



The “Two Lines Control Model” in China’s State and Society Relations: Central State’s Management of Confucian Revival in the New Century⁺

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Abstract

Whether the authoritarian Chinese state can effectively control an increasingly powerful and autonomous society remains a major debate of Chinese politics. This paper, by drawing on extensive field work, examines an important case, the state’s engagement with the revival of Confucian education in China’s urban society. It advances the current literature in the following ways: first, the central state’s control of Confucian education is far more complicated than has been discussed in previous literature. The central state uses two policy lines, namely, guiding line and bottom line, to shape the development of Confucian education and avoid challenges against the official ideology. Second, the implementation of the two lines at the local level, however, is varied. Though the bottom line is generally firmly followed, the guiding line is carried out with dramatic differences. Third, the variances in local management is found to be closely related with the current political institution in which the central state does not finance local authorities but still retains power to dismiss those who dare to trespass the bottom line.

Keywords: *state and society relations, Confucian education, the central state, bottom line, ideology*





JEL Classification: H19, I28, P36, Z18

1. Introduction

Whether the Chinese state can effectively control an increasingly powerful and autonomous society remains a major debate of Chinese politics. Pessimists, for example, Minxin Pei (2006), contend that the Chinese state is unable to overcome its absolutist origins, and its monopoly of political power will ultimately suffer some form of systemic paralysis or power transition (see also Gilley, 2004; Chang, 2001; Hutton, 2006). However, optimists, represented by Dali Yang (2004), argue that the Chinese state has shown a strong capacity to adapt, adjust and innovate, and that its authoritarian polity has become more responsive and more attentive to economic and social needs (see also Nathan, 2003; Fewsmith, 2001; Dickson, 2003, 2008). This paper contributes to a crucial aspect of the debate, specifically, whether the Chinese state can properly structure different ideologies and beliefs generated amid society. This is significant because ideology is fundamental for political legitimacy which constitutes “the core of any political organization” (Alagappa, 1995: 3). Given China’s recent and possible economic slowdown in the near future, ideological control will be critical for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s legitimacy. It is widely speculated that in case the “quick win” of rapid growth is exhausted, the current regime’s legitimacy will soon come under serious attack (Eichengreen, Park and Shin, 2011; Bradsher, 2012). In fact, A plethora of economic obstacles have already been noted, such as an economic slump of major export markets, stalled economic reforms, institutional deficiencies, resource constraints, demographic aging and environmental degradation, all of which have depressed China’s growth and will continue to do so in the foreseeable future.¹ Besides, with the onset of a series of social and political reforms promised by the current CCP leaders at the third plenary session of the eighteenth central committee, ideological control has become essential for political stability in at least the near future. Hence, whether the Chinese state can keep non-official ideologies and beliefs within its grip remains critical





for its control over society.

This paper explores the issue by examining an important case, specifically, the state’s engagement with the revival of Confucian education in China’s urban society since the new century. Since the early twenty-first century, Confucianism has undergone a revival among China’s urban citizens. Together with Liberalism and Socialism, it has now become one the most influential ideological currents in contemporary China (Tu, 2011). While most existing literature either believes that the Chinese state has either dominated the Confucian revival or that it has little control over it at all, this paper shows that the state’s control is far more sophisticated than “domination” or “non-interference”. The central state uses a two line strategy, namely, a guiding line and bottom line to control the Confucian education. The state mainly provides two guiding lines for lower educational authorities to follow, “replacing Confucianism with ambiguous ‘traditional culture’” and “integrating Confucian elements with the official ideology”. It also sets a bottom line to avoid any challenge against the official ideology. But the two lines are not equally implemented by local educational authorities. While the bottom line is firmly followed, the guiding lines are carried out in different degrees and with varying approaches. This creates an important effect, that is, the central state still retains strong power to avert contraventions against its official ideology but holds only limited control over the direction of the content of Confucian education. Such an effect is found to be closely related with the current political institution in which the central state does not finance local authorities but still retains power to dismiss local authorities who dare to trespass the bottom line.

This research is mainly based on my extensive fieldwork in Guangzhou and Shenzhen in Guangdong Province and Qingdao in Shandong Province from December 2010 to October 2011. A second trip to Guangzhou and Shenzhen was made in July 2013 for the purpose of validating and confirming data collected during the first trip. A small part of the data also comes from my fieldwork in Beijing and Yangzhou in Jiangsu province in early 2011. During the fieldwork, I interviewed bureaucrats and officials from the local education bureaus (*jiaoyuju* 教





育局) and propaganda departments (*xuanchuanbu* 宣传部), teachers and principals from local public schools, Confucian classes (*dujingban* 读经班) and Confucian schools (*quanrizhi jingdian xuetang* 全日制经典学堂). I also collected archival materials, made on-site observations and obtained data from media reports and other secondary sources. The data collection methods will be elaborated later.

1.1. Background: The Confucian Revival in Chinese Education in the New Century

Since early this century, Confucianism has undergone a revival among the urban Chinese public. This is shown in the surging public interest in Confucius and his teachings. The best example is the unprecedented popularity of Professor Yu Dan's TV lectures on Confucianism, entitled *Yu Dan's Reflections on "The Analects"*, in 2006. Her subsequent book based on the scripts of the TV lectures was also warmly received. Within a year, her book had sold four million legal copies across China and an estimated six million pirated ones, remaining at the top of the Chinese bestseller list that year. In the following year, the surging popular demand has given birth to over one hundred kinds of books interpreting Confucianism (Chen, 2007).

The revival of Confucianism has brought a rapidly rising number of children who were sent by their parents to study the Confucian canons in various "Confucian kindergartens" (*quanrizhi jindian youeryuan* 全日制经典幼儿园), "Confucian classes", and Confucian schools.² According to one report from the International Confucius Studies Association, children learning the Confucian canons (including those in government-supported Confucian educational programmes) amounted to over 10 million (Chen, 2007).³ The report also claimed that besides the 10 million children, there were at least 20 million supporting parents and teachers.

"Confucian classes" refer to a group of students organized for the purpose of learning ancient Chinese classics. It usually employs one or two teachers and recruits children younger than twelve years. Its size ranges from a few students to a few dozen. Most students come from





urban middle class families and meet with teachers regularly, usually at the weekend for one or two hours’ reading and teaching. Students are sent to these classes by their parents; and in some classes, parents also participate in the class activities. Some of the Confucian classes are run by certain social organizations (for example, some Buddhist groups) for non-commercial purposes,⁴ but others are purely commercial, such as some training companies in China. The reason that some Buddhist groups were heavily involved in supporting Confucian education, as explained by one of my interviewees, is that Buddhist groups usually consider financing such Confucian education a “virtuous act”. They viewed it as beneficial for spreading Buddhism among the urban middle class because Buddhism in China, after its more than two thousand years of localization, has now greatly overlapped with Confucianism (interview, Qingdao, April 2011).

“Confucian schools” refers to full-time schools specializing in instructing the Chinese classics. These schools are usually operated by social groups (non-official groups), and some of them are, in fact, kindergartens which recruit children younger than seven years. Different from ordinary kindergartens, these schools focus their pre-school education on learning and reciting ancient classics, mainly Confucian ones. In Shenzhen alone, a southern coastal city in Guangdong province, there were at least 34 “Confucian classes” and “Confucian private schools” in 2009 (Shi, 2010).

Since education has always been fundamental for the Chinese state to instill “proper” ideology among its citizens and therefore claim its political legitimacy, it is unlikely that the Chinese government would turn a blind eye to the growing prominence of Confucianism in education. In fact, education, along with mass media and publication, remains to be the key ideological strongholds over which the CCP can never afford to lose its grip, because unlike in liberal democracies where consent is expressed through an institutionalized system of election, the Chinese political system still heavily relies on mass ideological education and campaigns to obtain and mobilize popular consent for its legitimacy (Beetham, 1991; Holbig, 2009). How, then, did the CCP respond to this “Confucian education fever”?





2. Data Collection Methods

This research mainly uses qualitative methods in collecting data. Confucian education still remains somewhat controversial in China and therefore it is difficult to conduct mass surveys of government officials. In-depth interviews, however, allowed this researcher to gather information from government officials and related people in a much more flexible way.

Fieldwork was mostly conducted in Guangzhou and Shenzhen in Guangdong province and Qingdao in Shandong province from December 2010 to October 2011. A second trip to Guangzhou and Shenzhen was made in July 2013 for the purpose of validating and confirming data collected during the first trip. The rationale for choosing these three locations is because Confucian education was observed as experiencing strong revival in these places. And the three places represent three different models of local government's involvement in the Confucian education. In Qingdao, both the prefectural-level (*shi* 市) and district (*qu* 区) (or county/*xian* 县) -level educational authorities are observed as promoting Confucian education; whereas in Shenzhen, only district-level authorities do so. In Guangzhou, neither the prefectural- nor district-level authorities take active measures in promulgating Confucian education. Thus, by examining the three models, I hope this research can possibly come to a reliable conclusion about the Chinese state's management of the Confucian education.

In-depth interviews provide most of the data for the study. During the fieldwork, I interviewed bureaucrats and officials from the local education bureaus (*jiaoyuju* 教育局) and propaganda departments (*xuanchuanbu* 宣传部), teachers and principals from local public schools, Confucian classes and Confucian schools by using semi-structured questions prepared beforehand. For governmental officials, I tried to contact those who were in charge of education and propaganda in the three cities (including those at the province (*sheng* 省), prefecture and district level). During the first round of fieldwork, I obtained three written, one telephone, and twenty-seven face-to-face in-depth interviews. In the second trip, I obtained another eleven interviews





during which I shared my findings with some of the interviewees and listened to their feedbacks. To protect my informants, their identities will not be disclosed in the paper.

Governmental and non-governmental documents also provide important data for this study. They were obtained mainly by three methods. First, some were collected during my interviews with officials at local governmental bureaus. However, some local officials, particularly those at the prefecture level or above, viewed opening their policy documents to those from overseas institutes as potentially troublesome and thus refused to provide some of the documents, even if those were not classified. But this could sometimes be overcome by the second method, turning to the archives of non-official associations. During my visits to these associations, some of them voluntarily showed me official documents which they had received from different levels of government authorities. These organizations, after receiving official documents or directives from their supervising governmental authorities, usually kept these files in order (some of these associations’ internal publications also cover public speeches made by central leaders and local authorities concerning Confucianism). The last method involved searching through the Internet. Some local policy documents can be found on the Internet. By these methods, I was able to secure most of the policy documents concerning Confucian education in these three places.

This research is a part of my on-going research project on the Chinese state’s response to the Confucian revival in contemporary China for which I also conducted fieldwork in Beijing and Yangzhou in Jiangsu province. A small part of the data also comes from my fieldwork in Beijing. However, most of the data for the study were obtained from the three places mentioned previously.

3. The Chinese State’s Control over Confucian Revival in Previous Literature

Most existing literature discussing the role of the Chinese state in the Confucian revival bifurcates along two lines, namely, Instrumentalist and Primordialist. Scholars in the Instrumentalist camp believe that it is





the Chinese state that has purposively created and manipulated the Confucian revival for its own political purposes. It has carefully controlled the Confucian revival. For example, Werner Meissner contended that the Chinese government had funded large-scale research activities and programmes for developing neo-Confucianism in China with its purpose of deploying Confucianism as “an instrument to counter Western influence” (1999: 18). Geremie Barme argued that the opening ceremony of the 29th Olympiad in Beijing, a full representation of Chinese traditional culture, was simply “created under Party fiat with the active collaboration of local and international arts figures” (Barme, 2009: 64). Similarly, Min and Galikowski also claimed that “the Confucian tradition has been revived by the authorities as an important cultural source from which a new national identity can be constructed” (2001: 160). Recent works concerning the rising Confucianism also accentuate the Chinese government’s support for the Confucian revival among the Chinese scholars and general public (see Ai, 2007; Bell, 2008). Some also argue that the state has deliberately appropriated Confucian elements in its cultural diplomacy policies (Cheung, 2012)

The Instrumentalist literature builds a “top-down” control model to explain the state and society interactions in the Confucian revival. This model has a long tradition and has been widely used in analysing the state-society relations in China’s symbolic settings. For example, Schurmann (1966) argued that the Chinese state had used frequent ideological mobilization as a basic mechanism for its legitimization during the Cultural Revolution. The state conducted sweeping ideological campaigns to propagate its official ideologies among even common citizens. This ideological control intensified the state’s dominance over society by establishing direct and impersonal ties between the totalitarian party (its elites) and the masses (Kornhauser, 1959; Arendt, 1951). After China’s opening and reforming policies in 1978, according to Esarey (2005) and Shambaugh (2007), although the state may have lost its total control over all information within society, it still has the capacity to censor and to crack down when and where it sees fit.



In contrast to the Instrumentalists and the top-down control model, the Primordialist, however, attributed the Confucian revival to a growing cultural identity within the Chinese society and viewed the state as not much involved in the Confucian revival. For instance, Guo ascribed the rise of Confucianism to “identification with the nation, particularly national spirit or national essence” (2004: 17). John Makeham (2008: 9) also claimed that “the idea that ‘*ruxue*, *rujia* thought, and *rujia* culture (Confucianism) constitute a form of cultural expression integral to Chinese identity’ was pervasive among the discourse about Confucianism in contemporary China and covers a wide spectrum of participants – academic and official, mainland and overseas-based”. Sebastien Billioud (2007a, b, 2008) insisted that although the Chinese government has been involved in the cultural revival, its role was only conducive and therefore limited. It is the rising interest over Confucianism among the Chinese society that has contributed to the Confucian revival in contemporary China (see also Xu, 2010). Zhao also claimed that the emergence of the cultural nationalistic discourse “was largely independent of ideological propaganda” or “repressive measures taken by the government” (1997: 738). Similarly, Pang (2011, 2012) found that the ordinary citizens’ increasing identity with traditional culture served as the fundamental force for the approval of traditional festivals as public holidays.

The Primordialists build a “bottom-up” model in which society takes the initiative, breeding the Confucian revival that challenges the state, but the state has only limited control over it.⁵ Such a model is not new in the literature for China’s ideological relations between state and society.⁶ For example, Kraus (2004) claimed that owing to technological advances combined with commercialization and globalization, social forces now have growing impact on the initiation and circulation of public information and messages within society, the building block of the “symbolic environment” from which people derive their worldviews, values and action strategies. Lynch (1999) has also argued that millions of individuals and organizations now contribute to the construction of the symbolic environment, controlling more and more ideological resources and reducing the state’s relevance in communication flows.



4. The Central State's Guiding Lines for the Confucian Education

Although both the “top-down” and “bottom-up” model catch part of the intricate state and society interactions in current China and, specifically, in the Confucian revival, the Chinese state's actual control over Confucian revival, as my fieldwork shows, is much more complicated than they suggest. It is neither careful control nor careless non-interference.

The state, especially the central state, mainly adopts a “two-line” strategy in their management of the Confucian education, one is the guiding line and the other is the bottom line. The central state in this thesis refers to the top-most level of the Chinese party-state which includes: (1) the Central Politburo of Chinese Communist Party and its constituent units; (2) the State Council and its constituent ministries, commissions, bureaus, offices; (3) the National People's Congress, its Standing Committee and constituent Committees; (4) the Supreme People's Court and Procuracy (Shambaugh, 2000). The central state, first of all, has made some basic policy parameters concerning the management of Confucian revival, but most of the guidelines are loose and general in nature and they are implemented with varying degrees by different local authorities. Second, it has set a firm bottom line to prevent contraventions against the official ideology and the CCP's rule. However, the implementation of the bottom line is seen as much more completely and strictly followed among local officials than the guiding lines. This unbalanced implementation can be largely attributed to the Chinese political institutions that the central state does not finance the local authorities but still retain power to dismiss local authorities who dare to trespass the bottom line.

The centre has made basic policy parameters for local authorities, among which “replacing Confucianism by an ambiguous notion of ‘traditional Chinese culture’” and “co-opting preferred Confucian fragments into the official ideology” are the two most important.⁷ However, in terms of implementation of these policy guide lines, there is a considerable degree of differences among local authorities.





4.1. Replacing Confucianism with "Traditional Chinese Culture"

The first and foremost policy guiding line in responding to the Confucian revival in education is to supplant the Confucian ideology with "traditional Chinese culture", a term that is deliberately more inclusive and ambiguous than "Confucianism". In fact, the state has never clearly defined what "traditional Chinese culture" is in its official documents, but we can get some idea of its long list by referring to the textbook of *The Chinese traditional culture* (*Zhongguo chuantong wenhua* 《中国传统文化》) authorized by the Ministry of Education (Zhu, 2010). According to the book, traditional Chinese culture composes of not only "the traditional Chinese thoughts" including at least Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism, but also ancient Chinese architecture, calligraphy, literature, dramas, customs, clothes, to name but a few. Even by this incomplete list, Confucianism can only be counted as *one* minor category of the all-inclusive "traditional Chinese culture", albeit an important one.

By diluting Confucianism with the extensive and excursive "traditional culture", the central state, on the one hand, intends to limit space for the independent development of Confucianism. It has constantly emphasized that the right attitude towards Confucianism should be "removing the dross while keeping the essence". It does not approve inheriting Confucianism without deleting elements that are incompatible with its rule. On the other hand, it is also worried that Confucianism may trigger narrow-minded Han-nationalism, which is adversary to the unity of ethnic minorities. "Our concern about this has become particularly strong, due to the rise of ethnic conflicts in Xinjiang, Tibet and Inner Mongolia in recent years," according to one of the informants in the Shenzhen Propaganda department (interview, Shenzhen, May 2011).

This guiding line is shown in the central state's major official documents, such as the 2001 "Action Plan for the Development of Civic Morality" (*gongming daode jianshe shishi gangyao* 公民道德建设实施纲要), the 2004 "Several Opinions concerning further Strengthening and Improving the Juvenile's Thought and Morality Building by the CCP's Central Committee and State Council" (*Zhonggong Zhongyang*





Guowuyuan guanyu jinyibu jiaqiang he gaijin weichengnianren sixiangdaode de ruogan yijian 中共中央国务院关于进一步加强和改进为成年人思想道德的若干意见), the 2006 “The Eleventh Five-Year Plan for Cultural Development, 2006-2010” (*guojia shiyiwu shiqi wenhua fazhan gangyao* 国家十一五时期文化发展纲要) and the CCP’s Seventeenth and Eighteenth Congress Report in 2007 and 2012.

In all these documents, “Chinese traditional culture” is lauded, and education of “the essences of Chinese traditional culture” is also explicitly emphasized; however, none of the major documents has even mentioned the term “Confucian”, or “Confucianism” or “Confucius”. Rather, the words with the connotation of Confucianism in these documents are always “traditional culture” (*chuantong wenhua* 传统文化), “Chinese culture” (*zhonghua wenhua* 中华文化) or “Chinese traditional culture” (*zhonghua chuantong wenhua* 中华传统文化). Even “national studies” (*guoxue* 国学) which has a comparatively stronger reference to Confucianism cannot be spotted.⁸

“Traditional culture”, in these documents, was often vaguely referred to as the Chinese calligraphy, painting, some classic arts, poetry and the classics.⁹ Confucianism or its related activities are seldom mentioned. For instance, in section 30 of the 2006 document, it was clearly stipulated that:

In those primary schools where resources are available, classes in calligraphy, painting and other classical arts should be set up and open for the students. At the middle school level, in the course of Chinese (*Yuwen* 語文), the proportion of poetry and the classics should be increased. And in both primary and middle school, traditional culture should be incorporated into various disciplines or subjects by connecting traditional culture with their distinctive content.

In terms of implementation of the policy line at the local level, however, there is a considerable degree of differences among local authorities in different places.¹⁰ During my field trip, local authorities in B District, Shenzhen and several public schools of Guangzhou follow the line closely by focusing much of the teaching on various forms of traditional culture in their promoted educational programmes; however,





local authorities in L Town, Qingdao seemed to ignore the policy and was seen as putting great emphasis on the teaching of the Confucian Classics.

In one of the educational policy documents of the local educational authorities in B District, Shenzhen, for local schools, education on “diversified forms of traditional culture” was emphasized. One of the educational authorities in this district told me that they encouraged local schools to develop their own “school-based courses” (*tese xiaoben kecheng* 特色校本课程) instructing a certain form of Chinese traditional culture such as the Beijing Opera (interview, Shenzhen, May 2011). According to my observation during the field trip, these schools do have developed their “school-based courses”, but none of the schools provides any specialized course on Confucianism.

In Guangzhou, no educational authorities at the prefecture- or district-level government have formally launched educational programmes about Confucianism. But there are several middle schools and primary schools in the T District offering Confucianism-related courses or the so-called *guoxue* education. My visit to these schools and interviews with their principals and teachers show that they faithfully followed the central policy of promoting traditional culture, rather than Confucianism. One primary school principal said that their education focuses on the teaching of traditional culture, though they will combine some stories from the Confucian Classics into their teaching (interview, Guangzhou, March 2011). She emphasized that “traditional culture is a much broader concept than Confucianism and since some people (she meant some pupils’ parents) still hold some negative opinions about Confucianism, we do not want to arouse their dissatisfaction” (interview, Guangzhou, March 2011).

However, the Confucian education in the C Town (*xian* 县), Qingdao, shows a different story. Local educational authorities in the town have been enthusiastic about promoting Confucian education. Local public schools have put explicit emphasis on the education of the Confucian classics such as the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 《论语》). For example, public primary schools even required their students to read and even recite a long list of elementary Confucian classics including the *Three*





characters classics (*Sanzijing* 《三字经》), *Standards for students* (*Dizigui* 《弟子规》) and *The book of family names* (*Baijiaxing* 《百家姓》) in the children's morning reading class. These books are not abridged and the schools usually requested the students to read these books without "proper selection", that is, "removing the dross while keeping the essence". In these schools, Confucian education often takes a dominant part in their *guoxue* education programmes. Education of other forms of traditional culture such as the calligraphy and painting, contrary to Shenzhen and Guangzhou, only takes limited time and resources in these public schools.

Such explicit and unselective use of the Confucian classics is in apparent contradiction to the central state's guiding line. Similar cases, however, can also be seen in some public schools in another District in Qingdao. Their teaching style even bears some closeness to that of Confucian private schools (these schools are not government-funded and therefore enjoy some degree of autonomy in deciding their own curricular) which concentrate their education on the reading of authentic Confucian classics.¹¹ In addition, it is worth mentioning that the teaching style, interestingly, is not questioned by the local educational authorities.

4.2. Co-opting Preferred Confucian Fragments into the Official Ideology

Besides attenuating Confucianism with traditional culture in the current education system, the central government has also set another guiding policy, actively co-opting selective elements of Confucianism into its official ideology. By setting these guiding policies, the central state intends to use Confucianism (or traditional culture) as an expedient tool for its own ideological promotion. This is not new in Chinese politics. Before 1949, the then ruling Chiang Kai-shek government had also adopted a similar strategy in its Confucian-inspired moral education. Emblematic of this are Dai Jitao's theories linking Confucianism and Sun Yat-sen's Three Principles of the People (Zheng, 2004, cited from Billioud and Thoraval, 2007). In the imperial times, similarly, the imperial state also mastered the co-optation skills. They, in regulating





popular religious beliefs, co-opted into its official pantheon (like the official ideology today) some popular deities who had already acquired considerable followings (like Confucianism today). In this way, the state took advantage of the popular deities, which after being reshaped and restructured, served for the validation of the state (Shahar and Weller, 1996). The current Chinese authorities are also proficient in this skill.

Local authorities, interestingly, though generally following the guidance, selected different ingredients from the Confucian stock to promote different elements of the official ideology. For instance, some focus on patriotism, while others emphasize on “Socialist Concepts on Honours and Disgraces” (SCHD). Local authorities have their quite distinctive focuses in their educational programmes.

During my field trip, I found that local authorities in Shenzhen and Guangzhou put great emphasis on cultivating patriotism in their traditional culture programmes. In the B District, Shenzhen, one of the local educational officials asserted that their primary teaching objective is to cultivate the students’ *national spirits* for which *patriotism* and the *Zeitgeist* of reform and innovation” (*gaige he kaifang de shidai jingshen* 改革和开放的时代精神) (interview, Shenzhen, May 2011). They also put this in its 2009 “Guidelines for Teaching National Studies” (*guoxue jiaoxue yaoqiu* 国学教育要求) for local schools, and made it as the core principle.¹² According to this official, Confucianism, or more broadly speaking, traditional culture, is compatible with the official Patriotism. First, some of the Confucian ethics such as *zhong* 忠 (loyalty to the country), are in line with patriotism; and second, instilling traditional culture itself is helpful for cultivating national identity, or the so-called “national spirit” (interview, Shenzhen, May 2011).

In the schools where education of Confucianism (traditional culture) was inserted into the curriculum in Guangzhou, education of patriotism was also placed with priority. An illustrative case involves the official programme titled “Red Scarf National Studies Inheriting and Educating Activities” (*honglingjin guoxue chuancheng jiaoyu huodong* 红领中国学传承教育活动). The organizer of the programme in this primary school explained, “one of the most important purposes of our programme is to instill patriotism among the students” (interview,





Guangzhou, March 2011). This is also clearly written in the prelude of the textbook for the programme, which stressed patriotism and “making it the main rhythm of the programme”. It also says that this programme aims to implement the requirements of the central document, “Several Opinions Concerning Further Strengthening and Improving the Juvenile’s Thought and Morality Building”, concerning patriotic education. The implications are clear: the programme is initiated to cultivate “national spirit”, that is, patriotism. In fact, even a partial examination of the textbooks suggests that patriotism is, indeed, a predominant theme over others such as diligence, credibility and frugality, since the book length for patriotism is, by all means, much longer than the others.

Patriotic education, however, was not very much emphasized in the teaching programmes of Confucianism (traditional culture) in other places of my field trip. An interesting case is the moral education programme promoted by the Beijing Oriental Morality Research Institute (Beijing Dongfang Daode Yanjiusuo 北京东方道德研究所, hereafter BOMRI), a research organization affiliated with the Beijing College of Youth Politics. It actively connected its educating programmes of Confucianism with the “Socialist Concepts on Honours and Disgraces” (*shehui zhuyi rongruguan* 社会主义荣辱观, hereafter SCHD).¹³ After 2006 when the “Socialist Concepts on Honours and Disgraces” (SCHD) was issued, an active alliance between the two has been made. SCHD is a set of moral concepts developed by the General Secretary of the CCP, Hu Jintao, and is also known as “Eight Virtues and Shames”. It encompasses the following list of ethical values: (1), love the country; (2), serve the people; (3), follow science; (4), be diligent; (5), help each other and make no gains at others' expense; (6), be honest and trustworthy; (7), be disciplined and law-abiding; (8), live plainly, and do not wallow in luxuries and pleasures.

In the moral education programme promoted by the BOMRI, according to the director, the “traditional virtues” they promoted can be summarized as *bade* 八德 (“eight virtues”): *zhong* 忠 (loyalty), *xiao* 孝 (filial respect for parents), *cheng* 诚 (honesty), *xin* 信 (trustworthiness and credibility), *li* 礼 (rituals/respecting others), *yi* 义 (uprightness), *lian*





廉 (frugality), *chi* 耻 (sense of shame), a slightly different version of the SCHD. Though *zhong* (loyalty) is close to patriotism in their programme, their emphasis is more on *xiao* (filial respect for parents), *cheng* (honesty), *xin* (trustworthiness and credibility) and *chi* (sense of shame). This is because their aim is to cultivate the youth morality, hopefully as a cure for the rapid decline of moral decline among young students in their eyes. Teachers in BOMRI asserted that their main job is to interpret the eight virtues and instill them among the teachers responsible for moral education in the primary and middle schools (interviews, Beijing, January 2011). Their programme received financial support from the Beijing Municipal Government and some “relevant departments” within the Ministry of Education. First conducted as a trial programme teaching traditional Chinese virtues to 40, 000 students in four universities and over a hundred primary and secondary schools in Beijing, it later expanded to a national programme involving 373 schools and universities in Beijing, Nanjing, Shandong, Heilongjiang, Chongqing, Sichuan, Shenzhen, Tianjin, Wuhan and Xian (interview, Beijing, January 2011).

As for the reason for focusing on civil morality education, one director of the BOMRI (and also some teachers) asserted that it is related to its former dean, Professor Wang Dianqin, who committed himself to promoting Confucianism, especially Confucian morality (interviews, Beijing, January 2011). Wang perceived Confucian ethics as an effective cure for the sharp moral decline among youngsters in the early 1990s, which he believed was serious. He set the tradition of emphasizing on the building of moral characters.

Besides, such focus can be also partly attributed to the income resources of this institute. According to one of the leaders, although they can get some financial subsidies from the Beijing Municipal Government for its operation, the amount is, in fact, far from enough (interview, Beijing, January 2011). They currently have seven full-time faculty members and more than 30 part-time researchers. They have to rely on the donation of enterprises and some unofficial organizations for part of their income and operational fees. In fact, they are allowed and even encouraged to collaborate with other segments of society to reduce





the local government's burden. The enterprises and organizations, however, tend not to be interested in cultivating patriotism but in promoting some social moralities such as *cheng* (honesty) and *xin* (trustworthiness and credibility). They are more inclined to finance the programme to improve the morality of youth, which they see as meaningful.

In other places, similar educational campaigns to combine the Confucian ethics with SCHD have been actively launched, especially by local educational authorities such as in Nanchang (Lei, 2006) and Shenyang¹⁴. In these programmes, though patriotism is mentioned, it is not placed as priority.

In sum, the central state retains its control over the education of Confucianism by providing some general guidance for local authorities including educational officials and school principals. However, local authorities, as has been shown in previous analysis, implemented the guidance in different degrees and approaches. One of the reasons for the variations in local authorities' implementations of the central state's guiding line lies in the decentralization of administrative power from the centre to the local level. Since the early 1980s, the central government has gradually relaxed its stifling control and assigned more and more authority and responsibility for the management of education to the local level. The first step was the "Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Reform of the Educational Structure" (*Zhonggong Zhongyang guanyu jiaoyu tizhi gaige de jue ding* 中共中央关于教育体制改革的决定) issued by the CCP's central Committee in May 1985 (see Tsang, 2003; Wong, 2000; Fernanda, Wiseman, and Baker, 2002). In the 1990s, the division between the central and local has been further specified, and the central educational agencies do not finance or control the administrative management of tertiary and pre-collegiate institutions, though the central should retain its authority for making fundamental rules and regulations.

Due to the decentralized system, the central state has left only inadequate power and authority to control local authorities' management over local education. The central state has had to narrow its focus to making some general guidance that can sanction and bolster its rule. For





local authorities, since they are allowed considerable freedom and authority in making decisions, they can do what they believe as appropriate and reasonable, so long as they do not ignore the centre’s guidelines too flagrantly.

5. The Central State’s Bottom Line for the Confucian Revival

Besides providing some guiding policy parameters concerning Confucianism, the central state also sets a firm bottom line to prevent contraventions against the official ideology and its rule. The bottom line represents the official limits for Confucian discourses and social activities, and in fact, is not specifically designed for Confucianism but rather geared to all activities in the public media discourses.

The bottom line can be summarized as follows:

- (1) inciting subversion of the regime of people’s democratic dictatorship and the socialist system, national division, rebellion or rioting;
- (2) inciting opposition to the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party;
- (3) inciting defiance or disruption to the implementation of the Constitution or laws;
- (4) inciting ethnic or racial discrimination or hatred, or disrupting national unity;
- (5) propagating murder, obscenity or pornography or instigating criminal activities (Shambaugh, 2007).¹⁵

Local officials in ideology-related departments dealing with education and the mass media are required to familiarize themselves with the bottom line even during their pre-career training. The central state has an overarching and sprawling propaganda system penetrating its officialdom which exercises its censorship responsibilities for all information released to the public media, checking whether any public discourse of Confucianism contravenes the bottom line.¹⁶

The central state’s coercive control of Confucian education (discourses and activities) is institutionally motivated. As head of the CCP organization and the state bureaucracy, central authorities still rely on the official ideology to mobilize the commitment and loyalty of the





rank and file of the administrative staff at all levels, and to shape consensus and unity for the CCP's organizational life. In addition, the institutional legacies of Marxism and Maoism give the official ideology an important presence in at least the organizational life of the party state that cannot be questioned or ignored. Thus the central authorities have a great stake in preserving the stability of the official ideology at least within the party. This also explains why official ideologies still feature prominently in the education of party members at various levels at party schools which aim at training the CCP's local cadres (Shambough, 2007).

In contrast with the guiding lines, the bottom line was seen as carefully and strictly followed by local educational authorities in my field trip. One of the reasons is the "double check" system of monitoring local educational authorities' management of the Confucian education. One of my interviewees in the educational bureau of B District, Shenzhen, remarked that their *guoxue* programme of Confucianism is subject to the check of two supervising organs, one being their higher-level educational authorities (in his case, the educational bureau in the prefectural educational bureau in Shenzhen) and the other the same-level propaganda department (the propaganda department in the B District, Shenzhen) (interview, Shenzhen, May 2011). Both of them will check whether their programme is in contradiction with the central state's bottom line, especially the propaganda department. In fact, one interviewee in the S District, Qingdao city, revealed that even their public activities related to *guoxue* (or Confucianism) are subject to the approval of the propaganda department (interview, Qingdao, April, 2011). For example, they need to obtain approval from the local propaganda development before they launch public lectures about Confucianism run by local community committees (*juweihui* 居委会), and courses on Confucianism for the elderly (*laonian xingquban* 老年兴趣班) (interview, Qingdao, April, 2011)¹⁷.

This system, in fact, can also partly explain why local educational authorities are loose in following the guiding lines but strict in the bottom line. In theory, officials in the higher-level educational bureau and the propaganda department need to assess the educational





programme, for example, to see whether it has followed the central state’s guiding line and bottom line. However, these officials sometimes may lack enough professional knowledge of Confucianism; more importantly, as long as the programme is not in contravention against the official bottom line, these officials will not lose anything even if there are some obvious contradictions in the programme with the guiding principles. In fact, they will not gain anything if the programme properly implements the guiding lines. Thus, they have few institutional motivations to check whether it has followed the guiding lines, and tend to believe local educational authorities’ explanations about whether and how their programmes apply the guiding lines. But the check of the bottom line is different. If the programme is found with anti-government content, these officials will have to take responsibilities, especially for propaganda officials. In a word, the current system only provides institutional motivations for checking the bottom line but few motivations for guiding lines.

During the field trip, I found that though the propaganda officials mostly rely on the self-censorship of lower educational authorities and principals, they do not lose their alert. They still insist on at least some kind of check. Educational officials in District B, Shenzhen, revealed that leaders from the propaganda department came to their bureau and inspected their work every year. This is because the propaganda officials understand the importance of the bottom line, and they know that they will have to shoulder responsibility for any serious ideological accident in their bailiwick. Thus, they usually keep a much closer eye on whether the programme follows the bottom line.

6. Conclusion

This paper examines the Chinese state’s engagement with the revival of Confucian education in China’s urban society since the new century. It contributes to a major debate of Chinese politics, whether the authoritarian Chinese state can effectively control an increasingly powerful and autonomous society. It is significant because, on the one hand, ideological control has become critical for political stability given





the recent economic slowdown and possible onset of social and political reforms in the near future; and on the other, Confucianism has undergone a revival among China's urban citizens. Together with Liberalism and Socialism, it has now become one of the most influential ideological currents in contemporary China.

While most existing literature either believes that the Chinese state has either dominated the Confucian revival or that it has little control over it at all, this paper shows that the state's control is far more sophisticated than "domination" or "non-interference". Based on field research, this paper argues that the central state uses a "two lines" strategy, namely, a guiding line and a bottom line to control the Confucian education. The state mainly provides two guiding lines for lower educational authorities to follow, replacing Confucianism with ambiguous "traditional culture" and integrating Confucian elements with the official ideology. It also sets a bottom line to avoid any challenge against the official ideology. But the two lines are not equally implemented by lower educational authorities. While the bottom line is firmly followed, the guiding line is carried out with varying degrees and approaches. Thus, the effect of the two policy lines on shaping the development of Confucian education is, therefore, different. The central state still retains strong power to avert contraventions against its official ideology but holds only some or limited control over the direction of the content of Confucian education. Such an effect is found to be closely related to the current political institution in which the central state does not finance local authorities but still retains power to dismiss local authorities who dare to trespass the bottom line.

Notes

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1. Y. Zhu, “‘Performance legitimacy’ and China’s political adaptation strategy”, *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, Vol. 16, No. 2, 2011, pp. 123-140; D. Zhao, “The mandate of heaven and performance legitimation in historical and contemporary China”, *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 53, No. 3, 2009, pp. 416-433. After three decades’ impressive growth, there have already been signs of an economic downturn since 2011 (B. Eichengreen *et al.*, “When fast-growing economies slow down: International evidence and implications for China”, *Asian Economic Papers*, MIT Press, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2012, pp. 42-87). In 2008 and 2012, over 70 per cent and 60 per cent of Chinese people claimed that “rising prices” (inflation) were a very big problem for China (Pew Global Center, “Growing concerns in China about inequality, corruption”, 2012, viewed in October 2012, available at: <http://www.pewglobal.org/2012/10/16/chapter-1-domestic-issues-and-national-problems/>). In fact, a recent study shows that the CCP has already anticipated slower economic growth and devised strategies to shore up its legitimacy from multiple ideological sources (“China’s state legitimacy can weather economic slowdown”, *Oxford Analytica Daily Brief*, 2012, viewed in October 2012, available at: <http://www.oxan.com/Analysis/DailyBrief/Samples/ChinaStateLegitimacy.aspx>).
 2. For a detailed description of the bottom-up educational movement, please refer to Sébastien Billioud and Joël Thoraval, “Jiaohua: The Confucian revival in China as an educative project”, *China Perspectives*, No. 4, 2007. Tianlong Yu, “The revival of Confucianism in Chinese schools: A historical-political review”, *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, Vol. 28, No. 2, June 2008.
 3. The author did not clearly state how or when this number was calculated.
 4. Besides the Confucian educators and Buddhists, many Chinese Catholic and Protestant churches also adapt the Confucian classics in their Sunday school moral lessons for children. The author would like to express her





- gratitude to one of the anonymous reviewers for pointing this out.
5. *Primordialism* is another commonly used paradigm in explaining rising political ideologies. In contrast to Instrumentalism, this approach stresses the role of society, rather than the state, in the emergence and production of political ideologies. For instance, scholars in this school, when explaining the origins of nationalism, postulate that it is the societal members' identification with their common ethnic ties and culture that has served as the base for modern nationalism (A. Smith, *Nationalism and modernism: A critical survey of recent theories of nations and nationalism*, Routledge, London, 1998; A. Smith, *Myths and memories of the nation*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
 6. Some literature about the Chinese state and society relations in the late Qing period argues that some societal groups have appropriated Confucian elements for their challenges against the imperial state (for details, see Chen, 2010). The author would like to express her thanks to one of the anonymous reviewers for suggesting the literature.
 7. The author would like to clarify that the two guiding lines do not mean that the central authorities have a clear attitude or policy over Confucianism. For example, the statue of Confucius that stood in front of the National Museum of China in Beijing was later removed in April 2011. The incident suggests that there should be internal debates or disagreements concerning the topics of Confucius and Confucianism within the central authorities. The author would like to express her thanks to one of the anonymous reviewers for pointing this out.
 8. Similar findings have already been noted by other scholars such as John Makeham in *Lost soul: "Confucianism" in contemporary Chinese academic discourse*, Harvard University Asia Center, 2008; Sébastien Billioud, "Confucianism, 'cultural tradition,' and official discourses at the start of the new century", *China Perspectives*, No. 3, 2007.
 9. Though "the classics" may have strong connotations of Confucianism, the documents never clearly denoted the classics as "Confucian" or Confucian-related. In practice, as my field trip has discovered, the public schools often include Confucianism, Daoism, and even Marxism and some Western classics such as Shakespeare's works in their "classics education".
 10. The research here only focuses on the educational activities in government-funded public schools as they are the main venues where the government policies are meant to be carried out.
 11. In fact, there are a few non-government funded private Confucian schools (*sishu* 私塾) in China, especially in the Pearl River Delta area. See





- Sébastien Billioud, "Jiaohua: The Confucian revival today as an educative project", 2007.
12. This document can be downloaded from http://bagxt.baoan.net.cn/wz_Show.asp?ArticleID=511
 13. Patriotism and the SCHD are two major components of the Socialist Core Value System, which the CCP claimed as "the essence of the Socialist ideology" in its 17th National Congress in 2007. The other components of the core value system are "Marxism", "Shared Ideal of Socialism with Chinese characteristics" (*Zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi gongtong lixiang* 中国特色社会主义共同理想), "the Zeitgeist of reform and innovation" (*gaige he kaifang de shidai jingshen* 改革和开放的时代精神). And interestingly, while Confucianism has actively been restructured and reshaped to be wedged into patriotism and the SCHD, no systematic efforts have been observed to connect Confucianism with the other components of the core value system. It may be because there are not many overlapping between Confucianism and the others.
 14. For introduction of their specific activities, please refer to http://www.hgedu.cn/CMS/CMS/zjg/dyk/lm3/2007-4-13_1176431894737.html
 15. The five rules are included in the "Provisional Rules for the Administration of Periodicals". For detailed discussion of the rules, see D. Shambaugh, "China's propaganda system: Institutions, processes and efficacy", *The China Journal*, Vol. 57, 2007.
 16. The Chinese propaganda system is mainly composed of two institutions: one is the Communist Party Propaganda system and the other is the state bureaucratic agencies concerning information control and propaganda like the General Administration of Press and Publications. In reality, as the party propaganda system usually leads the state functional agencies, the two can be viewed as merged. The central party propaganda department usually settles every detail of the newly developed party ideology, usually by party leaders. Local branches can only passively receive the edicts. Most of the CCPPD's work is concentrated on writing and disseminating official ideological propaganda information, see D. Shambaugh, "China's propaganda system: Institutions, processes and efficacy", *The China Journal*, Vol. 57, 2007.
 17. Although in most cases, they will get the permission without problems, they have to go through the procedures.



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