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hermosa@us.es

Universidad de Sevilla  
España

Chan, Kin-man

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# I. POLÍTICA, SOCIEDAD Y CULTURA

## Moral Crisis and Confucian Resurrection: *New Three-Word Classic* in China

## Crisis moral y resurrección del confucianismo: *nuevo Clásico de las Tres Palabras* en China

Kin-man Chan<sup>1</sup>

The Chinese University of Hong Kong (China)

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### Abstract

The transition from state socialism to market socialism in China since 1978 led to a sense of disorientation and moral crisis in the Chinese population which by the mid-1990s the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) attempted to correct. Specifically, the CCP Committee in the region of Guangdong responded by elaborating a new version of the teaching manual *Three-Word Classic* in order to meet the new social

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<sup>1</sup> (kmchancuhk@gmail.com). Kin-man Chan es Doctor en Sociología por la Universidad de Yale (Estados Unidos) y actualmente trabaja como Profesor Titular en el Dpto. de Sociología de la Universidad China de Hong Kong, donde ha fundado el *Centre for Civil Society Studies*. Hasta hace muy poco ha sido director del prestigioso *Universities Service Centre for China Studies*, cargo del que se ha visto obligado a dimitir debido a su activismo ciudadano a favor de la democracia.

Forma parte del Comité Científico de varias revistas académicas: *Journal of Civil Society* (US), *China Non-Profit Review* (Beijing) y *Third Sector Review* (Taiwan). Sus principales libros son *Stories and Theories of Democracy* (con Choy Chi Keung), *Contentious Views: Nine Debates that Changed Hong Kong* (con Ng Shu Yui), *One Country Two Systems* (con Tsui Sing Yan), *Trade Association and Social Capital* (con Qiu Haixiong), *Towards Civil Society* y *Civil Society Perspective: Towards Good Governance*.

El Prof. Chan es un activo luchador por la democracia y los derechos cívicos. En torno al año 2010 participó en las negociaciones del Partido Democrático con el gobierno central de China para impulsar un conjunto de reformas políticas en Hong Kong. Posteriormente, junto al Prof. Benny Tai y al Rev. Chu Yiu-ming creó el movimiento *Occupy Central with Love and Peace*, cuyas manifestaciones pacíficas a favor de la democracia en otoño de 2014, junto con varias organizaciones de estudiantes, merecieron los titulares de los principales medios internacionales como la “Revolución de los Paraguas”.

circumstances with a body of specific moral rules based on Confucian philosophy and aimed at the Chinese younger generations. The Party's chief goal was to rebuild the framework of moral behavior ousted by the rapid social changes of the 80s and 90s and which until the reform era was supplied by the official line of the CCP and the ideas nurtured during the Cultural Revolution. The *New Three-Word Classic* soon became widely popular in the country and allowed schools to teach their students a series of moral rules through the examples of historical figures and events which overall championed patriotism and diligence in learning but failed to address public spiritedness, essential in guiding emerging public life in China.

**Key-words:** China, moral crisis, public morality, civil society, moral education.

## Resumen

La transición del socialismo de estado al socialismo de mercado en China a partir de 1978 codujo a una sensación de desorientación y crisis moral en la población china que a mediados de la década de 1990 el Partido Comunista Chino (PCC) intentó corregir. Concretamente, el Comité del PCC de la región de Guangdong respondió elaborando una nueva versión del manual de enseñanza *Clásico de las Tres Palabras* para así responder a las nuevas circunstancias sociales con un conjunto de reglas morales específicas basadas en la filosofía de Confucio y dirigido a las generaciones chinas más jóvenes. El principal objetivo del Partido fue reconstruir el marco de comportamiento moral desbancado por los rápidos cambios sociales de los 80 y los 90 and que hasta la época de la reforma procedía de la línea oficial del PCC y las ideas surgidas durante la Revolución Cultural. El *Nuevo Clásico de las Tres Palabras* pronto se hizo enormemente popular en el país y permitió que las escuelas enseñaran a sus alumnos una serie de reglas morales a través de ejemplos de personajes y sucesos históricos que en su conjunto abogaban por el patriotismo y la diligencia en el aprendizaje, si bien no consiguió abordar la iniciativa pública, esencial para guiar la emergente vida pública en China.

**Palabras-clave:** China, crisis moral, moralidad pública, sociedad civil, educación moral.

## Introduction

This paper discusses how Confucianism was used by a regional branch of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to deal with the moral crisis arising from the transition of state socialism to market socialism in China since 1978. The

paper first analyzes the origin of this moral crisis and how the CCP Committee in Guangdong responded to this crisis by publishing the *New Three-Word Classic* in 1995. The publication adopted many Confucian ideals and aimed at providing a vivid moral guidance in a drastically changing environment. Finally, the paper critically assesses the effectiveness of Confucianism, when used by the state as an ideology, in resolving the moral problems of contemporary Chinese society.

The discussion is based on the findings from a sub-project of a study of Confucianism and modernity in Chinese societies (Cheung, Chan, Chan, King, Chiu & Chung 2006). The research was conducted in the summer of 1998 in Guangzhou. The major author of the book, officials in the Propaganda Department of the Guangzhou Party Committee and a number of parents were interviewed. Content of the book and news reports on the publication and related issues from 1995 to 1998 in a local newspaper *Yangcheng Wenbao* were analyzed. Selection of Guangdong as a site for case study has a significant implication to China not because of its typicality, but because the region is the frontier of economic reform. The socio-economic restructuring in this region might shed lights on the future of China.

## **Moral Crisis and Its Roots**

The sense of moral crisis in China emerged simultaneously with the introduction of economic reforms in late 1970s. In 1980, a letter, “The Path of Life is Getting Narrower”, sent by a young female worker to *China’s Youth* aroused enormous attention from the public. The letter expressed the worker’s deep sense of confusion after witnessing the huge discrepancy between the Party’s indoctrination and social reality. In response to her question about the meaning of life after disillusionment from the Cultural Revolution, more than 40,000 letters, including one from the CCP chief ideologist, were sent to the magazine to discuss the issue.

The moral crisis at this stage can be described as a form of disillusionment with socialism and legitimacy crisis of the CCP. Studies showed that many people questioned the validity of Marxism and adopted a pragmatic attitude toward the joining of the CCP (Rosen 1990:295). Young people regarded party membership as a ticket to career development and only a tiny minority believed in the Communist ideals or the spirit of “serving the people”. This moral crisis was further aggravated by drastic opening of China to market economy and international trade. The promotion of pragmatism and materialism by the state (Pye 1986), the rampant corruption caused by the dual existence of market and planned economies (Chan 2000), the deterioration of public order due to rapid

urbanization, and the emergence of new social and economic activities without established norms and regulations, led to a state of confusion and uneasiness. In this later stage, the moral crisis can be understood as a form of “social disorganization” (Rubington & Winberg 1989), i.e. a state of normlessness, cultural conflict or breakdown of rules due to dramatic social change. Simply put, people feel that they lack lucid moral guidance to lead their lives in the reform era.

The extent of this moral crisis cannot be accurately assessed due to the political sensitivity of the issue. Large scale value surveys are usually restricted in China when openly asking people’s value orientations in matters related to public domain. Without systematic data of this kind, it is difficult to judge whether the alleged moral crisis is a full-blown one or it is confined to certain areas in certain dimension of morality. At least, our study of laidoff workers in Guangzhou (Chan & Qiu 1999) shows that there is a revival of family values in China in terms of assisting family members to cope with financial hardship, indicating that the crisis may be less serious in the private arena. Another survey in Guangzhou shows that people highly valued “marriage and family” but ranked “fulfilling social responsibilities” as the least important value (Chan 1996:281), indicating that the crisis may be more pressing in the public arena.

The decay of public morality in contemporary China, in terms of growth of self-absorbed behaviors due to the loss of trust and respect for people and institutions beyond families, is the outcome of devastating cultural conflicts and institutional arrangements. The former refers to the promotion of Maoist extreme rituals of struggle (especially during the Cultural Revolution) that destroyed the synthesis of Confucianism with Marxism. The complete exclusion of personal and familial interests led to the glorification of strident dogmatism. The brutality of power struggle further revealed the hypocrisy of the supporters of the new socialist morality. The result was an explosion of pure moral zeal that ironically led to the demoralization of the society and the degradation of the moral character of some community leaders. Many in the population were left without any firm set of principles to believe in or structured rituals which may help them bring order to their lives (Madsan, 1984:23-25, 261-262; Whyte & Parish, 1984:324-325).

Chu and Ju (1993:283) also found that the Cultural Revolution is a unique factor in causing the decay of social trust when friends and family members betrayed each other. They also believe that the full-scale assault on the traditional Chinese values not only demoralized the generation in Mao’s era, but also disrupted the basic socialization process of the next generation: “Growing up in such a cultural vacuum, where traditional values no longer prevail and new values have yet to be established, may do more damage to young Chinese than the impact of value denunciation their parents had to endure... They have

no roots in traditional Chinese culture. They came of age at a time of anomic confusion, and therefore exhibit more skepticism and awareness of the evil in human nature" (1993:300).

Today, this generation faces a new episode of cultural conflict, as contradictory principles are promoted in "market socialism". On the one hand, "developing production force" is proclaimed by the state as the primary national objective, getting rich is glorious, and market force is praised. When this market principle is pushed to the extreme, collective interest can be understood as the sum of individual happiness. On the other hand, the state still promotes socialist morality in terms of frugality, equality, serving the people, and sacrifice of individual interest for the sake of the collectivity. The tension of these moral principles has never been systematically dealt with as open and critical debates on the official ideology are discouraged, if not banned. At the same time, the state mechanically swaps from one principle to another catering for different political needs. In order to achieve economic growth, officials may adopt a pragmatic language encouraging consumerism and individual gratifications; when dealing with national security issue, the state may emphasize collectivity and harmony, and attack the individualistic tendency in Western capitalist and liberal-democratic societies. While the official ideology is self-contradictory and the society lacks a public sphere for constituting a social value system of its own, people lack a vivid moral framework in coping with the predicaments during the reform era.

The second origin of the problem lies at the institutional level. One of the most significant motivations for being responsible is the need "to belong somewhere". If a person becomes a member of a community, and if this community is vital to one's survival and/or well-being, one will be prompted to act in a way so that the consequences of one's acts will not be harmful to the community, and one will accept the fact of one's responsibility to this community (Hankiss, 1990). Erikson's study also shows that the loss of community might lead to "a sense of cultural disorientation, a feeling of powerlessness, a dulled apathy and a generalized fear about the condition of the universe"(1976:258). To him, in the long run, morality is a form of community participation. Putnam (1993), in his landmarked study of civic communities in Italy, also argues that effective civic organizations are vital to the formation of "norms of reciprocity" and social trust among strangers. Without these organizations, people tend to free-ride and make transactions more costly in the arena beyond families.

In China, the destruction of the nascent civil society of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Strand 1990) by the CCP after 1949, unintentionally demoralized the people by depriving the community of participation. Natural communities and autonomous social organizations were replaced by the state-controlled rural collectives and the urban *danwei* system, particularly state or collective

enterprises providing employment and welfare protections to the workers. Public spaces, like the free press and teahouses where political discussion had been held freely in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, were abandoned. This public sphere is crucial in creating a “socially constitutive” value system and expressing the encompassing collective identity of any given society (Frientzel-Zagorska, 1990). Without this value system and collective identity, people either have to rely on an official moral framework or a private idiosyncratic understanding of reality. A “dual culture” then emerges: an official culture filled with bright euphemisms, silences, and platitudes such as those Havel describes, “a world of appearance, a mere ritual, a formalized language deprived of semantic contact with reality” (1985:32) and an unofficial culture that had its own knowledge of social problems. Bennett (1979) argues that when people face such dual realities, they are tempted to make one of two dissatisfying concessions to come to terms with the political world: either private understandings must be sacrificed for arbitrary public understandings, or public understandings must be rejected in favor of idiosyncratic interpretations. The former solution, to cope with a world that is not one’s own making, generally results in *alienation*, while the latter strategy very likely generates the problem of *anomie* (1979:130).

In Mao’s era, especially during the Cultural Revolution, people suffered from alienation, as they were repeatedly mobilized to participate in political struggles that otherwise they might not support. After a decade of ruthless crackdown on “class enemies” without clear definition, and the destruction of heritages without generating a more promising culture, what remained in society were fear and disillusion. By the end of the Cultural Revolution, many people felt fatigue of the state’s limited cultural repertoire and determined to stay away from the public arena. The liberalization during the reforms after 1978 then permitted thousands of communities and millions of families the physical and moral space in which to express and preserve memories not of the state’s design (Davis 1989:95). Retreat to the private world of the family became a common antidote to the alienated public world. This resurgence of family provided an institutional base for the reconstitution of private morality, i.e. norms and values dictating personal and family relationships. The reconstitution of public morality, however, faces more obstacles when dealing with people and organizations beyond personal networks and families. People normally lack a genuine community where to develop trust and a socially constitutive value system as guidance. Instead, very often they resort to an individualistic self-absorbing approach that finally leads to a state of anomie. Thus, the root of demoralization, especially in the public arena, concerns both the cultural and institutional disorientation.



## Confucianism as a Solution?

The Chinese state is not unaware of the prevalent moral crisis during the reform era, though they may have their own interpretation and solution of the problem. One of the strategies was to promote “spiritual civilization” from time to time through campaigns and educational programs. While these campaigns aimed at raising moral standards of the people, the style remained orthodox and the substance lacked contemporary relevance. In a 1993 meeting on developing socialist spiritual civilization, the Propaganda Department of the Guangdong Party Committee proposed to publish a “New Three-Word Classic” (*Xin San Zi Jing*) as an innovative means to promote a new socialist morality in the era of market socialism. The book was finally published in Feb. 10, 1995.

A major contributor to the new book explained to the author of this paper that the publication aimed at providing moral guidance to Chinese people under the transition from a planned economy to a market economy, and from a closed society to an open society. Many problems emerged in this transition, as old rules broke down while new ones were yet to establish. He did not believe that the problems could be solved by appealing to “authority” or by shouting hollow slogans as in the past. He admitted that socialism and the CCP had lost their legitimacy. On the contrary, he believed that many traditional values were still relevant today and could provide people with a moral framework necessary to lead a virtuous life. He understood that people were disgusted by indoctrination and coercion, and so he believed only through “consent and internalization” could new moral values be promoted. In order to reconstitute social order, he thought they first had to cultivate the moral tissue of the people. However, he told me that he had no intention whatsoever to promote Confucianism, but since many traditional values were rooted in Confucianism, he inevitably became an advocate of Confucian values.

As a matter of fact, the old *Three-Word Classic* was a popular handy text for people in traditional China to learn Confucian teachings. At first, the editors of the *New Three-World Classic* even adopted an ultimate Confucian ideal – “self-cultivation, regulating the family, ordering the state and bringing peace to the world” – as the theme of the book. However, later they found that as their targeted readers were youngsters, the third and fourth objectives of the Confucian life were too difficult to reach. They later changed the theme of the book to “educating the young people to be a good child in family, a good student in school and a good citizen in society”. In a press release published in the April 29, 1995 issue of *Yangcheng Wenbao*, the theme was further elaborated: “to love your country, you should first love your family and your hometown; to love the people, you should first love your parents, relatives and neighbors; to love science, you should first study diligently; to love labor,



you should first help do housework and charity; to love socialism, you should first learn a socialist, civilized mode of behaviors". In a word, the *New Classic* attempted to transform those abstract moral objects such as country, people, labor and socialism into concrete entities and persons that one could develop a moral relationship with. They were also translating the political and public moral concern into private moral issues, which was not unlike the Confucian belief that what one did in the confines of one's private home was politically significant, or the passage in the Book of Documents: "Simply by being a good son and friendly to his brothers a man can exert influence upon government!" (Tu 1998:12) Our informant made a metaphor of "asking children to jump and pick fruits from the tree". They needed to jump up to a quite tall tree, which represents a challenge in moral development. But the tree should not be too tall to make the fruits unreachable; otherwise, any political ideals would be deemed too unreachable for the children today.

As the book was written by a group of liberal intellectuals with the auspice of the Guangdong Communist Party, it inevitably involved a complex process of negotiation and compromise. There were five consents reached during the elaboration of the book. The new manual should 1) promote traditional virtues and modern spirit at the same time; to emphasize patriotism and communist moral characters at the same time; 2) fit the psychological needs of the young generation and provide a hierarchy of moral challenges to these youngsters. 3) promote some model figures of China, traditional and modern, to provide a sensational configuration of moral standards. 4) promote moral education through history, science and cultural knowledge; and 5) attract readers by including pictures in the text. Our informant described the writing process as quite liberal, with no "cardinal principles" imposed from above. Though some high-ranking officials acted as gatekeepers, some of their opinions were rejected by the authors as well. Even the idea of "communist moral characters" was introduced to ensure the "political correctness" of the publication: it was understood in the editorial board as nothing but moral virtues.

Public response to the publication was overwhelming. More than 40 millions copies were sold (12 millions in Guangdong), mainly through the school system. Around 1 million copies were sold directly to the market through bookstores. Besides, instruction manuals and supplementary readings of the *New Classic* also circulated widely. A series of 30 talks explaining the *New Classic* were broadcast in radio; a music contest was held to create a melody for the text; and drama shows were staged to bring to life some stories found in the *New Classic*.

Our informant was impressed by the local response to one of the lectures he gave: "Around four thousand people came to listen to me. These parents sat quietly in an open space just to understand more about the *New Three-Word*

*Classic*. They were so attentive that not a single villager went to the bathroom. So far, I have given 109 lectures, and the responses from the people were like ‘hunger and thirst’. As I worked too hard, my throat was so uncomfortable that I finally needed to seek medical help. Some doctors and patients recognized me and earnestly let me jump the line to be treated”.

Although the Guangdong authorities had issued a memorandum to support the circulation of the book, the promotion, sales, discussions and other related contests went beyond the top-down mobilization. Some schools encouraged their students to memorize the text of the *New Classic* though it was not officially included in their curriculums. Publishers in other provinces requested to re-print the *New Classic* themselves, as the 15 printers in Guangdong could not print it fast enough to meet the demand. The book was later selected as the Best Book of the Year in China. Top leaders Li Nanqing and Zhou Jiahua met the representatives from the editorial board to discuss the possibility of promoting the book nationwide.

### **Dilemma in the *New Three-Word Classic***

Although the *New Classic* attempted to transform abstract moral ideas into concrete moral guidelines and from political-moral concerns into private moral codes, content analysis of the text found that the book focused more on the promotion of patriotism, sense of history, and modernization than private moral guidelines. The book contains 105 sections, each section includes four sentences and each sentence is made up of three words. Following the main text, background information and interpretations of some idioms, historical events and legends, were provided. Since the book has gone through several editions, this study uses the first edition as the basis of analysis. Table 1 reports the distribution of the sections according to the themes summarized and translated by the author of this paper. Table 2 reports the distribution of sections according to the division of public and private morality.

Table 1. Major Themes of the New Three-Word Classic

Theme*	Number of sections
Patriotism	28
Historical knowledge/sense	16
Importance of moral/family education	10
Modernization/reforms	9
Deference, obedience, observance of rules & norms	7
Beauty of motherland	6
Diligence in learning/work	6
Scientific spirit	5
Filial piety & family values	5
Benevolence	4
Serving the people	4
Honesty	3
Civic virtue	3
Friendship	3
Labor and physical fitness	2
Remonstrance	2
Frugality	1
Confucianism	1
Democracy	1

\* Each section can have more than one theme.

Table 2. Public versus Private Morality

Public Morality	Number of sections
Patriotism	28
Serving the people	4
Civic virtue	3
Remonstrance	2
Democracy	1
Private Morality	
Self-cultivation	
Diligence in learning/work	6
Honesty	3
Labor and physical fitness	2
Frugality	1
Interpersonal relationship	
Deference, obedience, observance of rules & norms	7
Benevolence	4
Friendship	3
Family values	
Importance of moral/family education	10
Filial piety & family values	5

## **Public Morality**

### **Patriotism**

Promotion of patriotism is a major theme of the *New Three-Word Classic*. Very often, it is expressed through the spirit of “sacrifice for the country” illustrated by historical figures and events. In section 49, the story of Su Wu is told: Su was a Chinese ambassador to Mongolia during the Han Dynasty, exiled by the Mongolians to a no-man’s-land after he refused to desert his own country. The story of Wen Tianxiang is presented in section 37 in appreciation of his loyalty to the country. He was a chief official in southern Sung who killed himself for refusing to surrender during a foreign invasion. Another famous icon of loyalty, Qu Yuan, appears in section 71. The Opium War of 1840-42 and the looting and burning of Yuan Ming Yuan by the British and French armies in 1860 are presented in section 55 and 56 as a national shame. In connection with it, Fan Zhongyan’s idea of “to be first in worrying about the country’s problems and last in enjoying its pleasures”, which appears in section 50, can also be interpreted as an attempt to promote concern and consciousness for national interest.

### **Civic virtue/serving the people**

In section 29, the book teaches the reader to abide by laws and have public morality, and in section 41, to take care of public goods. Section 44 promotes the idea of environmental protection. In section 31, Premier Zhou Enlai is introduced as a model leader who spent his whole life helping the poor and those in need. Section 32 pinpoints military general Zhu Da’s equalitarian style of leadership. Revolutionary cadre Jiao Yulu is praised in section 34, as he insisted in working for the people while he was suffering from the pains of liver cancer. Surprisingly, the model of dedicated service to the people, Lei Feng, appears briefly in section 33 without any supplementary explanation of the text. Lei is graphically presented as a kind young man helping an old lady cross the street. His revolutionary spirit and commitment to Mao and the CCP are not mentioned.

### **Remonstrance/democracy**

Unlike the popular interpretation of Confucian values as advocator of submission to authority, the *New Classic* understands the relationship between superior and subordinate roles as reciprocal. When a ruler in government and

parents in family make errors, ministers and children respectively should correct them. In section 12 it is stated: “When parents commit error, you should correct (*jian*) them with sincere attitude and soft language”. The “human mirror”, Wei Zheng, is praised in section 50, as Wei was a minister in the Tang Dynasty who dared to annoy the emperor by initiating more than 200 attempts of remonstrance. There is no direct discussion of democracy in the book and only when the book praises the founder of the republic Sun Yat-sen in section 60, he is named as the pioneer in advocating democracy and overthrowing the empire.

### ***Private Morality***

#### **Self-cultivation (diligence, honesty, physical health, frugality)**

The story of Su Qin, who stabbed himself in order to keep awake and keep studying at night, appears in section 19. In section 25, an old lady showed the importance of endurance to the young poet Li Bai by making a needle from a huge medal bar. Section 26 tells us of poor kids who, though lacking candles, collected light-buds or relied on reflection of moonbeams on snow to light up their rooms for study at night. Section 40 and 41 warn that crimes and vices are originated from greed, and an honest official in Han Dynasty is praised for persistently refusing bribes from others. Historian Si Maqian is praised in section 72 for his honesty in recording history. In his book, he did not conceal the emperor’s vices nor did he flatter the people in power. In section 42 it is concluded that frugality is the key to success, and conspicuous consumption the path to a country’s or family’s ruin.

#### **Interpersonal relationship (deference, benevolence, friendship)**

The most famous story of deference tells us in section 8 of Kong Rong picking the smallest pear to let his elder brothers have the larger ones. Phrases such as “China is a country respecting rites (*li yi*)”, “respect your teachers, respect the seniors”, “abide by laws in society and follow the rules in school” are repeatedly stated in sections 6, 23, 29, 43, 44 and 46. The famous Confucius’s golden rules are documented in section 38: “If you don’t think it is good, don’t do it unto others”, and “if you desire to achieve something, you should also let others to achieve it too”. The legend of Si Maguang saving a kid who was drowning is praised as an act of benevolence and bravery in section 39. In section 73, Di Pu is named “sage of poem”, as his poems are full of empathy with human sufferings. Concerning friendship, sections 35 and 36 use the

relationship between Guan and Bao as an example to illustrate that sincerity and humbleness are basic principles of friendship. One should be lenient to others but austere to oneself. One should also be picky in choosing friends and be trustful (*dao yi*) to others. The following rule by Confucius is quoted in section 37: “Whenever a few persons walk together, there comes my teacher. When I see a virtuous person, I think about learning from him”.

### **Family values (family education, filial piety)**

In the first few sections, the *New Classic* declares that human nature is like an unpolished jade, that human feelings (*qing*) and man’s ontologically ultimate nature (*xing*) can be shaped by moral education (see also Metzger 1977:31). Moral education is most important among other kinds of education, while responsibility for moral teaching rests upon the parents. The famous stories of Meng Ke’s mother, who moved three times to find a decent neighborhood for him and cut a cloth under knitting to show the importance of endurance, appears in section 3. Section 4 records another famous story, that of Yue Fei’s mother, who tattooed “loyalty to country” in his back before he went to battlefield. In this story, private morality (filial piety) and public morality (loyalty) are united. The model of filial piety, Huang Xiang of the Han Dynasty, is promoted in section 7 for her thoughtfulness in warming her father’s bed before letting his father sleep in winter. To be practical, readers of the *New Classic* are encouraged in section 13 to share household chores as a way to show their love to their families. Finally, the motto “My family loves me and I love my family. Extending the same feeling, I love my country” appears in section 14 as a typical Confucian way of constituting public morality through family values.

Summing up, there are several characteristics of the *New Three-Word Classic*:

1) It promotes Confucianism. The book adopted many traditional Chinese stories and proverbs that were used in the past as an expression of Confucian values. Confucius and Mencius were introduced in section 68 as founders of Confucianism. Confucianism was depicted as a school which emphasizes education and promotes benevolence (*ren*) and righteousness (*yi*). This was exactly the theme of the *New Classic*.

2) It avoids socialist ideology. Not a single section mentioned socialism or communism. Mao was introduced in section 62 and 63 no more than as a historical figure who led the 1949 revolution and the war against Japan. Former

President Liu Shao-qi was promoted in section 30 not because of his political belief, but of his moral virtues. Lei Feng, the icon of socialist morality, who ignored personal and familial interests and sacrifice himself for the well-being of the collectivity, was only briefly introduced without further elaboration of his political commitment.

3) It poses a dilemma. The original goal of the book was to provide practical moral guidelines to young people by avoiding high-sounding, orthodox ideals. While the book did avoid socialist morality and reiterated the importance of self-cultivation, proper interpersonal relationship, and family values, promotion of patriotism still took up a major portion of the book. This could be an outcome of political compromise between the writers and the party officials, as nationalism was an ideology accepted by both socialists and liberals in modern China. As a result, careful readers would find an unbridgeable gap between this nationalistic sentiment and private moral concerns. It is unclear how this heavy dose of patriotism can make one a virtuous person particularly when there is rampant corruption in the state. Can political leaders serve as moral authority to the people as prescribed by the Confucian ideal? Today, is it patriotic or virtuous to cooperate with other citizens in fighting against corruption or pollution? Should they trust strangers when there is a large influx of migrants from villages to cities who have become second class citizens and a potential threat to law and order? Presumably in order to avoid political troubles, only a few sections of the book were devoted to civic virtues concerning proper behavior (like environmental protection) in the public arena between family and state. As shown in Table 2, more sections of the book are devoted to nurturing readers' patriotism or family loyalty. This is consistent with the dominant Confucian tradition that "the conceptual continuum moves directly from family to state, without any infrastructure in-between, and even the state is thought of, in ritual terms, as the family writ large" (De Bary 1998: 37). But this created a problem in the public life of the Chinese people when their devotion was absorbed completely by family obligations. In rectifying this family-absorbing tendency, extreme actions were taken during the Cultural Revolution to eradicate personal and familial interest. The tragic result of this turbulence ironically led to further demoralization in the society. How to reconstitute personal morality and find a new cultural base for public morality in the contemporary context is a pressing issue in China today not duly resolved by the publication of the *New Classic*.



## Conclusion

The publication of the *New Three-Word Classic* reflected that CCP had recognized a moral crisis in Chinese society, which led the Party branch in Guangdong (the region considered the frontier of reform) to encourage the adoption of Confucianism as a value system in order to rebuild the social moral tissue. Although brief (probably due to the implied challenge to the official ideology it posed), the experiment revealed the existence of a moral vacuum and the potential for resurrecting traditional Chinese values.

The logic of Confucian thinking is first develop personal virtues through fulfilling family obligations and then elevate this loyalty from family to the country. The publication of the *New Classic*, however, represented a political compromise between the concerned intellectuals and the party by putting priority on patriotism over private morality as shown in the number of sections devoted to teaching patriotism. It is not clear how the emphasis on patriotism can be instrumental in nurturing personal virtues or whether it is a solution to the moral questions in people's mind.

Many studies have shown that there is a revival of family values in China after the reform, and even parents who live apart from their married children still tend to maintain very close contact. Multifaceted interdependence between households of parents and married children can be easily found in terms of interchange of gifts and money (Unger, 1993:26), and in times of need, lay-off workers can still seek support from their family members (Chan & Qiu 1999). In this regard, private morality has been reconstituted in tandem with the retreat of the state from society. On the contrary, people have a strong feeling of moral decay in the public domain. Public disorder caused by massive migration of rural population to the cities, pollution and toxic food produced by big companies, rampant corruption and abuse of power, fierce competition for educational, housing and medical resources have made people feel more insecure than ever. Parents are confused about the moral principles they should teach their children when dealing with people beyond their immediate circle. Should they offer help to strangers when the society is full of traps? Should they defer to others when opportunities are so limited? Is it wise to challenge an unjust situation? There is a feeling of uneasiness among the parents, so that, on the one hand, they are worried that the new generation has become more individualistic and materialistic; on the other hand, in order to protect their children from running into trouble in this corrupt society, they are hesitant to socialize their children into principled persons with mindfulness, courtesy, sense of justice and other civic virtues. After all, these parents are from the "lost generation" of the Cultural Revolution who were demoralized by political struggles. In view of this, neither the heavy dose of patriotism in the New Classic nor the traditional

Confucian teaching of private morality can help resolve this moral dilemma. Deep-rooted insecurity in public life must be addressed in order to rebuild the moral tissue in society.

This brings us back to the debate on “good society”. Bellah et al (1991) maintain that it is not purely a matter of “habits of the heart” such as individualism that causes so many problems in contemporary society. There is an institutional dimension of moral issue. Simply put, it is difficult to be a good person in the absence of a good society. In the case of China, the sense of insecurity is caused by the loss of community when people are liberated from state-controlled work units but not allowed to associate with each other through autonomous social organizations (Chan 2013). Social capital in terms of norm of reciprocity and trust is rich in social networks among friends and relatives but shallow in the community.

Apparently, Chinese today still value Confucian teachings such as filial piety, diligence and honesty, but they are inadequate to respond to their major concerns on public morality. The Confucian “leap of loyalty” from family to state undermines the development of public spiritedness and consequently an autonomous social sphere essential to nurture public morality through civic participation. If the “public” can be understood as a realm between state and society, it needs efforts both from state as well as from society to reconstitute public morality. Civil society or community is an institutional arrangement urgently needed in China for people to formulate a socially constitutive value system, to establish trust and to defend society against a corrupt state. Confucianism is either too family-oriented or too state-centered, so that it cannot provide a solid cultural foundation for establishing a vibrant civil society between families and state. To save China from moral predicament, further opening of the ideological arena is urgently in need.

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