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Translated by N. Jayaram

1 This book is presented as the exploration of a paradox: how one institution – the State Bureau for Letters and Visits – that helped the Communist Party consolidate its power has transformed itself into a space for contestation, how complaint has come to mean protest, and furthermore, how the image of the victim has been transmuted into that of actor.

2 Since imperial times, there has been an institution for aggrieved citizens to address their complaints to the authorities orally or in writing. Whereas the authorities have always considered this device less a means of facilitating justiciability than of tracking "the feelings of those below" and of keeping abreast of social and administrative dysfunction at the local level so as to better govern and solidify their power, petitioners have gradually sought to redefine how social justice must be ensured and to pressure the state to assume its role of guarantor in this regard. The authors thus posit that complaint has become a form of action: it is not a matter of putting oneself at the mercy of superior entities but of trying to persuade them and apply pressure to them by reaffirming and possibly recreating the norms that ought to prevail in society.

3 The book sets out to analyse the transformation of this space for expression by marshalling the historical sociology of norms as well as rigorous linguistic analyses of statements in order to clarify who is addressing whom, saying what, and how. Sociologist Isabelle Thireau and historian Hua Linshan draw on an impressive body of 600 letters lodged with the offices for letters and visits at various levels of China's administrative hierarchy and in different provinces, sources that are difficult to access as they have long remained confidential. They have also consulted official monographs, interviewed 30-odd migrants in Shenzhen and Guangzhou, and reviewed the specialised press as well as the works of Chinese and foreign scholars. The authors also buttress their reflections with ethnographic descriptions based on observations in offices of letters and visits. Such reflections, while anchoring the argumentation in lived social reality, offer welcome respite in a text that is sometimes arduously abstract. But this book also purports to be a work of political sociology to the extent that proceeding from an analysis of the way in which petitioners address the state, *in fine* it seeks to highlight the evolution of relations between the rulers and the ruled.

4 The authors go over a 56-year period – from 1951, when the Communist Party revived the practice, until 2007 – and show how the relationship has gradually been remoulded to resemble an inversion of the domination position, as hinted in the book's title: "ruses of democracy." Although the authors stress that the petitioners never completely took up the authorities' injunctions, they show how the institution helped the Party orchestrate the "tales of bitterness" that lay behind the 1950s agrarian reforms; only those with a good class background were able to pronounce themselves in the name of the ethical principles and policies underlying class struggle and to denounce those belonging to social categories targeted for elimination. In other words, the authors show how manipulation of petitioners' stands led to physical violence, helped to redefine the social and political order, and strengthened the Party's authority. During the 1950s, even though the Party would have wished to use the administration of letters and visits as "a springboard to mass movements through the decades," in reality the institution "did not constitute a major tool of class struggle" (pp. 128-129), the authors show. While this function was indeed present, the analysis of petitions reveals that what concerned

the petitioners most consistently was, above all, local cadres' abuse of power, and that the formulation of these denunciations did not necessarily follow the ideological guidelines of the era. Similarly, during the 1980s, while the new leadership sought to use this institution to orchestrate the campaign to rehabilitate "rightists," the petitions often referred to events before the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), not stopping at describing the political manipulations they were subject to but also including "recurring actions, ideological contradictions, and structural problems" (p. 199). Such expression has always overshot the limits the Party sought to impose. At the end of the book, the authors say that recourse to the office of letters and visits constitutes "one initiative among many in a long and difficult collective action during which individuals combine different resources to express their sense of injustice and obtain a response" (p. 250). All social classes are taking advantage of this institution; the authors stress that contrary to widely held belief, not only the lower classes but also investors, administrators, political cadres, and property owners are also using it. Grievances fall into two main categories: "problems left over from history" and "current problems," mainly seizure of agricultural land, urban demolition and expropriation, the functioning of judicial institutions, enterprise restructuring and labour rights, and environmental problems. The authors conclude that the way in which petitions use this procedure "directly contributes to state formation" (p. 416) by forcing the party to reform the administration of letters and visits through investing it with greater transparency and efficiency; in other words, by encouraging the invention of "new procedures and new uses" and by directly influencing political action, pressuring the authorities to adopt policies better geared to popular expectations.

5 Evolution of the space for expression, with the major turning point having come in the early 1980s, is dealt with in the book's second part and may be summarised as follows: the end of restrictions with regard to who may or may not avail of this institution following the abolition of class struggle, the appearance of new normative references such as laws to which petitioners refer more and more precisely, and expansion of the previously highly restricted and codified space for expression thanks to the emergence of conveniences encouraged by the Party, such as telephone hotlines or newspaper columns devoted to petitions, as well as the new role played by the media in relaying petitioners' demands. In other words, the authors show how this initially private and confidential space became a semi-public one, gradually emerging as the epicentre of collective action. In line with the work of Kevin O'Brien and Li Lianjiang, they stress that there has been an increase in collective visits and in the number of participants, and politicisation of rising demands made to higher level administrations even as "the authorities are addressed in a more direct manner than earlier and on an unprecedented level of equality," with external pressure also being brought to bear on the authorities.

6 The words "ruses of democracy" in the title refers to the author's thesis that quite beyond individual petitions, one factor at work historically is an underlying "process of democratic invention"(p. 434). Petitioners have now shed the informer or accuser status assigned to them in the 1950s, albeit without recognition of their victimhood. Far from being passive, the petitioners express their capacity to affirm the moral and political bearings to which they ask leaders to conform. Forms of democratic practice are indeed emerging in China in the guise of surveillance or prevention, challenging a judgment, and in sum "organising defiance," which, the authors stress – taking the Pierre Rosenvallon line of thinking – only strengthens the current political leadership's legitimacy.[1]The book's major strength, which qualifies it as a milestone in sociological studies on China, is its detailed analysis of the emergence, structuring, and dynamics of this new political space. But it would be advisable to exercise great caution in applying the term democracy to an authoritarian system, and to its ins and outs, especially when it comes to the administration of letters and visits, at the risk of losing one's bearings. It concerns the primary meaning of the word democracy, which immediately leads to a contradictory debate. The authors ably show that petitioners cannot confront the authorities to whom they look for resolution of their problem. The term "democracy" evokes the concept of people's power, especially the power to decide, which still remains indisputably and unchallenged in the party's hands. Whatever its modalities, petitioning is always an approach to a superior entity, which even in the face of popular

pressure retains its discretionary power on both the resolution of problems petitioners bring to the bureau and on determining the parameters for this "democratic participation," which has officially become a priority since the 17th Party Congress. It shows the way in which the Party has resumed charge of this bureau, notably by systematically sending petitions addressed to the central government down to local administrations that had already failed to find a solution, and looking on as local authorities take recourse through arrests and the setting up of "black jails." Again, as pointed out in Yu Jianrong's famous report (2005) quoted at length by the authors, nothing is farther from this bureau than the concept of justiciability: most petitions fail, and many petitioners have spent lifetimes, some since the 1980s, lost in the Kafkaesque maze of this bureau and its basically perverse functioning, as brought out dramatically in Zhao Liang's documentary *Petition* (Shangfang). For the Party, it is all about channelling popular discontent while using individual petitions to put in place new governance techniques geared to maintaining social stability. What stood out in Yu's report was its attempt at clarification by proposing that petitions be handled by courts so that the Bureau of Letters and Visits could concentrate entirely on institutionalised "democratic participation." From an ethical standpoint, it is advisable to beware of the contamination of concepts used by Chinese authorities, because once a normative definition of the term "democracy" is abandoned, the Party will have won out with its own claim of pursuing a democratic path.

7 The authors' perspective thus appears a trifle idealistic, and their conclusion could have considered the ambiguity in the dynamics of interactions between state authorities and social actors instead of emphasising the petitioners' power of complaint: of course the scope for complaints has been expanded, but that is mainly due to openings granted by the authorities themselves, especially through the rehabilitation policy adopted in the early 1980s. The book also tends to idealise the role of letters and visits offices in formulating new public policies to meet popular aspirations – notably with regard to changes in the central government policies towards migrants early in the last decade – and generally in state building. Other tools and actors – media, social organisations, scholars, and lawyers – contribute to this process, the agents of change being necessarily numerous and in mutual interaction.

8 It should be stressed that this is not an attempt to deny that political space could be opening up, with the specific purpose of articulating around negotiation rather than conflict. Nor is it being suggested that such mobilisation would have no political impact in terms of constructing – more precisely rationalising – the state. But what the authors fail to mention is that this mobilisation forms an integral part of the Chinese regime's functioning, and that the resultant state rationalisation would help the party entrench itself in power – in other words, help explain the authoritarian regime's adaptability and durability. Recall the work of Olivier Dabène, Vincent Geisser, and Gilles Massardier, the title of whose book *Democratic authoritarianisms and authoritarian democracies in the twenty-first century*[2] underlines this tendency towards hybridisation of political regimes that characterise the current era. This has less to do with noting the disappearance of ontological difference between authoritarianism and democracy than with promoting a dialectical approach that would do justice to the complexity of regimes by highlighting their own contradictions and gaps in order to show how forms of democracy and authoritarianism are related within the same political regime.

9 Has the paradox been resolved? Not really: this institution continues to serve the purpose Mao assigned it at its creation in 1951 by remaining "a means of strengthening the people's links with the Party and with the people's government," and this book could also have been subtitled "ruses of bureaucracy." It is rightly this paradox that lies at the heart of the authoritarian Chinese regime's functioning, and which the authors fail to bring out sufficiently in choosing to highlight a sociological viewpoint and avoid reflection on the political regime.

Notes

1 Pierre Rosenvallon, La contre-démocratie. La politique à l'âge de la défiance, Paris, Seuil, Points essais, 2006 (Counter-democracy: Politics in an age of distrust, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2008).

2 Olivier Dabène, Vincent Geisser and Gilles Massardier, Autoritarismes démocratiques et démocraties autoritaires au XXIe, Paris, La Découverte, 2008.

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