

# The Sources of Contemporary Political Thought in Greater China

Organised by:

Institut Ricci Paris

Participants (by alphabetical order):

Isabelle Thireau - Director of studies at EHESS

Jean-François Di Meglio - President of Asia Centre

John Lagerwey - Director of the Institut Ricci Paris

Michel Masson - former director of the Institut Ricci Paris. Head of the Institute's "Thinkers' Corner"

Conference memo

19th of October 2021



## Structure

*Opening remarks* by Jean-François Di Meglio

*Introducing Le Coin des Penseurs* with Michel Masson

*Contextualising the significance of Le Coin des Penseurs* with Isabelle Thireau

*Main panel* with Jean-François Di Meglio, John Lagerwey, and Michel Masson

*Q&A*

### Event description

Each month, *Le Coin des Penseurs* (Thinkers' Corner) allows a Western audience to discover an article published in different journals and media forms across China. Reviewed and annotated by the translators, they provide a Chinese reading of the events and key points of reflection on the country in recent years. Their topicality, the sharpness of the gaze carried by these Chinese authors, whatever the political, spiritual, or political context in which they express themselves, makes this work carried out by Father Michel Masson, François Hominal and a few other contributors a benchmark whose merit exceeds that of a simple translation. It is really a "bridge" between two referent universes, which is even more precious at a time when dialogue with China is getting more difficult. This also reinforces the guiding principle behind the work of Asia Centre, "Asia at the source", making it possible to read significant texts from their original version.

### Opening remarks

Asia Centre's 6<sup>th</sup> *Asia Trends* publication, worked on in collaboration with the *Institut Ricci* in Paris brings us, at Asia Centre, back to our source material. Our vision of "Asia at the source", which we still stand by, feels embodied through the formal printing of this volume, *Le Coin des Penseurs*. At a moment when China seems to be closing off, yet again, it is more crucial now than ever for us to delve into working with source material, in Chinese, with a focus not solely on academic writings but also writings of the average people in China. Understanding context requires not only macro analysis, but also the micro – which with *Le Coin des Penseurs* is a step in the right direction. It is also the idea of lending a voice to those that need it that becomes a focal point for our collaborative endeavour. The source material comes from a variety of places, and with this we hope to offer our readers a variety of thoughts as well as opinions on what the Chinese see or would like to see in their country.

## Introducing *Le Coin des Penseurs* (Thinkers' Corner)

*Le Coin des Penseurs* is a three-part endeavour. There is the first section, 'the weight of history', the second covering Christianity, and the last on politics in China. The first section covering the weight of history attempts to talk about the suffering of the Chinese people, especially with regards to their experience *vis-à-vis* their ruling parties. The second section, on Christianity covers the subject of China's relationship with the Pope and whether one could perceive this as an "accord with the devil". Another important subject matter in this specific section is that around the positionality of Christianity in China – what role and actions when it comes to Christianity in China? Covering topics such as the "conversion" of China, through a somewhat sinister lens of Christianity will hopefully bring us to have fruitful discussions about the space religion takes up in the country. Some may consider this topic to be a dangerous one considering Chairman Xi would like to see Christianity as the scapegoat for what the Party would like to emphasise as "bad religion". However, the discussion is worthwhile, nonetheless. The last section, covering politics, takes up similar themes to the ones seen in the first section discussing the weight of history. We talk about what cultural extremism means or looks like in the Chinese context – and how this new wave of extremism may or may not shake the country.

## Contextualising the significance of *Le Coin des Penseurs*

*Le Coin des Penseurs* has the goal of localising and contextualising China. The endeavour started a few years back as a niche with a focus on temporality and chronology. The name, with a focus on "thinker" rather than anything loftier is an attempt at making sure we include everyone and anyone as a part of the group. One does not need to be a philosopher to be a thinker. It is this exchange between thinkers that is our intention. It is a work of, on the one hand, translation, but on the other also heavy interpretation. It was previously called China New Analysis (1953-1998) with 1 625 volumes, with strong focus on "China at the source" using press clippings – now we have 97 more formal publications under the name *Le Coin des Penseurs*. The main goal was and is to bring people's attentions towards the important themes and current events happening in the country. *Le Coin des Penseurs* also tries to bring a sliver of positivity to our readers, especially in times when China is closing off. This special edition, worked on in collaboration with Asia Centre, is a compilation of some *Le Coin des Penseurs* publications. The amount of analysis and the depth of understanding of the context is fabulous. The entire endeavour feels like an in-depth investigation.

An example of such depth can be seen through the work done when a translation and analysis of a set of 768 postal correspondences that happened between people within one same family was done. It not only gave us micro stories of a smaller family unit, but we also lived through these correspondences a rich history, a much-needed contextualisation, and a sense of intimacy.

*Le Coin des Penseurs* also offers rich geographical diversity and representation. Some texts from different disciplines, others from a different point of view – from Hong Kong press clippings, texts from private websites, interviews, reviews, university publications, QQ, PhD theses... All these selected by Michel. Michel's vision of "it interests me; therefore, I would assume it would interest others" seems to have been the right way when it comes to text selection. What we know is these texts touch people in ways we couldn't anticipate. It's important to understand how these texts are being chosen and ask with what thought process the section has happened behind it.

## Main panel

**Michel Masson** – Text selection is random but also rather more technical than one would think. There definitely is a priority put on 20<sup>th</sup> century texts, however, not only. There are of course, certain specific texts that are thought of before the search. Sometimes even before the texts have been written. Others, we find through introductions, that speak of texts we should investigate. There are some new subjects that simply need to be talked about. For example, talks around the Axial period. In the same way the Chinese have translated all our philosophical greats (Weber, being one example), we offer the possibility for our audiences, our universities here in Europe to discover China’s greats, insights on their society and the voices that come from it. The key is always the exchange, expanding the possibility of understanding each other. We also try to select texts that are more recent than not, on a subject that is not too technical to enable the understanding of everyone.

**Isabelle Thireau** – It’s important to also add that the way in which these compilations, as well as the mere fact that these translations happen tend to interest Chinese thinkers themselves. Understanding how others understand what is familiar to oneself seems to be key here.

**Jean-François Di Meglio** – The access we have to material as recent as 2021 is very precious today, considering the situation in China is changing rapidly. Today we are once again the ‘China watchers’ of 1981 due to its increasing closing off. Considering China is continuously closing off more and more, how much longer do you reckon we’ll be able to access ‘source material’ for *Le Coin des Penseurs*?

**Michel Masson** – Not sure. There is already a lot of material on the internet that has been blocked off. What’s happening in Hong Kong, is worrying. More recently we have been accessing topics that aren’t censored, such as calligraphy. However, hope is not gone. A story recently about how the Japanese gave help to the Chinese at Wuhan by sending medical supplies during the Covid-19 crisis, with a poem about how we “all live under the same sky”. – gives me some hope.

## Q&A

**I have lived 20 years in China. I only came back to Europe 2 years ago when the pandemic started. I would like to say from my experience in China, when it comes to available texts, I paid high attention to the way editorials and news were written in China. I found quite a bit of useful information, for example through *China Daily* or *Global Times*, covering social context. Of course, censorship back in the day wasn’t as bad as it is today – but we were able to find surprisingly a lot of information and a diversity of it at that. Snapshots of Chinese thought. Have you had the occasion, during all these years you’ve been reading and sifting through texts, to look for material that isn’t in Chinese but rather content expressed in a Chinese way? For example, the *Global Times* although it is written in English, I imagine in Chinese it may be quite different.**

**Michel Masson** – Not really. uniquely texts in Chinese. We’re looking for authenticity.

**Isabelle Thireau** – Texts of *Le Coin des Penseurs* is also a bit different from the paraphrased ones you find in media. The ones we have are expressed in a more direct manner, more personal, more expressive. With a more complex web of contextualisation. The language and vocabulary that you see in *Le Coin des Penseurs* texts is for example, very different from the standard

Chinese you see in China. The texts we have are also a lot more strongly opinionated. The language in news outlets don't take risks. They are a lot more controlled.

**It seems like things are getting tighter in China in terms of freedom of expression. How is it that certain dissidents that openly speak badly about the Party survive, while others are immediately silenced?**

**Michel Masson** – Certain individuals are protected by their factions. Their clans, their social connections, and hierarchies. The most recent article about Covid-19 and its related troubles was written by universities within China, criticising the methods used within China to combat it. With the existence of Weibo, it's difficult also for the Party to immediately censor content.

**Isabelle Thireau** – For sure, there are certain factions that protect certain people. Censorship is also definitely an issue. However, it isn't always as hopeless as we feel it is. The fact that certain people are being protected isn't a bad thing – as some of these protected people may also be advancing what's good for society. Afterall, there's always space for the evolution of the political culture in China, even if it is very difficult today. Writing open letters to the governing party is a constitutional right in China, and it was a form of political expression that was frequently used within China. Unfortunately, recently the censorship starts from control at the root, so these actions haven't been as visible. However, there is still hope! This is also why Michel's identification of these safe pockets of spaces where the Chinese *can* express themselves and talk about the current situation is that much more valuable.

**With regards to practicing Catholics in China – what are your thoughts on the subject? Have you seen people from this community expressing themselves, talking about their religious practices?**

**Michel Masson** – There was a text about Catholics in China, indeed. They used to say “one more Catholic, one fewer Chinese” back in the day. These days things are changing, many are openly talking about their religious faith. Especially those that are more than 40 years old. It's difficult to obtain concrete data, information – the numbers aren't clear, however. It is worth mentioning however, that despite some progresses, there still are some strong persecutions against them, as well as general rivalries between these religious groups.

**John Lagerwey** – The Communist Party also fears Christians, especially the Evangelic Protestants, due to their rapidly increasing numbers. It is ironic really that the Evangelists were considered previously in China as model religious practitioners. The Party is now encouraging Daoism, Confucianism and Buddhism as the more “Chinese” religions. This is also a part of the Party's nationalist initiatives, perhaps.

**The regime today is the most Confucian there has been so far from an external perspective – and seems to be becoming increasingly more so in their expression of nationhood. This reminds me of the Cultural Revolution, and how for so long the elite had been trying to kill popular culture and remove pagan beliefs. And yet today, so much of this popular religion and culture seems to be coming back, which is quite ironic. What are your thoughts about this? Perhaps this is again, what the weight of history contains.**

**Michel Masson** – Even today in China there are plenty of people that practice shamanism in social housing and more. It isn't a part of Chinese culture that has died. Addressing your comments about Confucianism, if you look at history, the Confucians are the ones that the ones

that introduced modernity to China, through the translation of foreign texts and more. It's important to also remember the Confucianism we see today in China is not in its pure form. Confucianism stems from generosity, respect of others – things we don't see today in Xi's China.

**Going back to popular religious practices in China other than shamanism, such as Daoism and Buddhism – there has been a resurgence of Buddhism in China – what is the situation today in China with regards to Buddhism as well as Daoism?**

**Michel Masson** – The way that people find Buddhism and Daoism then convert to those religions is through the asking of larger existential questions. Questions around morality and more. Buddhism has always been historically very close to the government. Close to the literate, even more so than the Daoists for example. In Taiwan, for example, it's very Buddhist, very alive when it comes to religion. There are also many derivations of Buddhism within the country. Within China, I'm less sure what the scene looks like.

**John Lagerwey** – There are two types of Daoism. One, that is transmitted from father to son. The other, formalised through temples. The only ones formally recognised by the state were the latter as they were officially registered with an associated temple that the Party could monitor closely. However, they aren't the most 'dangerous' in the eyes of the Party. After what happened at Tiananmen, it was the Daoists that were the first ones to talk positively and supportively about the state, and here again, there is a whole power struggle game going on – between those that are close to the main source of power and the others. The Party has been supporting Daoism also due to the soft influence the religious culture has had internationally, with its promotion of martial arts abroad, and Chinese herbal medicine, for example.