By Nora Sausmikat

The crucial question of the role of Chinese intellectuals towards the (Party) state, which occupied generations of elite intellectuals throughout the past century, was one of the issues at the conference on ‘Intellecuals in Social Development in China’. Social development in this context means the development of more professionalism and the anticipated dominion of technocrats among the political elite, the search for overall ideological solutions for the development of society became an outdated question.

By Dr Leo Douw

The opening remarks and keynote speakers were well chosen but out of four speakers were not present personally and their speeches needed to be read out by someone else. These keynote speakers included, among others, Li Rui (the former deputy minister of the organizational department of the Central Committee and former secretary of Mao Zedong) and Menghong Chen (both of Leiden University, Acadamy of Social Sciences, consultant of Jiang Zemin and head of the propaganda department, today head of the Sinophone International business school), Wu Jiang (a former close associate of Hu Yaobang and dean of the education department at the Party’s university, and the former vice president of Beijing University, Ji Xianlin. Li Rui’s long speech introduced the central problem of the conference: the self-definition and function of intellectuals in a non-democratic environment. He demanded in an unusually open manner democratic reforms, a free press, and the phasing out of the long enduring, totalitarian dictatorship. Simultaneously he called for a Maoist ‘anti-rightist’ movement. Like many other speaking, he also focused on the reflection of the role of intellectuals since the May Fourth movement of 1919, and addressed both the central question ‘Who are we?’ and the necessity to protect independence as well as a critical spirit.

Throughout the whole conference, the most heated debates were caused by such themes as the evaluation of Hu Yaobang, the emancipation of intellectuals as an independent group, the question whether the implementation of a democratic system could help to free intellectuals from their dependency on the Party.

The evaluation of the role of intellectuals in Chinese history was also concerned with their tradition and dependence on politicians and their lack of independence. Yu Keping (Beijing, Centre for Comparative Politics), for example, demonstrated by using the destinies of prominent people like Qiu Shiyan, an important figure of the May Fourth movement and scholar of Li Dazhao, that too much critical spirit will only lead to failure. Yu and many other participants used an old metaphor of Mao Zedong, ‘[i]ntellectuals are the hair on the head of the people’, to illustrate the limitation of the May Fourth intellectuals and scholars of Li Dazhao, on the other hand, stated that Mao Zedong’s description of intellectuals was wrong. So as to prove that intellectuals are the central force for modernization, a new category ‘Enlightenment Movement’ (1915-1935) and the ‘Enlightenment movement of scientific socialism’ from 1935 to 1941. In his closing remarks he urged the intellectuals – despite their major role in modernization – to work on their weaknesses, i.e. peasant consciousness, grade orientation, and opportunism.

The journalist Yang Jisheng from the Xinhua news agency provocatively stated that there is no such group as intellectuals in China if defined as an independent group. Other more substantial critiques reflected on the Party’s history, especially the anti-rightist movement and the Cultural Revolution. Zhao Boans and others stated him with that stated with open reflection and much more detailed research on the Cultural Revolution there would be no chance for democra- tization in China. Notwithstanding the positive evaluation by Yu Keping (Science Report), that intellectuals became emancipated during the 1990s and his call for active support entrance into the WTO because this would guarantee stability and human rights in the long run, the discussion returned to the definition of intellectuals. Xu Xianglin (Beijing University) pointed to the necessity of pro- ducing ‘big democratic thinkers’ to promote modernization, while others like the nationalist Pan Wei (Beijing Universi- ty) argued that democracy is a Western product that nobody understands anyway.

Xu Datong (Tianjin University) described in a very detailed manner the influence of power and stability pressured the rulers to be concerned with the people, and the concept of the ‘three principles’ has nothing to do with democracy. Qin Hui, another protagonist of the search for indigenous elements of democracy, who has already advanced to become ‘China’s Habermas’, elaborated the lengths between the three philosophical schools of Confucianism, legalism, and Daoism and compared them with liberalism. In the eyes of Kong Xianglin (Beijing University), it is possible to talk of a ‘new Confucianism’, which creates a theory of the people and not of the state. Feng Chongyi (Sydney University) analysed the changing role of intellectuals confronting commercialization and exploitation, and the emergence of the ‘new possibilities of independence for professionals.

There was wide consensus that intellectuals should not be treated as instruments for politicians. Interestingly and partly because they do not possess their possible debates, the discussions did much more to reveal the concern of the participants than did the papers. Against the background of the recent debates inside China, the hot topic was political reform. All in the conference was very well organized, the discussions provided the participants with a lot of information besides the copies of the papers.