China Perspectives Amidst Scientific Change and Digitalisation

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This current edition offers a "varia" instead of our usual special feature. We have decided to allow a little more time for completing the forthcoming issues, in order to avoid excessive haste in our procedures for peer-review and publication. This situation is exceptional, and that will certainly remain the case. Over the past ten years, the specific contribution of *China Perspectives* has been our publication of dossiers containing original and diverse responses to the major questions confronting contemporary China. Our journal is the only publication dedicated to China in the social sciences to follow this format systematically, and we still receive positive feedback for it. That is why we continue to encourage researchers from all over the world to propose projects for future dossiers to further enrich our multidisciplinary approach to the political, economic, social, and cultural developments in contemporary China.

In this volume, 20 years after the return of Hong Kong to China, we wish to give particular emphasis to articles dealing with the relations between Hong Kong and the People's Republic. But the issue also reflects the wide range of topics (electoral sociology, the political economy of the media, industrial policy, the sociology of public involvement, mass mobilisations) as well as the different geographical areas covered by our journal (the People's Republic, Hong Kong, and Taiwan). In reality, the range of topics we cover is even more extensive. In recent years we have published material on literature, international relations, media, health, technological innovations, environment, urban development, and other topics, which shows the extraordinary diversity of research on China. These approaches also illuminate in original ways the complex issues facing these societies today.

After careful consideration, we have decided to give ourselves enough time to let the dossiers develop to their full potential, and this also reflects the level of rigour, of which the journal is justly proud. Working together in an atmosphere of collegiality, our editorial board studies the projected features well in advance, and we rely on every article being read at least three times, including two readings by external experts. This ensures that every article is given the greatest chance of being read in a supportive and constructive manner, while also guaranteeing close attention to the quality of the final result. We take pride in being able to affirm that the only criterion for deciding to accept an article is its scientific quality – its clarity in presenting its ideas, its rigorous research procedures, its transparency with regard to its sources, and such matters as its engagement with already published material.

The last four years spent in assessing articles for publication have taught me that making such decisions does not come easily. The work of the editorial board often consists of reaching a consensus between quite disparate views on what basically makes a good article. What importance should be given to the structuring of an article? Or to literature review? How to assess the construction of a research corpus, or the originality of its conclusions? Questions that any individual member might consider self-evident within his own field are no longer so certain in the field of confrontation between various disciplines such as political science, anthropology, economics, literature, geography, international relations, or sociology. The difficult and exciting challenge faced by the *China Perspectives* team is the search for a just medium between these different approaches, in order to achieve a result free of jargon, readable outside disciplinary boundaries, and still demanding in terms of originality and academic rigour.

The result of all these efforts is very encouraging. *China Perspectives* has just been included in a promising index, the Emerging Sources Citation Index. This index was set up by the Web of Science organisation to provide access to the well-known Social Sciences Citation Index, which has become a global reference for measuring the scientific "impact" of an academic journal. Following our journal's inclusion in the rival Scopus index in 2015, the new entry marks a considerable level of recognition in the academic field. We are also very pleased to note strong growth in the figures for online consultation of our articles, and in the number of articles submitted by researchers from all over the world. These are very positive results for which our earlier teams, who have worked for so long to achieve them, should also be congratulated.

The above summary shows how much the journal has been transformed since the launch of the *Bulletin de Sinologie* in 1979, followed by *Perspectives Chinoises* in 1992 (and its English version in 1995). At first the bulletin published extracts from the Chinese press, followed by articles throwing light on the current political and social realities in China, while the monthly bulletin became a bimonthly journal, and in 2007 a quarterly. As the publication frequency changed, the articles became progressively longer, the contributors became more numerous and more international, and the editorial procedures incorporated the double-blind assessments that characterise most scientific journals nowadays. Over the same period the readership has likewise changed. For a long time the journal was read by a fairly broad range of those interested in China, such as academics, diplomats, journalists, enterprises, and NGOs. More recently it has taken a more scientific turn, with longer articles and a more weighty critical apparatus. Our progress in terms of scientific input has therefore been achieved through a shift towards a more international and specialist readership, but unfortunately to the detriment of providing insights to the public at large.

For better or for worse, this development reflects changes in the scientific and professional field that are affecting the social sciences in France and elsewhere, especially Hong Kong, where our journal is produced. There is a globally shared push toward producing increasingly codified and uniform scientific formats. In fact, research workers, research centres, and universities are all assessed and financed according to criteria that are overwhelmingly dependent on the quantity and the "impact" of their publications. This is mainly calculated on the basis of the number of times their articles are cited in other academic journals. This situation partly reflects the influence of a particular management model that first became widespread in the exact sciences. It favours the use of quantitative indicators that are narrow in comparison with a more holistic understanding of scientific activity. This tendency has become generalised even when the rate of citation does not correlate with the quality of the publications (Brembs, Button, and Munafo 2013; Vanclay 2012), and can be manipulated by journals using marketing strategies that are hardly compatible with scientific impartiality (Chew, Villanueva, and Van der Weyden 2007). The principle of double-blind assessment prevalent in many journals has many virtues, especially in allowing for a collective endorsement of research results, and in avoiding duplication of work along similar lines. But the "fetishism" (Wilmott 2011) of journal rankings in research assessments entails many perverse effects that are by now well known (Colquhoun 2014; Seglen 1997; Gruber 2014). It tends to ruin a pluralist approach by hierarchizing publications and by massively channelling contributions towards those most frequently cited (mostly in English). The latter are therefore given considerable power in their capacity as "gatekeepers," while the most reputed writers are literally courted by journals hoping to profit from their high profile. That also steers researchers away from the other tasks that are essential to the diffusion of knowledge, but for which they no longer have any time since they are overwhelmed by ever more ambitious publication targets (and by the search for external funding) (Lawrence 2007). Teaching, editorial work, and the writing of books and articles for the general public are considered of practically no value to researchers' professional careers. In the most serious cases, the pressure to publish can even amount to incitement to fraud (when rewards or qualifications are conditional upon publication in prestigious journals). In sum, the "impact factor madness" can be considered a "tragedy of the commons" in the sense that the combined effect of bureaucratic mechanisms with the short-term interests of the various players – researchers, reviewers, and journals – can be detrimental to the production of research with genuine value (Casadevall and Fang 2014). All this makes it more difficult to produce critical insights in the social sciences that can truly illuminate the social, cultural, and political processes at work in the contemporary world.

China Perspectives cannot completely avoid these contradictions. Our ambition is to produce trustworthy and rigorously tested knowledge, and to attract talented writers who can throw light on China in pertinent and original ways. We therefore cannot simply free ourselves from the assessment criteria appropriate to our field, despite their limitations, since our contributors, authors, assessors, and readers are themselves caught up in this sort of bureaucratic logic. But rather than placing all our bets on an increase in our citation numbers, our journal has for a number of years staked its future on a long-term strategy that consists of maintaining its specific qualities and its editorial integrity above all. In this way it provides an attractive alternative for researchers with a qualitative approach to China whose methods are sometimes less well recognised by other journals. Being published in English and French, it offers international exposure to Francophone writers. It also enables the inclusion of high-quality illustrations, and even the publication of original documents, such as the series of historical photographs taken by David Zweig during the political movements of 1975-1976 (issue no. 2016/1). Above all, our emphasis on the thematic nature of our dossiers constitutes an added value to which we are greatly attached; it allows us to combine the different disciplinary approaches around a single common phenomenon and to emphasise local variations in order to reach a more complete and distanced overview.

Moreover, the development of our journal towards a more scientific style corresponds to shifts in the media in general over the past ten or twenty years. With the upheavals brought on by the digital revolution, it has become less important to formulate an immediate response since there are excellent websites offering analyses in short, rapidly published forms, which are free and easily accessed. High-quality blogs proliferate nowadays. They cover developments in the Chinese regime and are maintained by journalists, academics, and others. These forms are a perfect response to the social demands of popularised science. This development is undoubtedly a factor behind the ongoing refocusing of *China Perspectives* onto our main source of added value, namely our long, well-documented research articles. At the same time, our "current affairs" rubric, freely accessible on our website, continues to enjoy great success, and in the future this means that we should reflect on the best ways of providing such content online.

Apart from the question of the relationship between the printed version and the website, the main challenge in the future will be how to position our journal in the face of the digital revolution. Clearly, the uses of academic articles have changed, and nowadays most researchers download individual articles through digital portals. Our review has taken account of this situation and adapted our means of distribution. We have reduced our paywall to one year, and two French platforms offer it free of charge after the first year of publication (Persée and Revues.org), as well as JSTOR. The first year is chargeable and can be accessed via several sites (EBSCO, Proquest, InfoRMIT). However, their charges are a source of dispute on account of the financial burden they place on libraries and the increasing dependence of journals on this "oligopoly," which paradoxically has developed thanks to digitalisation (Larivière, Haustein, and Mongon 2015). That is why we opted to retain our independent means of distribution by renewing our own website in 2014.

The impact of digitalisation on research practices is also to be found in the format of the articles themselves. So we, too, have chosen to adopt a more standardised norm for references, in the so-called Chicago style (author date), which begins with this issue. This format will cut down on pre-publication work and will facilitate automatic referencing on the various databases, which is indispensable for gaining exposure for the articles (for a literary view of this, see Perec 2007).

Given this situation, why do we not completely enter the digital world, perhaps even providing open access, which would certainly give us unrestricted exposure and would follow the trend towards the greater democratisation of knowledge? The fact is that the editorial options described above make heavy demands on resources, from formatting the articles to the printed page, after the processes of translation and iconographic preparation. The revenues from charging for all our online sources would not by themselves cover the journal's production costs, so the printed edition is still essential for us. The under-estimation of production costs incurred by academic journals is a chronic phenomenon (Contat and Gremillet 2015; Van Noorden 2013). This is shown especially in the design of publi-

cation platforms available on the market, which in editorial terms provide only relatively simple options. For example, their illustrations are often low-resolution, and their automatic layout offers few choices. Doubtless these options are already a great achievement, especially when it is a matter of free access, but they do not meet the current commitments of *China Perspectives*. We are attached to the need for tailor-made presentation, careful re-reading, high-quality iconography, variety of content, and, still, for linguistic accessibility in both French and English. We have no doubt that these are the best part of the historical inheritance of *China Perspectives*, and we defend the need to devote substantial funding to them (other journals that have moved to open access say the same: see the *Tracés* editorial 2017; and Demazière 2017).

These reflections will doubtless continue to shape our policy, particularly as the fields of technical progress and editorial policy continue to change and open up new possibilities. This will provide an enormous potential for innovation in the future, with the opportunity to offer our readers an increasingly rich and diverse range of content adapted to their needs. As I will be leaving CEFC after four extremely interesting years, during which I have been able to benefit greatly from this unique position for observing the social sciences on China, this challenge will be met by the editorial board, and by the new editor-in-chief, Judith Audin. With her, the journal is in very capable hands and is well-positioned to produce exciting new issues for the rest of 2017 and 2018.

Translated by Jonathan Hall

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