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NOTE DE L'ÉDITEUR

Translated from the French original by Bernie Mahapatra

- 1 Over the last thirty years, many works, both Chinese and foreign, have been devoted to the reformist activities of notables from various Chinese provinces during the last half-century of the Qing dynasty, particularly during the period 1901-12. These books have also covered the different forms of associations that these elite organised themselves into in order to increase the efficiency of their actions and their ability to negotiate with the imperial administration. In the general hubbub of activity that led the provincial elite to intellectual, political and social change after the Boxers, the notables and educated classes of Jiangsu held a distinguished position. This was achieved by sheer numbers as much as material means, particularly in the abundance of newspapers and print media they had at their disposal, and which left ample material for historical studies.
- 2 We are all familiar with the broad outline of the role played by the Jiangsu General Education Association, which was founded in 1905 by several eminent figures from the province and chaired by the illustrious businessman Zhang Jian, holder of a first-class

doctorate. It became the mould for a real constitutional party, the forerunner Association to a constitutional regime that was at the forefront of political life during the latter years of the monarchy and which assured a fairly peaceful transition to the Republican regime when the 1911 revolution came. Xiaohong Xiao-Planes' monograph provides us with a detailed account of the Association's history from 1905 to 1914, thanks to the comprehensive collection of the organisation's own publications as well as those of local institutions that supported it, and to which the author obtained access in both Shanghai and Nanking. These sources were supplemented by the incredible wealth of materials and works that have been published recently in mainland China and Taiwan. The book analyses this history as a model example of the development of the local elite's collective representation and public action up to the time when the forced takeover by Yuan Shikai, in 1913-14, stripped these elite of the legal provincial power they had finally gained through their commitment to serve a political rebuilding of the imperial state after the Taiping defeat.

- 3 The book retraces the innovations introduced into the Jiangsu education system from 1860-1900, encouraged alternately by the local authorities and the educated classes. It then covers the application of the imperial reformist "New Policy" (*xinzheng*) after 1901—a message relayed by the zealous initiatives of the notables, the young educated classes, the merchants and even scorned social groups, such as prostitutes, opera singers and barbers, calling for a reformed education system. The Jiangsu General Education Association was founded in October 1905, the day after the imperial examinations were abolished, against a background of multiple problems and disputes relating to the reform—retraining of prize-winners and entrants from the old examinations, funding and administration of the new establishments, and pedagogic anarchy. Its members comprised traditional educated people and young progressives, provincial notables and men from Shanghai, a city which, being the home and flagship of modernity, was chosen to house the association's headquarters. The organisation modelled itself on the Shanghai Chamber of Commerce, itself inspired by the "democratic" statutes of the municipal Council for the international concession. By officially establishing education associations in each sub-prefecture to assist in the administration of the education system, the imperial regulations of 1906 enabled the Jiangsu Association to become part of a wide network of local divisions that comprised more than 5,000 members in 1908.
- 4 The Association dedicated itself to providing guidance to and mediation between the provincial administration, local communities and educational establishments. Its business, very formal and correct, was conducted by a small nucleus of young educated people based in Shanghai. The new education administration, set up in 1906, inaugurated a sharing of functions between civil servants and educated notables, called in to act as "advisors". On failing to obtain these "advisors" through local election, the Jiangsu General Education Association seized this opportunity to place its members at every level of the new departments. It filled in for administrative cadres to calm disputes over education, train teachers, sponsor youth education, relaunch elementary education, promote technical education, collect and manage the finances for education, and even co-ordinate and integrate educational establishments on a national scale. Among all these activities, there emerged, with cautious pragmatism, the implementation of a "professional power" and the use of democratic rules among the elite.

- 5 The final part of the book examines the organisations and political undertakings that the Association's members became involved with, involving the development of civics, the election and workings of the provincial assembly and local councils, petitions for the immediate convening of a parliament and appointment of an accountable cabinet, joining the Republican revolution, and support for Yuan Shikai.
- 6 At the end of this progression of events, that is sometimes heavy going but lavishly detailed, covering the local policy of the time, the author challenges any relevance held by the notions of "public sphere" and "civil society" in interpreting the evolution of the local Chinese elite at the end of the empire and the beginning of the Republic. In fact, despite its spontaneity, the activism of the local elite sought the support of power, it did not attempt to clash with it or to organise itself outside of its structure. It aimed to "extend an official approach to constitutionality of the regime". The popular sovereignty that the activists sought from the administration had its foundations in the Confucian doctrine of *minben*, according to which, the people are the state's *raison d'être*. In their eyes at least, this implied the existence of organic links between different localities, of the elite and of the people, following on from which, came the "pedagogic procedures" of political participation that they defended. Invested with new responsibilities in their locality, the most educated used these to initiate the people, in the sense of the general interest, so that the people could, in turn, participate in public affairs—the power of the notables would engender power among the people. Mrs Xiao-Planes emphasises, however, that although this political plan formed part of what P A Kuhn called the historical "constitutional programme" of the Chinese state (i.e. the recourse to administrative decentralisation and political participation by the rank and file to curb the chronic degradation of the government apparatus), the local autonomy (*difang zizhi*) demanded and practiced by the Jiangsu elite at the beginning of the twentieth century led to a plurality of independent political entities and to the rejection of a monolithic conception of central autocracy. In the end, she suggests a fundamentally different definition of the relationship between the state and society, a definition in which instead of functioning by integrating the dynamism of the society, the political organisation arbitrates between different interests. One weakness of the book is undoubtedly the fact that it does not weigh up exactly what the Jiangsu elite as a whole, whom the author calls "the activists" and who are the specific subject of her investigation, represent. However, armed with an outstanding critical and bibliographical apparatus, this erudite study of the inner workings of provincial modernity at the beginning of the last century provides much food for thought on this subject.