

A »Who's Who« of Chinese Intellectuals and What They Think about China

MARK LEONARD:

What Does China Think?

London 2008

Fourth Estate/Harper Collins, 224 pp.

HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG (Ed.):

Wie China debattiert. Neue Essays und Bilder aus China

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HBS, 200 pp.

China is shaking the world. This may be a platitude, but it is no less true for all that. On the one hand, China gives rise to incomprehension for the prosecution of dissidents or the execution of foreigners under obscure circumstances, while on the other hand, it is keeping the engine of world growth running and trying to spur domestic demand, a move which may help to correct global imbalances.

In Copenhagen, German Chancellor Angela Merkel encountered a »very self confident China« and the world had to take notice once again that almost nothing can be managed in international politics without China. Many in the West allege »global player affectations« (*Financial Times Deutschland*, December 20, 2009) and regard China as the next big »muscle man« (*Tagesspiegel*, January 31, 2010). These characterizations, which often reveal some uncertainty with regard to how to handle the rise of China, have changed in recent years, however. »Does China matter?« (Gerald Segal) was the question a decade ago, but today it is obvious that we have to take China seriously if we want to cope with the problems of the early twenty-first century. Because of its growing influence, China will shape the world, to a certain extent, whether the world likes it or not. Therefore it would be wise to reach an understanding of how politics work in China and especially what ideas and people influence Chinese politics.

Two recently published books seek to examine what Chinese intellectuals and policy advisers think and what ideas they have about China's future. The first is Mark Leonard's »What Does China Think?«, in preparation for which the author conducted interviews with various Chinese scholars and members of think tanks. The other, »How China Debates«, is a volume of essays written by Chinese scholars, which have been translated for the first time into German and edited by the Heinrich Böll Stiftung.

For Leonard, China is a new »shaper of world order« and its rise »is the big story of our age and its after-effects could echo down for generations to come« (p. 5). For him, this is why it is important to know »What (...) China think[s]?« The title is a little exaggerated and misleading, because the reader is not intro-

duced to the thoughts of ordinary Chinese citizens (as in Liao Yiwu's »The Corpse Walker: Real Life Stories: China from the Bottom up« – in German: »Fräulein Hallo und der Bauernkaiser: Chinas Gesellschaft von unten«), but to the thoughts of intellectuals and scholars.

Leonard surveys the most important topics of the economy, the political system (democracy and the rule of law) and foreign policy. It is true that not many new facts are presented; most of the topics and interpretations can be found in other China-related publications. However, its presentation of the views of dozens of Chinese thinkers makes it a good and, generally, readable addition, alongside more academic publications.

Throughout the book, Leonard illustrates that intense debates are going on within China's intellectual sphere on the different topics named. Looking at the economy, the reader learns that »New Rightists,« such as Zhang Weiying, are demanding the development of a free market: »He thinks that the planned economy is the foundation of political despotism; that China's freedom will not come until the public sector is dismantled and sold off (...)« (p. 20). On the other hand, »New Leftists,« such as Wang Hui or Cui Zhiyuan, also advocate economic growth, but want to see a focus on social justice and environmental awareness.

In relation to democracy, one becomes acquainted with a wide range of ideas previously almost unknown to Westerners. Some might know Yu Keping and his essay »Democracy is a good thing« or his concept of »incremental democracy.« But besides grassroots democracy, Yu favors internal party democracy, in the belief that »party members should ›get democracy first,‹ just as the coastal regions were allowed to ›get rich first,« (p. 57). Also very interesting is the point made by Pan Wei, arguing that »elections will not solve any of the problems facing China today« (p. 60): on the contrary, Pan rejects democracy and favors the rule of law without democracy, while Wang Hui notes that the »rule of law« is meaningless without democracy.

All in all, Leonard provides a vivid picture of debates related to domestic topics. Despite his sometimes slightly self-absorbed approach, he has the ability to summarize complex topics in memorable terms: for example, Leonard sums up his explanation that the main criterion for political reform is that it must not threaten the Communist Party's rule, as follows: »You could call it ›Anything but National Elections,« (p. 80).

With regard to foreign policy and international relations, he identifies two camps which he labels »liberal internationalists« and »neo-cons or, considering their formal affiliation, ›neo-comms,« (pp. 89f). For all of them it is essential to enlarge China's so-called Comprehensive National Power, but opinions vary on how to do this. For liberal internationalists, such as Zheng Bijian or Qin Yaqing, China should rise peacefully, but neo-comms such as Yan Xuetong criticize the liberals' »appeasement« and are »fixated with the USA and sure that China's military modernization is the key to world stability« (p. 91).

Summarizing, Leonard, who describes himself as an »accidental sinologist« (p. 9), provides some interesting insights into how Chinese thinkers see the world and China. He shows a wider audience that there are controversial debates and thinkers in China, which are by no means confined to praising the leadership. Of course, none of the interviewees is what the West would call a dissident. Because if you want your voice be heard and to exercise some influence, you must not challenge the Communist Party. But that does not mean these thinkers are cozying up to the regime and afraid to speak out. Take, for example, Yan Xuetong's call for substantial change in China: »If you do not have a good political system at home, you cannot attract support from your neighbors. If China wants to increase its soft power, it must have political reform« (p. 98).

Leonard concludes that the first 30 years of China's reform have been mainly about the People's Republic joining the world and that »the story of the next thirty years will be about how a more self-confident China reaches out and shapes the world« (p. 117). Even though Leonard notes that »it is possible that Beijing's formula of state capitalism, open markets and a closed political system will not last the course« (p. 134), in general he seems quite optimistic about China's path to superpower status. For him, »China will not define the new order its own, but it will provide an alternative pole and philosophy (...)« (p. 117).

Sometimes, the book is a little wearing due to Leonard's constant name-dropping and anecdotal style, with the author present at all times: »I will never forget my first visit to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (...)« (p. 8), or »I met Wang Hui in the ›Thinkers Café‹ (...)« (p. 32), or »Recently I had dinner with a leading Chinese public intellectual (...)« (p. 62). The chosen metaphors also make one wonder: »Prince Charles would have called [Pingchang City] a ›carbuncle,‹ [reference to a famous speech lamenting plans for an extension to the National Gallery in London, which he described as a »monstrous carbuncle on the face of a much-loved and elegant friend«] but I was moved by the utopianism of its already anachronistic vision of modernity« (pp. 49f). Or describing Wang Shaoguang and Hu Angang as »a sort of Lennon and McCartney of ›New Left‹ economics in China« (p. 36).

While, to be sure, this is a question of personal taste and some will enjoy his fluent style, more disappointing are a number of factual inaccuracies. He writes that »in the 1970s students built a ›democracy wall‹ in Beijing by creating posters with large characters that called for free elections« (p. 59). This movement dates from 1979, one of its central figures being Wei Jingsheng, who wanted to expand the so-called »Four Modernizations« with a fifth, which should have been democracy. When Leonard talks about »elections to the Politburo's Standing Committee« in 2007 (p. 49), he is playing a little too fast and loose, failing to underline that these were merely behind-the-scenes negotiations and based on entrenched nepotism and thus far from what a Western reader would understand as »elections.« Or what about the number of missiles targeting Taiwan: is it 900 (p. 106)

or 700 (p. 110)? And even an »accidental« sinologist should know that it is »Yin and Yang« and not »Ying and Yang« (pp. 64, 86). But besides these minor points, the book is easy and, mostly, fun to read.

While Leonard, with his sometimes conversational and mannered style, interprets his findings from a Western point of view, the collection of articles and essays edited by the Heinrich Böll Stiftung takes a completely different approach. The editors have chosen articles by Chinese scholars seeking to explain China's contemporary problems. The articles were chosen because they have »heavily influenced political discourses and public opinion« (Foreword 7). Even though it remains unclear what kind of influence these articles had, most of them were published in either academic journals or well-known magazines, such as »Nanfang Zhoumo« (Southern Weekend). In contrast to Leonard's book, this volume can become a little tiring because most of the texts are academic in style and sometimes the Chinese way of writing can be confusing for Western readers.

Nevertheless, it is a valuable experience to learn what words Chinese scholars – who are living in China and cannot be labeled dissidents – use to describe the current frictions and problems in the country. Some are more outspoken than others, but all of them look at pressing topics and do not mince words. This is the major advantage of this selection of essays: it is not Western academics or journalists explaining the problems China is facing and sometimes pointing the finger, but indigenous authors. The topics range from the role of intellectuals to reforms of the legal system and the meaning of globalization for China.

One impressive article is Li Changping's »The real reasons for the poverty of peasants.« This is an excellent example of how outspokenly and directly one can argue, even in China. Li is convinced that poverty has its origins mainly in what he calls »the incorrect structural patterns established by the rulers« (p. 89). In a very honest way, he explains what is rotten in the People's Republic of China. The original manuscript dates back to 2004 and Li has updated it, which is easy to follow thanks to the layout. The updated version has been toned down a bit, but not because Li got cold feet. Rather, there have been changes in government policies since 2004 which have helped to improve the situation. Nevertheless, his text still is a »cri de coeur« intended to shake things up. He states that the social security system does not include Chinese peasants (p. 91) and claims that leaving the distribution of resources to the powers that be is not the most effective way of fighting poverty because of the problem of corruption (p. 92). Li also explains the structure of wages and notes that, for peasants, it is »totally inhuman« (p. 95). He also asks questions which seem perfectly normal to Westerners, but in the Chinese context are quite incredible: »China's population consists of 70 percent peasants. How can it be that the state does not represent their interests?« (p. 95). His openness is stunning. Take, for example, his words on the legal system in China: »Poor people cannot afford the law; for them it is a luxury product« (p. 96). But he also explains the dilemma of the lower administrative levels, pointing out

that lower party or government bodies »cannot exist without contraventions« because the Ministry of Finance covers only 60 percent of the budgeted expenditure and the remaining 40 percent must be »earned« by local institutions (p. 96).

Li concludes his text by stating: »In every sector [of society] there are marginalized people and privileged people, and the privileged receive their benefits largely at the expense of the marginalized« (p. 99). But even though he brings up many of China's most painful problems, he never criticizes the national government. On the contrary, even this outspoken scholar closes his essay with supportive words for the leaders: »Fortunately, the new party leadership has submitted the so-called ›Scientific Development Concept‹ and has written on the banner of the party: ›Putting people first‹.« It is not clear whether he really believes this or whether it is mere genuflection to placate the authorities.

And Li is not alone with this style of writing. It is interesting to see how these Chinese scholars attack China's urgent problems while never quite crossing the line, which is the most important consideration for intellectuals in China: you only have a chance of exerting influence if you do not challenge the power of the ruling party. There is a fine line between naming the problems and avoiding confrontation with leadership. For example, Yu Jianrong detects a »crisis of governance,« by which he means that the effectiveness of the state in upholding the social order is no longer guaranteed (p. 111). Even though this is a justified complaint, he also states at the end of his essay: »we all noted the efforts of the Communist Party (...) at the 17th Party Congress. Maybe we do not fully agree with the approach of the political leadership, but nevertheless their attempts to answer the social problems merit approval« (p. 131).

An analysis of the »difficult reform of the judicial system in China« is presented by He Weifang. He is well known for his vehement rejection of the death penalty and was one of the signatories of Charta 08, the document which landed Liu Xiaobo in prison for 11 years. He explains that, in some cases, the party directly intervenes in trials and imposes a compromise, so that the proceedings »become a farce or charade« (p. 104). In this system, according to He, the court and prosecution must heed »the wishes of outside powers« (p. 104). Taking all this into account, it is not surprising to read in the short but helpful portrait of the author that he was transferred from prestigious Beijing University to a university in the western province of Xinjiang in March 2009 (p. 23).

Zhan Jiang is also very blunt in his article on the »media as a driving force of civic participation« (p. 133). Zhan states that traditional official newspapers, especially at the local level, are controlled by local officials and »are full of boring instructions that do not affect the public.« Thus the media, which should be a social tool, is »degraded into a tool of (...) local potentates« (p. 140). Zhan not only criticizes the media, but also calls for media laws (p. 141).

Another impressive piece is a short article written by Liu Junning. In their introduction the editors explain that Liu »breaks a taboo« with his text (p. 189).

And that is no exaggeration. Liu not only calls for gradual administrative reforms within the existing system, but also for real political reforms within the party and government. According to Liu, gradual reforms are hampered by difficulties or what he calls »specifics.« »They only affect the surface of the system but not its substance« (p. 191). That means, in his view, that »the reforms within the current system only touch the walls. With the next stage of reforms one must tackle the basic structure« (p. 191). This should include, for example, a »switch from dictatorship to democracy« (p. 192). Referring to the People's Republic's constitution, which states that China is a democratic dictatorship, Liu brings home the message by noting »what we see is more a dictatorship than a democracy« (p. 192).

Even though some scholars in China and the West would argue that China is no longer a dictatorship but an authoritarian state, this illustrates one of the most positive features of this collection of essays: Chinese scholars are speaking out and do not hesitate to get on a collision course with the leadership.

Besides the large quantity of information about China the reader is presented with, it is also an interesting reading experience because of its singular expressions and style. For example, one encounters the classic »emancipation of thought« (p. 35) or vague references to the »events of 1989« (p. 56). Sometimes, this makes the book a little hard to read and, at first glance, one might feel inclined to criticize the translation. In fact, however, it is both eye opening and helpful that most of the translators stuck to the original Chinese texts as much as possible, which gives a better understanding, even if it takes time to get used to it. Sometimes it can be confusing because the transcription of Chinese terms is not consistent. Furthermore, it would perhaps be easier to read if the brief portraits of the contributors were placed just before their essays and not all together at the beginning, compelling the reader to shift back and forth. But these are only minor objections. On the other hand, another major plus is the wonderful photographs.

All in all, the books provide a vivid picture of the internal debates in China and help Western readers to understand better what is going on in the Middle Kingdom. Both are must-reads because they describe what contemporary Chinese scholars think and how they see the world.

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