

Torstein Hjellum: *Kinesisk politikk*. (Chinese Politics) Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1995. 278 pp.

Torstein Hjellum's aim with this political history of China from 1840 to the present is to answer central and well-posed questions of concern for historians and social scientists in China studies. According to his introduction the central issue is with which means the Chinese have sought to regain inner strength and political independence after the Opium War. He enumerates five such "projects" during the period: (1) The imperial reform measures before the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911; (2) the efforts to build a republican system under Yuan Shikai 1912-1919; (3) the nationalist government of Chiang Kaishek 1927-1937; (4) the PRC under Mao 1949-1976; and (5) finally the Dengist reforms since 1978. The analysis is informed by three "historic confrontations": the clash between civilizations; the meeting of production modes; and the struggle between different models for change. The arrangement of the book is accordingly five chapters, each dealing with one of the reform projects with a summary and, for the last two chapters on Maoism and Dengism, a short evaluation of the period in question.

A work on modern Chinese political history in a Scandinavian language is to be highly welcomed. Far too little is being published on this subject for the general public, who is not fluent in English. The target group for the book is not explicitly stated, but a guess would be students and journalists, as well as people generally interested in Asian affairs. The language and presentation, though, most-

ly indicates that Hjellum primarily has had introductory courses at the university level in mind.

It is a substantial and serious book in posing good questions and touching most of the commonly accepted aspects of modern Chinese political development. The author takes pain to be accurate and does not hide his own preconceptions. His overall judgement is that traditions prevail and will recreate themselves in spite of drastic attacks. Mao Zedong, as the only one, is credited with an honest attempt to break the hold of the Confucian, imperial civilization, but he failed, and today we see in China the strange creature of an authoritarian, Confucian, and capitalist state. This is all heard before, but it is supported by a rather systematic, though sometimes a little superficial and biased, argumentation.

The bias is most conspicuous in the last chapters. Especially the chapter about Maoism covering China from 1949 to 1976 is disappointing in its tendency to focus on the person of Mao, his visions and his goals. It is problematic to evaluate 30 years of communist rule in China based on an analysis of the motives, methods and consequences of Mao's launching of the Cultural Revolution. Most problematic is that Hjellum appears to (almost) defend violence as a political weapon, by stating that no alternatives to brutal activism existed in China in 1966-67 (*sic!*). In Hjellum's periodization the period from 1960 until the triumph of Dengism is included in the Cultural Revolution, and this leaves little space to anything, that cannot be said to be background to, content of, or aftermath to that particular phenomenon. The focus on the individual is present in other parts as well, so a more thorough discussion of the role of the individual would have been welcome, especially as personal leadership is given so much weight. By the way, do we really need another -ism? Why not just the term, the reforms of Deng Xiaoping, if history *has to* be that personalized.

Parts of the book gives food for reflections on, what actually constitutes an "explanation". Historians are usually possessed with finding explanations, and so is Hjellum obviously, in view of the many questions he raises. But very often (and that goes for historians generally, maybe more than for political scientists) the explanation found is just another way of saying what actually happened. As when the failure of the reforms of the Qing dynasty is explained by the court's failing capacity to adapt to the social development, or

when the non-modernization of the Chinese economy under nationalist rule is attributed to China's weakness as a nation.

Hjellum's basic concept is the notion of civilization, which seems to be the same as culture and/or tradition, as a force which resists reformation and attempts at political change. Such an analysis provides clarity to the book, but at the same time maybe presents too simple a picture of a complex reality. Some simplification is unavoidable in this type of work, though, and in general the book can be recommended as a useful text-book at university level or as a source of information for non-specialized readers.

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