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BOOK REVIEW

L'empire terrestre. Histoire du politique en Chine aux XXe et XXIe siècles

Yves Chevrier

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Soline SCHWEISGUTH

EHESS, France

soline.schweisguth@ehess.fr

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“Where does China go? What is it? Where does it come from?” (p. 27). These three questions open Yves Chevrier’s very ambitious book. In this two-volume opus, Yves Chevrier, who was director of “Centre Chine” at EHESS and is now professor emeritus at CESPRA (Centre d’études sociologiques et politiques Raymond Aron), seeks to shed a new light on the history of politics in twentieth China. It is neither a mere political history nor a chronological synthesis of recent historiography. It can rather be defined as an essay aiming at understanding modern China as a “terrestrial empire” conceived as a “specific non-democratic political form, different from the late empire [...] and from Mao’s totalitarianism” (p. 29). In the first volume, which runs from 1895 to 1976, he defines three moments in the process of construction of politics revolving around two axes: democracy and the state.

Contrary to Rebecca Karl (2020) who focused on the “nine years” of revolutionary moments in his narrative of modern China, one could say that Yves Chevrier prefers the “five years” to delimit three moments in terms of forms of politics. During the first moment, from 1895 to 1915, “the institution of politics became democratic institutionalisation” (p. 203). By choosing to start his narrative in 1895, Chevrier links modern politics to a democratic dynamic rather than to one of crisis and revolution. However, the murder of Song Jiaoren in 1913 marked the end of this process of democratic institutionalisation. The second period, from 1915 to 1925, marked the birth of a new kind of politics and democracy that were not grounded, contrary to before, on the state: this is what Yves Chevrier calls “the golden age of the activist self” (p. 481). Around the May Fourth Movement, democracy was transformed into a new form of activism which did not need the state as an institution to mediate between the selves and politics. Finally, the last period of this first volume, from 1926 to 1976 was the moment of construction of the two monopolistic parties, namely the Guomindang and the Communist Party. Maoism is then described as a technique producing politics through division and the extension of struggle. The institutional democracy was then buried, replaced by a democracy of action in which the state was only created through division.

Before expanding on Yves Chevrier’s arguments, one needs to note that such a book structure has the merit of highlighting key moments in the modern history of China. However, it can also be confusing for non-specialists since it does not follow any strict chronological thread, although some tools, such as an index, a short chronology and a bibliography, can be very helpful for those not familiar with Chinese history. Moreover, the author uses a lot of comparisons over time and space, referring for instance to François Furet’s studies on the French revolution as well as to more recent events under Deng Xiaoping or Xi Jinping.

In a long introduction, Yves Chevrier develops the aim of his two-volume project and his conception of what should be a history of politics. Although he does not ignore social and cultural history, Chevrier seeks to understand the history of politics through a political lens, focusing on main political figures and debates in a sometimes restrictive way, leaving aside more grass-root and local histories. He repels both an external vision that would consider the Chinese path as a mere response to external impulses and an internal one focusing on tradition. He rather underlines the ongoing process of reinventing tradition. Chevrier thus escapes the pitfalls of a continuity-versus-rupture framework by emphasising the construction of original political forms.

The first part starts in 1895 when the political form of a world-Empire went into crisis and, according to Chevrier, started to be conceived as political. This revolution in the conception of politics ended up in the institutionalisation of democracy, with the late 19th century reforms and finally the proclamation of the Republic of China, its elections and its democratic failures. Democracy was thus achieved through institutions, put in place both at the national and local levels with the support of notables. Chevrier recognises it as an attempt in Chinese history of institutional democracy, although it quickly ended up in a failure after Yuan Shikai's restoration and death because it "betrayed its first intention – to strengthen the state" (p. 252). According to the author, this constituted the first moment of modern politics. By beginning his narrative of modern politics in 1895 rather than with the May Fourth Movement, Yves Chevrier emphasises institutionalisation rather than cultural movements as the foundation of Chinese democracy. Thus, the actors supporting the first form of Chinese democracy were the local gentry and the notables in the peripheries rather than the intellectuals in Beijing or Shanghai. Eventually, this narrative tends to show that modern politics and institutional democracy came into being without major rupture or revolution, which sometimes disappear from the narrative behind intellectual and political debates.

The second part focuses on the period between 1915 and 1925 when, according to Yves Chevrier, a new kind of politics emerged, that of autonomous action led by activist subjects. Whereas before 1915, the Chinese people was conceived through the institutions of the state, it was then found in direct action. In terms of the history of democracy, the May Fourth Movement marked the turn to a democratic movement which was not linked to the state anymore and became de-institutionalised. Therefore, modern politics which was invented through the state paradigm was reinvented through the paradigm of the subject and a new form of democracy emerged: activist democracy. The May Fourth Movement was not the age of the invention of democracy in China but that of its de-institutionalisation; the rupture of this period was not one with Confucius but one with the immediate past of democratic institutionalisation. Finally, by isolating these ten years, Yves Chevrier argues that the totalitarian turn of the Maoist years is not due to the empire's collapse but to the illusions of de-institutionalisation.

Finally, the last part of this first volume focuses on what Yves Chevrier calls "the Fifty Years' War", from 1926 to 1976. The very choice of dates is interesting since it avoids the rupture of 1949 and puts the Guomindang and the Communist Party (and thus Taiwan and China) on the same level, each representing a different form of democracy. The main rupture is put in 1955, described as "the turn of the regime and of the century" (p. 900). Indeed, before 1955, hegemony was sought through union, whereas internal divisions became the crux of the Maoist system of action afterwards. However, this rupture of 1955 appears more as an unveiling of a Maoist system already in development since the 1930s rather than as a real change in its mode of action. In this sense, the historicization of the Maoist system proposed by Yves Chevrier is somehow limited by his own theoretical framework which focuses on central theoretical elaborations and modes of action. Indeed, although Yves Chevrier's book proposes a very thought-provoking explanation of the Maoist domination, it does not elude its con-

crete application and its adaptation over time and space as recent American and Chinese historiography focusing on local histories have done. Yves Chevrier does not ignore this historiography but seeks to integrate it in a more theoretical and general framework, closer to political theory.

The common theme of these fifty years is not revolution but war. To understand the construction of the Communist Party, Yves Chevrier adopts neither the paradigm of a nationalist revolution nor that of a peasants' revolution. Instead, he considers Maoism as an original form of totalitarianism, what he calls "the Maoist complication of totalitarianism" (p. 910), based on the extension of struggle in fragmented territories. Yves Chevrier finds the originality of Maoism in the decentralised activist struggle unleashed in order to achieve hegemony. In this conception, Mao Zedong appears as the "Divider" creating a fragmented system of activism, breaking any monopoly by universalising action: contrary to Stalin who ruled over revolution, Mao ruled through revolution. This method of action reached its climax during the Cultural Revolution and its activists competition. The Maoist democracy was therefore a democracy of action, as it had been during the precedent period, but embedded in a political frame.

Thanks to his original conception of Maoism, Yves Chevrier complicates the totalitarian framework. If the state existed during Maoist totalitarianism, it was only through the "*désétatisation* of politics". To put it in other words, the monopoly of the totalitarian state only existed through division: in the core of the Maoist totalitarian state, one could only find struggle and action. Thus, he opposes both visions of Mao as a Stalinist dictator and as an anti-system activist. On the other side of the Taiwan strait, Yves Chevrier considers Jiang Jieshi's action as an attempt to construct the state without China, in contrast with the situation of China without the state during the Republican period. If one takes back the two threads of state and democracy that run throughout the whole narrative, one sees in 1976 the wreck of institutionalised democracy on both sides, with an authoritarian state in Taiwan and a fragmented one in China.

The post-Mao period, which is only evoked in this first-volume, is seen as one of restoration of the state in China, becoming a state without democracy, and of the construction of institutional democracy in Taiwan, becoming a democracy without state. Therefore, according to Yves Chevrier, Xi Jinping's rule today does not constitute a return to the Maoist system but a restoration of the state which transforms revolution into a mere tradition, and thus puts an end to the democratic cycle that began a century ago.

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