



Stein Ringen, *The Perfect Dictatorship: China in the 21st Century*,

Hong Kong, HKU Press, 2016, 193 pp.

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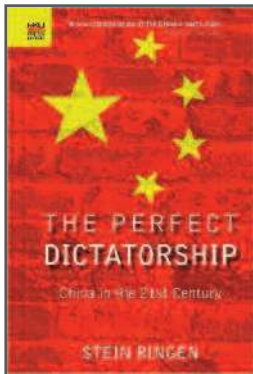
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Book reviews



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DAVID BARTEL

With *The Perfect Dictatorship*, Stein Ringen proposes to explain how a regime built on “much that is unpleasant” (p. 135) manages nevertheless to carry on, imposing on its population a form of compulsory arrangement that is unmistakably a silent victory for totalitarianism (p. 143). It is indeed intellectually uncomfortable to conceive that a country seemingly developing its way toward economic capitalism – so it is said – may continue to be politically Leninist (p. 165). We believe this book deserves our attention for three main reasons. First, each page denounces the complacent view that the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is only a regime that is economically successful and efficient in what it delivers. This is not to take the country seriously, says the author. Second, devoid of sentimental bond to his subject, Ringen is rather immune to the often blinding glitter of the Chinese “state civilisation.” And third, the book pays serious attention to the political questions raised by the genuine economic rise of the country and to the no less genuine desire for power of its leadership in considering the Chinese state as a mature state. It therefore takes the Party at face value, cleverly avoiding the twin pitfalls of Chinese “otherness” and “political culture,” two trendy discourses seemingly incapable of sharply defining the reality of the present. Ringen, a professor at Oxford University and renowned specialist in state analysis, contributes to the debate on the nature of the Chinese state by bringing together scattered known arguments in an intellectually dense interpretative essay without concession.

The first advantage of the book is that it is extremely clear about its own perspective, claiming from the outset that “China analysis should be grounded in an undisguised awareness that we are dealing with a dictatorial state” (p. viii). The objective of the book, says Ringen, is an attempt to analyse the Chinese regime from outside the box of China Studies. Ringen believes that the distance of detached observation remains an advantage, evoking the self-deception of the Mao era and pointing out some more recent publications, naïve or slavish to the point of embarrassment (p. 39). Ringen defends himself from any further Chinese ambition and sees himself as a social analyst and a methodological individualist. For him, a state manifests itself in what it delivers, down to the lower reaches of its population (p. 41).

In the case of the PRC, if the term “authoritarian” is too accommodating, the terms “dictatorship” and “totalitarianism” are problematic and seem primitive and oversimplifying in defining the actual current nature of the regime, which must be reconsidered in the light of contemporary reality (p. 2). The PRC is a sophisticated dictatorship under which citizens are granted many liberties, but only up to a certain point, beyond which the Party intervenes with all the force considered necessary. The Party is here and everybody knows it. If it doesn’t tell everybody what they can do, it controls in detail what they cannot do, read, or listen to. Obviously, this subtle system of indirect control is more profitable in the long run than the mere application of brute force (p. 137). However, Ringen reminds us, “the threat of punishment, harassment, detention, the loss of job or home, retribution against family and friends, violence, and ultimately death” remain persistently present. It is totally possible to get on with life in the PRC today as long as the rules – the boundaries of which remain strategically obscure – are understood, integrated, and accepted. The pages devoted to the law are edifying and remind the reader of a fact commonly overlooked: in the PRC, the prevailing legal theory is that the law is in the service to the Party that makes the rules and that can consequently override legal decisions. The law exists only as long as it does not disturb the one who wrote it. Moreover, it is never clear what a law actually is (p. 79).

The regime’s totalitarian essence permeates everyday life so deeply that the space of the political is shrunk to nothing. In the PRC, what remains of political life is “forced underground and into privacy, secrecy, and isolation” (p. 139). The in-depth study of the individual and corporate taxation mechanisms, social services, public sector, and social insurance and assistance offers a rational cartography of the regime’s capacity; if it possesses the necessary ability to uphold state determination, it remains “more effective than efficient” (p. 115). Following a thorough analysis of the state, its economy, and its power matrix (Party, military, executive, legislature, police, and administration), the author reaches the slightly ironic conclusion that if Chinese leaders undeniably invented a form of political regime, they actually reinvented dictatorship. He coins the neologism “controlocracy” (p. 138).

The memory of the “three ghosts” haunting the leadership is the only mention of history in the book: the century of humiliation (1842-1949), the destructive excesses of the Mao era, and the fall of the USSR (pp. 2-3). From this triple determination was born the absolute priority of the party-state: to ensure its own perpetuation. The post-1978 reformed state operates therefore on a twofold agenda: on the one hand, economic growth must be secured to noticeably reward the population; on the other hand, for its own survival, the Party must rebuild the “machinery” of social control (p. 6). From this perspective, “reform” is not a mere copy of Western modernising mechanisms, but rather a strengthening and perfection of the regime (p. 166). Skilfully using official data, Ringen rapidly shifts from analysis of the political system and its social impact to a critical interpretation of the “model,” citing other examples of modernisation where political and social progress accompanied economic development. In Taiwan and South Korea, complementing economic growth allowed the governments to obtain the compliance of their populations. They purchased legitimacy through

investment in education and social protection (p. 35). Ringen questions the motivation and objective of a reform project that in the PRC is obviously reduced to a heedless quest for economic growth devoted purely to the objective of national might. Nevertheless, in this pursuit of "greatness," the PRC strives to impress only by a display of "bigness" (p. 35), a "growth-ism" confirming the feeling that if Chinese leaders understand the meaning of growth, they no longer know what growth is for (p. 48). Yet, Ringen adds, power without purpose is "a threatening constellation" (p. 49).

The chapter focusing on the reality of poverty is eloquent. The perspective imposed on statistical tools permits the author to argue that if many people were lifted out of poverty, "many, very many were left behind in destitution" (p. 120). And the lives of those who, according to official data, emerged from poverty have probably not evolved very much; China remains a country of "massive and oppressive poverty" (p. 148). What Ringen adds accurately is that for poverty as for growth, the regime claims more than it deserves, and that the effective reduction of poverty has come on the back of economic growth that the state merely follows, rather than as a "result of redistribution through social policy" (p. 148). In terms of what it takes, the Chinese state is highly developed, while in terms of what it delivers, it is still underdeveloped (p. 164). For Ringen, the Chinese state "does less for its people than it would be able to and could afford to because it has other determination and priorities than to work for the good of the common people" (p. 166). Ringen's book is then a meticulous deconstruction of the clumsiness of the "liberal myth" that relates the necessity of Chinese development to the inevitability of the political liberalisation of the country – a myth, he says, that should not have survived the drama of June 1989.

Ringen divides the phenomenon of corruption into three levels. The lower one, present everywhere in everyday life, is diffuse: services, authorisations, stamps, contracts, certificates, business, licenses, schools, hospitals... The second level, within the bureaucratic apparatus, corresponds to the buying and selling of position and promotion. Finally, at the highest level of the state, it is not embezzlement anymore; it is "organized crime" (p. 24-25). Consequently, for him, the present governmental campaign against corruption is invigorated by a dual ambition: the Party needs to purge its internal opposition, after which the competition of a parasitic oligarchy must be eradicated to reaffirm the Party's direction in the political and economic realms, and ultimately in society (p. 28). Ringen extends the analysis by pointing out the radical inversion of priorities systematically corroding the entire bureaucratic apparatus. Civil servants do not serve the public anymore. They have to cultivate the upper stratum of their hierarchy, generally in charge of their position, in a never-ending game of obligation and reciprocity where the mere idea of public service is overturned to become a tool at the sole service of the Party.

In terms of control, the author points to the co-optation of all civil society organisations. This takeover of potentially critical social movements is an important feature of the admirable dynamic stability of a regime frightened most of all by any social activism able to organise and to create networks (p. 140). It is not the organisation toward such objectives that poses a problem, but rather it is organisation itself (p. 141). The space the regime leaves to the people, and that gives the impression of a form of normality to everyday life, is composed only of areas of indifference conceded by the state, often to compensate for its continuing disengagement from the social realm: a retreat of the state that is not – never is – a retreat of the party-state (p. 137). The relationship of domination between the leadership and society has not fundamentally changed, even if it has been softened, and

the totalitarian ambition seems not yet even questioned. It is obvious here that controlocracy is the most perfect dictatorship: it does not depend on the omnipresence of terror, and the regime can even afford to be parsimonious in its use of brute force. Nevertheless, the threat is ubiquitous (p. 141).

The Chinese, like all human beings confronted with a state that is strong, cumbersome, and intrusive, have no other choice than to compromise. Strategies to respond and adapt are abundant: "by courage, by ingenuity, by helping and protecting each other, by opposing and protecting, by organizing, by subverting, by pretending, by surviving (...) as well as by acquiescence and obedience, by collaborating in oppression, by opportunism and cowardice." Ringen adds: "the rich tapestry of the human condition (...) for the good and for the bad" (p. 40). Here we see the cultural alibi as well as the historicist excuse, both essentialising a so-called Chinese specificity, brushed away with convincing eloquence. The author further questions the ultimate primacy of stability. He argues that political opening could have unleashed more energy and creativity. And even if it might not have been workable, the official litany of its potential demise to justify the current state of affairs "is not credible" (p. 146). What remains true is that each and every attempt at political opening was immediately translated into claims for more democracy. The Party knows it does not have the genuine support of the population in a society that has become one of the most unequal on earth. The few reports available on the quality of life and happiness of the population completes a bleak portrayal of reality in today's PRC. It proves again that there is no correlation between economic growth and the well-being of a population (pp. 149-150).

To conclude this enlightening essay, Ringen engages the "China Dream" (*Zhongguo meng*) of the present leadership.⁽¹⁾ He picks up a recent press article allowing no doubt of the link between national greatness and the individual happiness of each and every Chinese. Beyond the customary nationalist celebration, the Chinese leadership's rhetoric seems aimed solely at the subordination of individual autonomy to the national might in a re-enactment of the terrible idea of the "People-as-One" coined by Claude Lefort, who defined the totalitarian phenomenon as the consubstantiality of state and society.⁽²⁾ An essential characteristic of totalitarianism, this fantasy of the unity of the people with their leader (be it an individual or a group), of a homogeneous organic society, pure and unique, is grounded on the denial of a divide between state and society. Fundamentally, repeats Ringen, the idea of unity between a nation and a person is a fascist idea, "the fascist idea," he even insists (p. 176). The cold radicalism of this depiction of the Chinese regime will obviously generate criticism, disagreement, and debate. This may also be the reason why this book is essential reading.

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1. To translate *Zhongguo meng* using "China Dream" rather than "Chinese Dream" makes sense if we accept that the dream of Chinese leaders may not be the dream of all Chinese.
2. Claude Lefort, *Le Temps présent. Écrits 1945-2005*, Paris, Belin, 2007, p. 268. Michel Bonnin developed Lefort's idea in relation to China in "Comment définir le régime politique chinois aujourd'hui," in Yves Michaux (dir.), *La Chine aujourd'hui*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2003.