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China:

Wukan – a symbol of popular resistance

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The terms of the debate on the future of the Chinese political system are often defined starting from three different perspectives: some believe in a democratic transition impelled by movements of citizens and intellectuals [1], others believe in a popular uprising legitimated by social inequalities and corruption [2], finally some believe in a reform guided slowly by the élites of the Communist Party [3]. These three perspectives embody different visions of the roots of the current tensions and relationship of forces in contemporary China.

But whether the working class, the middle classes or the political élites are seen as the subject of political transformations, a common character of these three perspectives is considering the city as the site of change. And yet the massive protest which developed in Wukan (a coastal village in the province of Guangdong in the south of China) at the end of 2011 has drawn attention to the countryside, from whence the Chinese revolution emerged.

Land at the heart of Chinese social struggles

The protest at Wukan results from the conjuncture of two factors - the corruption of the local authorities (*cunweihui*, the village committee, which is directly linked to the Communist Party), and the question of who owns land in the countryside - two problems of the greatest importance in rural China since the beginning of the privatisations from 1978 onwards.

Indeed, the acquisition of land takes an increasingly central place in social contradiction in China today. After the Communist revolution in 1949, the social system was based on the binary City/Country distinction which defined both the rights of citizens and land rights. In the Communist era, the land of the cities belonged to the state to allow the construction of factories and public enterprises; the land of the countryside belonged to peasant collectives (commune, *gongshe*) and was devoted to agricultural use. The economic reform undertaken in 1978 has changed this system. A new law in 1991, which distinguished the “right of use” and the “right of possession”, allowed the local authorities to lease the land to other economic actors with the agreement of the villagers and with compensation [7].

In reality the work of the village committee was not always transparent, despite the existence of elections at the village level [8]. This has created then a major source of conflict in China today. Because of rapid urbanisation, the geographical frontier between the “city” and the “countryside” tends to become vague. This has created financial opportunities for the political cadres in the countryside who have made big profits by selling the land to property agencies without the agreement of the villagers. Thousands of demonstrations have taken place around the sale of land and the derisory compensation paid.

This is the scenario which is at the origin of the struggle of the villagers of Wukan. Since 1993, the village committee has little by little sold collective land to construction companies. Whereas the official representatives have received profits of more than 70 million Yuan, the costs of compensation were only 550 Yuan (55 euros) per family. A mobilisation seeking the democratisation of the village committee and the revaluation of land values thus began.

Mobilisation and repression

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As during the Arab spring, youth have played a central role in the mobilisation. The experience of work in the cities has rendered them more conscious of the injustice of the monopoly of power by the village committee. Thus in 2009 a social network called “Wukan Radical Youth” was created to discuss the situation of the village. The network broadcast video discussions and distributed leaflets and songs which stressed corruption and evoked *résistance*.

In September 2011, 5,000 villagers demonstrated before the village committee and elected 13 representatives to negotiate with the Guangdong officials. Above all they asked the officials to investigate the corruption of the village committee and the compensation for financial losses of the villagers. This protest won a favourable response from the Guangdong authorities.

But after a month of waiting without action, another collective petition was launched in November with the slogan “Give us the agricultural land” and “Down with corruption!” This new action was violently repressed by the authorities. On December 9, the authorities arrested five members of the temporary village committee deemed “illegal” by the officials. At the same time, the Lufeng municipality announced that all the problems raised by the villagers had been resolved and the case of Wukan should end with the resignation of the former representative of its village committee.

The next day, the villagers were stupefied to learn of the death in custody of Xue Jing-po, aged 47, vice-president of the temporary village committee. The police denied all responsibility. Overcome with anger and sorrow, the villagers decided to resist to protect the other activists against new arrests. They set up barricades at the entry to the village to block access to officials and police. Only journalists from Hong Kong and foreign countries were authorised to enter, the villagers being suspicious of Chinese journalists who might be members of the secret services.

In the following ten days, tension rose markedly, in particular because of the attention aroused by the foreign media. The police cut off water, electricity and food supplies to the villagers who had to live off their reserves and the solidarity of neighbouring villages. At the same time, the demonstrations continued around firm demands: democratic election of local leaders, the return of the remains of Xue and a continued investigation of corruption on the village committee.

But the Guangdong cadres were no longer trusted and the villagers requested the intervention of Beijing. Faced with the calumnies “of conspiracy with the foreign media” spread by the officials, the villagers remained solid, maintaining their demands and the request for intervention from the Beijing government. After ten days of demonstrations and confrontations with police from the city, and despite the rumour of an army intervention, the villagers were uplifted by the turn of events on December 20. The vice-secretary of Guangdong made a televised speech announcing that the demands of the villagers were “reasonable”, specifying that if they did not organise “over-radical” demonstrations, the authorities had agreed to free four people still held and to respond to their demands.

After a continuous negotiation between the villagers and the authorities on February 1, 2012, the first “democratic” and “transparent” election finally took place in Wukan. 6,000 villagers participating in the election of 109 representatives. Lin [\[9\]](#) aged 67, the main negotiator with the Guangdong officials, was elected President of the village committee. On February 14, Xue’s family was finally allowed to bury him.

The struggle in Wukan thus ended with the birth of an autonomous and “democratic” political structure and the name of Wukan incarnates the new paradigm of the people’s struggle in China.

Why did they succeed?

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As we tried to explain in the introduction, the cause of the conflict in Wukan is not extraordinary but represents a short episode in a long series of conflicts. However, several factors have made for the exceptional “success” of Wukan among the incessant protests in rural China today.

Firstly, the self-organisation of the villagers, initiated by the youth, was an essential factor. Zhuang, the leader of “Wukan Radical Youth” has a clothes shop in a big town near Wukan. Discussing with other migrant workers, he understood that the behaviour of the local rulers was scandalous. With another youth born in 1990, they interviewed some old people in the villages on the privatisation of land by the local political élites. Thus the will to fight was forged and cooperation established between the 41 clans [10]. A division of tasks was established and became more obvious after the death of Xue: the older people took care of negotiations with the government while the youth participated in stewarding and remained in the first rank of the demonstrations.

Secondly, the attention brought by the foreign media was undoubtedly a favourable factor. Because of Wukan’s position near Guangdong and Hong Kong, its struggle was followed very closely by the Hong Kong media, who not only sent images of the struggle around the world, but also put pressure on the governments of Guangdong and Shanwei.

Another striking characteristic is the politico-economic structure of Guangdong. Having been the leading region developed by the economic reform, Guangdong has a more liberal ambiance than other Chinese provinces. Its governor, Wang Yang, is influenced by the “liberal current” inside the CCP. The Wukan struggle took place just before the 18th “State National Assembly” which was to renew its cadres. The international pressures of the media thus encouraged a more “conciliatory” approach from Wang and prevented military repression.

Finally the demand for more “local democracy”, without however defying the legitimacy of the Communist Party, illustrates the contradictions of the resistance in China today. In a context of radical transformation of Chinese society, the central government supports the victims of violation of the law to better fragment the massive résistance [11]. In the name of “defence of rights” (*weiquan*) and the “rule of law” (*fazhi*), the government increasingly tolerates individual action for the defence of rights, but oppositional and collective mobilisations are severely repressed [12]. The insistence of the villagers on referring to the central government in Beijing to defend their rights has the goal of delegitimizing military repression.

In fact this choice is not only a strategy of negotiation, but is also linked to the complex heritage of the Communist Party. For a great part of the older generation who lived through the era of the Communist revolution and Mao, the CCP and the central government still have an idealised image which incarnates a regime which “serves the people”. Also, as citizens have got wealthier with the economic reforms, their anger has been turned directly and exclusively towards the local leaders, rather than the Beijing government. Thus Zhuang’s father has affirmed that “the Party is still with the people!” [13]. In spite of the rage against local injustices the heritage of the Communist revolution allows the maintenance of loyalty towards the Chinese state.

If local injustices explain the determination of the villagers to struggle, the statement by Zhuang’s father show the capital of confidence that the central government maintains. In other words, despite the widespread corruption at all administrative levels in China today, the discontent with the local regime is not necessarily reflected by a loss of legitimacy in the system. This is the dilemma stressed by Han Han, a writer and popular blogger living in Shanghai, intervening in a series of debates on China’s future: “the Communist Party has 80 million members and 300 million families are linked to these members, so this goes beyond the framework of a political party, it amounts to a system. Moreover, unlike the Arab revolutions, political discontent in China today cannot be reduced to the image of a dictator inside the Communist Party” [14]

The stunning success of Wukan is then also revealing of the limits of the political movement in China today. Without

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a political alternative the reign of the CCP remains the most legitimate for most citizens in spite of all its faults. Also the increasingly flexible attitude of the government heads off the intensification of the popular struggles by valuing “negotiation”. If the claim for more autonomy at the level of the local structures – village, factory, school – is a convergent demand of the struggles in different milieus, the trend to flexible “reforms” at the local level could mean for now an absence of opposition to the central government and of a dramatic overthrow in the style of the Arab Spring.

[1] This is for example the constant demand of the overseas movement for democratisation since the Tiananmen massacre in 1989. In China, there is also a current of thought which wishes to reproduce the “Velvet Revolution” guided by intellectuals, illustrated by Liu Xiao-Bo, Nobel Peace Prize winner in 2010, held since 2009 because of his activity around “Charter 08”. We can add the protest of the dissident artist Ai Weiwei, essentially asking for more freedom of expression and less corruption

[2] This is for example the viewpoint of the novelist Yu Hua expressed in the following article, <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/dec/11/opinion/la-oe-yu-hua-china-20111211>

[3] This is perhaps the most widespread view and has led to much research on the various currents inside the Communist Party. For a summary, see: http://www.piiie.com/publications/chapters_preview/4174/03iie4174.pdf

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[7] Ding Chengri, 2003, “Land Policy Reform in China : assessment and prospects.” Land Use Policy (20), pp.109-120

[8] The “Village committee organisation law” of 1988 states that the village committee should be decided and renewed by regular elections. However, in reality, because of the rural exodus and the non existence of elections at higher levels, it is hard to apply this law in all Chinese villages. In Wukan, there were several so called “elections” organised by the village committee, but this has never been done in a transparent manner, and the same people have monopolised power on the village committee for 41 years <http://www.lifeweek.com.cn/2011/1220/36080.shtml>

[9] A member of the Peoples Liberation Army during the Cultural Revolution; in 1969, he worked for three years on the village committee, before becoming an entrepreneur until his retirement

[10] Social relations in the Chinese countryside is organised around the “clan” – people who have the same family name and the same genealogy. For generations, decisions on the overall interests of the village have been decided by common discussions among generations. In Wukan, there are 41 clans and it is not possible to have a significant mobilisation without their solidarity

[11] In the case of violation of rights, often by the corruption of local authorities, Chinese citizens have the right to go to Beijing to “petition” the central authorities and request compensation. This system of *Shangfang*, or individual petition, is not only a long and slow procedure, but it is often blocked by the local authorities. On the other hand, the state encourages a legal approach to encourage individual solutions to conflicts linked to land. See <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/EG03Ad03.html>

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[12] See Yongshun Cai, 2008, "Local Governments and the Suppression of Popular Resistance in China", The China Quarterly, March 2008, pp.20-42

[13] See <http://www.isunaffairs.com/?p=1648>

[14] http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4701280b0102dz5s.html