

China and the Issue of Communism Chinese Transition and the Future of China Excerpts from L'Asie et Nous

***Jean-Luc Domenach Interview with Aimé Savard
Translated from the French by Betty Ann Maheu. MM***

The following excerpts from L'Asie et Nous, Jean-Luc Domenach Entretien avec Aimé Savard are taken from Chapter 6, "China and the Issue of Communism," and Chapter 7, "Chinese Transition and the Future of China." The materials are used with the permission of the publisher, (Desclée de Brouwer, Paris, 2001).

I. China and the Issue of Communism

Aimé Savard: ... You wanted to entitle this chapter "China and the Issue of Communism." Why do you link these two realities: China is thousands of years old and Communism is a recent arrival and already on its way out?

Jean-Luc Domenach: I know that it already seems strange, and that it will seem even stranger in the future to link these two matters together. China, in fact, is a reality that is thousands of years old, and its history is not over. It is a rich, extraordinary history, and in the future, it will become more and more clear that Communism has only been a short moment in that history, and probably a rather mediocre one. As for myself, I arrived at the subject of China through the issue of Communism. It is also something typical of this generation. It was a time when Communism in China won fame for pretending to be something different.

(From now on only the initials will be used: A.S.- and J-L.D.-)

A.S.- And a Communism that fascinated a number of Westerners.

J-L.D.- [...] that fascinated a large number of the Westerners of my generation. I wanted to know all I could about China to enable me to make a judgment on the validity of the Maoist faith. It was also a matter of conviction for me. I had always been of the opinion that knowledge is valuable in itself, surely, but the service it renders to the collectivity is even more valuable. The service that I could render was to help shed light gradually on Communism's contribution to China. The answer was very problematic. [...]

A.S.- To understand Chinese Communism well, which is very original in respect to Soviet Communism, and to other forms of Communism, we must consider that it was set in a mould fashioned by the Chinese Empire. Was it not then necessary to know the history of China in order to grasp its specificity?

J-L.D.- Yes this is something that I came to realize gradually. Other needs had already come to light: knowledge of the language, first of all. I have already mentioned how very difficult that language is, and how long and laborious it is to learn it. But once you know the language, things in China, as everywhere else, take on a different light. Language gives a special access to the reality of the country.

Therefore, one must know the language, but one must also know the movements going on in society and in contemporary culture. The Communist Revolution is first and foremost a contemporary phenomenon. It is a 20th century revolution, which is part of the great movement for national independence, and the great anti-imperialist movement, which occurred during the second third of the 20th century. We cannot understand anything if we do not understand that it is the result of a collective will based on nationalism, against the Western powers that humiliated and enslaved the Chinese as well numerous other peoples in the world.

A.S.- Yes, but the Chinese revolution was a historical moment wherein Mao and the Communist Party took over power. Then this revolution became institutionalized in a regime. And this regime nonetheless modeled itself on China's old empire. It found its reference points in Chinese history and traditions, would this not simply be Confucianism for example?

J-L.D.- Yes, many are of that mind and I also am more and more inclined in that direction, but with extreme prudence and for a variety of reasons. First of all, during the present period, the economic and globalization movements are so strong that their influence remains, from afar, the main factors of transformation of Chinese society and politics. Second, if the past plays a role in the evolution of the Chinese Communist regime, that past is not very old. Before, citing Confucianism, we must take into account the bureaucratic traditions of the Chinese Empire as it was at the very end.

All this to me seems much more present in China today than any base of traditional Chinese culture, that, in my opinion, we mention with some exaggeration. It is erroneous to think that there exists in some way, a given cultural base in nations and in human societies, which is given at a certain moment, and then remains with only a few insignificant modifications through to modern times. In fact, that base continually changes. Confucianism, that many cite as the foundation of Chinese civilization has itself evolved a great deal. Furthermore, it has never been the sole authoritative tradition in Chinese culture. In fact, there is a whole series of traditions of dissidence, of protest—popular revolts are examples—that have weakened the position of Confucianism in society.

A.S.- But can we not say that a Mao Zedong or a Deng Xiaopeng corresponds more to the image of China emperors than to the image the Socialists had of a socialist or Communist leader during the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century?

J-L.D.- We can say that and many do. Mao certainly compared himself to an emperor, to the first, the most important, the great founder, Emperor Qin. He thereby diverted to his advantage the accusation leveled against him by certain of his opponents: "Mao is like Emperor Qin; he burns the books."

But I would like to mention a general phenomenon in the history of Communism in the 20th century: Marxist-Leninist regimes everywhere set in place personal powers that are literally authoritarian. This is still true today in Cuba, and it was so in Moscow, because Stalin liked comparing himself to Ivan the Terrible. On the other hand, when we refer to emperors of the past,

what emperors are we talking about? To what despotic traditions are we alluding? There are many throughout history. Surely the habits of personal behavior, under the Empire favored the evolution of Maoist power—more so than for Deng Xiaopeng, who remained more modest at least outwardly. My tendency is not to make too many comparisons with tradition, which are seductive, that attract the customer, that offer a kind of intellectual fireworks for tourists in China, but that, finally do not really allow for particularizing the characteristics of Chinese Communism. If this type of Communism has had its own specificities, they do not lie in personal power. We must look for them in greater utopian ambitions. Can this utopian ambition be explained by the past? Maybe, in one sense. For there have been utopian traditions in China, but no more so than anywhere else, and no more so than authoritarian traditions. Basically, we are obliged to conclude that on the one hand, the main characteristic of Chinese Communism is its utopian character, and on the other, its destructive capacity. The two are linked. This central originality cannot be explained by the past. Therefore, I am a bit suspicious of any exaggeration regarding the role of the past [...]

A.S.- ...The history of Chinese Communism since Mao Zedong's victory has been a succession of changes, sometimes even of reversals...

J-L.D.-:I spent a great deal of time trying to understand the importance of recent changes because, behind these changes, there are nonetheless some lines of continuity between the China of the Maoist era and the China of the last 200 years. Ideological talk always defines the Communist Party as the leading authority that builds Socialism. The economy that today, is evolving largely outside the plan, perhaps towards an illegitimate form of capitalism is presented as a Socialist Market Economy. There is continuity also among the men. At the top level, the Jiang Zemins and the Li Pengs are the people who have been formed on the benches of Soviet universities, at the beginning of the 50s, and who have only a weak propensity for understanding ideas of democracy and of respect for culture. They are people who have grown up in the Communist mould, and that is what we must keep in mind,

whatever may be their pragmatism and the penchant for technocracy.

Besides, the means for an eventual turning back are perhaps there: the power of the Public Security and the State Security, the strength of the army, that still numbers more than 2 million soldiers and who, in case of necessity, as we saw well in 1989, can be used to massacre the population. There are still some convinced Communists, though there are not very many, but they are often leaders, and they are intent on safeguarding their powers. [...]

A.S.- Even if we can make comparisons between Mao and Stalin, Chinese Communism has still been very different from Soviet Communism. What have been the major differences?

J-L.D.- Chinese Communism has held a more moral discourse. Its wish to change human beings translated into a higher degree of idealism. What for the Soviets was only a matter of words was concretely undertaken in China, at least at first. The comparison, for example between the two Gulags, the Soviet Gulag and the Chinese Gulag are very revealing. The Soviet Gulag was a concentration camp where people were put to work without much importance given to human losses. The object was above all, economic investment. In the Chinese Gulag, there was instead a real attempt to reform people.

A.S.- Is that what in the Chinese Communist vocabulary is called thought reform and reeducation?

J-L.D.- Yes, and this turned the Chinese Gulag into a terrible world. There is nothing worse that to empty a person of his/her own personality. It is different from the Soviet Gulag, but this difference is for the worse in the measure where idealism is pushed even farther and applied more realistically. There is no equivalent in Soviet history to the "Great Leap Forward" from 1958-1960 which was a tremendous movement of utopian mobilization, and which catapulted a whole population outside of itself. The workers slept in the factories. Peasants sometimes worked 18 hours a day in the fields for months on end. The result of all this was evidently a general exhaustion and terrible losses.

And so, I think that Chinese Communism has been worse than Soviet Communism, at least until the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. It was worse and collapsed more quickly. Don't forget that Soviet Communism lasted for 70 years while at the end of 50 years, we don't know what is left of Chinese Communism. This serious weakness is due to the fact that it was more utopian, that it was long controlled by a man who, alas, believed in what he was doing! Decisive dates intervened very quickly in 1949, Chinese Communism came into power; it re-established order and beginning in 1955, for 20 years, it carried out its destiny through huge utopian mobilizations: the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, which led it to ruin with horrifying consequences. [...]

A.S.- Finally, what will be left of this period, pure and simple of Chinese Communism, that is to say of Maoism?

J-L.D.-: In general, Communism will remain as a very important phenomenon in the history of the world. If it has been in the forefront for so long; if it contributed to setting up a major confrontation: the Cold War that has generated hot wars; if it has been so destructive, it is because it expressed, because it interpreted very strong human aspirations [...] And I think that if, in China, Communism has been so radical, it is due in great part to the intense humiliation China suffered from the West....

II. Chinese Transition and the Future of China

J.L.D.- The scope of China's urbanization is phenomenal. In the next half-century, China will know an almost incredible demographic evolution. Twenty years ago China was still 80% rural, and in 30 to 40 years it will have become from 70% to 75% urban. Within a few decades, the center of gravity of the Chinese population will shift tremendously. This is not in itself unique: it happened in South Korea between the 1950s and today. But what is amazing in the case of China is that this evolution concerns more than a billion people.

A.S.- [...] This urbanization will bring with it some significant concentrations of population in gigantic megalopolises.

J-L.D.- China will set up a system of megalopolises such as do not exist anywhere in the world. This brings us to the Chinese transition enigma, which is economic, social and political. The economic enigma can be summarized as: is it possible to pursue such rapid growth for so long a time, in a situation where competition becomes more and more difficult for the Chinese economy? Presently, according to official statistics, probably overstated. Chinese economic growth is not more than 7 to 7.5%.

This leads us to the social enigma: at what moment will the Chinese people decide that the economic growth is no longer sufficient to satisfy their aspirations? This population is politically emasculated, with no right of free speech. It can make others understand what it thinks but it cannot express this politically. All this is paid for with promises of refrigerators, and television sets within a few years and promises of a considerably improved standard of living....

The last enigma is political. What kind of governance is China aiming for? Democracy is not at all probable in the foreseeable future, but Communism is equally more and more improbable. Where then are Chinese politics going?

A.S.- Can the Chinese system, such as it has now become, still strictly speaking, be considered a Communist regime?

J-L.D.- The question is well taken. About all that is left of Communism are a few institutions, the pretensions of the regime, official speeches, social customs, and the ever-ubiquitous Communist Party. This situation will still weigh heavily for years and years, even decades to come. But we also see that what is going on in China is very different from what is going on in several other Communist regimes still in power: North Korea is petrified in its post Stalinism, Cuba is immobilized in an agonizing Castroism, and even Vietnam that has begun to follow the China model, does not quite make it, because it receives fewer investments, and because the Vietnamese Party is less committed to this end.

In China we find ourselves confronted with a completely new reality founded on reciprocal lies. For us Westerners this is very surprising. In China the government and also the people speak

in lies, and no one has any illusions about it whatsoever. All lie to themselves and to others and no one believes the other's lies. The authorities say, I remain a Communist; I am simply engaging in development. He lies to himself in the measure that his development is more and more capitalistic and less and less communistic. He lies to others because the biggest changes have capitalism and money as goal. At the same time the people say to the government: I obey you. The people manifest their attachment to Communism, but in doing so, they lie to themselves and they know it, since there are very few Communists left among the Chinese population. They lie to the regime that is well aware of it. There is then a kind of tacit accord which permits the system to function, and which has flexibility inconceivable in the Western system. Truly, everyone accepts this reciprocal lie because it is the condition for China's survival during this particular period when everyone makes money on the back of everyone else, and when everyone reaps some advantage. Those in power exploit the economic growth, but since growth is so important—as long as it lasts—the population sees its living standards improve.

A.S.- This system must breed considerable corruption.

J-L.D.- Yes, but a corruption that must be understood within the present Chinese context. We must avoid a certain hypocritical attitude that we, French, are sometimes tempted to adopt in these matters.

The first characteristic of Chinese corruption and dishonest practices is that they are generalized, that is, everyone engages in some small measure in corrupt activities. There is the second job, some small appropriating of others goods. Every public sector is the object of some dishonest practices by gangs or some small group.

I want to cite the example of a French firm that had settled in China. I had warned its leaders to be careful and to negotiate everything. They paid no attention and at the end of two weeks, the cars were disappearing from the car parks. Since they had not well understood, the computers then began to disappear. They had failed to negotiate with the gang that had appropriated the car parks, and who figured it had the right over everything in the place.

We must remember, however, that this kind of corruption is anybody's game. It is a second economy whereby each one earns a bit of money. It is something to which everyone has access. If you can't buy a train ticket through regular channels, you can find some "by going through the back door." It will be two to three times more expensive, but it will not be out of reach if you need to go to a funeral or a wedding. If you take a ship you will discover that some dishonest practices are taken for granted: the ship's personnel receive very little pay, and the tips must normally make up for half the salary. That kind of dishonesty is an integral part of the functioning of the economy and integrated into the economic calculations.

Corruption is therefore generalized but we must understand that it facilitates the functioning of the economy at this time of transition.

(After a brief discussion on the effects of corruption, the journalist returns to the question of communism.)

A.S.- You say that the government maintains that it is Communistic, but that in reality, the economy functions essentially according to the rules of capitalism. The fact remains that the Party is always in power, that it uses every means of control over the people; it suppresses every movement of protest and sees no need to respect human rights.

J-L.D.- That is completely correct. We must very emphatically stress, that China remains one of the world's nations that tramples on human rights. Very reliable non-governmental organizations, in particular, Amnesty International that works in an exceedingly professional, balanced, and efficacious way, regularly mention this....

[...] What do we blame her for? First of all, the number of executions through capital punishment meted out to most of the condemned. Amnesty International gives a benchmark of some thousands of executions every year. I think there are some tens of thousands yearly.

A.S.- These executions are often organized on a massive scale in the stadiums, in public, at least recently. Ordinarily, the condemned receive a bullet in the back of the neck and their families must reimburse the price of the bullet.

(There follows a description of how these executions are carried out before the crowds and an account of how these executions have touched people of very high rank in the government who were tainted with corruption.)

J-L.D.- To conclude this matter, I am convinced that we must forcefully denounce all violations of human rights in China as well as everywhere else. But in truth we must say that in China, this situation, from this point of view, if it is still serious, is no more serious than it was before. It is evolving in such a way as to permit us to hope that, within a few decades, the situation will begin to normalize.

A.S.- To what extent has the Communist Party lost control of the population?

J-L.D.- The question arises because direct repression is less strong than before and the ability of the Party to mobilize itself is weaker. How is the Party going to extricate itself from all this? Everyone who goes to China has the impression that the Chinese they meet behave more and more like people in any other country. But I am also constrained to think that the power still lies with the one Party system. How can we reconcile these two observations? I think that behind all this, there is a new strategy of control especially in directing the economy and society, regulated by very many diverse means, and much more diffused than in the past [...]

A.S.- You mentioned that we have no idea where the Chinese transition is going. However, from the analysis that you have just made, don't you see some direction taking shape?

J-L.D.- There is no comparison between the importance of this country and that of other countries in the world, in the uncertainty that hovers over its future, and the extent of what we know about the present and the extent of what we don't know about the future. That is really the essential Chinese characteristic.

Having said this, there is now a quasi certitude that I would not have dared indicate as such, five or six years ago, at least before the death of Deng Xiaoping, in 1997. Unless there is an economic crisis, Communism has seen its day. It is finished because if they wanted to go back now, it would provoke chaos, create disturbances, and produce a global impoverishment that would render the administration of China by the Chinese government, and by aid organizations near to impossible. Nonetheless, I say barring an economic crisis, because if a major economic crisis did occur the conservatives in the Communist Party would have an argument at their command to turn things around [...]. However, if China escapes a serious economic crisis, I think that Communism will have become obsolete.

A.S.- But beyond the end of Communism, what else can be said.

J-L.D. First of all, by definition what is in the process of taking shape is being prepared in an underground and secret fashion since, as I have already said, the principle behind the present evolution is the reciprocal lie, and what is not said. For that reason, things will be done before we recognize them and before they are expressed.

Many elements can get all mixed up to prepare for the future. There will inevitably be a certain political authoritarianism. To leave the door open to provide an out for the Communist leaders, someone will have to find them a place in the political and economic system. Moreover, overseas as well as within the Chinese population itself, many people are convinced that a big country such as China needs a State that is strong [...]

(After signaling a number of negative aspects in the present situation, the interviewer asks):

A.S.- You have made a number of negative points. Do you not also have reasons to be optimistic for China's future?

J-L.D.-Yes, I am more optimistic that I was in the past. Since manifesting my interest in China, I have, generally been listed among the pessimists. Now, I am more optimistic because, for the first time in 200 years, we must recognize that China's evolution is progressing in large part in a good way. Basically, since the Opium Wars, China has gone from one catastrophe to the next.

Catastrophes from the outside: the Opium Wars, i.e., foreign assaults on China, the war with Japan, the Cold War, which forced China to align itself with the Soviet Union. Social catastrophes, the Chinese crisis under the Empire, the Civil War, Communist repression and follies.

During the last 20 years, this tragic cycle has been in the process of reversing itself. The international community is extraordinarily favorable towards China. Since Nixon's visit to Beijing in 1972, the West has given China special treatment: at first, the West looked at China as an alliance against the Soviet Union, and it benefited from a guarantee of security. Then, since the end of the Cold War, the whole world has been exercising Bishop Myrielle's strategy. You will recall that Bishop Myrielle is the bishop in *Les Misérables*, who welcomes an old prisoner at his table to show him kindness and to teach him civilized manners, thinking that this is the best way to get him to reform. We can say that the West has systematically invited China to its table during the last 20 years, through considerable financial help, and business deals that are often very generous.

The West also furnishes China with technology of all kinds, and notably by receiving an endless stream of students and researchers. Financially and technologically, China is assured of much of its development, thanks to the West that wishes it well [...]

A.S.- You are convinced that China has finally entered into a commendable cycle?

J-L.D.- Yes, in spite of everything, I have the impression that as the years pass, more and more opportunities will arise to keep the cycle praiseworthy. But neither do I forget that for centuries and centuries, a ghost haunts Chinese history: that Ghost in Chinese is called *Luan*.

Luan is disorder or rather chaos. *Luan* is the moment when a society experiences a kind of collapse, a kind of flaw, where nothing works and where catastrophes are linked together. Chinese history has known this many times, at the end of dynasties. The country experiences foreign invasions, weak leadership, revolts multiply and Chinese history seems to come to a standstill. [...]

A.S.- If China manages to avoid the *Luan*, do you think that it will become a very great power by the end of this century?

J-L.D.- We must admit first of all that China has never completely accepted the challenge of the West. As I have already indicated, Communism was China revolt against the West. Today, China has reestablished its political independence, but it does not yet have the intellectual capacity to insure a real economic independence. It will be able to become a great power only if it resolves its problem with the West.

A.S.- This time I find you rather pessimistic.

J-L.D.- I will explain. First of all, we must be aware that our naivety gives China more credit than is its due. Western tourists accept in China things that they would not accept in Egypt or Kenya. We think that a country with such a great past is a country that will inevitably have a great future.

A.S.- China is also a country with more than 1.2 billion inhabitants.

J-L.D.- Yes, we believe spontaneously that a country that is so ancient and as thickly populated is destined for greatness. But, this is not a guarantee....