

Reform in China: Sluggish or Dynamic?

An Interview with Lucien Bianco

Books & Ideas: Why did you become interested in China back in the 1950s?

Lucien Bianco: I began learning Chinese in 1953. I knew absolutely nothing about China, Chinese society, or Chinese culture. I wanted to study an overpopulated and underdeveloped country, preferably a big one. Therefore it had to be either China or India. China had just had a revolution and I was on the left: so it was China. When you're on the left, studying a revolution is very sobering. Then, for my history examinations, I gave up Chinese. This was during the Algerian War, my generation's great ordeal: after I took my state examinations, my military service took a while, after which I became a high school teacher in the provinces. I took up Chinese again in 1960, when I got a job at a Parisian high school. At the time, I studied Chinese at the Eastern Languages School (École des Langues Orientales). In 1954, I visited China for the first time because Jean Dresch, a communist geographer and an alumnus of the Ecole Normale Supérieure, wanted a student at the same school to be part of the Franco-Chinese friendship delegation being sent to China. I was the only one studying Chinese at the Ecole Normale. Althusser called me and said: "you can go to China on a junket." At the time, visitors to China were so rare that Zhou Enlai received us. Mao shook hands with all of us. I came home thrilled. For me, the shock came with the Cultural Revolution. 1966 was a turning point. I was quickly persuaded that the Red Guards were being manipulated. That seemed obvious to me. Mao horrified me.

Books & Ideas: How did you come to be a historian of the Chinese peasantry?

Lucien Bianco: I chose the Chinese peasantry for pretty much the same reason: I wanted to study the poorest and unhappiest people, those who seemed the most oppressed. We only had access to the official historiography: revolutionary peasants following the path shown by the

Party, leading to a future that was obviously good. I wanted to study non-communist revolts to learn how peasants behaved when they are not mobilized by revolutionary intellectuals. Sources were so rare that I wasted a lot of time trying to locate them. So I decided to do something else, and became interested in demography. China interested me because it was an overpopulated country. Though I had no training as a demographer, in the fifties I used to go to François Perroux's lectures on what at that time was called the Third World. This was the problem that interested me, far more than my own society did. For at least ten years I set peasants aside since I was unable to study them. It was frustrating research until, in Nanking, I bought a book—as I explain in the introduction to my work on peasants—that was a true gold mine, published in Beijing in 1992, but which I only discovered in 1994. Over its five volumes, I found references to many sources—not exactly archives, but illuminating documents, which made it possible to better grasp the complexity of local situations. All of this confirmed my initial intuition: peasants had concrete goals, very immediate demands and grievances, with no intention whatsoever of participating in a revolution. It was a misunderstanding. Yet communist bases, after all, offered protection from Japanese atrocities. There was also a quid pro quo: peasants were granted social reforms that the nationalist government never offered. Despite all this, only a small minority of peasants willingly followed the communists: not poor peasants, as Mao claimed on principle, but young peasants, between 18 and 25 years old. Peasants over forty were skeptical; they were not the kind to be drawn into such an adventure. It was thus only a small group of young people who joined the communists. The early members were primarily young people from privileged backgrounds, who were educated and were the sons of landowners.

Books & Ideas: Can one compare Mao and Stalin?

Lucien Bianco: In my eyes, they are both monsters. Stalin was a more traditional monster than Mao: it's hard to be more of a "bastard" than he was. Hitler was an off-the-charts criminal madman. I recognize that Stalin believed in an ideal and that he thought he was creating a more just society—at the beginning, and perhaps for quite a while. Focused on his goal (and on consolidating power), he gladly sacrificed human life, which he compared to the wood chips that fly off when one cuts down a tree. From his own perspective, Stalin was fairly coherent. He made more than one mistake. This didn't help him and even compromised him and delayed the completion of his projects. But he achieved his goals: he transformed at breakneck speed an unexplored and underutilized continent and turned a traditional rural

society into a modern industrial nation capable of pushing back a German invasion—after an initial retreat that was all the more tragic because of the stubbornness with which he denied the danger (this was one of his most catastrophic errors, but one could cite others as well). Mao is incoherent. In one sense, he is somewhat less monstrous than Stalin, since Liu Shaoqi and Peng Dehuai were not, after all, executed, even though they died—along with He Long—during the Cultural Revolution. Mao was responsible for their deaths, but Peng Zhen, Deng Xiaoping, and many others survived not only the Cultural Revolution, but Mao himself. In the USSR, Ryutin criticized Stalin in 1932; though Stalin was not able to do away with him then, Ryutin didn't survive the Great Terror. Stalin settled his scores with Ryutin, along with numerous other “potential” opponents, at the latest between 1937 and 1938. So from this point of view, Mao killed fewer people than Stalin. At the same time, due to his incoherency, Mao caused more catastrophes and achieved less. One can compare the two famines (of 1931-1933 in Russia and of 1958-1962 in China), but these criminals' greatest crimes were the Cultural Revolution and the Great Terror.

Books & Ideas: What is your opinion of the single child policy?

Lucien Bianco: I am sad to say that I found the single child campaign far less horrifying, when it was launched in early 1979, than the Maoist campaigns. The same methods were used to mobilize the population. The suffering of women, who were often forced to abort when they were in their seventh month of pregnancy, with all the risks this entailed, and all the policing—it was awful. But it had a rationality that the Maoist campaigns lacked. China's leaders became aware, though far too late, of the need to rein in demographic growth. Once again, the situation must be compared to India. I won't see it in my own life time, but you will see India's population exceed that of China's. This is not to democracy's credit. During a trip to the Far East in the 1970s—I don't remember exactly what year—I came back from China telling myself that I was an idiot for studying a totalitarian country. It was impossible to get access to sources, impossible to do research. I interviewed couples on topics that included birth control policies; it was clear that everything had been planned, that the individuals who would answer my questions had been selected. They had been indoctrinated beforehand. It was unbearable. So I decided to go once to New Delhi and once to Bombay to see how interviews would go in the country that I should have studied. From Bombay, I travelled forty kilometers to a fishing village, with the help of colleagues from the United States. There, I asked my questions. Obviously, I did not speak Marathi. I spoke English and my colleague

translated. I investigated two fishing villages. I was the one who chose the two families to be questioned—each had eight children! The Indian counterpoint is that I would always see posters all over the place denouncing Indira Gandhi’s attempted genocide, since she had tried to take the first step towards population control: she wanted to “kill our people.” This is how population control occurred in a democratic country. Then I read articles in English describing how this policy was applied in India—the corruption of civil servants who sterilized sixteen year old girls as well as sixty year old women and sterilized the same person several times, simply to get a bonus. Population control policies failed in India, whereas in China they achieved spectacular results. The communist leaders made it clear from the outset that these policies were to exist for one generation, and at present we can see that they have at last been eased up. There were concessions—as everyone knows—first for national minorities, in the countryside, and so on. Overall, these policies, though they used inhumane methods, were a success.

Books & Ideas: Does the idea of fuqiang (i.e., of a rich and powerful China) strike you as important for understanding twentieth-century China?

Lucien Bianco: When *Perspectives Chinoises* asked me in 1999 to make an assessment of fifty years of revolution, I chose “*Fuqiang*” as the title because the term summed up the ambitions of the revolutionaries, as well as those of the late Qing mandarins of the second half of the nineteenth century. The word means wealth and power, as means for ensuring that China would not let itself be oppressed by rich Westerners and imperialists, as well as for reconnecting with China’s past greatness. This nationalism is both defensive and offensive: the goal is to become “number one” again. It’s been years since the ideals and illusions I had when I was twenty have given way to less lofty convictions and especially to questions and doubts, but there is one feeling from my youth that I have never wavered from: my loathing of nationalism. My analysis of China has evolved. When, in the sixties, I wrote *Les origines de la Révolution chinoise* [The Origins of the Chinese Revolution], I was spontaneously most interested in the revolution’s social causes. I wanted to bring to the forefront the issues the Americans did not emphasize enough. National issues seemed trite and obvious, as John King Fairbank and Ssu-yü Teng had shown in *China’s Response to the West*. Yet the more I read, the closer I came to embracing the point of view of most Americans: that the revolution was primarily nationalist in character. Marx believed that revolutions would arise from capitalism’s contradictions in the most advanced countries of Western Europe, starting with

Germany and England. The two great communist revolutions broke out in underdeveloped countries, countries that were “backward,” as Lenin described Russia: once they were in power, revolutionaries had to help their countries catch up. This was the case in Russia and China. The purpose of these revolutions was to bring Russia and China to the same level as other countries—and then to surpass them. Mao’s mistake was to stray from this path. More than anything, what he had retained and internalized from Marxism was its egalitarianism, thanks to which the gap between China and the West—without even mentioning Taiwan—increased over his lifetime. I believe that even today this success, which has astounded the world, is primarily about catching up. The Chinese are moving so fast that they are beating us in some technological fields; but in my view, it’s still about the search for *fuqiang*, for wealth and power.

Books & Ideas: How should we interpret the elitist discourse which holds that the Chinese population is not yet ready for a democratic regime?

Lucien Bianco: I have always been sensitive, even during my very superficial trips to China, to intellectuals’ prejudices concerning the uneducated masses. I find these views shocking and painful. When someone like Lu Xun returned to his village and met a childhood friend who helped him to discover nature but treated him now as a superior, he was troubled by the gap between them. But men like Lu Xun are rare. In Chinese traditions, it is a constant to place the educated far above the ranks of ordinary mortals. In his memoirs, Zhu De, explains how, during his years as a student, when he would come home, his family would bow respectfully before the child it had raised because he was a graduate. This is an attitude I used to attribute to intellectuals and cultivated groups in China. Yet this doesn’t prevent me from being struck by much of what they have to say today. It’s the problem of inevitable social change and the time it requires and of the risk of giving everyone the right to vote at present, when rural inhabitants make up 48% of the population and cities are full of many very underprivileged and poorly educated people. In the countryside, there is a risk that elections could be seen as a choice between a good master (i.e., a good party secretary) and a bad master: they would be about individuals, rather than a choice between different policies. Such considerations lead us to question our own democratic maturity. As Rousseau (more or less) said: “If a nation of gods existed, it would govern itself democratically.” But are we, who don’t want to hear the truth about our own country, really that much more mature? In France, candidates, who refrain from telling us the truth, are very conscious of this fact. But to get back to China, a

major obstacle for democracy is obviously the Leninist party, which controls everything: the economy, politics, information (fortunately, as Liu Xiaobo, the imprisoned Nobel Prize winner, has written, the internet has proved a godsend for avoiding censorship), etc. Today, this power—as you have described it yourself—is remarkably pragmatic: from some points of view, given its own goals, it’s running things pretty well. As for genuinely political reforms, it seems to me that it is advancing very slowly and timidly. The leadership has learned a lesson from what happened in the USSR. They fear a Chinese Gorbachev like the plague. He was heavily criticized, but his historical accomplishments make him one of the great men of the twentieth century, even if he entertained incredible illusions. He believed that the system could be reformed, which I do not believe is possible. It is clear the China’s leaders are paralyzed by an awareness of the risks they would take in launching political reform. Even so, they nonetheless embody one of the primary obstacles to a democratic transition, without even mentioning how this plutocratic oligarchy’s corruption exacerbates public skepticism. Prime Minister Wen Jiabao was among those who embraced a reassuring discourse (though some saw it as deceptive: his acting ability received ironic praise), yet we have just learned that his family enormously enriched itself by shocking means ... I nevertheless think that one cannot lightly dismiss the arguments and warnings of China’s intellectual elite, at least those who do not bask in patriotic Confucian nostalgia.

Books & Ideas: How far along is the “de-Maoization” process that you first called for after the Great Helmsman’s death?

Lucien Bianco: Mao’s death was a kind of deliverance. The two happiest days in the history of the two great revolutions were March 5, 1953—Stalin’s death—and September 9, 1976—Mao’s death. This is ironic when one thinks back to Marx—to his determinism, on the one hand, and to the proletariat’s historic role, on the other. For me, the happiest day was not the day Mao died, but four weeks later: the coup against the Gang of Four, which brought about their fall. I couldn’t work, I jumped for joy all day. An important first step in the necessary process of “de-Maoization” was achieved by Deng Xiaoping who, as Mao feared, “restored capitalism.” Ezra Vogel’s book, which is very pro-Deng, is the best study of this extraordinary revolution. As Vogel sees it, Deng is one of the people who did the most to change the twentieth-century world, even more than Gorbachev. Deng Xiaoping’s contribution was thus beneficial and positive. That said, we can’t forget Tiananmen in 1989 or Wei Jingsheng’s arrest in 1979. I was in Peking in 1979. I met Xu Wenli and dined at his

home. He struck me as a reasonable reformer—that's what I wrote in *Le Monde* when he was arrested in 1981. One understands the arguments of Deng Xiaoping, who was very pragmatic: the regime must be preserved, one must act very prudently, and so on. Yet the famous 1981 resolution on the party's history was ten times as innocuous as Khrushchev's secret speech to the Twentieth Party Congress, which itself was incomplete and selective. De-Maoization has thus been far less complete than Khrushchev's de-Stalinization, which itself was insufficient. Where are we today? Since Deng, little progress has been made. De-Maoization, for the most part, has barely begun. The leadership avoids criticizing Mao too explicitly, as their legitimacy depends on him. The Chinese are kept in a state of ignorance regarding the famine, the Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution. They are told nothing about these things. The leaders know the truth but keep quiet. Many are born into the system. They even speak of a "prince's party" (*taizi dang*), referring to the sons of the leaders of the Maoist era. Remember how dynasties were established in our own society, how nobilities formed around victorious warrior-kings? In China, this hereditary nobility is in power and its fiefdoms extend to the powerful companies that have remained under the state's control: these privileges are a major source of wealth. It is an archaic and traditional regime. There is much to be done, much to de-Maoize—and all this is happening too slowly for me.

Books & Ideas: Has the rhetoric of the Hu-Wen era, which was more attentive to social inequalities and less focused on economic growth, brought about any real change in the Chinese countryside?

Lucien Bianco: After the era of Jiang Zemin, who favored city-driven development, this rhetoric was welcome. Deng Xiaoping once said: "Some will get rich first." Jiang was from Shanghai and exploited this advantage, which is normal. During the Maoist era, Shanghai had been underprivileged: it would have been stupid to ignore this advantage. As for Hu-Wen's rhetoric, from early on it was hard to be fooled, since Hu and Wen were apparatchiks. They followed the party trajectory and patiently pursued their careers—just like Xi Jinping, from whom we cannot expect miracles either. As for this rhetoric about reducing inequalities and about a harmonious society, it was good that it was said. Hu came from the Communist Youth League and had served for years in China's western interior. Their rural tax policies and the reduction of farm taxes were important, even if these taxes and fees reappeared under new names. One of the essential aspects of the peasant revolts that interested me at the time was taxation. This is the reason that peasants revolted. Today, they do so because of land

confiscations. Not expropriations, because they do not own their land. But their land, which is their livelihood, is taken away from them and they are only barely compensated. In your own thesis, you show that the party listened to enlightened intellectuals—and so much the better that the party pays attention to experts. That said, I think all this only has very limited effects. There remains an abyss, an enormous abyss between rural and urban populations in this respect, not only in terms of living standards, but in terms of access to education, to health care, etc. Glaring inequalities have absolutely not been reduced; they are enormous. Thus while this rhetoric has changed little, it is better that it exists than not; maybe in the future it will be less neglected.

Books & Ideas: What is the role of experts today? Are we seeing a return to the past or continuity?

Lucien Bianco: For the educated, there is definitely a return to the past—real continuity—after the Maoist parenthesis. Under Mao, informed opinion was occasionally taken into account, but most of the time it was dismissed or repressed. In Russia, the same thing happened during the late 1920s: the experts' ideas were ignored, they were brought to trial and accused of sabotage. Mao made the same stupid mistake in launching the Great Leap Forward. The opinion of educated people was ignored and experts full of 'bourgeois' ideas were scorned by Mao for having (as he put it) the nervous prudence of old women with bound feet. The current regime is cleverer; it takes experts' opinion far more into account, inviting them to express themselves in ad hoc organizations or commissions. Of course, the party remains unrivalled and dictatorial—very authoritarian, let's say. I am in complete agreement with Linz, who sees post-totalitarianism as a variety of authoritarianism. These regimes are distinct in that they went through a totalitarian stage, but are still authoritarian regimes like any other. If I was a Chinese intellectual, I would rather live today a hundred times more than under Mao. There's no comparison. The difference between how they live today and how they lived back then is much greater than how they live today and how we live. Thus a huge step has been made, but again, we need another one.

Books & Ideas: What are your latest projects?

Lucien Bianco: I've thrown myself into a comparison of the two revolutions, which is crazy when one is over eighty. It's like La Fontaine's tale of the old gardener and the three young

men: can one still grow things at such an age? I am now reading a lot more about Russia than China. There are so many scholars of Russia, you realize how much more advanced Sovietologists are compared to us. I am taking on this work like an honest broker, as I did in my first book: I make no claim to being exhaustive. The key is that Mao believed himself to be highly original and claimed to correct all the problems that he saw (and seeing them was a good start) in the “new class”—he didn’t use that term, but he showed a sensitivity to the problem that was completely lacking in Stalin. Ultimately he copied, but he didn’t learn any lessons. Compared to the hopes that inspired them, these twentieth-century “proletarian” revolutions were colossal failures. I would like to write this book before I die or become senile, but I am losing a lot of time reading about Russia. In the short term, I’ve been invited to a conference on iconoclasm. Naturally, I was asked to talk about the iconoclasm of the Red Guards. I called my paper “Iconoclasm and Manipulation.” I am taking advantage of it to spend my time in Paris’ Russian libraries—without being able to read Russian. I read in English, French, occasionally in German.

Published in *Books&Ideas*, 19th November 2013.

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First published in French on laviedesidees.fr, 8th February 2013.