

## Book review: Xu Zhiyuan: Paper Tiger - Inside the Real China. London: Head of Zeus 2017. ISBN 978-1-78185-978-0

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XU ZHIYUAN, *Paper Tiger. Inside the Real China*. London: Head of Zeus, 2017. 305 pages, £ 8.99. ISBN 9-781781-859803

This is a collection of essays that Xu Zhiyuan, a well-known journalist and essayist living in Beijing, wrote for the Chinese language versions of the *Financial Times* and *Bloomberg Businessweek* from 2007 to 2015 and which have been translated into English. His publications could not appear in mainland China, but he is still free to travel and to investigate there. Though Xu claims not to be a “dissident writer”, he pulls no punches against the Communist regime, both under Mao’s totalitarian terror and under the current capitalist party cartel.

In his 80 essays the themes are varied, often tied to topical events, like the Beijing 2008 Olympics, the Nobel Peace Prize award to Liu Xiaobo (and his subsequent sentencing to 11 years in jail), the Sichuan earthquake of 2008, or spectacular political events, like the Bo Xilai trial (ending in a life sentence), acts of political repression and reactions to crimes. Unavoidably there is a fair amount of repetition and his conclusions understandably are often similar. Yet his essays make fascinating and instructive reading as he retells and interprets his varied encounters all over China.

To Xu the “China model” is “absurd, unjust and unsustainable” (p. ix). It is the result of the hard work of the Chinese people, not of the country’s leadership, which defends a sclerotic political system against a steadily progressing society. For Xi Jinping “reforms” mean top-down changes tightly controlled by a Leninist party. While oppression, fear and silence spread, the society is engulfed by consumerism, entrepreneurship and a common fervour for the stock market, as people hope for security, which, after decades of policy-induced poverty, they believe only money, prosperity and status symbols can bring (p. 7). Hence the majority poses no challenge and continues to believe in party state power, as long as it delivers the goods. Also the economic elites – rootless as they have become – are unwilling to transform their wealth into social and educational causes but remain obsessed with only one subject of conversation: how to make more money. Living in a spiritual vacuum without deep convictions, they see material wealth as the only measure of their success (p. 13).

Xu debunks the Western illusion that free trade, a market economy, the internet, globalisation and a growing middle class would eliminate the Party and change China into an open and democratic society (p. 162). Rather, the “Beijing Consensus” showed that dictatorship and economic freedoms could coexist. The “Great Firewall” has cut off mainland Chinese from the world by banning Google and Facebook. Now they live in small closed and tightly supervised internet communities. TV programmes consist mainly of talent and variety shows, and even young professionals are immersed in trivial pleasures.

People believe that one can only rely on one's own resources, as everything else (such as housing or admission to schools) is scarce and uncertain in the absence of consistent rules (p. 72). As nothing, including private property, is protected by law, any individual or company can be attacked at any time. The response is to seek protection through political connections and through bribes. Ultimately businesspeople who become too successful – or officials who become too corrupt – move abroad, preferably to Canada and Australia, to safety with their families and wealth (p. 56). Dissidents are so brutally repressed that they become bitter and dogmatic, and often turn to infighting amongst each other (p. 205). The resulting political apathy has helped the regime to push grand projects through, unhampered by environmentalists or labour unions. For the construction of the Yangtze Dam in 1997, for instance, 1 million people were driven from their homes (p. 75).

The Communist Party of China has become a power cartel in its own right, interested only in profit, maintaining the status quo and surviving its eternal ruthless factional fights. It controls not only the governments ministries “working like organized crime syndicates” (p. 107) and the monopolies of the state-owned enterprises with their unlimited supply of cheap credit, but also the security apparatus and the bureaucracy down to the last village. In its violent past of revolution, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution and Mao's personality cult it erased people's memories, destroyed ancestral halls and cultural traditions, razed cities and burned written records (p. 110). Over the years it survived its perennial internal power struggles among party cliques, such as purging Bo Xilai with his dictatorial personal ambitions, getting rid of the “Shanghai gang” of Jiang Zemin or eliminating certain princelings. For its 90 million members and officials, as “bribeable businessmen looking out for their own interests” (p. 35) without convictions, the only thing which counts is loyalty to the right faction or leader through a network of personal connections. Party congresses have traditionally consisted of empty sloganeering and clichés and hierarchic rituals. If anything then hours of ambiguous wording would leave people in a permanent state of confusion about future actual policies. Within the party, climbing up the ladder of privilege within the rules of the game and being allied with the right faction rewarded mediocrity, with the best, those with their own thoughts, being weeded out (p. 174). The party as such became a “giant interest group of its own” that exploits the country. It represents neither workers and farmers, nor the middle classes or the billionaires. As a cartel of the dominant interests it consistently decides against workers' rights, the environment and public morality. People are seen primarily as tools or material for production and consumption (p. 197). Thanks to the *hukou* system (adopted from the Soviet *propiska* internal passports), rural migrants receive the worst treatment, as an unprotected urban labour force. Ethnic Uighurs are viewed by a non-comprehending public opinion as thugs

and thieves – in contrast to their perception by Westerners, who sympathise with them as underdogs (p. 258). The home territory of the Uighurs, Xinjiang, has (like Tibet) seen a massive influx since 2000 of development projects and poor Chinese settlers, whose main aim is to make money quickly and then get out again (p. 260).

As a result of unchecked one-party rule a self-serving bureaucracy has increasingly expanded, greedily and detachedly eating up national wealth and resources, wasting public funds for administrative palaces in small towns and for useless infrastructure (p. 267). It has destroyed all political and civil organisations, stifled creativity and suppressed cultural traditions and the freedom of speech (p. 120). Since a proper budget law does not exist, local officials are free to spend funds on whatever local party officers (often themselves) they choose. Land sales are a major source of revenue for county and city governments, which explains their eagerness for new real estate development and the expropriation of farmland. For township and village governments fines for second pregnancies are a lucrative side income. Hence their eagerness to chase pregnant women for forced, even late-term abortions (p. 289). However, people still expect officials to provide decent housing, education and security (all of which is in short supply) and even increasing share prices. While Beijing and Shanghai, as prosperous and safe places of numerous and often important residents, see little discontent and unrest, this is different in the rest of the country where people are resentful and suspicious of arrogant and aloof officialdom. Among the many examples cited by Xu, the uncaring and much delayed public response to the Sichuan earthquake of 2008, which killed 70,000 people, figures prominently. Officials only care to please their superiors and see the population as uneducated and unworthy (p. 240). 90,000 local “disturbances” against administrative injustice are registered each year. The system’s response is to prosecute perceived ringleaders as “criminals” and to purge a few incompetent local officials (p. 209). Hushed up as internal affairs, such cases pose no systemic threat.

Still the regime feels vulnerable. Its legitimacy is based on violence, a revolution and a civil war that ended in 1949, but not on an election. With no convictions and no real communication with its subjects, it is afraid of any unrest and wants stability above everything (p. 249). Crushing any possible dissent mercilessly and playing the nationalist card are its main instruments.

In Xu’s view China is a major benefactor of the international status quo and does not have any interest in challenging it or creating a new world order. At the time of writing (2011) it was “passive on the international stage” (p. 64), had “no military ambitions” (p. 218) and was “not interested in aggressive expansionism” (p. 163). Eight years later things have obviously changed under Xi Jinping. Earlier there were only unintentional external consequences of China’s demand for energy and raw materials and its use of an undervalued

currency and cheap labour – conquering export markets and driving up raw material prices. Yet China's leadership remained unaware of its global responsibilities. Neither did it care about them, nor about foreign criticism of its foreign and domestic policies (p. 212). This is reflected in the attitudes of their citizens, who now settle all over the world with little knowledge of national cultures and even less understanding of local life, and worse, no desire to learn (p. 186).

This somewhat melancholic volume of a very perceptive, well informed observer makes insightful and fascinating reading. Hence with Xu's critical insights the book is a useful antidote to the propaganda spread by the regime's Confucius Institutes at Western universities. His repeated conclusion that the regime is unsustainable is plausible and easy to follow. Yet Xu shirks the question of actual regime change – with good reason. Were he to have indicated identifiable actors within China, the regime would have arrested, eliminated or rendered them harmless long ago. The book's format of a collection of previously published essays makes them sometimes appear dated and occasionally repetitive. Although aimed at a general reader and not at an academic audience, Xu's essays offer valuable insights into dramatic events of the last decade and to social milieus and outlying provinces not readily accessible to foreign researchers.

*Albrecht Rothacher*

CHRISTOPHER J. SHEPHERD, *Haunted Houses and Ghostly Encounters: Ethnography and Animism in East Timor, 1860–1975*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2019. 416 pages, 21 illustrations, 4 maps, £25.00. ISBN 978-87-7694-267-0

This volume by Christopher J. Shepherd presents itself as a meta-ethnography, an analysis of how ethnography, ethnographers and animism converge in Portuguese Timor, which was Portugal's most distant colony in Southeast Asia. This colonial presence ended in 1975 and was followed by a complex and troubled decolonisation process that involved a civil war between the political parties. Although the country proclaimed independence on 28 November of the same year, it was soon invaded by Indonesia, which occupied the territory until 1999, when a UN-supervised referendum ensured freedom from foreign rule. Resistance to the Indonesian occupation lasted 24 years and cost the lives of an estimated 180,000 people.

The book consists of an introduction, two distinct parts and a conclusion. The sobriety of its structure contrasts with the detail of its ten chapters, each