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DEALING WITH A RESURGENT CHINA

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Talking about Chinese Society and Talking to Chinese Society

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Abstract

In Europe, the mainstream discourse on China reduces Chinese society to its political system. Chinese society is presented as being backward, rigid, fragmented, and incapable of challenging political power. European values are systematically opposed to supposed Chinese values. In this polarized framework, the Chinese are generally considered to be devoid of opinions, or at least unable to express them. The first problem of this narrative is that many Chinese, including those who are most critical of the current regime, consider it as "anti-Chinese". The second is that it does not correspond to reality. As a consequence, if we want to talk about China and to China, we have to change our vision of Chinese society. Chinese society is different from the mainstream image of a totalitarian society populated by submissive individuals who are dominated by an omnipotent power. First, the Chinese population is not submissive. Social conflict arises in a very broad range of situations. Second, new opinion movements question the new model of society which has emerged in the 1990s. Third, Chinese people, and more particularly the middle class, enjoy a large scope of freedom in matter of lifestyle and personal choices. Finally, despite censorship, social networks have become a genuine forum for exchanging information and view. All these changes oblige the Party to take into account new norms and values which are not so different from those expressed in European societies. The political authorities know that they are judged by the people, and the people know that they can put pressure on the authorities. Chinese society therefore maintains a critical distance from the authorities. It is less influenced by ideological currents than by "interests." From this point of view, the Chinese population shares a lot of opinions and expectations with the European population.

Moreover, the supposed "Chinese values" are in fact found all over the world and that there is nothing inherently "Chinese" about them. What they all have in common is that they stem from European political theories or ideologies that developed precisely in reaction to the emergence of the Enlightenment and democracy. Today in Europe, xenophobic, homophobic, and ultra-nationalist ideologies, illiberal parties, and even some national governments defend the idea that values are not universal. And these ideas can be leveraged to obtain good electoral results. The fact that liberal European values are being challenged in Europe itself should encourage us to take account of the doubts being expressed in Chinese society.

Key Findings

- There is no doubt that Europe needs to take a different view of China if it wants to start a dialogue with Chinese people.
- One of the first steps is to recognize the distance that exists between political power and social life in China, and the specific nature of the relationship between the two spheres.
- Social classes, social categories, and social groups are now defending their interests, and distinct opinion movements are emerging. From this point of view, the Chinese population shares a lot of opinions and expectations with the European population.
- The Party, far from being omnipotent, is obliged to make concessions to Society's demands.
- The political authorities know that they are judged by the people, and the people know that they can put pressure on the authorities.
- This balance is fragile. The temporary or long-term inability of the one-party system to satisfy the various social categories can lead to reactions at any time.
- The existence of a field of social conflict shows that Chinese society has the capacity to show its discontent.
- More significantly, the new generations question the current model of society based on hard work, competition, and consumption.
- There is no cultural or structural opposition to "democracy" in general in Chinese society, but there are serious questions about the impact that a system of representative democracy (in short, elections) would have on the country's stability and development.
- The supposed "Chinese values" are in fact found all over the world and that there is nothing inherently "Chinese" about them. What they all have in common is that they stem from European political theories or ideologies.
- Today in Europe, xenophobic, homophobic, and ultra-nationalist ideologies, illiberal parties, and even some national governments defend the idea that values are not universal. And these ideas can be leveraged to obtain good electoral results.
- The fact that European values are being challenged in Europe itself should encourage us to take account of the doubts being expressed in Chinese society.

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Introduction

In Europe, the mainstream discourse on China, whether academic, journalistic, or political, reduces Chinese society to its political system. The aim is to show that all China's problems are linked to the existence of a one-party system, rather than to the sort of events or phenomena that may affect any society, whether democratic or not.

Within this discourse, Chinese society is presented as being backward, rigid, fragmented, and incapable of challenging political power. Finally, the absence of democracy is assumed to make China a dangerous state because of its propensity to "export" its supposed model.

This discourse on China is also, implicitly, a discourse directed toward China. In practice, the media, governments, and certain researchers address Chinese society in a way that extols the merits of the "European model". According to this view, the Chinese population is split between, on the one hand, a mass that is in thrall to Party propaganda and therefore has no opinions of their own, and, on the other hand, a few courageous and dedicated individuals (lawyers, intellectuals, activists) who support the democratic model. This approach systematically opposes European values to supposed Chinese values, and assumes that these are fundamentally different from one another. In this polarized framework (where everything and everyone is either for or against "democracy"), the Chinese are generally considered to be devoid of opinions, or at least unable to express them.

The first flaw in this discourse is that it is inaudible to the Chinese population. Of course, it could be argued that this lack of understanding is itself the result of propaganda, but this argument fails to explain why that same discourse similarly falls on deaf ears among those who are most impervious to the influence of propaganda. In informal discussions with academics, intellectuals, or ordinary members of the middle class in interviews conducted as part of the DWARC project with students or overseas Chinese, and even in exchanges with young bicultural people we find an undeniable resentment of the way China is represented in Europe. Individuals in this specific "public" are unlikely to be under the ideological yoke of the Party, and are often critical of the policies implemented in China and of certain aspects of the political regime, yet they feel that they know "another China," that of their family, friends, and colleagues. This other China has little in common with the European narrative, which instead appears to them as being profoundly "anti-Chinese."

The other problem is that this discourse on China does not correspond to reality. It denies the complexity of Chinese society, together with the many ambiguities, contradictions, and questions that are identified by research in this area. It fails to take account of the mass of available information and the dynamics highlighted by both Chinese and non-Chinese scholars.

To be clear, I am not arguing here for a more positive (or negative) evaluation of the structures of Chinese society, or a more accommodating attitude toward the Chinese political system. Nor is it a question of viewing representative democracy and authoritarianism as equivalent regimes. In short, I am not proposing any "value" judgements, but rather trying to answer the following question: under what conditions could Europe speak

better – more accurately and more effectively – both about Chinese society and to Chinese society?

To answer this question, three approaches are needed. First, we need to challenge the image of China that is presented in Europe. Second, we need to recognize that, while most Chinese are not preoccupied with questions of political regimes, this does not mean that they have no opinions in other areas. Indeed, these opinions are crucial to understanding the relations between society and the Party-State. Finally, we also need to present a different image of European societies, one that is not centered on a unique set of models and values but rather on a plurality of models and values. We need to avoid presenting Europe and China as two irreducible worlds.

Chinese Society Has Become a “Normal” Society

Today, the view of Chinese society as a mass of docile individuals dominated by a totalitarian power is very far from reality. In fact, many features of this society make it appear “normal” in an international context, and even broadly similar to European societies. First, the Chinese population is not submissive. Social conflict arises in a very broad range of situations. Since the end of the 1990s, employees of state-owned enterprises undergoing restructuring, exploited migrant workers, homeowners scammed by developers or new housing managers, and residents living near polluting factories have stood up for their interests against powerful companies and administrations. More recently, delivery workers have protested about their working conditions and pay, and demonstrations have been organized by citizens who found themselves dispossessed by collapsing banks or by companies that failed to build the homes for which they had been paid in advance. Even more significantly, at the end of November 2022, thousands of people took to the streets to demand an end to the “Dynamic zero-COVID” policy. A month earlier, most Western observers and journalists had proclaimed that China was now completely under the yoke of Xi Jinping, who had just been re-elected for a third term. Yet the demonstrations in November, together with the reactions on social networks, showed that a large section of the population, far from having fallen under a blanket of oppression, was determined to make its voice heard and even to have its demands met. At the beginning of December, it became evident that the Chinese authorities were beginning to dismantle the system they had put in place three years earlier. Although measures had already been taken on 11 November, the unrest forced the Party to take more radical measures.

Opinions are expressed not only through social movements but also on social networks. Despite censorship, these have become a genuine forum for exchanging information and views. Because of the authorities' ability to control information, and in the absence of independent national media, it has also become an indispensable source of information for the Party and the government on the state of the country. Just as social networks allowed us to find out what was happening in China during the pandemic, the central authorities use the same means to obtain information about local situations, social problems, and the failings of officials.

The protests that take place in today's China do not constitute a major challenge to the political system. And indeed, why should we expect them to? We will return to this

question later. Nevertheless, the existence of such protests does reflect the emergence of interests and representations on the part of particular social groups and categories. This phenomenon alone should lead analysis of Chinese society to move away from its established models.

In many domains, Chinese society has evolved in a way that is the envy of many developing countries. The population's standard of living has risen considerably, enabling a large number of people to enjoy the lifestyle of a consumer society. The development of education, particularly higher education institutions, has led to a spectacular improvement in the quality of the workforce and in people's life opportunities. Admittedly, inequalities have increased in proportion, but economic growth, poverty-reduction policies, and social conflicts have all helped to improve the lives of the majority of the population. Absolute poverty has been eradicated and a middle class has emerged. Members of this middle class are well-educated and well-paid, they act as rational investors and consumers, and, although politically moderate, they are quick to defend their rights. Together, this class is emblematic of the modernity of Chinese society. They travel, go out, take an interest in politics, and strive to give their children the best conditions for success, often sending them to study in foreign universities. This group – variously referred to as the intermediate classes or strata, the middle-property class, or (in official speeches) the “middle incomers” – set the tone of Chinese society in terms of lifestyles, tastes, and leisure activities.

It is also important to note that the concerns and expectations of Chinese people are much the same as those found in modern societies around the world: finding a good job, getting married, having a child, providing them with a good education, accumulating wealth, consuming, and so on. In short, Chinese society has entered the world of modernity in the most trivial sense of the term. This is a situation that affects the whole of society: although these concerns and expectations primarily concern the middle class, they also serve as a reference point for those who enjoy consumer society to a lesser degree, such as peasants and migrants. Even the problems and anxieties facing China bear a strong resemblance to those of European societies. A range of familiar issues – the race for qualifications from early childhood, ubiquitous competition, discrimination against the working classes and their difficulties in being represented, the anxiety of the middle class in the face of an uncertain future – fuel debates in the private sphere, on social networks, and in the work of Chinese researchers.

The Conditions for a Modus Vivendi

Modern Chinese society demands a lot from its rulers. This is due to the relationship that developed between the people and the Party in the early 1990s. Following the dramatic events of Tiananmen Square in 1989, the strategy for maintaining the legitimacy of the Party, and thus keeping it in power, came to be based on satisfying the material and moral interests of the population. The general avoidance of talking about politics should not, therefore, be seen as a sign of the failure of China's normalization, but rather as the condition of that normalization. Chinese society has become what it is today precisely by sidestepping the political question (that is, questioning the very nature of the political regime). Since the 1990s, all the Party's ideological watchwords – the Three Represents, the Chinese Dream, Small

Prosperity, Common Prosperity – have revolved around the rejection of anything that might divide (including, of course, representative democracy) or undermine the upward trajectory of China and the Chinese people. According to the Party, China and the Chinese people will only be able to accomplish their ambitions if that success is achieved as part of a common project centered around the Party and the Nation.

From the outset, then, this new relationship between the population and the Party was based on a nationalist and organic conception of China's development. Of course, the current authorities are taking political advantage of this conception. But this is nothing new. Since the end of the nineteenth century, most elites in China, whatever their political views, have been convinced that the country's development and modernization, the prosperity of the Chinese people, and the country's return to the world stage can be achieved only through strong, unified government. China is not just any country, in terms of its size, demography, diplomatic impact, etc., so this comeback is inevitably taking on spectacular and disruptive forms in an international context.

It should also be noted that the nation's assertiveness on the international stage has an instrumental aspect for individuals: the increased presence in the world of Chinese companies, diplomats, universities, and workers is leading to increased opportunities for personal success. This instrumentalization is not just about material benefits, but also about improving the perception and status of China and the Chinese. For example, Chinese travelers are bound to feel a certain pride when they see European airports (and Italian trains) displaying information in Chinese on how to get around or when and where to depart. And this sense of pride can logically be attributed to the accomplishments of the Party.

To be even more precise, the Party's mission, as conceived by the population and expressed through interviews, social conflicts, and social networks, should be to create a "middle class" society (in the official language, a "society of small prosperity") that encompasses the whole Chinese population. This process has been underway since the late 1990s, with some success but, as we shall see, also with many difficulties.

What has changed since Xi Jinping came to power is that the range of taboo subjects, on which discussion is limited, has gradually been extended. Almost everything can be considered to be political or linked to the concept of national security. But this situation does not limit the margins of freedom that have been acquired in the domain of individual choice. For example, while LGBT associations have seen their capacity for action limited or even abolished (like many other associations), sexual orientation itself remains a matter of personal choice. We will also see that this return to control does not prevent opinions from being expressed.

Sharing Values With Europe?

The mainstream image of Chinese society in Europe is that of a society with specific values that are very different from European values. According to this image, Chinese society considers the collective to be superior to the individual, respect for human rights is non-existent, and there is no interest in democratic debate. It is also assumed that the Chinese are

resistant to the idea that there are universal values common to the whole of humanity. Three arguments can be put forward to challenge this image.

First, one can argue that these supposed counter-values are in fact found all over the world and that there is nothing inherently “Chinese” about them. What they all have in common is that they stem from European political theories or ideologies that developed precisely in reaction to the emergence of the Enlightenment and democracy. The very concept of authoritarian rule was developed in Europe and is part of the heritage of European values. And even today in Europe, xenophobic, homophobic, and ultra-nationalist ideologies, illiberal parties, and even some national governments defend the idea that values are not universal. And these ideas can be leveraged to obtain good electoral results.

It should be remembered that both the “Maoist” regime and the current one refer to Marxism – a European ideology if ever there was one – even if they combine this reference with other elements: Confucian or legalist reminiscences in the case of the Maoist regime, and capitalist and illiberal elements since the 1990s. Furthermore, when the Chinese government itself takes up this idea of a Chinese exception in terms of values, the specific mechanisms that it extolls are in fact commonly found in Europe too. One example is the value of meritocracy, which is supposed to replace the use of elections for the selection of political leaders. In modern China the value of skills, competence, good governance, and technocracy are promoted, while it is argued that elections would engender “populism” and “demagoguery”. The speed of decision-making in a one-party system is emphasized, while the democratic process is said to lead to hesitation, inertia, and constant policy changes. But once again, surely we find these same views in many European countries, attached to projects to strengthen national identity and curtail civil liberties?

European democracy and liberal values are in crisis. The recent success of authoritarian ideologies, which are increasingly powerful in Europe, is a symptom of this situation. In China, as in Europe, people debate the supposed dangers posed by migration (although, in China, this is more likely to concern internal migration) and by ethnic or sexual minorities. The same criticisms of elective representative democracy that are flourishing in Europe and the Americas are also of concern to the Chinese. There is no cultural or structural opposition to “democracy” in general in Chinese society, but there are serious questions about the impact that a system of representative democracy (in short, elections) would have on the country’s stability. The debate is framed in pragmatic terms: what would we gain from such a system, and what would we lose by abandoning the current system? In a country that has no experience in this field, many people may come the conclusion that it would be unwise to embark on a system that seems so “bad,” even in the view of a significant number of Europeans.

The second argument against the common image of Chinese society relates to the content of opinions in China, which often differ little from those expressed in Europe. Admittedly, as mentioned above, there is little debate about the political system, and it is common to hear intellectuals, researchers, students, and ordinary members of the middle class express their doubts or fears about the consequences, for the country’s stability and prosperity, of establishing an election-based representative democracy. Nevertheless, beyond this blind spot – which, it must be repeated, is tending to increase – Chinese society and more specifically the middle class express opinions. Questions about freedom of association and expression, the legitimacy of the defense of interests, the need to fight

against corruption and to support the extension of the rule of law, the protection of sexual minorities, respect for fundamental rights, the place of work, and the education of children are always present, and find voice in social conflicts and opinion movements, on social networks, in private discussions, and, of course, in interviews.

In China, as in Europe, people's concerns revolve around problems of access to housing and property ownership, health (including access to health insurance), education, social inequalities, working conditions, employment and unemployment, meritocracy, relationship problems with children, partners, and parents, and so on. But there are also debates about life philosophies, lifestyles, fashion, tastes, and leisure. In short, there are many ways of thinking about the kind of society people want to create in the future.

A Society Reflecting on Itself

The fact that the obedience of the population is based on a *modus vivendi* means that social stability is not based on terror, nor on eternal cultural norms specific to China, but rather on respect for social interests, even if they are obviously not all treated in the same way. This reality can be seen in the way social conflicts are arbitrated and negotiated. The social concerns that are held to be most important in the eyes of the Party are also expressed through social policies and public action. One example is the campaign against absolute poverty, which combines measures relating to housing, health, and income. Another of the Party's main concerns can be gauged from the recent measures for tackling the real estate crisis, which are notably aimed at preserving the wealth of the middle class, since property investing is the main way of saving money in China. The Chinese government places the concept of the welfare state at the heart of its social policies. From this point of view, China is much more advanced than the democratic countries in the group of BRICS. This may explain why the Chinese "model" is so attractive to some of the world's population. But once again, the successes achieved by this model have less to do with its Chinese character than with its particular historical trajectory and its willingness – for better or worse – to grant maximum power to the state, including over large Chinese companies (whether public or private), large entrepreneurs, and billionaires.

The present situation of China, in which a single party is attempting to satisfy a society that can defend its interests, yet without giving that society the means to organize itself, is fragile. The balance depends on subjective factors (the population's degree of satisfaction), external factors (the international economic situation), and factors that are difficult to control (local government indebtedness, social conflicts, the level of internal growth). Among these factors, the recent slowdown in economic growth poses a significant threat, as it increases youth unemployment. Jobs are now harder to find, especially for students who did not study at elite universities, but even those from the top higher education institutions are finding it difficult. Competition is also reducing salary levels, particularly for people's first jobs. In many sectors, the pandemic has led to business failures, and the real estate crisis has brought property and construction giants to their knees. In short, we are not only seeing slower than expected progress from the "new economy" based on cutting-edge technologies, but also the sectors that previously contributed so much to the Chinese miracle are now in difficulty. Many middle-class families are facing the prospect of social downgrading because of falling incomes, tensions on the job market, and excessive debt (particularly property debt).

Crucially, our knowledge of these problems does not stem from a few indiscretions or from Western newspapers: they are analyzed in detail in Chinese academic journals, which are also trying to find solutions.

The combination of these objective data with a subjective dimension, that of public opinion, has led a part of the middle class to call into question the norms and values on which the “society of small prosperity” was established. The middle class is in the midst of an existential crisis. Unlike the working classes, which are still struggling to satisfy their basic needs, and the rich, whose situation is made simpler by their unlimited means, the middle class is faced with difficult choices. What should I buy? What brand of clothes or car? Where should I live? Which school should I choose for my child? Where should I invest my money? Whom should I marry? Should I change jobs? Being part of the middle class also means spending a lot to ensure that your offspring get the best education and to meet the increasing costs of health care. These are just some of the questions and problems facing all members of the middle class who want to demonstrate to others, and themselves, that they fit the image of the quintessential new Chinese: a good, respectable citizen, and a rational consumer, enjoying prosperity and good taste.

Today, however, this anxiety is compounded by a feeling of unease due to the impossibility of meeting these new standards in an increasingly complicated economic climate. The race for social status and social reproduction is leading many Chinese people into debt overload, pushing them to work harder and harder. They have the feeling of being trapped in a system whose logic escapes them. When reading the research of Chinese sociologists in this field, the concept that most readily springs to mind is that of “alienation.”

More recently, new “opinion” movements have appeared that express this malaise, particularly among young people, which in itself demonstrates the vitality of Chinese society. Strong criticism is being levelled at the very essence of the norms and values that emerged from the reforms of the 1990s, namely an insatiable desire to succeed and progress (individually, as a family, and collectively as a nation) in the context of ubiquitous competition. Young people from the middle class, but sometimes also second- or third-generation migrants from rural areas, no longer want to “play the game” and are asking “what’s the point?”. They sense an “involution” (*xiaojuan*) of the system, and feel that the competition for money, power, and social status no longer makes sense and is leading them nowhere. This attitude is the product of physical and mental weariness, but also of the fact that many people realize that their efforts are only leading to minimal gains, or even leading them backwards. In short, the game is no longer worth the candle. The ideology of “996” (working from 9am to 9pm, six days a week) – the symbol of the new norms of hard work, competition, unlimited consumption, and accumulation – is losing its appeal.

Among these opinion movements, it was the *tangping* movement (which appeared in 2020 but took off in the wake of a few words posted in May 2021 on a social network) that brought the phenomenon to greater visibility. The term “*tangping*” can be literally translated as “lying flat,” but its real meaning is close to the expression “let’s lie down.” It means no longer taking part in the social game, working just enough to survive and enjoy life, not getting married or having children, and avoiding buying an apartment or a car in order not to take on responsibilities. Another manifestation of this trend was recently reported by the newspaper *Le Monde*: the fashion of celebrating one’s resignation in a restaurant. This life

change has come to be seen as a happy event that will allow one to enjoy life.¹ The movement has no organization or leader, but it nonetheless has a large number of adherents. It is the expression of a strong social identity, crystallized through social networks, and although it expresses dissatisfaction with current society, it does not seek to imagine a different form of society to replace it.

This opinion movement is concerning to the authorities, and has also been heavily criticized by leading intellectuals. But how can this type of movement – which is diffuse, anonymous, and non-political – be opposed? So many people, including those in positions of power, are asking themselves: what should be done to reform society? To give other meanings to life? The debates around these questions are giving rise to a great deal of research, which can be read in the Chinese academic media. This research does not hold back from criticizing certain policies or practices. But the paradox is only apparent: the authorities, being unable to contain such a widespread movement, need advice, and they get it from those who know Chinese society best – that is, from academic researchers. One of the characteristics of the relationship between researchers and politicians is that the latter continue to rely on the work of the former to understand China. This does not mean that politicians always listen to the advice of researchers, but that they take account of researchers' analyses when they feel the need to do so.

Conclusion: Using A Different Language

The challenge of talking about China and talking to China involves clearly perceiving the characteristics of Chinese society. The aim of this policy brief is not to judge Chinese society, nor to highlight the achievements of the government or of the “Chinese model,” but rather to point out that Chinese society is different from the mainstream image of a totalitarian society populated by submissive individuals who are dominated by an omnipotent power. There is no doubt that Europe needs to take a different view of China if it wants to start a dialogue with Chinese people. How can we talk to China without giving the impression that we are trying to promote a “virtuous” (European) model against a “non-virtuous” (Chinese) one, that we are pitting a good society against a bad one?

One of the first steps is to recognize the distance that exists between political power and social life in China, and the specific nature of the relationship between the two spheres. Social classes, social categories, and social groups are now defending their interests, and distinct opinion movements are emerging. The Party, far from being omnipotent, is obliged to take account of its distance from this society, and to make a certain number of concessions to its demands: it must play the *modus vivendi* game. In this respect, the relationship between the state and society is not very dissimilar from the one we know in Europe. Admittedly, the political context in China is not the same, and the absence of mediation by the institutions of representative democracy considerably modifies relationships between the authorities and the population, but these relationships nonetheless exist. The political authorities know that they are judged by the people, and the people know that they can put pressure on the authorities. Chinese society therefore maintains a critical distance from the authorities. It is less influenced by ideological currents than by “interests.” This is an essential point, because one

¹ Simon Leplâtre, *Le Monde*, August 28, 2023.

of the criteria Hannah Arendt uses to identify totalitarian tendencies in a society is precisely the disappearance of the concept of “interests” in favor of an ideology that is supposed to determine society and politics entirely. We do not see this all-powerful idea at work in China. Most of the population live their lives without being guided by any specific ideology. Owing to the meticulous surveillance of the population, and to the space afforded for expression on social networks and through social conflicts, a certain balance exists based on a kind of social management.

But this balance is fragile. The temporary or long-term inability of the one-party system to satisfy the various social categories can lead to reactions at any time. The existence of a field of social conflict shows that Chinese society today has the capacity to show its discontent. The development of opinion movements questioning the new model of society based on hard work, competition, and consumption reveals a certain form of emancipation – the possibility of opting out – which in itself obliges us to change the way we talk to China. Although it is too early to draw conclusions from our research, it appears that the opinions expressed are complex, nuanced, and based on a strongly self-centered point of view that – for the time being – keeps the question of a change of political regime at bay. The primary interest of our interviewees seems to be their own personal trajectory. Priority is given to the individual point of view, and to freedoms at the individual level in terms of lifestyles, career, or sexual orientation. This perspective is obviously much more in evidence among the younger generations.

Finally, it is necessary both to take these opinions seriously into account and to adopt a modest attitude toward the virtues of “European values.” The fact that these values are being challenged in Europe itself, through the migration crisis or the crisis of democracy, should encourage us to take account of the doubts being expressed in Chinese society. Are we not living in a time when serious questions are being asked about the value of elections and parliamentarianism, and about the virtues of tolerance and dialogue? Some would like to steer representative democracy toward greater stability, order, efficiency, and technocracy. They advocate for an illiberal, meritocratic, oligarchic regime. Others, meanwhile, would like to give the people a greater say and to exercise democratic control over technocrats. The history of democracy is made up of these debates and conflicts. From the end of the eighteenth century onwards, people in Europe, and even democrats, highlighted the supposed dangers of giving power to “the people,” and in particular to peasants, domestic servants, the poor, and women.

In this situation of crisis for democracy, might there be some benefit in taking account of the questions raised by Chinese public opinion, to help us reflect on these issues? We should not imagine, of course, that we will find the ideal solution through a process of theoretical reflection. Clearly, the debate must take account of political realities, including diverse interests, social classes, inequalities, social stratification, and of course politics. But that is also why it is essential for us to take seriously the opinions of the Chinese people and the way in which Chinese society views itself.

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