



Ian Buruma, *Bad Elements. Chinese Rebels from Los Angeles to Beijing*

London, Orion/Phoenix, 2003, 404 p.

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NOTE DE L'ÉDITEUR

Translated from the French original by Peter Brown

- 1 Some journalists and travellers bent on exploring like to go off the beaten track in order to discover the “real China”. Ian Buruma is one such person. Refusing to go and interview the umpteenth “red capitalist” like the Harvard econometrics graduate with an important government position, or the up and coming young woman from Shanghai whose eyes are opened and who dresses in Armani, he decided to write about an ill-defined group of individuals crazy enough to stand up to one of the most powerful regimes on earth. He went on the trail of the *huai fenzi*, taking on the “bad apples” label applied by the authorities to these men and women of extraordinary courage. As the vicissitudes of history have led the Chinese to live under two regimes, and a small island in South-East Asia where the majority of the population are “Sons of Heaven”, Ian Buruma had to scour the world in search of these *huai fenzi* in order to hear their story—from mainland China to Singapore, Taiwan and, of course, “overseas”, principally the United States.
- 2 The resulting work provides a very complete picture of dissidence in the “Cultural China” dear to the heart of Tu Weiming. The empathy that the writer feels towards these “bad apples” allows him to enthusiastically describe these larger-than-life characters of extraordinary humanity who, despite the tragedies they have known, have not given up. This is a powerful lesson for all those who keep on repeating that the Chinese are not mature enough for democracy and that the “Celestials” have an innate sense of obedience to hierarchy. This extremely lively portrait gallery represents an invaluable source of information about the elusive pro-democracy

movement. How is it then that we are left with a bitter taste in our mouths after reading this book?

- 3 It is not caused by an overcritical view on the part of the writer, but rather by the fact that, in spite of their qualities, these heroes have never been able to mobilise a sufficient proportion of the population to put an end to absolutism—except in Taiwan.
- 4 These wonderful oppositional figures have trouble setting up organisations. They have a tendency to let themselves get caught up in internal divisions. Buruma does lay blame on them for this; indeed, when the personalities he interviews do not explain the origins of such dissent, he does so himself by describing the political context and the hardships of life in exile. It is he who, in short, finds excuses for them. Never does the empathy he feels for these “bad apples” falter.
- 5 Ian Buruma does not hide his own view of things: “I believe that Communist Party rule will end in China; sooner or later all dynasties do. But when or how, I cannot say. Will one authoritarian dynasty be replaced, once again, by another, in the name of national unity and superior virtue? Or will the Chinese finally be able to govern themselves in a freer and more open society? The example of Taiwan, whose citizens can now speak freely and elect their own government, shows that it is possible. The example of Singapore, which combines a relative economic liberalism with political authoritarianism, points in another, equally plausible, direction” (introduction, p. XV).
- 6 It is with those living in exile that Ian Buruma begins his journey to the heart of dissident life. The descriptions of the individual personalities he presents, whether 1989 student leaders like Chai Ling and Li Lu, or those involved in the Democracy Wall movement, such as Wei Jingsheng, are very impressive indeed.
- 7 Some of the dissidents who have settled in the West are desperately in search of a alternative ideology to Marxism-Leninism. For Buruma, this quest must be put into the more general framework of Chinese culture. Thus, the Christianity of Yuan Zhiming, one of the writers of the TV series, *River Elegy (Heshang)*, recalls the commitment of the Confucian *literati*. But Yuan Zhiming is also a product of the Communist regime, since he desperately tries to find a new dogma to explain China’s backwardness. The ideologues of the opposition are sometimes at a loss. Su Xiaokang, for example, a fellow writer on the series, has no qualms about seeking in Buddhism or Christianity or *qigong* a cure to the despair that followed the tragedy which struck his family in the United States. However, unlike his comrade, he states that since losing his faith in Maoism, it has become impossible for him to believe in any religion or ideology: “I have tried hard, but I can’t believe in anything at all” (p. 64).
- 8 The scars left by Maoism are well described by Li Shuxian, the wife of Fang Lizhi, one of these “stars of Arizona”: “The worst thing is that they control our memories... Especially when they have done something terrible, they hide history or force people to forget. Even my son doesn’t know what happened in those days. That is why we must educate people, step by step, about the truth” (p. 82). Buruma clearly shows the important differences between the generations, depicting, as he does, individuals, not the homogenous militants of a social movement.
- 9 The interviews with dissidents are of course fascinating, but it is when he describes the difficulties encountered by someone who wishes to talk to them on the territory of the People’s Republic, that Ian Buruma gives the full measure of his talent. The account he gives of his non-meeting with the former private secretary of Zhao Ziyang, Bao Tong,

organised by the journalist Dai Qing in an underground railway station in Peking, is particularly enlightening. For those who sing the praises of China's "normalisation", this episode is very instructive; to those who are working in the same field as Buruma, it brings a great many experiences back to mind.

- 10 We should not, however, believe that the writer is blinded by the empathy he feels for the people he meets. Through their declarations we discover the faults that explain the movement's weaknesses. We can see their sectarianism coming through, as well as their exacerbated individualism—perhaps a natural reaction to the collectivism imposed by a totalitarian regime—the weakness of their political culture, their ignorance of anything not Chinese.
- 11 This is a unique work in so far as Buruma interviewed each and every dissident throughout the Chinese world in a position to talk today (those who are not in prison or dead). What emerges is a portrait of incredible courage, bordering on madness. The writer shows with extremely deft touches the extent to which these strong personalities who dare to oppose the Chinese regime are marked by the culture of the Empire. This is even the case with the most Westernised of them, like Hong Kong's Martin Lee, the Catholic son of a Kuomintang general, or Emily Lau. What they have in common is both a deep understanding of this regime and a stated willingness, whatever the cost, to refuse to believe that a horse is a deer just because the Emperor says so.
- 12 Academics often have nothing but contempt for journalists. Yet, when journalism is practised by a great professional who has undertaken his research over a period of five years, it receives its due credentials. The Ian Burumas of this world do not come in their thousands, and this book is much more enlightening than a great many academic works. This is a real historian's effort, a collection of eye witness accounts that will prove indispensable to anyone working on this too often neglected subject.