

Joel Andreas, *Rise of the Red Engineers, The Cultural Revolution and the Origins of China's New Class*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 2009, 344 pp.

## **Dominique Tyl**

Many among the leaders of China today are trained engineers from the best universities across the country. J. Andreas traces their way to power. Not as individuals, but as a new social group, from the point of view of similar career pattern. To really understand the situation the author goes back to the beginning of the regime, when the Communist party started to control higher education at Tsinghua University. But the book does not deal so much with the present time, which seems to be the end-product of the long and tortuous policy of higher education. It is still not clear what the next generation will be. Management, finance, law, etc. should become part of the expertise needed at the upper echelons of the government. We also do know that a network of alumni is helpful to promote capable persons and extend business.

What were the ideas, motivations, purposes, and results of the various phases in the reform of universities in China from 1949 on? As the subtitle of the book indicates, the Cultural Revolution is given special attention to find answers to these questions. Economic power was rapidly discarded as an important factor of class distinction. But it took much longer and a firm determination to uproot cultural capital. First, the members of the old elite, heirs of a long past before 1949, could not but give advantage to their off-springs, who were admitted in the best middle-schools. Nothing comparable was even imaginable in villages, with so meager and basic an education. Political capital, on the other hand, began to play a specific role for the children of important Communist Party cadres in the cities. But Mao Zedong fought vehemently to establish a classless society.

J. Andreas, who has interviewed a large number of teachers and former students at Tsinghua University, relates the path followed, with often contradictory decisions, by successive authorities in search of an efficient system of higher education enabling the country to train experts while avoiding the formation of distinct social classes. Hence the invention of the worker-peasant-soldier students, and the supervision of cadres and teachers from above and below (pp. 138 ff.). That Mao saw the potential of class distinction in the Party explains many of his campaigns inside its ranks. Jiang Nanxiang became one of the victims of this, after a period of authoritarian rule implemented by him at the head of Tsinghua, and before his return to high position in the government when Deng Xiaoping achieved a definite victory.

Andreas does not say much of the dreadful treatment of persons during the Cultural Revolution at Tsinghua, since he focuses on the manipulation by central authorities to fight against any form of class resurgence. It is less certain that the consequences of all the experiments from 1966 to 1976 were realistic. But, during that period, education at many levels, even in villages, developed rapidly for the benefit of the whole country. In universities students worked hard, often to compensate for poor educational foundations; control by peers helped avoid sycophantism. All the same, reforms did not prove convincingly efficient for the advancement at a steady pace of the country's economic development.

This led to the return to a traditional examination system and progressive selection through a careful preparation in key middle-schools, with the obvious advantage of solid family cultural capital. But that did not eliminate the importance of political capital in the struggle to enter the best schools and to plan a career. The children of well-connected families had a better chance because they were better trained, thanks to greater possibilities to do so. All the same, the new marriage of political and cultural capital did support the new economic capital. And the three again gave society its pattern of class distinction. With the omnipresence and pre-eminence of the Party, political capital should in a foreseeable future remain associated with cultural capital, with privileged schooling in a mandatory education system. Economic capital already plays its part in differentiating social groups, which are nonetheless not completely independent from each other.

The concluding pages of Andreas' excellent book return to a comparison between what happened in the USSR and China, alluded to in the introduction. Andreas insists that during the Mao era, cultural capital was permanently the target of attacks to reach social leveling. Political capital also presented the danger of the reproduction of class based on political credentials and network, separating, even in the ranks of the Party, higher and lower members. When class-leveling was discarded from Party's philosophy, cultural and political capitals, already somehow convergent in the 1950's, could even be more closely associated.

In communist countries, and probably in others as well, vested interests, with horizontal links, appear to be a major strength in the reproduction of groups and to oppose to emergence of new ones. In his remarkable study, Andreas shows that this should be enough to explain much of what happened in China. Class-leveling seems to be an elusive goal or a powerful utopia inspiring continuously, at least among sections of society and social leaders, efforts, or brutalities, for more equal redistribution of all kinds of capital. It is probably safe to say that China, today as yesterday, faces practically the same challenge, without having so far offered convincing answers or clear programs.