

New Europe College
Ștefan Odobleja Program
Yearbook 2014-2015



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This volume was published within the Human Resources Program – PN II, implemented with the support of the Ministry of National Education - The Executive Agency for Higher Education and Research Funding (MEN – UEFISCDI), project code PN-II– RU–BSO-2014

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ISSN 1584-0298

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APPEAL TO CONFUCIANISM IN CHINESE POLITICAL DISCOURSE: HU JINTAO'S HUMAN-CENTERED RHETORIC

Abstract

Chinese political discourse has changed dramatically, in the last decade, as a result of China's story of economic success and continuous growth. At the same time, the Chinese leadership has become more and more aware that economic success alone can no longer be used as single means of legitimation. Successful economic policies did not translate into benefits for people from all social strata and increased the feeling of discontent. The paper analyzes attempts to recover and reinterpret Confucian moral values to the present political realities; it discusses the appropriation of Confucian values in the new political discourse of the Chinese elite to legitimize the continuation of the CCP's stay in power, focusing mainly on the ten-year period of Hu Jintao's government, between 2002 and 2012.

Keywords: Confucianism, Marxism, tradition, political discourse, legitimacy.

Introduction

After more than half a century of overt anti-traditional, and especially anti-Confucian rhetoric, we are witnessing today what seems to be a "comeback" of tradition on the political stage, as reflected in official political discourse. From the ever-present slogans such as "put the people first" (*yi ren wei ben*), "create a socialist harmonious society" (*goujian shehuizhuyi hexie shehui*), "increase moral training" (*jiaqiang daode xiuyang*), or the education campaigns in elementary schools based on the "Eight Honors and Eight Disgraces" (*ba rong, ba chi*), during Hu Jintao's period (2002-2012), which could be easily identified as having Confucian origins, to the less obvious, but nevertheless present employment of

traditional values in the Party discourse after Xi Jinping's coming to power, in 2012, Confucianism has become more and more common present in the elite discourse of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Looking at the new type of rhetoric, so different from the "traditional" Marxist rhetoric of class struggle and continuous revolution, one cannot help but wonder whether the Chinese Communist Party is slowly replacing Marxist ideology with Confucianism,¹ is trying to blend the two ideologies into what is called Sinicized Marxism (*Zhongguohua de Makesizhuyi*), or uses Confucian tradition only at the discursive level, in an attempt to legitimize its rule in the eyes of the people. One should point out from the very beginning that, while not denying that tradition is an important source of inspiration for the current political discourse, the CCP leaders seem to go to great lengths to avoid naming any specific traditional system of thought, in other words, they rarely acknowledge the Confucian origins of many of the concepts present in their discourse, using instead the much more general concept of "Chinese tradition".

Chinese cultural tradition is in no way restricted to Confucianism. Albeit important, Confucianism is just one of the elements that form what is perceived today as "Chinese culture". The term Confucianism itself is rather problematic since it is used in the Western world to refer to a system of thought, a religion, and even various local customs and social practices.² Nevertheless, the contribution Confucianism had to China's political life surpasses that of any other element composing the Chinese culture. As a system of thought that originated from Confucius's teachings, Confucianism was used to maintain order and social stability. As Jiang Qing pointed out, in moments of crisis, it was always Confucianism that was called to "clear up the mess, set up the enlightenment by rites and music, stabilize social life and thus proving the constructive nature of Confucianism" (Jiang, 1989:35). It is its very political application of Confucianism that ensured its survival for thousands of years.

The politicization and elevation of Confucianism to state ideology in Han (206 BC – 220 AD) ensured that, from that moment on, the continuous exposure to Confucian ideology and the emphasis on its core concepts of the 'Three Principles and Five Regulations' (*san gang wu chang*) made Confucianism part of what Li Zehou, quoted by Tu Wei-ming, called "the psychocultural construct" of the Chinese people (Tu, 1993:176). Internalized Confucianism became a system of reference for people's social interactions. No matter how much Confucianism changed over the years, the 'Three Principles' which advocated the need for the minister, son and

wife to be subordinated and loyal to the ruler, father and husband, and the 'Five Regulations' of *ren* (humanness), *yi* (righteousness), *li* (propriety), *zhi* (wisdom) and *xin* (trustfulness) were constantly used to judge an individual's behavior in the social and political space.

The aim of paper is to explore the usage of traditional values in the contemporary political discourse, focusing especially on the former CCP Secretary General Hu Jintao's speeches between 2002 and 2012.

Marxism or Confucianism?

For China, the 1980s did not mean only the beginning of a successful period of economic reforms, but also a period of cultural freedom when many of the topics that had been considered taboo could once again be publically addressed and debated. One of the most debated topics, especially in the intellectual circles, was that of tradition with special emphasis on the importance of Confucianism to Chinese culture. On the mainland, the debate on the role of Confucianism in shaping China and creating a Chinese identity started in early 1980s and developed rapidly, so that in 1986, the National Office for Philosophy and Social Science (*Quanguo zhexue shehui kexue bangongshi*) nominated research on New Confucianism as key-research and named professors Fang Keli and Li Jinqian in charge with a project funded under the seventh five-year plan, which was eventually extended for another five years, in 1992 (Hu, 2007).

The renewed interest in traditional culture became known as "*guoxue re*" (traditional learning fever), or "*ruxue re*" (Confucianism fever). According to Yang Sung-moo (2010), between 1978 and 2008, there were 204 events related to Confucius that were organized on the Chinese mainland alone, while Li Qiqian (1991) noted that new organizations dedicated to research of Confucian thought had been established on regular basis, listing the most important 15 organizations established between 1979 and 1990, with The China Confucius Foundation as the most important. Makeham (2008) mentions that Li listed only the most important organizations, leaving out some of the smaller one, and quotes Zhang Shuhua saying that by the beginning of the 21st century, the number of such organizations was close to one hundred. Makeham also identifies two main reasons behind the revival of Confucian studies on the Chinese mainland, in the 1980s: the interest in Confucian capitalism which could be used as an alternative model to Western modernity, and the fact that the debate on Confucianism

created the space for the bigger debate of the role of the Chinese tradition in creating the Chinese nation. The whole debate on the importance of tradition to the creation of a Chinese identity could not leave supporters of Marxism indifferent. Tu Wei-ming, while agreeing with Feng Youlan that “Confucianism helped inspire the self-consciousness of the Chinese people as a distinct cultural entity”, also noted that it “opened the door for Marxist historians to explore the roots of Chinese culture in Confucian terms without directly confronting the issue of evaluating the role of Confucianism in modern China.” (Tu, 1993:13-14).

One of the elements that made the revival of Confucian studies possible was people’s loss of faith in Marxist ideology. While enjoying (or not) the success of the Reform and Opening policies, the Chinese people, and especially the Chinese youth, lost its faith in Marxist ideology of the Communist Party. After the beginning of the new century, continuous economic success, increasing contacts between China and the Western world and access to modern means of communication aggravated the ideological crisis faced by the Party, in spite of constant reminders that Marxism was still its core ideology.³ Although rarely admitted publicly, the loss in faith in Marxist ideology is one of the problems which concerns the Party⁴ and which led to increased calls by the Party officials to strengthen political education in schools.⁵

There are many reasons young Chinese stopped believing in Marxism. Besides Marxism’s decrease in popularity at the international level and the growing presence in the public discourse of concepts such as “democracy”, “freedom”, “rights”, etc., the Chinese need only look around and wonder how relevant the basic principles of “public property”, “class struggle” still are. It is not only the common people who debate the meaning of Marxism; Yang Ruisen mentions that there are different points of view regarding the “two 30-year periods” even within the Party.

There are people who oppose the two 30-year periods and use the great achievements during the last 30 years of Reform and Opening to deny the first 30 years after the founding of the new China and call it a period of repeated mistakes by the Party, when certain Party leaders killed and fought one another for power and wealth, a period when the people lived miserable lives. There are also those who, when looking at the glorious results in the past 30 years of Reform and Opening, say that “the satellites flew up the sky, but the red flag fell to the ground; it is the moment when the Chinese socialism set foot on the evil road of revisionism (Yang, 2010:5).

There are also scholars who link the loss in faith to a so-called “national identity crisis” (*minzu rentong weiji*), thus echoing the discussions regarding the role of tradition in shaping Chinese identity from the 1980s. According to Liu Kui and Xu Jun (2010), one of the challenges brought by globalization was that “national identity” turned from a political concept based mainly on the idea of sovereign rights, into a cultural concept, where culture and religion played a much more important role than politics and this fueled discussions regarding the role of Marxism in contemporary Chinese society.

For the Party itself, the question is not whether Marxism still is its “core ideology”, but to what extent it can be sinicized (*Zhongguohua*). There has been a lot of discussion regarding the meaning of sinicized Marxism among the Party intellectuals, but if there is one element that draws consensus that is the fact that Marxism has been going through a continuous process of sinicization ever since it was first introduced in China. The concern of this paper is the role of tradition, mainly of Confucianism, in this process of sinicization. Needless to say, this is also a highly debated topic by the Marxist scholars. Chinese culture has always been considered as part of the “specific Chinese experience” (*Zhongguo juti shiji*) by all Chinese leaders starting with Mao Zedong. Therefore, one of the main answers by the Marxist scholars to those who call Marxism a “foreign ideology forced upon China” is that Western-born Marxism grew roots, bloomed and bore fruits in China just because it was nurtured by the rich soil of the Chinese culture, forming an organic bond with it. Moreover, calling Marxism a “foreign ideology” is wrong because, in spite of its birthplace, Marxism forms the theoretical base of the proletarian revolution and therefore it cannot be confined to a certain country or nation; the only element that makes a difference is class. The Marxist approach to the “outstanding traditional culture” is “absorb its best, reject the drags” (*qi qi jingua, qu qi zaopo*), without being very specific. Confucianism *per se* is rarely ever mentioned in the official political discourse; most of the times Marxist intellectuals underline the richness of the traditional culture which is composed from much more than Confucianism. “To identify traditional Chinese culture with Confucianism does not match the reality of the Chinese culture, where Daoism, Mohism or other schools also have many useful ideological resources, sometimes even more resourceful than Confucianism.” (Zhang, 2008:27).

Although, while agreeing with Makeham (2008) and Ai (2008) that there is still not enough proof that that the Party actively supports Confucianism,

there is no denying that Confucianism is present in the official discourse of the Party's leaders, even if it is not openly named. What happens then, when Marxism meets Confucianism? The debate regarding the role of Confucianism in China's future development brings face to face the New Confucians who see China at crossroads and advocate the replacement of Marxism with Confucianism as a solution for social and political problems, and the Marxists who, facing an ideology crisis, try to incorporate elements of traditional culture, mainly Confucianism, into Marxist ideology to further sinicize it. Regardless of one's approach to Confucianism, and while repeatedly emphasizing that Chinese tradition cannot be reduced to Confucianism alone, everyone agrees that Confucianism was the dominant ideology in China for over two thousand years.

Nowadays, many Marxist scholars do not see Confucianism and Marxism as total opposites any longer and consider dialogue between the two possible. Zhang Shibao (2008) reckons that, in the last hundred years since Marxism entered China, the relation between the two ideologies went through three stages: opposition (*duikang*), before 1949, confrontation (*duizhi*), between 1949 to the 1980s, and dialogue, after the 1980s. How much should Confucianism be allowed to influence Marxism is a very complex matter debated within the Party. Occasional employment of Confucian concepts and values by the highest leaders of the Party makes virtually impossible to openly oppose Confucianism. One can criticize it, but cannot reject it totally. Most of the articles regarding the sinicization of Marxism touch upon the question of "Marxist Confucianization" (*Makesizhuyi rujiahua*), which the Marxists totally reject. Besides the ever-present argument that Confucianism is just one of the traditional schools of thought and that Confucianization would actually narrow Marxism down, there is also the question whether Confucianism is prepared to deal with present day situations. Scholars like Zhao Cunsheng (2009) or Yang Ruisen (2010) argue that, even if there is no denying that there are valuable elements in Confucianism, they still need to stand the test of modern times. According to Yang, the reason for which some scholars see a tendency in Marxism to become more Confucian is because they mix up the historical cultural inheritance with the origins of the basic theory behind China's socialist modernization drive.

What Marxist scholars oppose openly is not Confucianism, but Confucian scholars, mainly those from Mainland China, defined by Zhang Shibao as follows:

In order to determine whether someone is a Mainland Confucian, the most important thing is to look at the way he deals with the relation between Confucianism and Marxism. This is the touchstone. If someone holds fast to his Confucian beliefs and opposes Marxism, then he is a Mainland Confucian; if one does not oppose Marxism, although he is very close to Confucianism, then we cannot say that he is a Mainland Confucian, he is merely a Confucian scholar (Zhang, 2008:26).

In a more recent article, Zhang Shibao becomes even more radical and labels the calls by Mainland Confucians to replace Marxism with Confucianism “a serious interference with the cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics” (Zhang, 2010:60), an attempt to restore the old order, which should not be underestimated. The reason behind this attitude toward the Mainland Confucians is the fact that the latter advocate total replacement of Marxism with Confucianism. The most important representatives of this current of thought are Jiang Qing, Kang Xiaoguang and Chen Ming.

In 1989, Jiang Qing published in *Legein Monthly*, in Taiwan, an article entitled “The Practical Significance of the Revival of Confucianism on the Mainland and the Problems It Faces” (*Zhongguo dalu fuxing ruxue de xianshi yiyi ji qi mianlin de wenti*) in which he openly stated that:

In mainland China today, under the protection of state power, a foreign culture – Marxism-Leninism – has secured unique authority as the “national doctrine”. Yet this foreign culture can neither securely establish the national lifeblood of the Chinese nation, nor is it capable of giving expression to the national spirit of the Chinese nation (Jiang, 1989:32).⁶

Unlike Marxism, a foreign-born ideology, Confucianism is much more than an ideology; it embodies the essence of the Chinese culture, its vitality and its spirit.⁷ Jiang believes that the decline in morality on the Chinese mainland originates in the degradation of Confucian values, starting with the beginning of the 20th century, and therefore, reviving traditional culture is of vital importance. In “The True Spirit and True Values of Confucianism”, he clearly states that Chinese lost moral standards and social ethics collapsed due to the decline of the Confucian tradition in last century.

In the last one hundred years Chinese culture and Confucianism collapsed and the moral standards embodied by Confucianism no longer exist in society and in people’s hearts. The problem nowadays is not the morals are not respected, but that there are no more moral standards. The Chinese do not know what kind of behavior is moral behavior (Jiang, 2005).

Although he does not mention Marxism by name, Jiang Qing is not very subtle either, stating that the collapse of the moral standard exposed the Chinese heart to over fifty years of erosion (*fushi*) by political authority and twenty years of erosion by the wealth of the market economy. All these have brought China in such a serious condition that it has never experienced during its long history. One of the biggest problems of the Chinese political system today is “legitimacy vacancy” (*hefaxing quewei*). Confucianism can solve this problem, since ‘the kingly way’ (*wangdao*) can provide politics with “the triple legitimacy” (*san zhong hefaxing*). Jiang’s idea of triple legitimacy is a critique to the Western-style political system and mainly the Western concept of democracy. The triple legitimacy is given by the Heaven, the Earth and the people. The legitimacy of Heaven is transcendent sacred legitimacy, that of the Earth is the historic and cultural legitimacy, while the human legitimacy is given by the people’s will. On the other hand, the Western concept of democracy is based only on the “people’s sovereignty” and it lacks morality.

Democracy has a further serious problem: it lacks morality. In a democratic system, the authority and legitimacy of the government are determined by a formal will but not a substantive will of the people. They concern majority opinion with no respect for the quality of opinion. (Jiang, 2013:34)

The system proposed by Jiang Qing is a tri-cameral parliamentary system composed of The House of Confucian Scholars (*tong ru yuan*), the House of Common People (*shumin yuan*) and The House of National Essence (*guoti yuan*) whose chairman would be Confucius’s eldest direct descendent and the legislative body formed by descendants of sovereigns, great men of virtue and culture, as well as representatives of all religious cults in China.

Kang Xiaoguang (2004) also opposes Marxism, an alien ideology, and sees “re-sinization” (*zai Zhongguohua*) as the only viable solution for China’s future development. Starting from Harbermas’s theory that public sphere is the source of legitimacy, Kang emphasizes the relation between legitimacy and culture. First of all, legitimacy is an organic part of the cultural system, and secondly the only kind of legitimacy that can last is the one that has its roots in the Chinese culture, to which Marxism does not actually belong. Kang acknowledges the economic success brought by the Party’s policies, but doubts the Party’s ability to solve the current social problems, because both those who hold the political power and the rich lack humanness (*wei*

zheng bu ren, wei fu bu ren). The solution proposed by Kang is making Confucianism into a “state religion” (*guojiao*) and setting a “benevolent government” (*renzheng*), a concept that originates in Mencius, defined as “benevolent authoritarianism” (*renci de quanweizhuyi*), the governance of those who love the people, who have compassion.

Unlike Jiang, Kang Xiaoguang does not advocate in favor of a sudden replacement of Marxism with Confucianism, but proposes a gradual transition. The Four Books and Five Classics should be made compulsory reading in the Party schools, and all officials should be examined from the Confucian classics each time they want to be promoted. Slowly but surely, Confucianism would replace Marxism and the Communist Party would evolve into a community of Confucian scholars.

Chen Ming also agrees that Marxism should be replaced by Confucianism and calls for transforming Confucianism into a civil religion. He reckons that Mainland Confucians approach Confucianism as a civil religion and it is from this angle that they explain the relationship between it and society. One of the biggest problems identified by Chen is the “inadequate system” (*bu heli zhidu*), a system which needs to be rectified (*zhizhu zhengyi*) and this can be done only by Confucianism. Confucianism can answer many of the questions China faces today. Echoing Jiang Qing’s 1989 essay, Chen insists on the multi-dimensionality of Confucianism which holds the keys to designing, critiquing, analyzing and deconstructing the political system, and even to securing a peaceful existence. He argues that even the people at the top realized the necessity of a cultural revival and, therefore, the topics today shifted naturally from “communism” to “national revival” which acknowledges the importance of culture. The government should give up Marxist ideology because it lacks ethnic cultural identity (*minzu de wenhua rentong*) and cannot be seen as legitimate by the Chinese people.

Jiang Qing, Kang Xiaoguang and Chen Ming’s proposals are strongly opposed by the supporters of Marxism. Although many Marxist supporters also ceased to see Confucianism as a backward feudal ideology and accept its central role in the Chinese cultural system, they still insist that Confucianism should be approached from a Marxist perspective. Marxism can and needs to learn from Confucianism, but it cannot be replaced by it.

In an article published in 1989, Fang Keli⁸ identified New Confucianism as “the only ideology (*sixiang chaoliu*) that was likely to survive, had a certain theoretical creativity, quite a big influence and a rather long life”, besides Marxism. Again, in 2009, Fang mentioned that the encounter

between Marxist ideology and Confucianism not only could not be avoided, but Marxism needed to explore and critique the Confucian inheritance, including its moral values, human ideals and harmonious society concept, because it was directly related to the creation of Marxism with Chinese characteristics. Mou Zhongjian (2012) also points out that Confucianism is an integral part of sinicized Marxism. Starting from Mao Zedong and Liu Shaoqi's "On the Self-cultivation of a Communist Party Member" (*Lun gongchandangyuan de xiuyang*) and up to Hu Jintao's principle of "putting people first", Marxism kept alive the dialogue with Confucianism. If it wants to bring about a long period of peace and prosperity, Marxism needs to absorb Confucian wisdom regarding social management, moral education and the self-improvement, says Mou.

Responding to the critique that Marxism was an alien ideology, Fang Keli argued that although from the beginning of the 20th century, China had been exposed to numerous foreign ideologies (pragmatism, neo-realism, Neo-Kantianism, Neo-Hegelianism, logical positivism, etc.), none of them with the exception of Marxism was able to grow roots in the Chinese soil, because they did not incorporated elements of tradition.

None of Western systems of thought or ideologies that entered China have been able to grow roots in China, to spread and develop, unless they combined themselves with Chinese traditional thinking. (Fang, 1989:8)

The reason behind the success of Marxism in China was that it had become sinicized, and therefore part of the Chinese culture. As I have already shown, the ability of Marxism to incorporate elements of the local culture is a recurrent theme in the official discourse. Fang Keli, however, cautioned that although the study of tradition was important, tradition had to be approached critically, to identify and absorb the best elements fit for a modern society with a modern culture (*gu wei jin yong*), and reject "feudalist dregs" (*fengjianzhuyi zaopo*).

Marxist scholars consider that, even if there are many differences between Marxism and New Confucianism, such as the historical and cultural background on which they emerged, their historical tradition, their attitude toward tradition and Western knowledge (for example the understanding of that is "quintessence" and what are the "dregs"), or their approach and compromise regarding the relation between China and the West, there are also many common elements between the two ideologies, such as the appreciation of tradition, readiness to accept

what is outstanding in other cultures, the desire to “make the past serve the present, make what is foreign serve China” (*gu wei jin yong, yang wei Zhong yong*), the emphasis upon the relationship between people and society and people and nature, etc. However, this in no way makes Confucianism equal to Marxism.

True to his beliefs that Marxism is a strong and politically superior ideology, the only one that was capable to transform fundamentally the Chinese society, Fang Keli insists that the relation between the Marxism and Confucianism is that between mainstream ideology (*zhudao yishi*) and supporting ideology (*zhihuan yishi*). Research and study of Confucianism cannot be divorced from Marxism and should be approached only from the Marxist point of view of class-society and class struggle, because Confucianism was born in society which was marked by class struggle. Confucianism must be placed and studied in relation with the ideological struggle existing in contemporary Chinese society.

Chen Xianda (2011) also supports Fang’s view and emphasizes repeatedly that Marxism not only must, but it also can play the role of guiding principle in this dialogue. And it not because Marxism is the core ideology of the ruling Communist party, but because it has got a scientific view of the world and it has scientific methodology. It is the practicality and scientific nature of Marxism that allows it to take the upper hand. The scientific nature of Marxism is one of the main arguments of the Marxist intellectuals against the replacement of Marxism with Confucianism. Marxism can employ scientific theory to critique and choose the suitable elements of Confucianism, to give Confucianism a scientific trajectory in order to make it suitable for the present society.

Fang also answered the question whether socialism with Chinese characteristics could be called, or become “Confucian socialism” (*rujia shehuizhuyi*). The answer he gave was negative, saying that one could not simply put the equal sign between Chinese culture and Confucianism, let alone that this understanding of the Chinese socialism would ignore the importance of the May Fourth Movement and of all the events thereafter, until the establishment of the People’s Republic. Chen Xueming (2012) also rejected the idea of Marxist Confucianization. He answered those who considered that the success China accomplished after Mao’s death was due to a group of leaders who understood the importance of traditional culture, and especially of Confucianism, by stressing that the force that stood behind all the changes in the last 30 years was not Confucian in nature, but Marxist. While it cannot be denied that traditional culture did

play an important role in China's recent development, it was still Marxism that played the most important role. Chen Lai, professor of philosophy at Tsinghua University in Beijing, echoed Fang and Chen's positions, but took a more nuanced approach:

Marxism is the basic theory that guides our cause and Confucianism is the main force of the Chinese traditional culture. If we want to put into practice socialism with Chinese characteristics, we must pay attention to the relation between the two. If we only pay attention to the Chinese tradition culture with Confucianism at its core, and we do not stick to Marxism, than our socialist practice will lose its guiding ideology. But if we stick only to the Marxist classic theory and we do not research traditional Chinese culture with Confucianism as its core, than our socialism will lose its Chinese characteristics. (Chen, 2012)

The conclusion reached by most of the Marxist scholars is that it is impossible for Confucianism to regain its lost central position. Previous events proved that ignoring it was also a huge mistake, because Confucianism penetrated the Chinese consciousness and shaped each and every individual. Marxism is willing to engage in dialogue with Confucianism and learn from it, but in order for Confucianism to survive, it needs to give up its claim to supremacy and accept to be an important element of a multicultural 21st century.

Traditional Values in Hu Jintao's Discourse

The importance of cultural development has been repeatedly emphasized in the discourse of the Party elite. All the reports to the Party congresses in 1992, 1997, 2002 and 2012 stress the necessity of developing "socialist culture", or "socialist culture and spiritual civilization", under the guidance of Marxism, but they differ in the approach of the Party's general secretaries to traditional culture. If in 1992 and 1997, the then CCP General Secretary Jiang Zemin did not mention traditional culture in his reports at the Party congresses, talking instead of "the fine traditions of the Chinese nation" (*jicheng he fayang Zhonghua minzu youliang de sixiang wenhua chuantong*) and the need to carry on "the fine cultural traditions handed down from history" (*jicheng lishi wenhua youxiu chuantong*), in the 2002 report, he acknowledged the power of culture as "deeply rooted in the vitality, creativity and cohesion of a nation". By 2002, Marxism had already ceased to be "the unifying ideology"; the only

deeply rooted culture was the traditional one, albeit the Party insistence that Marxism was the successor of this culture and thus, Jiang's call for the Party members to understand the huge importance of cultural development can be interpreted as a covert urge to study traditional culture.

Jiang Zemin's successor, Hu Jintao was much more direct than Jiang and in the 2007 report at the 17th Congress, he identified culture as an element of national cohesion and national strength. Hu made a separate point in mentioning that the Party needed to "promote Chinese culture and build the common spiritual home for the Chinese nation", because "Chinese culture has been an unflinching driving force for the Chinese nation to keep its unity and make progress from generation to generation." The importance of culture as a unifying factor and the role of the Party as the inheritor of the traditional culture was also stressed in the "Decision of the CPC Central Committee on Major Issues Pertaining To Deepening Reforms of the Cultural System and Promoting the Great Development and Flourishing of Socialist Culture", passed in October 2011, at the Sixth Plenary Session of the Seventeenth CPC Central Committee. The "Decision" states that "traditional culture embodies the national spirit of self-improvement" and "it is a solid foundation for developing advanced socialist culture and an important pillar for building a common spiritual home of the Chinese nation". Nowhere in the "Decision" is Confucianism mentioned and reading the "Decision" from a Confucian perspective has been criticized by Marxist scholars. While they cannot deny that, for example, the core value system of honors (*rong*) and disgraces (*chi*) proposed in this document was influenced by the rich traditional culture (and once again, Confucianism is not mentioned by name), they insist that the system remains Marxist in nature because it was born out of the integration of the characteristics of the present times with the practical necessities and it embodies Marxist historical materialism and scientific development. Confucianism is named only when a clear line needs to be drawn between the Party's theoretical framework and tradition: the type of values mentioned in the "Decision" should not be over-read as a "cultural turn", and definitely not as Confucianization. What defenders of Marxism seem to overlook is that the very concept of shame (or "disgrace" (*chi*), as preferred in the official documents) is Confucian and it is related to the Confucian value of righteousness (*yi*) - just another Confucian value employed in the current political discourse. Just as Van Norden (2004) points out, shame is a characteristic of righteousness, and neither Mohists, who were not interested in self-cultivation, nor Zhuang Zi, who

was not interested in the individual's life as part of a social group, attached too much importance to it. The value system of honors and disgraces underlines a person's role within a social group, the "shame" and "honor" are defined within the social context; they are supposed to tell people what kind of behavior is seen as acceptable and how they can become (or remain) good citizens. The ability to recognize one's actions as shameful is an important step toward becoming a righteous person.

As I have already mentioned, Confucianism is rarely (if ever) mentioned by name in the elite discourse. However, after Hu's access to power, in 2002, slogans such as "putting people first" (*yi ren wei ben*), "governance for the people" (*zhi zheng wei min*), "building the Party for the public" (*li dang wei gong*) or "building a harmonious society" (*jianshe hexie shehui*) flooded "the market" and it is not difficult to read them as Confucian, mainly because of the people-centered rhetoric which can be found in most of the Confucian classics.

In the "Song of Five Sons", in *The Book of History*, it is stated that "It was the lesson of our great ancestor: The people should be cherished, and not looked down upon. The people are the root of a country; if the root is firm, the country is tranquil." (*Shangshu · Xiashu · Wu zi zhi ge*). Xun Zi went further and said: "The sovereign is like the boat and the people are like the water; the water carries the boat, but it can also sink the boat" (*Xunzi · Wang Zhi*). On the same key, Mencius made a hierarchy of the most important elements in a country: "The people are the most important, followed by the gods of soil and grain, with the sovereign as the lightest" (*Mengzi · Jin xin xia*) and "The three most important treasures of a lord are the land, the people and the government affairs." (*Mengzi · Jin xin xia*). As far as the government was concerned, Mencius stated that if the sovereign "puts in practice a benevolent government (*ren zheng*), people will love him more than they love themselves" (*Mengzi · Liang Hui wang xia*) and that "the sovereign that does not put in practice benevolent governance cannot bring peace under heaven" (*Mengzi · Liu lou shang*). Benevolent government is that type of government that focuses on people's needs; the role of the sovereign's main concern is the people and their welfare. The same idea lies at the base of Hu Jintao's concept of scientific development and it is reflected by its core principle of "putting people first". The reason for all the actions and policies proposed by the Party should be the welfare of the people. By insisting that the driving force behind the reforms is the welfare of the people, the Party works with the people for the people, Hu Jintao tried to present his governance as "benevolent". Hu's repeated

remarks, in the reports at the 17th and 18th congresses, or the Address at the CCP's 90th Anniversary, that it was not the people who served the Party, but the Party that represented and worked for the people remind of Xun Zi's statement that "The Heaven did not give birth to the people for the sovereign, but established the sovereign for the people". (*Xunzi · Da Lüe*). The same image of benevolent governance also transpires from Hu Jintao's Premier Wen Jiabao's understanding of Confucian culture. While seeking opinions on the annual government report, in 2010, Wen reportedly pointed out that the most important Confucian value was *ren* which he defined as "love for the people" (*ren zhe ai ren*), followed by compassion (*shan*), harmony (*he*), self-strengthening (*gangjian ziqiang*) and the concept of "putting people first" (*renben sixiang*).⁹ All these are values that need to be reflected into the governance. Those in power need to have *ren*, to love the people, to form a moral government that is *shan*, benevolent, constantly improve themselves morally, and treasure harmony more than anything else. By taking the recent economic crisis as an example, which Wen blamed on moral decay, he also warned that the price of failing to implement benevolent governance was primarily paid by the people and that, in turn, endangered those in power.

The emphasis on the individual ethics is also Confucian and so are the values that the Party tries to inoculate: loyalty (*zhong*), respect (*xiao*), love (*ai*) and righteousness (*yi*). In both his reports to the 17th and 18th Party congresses, Hu repeatedly underlined that the main duty of the Party and party members was that of serve the people wholeheartedly – *wei renmin fuwu, fuwu qunzhong*, build a party which served the interest of the people and governed for the people, *li dang wei gong, zhi zheng wei min*. If people are happy, the Party can be happy. There is no doubt that Hu was very much aware that "winning the hearts of the people is gaining the kingdom, while losing the hearts of the people is losing the kingdom" (*Li Ji · Da Xue*). The acknowledgement that economic success could not guarantee social stability, the insistence that cadres should work diligently, be upright and just, full of vitality and continuously increase their human quality (*suzhi*), and the warning that corruption and abuse of power could trigger the death of the Party, reminds of the fragment in *The Great Learning* where it is stated that "in a country, prosperity does not come from profit, but from righteousness" (*Li Ji · Da Xue*). The same ideas are present in the speech delivered at the Party's 90th Anniversary, where Hu once again reminded the party cadres that they worked for the people, could not make use of their power to seek private gains and

should conduct themselves with dignity so that they became models for the people (yet another Confucian concept – that of a moral model). Integrity, or morals, (*de*) is a cadre's most important asset and it is their integrity that dictates their every action: they morally improve themselves (*yi de xiu shen*), show integrity when serving the masses (*yi de fu zhong*), are moral example (*yi de ling cai*) and use morals to enhance competence (*yi de run cai*). The repetitive usage of the concept of *de* (integrity/morals) does not only remind of Jiang Zeming's urge to "combine governing the country according to the law with governing the country according to virtue" (Jiang, 2001), but also the fragment in the *Analects* where Confucius stated that: "He who exercises government by means of his virtue may be compared to the north polar star." (*Analects*· *Wei zheng*).

The over and again emphasis upon the cadres' moral standards is directly related to the Party's survival. *Zuozhuan* talks about "dying without decaying" (*si er bu xiu*), which is possible if three conditions are met: achieve virtue, render meritorious service and establish [wise] speech (*li de, li gong, li yan*) (*Zuozhuan* · *Xianggong ershisi nian*). The three conditions were further explained in *Chunqiu Zuozhuan Zhengyi*, as "achieving virtue means coming up with straight methods and providing relief to those in need; rendering meritorious service is eliminating hardship and providing aid in time; establish [wise] speech means that one's words express what one wants and the reason is worth transmitting."¹⁰ What the Party tries hardly to avoid is *si*, "death", therefore it is not concerned with its image after losing power. However, there is a striking resemblance between the conditions listed in *Zuozhuan* and what is asked from the Party cadres. In other words, by cultivating those elements that can project an image of a non-decadent party, it helps the Party remain in power. Therefore, the cadres must come up with straightforward solutions so that the masses benefit from their policies, must help those in need and must make sure that their deeds match their words, that they speak the language of the people.

The aim of Hu Jintao's politics is the creation of a harmonious society where people can live and work in peace and contentment (*renmin anju leye*). In the "Speech at Special Discussion Class for Leading Cadres at the Provincial and Ministerial Levels to Study Issue about Building a Harmonious Socialist Society" delivered in 2005, Hu acknowledged that the idea of a harmonious society was not new, but it a recurrent topic of Confucian philosophy. Confucius himself had mentioned that the most important thing was harmony (*yi he wei gui*) (*Analects*· *Xue er*), while *The Book of Rites* contained a clear description of how "the world of

great unity" (*da tong*) should be: "When the great unity was established, everything under heaven belonged to everybody. People were chosen according to their virtues and talents, their words were trustworthy and they cultivated harmony" (*Li Ji · Li Yun*). Hu also quoted *The Book of Great Unity* by Kang Youwei, in which "people loved each other like family, every one was equal and every thing was commonly shared" (Hu, 2005). Hu never denied that his theory of a harmonious society drew upon the existing Confucian ideal of harmony, but neither did he make a clear distinction between the Confucian ideal and the one he proposed. Instead, he said that the reason why the Confucian ideal could never become true was the environment into which it had been born – a society with class oppression and class exploitation.

Slogans employed by Hu Jintao can also be said to reflect the ideological changes inside the Party. The Party Hu inherited from Jiang Zemin was different from that of Mao Zedong's and even Deng Xiaoping's. For one, he had inherited a "party for everybody" (*quanmindang*), a party that did not represent only the workers, peasants and soldiers, but also the "red capitalists", in an age when most of the people ceased to believe in Marxism any longer. Economic success continued, but the leadership realized that it might not be enough to keep them in power, with enthusiasm for reforms worn out, economic success not necessarily bringing an increase of the people's standard of living and the gap between rich and poor growing.¹¹ Willy Lam shows that a few years before Hu Jintao took power, the Central Party School and Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) had begun studying the reasons behind the long-time ruling parties, such as People's Action Party in Singapore. Apparently, the conclusion they reached was that democracy was not necessarily the element that kept the parties in power, more important was the ability of these parties to convince the people that it was for them that the parties struggled. Therefore, new slogans were designed to show the ordinary Chinese that they matter, that the new echelon at the top considered first their needs and everything else came after. However, the slogans convey a confusing message. On one hand, they are of Confucian inspiration. As shown above, Hu Jintao himself acknowledged that "harmonious society" and "putting people first" were recurrent themes in the traditional Confucian thought. At the same time, there was no denying that "Confucius was back in style", as proven by movies, TV series, books, the Olympic Games, celebrations and the (timid) return of Confucian classics in schools. On the other hand, Marxist scholars repeatedly denied the Confucianization of the Party and

emphasized that Marxism still is and will remain the core ideology. The so-called “Confucian slogans” were, in fact, the result of the integration of Marxist basic values with Chinese practice (whatever that meant).

Appeal to Confucianism as Means of Legitimation

In his article “Performance Legitimacy and China’s Political Adaptation Strategy”, Zhu Yuchao noted that “the Chinese government has to admit that since the time of revolution and national reconstruction has long passed, the government’s main job now is to promote economic growth, strengthen national power and serve the needs of society and people” (Zhu, 2011:126). Starting with Jiang Zemin’s rule, the transformation the Communist Party went through is the transformation from a party of the revolutionary masses to a party of all the people, so that it can also embrace the better educated business-oriented urban middle class and the “red capitalists” and the shift (at least at the discursive level) toward a more people-oriented approach seem to suggest that the Party has already become aware of this fact. Hu Jintao made it very clear that there was no chance China would turn into a Western-style democracy. In the “Report at the 18th Congress”, Hu Jintao called on cadres to “hold high the banner of socialism with Chinese characteristics” and rejected “both the old and rigid closed-door policy and any attempt to abandon socialism and take an erroneous path”.

The urge to transform China into a moderate well-off society (*xiaokang shehui*) implies that the Party will continue its economic program; at the same time it needs the trust of the people in order to remain in power. The emphasis on the importance of the traditional culture to the sinicization of Marxism, the formulaic use of traditional values and Confucian-inspired slogans show that the Party needed to let go the narrative of leading China towards a strong modern state through economic success and come up with a new type of discourse, one that could win back the hearts of the people. It needed a discourse that could face the increasing social unrest, the calls for political participation by the urban middle class, still timid but rising nevertheless, endemic corruption, the new type of social media harder to control, which provides a relatively free space of debate, if not dissidence, people’s mistrust that the Party’s could solve the existing social problems.

The new type of discourse that emerged conserved all the traditional legitimizing elements - historical legitimation (the Party embodies the spirit

of the May 4th Movement, it is the continuator of the struggle for a rich and powerful China, it is the defender of the integrity and sovereignty of the country, with many of its members sacrificing their lives in the War of Resistance), ideological legitimation (the fight for freedom with references to Mao Zedong, the narratives of victimhood and victor employed during Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin's rules, although the emphasis on Marxist ideology is kept to a minimum) and the economic legitimation. However, it also started appealing much more to traditional culture than ever before. Although Marxism and Confucianism are very much different, the Party ceased to condemn Confucianism as a feudal backward ideology and accepted the fact that it could offer a solution for reaching to the people and thus remaining in power.

I do not consider that the employment of Confucian values in the official discourse can be viewed as Confucianization of the Communist Party. At least, not yet. The Party cannot give up Marxist ideology because that would mean the end of the Party as it is today. Instead, the leaders make use of Confucian concepts because these concepts form a language everybody in China understands. Confucianism is part of Chinese identity. It is so deeply rooted into the collective consciousness that in spite of the anti-Confucian campaigns during the May 4th Movement and the Mao Zedong periods, it could never be eradicated. Confucian thinkers and also CCP leaders nowadays distinguish between political Confucianism and popular Confucianism, where popular Confucianism is seen as consisting of beliefs and social practices employed at the very base of the society. What the anti-Confucian campaigns succeeded was eliminating political Confucianism, but not popular Confucianism, which the Party uses in its current discourse.¹² By incorporating Confucian elements in its discourse, the Party tries to create a sense of unity among the people, an imagined community (as Anderson would call it) defined not ethnically, but culturally, gathered around the caring parent-like Party (*fumu dang*). By re-centering its discourse on the people, the Party has a double aim. First is that of having its own cadres to acknowledge that their sole duty is to work for the people, and secondly is to have the people accept the Party as the benevolent ruler.

The Confucianism influenced rhetoric aims to unite the people around the Party, which is confounded with the state itself - *mei you gongchandang*, *mei you xin Zhongguo* (without the Communist Party there would be no new China), or *wangdang wangguo* (the end of the Party the end of the country), by using common traditional values and

exploiting collective memories that bring forward the image of a united family. The reason behind the rhetoric shift is the search for legitimacy. It is a discourse that does not operate with us-them opposites, but appeals to the collective consciousness and reinforces the image of the Party of the people by showing that the values of the Party and those of the common people are the same. The Party's efforts and goals are no different from those of a head of a family working to keep one's family happy. And like in any other family, the head of the family is not immune to error, but since it can accept the responsibility for its mistakes and does its best to correct them, the Party remains "one of them". Guo Baogang summed up this type of legitimation as:

[A] ruler, who has the mandate of Heaven, possesses the quality of virtue, shows respect to his subjects, follows the rules of the ancestors, and tries to win the hearts and minds of the people, will be considered a just and legitimate one. A just ruler will strengthen his legitimacy by promoting policies that will benefit the people, not himself, by ensuring relatively equal distribution of these benefits, and by allowing the people to do what they do the best. This unique cognitive model has influenced every government and its rulers throughout Chinese history. (Guo, 2003:1)

Thus, in a case of corruption, the people would not blame the Party as a whole, because the values that stay at the heart of it are right, but would condemn an individual who went astray and let him/herself get corrupted by profit. In a way, the people entrusted the Party with "the mandate" of bringing peace, prosperity and promoting justice, but the Party can meet their expectations only as long as the people remain loyal to it.

Tradition in general, and Confucianism in special, is instrumentally used by the Party to get moral legitimation, in a period when historical, ideological and economic legitimations are not enough any longer. It tries to answer those who doubt the right of the Party to rule by convincing them that even if not directly elected, the Party does not form a separate entity from the people and it has the "mandate of the people" (*min ming*) to govern. However, one must point out that, even if today sinicized Marxism is still the "grammar" and Confucianism only the "vocabulary",¹³ there is no way in saying whether over time, the repeated usage of Confucian vocabulary that carries within thousand of years of tradition does not end by changing the grammatical rules.

NOTES

- 1 And thus proving Daniel Bell's prevision true: "It is not entirely fanciful to surmise that the Chinese Communist Party will be relabeled the Chinese Confucian Party in the next couple of decades." (Bell, 2008:27).
- 2 In spite of all these, I have opted not to use the Chinese transliterations of *ruxue*, *rujia*, or even *rujiao* (which is more commonly understood as Confucian religion), as it would have been difficult for non-Chinese speakers to follow. The distinction between Confucianism as a system of thought and Confucianism as religion was made only where it was absolutely necessary. Unless otherwise specified, Confucianism refers to a system of thought.
- 3 See, for example, all the reports at the Party congresses, during the last two decades.
- 4 Money worshipping and the extreme egoism brought by the market economy, Western liberalism propaganda, uneven social distribution and economic polarization, corruption, food safety and moral decline are identified by Chen Xianda (2011) as the main challenges Marxism needs to face if it wants to keep its present status.
- 5 See the "Zhonggong Zhongyang Guowuyuan guanyu jin yi bu jiaqiang he gajin daxuesheng sixiang zhengzhi jiaoyu de yijian" (The Central Committee of the Party and the State Council's Ideas on the Further Enforcement and Improvement of Ideological and Political Education to College and University Students), (2014) available at music.njnu.edu.cn/upload/20100302102726490.doc
- 6 Translated in Makeham, 2008:262.
- 7 As a matter of fact, Jiang Qing makes a very clear distinction between *ruxue* as a school of thought and *rujiao*, as Confucian religion. According to Jiang, the school of thought is that type of Confucianism before it became the official learning of the Palace (*wanggongxue*). Once it was elevated to the status of "official learning" and used as governing principle for the people, society and politics it became much more than a school of thought, it became Confucian (civil) religion. In other words, *ruxue* is to *rujiao* what Christian theology is to Christianity. Most of the times, *rujiao* is the type of Confucianism Jiang Qing talks about. See Jiang Qing (2006).
- 8 Chen Ming calls Fang Keli a "red Confucian" (*hong rujia*). See Chen Ming (2012).
- 9 Wen Jiabao quoted by the Xinhua News Agency, 2010.
- 10 Fragment from *Chunqiu Zuozhuan Zhengyi* available at <http://baike.baidu.com/view/422664.htm>
- 11 Willy Wo-Lap Lam quotes an article published by People's Daily on the 18th of July 2004 saying that in 2003, for the first time since 1978, the number of destitute Chinese had increased by 800.000 and reached 30 million. See Willy Wo-Lap Lam, 2006.

- ¹² Lee Cheuk Yin (2003) discusses the importance of traditional values in Chinese communities. Basing his analysis on the research conducted by Godwin Chu and Ju Yanan in Shanghai, Lee shows that Confucian traditional values, especially those related to family, such as diligence, loyalty, devotion, and harmonious relations still rank very high on the hierarchical scale.
- ¹³ Fang Keli, "Zhanwang ruxue de weilai qianjing bixu zhengshi de liang ge wenti" (Two Questions That Must Be Addressed for the *Future of Confucian Studies*), quoted in Makeham, 2008:48.

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