

Jiaohua, an Educational Practice in the “Confucian” Company

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ABSTRACT: Based on fieldwork carried out between 2016 and 2020 in three Chinese private companies, this article analyses the implementation of *jiaohua*, a key idea in Confucianism, within a “Confucian” company. In the first two sections, I analyse the main measures put in place by this type of company in their attempt to model and transform the behaviour and state of mind of their employees. I then study the way in which the educational vocation of these entrepreneurs fits into an educational project supported by the authorities at the national level, the aim of which is to create a morally sound citizen. Taking account of the current sociopolitical context in China, it might be considered that the commitment of certain private entrepreneurs to the promotion of a “Confucian education” reflects their contribution to the making of the modern citizen that the state desires, as well as their conviction that Confucianism offers resources that will enable the construction of a Chinese capitalist ethic.

KEYWORDS: Confucian renewal, Confucianism, *jiaohua*, traditional culture, business ethic.

Introduction

Confucianism, the philosophical and moral values of which were considered by the iconoclasts of the early twentieth century to run counter to modernisation, consequently lost the central position it held at the end of the empire. In mainland China, the Maoist era met with a fanatical anti-Confucianism that came to a head during the Cultural Revolution. Since the end of the twentieth century, with an economic boom based on the opening up of the market, a growing renewal of Confucianism has been seen in Chinese society. Firstly, in the academic sphere, under the generic name of “Confucianism fever” (*ru xue re* 儒學熱) and the subsequent “national studies fever” (*guo xue re* 國學熱), the revival of interest in Confucianism, which expanded to include “traditional culture” as a whole, gained ground from the mid-2000s, “reaching the furthest reaches of the Chinese population itself.”¹ Here, it would seem to me indispensable to systematically place words such as “Confucianism,” “traditional culture,” and “tradition,” recurring terms in this article, in quotation marks since the entrepreneurs I met in the field often appropriated these terms in a very free and often imprecise manner. My aim in this article is not to formulate a critical analysis of the use of these categories, but to study how they direct action, and so I quote them as they were delivered, indicating their emic character through the use of quotation marks. The popular Confucian renewal observed during this period took on different forms and penetrated different spheres – religious (also including all self-cultivation practices), patrimonial, economic, and touristic – and was expressed by “a renewed and massive interest” in traditional culture (Billioud 2007: 53-68). Parallel to

these various dynamics, an enthusiasm for traditional forms of education emerged and was institutionalised in contemporary Chinese civil society. Inspired by *jiaohua* 教化, a key idea in Confucianism that carries the dual dimension of “education” (*jiao* 教) and “transformation” (*hua* 化), these educational practices look very different from those encountered in the official educational institutions. They not only consist in acquiring knowledge, but also contain a dimension of ethical normalisation, the aim of which is that individuals improve their behaviour and “transform themselves” (Billioud and Thoraval 2014: 31). The arrival and significance of this phenomenon in contemporary China has not escaped the notice of sociologists. Thus, the debate on the theme of *jiaohua* has been an object for analysis in many research papers over the last ten years. The latter have dealt with the reading of classic texts (Dutournier 2011; Billioud and Thoraval 2014: 63-87; Wang 2018), the new educational systems inspired by tradition (Billioud 2011b; Dutournier 2011; Billioud and Thoraval 2014; Yu 2016; Wu 2019), the role of *jiaohua* in certain religious projects (Billioud 2011a), and the relationship of *jiaohua* to traditional forms of artistic expression (Ji 2008).

In this article I devote myself to the corporate sphere, which at first sight would seem far removed from the domain of moral improvement and the transformative type of education that characterises *jiaohua*.² In fact, as an organisational unit of

1. Terms borrowed from Billioud and Thoraval (2014: 9).

2. It should be noted that the education of employees is not new in the history of China. For example, the implementation of training for employees (particularly manual workers) was initiated and defended during the Republican era by progressive intellectuals and enlightened industrialists. See McDerry (1986); Schulte (2013a, 2013b). However, it is not this type of professional training that we are concerned with here.

production, the company must assume a role that is above all economic. This perception of the function of the company is linked to the “defining characteristic of capitalism,” that is to say, the “perpetual returning of capital to the economic circuit with the aim of making a profit” (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999: 35–6). But this submission solely to the logic of the market poses dramatic problems for the very existence of society (Polanyi 1983). Within a global context, capitalism has generated inequalities of an unprecedented magnitude, leading to the emergence and development of dynamics of moral standards on an international scale, affecting both the economic and social spheres. The growing importance of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in recent decades is a good example of this.³ In the case of China, which has experienced spectacular growth following the policy of reform and opening, over the last few years, we have seen debates on the person and the social responsibility of the private entrepreneur (Guiheux 2006; Séhier 2014; Desplain 2019). According to Desplain, this phenomenon may be interpreted from a historical perspective. Under the Maoist regime, the organisation of the economy was based essentially on the planning and nationalisation of the means of production (Guiheux 2018: 37). Under the generic term 單位 (*danwei*, work unit), public companies during this period played a role that was not only economic but also social, political, and administrative. Following the reforms initiated at the end of the 1970s and the development of the market economy, a great many private companies were created and grew, driven above all by an economic rationale. This corporate reconfiguration disrupted the old social organisation of the Maoist era (Huchet and Yan 1996; Rocca 1996, 2006; Eyraud 1999; Pairault 2001; Kernén 2004; Guiheux 2006), and the new requirement to amass profit energised the market. However, alongside its economic boom, Chinese society became fractured by the various ills characteristic of the insufficiently regulated development of a capitalist system: social inequality, deterioration of moral values, environmental degradation, etc.

Against this background, the Confucian renewal that emerged in Chinese society during the 2000s enabled certain company directors to develop a sense of responsibility towards society by appropriating a spiritual resource that differed both from the values of liberal capitalism and the socialist ideology that had prevailed in the country since the arrival in power of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). As part of the movement marked by this new trend, certain company directors, by claiming for themselves the title of 儒商 (*rushang*, Confucian entrepreneur), an old term that originally designated a new status for traders in imperial society from the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) onwards and an alignment with the world of letters,⁴ moved in the direction of Confucianism, or more broadly speaking, towards “traditional” Chinese culture. This phenomenon grew to the point where it became a real passion and can now be found in a multitude of contexts. Prestigious universities such as Peking University and Tsinghua University offer training programs in “national studies” (*guoxue* 國學) intended for entrepreneurs interested in “traditional culture.”⁵ New private training structures for entrepreneurs are flourishing in the country; the Academy of Chinese Traders (*Huashang shuyuan* 華商書院) founded in 2006 in Shenzhen is

one such example.⁶ Certain entrepreneurs often express their ideas on the term *rushang* through publications or in social media. The organisation of many forums with the name *rushang* in recent years shows that enthusiasm for Confucianism amongst entrepreneurs continues to grow. Already present in the 2000s, the organisation of *rushang* forums is not a new phenomenon. Between 2008 and 2010, the Qingdao national entrepreneur forum (*Qingdao quanguo qiyejia luntan* 青島全國企業家論壇) in Shandong Province attracted a wide audience every year. Amongst the most recent forums, one can note the Bo’ao Confucian entrepreneur forum (*Bo’ao rushang luntan* 博鰲儒商論壇). Since 2016, on the initiative of Li Honglei 黎紅雷, a philosophy professor at Sun Yat-sen University, this forum has organised an annual conference at Bo’ao, Hainan Island, that attracts not only entrepreneurs, but also academics and officials. The 2019 conference drew an attendance of 2,000 people. Alongside their participation in the promotion of “traditional values” in these various contexts, these “Confucian” company directors also try to build a “corporate culture,” drawing inspiration not only from “traditional” values in the management of their businesses, but also by setting up real *jiaohua* policies for their employees.

The aim of this article is to analyse the practice of *jiaohua* in the “Confucian” company. I have focused mainly on the principal measures involved in the implementation of *jiaohua* within this type of company, then go on to examine how, in a China marked today by a crisis in values, the educational vocation of these entrepreneurs inspired by tradition fits into an education project supported by the authorities at the national level, the purpose of which is to create a moral citizen. My hypothesis is that, taking into consideration the current sociopolitical context in China, it is possible to consider the social commitment of certain private entrepreneurs to a “Confucian” education as reflecting the emergence of a type of entrepreneur who sees his role as extending beyond the maximisation of the company’s economic results alone.

My work is based on field studies carried out between 2016 and 2020 in three private companies, TW, GD, and FT.⁷ TW is located in Dongguan, Guangdong Province. Founded in 1997, the firm is in the business of manufacturing electronic parts for mobile telephones and employs fewer than 500 people. Since the mid-2000s, TW has put into practice “traditional cultural values” and has set itself the aim of transforming itself into a “company-school” (*xuexiao xing qiye* 學校型企業). Situated in a new industrial zone in Suzhou, about a hundred kilometres from Shanghai, GD, which had 2,000 employees in 2016, is a listed company making electronic cards for televisions and other

3. Amongst the vast amount of literature devoted to CSR, several relatively recent research papers have been quoted here, though this list is not exhaustive: Bodet and Lamarche (2007), Cazal (2008), Postel and Rousseau (2008), Lee (2009), Capron and Quairel-Lanoizelée (2010), Postel and Sobel (2010), Su and He (2010), Séhier (2014), Bartley (2018), and Baraud de Lagerie (2019).

4. For the emergence of *rushang* status under the Ming, see Yu (1987); Zhou and Yang (2010).

5. See the official sites of these two universities: <http://www.pkuguoexue.net/>, <http://www.tsinghuaguoexue.com/> (consulted on 5 January 2021).

6. For the Academy of Chinese Traders, see its official site: <http://www.hscollege.cn/index.php> (consulted on 5 January 2021).

7. The companies and people mentioned in this research are all anonymous.

household goods. At the beginning of the 2000s, GD initiated a project aimed at building a company focused on happiness [of the employees] (*xingfu qiye* 幸福企業) based on “family culture” (*jiawenhua* 家文化). FT is located in the economic development zone of Cixi, 60 kilometres from Ningbo, Zhejiang Province. A pioneer in the manufacturing of kitchen equipment, the group has 15,000 employees, and its turnover in 2016 reached eight billion RMB (around one billion euros). Mr M, the group’s president, has on several occasions explained the success of FT in terms of its attachment to “traditional Chinese values.” In recent years, the company has set out to become a “major company” (*weida de qiye* 偉大的企業).

My analysis is in three parts. In the first section, I will describe the way in which study of classical works within the “Confucian” company is put into practice, examining its organisation and its influence on the daily life of the company and on staff management. In the second section, whilst highlighting their symbolic and ritual dimensions, I will study a raft of practices aimed at the normalisation of behaviour and the moral improvement of employees. Lastly, through an analysis of the discourse of the entrepreneurs who are endeavouring to solicit a deep commitment on the part of their staff, I will analyse the issues inherent in this type of education that is often presented as aiming to promote “morality” in society as a whole.

The study of the classics within the company

As an essential element in the educational projects inspired by Confucianism, the study of classical works now occupies a central place in the daily activities of companies that lay claim to “traditional values.” In the three companies that make up my field of observation, this practice has been implemented progressively since the beginning of the century. The works suggested for reading by employees are mostly from the age associated with the Confucian tradition, such as the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語), the *Rules of the disciple* (*Dizigui* 弟子規), and the *Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大學). However, the proposed texts are not limited to the Confucian canon and sometimes deal with “traditional culture” as a whole – to use the expression often employed by the company directors – covering the three teachings of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. At GD, for example, the *Three fundamental classics* (*Sangenjing* 三根經) is one of the principal manuals for reading the classics. The book is made up of three classical texts that represent the three religions respectively: the *Dizigui*, which focuses on filial piety and respect for elders together with teachings that form part of the Confucian tradition, the *Lao-Tzu’s Treatise on the Response of the Tao* (*Taishang ganying pian* 太上感應篇), which relates to Taoism, and the *Shishanye dao jing* (十善業道經, *Discourse on the ten wholesome ways of action*), which relates to Buddhism and preaches the ten Buddhist virtues (Figure 1). The aim in promoting these texts is above all to enable employees to familiarise themselves with a classical culture that they typically know very little about. This activity is nonetheless becoming so common and frequent in corporate life that it sometimes constitutes a real managerial vector.



Figure 1. GD employees reading *Sangenjing*. Credit: author.

At TW, the reading of canonical texts is compulsory for all employees, both managers and manual workers, and is often intensive. The staff must read extracts from the *Dizigui* twice a day, in the morning at half past five and in the evening before dinner. Tuesday evening is devoted to studying the *Lunyu*. These sessions are also accompanied by the sharing of thoughts, reading out loud, and recitations of the texts.⁸ Although the information we received at TW revealed that this extremely strict organisation is no longer contested by the employees, this was not the case when the system was first set up. At the beginning of 2009, when the reading of the classics had just been introduced, the company was confronted with waves of resignations (50 to 60% of the staff). It was, however, out of the question for Mr L, the head of TW, to change his policy, since he was convinced of the importance of shared common values within a company: “People whose principles differ cannot establish a project together” (*Dao butong, bu xiang wei mou* 道不同, 不相為謀).⁹ Consequently, participation in sessions spent studying the classics and the sharing of “traditional” values promoted by the company have become integral elements of the criteria applied in the professional evaluation of employees and can have a direct impact on their jobs. Attendance at these sessions and punctuality, for example, are now amongst the indicators applied in the evaluation of employee behaviour; a bonus of 5 RMB is also

8. Observations in the field, Dongguan, December 2016.

9. Interview with Mr L, Dongguan, December 2016.

awarded for each attendance at a session.¹⁰ Where recruitment is concerned, being ready to commit to studying the classics is one of the basic criteria when hiring an employee. Moreover, in addition to professional competence, being willing to voluntarily assimilate the values promoted by the company would seem to allow an employee to obtain a position of responsibility more easily. Since his arrival at TW in the early 2000s, Mr Y, the company's deputy director general, has taken part in many "traditional culture" training programs in various study centres, often accompanying Mr L. Today as the "fellow traveller" of his director, Mr Y figures amongst TW's key people, both in management and in the company's activities in the promotion of "traditional" values.¹¹ The study of classical works at TW is therefore a professional activity that has a genuine impact on the career of its staff, particularly where recruitment, promotion, salary level, and dismissal are concerned.

Although study of the classics at TW seems particularly strict, my observations revealed that the way in which it is organised may vary from company to company. Mr M, chairman and managing director of the FT Group, has chosen a more flexible method. During our interview, he stated that he preferred to count on the autonomy of the staff rather than imposing a quantified system of evaluation upon them. He repeated several times that the study of "traditional culture" is a slow process during which individuals assimilate its values little by little, and self-transformation takes place progressively.¹² Consequently, he gives the company's different departments the freedom to organise the study of the classics for themselves, in particular where schedules are concerned. Each reading session intended for the workers is followed by a discussion between workers. Each is encouraged to share with the others three "good actions" (*haoren haoshi* 好人好事) they have recently performed, and at the same time, with the help of their colleagues, to reflect on three points in their behaviour that could be improved. In this way, Mr M tries to emphasise the impact that the study of the classics has on the behaviour of the workers and expects them to use classical works to normalise their behaviour. As for the managers and administrative staff, they are invited to study *Chuanxilu* (傳習錄, *Instructions for Practical Living*) by Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472-1529), a major representative of Neo-Confucianism from the Ming dynasty. The influence of this work on philosophy was greater than that of the *Dizigui*. At the end of each reading session, rather than giving an account of their daily behaviour, the managers must present an interpretation of what they have just read, relating it to their professional activities. Mr M mentions the different situations in which the ideas of Wang Yangming have influenced him in the management of his company. He considers technical innovation to be a key development strategy for the company, since in his opinion it is inspired by the idea of "the extension of innate moral knowledge" (*zhi liangzhi* 致良知) and the idea of bringing out our "original mind" (*benxin* 本心), two of Wang Yangming's basic concepts. To help the company's managers assimilate these philosophical ideas, Mr M has created a group on WeChat where he often discusses them. So these discussions with the managers appear as both moments of intellectual sharing and occasions to draw inspiration from the wisdom of the great philosopher that are of use to the management.¹³ The flexibility that characterises the organisation of the study of the classics at FT is the result of the policy of promoting "traditional culture" that encourages a "gradual assimilation" (*xunhua* 熏化)

of Confucianism and takes into account its practical interest for management.

The integration of Confucian values through symbolic and ritual practices

Jiaohua is not limited to reading. The study of classical works admittedly allows the employees to acquire the knowledge needed for their spiritual progress,¹⁴ but the companies also promote their *jiaohua* through symbolic and ritual practices intended to integrate certain values associated with the Confucian tradition such as "filial piety" (*xiao* 孝) and "humility" (*qianbei* 謙卑).

The reappropriation of filial piety

The cornerstone of 仁 (*ren*, the "sense of the human"), filial piety is the perfect expression of "the natural response of a child in the face of the love bestowed on him by his parents in the general context of family harmony and solidarity between generations" (Cheng 1997: 71). In traditional Chinese society, this concept can extend from the kinship system to other types of social relationships and serve, for example, as a model for the personal loyalty owed to governors (or to superiors), hence the close link between filial piety and loyalty (*zhong* 忠) (Goossaert and Palmer 2012: 186). Thus, filial piety is often considered to be a moral virtue that guarantees ethical behaviour and the principle of reciprocity in traditional society. This is why, in the wave of the Confucian renewal that has been emerging in mainland China since the early 2000s, filial piety has been widely promoted by various new religious movements such as Master Jingkong's (*Jingkong fashi* 淨空法師) Buddhist Group (Ji 2018), the *Yiguandao* (一貫道) (Billioud 2020b), certain academies (*shuyan* 書院) (Chung 2018: 140), and new educational institutions inspired by tradition. In this article, I investigate the way in which "Confucian" companies endeavour to highlight this ancient value.

In all three companies, we can see a panoply of practices aimed at revitalising filial piety among their employees. At FT, each employee is expected to regularly carry out "acts of filial piety" (*xingxiao* 行孝) towards their parents; in other words, actions likely to please them. At TW, filial piety is the first of the values openly promoted by the company (Figure 2). Certain symbolic practices are encouraged by the directors to allow employees to express their love and gratitude towards their parents. For example, they might offer their parents "filial piety shoes" (*xiaoqin xie* 孝親鞋), that is, buckets for footbaths, or moon cakes at the Mid-autumn Festival. The company encourages its employees to return to their home province for the Chinese New Year and the Qingming Festival, an occasion marked by a visit to the family tombs. At GD, various advantages are offered in the interests of the well-being of their employees' parents, including a monthly allowance of 200 RMB for employees whose parents are aged over 80.

10. This bonus has been abolished in recent years. Mr L explained to us the reason for ending this practice: "We did not want to turn our employees into mercenary people. We do not learn traditional culture out of self-interest." Discussion on WeChat, July 2020.

11. Interviews with Mr Y and with Ms Z, director of human resources at TW, Dongguan, December 2016.

12. Interview with Mr M, Ningbo, June 2017.

13. Ibid.

14. I am grateful to Billioud (2011a) for this idea.



Figure 2. The courtyard of the TW Company. Left: the statue of Confucius at the entrance to the company; right: the values promoted by the firm are pasted on the façade of the manufacturing unit. Credit: author.

Besides these material advantages, the objective of which is to honour elderly people, certain companies organise themed training sessions on filial piety. At GD, for example, from 2014 to 2015, twelve training sessions with the title “Holiness and wisdom education classes” (*sheng xian jiaoyu ban* 聖賢教育班) were organised. Filial piety was one of the most important themes. These training sessions attracted a total of 2,000 participants, that is, almost all of the staff. The company’s video documents made on these occasions show various “educational” practices during the sessions:¹⁵ the writing of a letter to one’s parents, reading the letter in front of an audience, the exchange of experiences, often in the form of a public confession, and washing parents’ feet. These practices, intended to raise awareness of the lack of filial piety, are often accompanied by speeches expressing remorse or gratitude towards parents.¹⁶ Tears in her eyes, GD employee Ms X, for example, expressed in front of all the participants her feelings and her repentance at not having demonstrated filial behaviour:

I would like to apologise to my mother. Recently, I have disliked and even hated her. She was always picking on me, saying I was bad for this or that reason. So, for almost a month I have not spoken to her. Although we are living under the same roof, we are like two strangers... I had almost forgotten where I came from! Without my mother, I would not even be in this world! When I saw this short film where someone is kneeling down to wash their mother’s feet, something I have never done until today, I told myself that it is the first thing I am going to do when I go home. I don’t know how to cook, either. From now on, I am going to learn to cook. And I will also spend more time with my mother.¹⁷

This type of confession (*huiguo* 悔過), literally “repent for a mistake,” exposing and keeping back none of one’s feelings and remorse, and often accompanied by tears, is marked by a very strong emotional aspect. The public reading of the letter intended for parents is a form of dialogue with the other participants. Some of them, carried away by emotion, climb onto the stage to embrace the reader and then themselves start to speak to continue the dialogue.¹⁸ These sessions on filial piety constitute ritual and symbolic practices that are strongly marked by shared emotions. Through this emotional process (*gandong* 感動), a collective emotion is created, the purpose of which is to unify, since the ultimate objective is the collective incorporation of

values and more specifically here, filial piety.

At GD, the sacralisation of filial piety through symbolic, ritual practices shows that this traditional concept has been set up as the basis of the Confucian moral education put in place by the company. Mr W, the founder of GD, confirms this, saying:

Filial piety is the most important of all the good actions (*baishan xiao wei xian* 百善孝為先). All the difficulties we encounter in life stem from a lack of filial piety. All our daily actions are linked to filial piety.¹⁹

The promotion of filial piety may also be seen as having an economic rationale. Based on the moral virtue of this traditional concept, a boss aims to obtain the loyalty and devotion of his employees. Ms G, GD’s human resources director, attests to what is at stake for management in the promotion of filial piety: “Only children who respect their parents will respect their superiors when they become adults.”²⁰ Still rooted in filial piety, which is also expressed within the family in an emotional relationship between elder and younger brothers, the “family” model aspired to by GD should also allow it to establish harmonious staff relations within the structure. It is therefore not difficult to understand why GD hopes to become a company founded on “family culture,” the key to which is “filial piety.”

Hygienics, discipline, and “humility”

Besides filial piety, another type of training to be seen in GD’s video documents proves striking: that aimed at teaching employees how to do cleaning. Many scenes show employees learning to tidy away their personal belongings, fold blankets, dust the furniture, clean the toilets, and pick up rubbish. These practices on the theme of hygiene take place in the same way as the promotion of filial piety previously described in symbolic, ritualistic forms. All members of staff (managers and manual workers alike), often accompanied by Mr W himself, take part in the cleaning operations with a great deal of care and attention. They use a toothbrush or a cutter in corners that are difficult to reach to eliminate all traces of dirt. Their devotion to these “humble” tasks takes on a religious solemnity. To achieve a blanket folded to resemble a “square of tofu,” employees must apply all the instructions meticulously. These practices that combine hygienics and discipline may be interpreted from two different angles.

Firstly, these activities based on hygienics contribute to developing humility, a quality that “Confucian” entrepreneurs judge important to integrate: “Teaching people to be humble is to teach them to reduce their ego, which has a tendency to expand disproportionately in a highly materialistic society.”²¹ Carrying out these “humble,” “insignificant,” and “undignified” tasks would

15. A “propaganda” department has been set up in GD to keep a record in the form of written documents, photos, and videos of the activities organised by the firm (observations in the field, Suzhou, May 2017).

16. Internal video documents at GD.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. Internal video documents at GD.

20. Ibid.

21. Interview with Mr W, Suzhou, May 2017.

therefore seem to constitute a sort of *jiaohua* that leads to the beginnings of “humility.”

What is more, learning to tidy away one’s personal belongings and remain clean has the objective of making employees understand that they must appear presentable not only in a public space, but also in the organisation of their private lives. This type of normative education aims to improve an individual’s civility by increasing their “quality” (*suzhi* 素質).²² For “Confucian” entrepreneurs the “modelling” of behaviours through the “correction” of certain bad habits represents a path of moral behaviour and discipline, both of which naturally are qualities that the majority of them also expect in their employees.

Ms F, the organiser of the training program, explains the relationship between tidying away one’s personal belongings and self-cultivation: “It is not because the personal belongings need to be tidied, but that we need, through tidying our belongings, to discover untidy areas and forgotten corners in our minds. We will discover the imperfections deep in our hearts, and then we will focus on the forgotten corners to make our hearts perfect.”²³ Ms G, human resources director at GD, also insists on the importance of this training: “What we want is not simply to teach you to fold blankets and towels, or to put away toothbrushes; it is to make you understand how to manage and plan your lives.”²⁴ Thus, cleaning and personal hygiene are considered propitious moments for a dialogue with the self, an examination of the mind that leads to a remodelling of the individual’s behaviours and state of mind. This type of ritualisation of behaviour that combines hygienics, discipline, and “traditional” values is in the spirit of the various *jiaohua* campaigns that have been implemented in modern China, for example as part of the New Life Movement (*xin shenghuo yundong* 新生活運動) of the 1930s (Billioud 2016: 803). The scale here, that of the company, is very different, however.

According to certain entrepreneurs, adherence to traditional values is an effective way of improving the behaviour and moral comportment of the individual. This submission to the norm reveals a process of domination exercised through *jiaohua*. Although it can be seen that *jiaohua* sometimes results in the cultivation and far-reaching transformation of the self (Jiang Fu 2021), within the context of a company, this method of education inspired by Confucianism is also, above all, an instrument of management.

From the normative education of employees to the construction of moral citizenship

Another aspect of the normative education dispensed by the “Confucian” company consists of speeches and practices that call upon the employees’ zeal in the workplace.

The expression 性命雙修 (*xingming shuangxiu*, to cultivate both one’s nature and one’s destiny) comes from Taoism and was originally used to describe a set of self-cultivation practices, the purpose of which was to achieve perfect harmony between the physical and the spiritual. At FT, it is through a reinterpretation of this expression that Mr M requires a total commitment on the part of his employees based on the perfecting of the self and professional dedication:

To achieve a complete and happy life we should cultivate both our nature and our destiny. The “cultivation of our nature” lies in the transformation and the perfecting of our nature; and the cultivation of our destiny consists in accepting our destiny and performing our duties fully (*jìn benfen* 盡本分).²⁵

However, for Mr M, “accepting one’s destiny” is in no way a passive attitude, but on the contrary is an active commitment. This idea is demonstrated by the desire formulated by Mr M regarding his employees: to become both “a pupil and joyful fighter” (*kuailè de xuéxī zhě hé fèndòu zhě* 快樂的學習者和奮鬥者). To do this, FT states that one of its responsibilities is to build an environment conducive to the personal fulfilment of its employees. Training systems applying these precepts have thus been set up. The aim of “rays of the sun” (*yángguāng jìhuà* 陽光計劃) is, for example, to identify and train young employees with high potential to lead them towards future positions of responsibility. At the same time, Mr M expects his employees to furnish unrelenting efforts throughout their lives:

Combat is the permanent state of our existence. Every man has his responsibilities. We live in this world to fight, and not to be happy.²⁶

Such statements call upon the dedication and self-discipline of the employees through a certain form of asceticism, the purpose of which is to create a diligent, motivated, and productive workforce.

Whilst not using the same terms, Mr W. also insists on the importance for the individual to fulfil the role society has assigned them:

My constant wish is that each employee of GD should become a model. At home, he should be a good son, a good father, and a good son-in-law. In the neighbourhood he should be a good volunteer. In the company he should be a good worker, a good manager. In addition, he should know how to transmit the culture of the holy and the wise (*shèngxián wénhuà* 聖賢文化).²⁷

These speeches show an expectation of more profound commitment that goes deeper than a simple professional relationship. By focusing on ethical behaviour and calling upon the civic values of employees, these entrepreneurs are creating a link between the collective representations of the company and the normalisation of a citizen’s behaviour in society. Experimentation on the moral education of their employees is

22. In recurrent use in public discourse in the years 1990–2000, the term *suzhi* “referred to the moral and cultural attributes of a modern, civilised individual” (Goossaert and Palmer 2012: 211–2). The idea was promoted during this period by government campaigns, the aim of which was to “remould revolutionary ideology and morality into a new model of civic virtue compatible with economic modernisation” (ibid.). Here the emphasis of this term is above all placed on behavioural norms. On *suzhi*, see also Anagnost (2004), Kipnis (2006), and Cao (2009).

23. Internal video documents at GD.

24. Ibid.

25. From an internal document at FT.

26. Ibid.

27. Speech by Mr W on the 22nd anniversary of GD.

therefore directed towards a much wider project, the objective of which is to contribute to the transformation of Chinese society as a whole through the implementation of a normative education. This vocation is represented by Mr L as one of “corporate social responsibility”:

The role of education is to exercise a good influence on a person so that they improve their behaviour. It is so that a bad person no longer commits bad actions, and that a good person improves still further [in their behaviour]. This is one of a company’s social responsibilities. Our company should be aware of its responsibilities by influencing the population through *jiaohua* to be able to guide it better.²⁸

With the same wish for social engagement through *jiaohua*, TW’s study of the classics program goes over and above the framework of the company and concerns a wider public, including anyone interested in “traditional culture.” Between 2009 and 2015, TW organised 166 training programs in “traditional culture” intended for a very diverse public: residents of the town of Dongguan, the families and friends of their employees, “enthusiasts” from different regions, etc. Moreover, introducing young people to cultural tradition is an important project. Since 2010, TW has created a “national studies” class open to young people and adolescents. Classes in “reading of the classics by children” (*shao’er dujing* 少兒讀經) are occasionally organised, for example during summer camps financed by the company.²⁹ To complete their educational projects successfully, these company directors often join forces with activists coming from a variety of different horizons: university professors, intellectuals from working-class backgrounds, Buddhist masters, retired civil servants, etc. The development of new communication technologies has modernised the organisation of training programs open to the general public. Thanks to the voice or written messaging systems of WeChat, in a discussion group created by TW on this application, live lectures and discussions on the subject matter of the “traditional culture” classes are organised regularly.³⁰

These lectures and practices that reflect the commitment of the new economic elite to society have emerged at a time when we are hearing more and more often that Chinese society, after experiencing a moral decline through the rise of capitalism and rampant materialism, would like moral order to be reestablished. Consequently, the application of *jiaohua* by these “Confucian” entrepreneurs might be considered to some extent an echo of the ethico-political campaigns initiated by the Chinese government over the last two decades. Indeed, since the beginning of the 2000s, several campaigns to reestablish moral behaviour in citizens have been initiated by the authorities. The themes and slogans employed by the authorities in these campaigns increasingly refer to “cultural tradition.” From the promulgation of several programs aimed at the moral education of citizens launched in the 2000s by then Chinese President Hu Jintao 胡錦濤,³¹ to the propaganda concerning the “fundamental values of socialism” initiated by the current central authorities in 2015, embodied in the slogan of the “Chinese dream,” the Party-state is attempting to implement a series of projects on a national scale, to a certain extent drawing on Confucian ethics,

often presented as the “traditional virtues of the Chinese nation” (*Zhonghua minzu de chuantong meide* 中華民族的傳統美德) in official discourse. Elements associated with Chinese cultural tradition (not only Confucian) now form part of an “ideological cocktail” that also includes other dimensions such as references to socialist heritage and to the history of the Communist Party, or the economic successes of recent decades (Billioud 2020a: 89). Through the evocation of a certain number of historical elements, the Party-state is endeavouring to slot itself into a continuity and a Chinese civilisation that would endow it with historical legitimacy. The main aim of the latter is above all to maintain its power through giving the population an education in moral behaviour and the establishment of confidence in the government (Boutonnet 2009).

In relation to these movements initiated by the authorities, the discourse and practices characterised by the educational ambitions of certain “Confucian” entrepreneurs demonstrate their attempts to position themselves as important players. The objective of their initiatives is, on the one hand, to influence the moral condition of the population by drawing on Confucian ethical values, thereby attenuating the widely-recognised moral crisis raging within Chinese society (Kang 2000; Boutonnet 2009; Ci 2014; Pieke 2018; Li and Yan 2019; Yan 2020); and on the other, to respond to the ethico-political discourse of official propaganda in order to legitimise their activities. The hybrid character revealed in the education project of Confucian entrepreneurs inspired by *jiaohua* leads us to think that the project now exceeds its purely educational dimension, and is expanding towards a wider politico-educational dimension.

Conclusion: The “Confucian entrepreneur,” an ancient title at the service of two constructions

There is a strong educational element associated with *jiaohua* in the “Confucian” company. From our observations in the field, it seems the *jiaohua* element is most often expressed by employees’ personal appropriation of textual resources and ritual, symbolic practices, and more generally by a value system suggested by the management. The motivations of “Confucian entrepreneurs” can be explained in two ways. On the one hand, an education that places the emphasis on certain “traditional” values such as filial piety, humility, and abnegation fits into a project aim at moulding a workforce equipped with a certain number of virtues: loyalty, assiduity, discipline, modesty, civility, etc. Moreover, this educational vocation is not merely limited to employees of the company but extends to a much wider public that encompasses the entire

28. Interview with Mr L, Dongguan, December 2016.

29. The reading of the classics by children constitutes a noteworthy phenomenon in the Confucian renewal amongst working people. New pedagogical approaches inspired by the tradition, observed in this movement, are giving rise to debate in contemporary Chinese society. For the phenomenon of reading the classics (*dujing* 讀經), see Hu (2005), Billioud and Thoraval (2007, 2014), Gong (2008), and Wang (2018).

30. Observations in the field, Dongguan, December 2016, January 2019, and January 2020.

31. To these programs that reference traditional Chinese culture may be added the growing use of slogans with Confucian accents, such as “harmonious socialist society” (*shehuizhuyi hexie shehui* 社會主義和諧社會), and the “socialist conception of honour and shame” (*shehuizhuyi rongru guan* 社會主義榮辱觀). For the official discourse pronounced during these campaigns and their relationship to traditional culture, see Billioud (2007), and Boutonnet (2009).

population. The educational ambition of these economic elites may therefore be considered as having a place in the project to construct the modern citizen of high quality (*suzhi*) that the state would like. On the other hand, the social commitment of these entrepreneurs expressed via the use of a Confucian rhetoric contributes to the construction of a business ethic. Although the boom in the private sector has gone hand-in-hand with China's economic ascent over the last 40 years, an increasingly common discourse in society on the decline of moral behaviour and the increasing power of materialism often calls into question a capitalism in frenetic search for profit. Many questions on the figure of the private entrepreneur, whose status has become ambiguous since the reforms, have arisen from this. Indeed, the perception of the new private entrepreneurs remains paradoxical for the authorities: on the one hand, because the figure of the private entrepreneur embodied the enemy of socialism during the revolutionary history of the Party, so its reestablishment has doubtless provoked ideological debates; and on the other, because the policies that commit the country to following a path of economic modernisation need to base themselves on new dynamic players, amongst whom the private entrepreneurs obviously figure. The Party's promotion of the new status of the private entrepreneur as a "hero of the socialist economy" during the reform era attests to the latter point (Guiheux 2012). However, the ideological hostility towards the private sector that took root during the Party's revolutionary history has not totally disappeared. Entrepreneurs are sometimes poorly protected by the law and exposed to the arbitrary decisions of the authorities (Guiheux 2015; Desplain 2019). This policy that combines praise and criticism renders ambiguous the relationship between the CCP and the entrepreneurs. In this specific context, the discourse and practices of certain entrepreneurs that call upon Confucian ethics allows them to display a desire to counterbalance the excesses

of capitalism. The claim of the new economic elite to the title of "Confucian entrepreneur" in reality reveals a need to construct and project a responsible and ethical image and thereby acquire legitimacy for rapid enrichment. Finally, I would emphasise the recourse to "tradition" via *jiaohua* that aims to build a new business ethic that also reflects a retreat into purely national references: participating in the invention of a capitalist model under the aegis of "socialism with Chinese characteristics," thereby echoing the new development policy promoted by the governmental authorities in recent years.

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