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Photo Essay: Deng Xiaoping's Failed Reform in  
1975-1976

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### Lucien Bianco, *La Récidive. Révolution russe et révolution chinoise* (Recurrence: Russian Revolution and Chinese Revolution),

Paris, Gallimard, Bibliothèque des Histoires, 2014, 528 pp.

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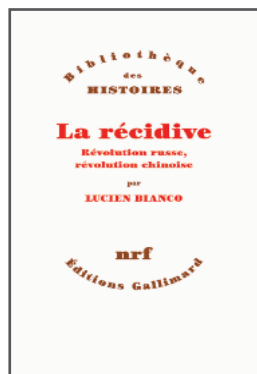
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# Book reviews



**Lucien Bianco,**  
**La Récidive. Révolution russe et**  
**révolution chinoise (Recurrence:**  
**Russian Revolution and Chinese**  
**Revolution),**

Paris, Gallimard, Bibliothèque des  
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## MARIE-CLAIRE BERGÈRE

This book studies and compares the Russian and Chinese revolutions, which occurred at different points in time, the path-breaking triumph of Stalinism (1917-1953) having preceded that of Maoism (1949-1976) by three decades. To ensure the soundness of the parallels, Lucien Bianco displayed honesty and courage in acquiring the competences that have made him an expert on Soviet Russia as well as of Communist China. His project was helped by recent advances in historiography – starting with the opening up of Soviet archives and the multitude of accounts and memoirs published in China.

The book thus presents a vast duo fresco. Chapter 1, entitled “Delay,” deals with the disparity in the initial situations of the two countries. These included economic backwardness and otherness in relation to the West, both more pronounced in China than in Russia; the predominance of nationalism in China while Russia was more concerned with social problems and dreams of a universal project and new humanity; and the decisive role of foreign wars in their success in seizing power (the First World War in Russia and the Japanese invasion of China in 1937). The detailed comparison proceeds theme by theme in a penetrating and virtuoso synthesis.

The next chapter describes the “Catch-up,” mainly economic, to which the two revolutionary regimes accorded priority, with greater success, or at least less suffering, in Russia than in China.

Chapter 3, devoted to “Politics,” brings out the essential kinship, “stemming from a common Leninist mould” (p. 86), between the two systems and their organisational structures, even after – in fact especially after – 1956-1957, when Mao Zedong began criticising the Soviet model and touting the “Chinese path.” The author shows how Mao only pursued the “Stalinist mode of applying Leninism” (p. 90), exaggerating its practices. His policies boiled down to those of the Soviet autocrat, and “from this viewpoint, [he] is a perfect replica of Stalin” (p. 102).

Chapters 4 and 5, entitled respectively “Peasants” and “Famines,” are subjects on which Bianco has carried out numerous studies over half a century and constitute the heart of the book and its most original section. For the Russian revolutionaries, the Muzhiks were just backward barbarians, and the peasant question was “an accursed issue” (p. 121). The “spontaneous con-

fiscation” of land in 1917 was followed by the “grain battle between the authorities and the peasants” (p. 127). The New Economic Policy (NEP), launched in 1921, liberalised the marketing of harvests. Eight years later, the “Great Turning” signalled the forced collectivisation of land and dekulakisation, policies that preceded the major Famine of 1932-1933 and led to stagnation in agricultural production and marginalisation of a peasantry sacrificed at the altar of industrialisation and urbanisation.

Despite the greater proximity the Chinese leaders enjoyed with the rural world, their agrarian policies were as prejudicial to peasants as those of their Soviet predecessors. Soon after 1949, the Party confiscated rich peasants’ lands, but two or three years later set out on the path followed by the Soviets, namely forced collectivisation. In China, as in the USSR, priority was accorded to industrial development financed by agricultural surplus, to the detriment of peasants, who were transformed into veritable “slaves of primitive accumulation” (p. 163). As a symbol and pre-eminent manifestation of the Chinese path, the Great Leap Forward was the collectivisation policy at fever pitch. The utopian rhetoric with which Mao couched it merely delayed coming to terms with its catastrophic results.

Chapter 5 presents a comparative study of the two major famines caused by the agrarian policies of the two revolutionary parties in power. The one that ravaged Russia from 1931 to 1933 claimed six to seven million lives, while the famine that accompanied the Great Leap Forward caused 20 to 40 million deaths. Setting out the role of structural factors – agriculture’s vulnerability to the vagaries of the weather and difficulties in managing demographic transition – Bianco highlights the personal responsibility of Stalin, who decided to profit from the war he launched against the peasantry to be rid of all opposition, and of Mao, steeped in his utopia and vanity.

Chapter 6 shows that the bureaucracy and the “New Class” nurtured by the two regimes had close sociological basis and habits (privileges and corruption). The only difference lay in the dictators’ attitude towards them: on the one hand quiet acceptance by Stalin, who appreciated the loyalty, competence, and conservatism of those he promoted; and on the other hand Mao’s repeated attacks against the new bourgeoisie, whose “work style” he criticised but to whom he was quick to hand back power after the chaotic Cultural Revolution.

In Chapter 7, focusing on Culture, the author picks out more similarities and differences: as for the former, rapid strides in literacy and the reign of socialist realism imposed by “guard dogs” quick to impose censorship and repression; as for the latter, more critical reactions in the USSR by writers and artists against cultural oppression versus a more muted reaction in China.

Chapter 8 compares the Soviet *Gulag* with the Chinese *laogai*. The first served as the model and reference for the second, and both in their ways have been equally cruel and destructive of humanity.

In Chapter 9, rather provocatively, Bianco abandons the Marxist reference to turn towards Plutarch to paint a portrait of the parallel lives of the two “Monsters,” Stalin and Mao. Both were moulded in a system that made them dictators, but their personalities led to variations in the exercise of

their power. Stalin, the realist, brought a cold and methodical cruelty to the eradication of all his opponents, current or potential. Mao practised a more detached cruelty. He was also less capable and no doubt less keen on guiding his country towards the path of economic development, the initial aim of the revolution he led.

While Bianco refuses to let history be held hostage by ideology, he does not adhere to a fragmentary, meticulous approach that graces current historic research. He grapples with the vast scenarios and major problems that were the subject of confrontations among previous generations: he approaches them without theoretical a priori, armed only with his deep knowledge of facts. This pragmatic approach could be labelled scientific if it had kept the author from offering a conclusion. But that is not the case, and his conclusions will rub quite a few readers the wrong way.

No, contrary to the claims of partisans disappointed by communism who sought refuge in Maoism, there was nothing original in the Chinese path. The regime founded by Mao had a fraternal resemblance to the Soviet regime, although not that of twins (p. 119). The Chinese revolution was only a "recurrence," repeating the error and the crime of the Russian one. Neither revolution attained the proclaimed aims of social justice and economic modernisation.

This negative judgement will shock the nostalgic, who can only challenge it with their faith in the Great Stalin and the Little Red Book. So be it. But will historians agree? It is no doubt in the last chapter, entitled "The Monsters," that Bianco goes the farthest. His absolute condemnation of Mao may not be acceptable to those who see the Great Helmsman's murderous utopia as more than a manipulation, and rather as reflecting a sincere revolutionary elan leading to salutary understandings and questionings. Those who want to accord Mao the benefit of the doubt (this reviewer is not among them) will certainly have difficulty coming up with facts capable of puncturing Bianco's punctilious argumentation. But then, is the author right in concluding, citing the failure of the two revolutions, that no revolution is capable of remedying the ills of the world? "Reformism," he avers, "is what works best." Subject to a test as exacting as that *Recurrence* imposes on the Russian and Chinese revolutions, can reformism really emerge "*magna cum laude*"?

This quick overview can hardly do justice to the science and humanity of a work made all the more pleasurable by its elegant and familiar style. There is no doubt that this book belongs in the historiography of the twentieth century and should long serve as a reference text for specialists. It should also appeal to larger intellectual circles, offering in an erudite and accessible manner the history of countries that globalisation has suddenly rendered close, and a history too often held hostage by ideology or simply ignored.

■ Translated by N. Jayaram.

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**Wenjing Guo,**  
**Internet entre État-parti et**  
**société civile en Chine (The**  
**Internet between the Party-**  
**State and Civil Society in China),**  
Paris, L'Harmattan, 2015, 329 pp.

NICOLE KHOURI

Wenjing Guo belongs to the so-called post-1980 generation, that of young Internet users on whom she focused a PhD thesis in socio-anthropology defended in October 2014: *Internet à Canton (Chine), Dynamiques sociales et politiques* (Internet in Guangzhou, China: Social and Political Dynamics), University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, and upon which this work is based.

The book is composed of two parts, one mainly devoted on the Internet in China (1994-2014) and the other to Internet usage based on three case studies undertaken in Guangzhou: a group of homosexuals formed around a "model mother" whose blog brought together thousands of Internet users, a residents' group mobilised against the construction of a waste incinerator, and an association of Internet users defending Cantonese language and culture: the tangible and intangible heritage of the city and the province. These two parts contain valuable methodological considerations. An overly short six-page conclusion follows.

Part 1 offers a synthesis of existing work and traces the Internet's evolution in China between 1994 and 2008, the latter year marking the passage from a regime marked by the government's sole responsibility for control to a governance logic by which entrepreneurs and Internet users are vested with responsibility for observing the norms laid down by the Party-state. This new governance also sought to ensure the participation of cadres and Party officials through the creation of blogs, in order to paint a benevolent image of the leadership. It took shape in the context of the "Harmonious Society" slogan put forward in 2002, evolving by 2008 towards the elaboration of a social reform. Like some other cities, Guangzhou constituted a pioneering laboratory where the notion of *gongyi* (public interest, public welfare) entails the commitment of ordinary people in resolving social problems. But 2008 also marked a turning point in the hardening of Internet censorship because of the rapid spread of news about incidents and mobilisations linked to ethnic confrontations (Tibet and Xinjiang), farmers' protests, or even major scandals ("bean curd schools," contaminated milk powder...).

The period between 2009 and 2014, the subject of the author's synthesis, saw the emergence of the incubator Yi Fu, founded in 2006 and analysed as an exemplary case of the market's insertion into social matters, largely borrowing from global models of venture philanthropy and corporate social responsibility. It led to a logic that, choosing among local grass roots initiatives, brings "acceptable" ones into a process of institutionalisation via fiscalisation and professionalisation through performance. Both Internet users and "social organisations" were asked by the government to take part in managing society online and offline.