Jonathan Unger (ed.), *The Nature of Chinese Politics. From Mao to Jiang*, Armonk

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- 1 This book has an ambitious and so to speak holistic title: an understanding of Chinese politics and its evolution since the foundation of the People's Republic in 1949. In reality, as Jonathan Unger indicates in his preface, this volume is mostly restricted to a study of the central elites of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), their structural organisation, the way they operate, their metamorphoses as well as the mechanisms which determine their renewal. Moreover, he spends much time discussing the relevance of the tools for analysis of these phenomena (factions, opinion groups, political action groups, formal and informal policies, institutionalisation). The product of two successive debates, one on the Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping periods, the other on the era of Jiang Zemin, first published in the excellent Australian journal edited by Jonathan Unger, *The China Journal*, this book is in some ways a paradox. In the past, the study of "elite Chinese politics" occupied a central place, for reasons which were more imposed than freely chosen—such as the lack of information and the difficulties of gaining access to the field. Now that, thanks to the greater diversification of political expression in China, this is no longer the case, some of the best Western political analysts of China offer this collection of reflections.
- 2 Having said that, the book is full of information, as much on past eras as on the present period of transitory sharing of power between Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. This book illustrates the much improved understanding we have today of the workings of power not only under Deng but also under Mao (part one). The opening up of the country, the increasing number of memoirs of leaders and accounts by cadres of the system, who are often emigrants, and the opening of archives have made it possible to shed light on many areas of darkness which surrounded the conflicts between Mao, and then Deng, and their colleagues. Contributions to this volume (as well as writings published

elsewhere) by Lowell Dittmer, Frederick Teiwes and Tsang Tsou (who died in 1999) particularly illustrate the major progress made. While access to information has become even easier under Jiang, the persistent impenetrability of the government and the unfinished character of the period under analysis (including the present) make it more difficult to establish definitive conclusions as to the *modus operandi* of the leadership of the CCP after the death of Deng, despite the wise and absolutely convincing suggestions put forward by Michel Oksenberg (in one of the last texts written before his death in 2001) or by Joseph Fewsmith.

- 3 This book also shows the wide diversity of possible approaches to the Chinese Communist government, as well as the frequently irreconcilable differences between certain analysts. The distinction between “informal politics” and “formal politics” defended by Dittmer, is called into question by both Lucian Pye, above all for cultural reasons—the importance of the *guanxi* and especially the non-institutionalised character of politics in China—and by Andrew Nathan, because of the structuring role played by the institutions. Likewise the factionalist model, based on clientelist relations, which developed after the publication of an article by Nathan in the *China Quarterly* at the end of the Cultural Revolution, continues to be divisive, despite the revisions introduced by its author, in particular the distinction he puts forward in this volume between cultural and structural (or institutional) factors in the explanation of political behaviour¹. Or again the notion of “normal politics” put forward by Teiwes in order to take into account a certain institutionalisation of the workings of the system is far from achieving unanimity: writers as measured as Fewsmith, inspired by the work of Tsang Tsou, remain prudent and do not rule out the possibility of witnessing new struggles for exclusive power (“the game to win all or lose all”) within the leadership of the CCP in the future. In the concluding chapter, Susan Shirk correctly suggests that the institutionalisation of political life at the top has been “delayed”, but nonetheless predicted the complete retirement of Jiang Zemin at the time of the sixteenth Congress in October 2002...
- 4 This kind of exercise shows how far the power games in Zhongnanhai, and more generally the future of the Chinese political regime remain freighted with uncertainty. One regrets, however, the generally secondary place occupied by society and the almost total absence of reflection on the political implications of the legal and institutional reforms introduced since the mid-1990s (in particular in view of China’s entry into the World Trade Organisation).
- 5 On the one hand, apart from Oksenberg, Dittmer and Fewsmith, society remains too often the poor relation among the analyses provided. Political power in China remains largely confiscated and no systemic change in the regime set up in 1949 has yet taken place under pressure from society. But on the other hand, the profound social and economic change in the country since the death of Mao cannot but have transformed in a determining fashion not only its political elites, whether civil or military (cf. the contribution by You Ji on the Army), but above all their relationship with society. It is this relationship which is at the very heart of the problem of defining the present political system. The notion of “fragmented authoritarianism” put forward by Oksenberg in the 1980s, which in its own author’s eyes is too static (p. 201), has not been superseded. This concept, like that of “drowsy authoritarianism”, transferred from 1970s Taiwan, and which I prefer, is probably the least inadequate for describing the present reality. But it remains incapable of encompassing the factors which force

the system to evolve². To Oksenberg these are four in number: the *ad hoc* adaptations of the leaders to the structural changes they have encouraged, the opening up to the outside world, the emergence of a proto-market economy and the transformation of communications (the Internet) and of transport. And, along with Fewsmith, one can point out that the repeated demands of society, whether these come from the beneficiaries or the victims of the reforms, as well as the appearance of a class of more or less private entrepreneurs, force the CCP to negotiate more and more frequently with forces which it no longer entirely controls, and with whom it has to renew and reinforce its legitimacy (hence Jiang's "three representations"). Finally the contributors to this volume could have emphasised more clearly the fact that any eruption of society into the political sphere intensifies or reveals the divisions which cut across the political elite and can, either (most often) provoke a paralysing reaction, and even regression (Tiananmen, Falungong), or accelerate evolution (the improvement in 2003 of the lot of rural migrants).

- 6 On the other hand, the legal and institutional reforms, and in particular the communist government's ambition, made official in 1997, to put into place the "rule of socialist law" and a "modern" system of government, deserves much greater attention. As substitutes for unattainable political reform, these reforms pursue the double objective of re-legitimation of a government which has abandoned its revolutionary roots, and of stabilisation of a relationship between state and society which is not sealed by any long-term political vision, nor any real social contract. Although the law is far from having dethroned politics and especially those who monopolise it, it constitutes a factor which is likely to structure the workings of the political system more widely and thus to influence the relationship between the Party and society.
- 7 Despite these reservations, *The Nature of Chinese Politics* is a valuable work. It renews a debate on the Chinese political elites which has already usefully extended to the local elites (cf. in particular the work of Li Cheng³) and reminds us of the persistent importance of the country's central leadership in a process of reform which is very likely to continue being driven from the top.

NOTES

1. Andrew J. Nathan, "A Factionalism Model for CCP Politics", *The China Quarterly*, No 53, January 1973, pp. 34-66.
2. Edwin A. Winkler, "Institutionalization and Participation on Taiwan: From Hard to Soft Authoritarianism?", *The China Quarterly*, No 99, September 1984, pp. 481-499.
3. In particular, *China's Leaders: The New Generation*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2001.