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“Confucianism”, an Alternative Source of Belief in Contemporary Chinese Society: An Empirical Study of the Founding of *Xin* 信 in a “Confucian” Company

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Abstract: Open claims to Confucian values, often associated with cultural traditionalism and a larger revival of Confucianism among the Chinese population from the 2000s onwards, have gained momentum in the world of entrepreneurs. The intensity of this phenomenon can be explained by a wide variety of motivations, among which a desire to establish a belief, a sort of *xin* 信 towards traditional values, has emerged from within the “Confucian” company. Based on fieldwork carried out between 2017 and 2018 at TW, a private company located in Dongguan (Guangdong), this paper aims to analyze the efforts undertaken by “Confucian” managers to use the spiritual guidance role of Confucianism. Our work is organized into three sections. First, we analyze the main modalities of proselytizing within TW. Then, based on the personal experiences of three employees of this company, we try to understand how they live the *jiaohua* and to what extent this “educational” experience inspired by Confucianism has allowed them to reorient themselves towards a new way of perceiving the world. Finally, by placing it in a broader context, that of contemporary Chinese society’s crisis of values, we question the role Confucianism can play in the foundation of a population’s beliefs.



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Keywords: Chinese traditional culture; Confucian revival; entrepreneurs; “Confucian” enterprise; *jiaohua*; proselytism

1. Introduction

This article is part of a study on the Confucian revival in the business world in contemporary China. Since the 2000s, China has seen the emergence of a “Confucian revival” among the population. This revival of Confucianism, often associated with a parallel revitalization of cultural tradition, is particularly popular amongst numerous entrepreneurs who publicly claim to adhere to these values. This new trend characterized by a resurgence of the *rushang* 儒商 (Confucian merchant) model, an ancient term that originally referred to a new type of merchants in the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) who were close to literati circles, is expressed in a multitude of contexts: the reading of classical works within the company; the practice of *jiaohua* 教化, the Confucian notion of education with underlies the ethical behavior of an individual; the integration of certain traditional values into management, etc. The intensity of this revitalization can be explained by a wide variety of motivations including economic rationale, social recognition, and public performances of commitment. Additionally, our field surveys seem to reveal a desire to create a true adherence, a kind of *xin* 信¹ towards traditional values, which reveals the proselytizing ambition of this type of business.

Before we begin our analysis, it is necessary to clarify some methodological orientations of this study. Firstly, about the terms “Confucianism” and “traditional culture”: as key words of this article, their use is in most cases a matter of interpretation on the part of our interlocutors in the field, not the establishment of any standards or norms on our part as to what is “Confucian” or “traditional”. In other words, in the context of our work, this term refers more to an “emic” representation on the part of our interlocutors than to an

“objective” analytical term. This clarification seems important, especially since the category of “Confucianism” is complex and entails very different elements. Being the product of the European science of religions that developed from the 19th century, “Confucianism” was conceived as the philosophical or religious doctrine of an eponymous character. However, instead of being confined to its restricted meaning referring to Confucius’ teaching to his disciples, since the Sage commented on a large number of texts from high antiquity, the word “Confucianism” (*rujia* 儒家) is often confused with classical culture. Therefore, “Confucianism” is frequently seen as a category that encompasses the entire Chinese cultural tradition.² The Confucian revival that became popular in the beginning of the 21st century is indeed marked by a quite significant renewed popular interest in traditional culture. The phenomenon has taken religious (Buddhism, Daoism, *qigong* and, more generally, all self-cultivation practices), educational (movement to get children to read classical literature), patrimonial, economic and touristic forms. It is also recognizable in terms of mass culture: for example, the craze for historical shows on television, the return of traditional dress, and the multiplication of Internet sites devoted to classical culture (Billioud 2007). To use Sébastien Billioud’s words: «in this context, Confucianism, which during the classical era permeated more or less every area of life, is currently being referred to in a fragmented way» (Billioud 2007).

The broad meaning of “Confucianism” is also observed in our field, and it helps to explain a significant overlap between “Confucianism” and “traditional culture” in this paper. The discourses of our interlocutors are marked by a lack of clear demarcation between “Confucianism” and “traditional culture”. Very often, these entrepreneurs and employees freely use these two words as two synonyms. Moreover, a widening of the semantic field of “Confucianism” has been observed on the religious level, through a syncretic dimension of the practices and discourses of certain entrepreneurs. Let us take the example of Mr. L, the general manager of TW, the company that will be the main field for this study. His value system reflects the influence of the three teachings of Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism. Mr. L’s personal belief is influenced to a large extent by Buddhism, and this influence has led to his advocacy of karma as the guiding principle for living in the world. At the same time, the boss of TW has the ambition to turn his company into a “school” to put Confucian ideologies into practice. Moreover, under the influence of Daoism, which advocates a harmonious relationship between man and nature, Mr. L is involved in activities that aim to develop bio-agriculture and health maintenance (*yangsheng* 养生). This syncretic dimension is also expressed through symbolic signs that decorate the company; for instance, an offering table in honor of the war god Guangong 关公, also named Guangdi 关帝, is placed in the corridor of the factory. Guangong is among the most popular gods in China, due to his embodiment of Confucian virtues, especially loyalty, courage, and righteousness. He is also revered as a Buddhist and Daoist god. A further example is the presence of three halls worshipping Buddha, Confucius, and Laozi, respectively, that employees can choose to use according to their need and belief for meditation and the studying of classical texts. This syncretic dimension observed in the practices of entrepreneurs claiming “Confucianism” makes it very difficult to define the term “Confucian entrepreneur” according to prior criteria. Statistics on the number of “Confucian” enterprises or “Confucian” entrepreneurs in the strict sense of the term is therefore almost an impossible task.

However, in the context of our work, a delimitation of this status, even if it takes a very broad meaning, seems necessary. We consider entrepreneurs who claim Confucianism through their speeches and practices, and more broadly the whole of traditional Chinese culture (including, on the religious level, references to Daoism, Buddhism, or popular religions), as “Confucian entrepreneurs”. This delimitation can help us, on the one hand, identify objects of study for our field observations; on the other hand, with its open and multiple character, allow us to take into consideration the great variety of forms in which the craze for Confucianism has appeared in the milieu of entrepreneurs. The purpose of our fieldwork is not to provide a fixed and normative definition of Confucianism, but to

question how our interlocutors claim Confucianism. In other words, rather than debating the question “Is Confucianism a religion?”, we are interested in how actors assimilate certain values of Confucianism by considering it as an alternative spiritual resource. In her analysis of ritual life in contemporary China, Anna Sun describes religion as “human social action for maintaining meaningful relationships with the divine, the dead, and the living”.³ She argues that “Multiple religious actions of this kind are often performed without the actors having, or needing to have, any religious identity at all”, and underlines that “the institutional and identity-based framework of an unacknowledged monotheism cannot do justice to the diversity of religious experiences in non-Western societies such as Asia”. In this way, she proposes a new theoretical framework focusing on “everyday religious practices” which helps us understand “the diversity of Chinese religious life and its apparent contradictions”. This analysis provides us with a theoretical framework for what will be described in the “Confucian company” under study.

Based on the above-mentioned delimitation of the “Confucian entrepreneurs”, as part of a larger study project on the Confucian revival in the business world in contemporary China, our fieldwork has been carried out during the years 2016–2020. Multiple visits to some 40 companies, as well as keeping in touch at a distance via WeChat, have enabled us to collect a large amount of data. The data are based on field observations, structured, semi-structured and informal interviews with company directors, but also with a number of employees and other people around them. We also rely on articles written by these entrepreneurs and their speeches given in different circumstances. Other data sources come from documents produced by the companies, such as annual reports, internal publications, video documents and official company websites. It is important to note that for our field study, instead of conducting surveys among a large number of companies, we decided to focus on a smaller number and to conduct more in-depth qualitative studies. We also conducted field studies on the Bo’ao Rushang Forum, an institution aimed at promoting Confucian values in the entrepreneurial community. In view of the very diverse status of its members and contributors, a study on this Forum, in particular on its organization, its activities, its financial sources, and the exchanges between its members, helped us to understand the interactions between different factors in the current Chinese society around the “Confucian” revival in the business world.⁴

Relying on our empirical studies, we have tried to develop our analysis along two lines. On the one hand, we have tried to show how these companies present themselves as being structured around moral values understood as “Confucian” or “traditional”. On the other hand, we questioned the way in which the term *rushang* (Confucian merchant) emerges and spreads in Chinese society. These two axes can help us understand the “Confucian” business phenomenon from two complementary perspectives.

From an “external” perspective, the return of Confucianism in the corporate world can only be understood if placed in the contemporary social landscape. Indeed, being part of the Confucian renewal movement in the Chinese society during the last decades, this phenomenon can be considered as resulting from a conjunction of various forces, such as political, economic and intellectual. In addition, the influence of certain religious groups, particularly Buddhist structures, as well as other social actors, must also be considered. The involvement of these different factors and their interaction observed in our fieldwork lead us to analyze the Confucian revival in the business world like an “ecology”, the approach advocated by Vincent Goossaert and David A. Palmer in their study of the development of China’s multiple religious modernities (See [Goossaert and Palmer 2011](#)).

From an “internal” point of view, the traditional values invoked by the entrepreneurs can be considered as the expression of an instrumentalization and also as the mobilization of deep convictions. It is true that sometimes the integration of traditional values in the firm can be associated with a concern for personnel management and the need to train a docile, motivated, and “moral” workforce. However, in many cases, the business leaders are committed to promoting morality through the reappropriation of “traditional” values to offer their employees a spiritual resource.

The Confucian revival that appeared during the 2000s can be understood to a certain extent as an expression of the Chinese population's need for spirituality. Indeed, for the last four decades, China's economic successes have masked a fragile and materialistic society. In a dynamic environment, faced with a breakdown of moral values within Chinese society recognized by both civil society and the authorities (Boutonnet 2009), part of the population is trying to avoid being absorbed by the sole quest for material profit. To exist they need to cultivate spirituality through beliefs and to search for fulfillment. In this particular social context, Confucianism can meet their needs and provide them with a new way of perceiving the world. Some of the practices and discourses observed during our fieldwork reveal a proselytizing dimension of companies that vouch for Confucian values. This is mainly seen through *jiaohua* (education/transformation), a key notion of Confucianism linking the acquisition of intellectual knowledge to the process of self-cultivation and training aimed at changing an individual's behavior and state of mind.

Based on the multiple sources collected during our field investigations between 2017 and 2018 at TW, a private company located in Dongguan, Guangdong, this paper aims to analyze the efforts undertaken by "Confucian" managers to use the spiritual guidance role of Confucianism.⁵ In particular, we ask: How do these "Confucian" entrepreneurs exploit traditional culture to establish spiritual conviction among their employees?

To answer this question, our work is organized as the following three sections. First, we analyze the main modalities of proselytizing within TW. Then, based on the personal experiences of three employees of this company, we try to understand how they live the *jiaohua* and to what extent this "educational" experience has allowed them to reorient themselves towards a new way of perceiving the world. Finally, by placing it in a broader context, that of contemporary Chinese society's crisis of values, we question the role that Confucianism can play in the foundation of a population's beliefs.

2. The Proselytizing Dimension in a "Confucian" Enterprise

TW is located in Dongguan, which is an important city for the manufacturing industry in Guangdong province, on the Pearl River Delta. This company was founded by Mr. L in 1997 and specializes in manufacturing cell phone electronic components. With approximately five hundred employees in 2016, and an annual turnover around one hundred million yuan, TW is famous in the region not because of its size or economic performance, but because of its experiments to put traditional cultural values into practice.

Their attempt to integrate Confucian values, or more broadly the whole of Chinese traditional culture, is evident first of all in the teaching of classical works within TW. This teaching is organized under various forms: courses, conferences, reading sessions, recitations of texts, exchanges and sharing, etc. The reading of the canonical works is strictly and punctually imposed on the employees. They must read classical works twice a day, in the morning and the evening. Canonical Confucian works such as *The Rules for Disciples* (*Dizigui* 弟子规), *The Classic of Filial Piety* (*Xiaojing* 孝经), or *The Analects* (*Lunyu* 论语) are the primary texts. Their purpose in promoting these texts is primarily to enable employees to familiarize themselves with a classical culture that they are mostly unfamiliar with, and to aid employees' first step towards spiritual advancement. This activity, however, plays such an important role in the life of this firm that it also constitutes evaluative criteria. Our observations in the field reveal that the study of classical works at TW has a concrete impact on the careers of personnel, and in particular on recruitment, promotion, pay, and even dismissal.⁶

The company's ambition to promote traditional culture often extends beyond its employees. This ranges from the parents and/or children of employees to anyone interested in participating. The company has founded a "national studies" class (*guoxueban* 国学班) for youth, summer camps on the theme of traditional culture, and a lecture series for adults. For parents who want their children to have a different and complementary education in addition to the official educational system, the "national studies" class has satisfactorily met their demands. It should be noted that all these activities are free, with the company

covering the costs. To promote traditional culture to a wider audience, several discussion groups on WeChat have been created by TW, in which Mr. L actively participates. In addition, real-time conferences within the WeChat groups are frequently organized. The topics discussed during these conferences are mainly related to the concerns of everyday life: children's education, family problems, health concerns, unemployment, economic worries, etc. The participants learn how to deal with these difficult situations by drawing on the doctrines of traditional culture. The stated purpose of this type of activity is to teach the audience how to cope with life, gain perspective through self-cultivation, and eventually find inner peace and happiness. These efforts to build a balanced state of mind in the local population demonstrate both the need for the "settlement of mind and life" (*anshen liming* 安身立命)⁷ among the population and a commitment of select economic elites, driven by concerns for the individual or collective destiny, to societal issues. It is traditional culture, used as a spiritual resource, that allows these requirements to be met.

In addition to the study of classics aimed at the adoption of traditional values, the proselytizing ambition is demonstrated through the implementation of specific projects to ensure the welfare of employees. As part of its policy of emphasizing its concern for human welfare (*yiren weiben* 以人为本: literally translates to "human-centered"), a value presented as traditional within TW, the firm allocates many material benefits to employees including free vegetarian meals, housing, childcare for employees, and even allowances financed by a fund established within the firm. However, these practices aimed at building employee well-being seem motivated less by social concern than a "missionary" vocation. Indeed, during the interview with Mr. L, he repeatedly mentioned the term *xin* 信 ("belief"). He clarified that it is mainly through the realization of three projects, concerning training and health maintenance of staff, that he tries to base the *xin* of TW employees towards the "traditional culture". These three projects are: (1) all employees will pass the "self-taught" exams (*zikao* 自考)⁸; (2) all employees will eat 100% organic vegetarian food; (3) through organic vegetarianism, health care and maintenance with traditional methods, employees and their family members will no longer fall seriously ill:

When these three projects were set up in 2013 at TW, no one thought that it would be feasible. But I was confident. In our society, such projects are considered very difficult, perhaps impossible to carry through. If traditional culture can help us turn them into reality, it will help my employees believe in traditional culture. (...) I have myself been a beneficiary of the wisdom of cultural tradition, and I want to pass it on. It is a desire that has grown within me. I feel compelled to do it, so that my mind is at peace. This is not an empty slogan, unlike "social responsibility" which is part of empty speeches (Interview, Dongguan, January 2018).

Mr. L's commitments do not stem from a desire to fulfill his duty to society, but rather from a proselytizing vocation whose real purpose is to establish among employees "belief" (*xin*) in traditional culture.

Another point worth highlighting in TW's proselytizing project is the syncretic dimension of their values. As mentioned above, some religious practices at TW reflect the influence of the three teachings of Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism. The syncretism of three spiritual traditions, occasionally associated with beliefs in certain popular or local gods, is far from being purely contemporary. It has been part of Chinese religious culture for more than 1000 years.⁹ It has also been highlighted by some researchers and is defined as the "basic characteristics of the folk religions among ethnic Han people." (Chen et al. 2018, p. 30). In the case of TW, this heterogeneous ensemble provides a multitude of spiritual resources for the implementation of *jiaohua*. This is revealed through the experiences of three employees of the firm.

3. The "Transformation" of Destiny and the Reorientation towards a New Way of Perceiving the World

As noted earlier, *jiaohua* has a dual dimension of "education" (*jiao*) and "transformation" (*hua*). According to Billioud and Thoraval: "These educational practices take very

different forms from those encountered in official educational institutions, do not only consist of acquiring knowledge, but also contain a dimension of ethical normalization that can have an impact on an individual's existence until he or she improves his or her behavior and transforms." (Billioud and Thoraval 2014, p. 31).

Inspired by this transforming dimension of *jiaohua*, some "Confucian" entrepreneurs believe that true adherence to traditional values can only be achieved through self-transformation, i.e., improving one's behavior and morals to the point of changing one's destiny. Three testimonies that we collected at TW illustrate the role of "preacher" of Mr. L, the boss of the company, through the "change of life" of certain employees. These include Mr. C, a young man who had attempted suicide, who changed his outlook on life and behavior after adhering to the principle of humility; Mr. X, an ex-convict, who was successfully reintegrated into society through traditional culture training that he first began in prison and later at TW; and Mr. H, a victim of polio at birth, who has significantly improved his health through "rectification" of his behavior and morality from the self-culture. These three experiences each hold a dimension of "transformation" or "conversion", that is, a new way of perceiving the world guided by a new hierarchy of values.

3.1. "The Dao Exists in Humility" (Dichu You Dao 低处有道)

The testimony of Mr. C, an employee of TW, illustrates an experience that gives rise to adherence to humility:

I came from Henan, I am 26 years old, I joined TW in January 2016. I learned e-commerce in college and graduated in 2013. At that time, I was too young, I had a lot of ideas, but I was not professionally stable. I couldn't stay at the same company long enough. Maybe it was because of my personality that my fiancée at that time, who came with me to Guangdong, left me. It was a hard hit to me, because we were already planning to get married. After our separation, I started to feel self-inferiority and guilt. All the bad experiences I had had before were eating away at my heart. Gradually, I became depressed. I suffered from insomnia, I couldn't concentrate on my work, I was very afraid, I thought about killing myself. At that time, I was pretty close to a fellow countryman who worked at TW, to whom I revealed my suicide intention. Fearing that he could not help me by himself, he told the company's management about my issues.

I was quickly summoned by Mr. L. There was a staff meeting that day, and he wanted me to declare openly that I did not want to live anymore. I was very afraid of people, I told him that I could not do that. But he told me that the more afraid I was, the more I had to do it. His intention was to let me face my situation instead of running away. But at that point, I was not in a normal condition. I was scared of everything, but he asked me to expose myself to everyone. It didn't give me any more energy, but it seemed to me that I was falling very low. My self-esteem was falling very low. I already had severe self-depreciation in front of others, but after that meeting I couldn't even face the people in the factory.

After that meeting, many colleagues wanted to help me; and of course, there were also people who gossiped about me. Most of the people at TW were fine. They learned the traditional culture and understood that not everyone lives happily in this world. It seems that, before me, some people had already made the same kind of public "confession" (huiguo 悔过: literally translates to "repent of a fault"). Those who had the same experience as me could understand, but not all the others.

Today, stepping back, I recognize that this meeting saved me. It forced me to throw away my self-esteem. My ego was reduced to a minimum. For the past year, I've been a cook in the TW canteen. Now I find that making mantou 馒头 (steamed buns) suits me very well, and if I can make them well, that would be a good start. Indeed, it is only in this state of mind that we can serve others. When I see my colleagues rush to my mantou, I feel very happy (Interview, Dongguan, January 2018).

Here, Mr. C was subjected to a harsh *jiaohua* practice. According to Mr. C, he had a "painful" experience, as a result of which his ego and self-esteem were almost destroyed.

This initiation into humility, however, seems to have brought him positive results: his ego has been correctly limited, his state of mind “has been transformed”. The conceited person he was before no longer exists; he no longer thinks about personal glory. As his attitude towards work, life and others changes, he feels that he is becoming “stronger” and “more responsible”. His “metamorphosis” opens new opportunities. At the end of the interview, Mr. C told us that he would soon be working as a manager at a NIKE-supplied insoles manufacturer. Interestingly, Mr. C got to know his future boss at TW when he came to taste the company’s vegetarian meals and very much enjoyed the *mantou* prepared by Mr. C. In summary, Mr. C highlights two lessons based on traditional values that particularly affected him:

(1) Altruism makes it possible to fulfill oneself” (lita 利他, liji 立己). My *mantou* is good, it is by doing service to others that I have realized my own values.

(2) Dao exists in humility. “(dichu you dao 低处有道). Let’s keep our ego to a minimum. It is often in a very modest state of mind that we come to apprehend the Dao (Interview, Dongguan, January 2018).

Mr. C’s testimony reveals an important dimension of *jiaohua*, that of the shaping of personality. Through moral education aimed at the establishment of humility, which as seen, can go to extremes, the individual bends to the norms. Mr. C’s “transformation” demonstrates a current approach in Confucian education that involves both the authoritative force of the superior and an inculcation of moral values in the individual. As his experience shows, at the end of the “training” process, the person often ends up submitting to the taught norms, and is convinced that he or she has attained greater morality.

3.2. The Moral Transformation of a Prisoner

As part of the popular Confucian revival movement of the 2000s, a moral education project largely promoted by the Lujiang Cultural Education Center (located in Tangchi, a town in the south of Anhui Province) and founded by the Venerable Jingkong 净空, a Taiwanese Buddhist monk, was begun in prisons. These activists advocate a new educational model, which through the teaching of the classics, especially that of the *Dizigui*, aims to “the effect of bringing a number of prisoners back to a buried natural goodness, and consequently to feeling genuine repentance” (Dutournier and Ji 2009, p. 78). TW company is actively engaged in this project via cooperation with prisons and drug rehabilitation centers. Training classes “For a Happy Life” (*xingfu rensheng jiangzuo* 幸福人生培训班) have been held in these places. Mr. L clarifies the purpose of this project as follows, “We should encourage these young people to turn into a constructive force instead of treating them as a nuisance to society. We should give them hope in their lives” (Interview, Dongguan, January 2018). To facilitate the reintegration of these young people into the labor market, TW has recruited a total of 26 former prisoners. Once integrated into the company, they continue their training in traditional culture with the other employees. This re-education has helped these young people to regain a sense of citizenship and self-confidence. The testimony of Mr. X, a former employee of TW who was recruited in this context, allowed us to learn more about this project.

Mr. X, 41 years old, is from Nanyang in Henan province. At the age of 15, he started working in Henan and Hubei. When he was 22, he came to Dongguan, and through personal connections was hired by a façade cleaning company. He soon became a team leader. In 2001, following an accident at work in his company and the refusal of the insurance company to pay compensation, the cleaning company went bankrupt. Mr. X then opened his own cleaning business employing approximately ten of his former colleagues. The business was doing quite well until the SARS epidemic of 2002–2003 devastated the country’s economy and greatly affected the company’s sales. Mr. X was forced to close his business. His workers from the company did not want to leave, so Mr. X stayed in Dongguan with his men to look for day labor. In 2004, having paid off all his debts, Mr. X returned to his hometown. With the help of his parents, he opened a small mobile phone shop, but this business eventually also failed. Mr. X then returned to

Dongguan to resume his cleaning business with his former colleagues. In 2006, he married a girl from his home country and the couple had a child. His business during this period, and until 2008, was flourishing. It was at this point that Mr. X started to hang out with “the wrong crowd” in bars and restaurants and became an alcoholic. One evening, while drunk, he seriously injured someone during a gang fight. He was sentenced to four years in prison.

Mr. X experienced this change of situation as a downfall, even thinking of committing suicide. It was at this point that the “Light of Life Help and Education Association” (*Shengming zhiguang bangjiao xiehui* 生命之光帮教协会), a non-governmental organization in Shenzhen, visited the prison to help its inmates. The association, chaired by Mr. Wang Gang, aimed to help young “delinquents”. TW was one of the active members of this association. During the visit, apart from presenting educational-themed performances, the association offered the inmates books, the majority of which were classic works, such as *Dizigui* 弟子规 (*Rules for Disciples*), a key work in the teaching of filial piety, and *Liaofan sixun* 了凡四训 (*The Four Lessons of Liaofan*), a book centered on the relationship between fate and self-cultivation. There were also books by Wang Fengyi 王凤仪, a well-known healer in popular circles who developed a “therapeutic” system based on morality. It was his book *Buyuanren* 不怨人 (*We Must Not Complain about Others*) that most affected Mr. X:

Before I got into prison, I often complained about this or that. After reading Wang Fengyi’s book, I realized that I was entirely at fault. With this change of mind, I promised myself that when I got out, I would join this association. I also vowed to be a good person (*yige haoren* 一个好人) from now on, so that my family would not worry about me anymore (Interview, Dongguan, January 2018).

According to him, thanks to the education of the traditional culture he received, he went from being a careless and detached person to a person who believes in fate:

Everything that happened to me was willed by my fate. Once I understood that this was the punishment I deserved, everything started to change (Interview, Dongguan, January 2018).

For good behavior, Mr. X was released after only three years in prison. On the day of his release and that of some other inmates, the Shenzhen prison management and several business leaders organized a job fair called “Get Out of Prison, Go to the Factory” (*chu le jianyummen, jin changmen* 出了监狱门, 进厂门), with the aim of helping released inmates reintegrate into society. This event was the first of its kind in China. It was on this occasion that Mr. X was hired by Mr. L.

Mr. X stayed at TW for over six months between 2012 and 2013. As he was not given a permanent position, he only performed short-term tasks in different departments of the company, such as the canteen and the SM Sofa Factory, which was run by Mr. L’s younger brother WJ. In most cases, Mr. X participated in the activities organized by the company to promote traditional culture. For example, he was sent by Mr. L to the bio-agriculture center of Professor An Jinlei in Hebei, who is an expert in this field. Together with his colleagues, he visited other companies to promote vegetarianism. On several occasions, he visited Shenzhen prison to share his own experiences with prisoners.

Mr. X left TW in 2013 because he felt compelled to help the people he knew from before his imprisonment to get in touch with traditional culture.

Many of the friends who have followed me in the past are well behaved, but some of them are not. For those who don’t behave properly, I have the responsibility to guide them to the traditional culture, so that their thoughts are not too confused. Every day they work hard and risk their lives by climbing scaffolding. Their parents worry about them. But these people, once they earn some money, leave their parents aside, go to play cards, gamble, or drink alcohol. When they have drunk too much, they go to the massage room and do crazy things. I find all this wrong, so I want to gradually bring these people back to the traditional culture. That’s why I left TW (Interview, Dongguan, January 2018).

In recent years, Mr. X has brought many of his friends to TW to study traditional culture. He joined the “Light of Life Education and Assistance Association”, the volunteer

group that helped him when he was in prison. He himself became a volunteer of this association, and regularly visits centers for the disabled, and old people's homes.

Today, Mr. X is the owner of a company with approximately 20 employees in the field of construction. Although his company is small, and only makes a hundred or two hundred-thousand-yuan profit per year, Mr. X is satisfied with his life:

My state of mind is now very balanced, if I feel tired, I rest, I am not anxious anymore. If a person's state of mind is good, everything will be fine. (...) I have been studying Dharma for the last two years, and I realized that whatever happened was the best thing that could happen to me. Whatever happens in life, you have to deal with it. There are no insurmountable obstacles. There is a saying that the rich have the troubles of the rich and the poor have the joy of the poor. Although we don't have much money in comparison to many people, we are happy and sincere, so we won't have any problems (Interview, Dongguan, January 2018).

Mr. X's experiences highlight to a large extent the "educational" dimension of the "Confucian" enterprise. Here, educating and transforming a person morally seem to take precedence over the economic functions of the enterprise, for as Mr. X revealed, during most of his work period at TW, instead of holding profitable positions, he mainly participated in activities promoting traditional culture that did not financially benefit the company. However, he was treated as a part-time employee and received a salary of 1000 *yuan*. At TW, the average monthly salary of a line worker is between 3000 and 4000 *yuan*. Clearly, there is no immediate economic rationale for hiring ex-prisoners at TW, as it is not a way to bring in new productive and skilled labor to the company. Such involvement in social work may undoubtedly have positive economic, social, and political side effects for his company, but the fact remains that Mr. L's ambition is to transform TW into a "spiritual practice space" (*daochang* 道场). Mr. X has achieved his inner transformation through *jiaohua*, so he can now sow "seeds of traditional culture" elsewhere. Mr. L's role as a preacher has thus been fulfilled through Mr. X's "transformation".

3.3. The Therapeutic Function of Morality

Although at first they seem a bit mystical, the experiences of Mr. H, a TW employee, reveal the striking therapeutic function of establishing morality through *jiaohua* and self-cultivation.

A 33-year-old from Taiyuan, a city in Shanxi province, Mr. H arrived at TW in August 2015. A victim of polio at birth, he began walking at age 7, talking at age 8, and remembering events at age 9. Being a victim of mockery and discrimination from people around him, Mr. H had a very difficult childhood. He gradually developed a rebellious, aggressive, and resentful personality. Mr. H tells his story as follows:

When I was 9 years old and entering the age of reason, I hated the people around me, especially my parents. First, I hated the fact that they had brought me into the world and that I was very different from the others. Secondly, I hated them for raising me, because I had to suffer and endure discrimination from others. Psychologically, I was not strong enough to bear all that. I was often getting into fights with those who made fun of me, and this caused my parents a lot of trouble. When I was 17 or 18 years old, I became a delinquent for revenge. My parents couldn't handle me anymore and let me go downhill little by little. My family had a small business that could maintain a decent life. But when I was 25, because of my bad behavior, the family business was bankrupt. I wanted to commit suicide several times. At 27, I swallowed six packets of rat poison in one go. Fortunately, the drugs I had bought were fake, and I was quickly rescued. At the age of 30, I went to Yunnan with some friends to participate in a drug deal. My family didn't want to see me become a criminal; therefore, with the help of one of my aunts, my parents sent me to TW.

At that point, I didn't believe there were any good people left in the world. I took a few classes at TW, but overall, I was very suspicious of what they were teaching me. What made me change was the Director's attitude towards me. For a month, I was given free room and full board at TW. On the occasion of the Mid-Autumn Festival, the company

gave me moon cakes and 1000 yuan. I was very moved. I couldn't understand why they were so kind to me. I wanted to know more about these people and the traditional culture, so I stayed at TW. I followed my tutor Mr. Yu, a 70-year-old technician, to take care of the maintenance. I had a salary of 2000 yuan at that time, which increased now to 3000 yuan.

I am especially grateful to TW for giving me a chance to work. Previously, in my hometown, I had tried to look for work. But the staff at my local labor office told me that people like me should go home. When I came to TW, I was lame; and they thought I was deaf and dumb, because I didn't dare to talk to others. But the staff at TW are different, no one made fun of me (Interview, Dongguan, January 2018).

It was in this new and completely different environment that Mr. H began to study the classics and self-cultivation. Additionally, these practices led him to radical changes that manifested themselves first on a physical level:

TW has changed me a lot. I never worked out before, and I spent most of my time in Internet cafes. Since I've been at this company, I've started working out again. But at first, because of my health condition, I could not do real sports activities. So, I worshipped the Buddha every day by doing 108 kowtows¹⁰ in front of his statue. This went on for a year and a half. When my health improved, I started running. I used to get up every morning at 5 o'clock to run. This habit has continued to this day, and I can now run at least 5 km a day.

I used to have a limp, but now I can walk normally. My hands used to shake all the time, but now, although my left hand is still a bit dull, my right hand is becoming quite normal. Back then, my head couldn't stop shaking, now I don't have that problem anymore. I used to be so weak I couldn't even climb to the fifth floor. Now I can carry more than 100 kg by myself. If there are reasons for these changes, I can't tell you what exactly. I guess it's because of the regular lifestyle here, and of the good mindset (Interview, Dongguan, January 2018).

Reading the classics has obviously helped Mr. H improve his speech and his reading:

Formerly, when I spoke, people didn't understand me. Now I speak much better, and this is thanks to my daily reading of *Dizigui* since I arrived in 2015. Between 2015 and 2016, along with my tutor Mr. Yu, we would get up every day at 4:30 am to read *Dizigui*. There was a big room on the top floor of the TW building, and there was no one there at that time. We were reading the book aloud. I have noticed that since 2016, people are slowly coming to understand me better when I talk to them.

Because of my illness, my memory was not good. But after memorizing *Dizigui* for three months, I can now recite almost all of them. I find it amazing that I can understand this kind of textbook, because from the second year of middle school, I dropped out of school. Therefore, I could barely read a few words. In *Dizigui*, there were a lot of words I didn't know, so I asked people to help me. The magic thing is that I could gradually read and understand them all, even though I still have trouble writing them (Interview, Dongguan, January 2018).

The reading of classical works (especially *Dizigui*) and the understanding of certain Confucian values, such as filial piety, led Mr. H to an introspection on his former behaviors, which led him to rectify his morality:

For the past two years I have been trying to understand myself. I was actually unprincipled and could be overly influenced, like grass on the wall that folds up when the wind blows on it. In the past, I had bad company, I dared to do almost anything except killing people. It was the positive energy of TW that made me change completely.

I used to think about killing myself all the time, and people said I was depressed. Now I don't have those thoughts. I don't hold grudges against my parents or other people anymore. I never used to apologize to my parents. I never thought of calling them when I traveled far away, it was them who always called me. I only contacted them when I needed money. After studying traditional culture, I finally understand that as a son I should have taken care of my parents, or at least not defied them or hated them, but I was very hard on my father. In fact, my family gave me everything, but I wasn't even grateful to them. (Interview, Dongguan, January 2018).

Despite its irrational appearance, Mr. H's testimonies highlight Sun's concept of "ritual rationality" as an alternative rationality rather than a trans-rational or irrational mode of thought.¹¹ The reading of the classics and physical exercises (reading aloud, running, kowtowing) are combined into devoted experiences of a religious nature. They contribute to a process of self-cultivation that is given a "therapeutic" dimension. This practice of "healing through morality" reminds us of the inventor of the system, Wang Fengyi (1864–1937) and his successor Liu Yousheng 刘有生 (1939–). Wang Fengyi, often also called "Wang the Good" (Wang shanren 王善人), was an uneducated peasant who was healed from a serious illness and then became aware of his healing powers (Billioud and Thoraval 2014, pp. 109–110). Having attained "enlightenment" and committed to transforming the world, Wang joined a famous "redemptive" society, the Wanguo Daodehui (Universal Morality Society) and contributed significantly to its rapid development in Republican China (Billioud 2011a). Overall, the therapeutic system developed by Wang Fengyi emphasizes the close links between our physical health and mind. The "rectifications" of our behavior and morality, ensured by self-cultivation, lead us towards an inner transformation allowing us to protect ourselves against the "five poisons" (*wudu* 五毒) residing in human nature, which are, according to Wang Fengyi, at the origin of our illnesses.¹² Embedded in the revival of traditional culture, several organizations disseminate this healing practice which is often considered as an extension of self-cultivation. This phenomenon was revealed and investigated by Sébastien Billioud through his field study of the Yidan xuetang 一耽学堂, a traditional culture teaching and promotion organization founded in 2001 in Beijing by Pang Fei, an activist teacher. In TW's library, we also noticed many materials (books, DVDs) introducing the therapeutic ideas and methods of the two "healers" (See Billioud 2011b).

These three cases all reveal the spiritual guidance role of Confucianism. Through a rectification of morality using *jiaohua*, often combined with self-cultivation, individuals can find a new spiritual direction in life. However, each path to "conversion" is accomplished in a different way.

Mr. C's experiences are an example of authoritative *jiaohua*. Relying on his position of power within the company, Mr. L resorts to harsh practices in the name of morality. This approach at first glance reminds us of the formula "*rubiao fali* 儒表法里" (Confucian on the surface, legalistic in reality), which overall summarizes the essential characteristic of the governmental practices of the Chinese Empire and helps us understand the authoritarian aspect of Confucianism.¹³ However, in the context of a moral cultivation, Mr. L's "tough love" and request for publicly sharing C's suicide reveals him to be "authoritative" (based on excellence) rather than "authoritarian" (based on coercion), a distinction proposed by Sor-hoon Tan through her study of the understanding of authority in the *Analects*.¹⁴ Although in Mr. L's practice, his "authoritative teaching" did not exclude "authoritarian practice", the latter constitutes above all a teaching technique whose aim is to lead the individual towards a greater morality.

As part of the Prison Moral Education Project, a "social experiment" originally initiated by the Jingkong Buddhist group, Mr. X's testimony demonstrates the moralizing power of ethics through an educational device "totally external to the liberal political model based on the rule of law"¹⁵. Furthermore, in the resources that contributed to Mr. X's spiritual reorientation, Confucianism was complemented with karma, a concept from Buddhism. Based on the principle of "changing one's fate through good works" (*xiuming* 修命), this concept attaches morality to behavior, a prerequisite for the desired alteration of individuals' conduct.

Mr. H's healing experience, centered on the therapeutic potential of moral recovery, illuminated the relationship between physical well-being and self-cultivation based in ethics and morality. This path, like the other two testimonies, offers the individual soul spiritual meaning and demonstrates the characteristics of "popular Confucianism" marked by a syncretism combining Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, and folk beliefs which remain.

4. Confucianism, an Alternative Source of Belief in the Face of the Moral Crisis

We have presented the proselytizing dimension in TW, a “Confucianism-inspired” firm, and now will move to situate this proselytizing in a wider context of contemporary Chinese society, which has been marked by declining spirituality and morality for several decades.

A consensus has emerged in China in recent few decades: simultaneous with the economic transformations post-reform, a crisis of morality, linked to a lack of belief, has emerged and is undermining society. This phenomenon has attracted the attention of academic researchers who have attempted to give sociological and philosophical explanations. Ci Jiwei, a professor of philosophy at the University of Hong Kong, calls this crisis the “spiritual crisis” (*jingshen weiji* 精神危机) or the “crisis of belief” (*xinyang weiji* 信仰危机). He formulated the concept of “desublimation” to explain the nature of the transition from the Maoist era to the reform era. This concept involves three dimensions: “epistemic”, “moral” and “corporeal”. The “epistemic” dimension has to do with “the belief in the truth: the correctness and the feasibility of communism as a moral-political system”. The “moral” dimension is a matter of the “stringency of the moral codes and practices” of this system, that is, “of the degree to which they require self-denial and self-sacrifice in favor of collective interests”. The “corporeal” dimension refers to “the organization of desires, in ways that are more or less ascetic or hedonistic”. According to Ci Jiwei, post-Maoist Chinese society has experienced a “de-sublimation” of these three dimensions, this generated by the decline of belief in the truth of communism as a system of “action-guiding” ideals, as well as the weakening of asceticism and altruism-collectivism, which in Mao’s time were “almost always preached in the same breath” with some reference to communism (See [Ci 2014](#), pp. 27–29).

Designated as “the greatest challenge in China today”, the crisis of morality in Chinese society since the reform has also been put forward by some committed intellectuals of the contemporary renewal movement, and of Confucianism in China from the second half of the 1990s onwards, as a justification for promoting Confucianism. In an article analyzing the origins and consequences of the Falungong affair, Kang Xiaoguang, a professor of sociology at the People’s University and a leading figure in the intellectual revival of Confucianism, points out that the rapid spread of this “subversive” movement, according to the Chinese government, is directly related to the lack of a “convincing ideology” in post-Maoist society:

We live in an era of collapsed beliefs. Tradition has long since been swept into the dustbin of history, and today there is no longer any system of ideas that can provide legitimacy. In a time of rapid change, in a country of 1.2 billion people, it is terrifying to have no spiritual basis.¹⁶

Linked to the above-mentioned “void” of belief, a crisis of morality can be observed throughout contemporary Chinese society. Health and food scandals are often cited to illustrate moral decline in the country. Examples include the tampered cow milk scandal in 2008, the release of fake vaccines by the pharmaceutical company Changsheng in 2018, or the scandals involving the employment of used cooking oil (*digouyou* 地沟油). The dominance of materialism and the matched moral decay are thus blamed for giving rise to a significant loss of confidence among the population. A consequence therefore of these changes is a crisis of trust.

As part of the Confucian revival movement from the 2000s onwards, the open advocacy of Confucian values within the entrepreneurial world presented above reveals a pressing need to revitalize the ethical norms of society. Of course, the instrumentalization of ethical and moral codes cannot be denied. For example, TW’s understanding of traditional values through the practice of *jiaohua* may concern the need to train a docile, motivated and “moral” workforce. However, in a social context where all face the crisis of values, the proselytizing initiatives of these economic elites to promote Confucianism may in part consist of looking for an alternative source of belief to address the pervasive loss of trust. The adherence to Confucianism by some entrepreneurs and their attempt to establish a

belief through the promotion of Confucianism remind us of new religious movements observed by Panchenko in post-Soviet Russia—a category of religious activity that falls somewhere between traditional “religion” and contemporary “spirituality”, but which is frequently associated with the sort of post-secular “crisis of values”. We will not analyze in detail these similarities here due to space limitation. A comparative study between the Confucian revival in the business world in contemporary China and these new religious movements observed in certain ex-socialist countries needs to be developed in the future in another context.¹⁷

5. Conclusions: A Proselytizing Mission Facing the Market Logic

Over the past forty years, Chinese society has undergone rapid change; behavioral norms, ethics, and moral reasoning have also radically changed. With China now marked by a plurality of values (Yan 2009, 2010), it is important to ask the following questions: to what extent will Confucianism be adopted by employees? In order to implement *jiaohua*, what are the main challenges facing “Confucian” entrepreneurs?

Our interviews with some TW employees provide us with some clues. In general, the managers show a rather willing and cooperative attitude towards the adoption of a company culture focused on traditional values. This can be explained by the way the company is managed, as the promotion of staff is largely determined by participation in activities promoting the “traditional culture” and by the degree of adherence to the values promoted by the company. The vast majority of current managers have been promoted from within the company; in general, they have been with TW for a long time and have a good understanding of the company’s culture. However, among the workers, the integration of Confucian values remains uneven. We observed people who directly participated in *jiaohua* practices and think they have largely “benefited” from them (*shouyi* 受益), more deeply adopt traditional values. This was the case for the three testimonies we have seen above. The experiences of these three employees can be seen as examples of the success of the proselytizing project of Mr. L. However, other employees are not deeply involved in the practice of *jiaohua*, and their considerations of the benefits of learning traditional culture remain rather general, not having yet reached an “awareness” of the doctrine of Confucianism, a necessary step to realize the redemptive project in some new religious movements, such as Yiguandao (See Billioud 2011a, p. 221). Our interview results suggest that employees are generally more interested in what might be called the “pragmatic” or “practical” function of Confucianism than in the deeper tenets of Confucian thought. Making the connection with her own family, Mrs. K, a 42-year-old worker, is convinced that studying Confucianism, and traditional culture more broadly, can only do good, but without conducting further analysis:

These are good things, so I should believe them, right? It’s always good to learn them. It can be helpful for us, or our children. We are taught to treat our parents with love and respect. They are our own parents, not other people’s, right? That’s why we should believe in all this (Interview, Dongguan, January 2018).

This type of adoption, considered “superficial” by Mr. L and his team, is a point that they considered to be improved through their *jiaohua* practice. This superficial adoption is often interpreted by Mr. L and his team as stemming from the social background of these employees, which is generally modest, and from their level of education, which often remains low. Therefore, according to Ms. X, a teacher of cultural tradition at TW, it is necessary to adopt a pedagogy better adapted to its audience:

To our workers, we should not talk about the classics with too deep a meaning. We should talk to them about family relationships, filial piety, values such as loyalty, brotherhood, values that are easy to integrate. It is not enough to read classical works and to talk about virtue every day, it is necessary to put them into practice. Self-cultivation is achieved through concrete things (Interview, Dongguan, January 2018).

This discourse emphasizing pedagogical adaptation and “practicing” in *jiaohua* reveals an issue faced by “Confucian” entrepreneurs: how to proceed to a deeper initiation into

“Confucian” doctrines and more complete integration of traditional values? In other words, what kind of *jiaohua* should be adopted to make traditional culture “take root” (*luodi* 落地)? This question was often mentioned by “Confucian” entrepreneurs during our field surveys.

In addition to the “pedagogical” issue, another challenge for these entrepreneurs is the high turnover of employees, which may lengthen or even interrupt the *jiaohua* process. As in many labor-intensive manufacturing companies, at TW, there is always a great deal of rapid hiring and departure of employees. Our study revealed the reasons for leaving are very varied, but not related to the company’s commitment to *jiaohua*. In addition to reasons such as personal projects or family situations, economic reasons, especially regarding wages, are often the most common cause for an employee’s departure.

Mrs. S and her husband were both working in the company. However, her husband recently resigned and has since been working for another company in Shenzhen. After her husband left, Mrs. S also submitted her resignation letter, and she plans to work at TW until the end of the month. Our interview with this young woman provides an example of a resignation related to economic reasons:

Life is expensive here; we still must help our families. We earn only 3000 yuan per person, after our expenses, we have not much left. So, we have decided to leave (Interview, Dongguan, January 2018).

Mrs. S revealed to us that her husband now earns double his salary when he was at TW. As for the reason for her own departure, she specifies that in addition to the economic reason, there is the need to join her husband. When asked about the possible connection between her resignation and the rigorous rhythm imposed by the compulsory study of classics within the company, she denies it entirely:

- Does your leaving have anything to do with the practice of traditional culture here?
- Nothing. Our parents tell us that it is better that we (the couple) stay together (Interview, Dongguan, January 2018).

Our interviews with management staff also confirmed that the departure of employees is the result of labor market regulation. In 2017, TW was marked by a larger number of resignations than in previous years: 100 people resigned out of 550¹⁸. According to Mr. Y, TW’s general manager, these departures are caused by the company’s declining sales figures, a massive phenomenon in the cell phone manufacturing sector during the same period. These resignations are, according to Mr. Y, the general manager of TW, not related to the implementation of the study of traditional culture in the company.

This mobility of the workforce, often linked to economic reasons, and consistent with the dynamism of the labor market in contemporary China, can constitute an additional challenge to Confucian entrepreneurs insofar as it can put an early end to their *jiaohua* project in the case of an employee’s rapid departure. However, in the face of this situation, Mr. L shows an attempt to step back by comparing the *jiaohua* process to that of a religious conversion; it does not matter to him whether the person subjected to this “spiritual education” continues to stay at TW or not.

It’s not a big deal if someone leaves here. TW is a “spiritual practice space” (*daochang*) where everyone has to do training (self-cultivation). But the purpose of our education is not to keep our men by our side forever. When our employee goes somewhere else, as he has already assimilated some notions of traditional culture at TW, he will compare here with his new place. He will surely wonder about the meaning of existence, about the question of values. His seed of consciousness (*juewu de zhongzi* 觉悟的种子) is already planted, it will sprout when the right time comes (Interview, Dongguan, January 2018).

Here, it seems that we are far from the economic field because rather than an organization with a purely economic aim the company is considered by Mr. L as a testing ground for his practice of *jiaohua* and the self-cultivation of his employees. The overarching goal of the company’s educational engagement seems to be the “transformation” of the individual, even if this is not immediately realized. Of course, we cannot deny a certain idealization of his actions and in his testimony, but in a society where the values of capitalism and materialism are gradually settling in, where the frantic quest for profit characterizes the majority

of companies—the latter claiming a “wolf” culture (*langxing wenhua* 狼性文化) that favors a fierce struggle against adversaries—Mr. L’s discourse represents real discordance with this prevailing mindset. Although the particular case that we have noted here has its obvious limitations, this empirical study of TW firm allows us to suggest a more general assessment. To a certain extent, it demonstrates a growing awareness of certain entrepreneurs that they should no longer concede only to the logic of the market. This explains the motivation to reorient individuals towards a new way of perceiving the world and towards a new hierarchy of values. This “proselytizing” mission gives rise to a quasi-religious dimension of “Confucian” companies. However, as we have seen, in a society now dominated by a market-driven system, which is morally characterized by materialism and individualism, it proves to be difficult for these entrepreneurs to realize their ideals. In this sense, the *jiaohua* of these entrepreneurs can only be understood as an experimental project within a Confucian utopia.

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Notes

- ¹ The term *xin* 信 is nuanced. In constituting a core value advocated by Confucianism, it can refer to several notions depending on the context, such as *xinyang* 信仰 (belief), *xinren* 信任 (trust), and *chengxin* 诚信 (credibility). In the present work, we refer to the first meaning: belief.
- ² For the delimitation of “Confucianism”, see (Billioud and Thoraval 2014, p. 10); for the origin of the term *ru* and its relationship to Confucianism, see (Zufferey 2003).
- ³ We refer here to the article by (Sun 2019).
- ⁴ Appearing already in the 2000s, the organization of *rushang* forums is not a new phenomenon. Between 2008 and 2010, the *Qingdao quanguo qiyejia luntan* 青岛全国企业家论坛, an annual forum of “Confucian” entrepreneurs instituted in Qingdao, Shandong, attracted a large audience each year. Founded in 2016, on the initiative of Li Honglei, a professor of philosophy at Sun Yat-sen University, the Bo’ao Rushang Forum (*Bo’ao Rushang Luntan* 博鳌儒商论坛) holds its annual conference in Bo’ao, on Hainan Island. Its members and participants include not only entrepreneurs, but also academics and political representatives. The 2017 conference of this Forum was attended by 1800 people.
- ⁵ This company and the people mentioned in this work are all anonymous.
- ⁶ This point is analyzed in (Jiang-Fu 2021).
- ⁷ For the notion of *anshen liming*, see (Billioud and Thoraval 2008, 2014).
- ⁸ Under the aegis of the Chinese Ministry of National Education, these examinations allow, due to the absence of age limit, to obtain a higher diploma issued by the Ministry of Education, without going through university training. Measures have been taken to motivate employees. In addition to exam preparation courses funded by TW, a bonus of 20,000 to 30,000 yuan is paid each year to the top performers. In 2016, the participation rate reached more than 80%, the success rate is 28%, and 47,000 yuan was invested in the same year for these examinations.
- ⁹ For the nature of syncretism and its function in the development and interaction of Chinese religious traditions, see (Berling 1980).
- ¹⁰ The kowtow is a gesture of deep respect that consists of kneeling and bowing so that the head touches the ground.
- ¹¹ We refer here to the following sentence of Sun (2019): “Ritual rationality is embedded in ritual action and engages reasoning in a different realm of life than that of scientific inquiry”.
- ¹² The “five poisons” consist of five touches of humor that provide, according to Wang Fengyi’s theory, favorable conditions for the appearance and development of disease: resentment (*yuan* 怨), hatred (*hen* 恨), irritation (*nao* 恼), anger (*nu* 怒), and worry (*fan* 烦). For Wang Fengyi’s healing methods, see (Wang 2011).
- ¹³ According to Qin Hui 秦晖, a professor of history at Tsinghua University, throughout China’s imperial history, with the exception of a short period between the third and sixth centuries when the Middle Kingdom was marked by division and weakening of

central power, almost all the great dynasties, despite their claim to Confucianism in terms of morality, adopted techniques of governance inspired by legalism, relying on the force of the law and the systematicity of its punishments. See (Qin 1998, 2002).

- 14 By using the contrast between these two adjectives, Tan tried to show that ideal authority in Confucianism is noncoercive; in contrast, the authoritarian is inherently coercive: “The paradigm of the authoritative in the *Analects* is the figure of the teacher who embodies tradition, while the despot who wields absolute power over others is authoritarian”. She argues that «In an imperfect world, the excellence of the authoritative is not always appreciated and voluntary compliance may not be forthcoming”. Therefore, “Under imperfect circumstances, it is always tempting for governments, even when they professed Confucian ideals, to employ coercion ‘for the good’ of others”. See (Tan 2010).
- 15 Dutournier and Ji underline the strong moral dimension on which this project is based: “In fact, despite the brandishing of legal statistics, it is not the sense of the lawful and the unlawful that is cultivated in Tangchi, but of the moral and the immoral, which is to say of a norm that is supposed to prevail at all levels of social life, and is established below the level of the law itself.” (Dutournier and Ji 2009, p. 78).
- 16 Kang Xiaoguang, « Falungong wenti de zhengzhi xiaoying », *Zhongguo shehui daokan*, N°33, 2000. Cited par Ownby (2009).
- 17 For new religious movements in post-Soviet Russia, see (Panchenko 2011).
- 18 We have not been able to obtain the necessary information to know whether these are voluntary or forced departures.

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