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Social experimentation and “popular Confucianism”

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GUILLAUME DUTOURNIER AND JI ZHE

The multiplicity of initiatives in China today that claim to be inspired by “Confucianism” calls for particular attention to the diversity of their practical application. In this case study, we analyse the formation and workings of a new kind of educational institution: initiated three years ago in the town of Tangchi (Anhui) by a Taiwanese Buddhist, but nonetheless strongly influenced by Confucian traditionalism, this “Cultural Education Centre” is inventing, somewhere between political control and moral proselytism, a new form of governmentality that could gain widespread acceptance.

Applied to contemporary China, which is in many ways post-Confucian, the term “Confucianism” is both essential and inadequate, as an analytical tool, to any observer of Chinese society, and is in any case to be used with caution. Initially coined by Westerners in order to identify a set of discourses and practices specific to the scholar-officials of the Empire, the word is frequently used in descriptions of contemporary China. However, its usage is not uniform, and refers at times to certain ideological permanencies inherited from the Imperial period, and at others to various attempts at reconstruction that, since the 1990s, have appeared in the doctrinal elaboration of government,⁽¹⁾ in official and semi-official educational discourse,⁽²⁾ or in the ethical sphere of everyday practice.⁽³⁾

We should note that while all these facts have something in common, grouping them together under the same term can distort perspective by excessive homogenisation. First of all, the word “Confucianism” refers basically to two different orders of reality: on the one hand, the phenomena related to the *Confucian fact*, which is to say to the structural but not necessarily formulated level that can be inferred from certain (particularly political and family) constants specific to Chinese society; and on the other, to the dynamics of identity – for which we propose to reserve the term *Confucianist* in order to distinguish them from the first group – characterised by conscious, organised demands and mobilisations. Secondly, the term leads, according to how one perceives its omnipresence in analyses, to imagining in an equally excessive way that “Confucianism” remains today a sort of “total social fact”, enduring beyond the institutional differentiation bequeathed by modernity, or conversely that it is now only a

residual notion, hovering like a “wandering ghost”⁽⁴⁾ over practices and institutions that, despite attempts at resurrection, have become fundamentally foreign to it. Consequently, taking into consideration the various manifestations of “Confucianism” at their true value in contemporary China requires, without yielding to the effect of mass, to begin with the diversity of practices that claim to be inspired by it and the concrete configurations in which they are placed.

The problem is that the term acts as a screen. “Confucianism” is indeed too vast, or too vague, to designate what in modern Chinese immediately breaks down into “*rujia*” (a fairly general term that does duty for “Confucian school”), as well as into “*ruxue*” (“Confucian study or studies”) and “*rujiao*” (“Confucian religion”), to which must be added the

Our thanks to Vincent Goossaert and Sébastien Billioud for their careful reading of this article and for the valuable suggestions they were kind enough to give us. Any flaws that remain are of course entirely our own. This article is part of an international research project supported by the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation and entitled “The Confucian Revival in Mainland China: Forms and Meanings of Confucian Piety Today”.

1. Cf. Sébastien Billioud, “Confucianisme, ‘tradition culturelle’ et discours officiels dans la Chine des années 2000” (Confucianism, “cultural tradition” and official discourses in China at the start of the new century), *Perspectives chinoises*, n° 2007 / 3, pp. 53-68.
2. Cf. Sébastien Billioud and Joël Thoraval, “*Jiaohua*: le renouveau confucéen en Chine comme projet éducatif” (*Jiaohua*: the Confucian revival in China as an educative project), *Perspectives chinoises*, 2007 / 4, pp. 4-21; Ji Zhe, “Éduquer par la musique. De l’initiation des enfants à la musique classique à la ‘culture de soi’ confucéenne des étudiants” (Educating through music. From an ‘initiation into classical music’ for children to Confucian self-cultivation for university students), *Perspectives chinoises*, n° 2008 / 3, pp. 118-129.
3. Cf. Daniel A. Bell, *China’s New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society*, Princeton University Press, 2008.
4. According to the expression of Yu Yingshi, *Xiandai ruxue de huigu yu zhanwang* (Modern Confucianism: Retrospective and Perspective), Beijing, Sanlian shidian, 2004, pp. 53-58; 262-270.

components “*xueshu*” (academic), “*guanfang*” (official), and “*minjian*” (popular) – without forgetting the inventiveness of the actors themselves in their practice of self-definition. There is here a range of notions that are related and in practice often intertwined, but which from the actors’ point of view seem noticeably distinct.⁽⁵⁾ This diffracted characteristic of Chinese terminology deserves to be taken seriously. In it is manifest the specifically plural dimension of the “Confucian revival,” which, far from being an optical effect, lies at the very heart of contemporary representations. Therefore, while the increasingly numerous promoters of “traditional culture” do not themselves take Confucianism as a cohesive entity, the observer must be attentive to the dynamics of polarisation that lead them to identify themselves not only in a dialectical relation to other current references (Buddhism, Taoism, Western modernisation), but also, very frequently, through logics of internal differentiation.⁽⁶⁾ Thus only a preliminary analysis of the complexity of the dynamics at work makes possible a full understanding of the global phenomena that characterise this field of culturalist demands. One will see in particular that the concomitance and the networking of the various movements are a major factor in the tendency of contemporary “Confucianism” to generate a form of *unanimity* – which favours both its political instrumentalisation and its potential role in the logics of social integration.

It is with this analytical framework that we here approach a specific case of “Confucianist revival.” Located in Tangchi, a town in the south of Anhui Province where we carried out field work in November 2007,⁽⁷⁾ this is in fact still a relatively isolated case, but it is indicative of the potential for the insertion of Confucianist themes into new political-cultural constructions. Tangchi is one of 17 towns in the district of Lujiang. It is of fairly modest size, with a population of 48,000 spread over the town itself and a dozen villages. While the economy of the district is far from flourishing, it nonetheless made possible in 2007 an average income of 3,587 *yuan*, according to official statistics.⁽⁸⁾ An unremarkable rural district three years ago, Lujiang today has become the location of an unusual enterprise, the implementation of which, symbolised by a complex of buildings that are relatively impressive in such a context, involves more than 400 people, and wields increasing influence both locally and nationally. Every six months, it receives a class of 30 teachers who are trained according to the criteria of “traditional culture.” This change is due to the initiative of a Taiwanese Buddhist monk, the Venerable Master Jingkong (Chin-Kung), who was born in February 1927 in the neighbouring town of Jinniu under the name Xu Yehong, and who

in 2005 became the founder of the present-day “Lujiang Cultural Education Centre” (*Lujiang wenhua jiaoyu zhongxin*).

This fairly spectacular development of an originally Buddhist enterprise may seem surprising at first, given the general suspicion the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) continues to display towards initiatives of a religious nature, especially when they originate from outside the People’s Republic. The Lujiang Centre is registered as “*minban feiqiye danwei*” (a non-entrepreneurial unit managed by the people), a category that the Chinese state legalised in 1998 in order to regulate non-profit NGOs, including certain private schools. A question that arises immediately is the means of legalisation: by what kinds of official or tacit exchanges and according to what means of interaction was such an initiative able to gain the support of the local government? One is also tempted to question the aims and the actual nature of the “education” practised by Jingkong’s disciples. Not only does the Centre put forward a number of Confucianist virtues (the first of which is “filial piety,” *xiao*) as doctrinal references, but its members hold in high esteem the “harmonious society” preached by Hu Jintao: should one not therefore immediately consider this establishment to be a new means of social control, the traditionalist tendency of which could only be in harmony with the imperatives of stable government?

In this ambiguous field, where the discourse of legitimisation and the strategies of instrumentalisation seem to overlap, two

5. While “*rujia*” designates Confucianism from the angle of what characterises it in particular in contrast with other “schools” or traditions, “*ruxue*” emphasises the intellectual dimension, without necessarily excluding ethical repercussions, while “*rujiao*” is a modern category aimed at identifying in Confucianism a “religious” component (deduced by analogy with Western religions) that historically led to the institutionalisation of the worship of Confucius and to the rituals that were — or still are — associated with it. Concerning the impact of the Western notion of “religion” on Confucianism at the end of the Empire, cf. Hsi-Yuan Chen, *Confucian Encounters with “Religion”: Rejections, Appropriations, and Transformations*, London, Routledge, forthcoming. On the distinction between popular Confucianism and official Confucianism, cf. Philip Clart, “Confucius and the Mediums: Is there a ‘Popular Confucianism?’” *T’oung Pao* 89 (1-3), 2003, pp. 1-38. For an analysis of the intellectual discourses stemming from “*ruxue*” in Taiwan and in the People’s Republic and of their links with cultural nationalism, cf. John Makeham, *Lost Soul: “Confucianism” in Contemporary Chinese Academic Discourse*, Harvard University Asia Center, 2008.
6. In today’s university circles, it is frequent to see proponents of a modernised and democratised “Confucian study” (*ruxue*), or of a “Confucian school” (*rujia*), with its own voice in the concert of philosophical nations, who have little esteem for the avatars of the “Confucian religion” (*rujiao*), while upholders of the latter are suspicious of the excesses of a “popular Confucianism” (*minjian rujia* or *minjian rujiao*) that is inclined to see itself as the guardian of an authenticity it denies to “academic Confucianism” (*xueshu ruxue*).
7. This field work was carried out by Guillaume Dutournier with the collaboration of Wang Yuchen, a doctoral candidate in anthropology at Beijing Normal University, whom we would like to thank for her enthusiasm and great competence. Our thanks also go to the Ateliers Doctoraux de Beijing (and in particular to their director, Jean-Louis Rocca), whose awarding of a field bursary made this research possible.
8. Average annual income for Chinese rural areas in 2007 was 4,410 *yuan*.

Presentation of Jingkong
from the brochure of the Centre
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traps must be avoided. The first would be to overestimate the alibi value of the “Confucianist” discourse in this Buddhist education programme; the second would be to posit some sort of Machiavellian dimension to its instrumentalisation by the local government. In fact, the centring of the discourse on traditional virtues, far from being a mere façade, substantially hinges on a coherent corpus of references and practices in which a range of actors, in the course of the process, eventually have their interests satisfied. Consequently, rather than approaching the elaboration of the Lujiang Cultural Education Centre in terms of *construction* – as the rational creation of an organ of proselytism or discipline – it is the *formation*⁽⁹⁾ of an institution of a particular kind that we will focus on here, in the sense of a conjunctural process whose deeper stakes remain largely invisible to the actors themselves.

Moreover, this process proves to be remarkably heterogeneous, to the point that the notion of “popular Confucianism,” although useful for describing it, expresses its complexity only imperfectly. It is therefore more as a singular *dispositif* that we will analyse the Lujiang Centre – in other words, as a composite formula based on both a “Confucianist” discourse and on certain Buddhist practices, on a popular dynamic and on official support, on moral teaching and on moralisation techniques – in short, as Michel Foucault puts it, on “the spoken as well as (on) the unspoken.”⁽¹⁰⁾ We seek to show that it is precisely the practical effectiveness of such an assembly that explains the relative stability of the establishment of the Lujiang Centre over the course of three years and despite its experimental character, while at the same time making it possible to envision future expansion.

From international Buddhism to “traditional culture”

A fundamentally collective enterprise, the Lujiang Cultural Education Centre links its own origins to the determination of a single individual. Extensively propagated in the publications that issue from it, the biography of the monk Jingkong appears *de facto* as a central means of legitimation.

However, while the religious virtues of its founder appear in the symbolic construction of the Centre, they do not lead to Buddhist proselytism any more than they place the monk at the head of its real functioning.

Born into an apparently comfortable family, Xu Yehong began his studies in Nanjing before fleeing to Taiwan with

Professor Chin Kung Shr was born in Lujiang county, Anhui province of China in 1927. His original name was XU Yehong. He was fond of classics as a child and read extensively in literature, history and religion, when he started to think about such profound issues as how to harvest world peace and how to help human beings lead a happy life. During the Anti-Japanese Aggression War period (1937-1945), he himself suffered from the deprivation of education. But with special diligence and perseverance, he spent his time in learning classics in history, philosophy and Buddhism for thirteen years under the guidance of Thomé H. Fang, (1899-1977), a great philosopher of Tongcheng Confucian School, Venerable Master Zhangjia Hutukutu, a famous Tibetan Buddhist master, and Li Bingnan, a well-known Buddhist scholar of Jinan, Shandong province. Professor Chin Kung Shr specializes in Pure Land Buddhism.



the Kuomintang.⁽¹¹⁾ A sign of his family’s close ties with the nationalist party is that he first worked there in a military training organisation. It was during this period that he first made the acquaintance of the neo-Confucian philosopher Fang Dongmei (1899-1977), then a professor at the University of Taiwan, at whose suggestion he embraced the study of philosophy and Buddhism. Influenced by this encounter and others,⁽¹²⁾ Xu had himself tonsured in February 1959, at the age of 32, in the Linji Temple in Yuanshan (Taipei), thus becoming Master Jingkong. In the 1960s and 70s, he carried out various duties in the Buddhist Association of the Republic of China (BAROC), where he began to show an interest in the Pure Land school (*Jingtu*).⁽¹³⁾ In 1977, he took on the task of promoting Buddhism among the overseas Chinese, then emigrated to the United States, where he founded the “Dallas Buddhist Association” in 1985. Three years later, he pursued his activity of spreading Buddhism in Southeast Asia (in particular Singapore). In 2001, he focused on Australia, especially Queensland, where he founded the Pure Land Learning College, the institution where he now spends most of his time.

While highly active abroad, Jingkong was not absent from the field of proselytism in mainland China, where Buddhism began to experience rebirth in the 1980s. In 1985, assisted by the layman Jian Fengwen, he set up the Foundation for Buddhist Education in Taiwan, which from 1989 to 1995 printed an edition of the *Buddhist Canon* (*Dazangjing*)

9. We here use the distinction made by Jean-François Bayart in *L'illusion identitaire* (*The Illusion of identity*), Paris, Fayard, 1996, p. 13.
10. We borrowed this concept of « dispositif » from Michel Foucault; cf., in particular, “Le jeu de Michel Foucault” (1977), *Dits et Écrits II* (*Sayings and Writings II*) (edited by D. Deleuze and F. Ewald), Paris, Gallimard, 2001, p. 299.
11. The biographical details given here come from what can be gleaned about Jingkong’s career from the website of the Pure Land Learning College, (www.amtb-aus.org, visited on October 3, 2008).
12. At that time Jingkong was also influenced by the teachings of the Seventh “Reincarnated Lama of Inner Mongolia” (Cangjia Kutuqtu, 1891-1978), and of the lay Buddhist Li Bingnan (1890-1986), who were also refugees on the island.
13. A Buddhist tradition aimed more at the popular sphere than at erudite speculation, the “Pure Land” school sees in the recitation of the name of Buddha Amitabha the surest way to obtain eternal life in the “Western Paradise” (or “Pure Land”), which is Buddha’s Kingdom.

aimed at a number of mainland institutions. He also reached a wide audience through the distribution of his lectures in printed and audiovisual form, so that by the end of the 1990s the Venerable Master Jingkong was widely known on the mainland,⁽¹⁴⁾ where he appeared as an influential figure in contemporary Buddhism.

Since the beginning of the new millennium, Jingkong has participated in several international conferences on intercultural and religious dialogue, which he states have made him aware of the problem of cultural diversity. This experience seems to have played a decisive role in a process of self-redefinition from simple monk to representative of Chinese culture in general, the latter being relabelled, in contrast with other cultures, as a tradition that singularly emphasises the values of “tolerance.” However, in an interview dating from 2006,⁽¹⁵⁾ Jingkong also acknowledges that his successive participation in five UN peace conferences and three international symposia finally made him aware of the futility of such meetings, which he sees as lacking any transformative power, despite their good intentions. It was therefore as a result of his activism in the promotion of Buddhism, as well as his disappointment with international organisations, that he decided to apply the resources of tolerance in Chinese culture by conceiving the prototype of a micro-society where cultural diversity and mutual understanding would be real. We should note that at this stage, the reference to “*chuantong wenhua*” (traditional Chinese culture) is still conceived only as an opening towards a horizon that was claimed as “multicultural.”

After an aborted initial attempt in the United States, he thought about settling in Singapore before the price of real estate turned out to be an obstacle to the large-scale project planned. He then turned to Australia, to the town of Toowoomba in Queensland, but was soon discouraged by what he perceived as a virtual absence of religious feeling among the Australians. Finally, it was on returning to his native region, in the district of Lujiang, that he finally found a propitious place to set up: openly sharing his project with the local authorities, he was pleased by a favourable reception that allowed him to found the “Lujiang Multicultural Education Centre” (*Lujiang duoyuan wenhua jiaoyu zhongxin*) at a cost of 70 million yuan in November 2005. Initially renting some buildings from the local government, the organisation acquired a purpose-built infrastructure at the end of 2006 (a building for teaching and offices, two others for dormitories, and another for various functions), and expanded by building facilities for teaching next door, with various annexes spread around the town (in particular a canteen open to residents, as well as

several hectares of land cultivated by members). Total expenses of 220 million yuan were paid entirely by private contributions from Southeast Asia as well as from Taiwan and the mainland.⁽¹⁶⁾

As far as conjunctural and personal factors are concerned, one can here put forward some hypotheses on the particular circumstances that seem to have facilitated the establishment in Tangchi of the centre planned by Jingkong.

One should first of all note the consistency with which, from the 1990s, Jingkong was a benefactor to both Buddhist and lay institutions of his native district (donations of a *Buddhist Canon* to the Temple of Fuhu on first returning to the mainland in 1997, of about a hundred computers to Lujiang High School, and also, a year later, the sum of 100,000 yuan to the high school's new library); there is no doubt but that these repeated marks of solicitude gradually led the local government to regard Jingkong as a benefactor before facilitating the realisation of his project. On this subject, we should add that, whether because of monkish prudence or of a condition imposed by the government, the honorific title of “Venerable Master” (*fashi*) no longer accompanies official references to Jingkong: his name is now simply preceded by the (respectful but considerably less Buddhist) formula of “Old Professor” (*lao jiaoshou*) — a title that is nonetheless justified by the numerous university degrees accumulated by Jingkong as an actor in international Buddhism. This is not the only unclear aspect regarding the religious theme: the monk Jingkong has proved to be a very unobtrusive partner for local government. While he is symbolically present in the Centre (in particular through numerous displayed portraits, in which he poses in his monk's robes), most of the time he is physically absent, with all the administrative duties being *de facto* delegated (apparently from the outset) to two lay Taiwanese disciples, Mrs. Yang Shufen and Mr. Cai Lixu,⁽¹⁷⁾ who head the establishment as Vice President and Head of Education, respectively. The discretion of the

14. Cf. He Yun, “Jingkong fashi fangwen ji” (Interview with Master Jingkong), *Fojiao wenhua*, n° 4, 1999, p. 4-7.

15. This interview, along with others, is part of a set of DVDs entitled *Hexie zhengjiu weiji* (*Harmony Solves The Crisis*), distributed in 2008 by the Centre for Buddhist Cultural Research in Beijing and the Guanghua Temple.

16. Among the contributors, a Mr. Lai, a Singapore Chinese, seems to be an emblematic figure. Presented as the first important donor to the Centre, he is said to have contributed 80 million yuan to its launching. This sum came partly from the legacy of his father, to whom the benefactor wished to pay tribute by this gesture.

17. Yang Shufen, a native of Taiwan, began promoting “traditional education” in 1990 in Taiwan and among the Chinese in Southeast Asia. In 2003 she turned to the mainland, where with her disciple Cai Lixu, a primary school teacher and fellow disciple of Jingkong, she founded a “*Xiaolian* Centre for Initiation into National Studies” at Haikou (on the island of Hainan), which promotes the spreading of Confucian morality among the young.

Flag-raising inside
the Centre of Lujiang
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founder and the intermediate role of his assistants thus spare government cadres, who are sometimes involved in the activities of the Centre, from direct contact with an individual with explicit religious attributes.

Lastly, from the point of view of a local government with statutory duties in the relaying of official propaganda, the monk's career presents a symbolic advantage that could only favour his acceptance, which is the retargeting of the initial multicultural objective exclusively to traditional Chinese culture. The original name (the Lujiang Multicultural Education Centre) referred to Jingkong's initial endeavours, all of which were carried out in the international Buddhist network outside of China. However, once it was transplanted to Tangchi, in the heart of rural China, the initial horizon of cultural diversity seems to have lost much of its relevance in the eyes of its promoters. This change led — by the simple removal of the adjective “*duoyuan*” from the name — to a fairly radical re-orientation of the aims of the Centre. Although an adaptation to the sociocultural conditions of the new site rather than submission to any pressure on the part of the authorities, this change could nonetheless only resonate with the nationalistic tone of official propaganda.

“Cultural education”: Civilising practices and the discourse of practice

Educational community or disciplinary institution?

Despite its local links, the Lujiang Cultural Education Centre is strongly connected, both symbolically and practically, with national issues. While its influence manifests itself above all within the perimeters of the town and the district, its students are recruited at the national level and are destined to eventually become “seed-professors” spread throughout society. Similarly, the “culture” that figures in the name of the establishment immediately places the Lujiang Centre in the vast area of “traditional culture”: the virtually exclusive use of non-simplified characters in the textual production of the Centre is a clear proclamation of this symbolic union. However, the objective declared here is remarkable above all for its ambition: it is a matter, neither more nor less, of contributing to the transformation of Chinese so-



ciety by the work of collective moralisation, based on the re-activation of “tradition” and promoted by an exemplary elite. The resources brought to bear for this are remarkably extensive: an expensive structure, the Centre aims to be both a space for the “training” (*peiyang*) of an avant-garde and an open and influential place, for the “promotion” (*hongyang*) of traditional culture. Here, as in other comparable cases, the project of “cultural education” means that one seeks to “train trainers”, that is to say, to change oneself as much as to change others.⁽¹⁸⁾ In practice, this latter aspect primarily concerns the residents of the town, who are systematically invited to enter a process of “self-cultivation” (*xiuyang* or *xiushen*) that is meant to be incumbent on everyone.

As an “educational” establishment that is both private and local, the Lujiang Centre presents the twofold particularity of committing itself to a cause of a civilising kind — which distinguishes it from the purely technical training in the private education sector — and of doing this in plain sight and presenting itself as already institutionalised or in the process of becoming so — which distances it from other more discreet forms of renewal of “traditional education.” The flag-raising that takes places every week in the presence of local cadres is the most obvious mark of this relationship with the official sphere.

We shall see, however, that this is a complex relationship, a mixture of dependence, unconscious imitation, and diversion.

This aspect shows above all in the method of recruiting students, which at first glance strongly resembles what would prevail in an adult education establishment. Thus, in November 2005, the Lujiang education centre (which was then still “multicultural”) launched for the first time a call for applications all over the country with a view to training “the teachers of moral education that today’s society so urgently needs.”⁽¹⁹⁾ The requirements of this campaign included

18. Cf. Sébastien Billioud and Joël Thoraval, *art. cit.*, pp. 16-18.

Salutation between a member of the Centre
and a young resident of the town.

© Guillaume Dutournier

moral qualities as much as institutionally validated qualifications (studies and professional experience).⁽²⁰⁾ This indicates that the Centre does not offer a substitute course but rather training complementary to existing courses: the “professors” it recruits are already teachers trained in the official system. During this first campaign, 30 people – most around the age of thirty – were selected for a six-month training course from among the 300 candidates who answered the call. While the course does not lead to a fully certified diploma, the “professors” who benefit from it often associate their arrival at the Centre with a break in their personal career: in some cases they even acquire a determination to substantially prolong their stay.⁽²¹⁾ By the end of 2007, there had been four classes of this kind, which brought to more than 100 the number of such “professors” trained by the Centre.

What are the skills taught in this unusual institution? While there is a kind of book learning dispensed in lecture mode, the major portion of the training lies in an overall process made up of classes and personal study, and above all community practice, which serves both as context and field of application. Thus, the life of the “professors” trained at Tangchi is precisely regulated, and not only – as is the case in many contemporary Chinese institutions – in terms of life rhythms (regulated times for meals that are taken communally, training schedules posted on notice boards, various ceremonies that all are required to attend), but also on the level of daily interaction, on which a particular etiquette makes its mark: every time they pass each other inside or outside the establishment, or when they meet any individual outside, members are expected to stop and make a strictly codified salutation (*jugong*) as a sign of mutual respect.⁽²²⁾

Moreover, the Centre practises strict vegetarianism, makes sleeping in dormitories compulsory, and restricts comings and goings, in particular at night. Lastly, while expressions of love are forbidden in accordance with the rule that – however theoretically – still prevails on many Chinese campuses,⁽²³⁾ the Centre displays an extremely radical sign of severance from contemporary society: mobile phones are forbidden. Thus, it is not mere training that the Cultural Education Centre offers, but also a genuine mental and physical, individual and collective discipline.

This ritualisation of community life also includes external appearance, with members differentiating themselves immediately from the other inhabitants of the village by means of special clothes that serve as markers of the three statuses defined by the Centre. These statuses correspond to different responsibilities and pay levels. A sleeveless red or blue smock indicates in the former case that the member is part



of the maintenance personnel (made up of volunteers, *yigong*, recruited according to very wide-ranging criteria – qualified or unqualified students, local retirees – for varying lengths of time) or in the latter that the member is one of those who have been selected for training (and who are paid a few hundred *yuan* a month). The third group (that of Cai Lixu and Yang Shufen) is distinguished by the wearing of a grey collarless jacket of a more traditional cut that immediately identifies them as set apart in the community: these are a few “professors” who as real cadres of the institution are subject to a special recruitment and are in charge of teaching and administration at the Centre.

Consequently, while one finds practices in the functioning of the Centre that are reminiscent of existing educational institutions, its asceticism makes it to some extent more like a form of lay monastery. For all that, the discipline that characterises it does not make it a real *disciplinary* structure, or even a *total institution* in Goffman’s sense,⁽²⁴⁾ to the extent

19. For a presentation of the criteria for recruitment to the Centre and of its activities, cf. Wu Haiyun, “Xuanxiao xianshi de “taoyuan” jingtu” (The Pure Land of a “shelter” in this deafening world), *Fenghuang zhoukan*, 2007, n° 15; text on line: <http://www.ifeng.com/phoenixtv/73024099118481408/20070710/908307.shtml> (visited on 3 October 2008).

20. While a “basic knowledge of traditional culture” and proof of “upright behaviour” are demanded, also required are at least three years’ teaching experience (this includes kindergartens), as well as, for those under 36, a core university degree and, for those between 37 and 45, a technical degree.

21. The management states that half the students in the class of 2005 chose to remain in the Centre after their training, apparently in most cases for more detailed learning.

22. Hands held against the stomach, with the right hand over the left, inclination of the chest 90° towards the front: this position to be held motionless for three seconds.

23. These similarities with ordinary educational institutions should not make us forget that in this case the “students” are adults: it is thus celibacy that the interdiction of amorous relations *de facto* imposes on those who are not yet married (these apparently being the majority). Moreover, while the principle of equality among members is put forward, the women are subject to additional rules: no hair colour or loose hair; no high heels or collarless or sleeveless clothes.

that the Centre remains open to the outside world — beginning with the village of Tangchi, which seems to be its natural deployment space. Its majestic architectural visibility, closed in with walls and guarded gates, does indeed mark a separation, but its members are all volunteers and identify with the cause of the Centre: while many remain involved beyond the six-month training, they are free to continue their activity there or to stop. In this regard, while it is difficult to have a clear idea of the question of breaking the rules of the Centre (*guiding*), one can assume that outright infringement would lead to sanctions, and even to expulsion from the community. However, again this is only the consequence of members voluntarily embracing a collective discipline whose primary aim is to serve as the means of individual self-culture. Thus the Centre's dynamic is not a function but fundamentally a work: its aim is not to train and supervise a collective, but to forge a community. All in all, while there is real involvement of the official sphere, it is essential to the effectiveness of the Centre that its institutionalisation not be total, in order for it to remain a place where, ideally, individual decision energises the collective and not the other way round.

A case of “popular Confucianism”? The primacy of practice

While the Centre asserts its communal dimension through a body of rules, it also does so by promoting a coherent doctrine. Without aiming for highly developed theoretical elaborations, this leads the members of the Centre to use a similar discourse, which borrows its essential theoretical framework from the traditional Confucian virtues. In fact, according to a recently published brochure, the Centre aligns its pedagogy “on the teaching contents linked to the eminent traditional culture of China, in particular on fundamental principles of the ‘Way of respecting one’s parents (*xiaodao*)’ and of the ‘Way of respecting one’s teachers (*shidao*)’”; to these doctrinal pillars are added equally Confucian virtues: “filial piety, loyalty, and honesty” (*xiaoti zhongxin*), “politeness, sense of justice, and of shame” (*liyi liangchi*), and “goodwill and serenity” (*ren’ai heping*).⁽²⁵⁾ Thus despite the fact that its founder was a Buddhist, it appears that the “cultural education” practised at the Centre is, at least on the level of terminology, typically “Confucianist.”

However, in order to be specified, this ideological content has to be related to its usage within the field of culturalist demands. Here, as in other comparable cases, it is the notion of “popular Confucianism” that is brought to bear. Indeed, the actors at the Centre specifically formulate their rejection of

“academic” discourse (*xueshu*) on Confucianism, its objective demands (scientificity and exhaustivity) being accused of compromising any authentic relation to culture, and fundamentally of being an obstacle to its “putting into practice” (*luoshi*). This opposition often appears in the form of an ingenious semantic inversion through which the Centre’s members deny belonging to “*ruxue*” (“Confucian study”), the better to assert their attachment to “*xueru*”⁽²⁶⁾ (which substitutes a verbal dynamism for the original noun; the expression can be translated as “effective application of Confucian study”). Far from being trivial, the popularity of this word game in Tangchi effectively reveals the divisions in the “Confucian revival.” Moreover, while it shows the primacy of “practice” in the pedagogy of the Centre, it is also an indication of the fundamental importance of *discourse* in this primacy. The fact is that the “popular Confucianism” of Lujiang is no less productive of discourse than the erudite Confucianism of academics; however it is so in a particular mode, based on specific textual references and rhetoric. Indeed, while all movements that claim to be part of “popular Confucianism” share a distrust of the academic field, it is expressed differently in each case. Thus on the question — which is absolutely central in historical Confucianism — of the canonical texts, the actors of the Centre favour an option that may seem minimalist compared with the choices made by other “popular Confucianism” movements. From the wide range of Confucian classics, they use only one very short text, which moreover is known as one of the few “classics for children”: the *Dizigui* (Rules for Disciples).⁽²⁷⁾ Comprised of 1,000 characters, this work, which is typical of child education in the mid-Qing Dynasty, is divided into short chapters, each based on suc-

24. For a definition of the concept of the “total institution” (which is inappropriate in this case), see Erving Goffman, *Asiles. Études sur la condition sociale des malades mentaux (Asylums: Essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates)* (trad. L. Lainé), Paris, Minuit, “Le sens commun,” 1968, pp. 41-54.

25. Cf. Lujiang wenhua jiaoyu zhongxin, *Hexie shehui, Liyi jiaobang: Lujiang wenhua jiaoyu zhongxin (Harmonious Society, The land where ritual and justice reign: The Lujiang Cultural Education Centre)* (undated), p. 2.

26. Cai Lixu replied as follows to a journalist who asked him if he saw himself as a “contemporary Confucian scholar”: “We are not followers of ‘*ruxue*,’ but of ‘*xueru*.’ We take Confucian culture in order to apply it with our whole body (*shenti lixing*): we do not make it into research (*yanjiu*).” Cf. “‘*Xueru*,’ er bu shi ‘*ruxue*’” (“‘*Xueru*,’ not ‘*ruxue*’”), in *Minzhu yu fazhi shibao*, 2007, n° 30, A02.

27. Before it was renamed by a certain Jia Cunren at the end of the Qing Dynasty, the *Dizigui* was called *Xunmengwen* (*Teachings for the Early Learning of Children*), the title given it by its first compiler, Li Yuxiu (1662-1722). For an overview of children’s literature in the Chinese tradition, cf. Xu Zi, *Mengxue duwu de lishi toudi (Historical perspective on books for the education of children)*, Wuhan, Hubei jiaoyu chubanshe, 1995; for a short presentation of the *Dizigui*, cf. Bai Limin, *Shaping the ideal child*, Hong Kong, The Chinese University Press, 2005, p. 81; for a detailed study see Lin Yuhuang, “*Dizigui chutan*” (*A First Approach to The Dizigui*), text on line at: <http://web.nutn.edu.tw/chinese/%E6%96%B0%E8%B3%87%E6%96%99%E5%A4%BE/%E5%BC%9F%E5%AD%90%E8%A6%8F/index.htm> (visited on 18 August 2008).

cessive segments of the same passage from the *Analects*,⁽²⁸⁾ the moral and ritual implications of which are expanded in trisyllabic and rhymed form. While this opuscle has been totally excluded from modern official education,⁽²⁹⁾ this has not prevented it, over the last ten years, from returning to favour with the growth, in Taiwan and then in China, of the “movement for the reading of the classics by children” (*ertong dujing yundong*),⁽³⁰⁾ which, as is the case in Tangchi, also actually reaches adults.

Despite its simplicity and concision, the justification of the *Dizigui* as a totalising Confucian classic that can be substituted for all the others is here inseparable from a discourse of insistence on practice. Indeed, the aim of “cultural education” is not to encourage exhaustive study of the various existing classics, but rather to accede to an essential intuition, the possession of which is supposed to provide the key to all moral action. In this regard, the brevity of the text and its quintessential character (Jingkong speaks of it in terms of “root of the root” of the classics) appear as the very condition of internal progress. The connection between this fundamental status attributed to a short text and the discourse on practice appears in these words of Jingkong:

The Great Way of which the Confucians speak is to be found in its entirety in the Dizigui. I tell the students that there is to be found the root of sacred study. Knowing how to read it, knowing it by heart is no use. It has to be applied! Each phrase, each character has to be put into practice. Succeeding in not departing from it at any moment in life, from the beginning of study until death, succeeding in abiding by that, that alone is really “studying.”⁽³¹⁾

The other aspect of the discourse on practice concerns its rhetorical application. While lectures take up a considerable part of training at the Centre, they do not much resemble those that take place in an ordinary education structure. Here again, the institutional model (in this case the classroom) is diverted towards a very different pragmatic situation. During our research, the Centre offered over several days a series of “lectures” on the theme of filial piety,⁽³²⁾ which several professors (some of whom had been specially invited for the occasion) delivered to trainees, but also to residents of the village. The organisers of the session pointed out to us that these lecturers were chosen not so much for their qualifications as for

their ability to communicate to a mixed audience their personal experience in matters of family and social morality. Here the public speaking skills highlight the life story of the speaker and his role as a witness, indeed as a model, aiming to pass on a truth presented as accessible to all because of its strong self-evidence. From this point of view, the theme of “filial piety” is not chosen at random. It consists in promoting an attitude of respect towards one’s parents that is endowed, in the Chinese context no doubt even more than anywhere, with a strong supposition of naturalness. Now the paradox here is that this naturalness is not, so to speak, self-evident: conceived as innate, but also as precarious and under threat, moral affection has to be kept alive if it is not to disappear. In other words, the effectiveness of this rhetoric of the evident depends on a supposition: that it is necessary, generation after generation, to carry on a *tradition of the natural*. This being so, the discourse seeks to be a progression (a trace or incitement) towards awareness, just as the audience is no longer a mere receiver, but an actor in the work of self-recovery, after which it is supposed – under this rhetorical relationship – to rediscover its fundamental dispositions in their entirety.

One can see it in this example: the collective and performative dimension of the Centre’s pedagogy is far from being restricted to its members alone, since it seeks to address itself to all the inhabitants of the village. To this end, the actors use a discourse that is also conveyed into action through a range of practices, techniques, and individual validations that make up the effectiveness of a *dispositif* – without it being possible to say who is in control.

28. “The Master said, ‘A youth, when at home, should be filial, and, abroad, respectful to his elders. He should be earnest and truthful. He should overflow in love to all, and cultivate the friendship of the good. When he has time and opportunity, after the performance of these things, he should employ them in polite studies’” (*Analects of Confucius*, 1.6, trans. Legge). This is how the *Dizigui* comments the very beginning of this passage: “Father and mother call (you)/Answer without delay/Father and mother order (you)/Act without laziness/ Father and mother teach (you)/Listen with respect/Father and mother scold (you)/Say nothing and accept (...). These commentaries draw in large part on the “Qili” chapter of the *Liji*, as well as from neo-Confucian texts of the Song and Ming Dynasties, in particular by Zhu Xi and Huang Zongxi.

29. Conversely, it is said to have been promoted by some local authorities in the Imperial period. Cf. Xu Zi, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

30. Cf. Sébastien Billioud and Joël Thoraval, *art. cit.*, p. 16.

31. *Ruhe luoshi dexing jiaoyu jiangxi shouce. Neibu xuexi ziliao* (Handbook on moral teaching and on the question of its practice. Internal study document), Lujiang wenhua jiaoyu zhongxin, 2006, p. 29.

32. This series of lectures also took place in 2006, although probably in another form. One publication shows traces of it: Yang Shufen, *Dizigui jiangjie*, Beijing dafang guang wen-hua gongyibu (undated).

A social experiment between political control and moral norms

From its beginnings, the Centre was conceived, not as a phalanstery jealously guarding an elite closed off from the world, but as a kernel of real social experimentation that aimed at extending itself. It is therefore both from the perspective of “Confucian” proselytism carried on by the Centre, and in its twofold relationship with government (the symbolic link with government ideology and its functional relationship with the local authorities) that we must understand the elaboration and the dynamic of its relations with the outside.

“Harmonious society”: from slogan to social experiment

In February 2005, not long before Jingkong founded the Centre, Hu Jintao launched his new slogan of “harmonious socialist society” (*shehuizhuyi hexie shehui*). During the Sixth plenary session of the Central Committee of the 16th Congress of the CCP (November 2006), a “Resolution of the Central Committee on some major stakes in the construction of a harmonious society” was passed, which made this “construction” the major task at the time. While this slogan is not really the first example of a Confucian-inspired line in the history of post-Maoist China,⁽³³⁾ it nevertheless translates a determination to come out of the modernist scheme through a more directly organic objective that also reveals the growing preoccupation of the Chinese leadership in the face of escalating social tensions in the country. Moreover, one can consider that, while symbolically marking the arrival of a new government, the gesture of ideological innovation makes it possible for citizens, at least to some extent, to remodel the interaction between state and society: with the state changing its political axis, the social actors are in their turn potentially capable of interpreting this change as a means of underpinning their own initiatives at local level. Thus in Tangchi, since the abandonment of the multicultural theme, it has been a question of building a “town model of harmony.” This last term has the status of a watchword in the Centre. Printed on all kinds of media, it is omnipresent in texts that are distributed, to the point where some of them have a confusing resemblance to pieces of official propaganda.⁽³⁴⁾ Even more remarkable is the fact that members wear, printed on the backs of their regulation jackets, either the expression “A harmonious society, a land where ritual and justice reign,”⁽³⁵⁾ or the litany “The harmonious society

begins with me, begins with my family, begins in Tangchi, begins in Lujiang.” This approach of vestimentary display, indeed of *incorporation* of the official slogan, raises questions. Is it simply a concession aimed at winning the favour of the local government? Should one, in a more pessimistic reading, attribute it to a form of voluntary servitude? Or does it, on the contrary, testify to a canny pursuit of self-chosen aims, in other words to make the slogan mean what the government never thought it might one day mean? The truth seems to us to lie precisely in the *coexistence* of these three virtualities — to which must also be added the self-interested use that can be subsequently made of it by local government. Indeed, in this assemblage, it is the complexity of the *dispositif* that produces its viability and its durability: it makes it possible for all of the protagonists to get what they want without ceasing to display a belief in the aim of a communal enterprise.

Thus, although the “harmonious society” claimed by the Centre does indeed come from the slogan of a neo-Communist regime in need of social tranquility, it also contains an experimental project in line with a real Confucian utopia. Jingkong formulates a proposition on the problems of Chinese society that is clearly political and inspired by nationalism and anti-modernism. To him, Chinese culture, the ferment of wisdom, is the most precious of all the world’s cultures. Its vicissitudes are explained, in his view, by the fact that “the teachings of our ancestors have been lost, forgotten, and that we have begun to believe in foreign superstitions.” Consequently, the Chinese must recover a sense of “natural unity,” to which Western democracy is perceived to be the precise opposite, but which Chinese single-party politics is supposed to favour, provided it undertakes a correct selection of its elites according to the criteria of traditional education. As Jingkong sees it, the Kuomintang failed in 1949 because its cadres had not been brought up in that spirit.⁽³⁶⁾ Now, “It is on filial piety that loyalty to the fatherland depends (...); it is on honesty that the absence of cor-

33. The objective of building a “relatively well-to-do society” (*xiaokang shehui*) defined by Deng Xiaoping referred back to the notion of “*xiaokang*” that stems from the *Shijing* and the *Liji* (where it had the even more positive meaning of a “peaceable and prosperous life”). Jiang Zemin also drew inspiration from Confucian discourse when he put forward the principle of “governing the country through morality” (*yi de zhi guo*).

34. “In order to apply the proposal of President Hu advocating the building of a harmonious society (...), and in accordance with the documents of the Council of State Affairs and of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (...), the Centre, basing itself essentially on the teachings of our eminent traditional moral culture, sets the following pedagogical guidelines (...),” cf. Lujiang wenhua jiaoyu zhongxin, *Hexie shehui, Liyi jiabang: Lujiang wenhua jiaoyu zhongxin*, p. 5.

35. This phrase combines Hu’s slogan with a famous expression from the *Liji*.

36. See, in the DVD series *Hexie zhengjiu weiji*, part 7: “Tangchi: a model for the world.”

ruption depends. [If members of the Communist Party] are all respectful towards their parents, if they are all honest, then there will be no better party in the world.”⁽³⁷⁾ However, in the perspective of the “Old Professor,” it is not in the CCP that salvation lies. Jingong states that he nurtures the hope, within ten years, of having cultivated 50 genuine sages, that is to say “Confuciuses, Menciuses, Shakyamunis of today.”⁽³⁸⁾ It is moreover with this aim that a deeper training step is offered to all those who have completed the initial six-month training. As Jingong says, “Since 30 professors have been able in only a few months to transform a village, why could we not change the whole of China? (...) It would be enough to record the teaching of our 30 professors and to broadcast it by satellite television: our country’s leaders could listen, each in whatever place he was. In a year, all of China’s problems would be solved.”

The formation of a “model” under government approval

Bolstered by these vast aims, the experiment in Lujiang corresponds more concretely to the proposal of a “model” (*shifan*). This claim to exemplarity at the local level presupposes the more or less active support of the district’s cadres. We must distinguish here between two modes of extension of this model, implying two types of government collaboration.

At the moment, most of the Centre’s activity concerns the local, in accordance with a scheme of progress from neighbour to neighbour that recalls the traditional motif, crystallised in the *Great Study*, of gradual spreading of local beneficial effects up to the most comprehensive level.⁽³⁹⁾ “It is harmonious families that by associating with each other make a harmonious Tangchi; it is harmonious villages and townships that join together to make a harmonious Lujiang. What men have in themselves of harmony, of respect, of peace, that is what lies at the source of the household, the country, the whole world.”⁽⁴⁰⁾ It is this first mode of extension that dictates, for example, that after two months of internal training, the members of the Centre are invited to go and meet the residents. The *Dizigui* plays a fundamental role in this: the classic is to be read over the next three years by all of the residents of the town, of the district, and then beyond. To this end visits to neighbouring schools are regularly organised, where classes in traditional art (calligraphy, painting, paper cutting, etc.) are also given. Even more directly, the members of the Centre go so far as to visit people’s houses in order to encourage parents to educate their

children according to traditional principles, and everybody is to behave according to their status within the family.

Exercised on a moral level, this local proselytism is backed up by discourse of a more political nature concerning the image of the town. While its transformation into a “model region” gradually imposes itself as a duty, it is also supposed to be a source of pride for all. It is on this two-fold level that the Centre’s activity comes within the scope of the official horizon of the local government: not only is the intervention of the members in the daily life of the town perceived as having the government’s approval, but their cause is presented as meeting the official objectives of enhancement of the district. In other words, spreading harmony cannot but presuppose a solid harmony with the local authorities. And *de facto*, the latter willingly support the undertaking from the moment that all explicitly religious colouring is duly banished from it, and to the extent that they hope to benefit from it themselves.

This support is even clearer when the Centre – and this is the second means of spreading the “model” – sets itself the task of seeking trans-regional channels that enable it to reach individuals all over the country, which correlatively can only increase the credit given to the officials. Such is the case of lectures entitled “Building a town in Tangchi that is a model of harmonious society,” which have been held periodically since February 2006, and where there is talk of hundreds of participants. Likewise, in May 2006, teachers from 260 kindergartens, primary, and secondary schools were brought together in Tangchi for training. Finally the Centre’s present leaders have been carrying out a major programme in the Hainan prisons, naturally in close collaboration with the administration. This entails, in direct connection with the local provincial court, using traditional culture as a means of moral reform aimed at making inmates aware of the gravity of their errors: an approach that is officially known as “important action in the reform of education in the prisons of Hainan Province.”⁽⁴¹⁾

37. Cf. *Hexie jiuzhen weiji*, part 4: The policy of the Royal Way: An ideal system with a view to accomplishing harmony between Heaven, the Earth and Man.”

38. Cf. *Hexie jiuzhen weiji*, part 7.

39. Cf. Anne Cheng, *Histoire de la pensée chinoise (A history of Chinese thought)*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1997, pp. 72-73.

40. These remarks can be read on the first page of the Centre’s website.

41. Preface by Zhang Fa (Deputy Director of the Department of Judicial Affairs of the Province of Hainan and Director of the Provincial Prison Administration) to a little book published jointly by the Provincial Prison Administration of Hainan and the “Xiaolian Centre for Initiation into National Studies” in Haikou, directed by Yang Shufen and Cai Lixu: *Chanhui yu xinsheng: xuexi Zhonghua minzu youxiu chuantong wenhua ganwu. Fuxing renyuan pian (Repentance and a new life: Studying and becoming aware of the eminent traditional culture of the Chinese people. Writings by prisoners)*, 2007.

Between everyday life and official sphere: moralisation techniques

While it is referred to in the discourse of the Centre's leaders, the “harmonious” quality of Tangchi is not evident as an objective fact. It can nonetheless be seen, if only by taking note of differences from other more ordinary towns: the visitor cannot avoid being struck by the remarkable tidiness of the streets; struck above all by the discourse of the inhabitants who, when questioned, are full of praise for the Centre and its action in the neighbourhood. This state of local opinion is undoubtedly not uniform or permanent. It seems nonetheless to be a result of the fairly systematic use of “moralisation techniques.” We must here distinguish between several kinds.

First are the day-to-day interactions between the town's residents and members of the Centre. Besides the salutation the latter must address to any passer-by, they are also expected to keep an eye on the tidiness of the streets. Now this two-fold civic and environmental preoccupation is inseparable from a form of incitement to good behaviour. According to members of the Centre, certain residents of the town who were at first indifferent or even hostile ended up feeling “moved” (*gandong*) by so much altruistic zeal, and consequently were subjectively obliged to participate in the work of public cleanliness. A story that is quoted in several accounts tells of how some “professors” went so far as to clean the private toilets of some individuals, who had sought to test them by making such a request before being deeply moved by the gesture. Through this preaching by example a new local order has gradually established itself in which the internal communal dimension becomes more and more substantial in the minds of the town's residents.

Another method concerns active collaboration with the government, from which the latter benefits in terms of image — and sometimes financially. Thus the Centre has created a system of rewards for virtuous residents, leading to the organisation of regular meetings that, according to the Centre's leaders, have the two-fold advantage of crediting social morality and involving the local government in its promotion. For example in January 2006, just two months after its opening, the Centre seized the occasion of the Spring Festival to award a “sum in token of respect for the elders” (*jinglaojin*, amounting to 121,200 *yuan*) to all the town's residents over 70 years old. To this end, a ceremony was organised by the Centre during which this sum was handed over to 60 representatives. This donation was not in any way financed by public funds, any more than was the ceremony, which was

however officiated by the president of the town's People's Assembly and numerous local cadres⁽⁴²⁾ (who expressed the government's “entire approval” of “the successes obtained in the Centre's work”⁽⁴³⁾). The officials were not merely content to approve this activity, they also benefited from it directly: the ceremony was an occasion for the Centre to give the town government the sum of 200,000 *yuan* as an “emergency fund.”

Another aspect of these techniques for raising moral standards implemented with the support of the government consists in the elaboration of an official framework for the assessment of the Centre's activities. Indeed, members constantly refer to local government statistics as formal proof of the significance of their action. The court figures thus passed on indicate that in 2006, the Centre's first year, the divorce rate in Tangchi decreased by 48.5 percent, while the police station's statistics show a reduction of 47 percent in the town's crime rate.⁽⁴⁴⁾ Brandished in conversation, these figures proclaim the legitimacy of a “model,” while at the same time tending to insert it into the official work of social pacification.

Governmental control, whether passive or active, symbolic or economic, thus appears not only as a central mechanism of the Centre's action and influence, but also as an aspect that is organised and even staged by the members themselves. If it is thus the case that the local government undeniably benefits from such an arrangement, is the simple word “instrumentalisation” sufficient to explain its durability up to now?

A new form of governmentability based on a collective mode of subjectivation

The Lujiang Centre confronts us with the paradox of an instrument whose founders claim certain aims that are “political” in the broad sense of the term, but which functions by working essentially on the level of morality. The politicians, for their part, are involved in this dynamic, but are in no way its promoters: it even seems sometimes that they are as much instrumentalised by the disciples of Jingkong as they are instrumentalisers (the mention of the divorce rate — which is in no way part of government priorities — in the statistics is

42. Notably present were the deputy secretary of the District CCP, the head of the local Propaganda Department, the deputy head of the district and the head of the district Education Bureau.

43. *Lujiang wenhua jiaoyu zhongxin*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

44. Zhou Yu, “Tangchi: Ruji wenhua yu hexie xiaozhen” (Tangchi: Confucian culture and a harmonious town), *Minzhu yu fazhi shibao*, 2007, n° 30, A01-02.

eloquent in this respect). While the Center does indeed exert a form of power, it is a matter of a “moralised” and “moralising” power, in other words, based on an individual capacity to integrate the norms of social regulation, and a collective capacity to have them integrated (ideally up to and including by the leaders). We are here, on a local level, in what Foucault calls a space of “governmentality,” at the point of “a meeting between techniques of domination over others and techniques of self,”⁽⁴⁵⁾ thus totally external to the liberal political model based on the rule of law. 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. Against the differentiation between the moral and political spheres that is the principle of the modernist reforms of the twentieth century, and contrary to the various political and legal consciousness-raising movements that can be seen to be developing today in China (particularly around the “rights defence movement,” *weiquan yundong*), it is at bottom a form of “ethical government” that is tending to establish itself in Lujiang.

This new model appears clearly in the way in which, in collaboration with the Centre’s leaders, the project of moral education in the prisons is being applied. The Prison Administration Office of Hainan Province has printed an *Anthology of the Classics of the Eminent Cultural Tradition of China*⁽⁴⁶⁾ for the prisoners, which includes extracts from the *Dizigui*. According to Lin Mingfen, Political Commissioner of Prisons of the town of Haikou, the teaching based on these texts has had the effect of bringing a number of prisoners back to a buried natural goodness, and consequently to feeling genuine repentance. Apparently, an experiment has even been carried out of releasing prisoners for a fixed period of time to visit their parents in order to make an act of contrition in front of them; all the prisoners are said to have returned to their cells at the set time.⁽⁴⁷⁾

What is remarkable here is that the “disciplinary discourse” that shows its effectiveness in this way presents itself as totally foreign to the law: it produces a discourse about the norm that seems to interfere very little with the legal serving of the sentence (the change in attitude of the convict, in this case, does not lead to any reduction in sentence). Moreover, in this context of Chinese culture being publicly and fervently claimed, one can observe in a disarmingly pure form a phenomenon that, while it often appears to be a commonplace of Chinese political history,⁽⁴⁸⁾ nonetheless constitutes in this case the heart of the mechanism: the filial relation-

ship is not only the metaphor, but also the vector of the relationship to power — and at the same time its naturalisation. The example of the convicts on furlough is instructive here: the movement by which they testify tardily to their gratitude towards their parents is the same as the one that confirms them in their social status as convicts.

The strong effectiveness of this *dispositif* finally depends on what one might call a “collective mode of subjectivation” in which the most intimate and emotional realities (as in the case of filial sentiment, rediscovered as innate but fragile) become factors in communal cohesion. While this two-fold movement can be found elsewhere in Chinese history and society, the specificity of the Lujiang Centre is that it systematises it to the point of making it the heart of a local arrangement and of an educational dynamic. Thus, to the members in training whom we were able to interview, admission to the Centre corresponded to a radical change in attitude towards their parents: they said they had gone from a situation of ingratitude to a strong feeling of debt and recognition (*gan'en*). Now this internal upheaval coincided with leaving the family, and with commitment to long months and even several years in a particularly demanding structure. Apparently paradoxical, this approach can be well understood once one perceives the Lujiang Centre for what it fundamentally is, which is to say, as we have shown, an *establishment devoted to the tradition of “natural” norms*. Thus the “emotion” that may be evident in the audience during a lecture on filial piety — an emotion that is shown on posters at the Centre showing photographs of a smiling audience, but also of a female listener in tears⁽⁴⁹⁾ — does indeed testify, in a spontaneous way, to the value of a filial relationship for one particular individual, but also to his or her insertion in a community that is capable of talking about this value and mediating it.

The emotion is thus controlled: it is part of a ritualised framework (in this case, classes begin with a triple collective

45. Cf. Michel Foucault, “Les techniques de soi” (Techniques of self), (1982), in *Dits et écrits II*, Paris, Gallimard, 2001, p. 1604.

46. Cf. Zhou Yu, *art. cit.*

47. Cf. Zhou Yu, *art. cit.*

48. Pierre-Étienne Will criticises some historians for mechanically adopting the classic parallel between imperial power and filial piety. In this particular case, it is not so much the parallel that we emphasise as its effectiveness within a specific *dispositif*. Cf. Pierre-Étienne Will, “Entre présent et passé” (Between present and past), preface to Philip A. Kuhn, *Les Origines de l'État chinois moderne* (The origins of the modern Chinese state), Paris, Édition de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 1999, p. 23.

49. This emotion also finds written expression in the publication of accounts by listeners of their reaction to lectures about the *Dizigui*. Cf. Lujiang wenhua jiaoyu zhongxin, *Dizigui: Xingfu hexie de rensheng yaoshi: Dizigui xuexi xinde* (The *Dizigui*, key to a happy and harmonious life: What its study teaches us) (undated).

Female listener in tears
on the posters at the Centre.
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salutation to the image of Confucius that hangs at the end of the room, followed by a collective rhythmic reading of the *Dizigui*) that consecrates its communal value while limiting its possible excesses. From this perspective, just as the convict contentedly returns to his cell after having re-established his link with his parents, intimate experience of the debt towards one's parents does not isolate one from the Tangchi community, or from that of Lujiang, or from the country as a whole; on the contrary everything here gives one to believe that it is their very ferment.

In search of "harmony": What kind?

The Lujiang Education Centre is no longer the only one of its kind: projects that claim it as a model range from the most discreet initiatives to the most official undertakings. Thus, a comparable experiment is being carried out in the district of Qingyun (Shandong Province) where a huge "Academy of Qingyun" has been founded with the mission of "spreading traditional culture."⁽⁵⁰⁾ Directly linked to Tangchi, this establishment has already on more than ten occasions sent representatives of local government, schools, and companies to be trained at the Lujiang Centre, while since September 2007, professors from Tangchi have been going to Qingyun to exchange views with local government officials.⁽⁵¹⁾ At the most private and least visible level, the influence of Tangchi is recognised among members of the still very small and more or less clandestine education network of the "sishu" (home schools).⁽⁵²⁾ At the most institutionalised level, the experiment carried out by the Centre's leaders in Haikou Prison seems to be well on the way to spreading elsewhere: the prison sent four staff to Lujiang for a short course in April 2006, and 40 cadres from the local prison system, as well as from re-education through labour (*laojiao*), went to the Centre for a week-long session in April 2007.

In the face of this emerging network, while the native notion of "popular Confucianism" is pertinent, one can see how important it is to specify its practical content. Indeed, the cohesiveness of the "movement" that one sees here lies less in its attachment to one tradition than in the implementation of this tradition within a specific framework. Rather than a simply "Confucian" discourse, it is a certain way of acting through this discourse, of getting the attention of, and putting in touch with each other, a range of actors, that brings the actors together around this "model." Confucian discourse exists elsewhere, in other configurations; but in Tangchi and in its various off-shoots, a singular framework



ensures that this discourse *takes hold* in a singular way, in spite of numerous heterogeneous factors that exist as much at the internal level of an establishment as at the level of its links with the rest of the network.

Thus, in the case of Tangchi, we have seen that the "Confucianism" of the Centre was due to a Buddhist, and in fact it has retained traces of this origin in certain details: as apart from the monks who can be encountered in Tangchi, the practice of vegetarianism and of contemplation before meals, the valuing of celibacy, or even the fact of addressing non-human creatures⁽⁵³⁾ verbally and in writing seem to point to this permanence. Moreover, while it is undeniably "popular" because of its insistence on practice and because of its exclusive reference to the traditional literature of children's education, it is no less broadly "official" because of the role played in it by the local authorities.

On the one hand, on a global level, positive appreciation does not imply total allegiance: reservations have been expressed by Buddhist monks visiting Tangchi,⁽⁵⁴⁾ and by certain residents pointing out excessively rigid operations. But

50. Cf. this establishment's website: <http://www.dfg.cn/gb/qingyun-net/index.html> (visited on September 10 2008).

51. A smaller-scale experiment is underway in the suburbs of Nanjing, in Jiangning, where a couple, who are also in touch with Lujiang, have bought a site in order to set up a "Centre for Cultural Education in The Tradition of The Sages."

52. Cf. Guillaume Dutournier, Wang Yuchen, "L'enseignement des "sishu" en Chine contemporaine: enjeux identitaires, pédagogiques et politiques d'un traditionalisme éducatif" (The Teaching of the "sishu" in contemporary China: Identity, pedagogical and political issues in an educational traditionalism), forthcoming under the aegis of the Ateliers Doc-torats de Beijing.

53. The Centre has a small farming area, where a notice has been posted to the animal world requesting with the greatest courtesy that "The Venerable Animal and Insect Ladies and Gentlemen" not feed on fields other than those provided for them.

54. A monk whom we interviewed recognised the value of the Centre's teaching as a foundation course, while stating that it could not satisfy him as a basis for self-cultivation, even from a simple lay perspective.

deeper down, the sharing of common references covers considerable practical differences. Thus one must be aware that the “harmony” of which members of the Centre speak and that which structures political discourse do not mean literally the same thing. The notion is firstly more often qualified as “socialist” in official language, an adjective that completely disappears in the context of Lujiang. Moreover, when the government speaks of “harmony,” it does not seek to deny (and the alarming character of official statistics⁽⁵⁵⁾ show this) that the causes of disharmony are not moral but political and social. The interpretation of Jingkong and his disciples is quite different. However much they use statistics to confirm their approach, these do not point to social conflicts, but to the supposed improvements in the *fengqi* (atmosphere, quality of morals), the political problem in their eyes forming a *continuum* with the moral problem. Finally, if harmony in Tangchi is to be constructed, it is to some extent by going back, since it is in fact conceived as depending on natural norms, which an institution like the Centre is aimed at reactivating. Given these differences, as well as the debates around the notion of “tradition” in government circles, one is not surprised by the fact that, despite certain enthusiastic assessments,⁽⁵⁶⁾ some official voices have come out against the pursuit of similar experiments.⁽⁵⁷⁾

And yet what cements this diversity, what provides meaning in the interweaving of these diverse internal components, as well as in the feeling of shared belonging linking together concomitant but completely uncoordinated enterprises, is the reference to a single framework that has demonstrated its practical and symbolic effectiveness in practice. In Tangchi, people can believe in the consensual discourse of the authorities, since the word “harmony” functions as a link between the global harmony that is supposed to mobilise the leaders and the harmony that is confirmed in a ritualised everyday life. People can believe in a general collaboration of individual goodwill, since “tradition,” far from shutting one into a particular relationship, situates the experiment on a great “Way of the Saints and the Sages” as impersonal as it is open to adaptations, and since, moreover, the most local and intimate action continues to draw approval from the deep sympathies of the *one* culture and the *one* society that are the very horizon of its symbolic effectiveness.

The success of such a “model” probably lies in the combination of unanimist fiction and self-cultivation, the former providing a strong ideological framework and the latter committing the individual at his deepest level.

As evidenced by the adjustments that the model has undergone over three years, it is by trial and error and through the

give and take of veiled interaction with the authorities that people have gradually and collectively become convinced of its viability. In this sense, despite its strongly traditional colouring, the future of the “Tangchi formula” remains open. While it appears likely to spread, its future will probably be played out between two different applications of governmentality of which it has become the testing-ground, which is to say, in short, between two practices of self-realisation in a community context of unanimist discourse: the one could continue to favour a form of social integration, while influencing the political through a moralising approach; the other, however, could prove to be purely disciplinary.⁽⁵⁸⁾ •

• Translated by Michael Black

55. According to official statistics, between 1994 and 2004, the phenomenon of “mass incidents” (which is to say demonstrations and attacks of all kinds against government organs) increased by 22.2 percent a year, reaching 74,000 a year in 2004. The total number of Chinese citizens involved in this kind of action has grown from 730,000 to 3.76 million. Cf. Hu Lianhe, Hu An'gang, Wang Lei, “Yingxiang shehui wending de shehui maodun bianhua taishu de shizheng fenxi” (Influence of social contradictions on social stability: Factual analysis of an evolution), *Shehui kexue zhanxian*, n° 4, 2006, pp. 175-185.

56. For example, a professor at the CCP Party Central School sees in the Lujiang Centre an appreciable political experiment from the point of view of the Harmonious Society: he compares it with what were then illegal innovations carried out by the peasants in Anhui in 1977, which finally set off the process of agricultural de-collectivisation. Cf. Liu Yuli, “Xiri Fengyang Xiaogang cun, jinzhao Lujiang Tangchi zhen – guanyu Anhui sheng Tangchi zhen shuli zhengque rongruguan, goujian hexie chengzhen de diaoyan,” (Yesterday the village of Xiaogang in Fengyang, today Tangchi in Lujiang: Investigations on the town of Tangchi in Anhui, where is being constructed a real sense of praise and of blame, and where a harmonious town is being built), *Fazhan daokan*, n° 1, 2007, text on line: <http://zhxue.ccps.gov.cn/fzdk/dklm.sjyts/834.html> (visited on 20 September 2008).

57. In September 2006, the Party Secretary of the town of Majing'ao (Hunan), inspired by the model of Lujiang, began to promote the teaching of the *Dizigui* in the local primary school. However, in April 2007, the head of the Education Bureau of the city of Jishou, backed up by a group of 70 teachers and government officials, undertook an examination of the Lujiang Centre over three days and decided to stop the experiment in Majing'ao. Severe criticisms were aimed at the Centre's practice of extralegal publication, as well as at what were deemed to be its retrograde ideas and imposition of vegetarianism. As these cadres saw it, resort to traditional culture has to be done “in a critical way,” which is to say, based on the versions of the classics for children revised by the competent government authorities. Cf. Chen Anqing, “Xiangxi xiaozhen, yi chang liuchan de ‘rujia zhizhen’ shiyan” (The failure of a “Confucian experiment” in a small town in Eastern Hunan), *Xiaoxiang chenban*, 17 May 2007.

58. A recent article in the press reveals that the Lujiang Cultural Education Centre was closed in December 2008, a story confirmed by the local government. The reason for this closure is at present still unknown, with the only explanation having filtered through from a member of the local Education Bureau referring to a decision by the hierarchy. However instructive it may be about the ambiguous attitude of government towards phenomena of “popular Confucianism,” this sudden interruption of the Tangchi experiment does not seem to imply — at least for the moment — the disappearance of the mark it has made on local consciousness, or the end of its influence over its substitutes and other initiatives that share the same inspiration. Cf. Pan Xiaoling, Wu Da, “Likai 'Kongzi' de rizi,” *Nanfang zhoumo*, 28 May 2009.

Glossary

Cai Lixu 蔡禮旭

chuantong wenhua 傳統文化

Dazangjing 大藏經

Dizigui 弟子規

duoyuan 多元

ertong dujing yundong 兒童讀經運動

Fang Dongmei 方東美

fengqi 風氣

gandong 感動

gan'en 感恩

guanfang 官方

guiding 規定

Hu Jintao 胡錦濤

Jian Fengwen 簡豐文

Jinniu 金牛

Jingkong fashi 淨空法師

jinglaojin 敬老金

Jingtu 淨土

jugong 鞠躬

Hainan 海南

Haikou 海口

hexie shehui 和諧社會

hongyang 弘揚

Kang Youwei 康有為

lao jiaoshou 老教授

laojiao 勞教

Li Bingnan 李炳南

liyi lianchi 禮儀廉恥

luoshi 落實

Lujiang wenhua jiaoyu zhongxin 盧江文化教育中心

minban feiqiye danwei 民辦非企業單位

minjian 民間

peiyang 培養

ren'ai heping 仁愛和平

rujia 儒家

rujiao 儒教

ruxue 儒學

shehuizhuyi hexie shehui 社會主義和諧社會

shidao 師道

sishu 私塾

Tangchi 湯池

weiquan yundong 維權運動

xiaodao 孝道

xiaoti zhongxin 孝悌忠信

xiushen 修身

xiuyang 修養

Xu Yehong 徐業鴻

xueru 學儒

xueshu 學術

Yang Shufen 楊淑芬

yigong 義工