

A Chinese Chronicle of Everyday Discontent

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What institutional means are available to the Chinese people for expressing their displeasure with officialdom? Isabelle Thireau and Hua Linshan's book is the first Western study of the *xinfang*, the Administration of Letters and Visits, a government agency that currently processes in excess of 13 million complaints a year.

Reviewed: Isabelle Thireau and Hua Linshan, *Les ruses de la démocratie. Protester en Chine*, Paris, Le Seuil, 2010. 450 p., 22 €.

This book goes behind the scenes of a Chinese governmental institution that has attracted considerable interest in recent years but that has hitherto not been the object of systematic study in a Western language. Created in 1951 but officially “normalized” only in 1995 and 2005, “the Administration of Letters and Visits” (*xinfang* for short) is “responsible for receiving, registering, and forwarding testimonies and requests to the concerned parties”. The sole channel for the Chinese people to voice their discontent until the 1980's, even to this day the *xinfang* provides a fundamental mechanism for a wide range of individuals and groups to expose injustices, embezzlement, or the faulty application of administrative procedures.

The book, which covers the period between 1949 and 2007, allots equal emphasis to two “epochs”: 200 pages for 1949-1982, and 200 pages to 1983-2007, an attempt at equal representation that is worth emphasizing because its focus on the past might surprise people for whom China exists only in the present. It is also worth noting that this

balanced approach affords both an understanding of the agency during the so-called socialist period and of the agency's historicity. The book sets out to demonstrate how this "locus of expression" "has never simply obeyed the injunctions of power" throughout New China's rather turbulent history. Indeed, the agency is considered by the authors to constitute a space for "interlocution", a function that they explore by attempting to answer the question: "How do the authors of testimonials manage to reconcile their lived experience with the rules of the authorities?"

Ensuring Power, Knowing the Situation

From 1949 through the early 1980's, the Administration of Letters and Visits was an integral part of campaigns to denounce injustice that were instigated by the authorities in an effort to ensure that the people's voice was at the "heart of the Chinese revolutionary project". By fomenting and then embellishing "tales of bitterness" in which poor, exploited peasants supposedly recount their misfortunes, stereotypes about the misdeeds of counter-revolutionaries were created. The role of victim became in this way a "central element of the process of localization of social problems and of the legitimation of moral principles" whose intention was to spread moral indignation outside the circle of those immediately concerned by a particular grievance. This space for self-expression thereby became the monopoly of a particular social class, providing a forum in which the accused were unable even to defend themselves because members of the "evil classes" could not even attend denunciation hearings. The accusers, totally absorbed in political campaigns associated with increasingly widespread mistreatment, executions, internment, and ostracism, had little choice but to support the regime.

At the time that it was created, the Administration of Letters and Visits made significant efforts to gain the support of the masses in order to become an instrument of social power. In the process, it also became the only channel of information to the central authorities about the real situation of the country, while also serving as a relief valve for social suffering. The people's voice was dangerous but indispensable.

The general operating principles that guided the agency's creation persist for the most into the present day. Only the "people's" denunciations are admissible, and reactionaries and counter-revolutionaries have no say in the matter. The crucial question concerns the ever-changing criteria used to define "the people", which change according to the shifting political struggles of the moment. Those identified as "enemies of the people" at the end of the 1950's were able to cry out against injustice by the early 60's, while by the end of the 70's, the people's enemies during the Cultural Revolution could demand reparations. As for today's complaints, the authorities have difficulty distinguishing "abnormal" (*bu zhengchang*) ones from the rest. How indeed to separate true from false and legitimate from illegitimate? A further general principle is that, since individuals can denounce any administrative level, any ultimate corrective actions or redress are determined by the very same local authorities where the incident or phenomenon took place – it is easy to imagine the difficulties, and a singular lack of standardized procedures only adds to the complexity that this administration faces. Furthermore, in addition to "generalist" offices that constitute the independent administration, every administrative office can create its own complaint bureaus for each of its jurisdictional levels, every one of them then attempting to establish classification criteria for its own cases.

Exploiting the Context, Obtaining reparations

Each historic decline in power at the center – in 1956-57, 1962-63, and after 1973 – has coincided with an upswing in unrest, each associated with a dramatic increase in the number of complaints filed by the victims of political changes. During these periods, the agency ceased to function exclusively as an instrument of class struggle and was assailed by issues that the higher administration could not resolve, such as denunciations of misconduct among its own cadres. The agency was considered "by the population to be a legitimate space for trying to protect itself from the arbitrary power of the lower-level representatives of the Party and the state". The accusing voice that the Party wanted to use to its own ends was thus redirected towards its own lower echelons.

Over the years, there has been noticeable growth in the population's "ability to recognize when [an individual's] situation falls under a particular rule" and to argue for the "legitimacy of the rules and principles established by the higher authorities" in order to demand that "these be justly applied".

"A Voice Getting Louder"

Since the 1980's, the *xinfang* has started to be overwhelmed by the people's voice, and the number of complaints has steadily increased, reaching 13 million only in the "specialized" offices between 2004 and 2006. "Visits continue to increase more rapidly than letters, and collective visits increase faster than individual visits, while the number of individuals participating in each collective visit constantly increases." People become impatient, and no longer satisfied by a single visit, they come more and more often, not hesitating at the same time to file complaints or instigate wider collective action. Every social level is involved, and plaintiffs are "affected by a more diverse range of events than in the past, indicating at the same time expectations that are perceived as legitimate" such as expropriation of agricultural land, urban demolitions, expropriations, forced displacements, the functioning of judicial institutions, reorganization of businesses and labor rights, and environmental problems. All of the complaints "affect local authorities, territorial governments, and the functioning of institutions." As noted by the *xinfang* itself, "the current difficulties result from the fact that letters and visits now concern very different situations that are tied to new regulations whose immediate and correct application is demanded by the people, and which take on a political dimension". This increased expression joins plaintiffs' efforts to define the "valid principles" for justice for all that entail "common references" and that "invoke precedents." The people are seeking to recruit support by adopting the rhetoric of the authorities, a Marxist vocabulary that also includes references to the law and to new legislation like labor laws. In this area, anything goes: the illegitimate character of violence, criticisms of deprivation of the means of existence, the sacredness of life, references to "human feelings", and respect for the individual's human rights. Another notable effort are the intense attempts to define "I", "you" (the "good" authorities), and "them" (the "bad" authorities), which is not easy in a society in which social identities, power, and norms are constantly being

redefined. In the face of this proliferation, efforts towards institutional reorganization increased, resulting in the regulations of 1995 and 2005. College-educated civil servants were recruited, internal procedures were defined and standardized, and the ability of local authorities was to be evaluated on how well they avoid complaints and resolve the problems that they cause. In addition, the regulations called for improvements in the screening of cases and the response time for complaints.

Politics, Democratization, Protest

This book constitutes an excellent contribution to the analysis of social contestation. Unlike more spectacular events like suicides and social upheavals that make their mark so felt in societies around the world, it provides a sort of chronicle of everyday discontent, an anthropology of daily contestation that very clearly reveals the current political stakes. Clearly, however, the book leaves us with the same dilemmas with which it began. The authorities are concerned that “this space for expression, which is supposed to establish a link between isolated individuals and representatives of the state, has become not only a place to test public action but to contribute to the creation of a local public space”. “The state also fears that criticizing local governments’ actions and decisions will weaken them”. In other words, the problem of the legitimacy of popular representation remains totally unresolved. Still, it is clear that these spaces have influenced the political scene, and the author herself notes in her conclusion that the complaints are highly political and that they do participate in shaping the state, both influencing public action and providing a link between the governed and the governing. The example of the extension of the Beijing airport in Chapter XI illustrates this latter phenomenon very well, showing the ever-clearer limits to frontal opposition between the authorities and society. There are also more and more frequent alliances between certain of the governed and the governing against other parties.

The debate among experts about whether or not to retain the *xinfang* also demands serious attention. People who oppose dismantling the institution are not ultimately beastly totalitarians, but are hoping instead to preserve the tension between democratic expression and social stability. It is worth considering whether advocates of a

pure judicialization of society forget that even in democratic societies, not everyone is able to resort to the law. Current French debates about mediation and the defense of children's rights illustrates that the legal state and representative democracy are not the be-all, end-all of participation and social contestation.

A criticism that could perhaps be applied to this book is that it does not go as far as it could in the political problematization of the Administration of Letters and Visits. But the authors' choices are legitimate, and they follow them through to the end. Their choices include giving pride of place to history, to an anthropology rising in generality (Boltanski, Luc and Thévenot, Laurent, *De la justification*, Paris, Métailié, 1990), to moral legitimization, and to staying as close as possible to testimonies in order to produce detailed analysis. This study will in any case provide a major tool for those who seek to pursue a reflection on the current political situation.

An additional kind of problematization that would have warranted more consideration by the authors is subjectivity. They cite the notion while nevertheless avoiding using it due to "the uncertain and sometimes contradictory character of certain arguments that are concealed behind the use of this terminology, and the even greater difficulty of translating the terms into Chinese categories". It is worth saying outright that the authors are on shaky ground on his point. Is the notion of the subject, as is often said, a Western invention, the Chinese continuing to have a hard time being autonomous individuals who are capable of deciding for themselves and are politically emancipated from the authorities? Or is the subject on the contrary a universal notion that takes on different forms according to time and place? And ultimately, if the Chinese are demanding subjectivity as part of modernization, in what name do we discard their desire? In other words, should we analyze social contestation specifically with respect to Chinese thought, from which the notion of subjectivity is ostensibly absent, or should we confront the contradictory and uncertain nature of the notion of subjectivity in order to use it merely as a tool for understanding contemporary societies? This is in any event a debate that deserves to be seriously addressed.

For Further reading:

- ▶ Kevin O'Brien, ed., *Popular Protest in China*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2008
- ▶ « À la recherche de la contestation politique dans la Chine urbaine », Dossier [Kiosque du CERI](#) sous la direction de Jean-Louis Rocca, avril 2010.
- ▶ Jean-Louis Rocca, *Une sociologie de la Chine*, Paris, La Découverte, Coll. Repères, 2010

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