

Article

## State Ideology and Propaganda with Chinese Characteristics: The Hidden Struggle between Confucianism and Marxism in Contemporary China<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This article discusses a new definition of “Chinese characteristics” in recent propaganda works in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The definition associates the expression with ancient Chinese civilization and traditional Chinese thought. As the new definition is gaining currency in state propaganda, some scholars interpret it as a signal that the Chinese Communist Party is ready for reconciliation with Confucianism or an experiment to replace, at least partially, Marxism with Confucianism as the state ideology. Some Confucian scholars thus try to formulate an account of Confucianism that could negotiate power with Marxism. This phenomenon shows that the practice of state ideology and propaganda in the PRC sometimes does not aim to shape people’s beliefs or value systems. Instead, it aims to channel the intellectual efforts of the educated toward memorizing the official interpretations of the *settled* state ideology or decoding *new* propaganda messages. The function of new propaganda messages resembles “calls for papers”: they invite academics to participate in building theoretical grounds for new formulations (such as mottos or slogans) or making policy suggestions that resonate with the formulations.

**Keywords:** Confucianism, Marxism, Chinese propaganda, state ideology

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Despite its frequent appearance, the meaning of the expression “Chinese characteristics” (*Zhongguo tese* 中國特色) remains largely unexplored. Although most Chinese official or authoritative encyclopedias and dictionaries contain an entry on “socialism with Chinese characteristics” (*Zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi* 中國特色社會主義), almost none of them have an entry on “Chinese characteristics.”<sup>2</sup> It thus remains unclear how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officially interprets the meaning of this expression. Like many loaded political expressions, “Chinese characteristics” is associated with various connotations. Rather than clarifying the exact meaning of the expression, this article focuses on an emerging definition associated with traditional Chinese culture. First, I describe why the new definition is gaining currency. Then, I consider the reactions of some Confucian scholars that have led to tensions between Confucianism and Marxism. This discussion sheds light on the continuity of ancient traditions in China’s contemporary practices of state ideology and propaganda. A key function of a “settled” state ideology—meaning, that it has already been written into the Party Charter (*dangzhang* 黨章) and installed in education—is not necessarily to indoctrinate the people a belief and value system. Instead, such ideology is intended to channel the intellectual efforts of young people (such as high school and university students) toward memorizing and rationalizing the ideology presented as a system of complex codes. This strategy resembles the function of classicism (*jingxue* 經學) in the imperial examination (*keju* 科舉) in ancient China. When a new line of ideology begins to take shape, its components, such as recently proposed formulations, emerge in propaganda writings and speeches.<sup>3</sup> This type of propaganda carry the function of a call for paper or call for policy suggestions: it is an invitation for academics to elaborate on the new formulations or to provide policy suggestions that resonate with certain new lines of propaganda.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Many encyclopedias and dictionaries have entries on “socialism with Chinese characteristics” but not on “Chinese characteristics.” See, for example, *Zhexue da cidian* 哲學大辭典 (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe 上海辭書出版社, 2010), 126; *Xiandai Hanyu cidian* 現代漢語詞典 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan 商務印書館, 2016), 1695.

<sup>3</sup> For an in-depth discussion on China’s political formal discourse, see Michael Schoenhals, *Doing Things with Words in Chinese Politics: Five Studies* (Berkeley: University of California, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> For a lengthier discussion on the function of “calls for papers,” see Ting-mien Lee, “Rethinking Chinese Propaganda: The Continuity of the Ancient Art of Governance,” presented at the workshop *Imaginary Worlds and Imperial Power: The Case of China*, Institute of Philosophy, Czech Academic of Sciences, December 19, 2022.

### New “Chinese Characteristics” and New Confucianism

Since the 1980s, the expression “Chinese characteristics” has frequently been used in state propaganda as part of the formulation “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” This formulation was explicitly put forward by Deng Xiaoping 鄧小平 (1904–1997) in his opening speech to the 12th Party Congress to refer to the reform and opening-up policies.<sup>5</sup> The slogan signaled the CCP’s adoption of capitalism and market economics without entirely giving up its ideological commitment to Marxism, Maoism, and socialism. Since then, this phrase has been widely used in the propaganda works of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). “Socialism with Chinese characteristics” suggested that given China’s socioeconomic circumstances at the time, the party had to pragmatically adopt certain policies that did not cohere with its previous official ideology. In this regard, one could say that the phrase “Chinese characteristics” refers vaguely to China’s socioeconomic circumstances. What was left unsaid, however, was that Marxism, Maoism, and planned economy were sidelined to give way to capitalism and market economy to encourage the country’s economic growth. In this context, the expression “Chinese characteristics” had little semantic content. Instead, its main function was to euphemistically explain why Marxism and Maoism were not followed and, more importantly, to ease the tension between Deng’s policies and the party’s original ideological commitments. By employing the expression “Chinese characteristics” in this manner, the political authorities did not necessarily intend to indicate any features that would describe the PRC or China as a country with an ancient civilization.<sup>6</sup>

However, the situation has changed in the last two decades. The widely known driving force behind this change has been China’s enormous economic growth, which proves that the approach of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” has been successful. As a result, the CCP no longer needs to resort to “Chinese characteristics,” an expression that vaguely refers to China’s special socioeconomic circumstances, to support its decision to adopt a market economy. In this situation, a new meaning emerged: there are indeed certain Chinese characteristics that have substantially contributed to the success of Chinese socialism. The consequent assumption is that “Chinese characteristics” refer to some elements of Chinese traditional culture that have contributed to China’s economic success in the past and can probably

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<sup>5</sup> “Deng Xiaoping yu Zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi” 鄧小平與中國特色社會主義 [Deng Xiaoping and socialism with Chinese characteristics] (accessed November 29, 2022), <<http://politics.people.com.cn/BIG5/n1/2021/0727/c1001-32172039.html>>.

<sup>6</sup> However, I am not suggesting that the expression “Chinese characteristics” is not used by Chinese speakers to refer to the characteristics that are unique to the CCT, the PRC, or China.

also contribute to China's success in other areas of domestic and international matters. Therefore, what was originally an "empty" phrase has come to refer to thoughts and practices rooted in ancient Chinese civilization. Concomitantly, the changing meaning of "Chinese characteristics" increasingly enjoys more attention than "Socialism" in the PRC propaganda messages.<sup>7</sup>

This new understanding and definition of "Chinese characteristics" has become more and more explicit during Xi Jinping's 習近平 reign. Many of his speeches associate "Chinese characteristics" with ancient Chinese civilization. In March 2021, for example, Xi paid a visit to Zhu Xi Garden (Zhu Xi *yuan* 朱熹園) and said the following:

When I went to Shandong for an inspection visit, I paid a visit to the Confucius Mansion and the Confucius Temple; when I was in the Wuyi Mountains, I paid a visit to the Zhu Xi [Garden]. [...] Without the five thousand years of civilization, would there be Chinese characteristics? Without Chinese characteristics, would we possibly have the success of the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics?<sup>8</sup>

It is clear that "Chinese characteristics" in Xi's statements refer to ancient Chinese civilization, which, according to him, laid the foundation for the success of "socialism with Chinese characteristics."

The new meaning of "Chinese characteristics" has often been invoked in Xi Jinping's speeches, official documents, and state-owned media reports during his reign. This new definition also began to appear frequently in academic discourse in various research fields, such as "management with Chinese characteristics" in business studies and "international relations theory with Chinese characteristics" in international relations.<sup>9</sup> It could be

<sup>7</sup> Kelvin Chi-Kin Cheung, "Away from Socialism, towards Chinese Characteristics: Confucianism and the Futures of Chinese Nationalism," in *China Information*, 26:2 (2012), 205–218.

<sup>8</sup> "Xi Jinping de wenhua qinghuai: women yao tebie zhongshi wajue Zhonghua wuqian nian wenming 57hiji de jinghua" 習近平的文化情懷: "我們要特別重視挖掘中華五千年文明中的精華" (accessed on August 8, 2022), <<http://www.scjc.gov.cn/scjc/zhyw01/2022/7/4/b071708eaf0440aebbfab192544852a8.shtml>>.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Yunzhou Du 杜運周 and Ning Sun 孫寧, "Jiangou Zhongguo tese de guanlixue lilun tixi: biyaoxing, kexingxing yu silu" 建構中國特色的管理學理論體系: 必要性、可行性與思路 [Constructing management theory with Chinese characteristics: necessity, feasibility, and thoughts], in *Chinese Journal of Management*, 19:6 (2022), 811–872; Song Qiu 邱松, "Xinshidai Zhongguo tese daguo waijiao de lilun yu 57 hijian yiyi: jian lun guoji guanxi lilun zhongguoxuepai de jiangou" 新時代中國特色大國外交的理論與實踐意義: 兼論國際關係理論中國學派的建構 [Theory and practice of big countries' international relations with Chinese

argued that “Chinese characteristics” imply that ancient Chinese culture or thought remains alive in or is still relevant to China today.

The increasing popularity of the new meaning of “Chinese characteristics” also changed the status of Confucianism. Although Confucianism used to be marginalized to some degree, it has come to be regarded as the icon of Chinese civilization. Under this new line of propaganda, more and more scholars from the social and political sciences have begun to employ Confucianism to address contemporary issues.<sup>10</sup> Some scholars have also seized the opportunity to use Confucianism to theorize about the CCP’s legitimacy and state policy. According to this trend, some scholars from the humanities have also expressed their visions about the country’s future and have promoted national studies (*guozue* 國學) and classicism (*jingxue* 經學) to further their influence in sociopolitical discourse.<sup>11</sup> The most notable iteration of this trend is “Contemporary Mainland New Confucianism” (*dangdai dalu xin rujia* 當代大陸新儒家), whose most recent generation is called “Kangism” (Kang Youwei *zhuyi* 康有為主義).<sup>12</sup>

One well-known controversy around Kangism involves the debate dubbed “Mainland vs. Hong Kong/Taiwan New Confucianism Controversy.”<sup>13</sup> The debate is often viewed as a bitter quarrel between

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characteristics in the new era: on the construction of Chinese School of International Relations], in *Xin Shiye*, 3 (2019), 81–87.

<sup>10</sup> Scholars proactively participate in the discussions on Confucian theory concerning the world order and the community with a shared future for mankind. See, for example, Gaozheng Zhu 朱高正, “Ruxue dui Zhongguo xiandaihua yu chongjian guoji zhixu de yiyi” 儒學對中國現代化與重建國際秩序的意義 [The relevance of Confucianism to China’s modernization and reconstruction of international order], in *Philosophical Analysis*, 3:6 (2012), 137–149; Yuxia Xu 徐瑜霞, “Renlei mingyun gongtongti de rujiazhexue jichu tanxi” 人類命運共同體的儒家哲學基礎探析 [On the Confucian philosophical foundation for “the community with a shared future for mankind”], in *Qi Lu Journal*, 4 (2022), 70–81. Attempts are also made in English language academia; see, for example, Tongdong Bai, *Against Political Equality: The Confucian Case* (Princeton: University Press, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> For detailed discussions on related topics, see Jinsong Sun 孫勁松, “Guoxue xueke jianshe mianlin de jige wenti” 國學學科建設面臨的幾個問題 [Some problems facing the construction of the discipline of national learning], in *Guoxue xuekan* 國學學刊 4 (2010), 10–15; Arif Dirlik, “Guoxue/National Learning in the Age of Global Modernity,” in *China Perspectives*, 1 (2011), 4–13; Ming Fang 方銘, “Guanyu guoxue ji guoxue yiji xueke sheli de yixie wenti” 關於國學及國學一級學科設立的一些問題 [A few problems with the establishment of national learning as a first-level discipline] (accessed August 16, 2022), <<http://www.guoxue.com/?p=3188>>; Ting Shen 沈庭, “Sheli ‘guo xue’ yiji xueke shi dangwuzhiji” 設立“國學”一級學科是當務之急 [It is urgent to establish “national learning” as a first-level discipline], in *Guangming ribao* 光明日報 (accessed August 18, 2022), <[http://www.wenming.cn/wmzh\\_pd/ws/gx/zxdt\\_9879/201507/t20150713\\_2726833.shtml](http://www.wenming.cn/wmzh_pd/ws/gx/zxdt_9879/201507/t20150713_2726833.shtml)>.

<sup>12</sup> For a brief overview of Kangism, see Ting-mien Lee, “A Preliminary Overview of Kang Youwei Studies in China Today,” in *Oriens Extremus*, 58 (2021), 175–190.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Zhaoguang Ge 葛兆光, “Yixiang tiankai: jinnianlai dalu xinruxue de zhengzhi suqiu” 異想天開：近年來大陸新儒學的政治訴求 [Asking for the moon: the political

Confucians based in Mainland China and those in Hong Kong and Taiwan. As the Kangists also published a book with the highly controversial title *China Must Be Re-Confucianized* (*Zhongguo bixu zai ruhua* 中國必須再儒化), Contemporary Mainland New Confucianism, or Kangism, is often (mis)understood as mainly a nationalistic movement of cultural chauvinism stemming from China's economic rise.<sup>14</sup> It is also (mis)understood as a self-proclaimed correct interpretation of Confucianism that aims to compete with the interpretations held by Confucian scholars who endorse Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism. However, as the Kangists and their Mainland observers have said on many occasions, their target interlocutors are leftists (*zuopai* 左派) or scholars of Marxism in Mainland China rather than other Confucian scholars.<sup>15</sup>

To better grasp the nature of this Confucian movement, one must consider the process described above—that is, how the phrase “Chinese characteristics” in the expression “socialism with Chinese characteristics” gradually became an ideological component equal in importance to socialism.<sup>16</sup> This process eventually resulted in a power struggle between Marxism and ancient Chinese thought, especially Confucianism. Born in the context of an official emphasis on “Chineseness,” Contemporary Mainland New Confucianism is not mainly intended to offer academics an alternative interpretation of Confucianism. It is more of an attempt to negotiate power with Marxist ideology; Marxism can be Sinicized, but it cannot be Chinese after all. Mainland New Confucians are, or once were, convinced that they could bring Marxism to the bargaining table or even replace Marxism as the state ideology because of the widespread expectation that Confucianism has

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appeal of Mainland New Confucianism in recent years], speech delivered in 2017 (accessed July 18, 2022), <<https://www.aisixiang.com/data/104951.html>>. For an English translation, see Ownby, David, “Ge Zhaoguang, ‘If Horses Had Wings’” (accessed on September 9, 2022), <<https://www.readingthechinadream.com/ge-zhaoguang-if-horses-had-wings.html>>; Stephen C. Angle, “The Adolescence of Mainland New Confucianism,” in *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 49:2 (2018), 83–99.

<sup>14</sup> Yun Ji 紀贇, “Xin rujia yu wenhua shawen zhuyi” 新儒家與文化沙文主義 [New Confucianism and cultural chauvinism] (accessed on August 15, 2022), <<https://www.rujiazg.com/article/11689>>.

<sup>15</sup> Ming Chen 陳明, “Chaoyue Mou Zongsan, huidao Kang Youwei: zai xinde lishi zhexue zhong lijie rujia de fazhan” 超越牟宗三、回到康有為：在新的歷史哲學中理解儒家的發展 [Transcend Mou Zongsan, return to Kang Youwei: understanding the evolution of Confucian studies in the new context of history and philosophy], in *Tianfu xinlun*, 2 (2016), 16–26; Xu Zhang 張旭, “Dalu xinrujia yu Kang Youwei zhuyi de xingqi” 大陸新儒家與新康有為主義的興起 [The emergence of Mainland New Confucianism and Neo-Kangism], in *Wenhua zongheng*, 6 (2017), 98–107.

<sup>16</sup> As Cheung showed, the phrase “Chinese characteristics” has been frequently invoked as its own term rather than being used to describe “socialism.” See Cheung, “Away from Socialism, towards Chinese Characteristics.”



gained leverage because of the increasing relevance of “Chinese characteristics” over “socialism” in many propaganda messages.

In addition to defining “Chinese characteristics” in terms of China’s ancient civilization, Xi Jinping also proposed the new motto “confidence in our culture” (*wenhua zixin* 文化自信) and affirmed its importance by adding it to Hu Jintao’s theory of “Three Confidences” (*sange zixin* 三個自信) in 2016. The theory of “Four Confidences” (*sige zixin* 四個自信)—confidence in our path (*daolu zixin* 道路自信), confidence in our system (*zhidu zixin* 制度自信), confidence in our theory (*lilun zixin* 理論自信), and confidence in our culture—was officially established by including it in amendments to the Party Charter at the 19th National Congress held in 2017.<sup>17</sup>

Bearing in mind that “confidence in our theory” refers to Marxist theory and “confidence in our culture” refers to traditional Chinese culture, we can see why some academics have come to believe that Confucianism can enjoy equal status with, or even higher status than, Marxism. Because “confidence in our culture” is the signature doctrine of Xi Jinping’s thought, popular speculation holds that the four confidences are not of equal significance. According to this line of thought, in Xi’s theory, “confidence in our culture” is the basis of the other three confidences, as Xi Jinping stated that without China’s ancient civilization, the country’s successful path would not have been possible. In other words, the CCP’s socioeconomic policies (confidence in our path), political system (confidence in our system), and Marxist ideology (confidence in our theory) were conceived and constructed based on traditional Chinese culture. Moreover, Xi Jinping frequently emphasizes that contemporary Chinese scholars ought to promote the excellent elements of Chinese traditional culture (*Zhonghua chuantong youxiu wenhua* 中華傳統優秀文化) and use them to carry out the mission of the “Sinicization of Marxism” (*Makesi zhuyi Zhongguo hua* 馬克思主義中國化). These developments have prompted some intellectuals to wonder whether Xi Jinping and/or the party favors traditional Chinese thought over Marxism. Against this backdrop, during the 2010s, the controversial Mainland New Confucianism, or Kangism, emerged and thrived.

### From Red Confucianism to Classicism Confucianism

As mentioned earlier, with the success of “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” the concepts of socialism and Chinese characteristics gradually became equally important elements in state propaganda. However,

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<sup>17</sup> Pengzhi Feng 馮鵬志, “Cong ‘sange zixin’ dao ‘sige zixin’” 從“三個自信”到“四個自信” [From “three confidences” to “four confidences”], CCP News (retrieved May 24, 2017), <<http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0707/c49150-28532466.html>>.

since the start of the 21st century, the expression “confidence in our culture” has gained greater regard. In this context, Xi Jinping has urged scholars to explore how traditional Chinese thought can yield insights for the task of the “Sinicization of Marxism” and provide possible approaches to tackle the challenges faced by China in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century international arena.

Some Confucian scholars believed that the party was ready for a reconciliation with Confucianism or an experiment to replace Marxism with Confucianism as the state ideology. This belief was not merely shared among a small group of Confucians but was in the air across intellectual and public communication. At a superficial level, this interpretation seems to be naïve because it is, to a large extent, grounded in what is said in propaganda messages. However, the interpretation is also likely based on intellectuals’ speculations about the unstated crises faced by the CCP.

One feature of Chinese propaganda is that what is left unsaid is sometimes much more important than what is actually spoken out loud. For example, what is left unsaid could be an attempt to highlight the CPP’s new crises or agendas. Having observed China’s chronic domestic problems in previous decades and the escalation of tensions with the West after its economic rise—both of which can potentially threaten regime stability and legitimacy—some Confucians have begun preparing for a second triumph of Confucianism.<sup>18</sup>

In the late 20th and early 21st century, economic success gradually transformed the way in which the Chinese public perceives the source of power legitimacy.<sup>19</sup> More and more people are inclined to think that the legitimacy of the CCP regime lies in the country’s economic achievements. Reliance on performance legitimacy is not unique to the PRC and is common among authoritarian regimes. However, in the case of the PRC, the switch from reliance on an ideological commitment to policy performance inevitably brought about confusion and controversy. In the eras of Jiang Zemin 江澤民 and Hu Jintao 胡錦濤, the CCP had already sensed the trickiness of the party’s commitment to Marxist ideology. On the one hand, Marxism continued playing a key role in articulating the legitimacy of the CCP’s power because its denial would implicitly shatter the CCP’s historical and ideological

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<sup>18</sup> As is widely known, the first triumph of Confucianism took place during the Han Dynasty. See Homer H. Dubs, “The Victory of Han Confucianism,” in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 58:3 (1938), 435–449. For a further discussion, see van Hans van Ess, “Ban Gu’s View on the ‘Second Victory of Confucianism’ and the Fall of the Former Han,” in *Early China* 45, (2022), 1–35.

<sup>19</sup> Yuchao Zhu, “‘Performance Legitimacy’ and China’s Political Adaptation Strategy,” in *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, 16:2 (2011), 123–140; Yih-Jye Hwang and Florian Schneider, “Performance, Meaning, and Ideology in the Making of Legitimacy: The Celebrations of the People’s Republic of China’s Sixty-Year Anniversary,” in *China Review*, 11:1 (2011), 27–55.



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legitimacy. More importantly, discarding Marxism would lead to a collapse of the existing patronage networks, which were built, consolidated, and reinforced through enormous state investment in propaganda and education. For example, to safeguard its historical and ideological legitimacy, the CCP has invested generously in “education in thought and politics” (*sizheng jiaoyu* 思政教育) by installing a “thought and politics” curriculum in high schools and higher education and by establishing schools of Marxism studies (*Mayuan* 馬院) in higher education. On the other hand, the party’s commitment to Marxist ideology became a burden or even a potential threat to regime stability. China’s impressive economic success has “let some people become rich first” (*rang yibufenren xian fuqilai* 讓一部分人先富起來) and resulted in a serious income gap and social injustice. Problematic wealth distribution is a breeding ground for social turmoil. Especially during the era of Hu Jintao, state propaganda tended to downplay Marxism and Maoism; instead, it highlighted the value of harmony (*hexie* 和諧) and the task of easing the majority’s resentment against the rich (*choufu* 仇富).<sup>20</sup> The signature concept of Hu’s theory, as has been indicated by many scholars, was the “harmonious society” (*hexie shehui* 和諧社會). During Hu’s reign, the expression “stability maintenance” (*weichi wending* 維持穩定, or, in short, *weiwen* 維穩) was frequently invoked and became a fixed formulation in official documents.<sup>21</sup> The promotion of social harmony, as many intellectuals sensed, revealed an attempt to downplay the revolutionary traits of Marxism and Maoism and to avoid depicting class struggle in a positive light. This provided Confucianism with a place in propaganda crafting—for example, as in the case of a Confucian theory of social harmony.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, such attempts did not essentially change the status of Confucianism in the PRC: it was an alternative form of the tradition of “red Confucianism,” which either interprets Confucianism in ways that render it compatible with Marxism,

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<sup>20</sup> On this topic, see, for example, Xiangxin Lu 陸相欣, “Bufen ruoshi qunti chansheng ‘choufu xinli’ de yuanyin jiqi huajie zhengce” 部分弱勢群體產生“仇富心理”的原因及其化解政策 [The causes and solutions to “the resentment against the rich”], in *Academic Journal of Zhongzhou*, 5 (2007), 109–111. Some would argue that “choufu” fails to capture the real issue: it is not the majority’s anger at the rich but rather their anger at the policies that resulted in an unfair distribution of wealth that have produced inharmonious situations.

<sup>21</sup> Yongnian Zheng and Keat Tok Sow, “Harmonious Society and Harmonious World: China’s Policy Discourse under Hu Jintao,” in *Briefing Series*, 26 (2007), 1–12.

<sup>22</sup> For some examples, see Meihua Lu 盧美華, “Ren dao: hexie shehui de daode jishi – dui ruxue daode jiazhi guan jiben jingshen de xiandai sikao” 仁道: 和諧社會的道德基石—對儒學道德價值觀基本精神的現代思考 [The way of benevolence: the moral foundation of a harmonious society – a modern reflection on Confucian moral values], in *Xueshu jiaoliu*, 12 (2009), 50–53; Baoxin Zhao 趙寶新, Lixin Zhao 趙麗新, and Wenhai Zhang 張文海, “Kongzi hexie shehui sixiang dui dangdai hexieshehui jianshe de yiyi” 孔子和諧社會思想對當代和諧社會建設的意義 [Kongzi’s thought on harmonious society and its modern relevance for the construction of a harmonious society], in *Daode yu wenming*, 6 (2012), 85–88.

applies a Marxist framework or terminology in interpreting Confucianism, or uses Confucian notions or theories to complement what is explicitly stated in propaganda.

The situation changed in the early 21st century, especially during Xi Jinping's first presidential term. As mentioned above, in the Xi era, "Chinese characteristics" clearly took on the new meaning of traditional Chinese culture or civilization. Chinese philosophy, particularly Confucianism, began to be attributed essential importance along with Marxism. Xi Jinping often quotes Confucian texts and expresses his endorsement of the ancient Chinese legacy. The underlying reason for this emphasis on traditional Chinese culture, as some have speculated, is to communicate the message that the strategy of downplaying Marxist ideology and resorting to performance legitimacy no longer works. In responding to the "calls for papers" and "calls for policy suggestions" made by new propaganda messages, some Confucians have suggested, though implicitly, switching from performance legitimacy back to ideological legitimacy, with the latter's content being Confucianism instead of Marxism.

The gradual shift from ideological legitimacy to performance legitimacy from the Deng Xiaoping era until the Jiang-Hu era saddled Xi's administration, as political scientists have noted, with an unprecedented challenge. In addition to poverty issues and a serious income gap, Xi also faced the problem of the predicted economic slowdown, as China cannot keep achieving high growth rates.<sup>23</sup> This means that the CCP must switch back to ideological legitimacy and/or construct alternative accounts of performance legitimacy. The party has explored both approaches. Rather than focusing on overall economic growth, the party has tried to demonstrate its determination to tackle the problem of uneven wealth distribution. The new enterprise of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" in the Xi era no longer revolves around "letting some people become rich first" but instead focuses on "lifting people out of poverty" or "the battle against poverty" (*tuopin gongjian zhan* 脫貧攻堅戰). The top socioeconomic mission of the Xi era, therefore, is to "construct a comprehensive moderately prosperous society" (*quanmian jiancheng xiaokang shehui* 全面建成小康社會). This new line of socioeconomic policy entails a new line of propaganda, which defines the enterprise of battling poverty as a crucial step in the "Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation" (*Zhonghua minzu de weida fuxing* 中華民族的偉大復興). Both the new agenda and its propaganda line contain clear references to Confucian classics. The "White Paper on China's Comprehensive Moderately

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<sup>23</sup> See "'Shisan wu' jingji zengzhang duokuai cai heshi" 十三五" 經濟增長多快才合適 [What is the appropriate estimation of economic growth for the Thirteenth Five-Year Plan?] (accessed September 8, 2022), <[http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-11/03/content\\_5003673.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-11/03/content_5003673.htm)>.

Prosperous Society” (*Zhongguo de quanmian xiaokang baipishu* 中國的全面小康白皮書), which was released by the news office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, quotes the *Book of Odes* (*shijing* 詩經) and the *Book of Rites* (*lijì* 禮記), stressing that “moderate prosperity has been the dream of the Chinese nation since ancient times” and that “moderate prosperity” (*xiaokang* 小康) is deeply rooted in ancient Chinese civilization.<sup>24</sup> All this, as some Confucian scholars have interpreted it, seems to suggest that Xi might favor Confucianism over Marxism or that he would welcome a proposal that uses Confucianism to solve the crises faced by the PRC.

However, scholars who want to respond to this “call for papers” should first answer the question regarding which kind of Confucianism can help maintain the stability of the regime and its power legitimacy and even substitute Marxism as the state ideology. For Contemporary Mainland New Confucians, or Kangists, the answer is Kang Youwei’s Confucianism, or New Text classicism (*jinwen jingxue* 今文經學). Elsewhere, I have provided a preliminary answer as to why Kang Youwei was chosen by some scholars over other Confucians.<sup>25</sup> In this article, I will briefly introduce two general reasons. The first is that Kang Youwei’s Confucianism is not an academic philosophy but a politically oriented classicism—a difference that will be explained shortly. More importantly, his Confucianism is New Text classicism, a version of Confucianism that triumphed and was established as the state ideology in the Han Dynasty.<sup>26</sup> The second main reason is that Kang had predicted and provided solutions to problems that China would inevitably encounter once it became a modern country or a “nation state.” In general, Kang Youwei was chosen because he was a leading scholar of New Text classicism and the leader of the One Hundred Days of Reform; he symbolizes dual-faceted Confucianism, emphasizing both classicism and modernization. The political subtext is that China may want to consider Kang’s proposal to revive classicism Confucianism as the state ideology to deepen its reformist approach, which is inevitably in tension with Marxism and Maoism. For these reasons, we witnessed the “Kang Youwei Fever” (Kang Youwei *re* 康有為熱) during the 2010s.

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<sup>24</sup> *Zhongguo de quanmian xiaokang* 中國的全面小康, Xinhua News Agency (Xinhua she 新華社) (accessed September 8, 2022), <[http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2021-09/28/content\\_5639778.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2021-09/28/content_5639778.htm)>.

<sup>25</sup> Lee, “A Preliminary Overview of Kang Youwei Studies in China Today.”

<sup>26</sup> Ting-mien Lee, “Ideological Orthodoxy, State Doctrine or Art of Governance? The ‘Victory of Confucianism’ Revisited in Contemporary Chinese Scholarship,” in *Contemporary Chinese Thought*, 51/2 (2022), 79–95.

## The School of Marxism Studies vs. the School of National Studies

To better understand the hidden struggle between Confucianism and Marxism, it is important to remember that “confidence in our theory” refers to Marxist theory (Makesi zhuyi lilun 馬克思主義理論) rather than Marxist philosophy (Makesi zhuyi zhexue 馬克思主義哲學), and that the distinction between Marxist philosophy and Marxist theory is only applicable in China. In the West, theory and philosophy are often conflated. Since 2005, Marxist theory has become a first-level discipline (*yiji xueke* 一級學科) under the category of legal studies.<sup>27</sup> Marxist philosophy, however, is a second-level discipline. Along with Chinese philosophy, it falls under the first-level discipline called “philosophy,” which is classified under the category of “philosophy.” To study Marxist philosophy, one must study Western and/or Chinese philosophies. However, to study Marxist theory, one must study politics, economics, Maoism, state propaganda, and public administration and be familiar with recent domestic and international social-political events. In other words, it is Marxist theory rather than Marxist philosophy that represents the state ideology of the PRC.

The distinction between Marxist philosophy and Marxist theory is analogous to the distinction between Confucianism as a philosophical tradition and Confucianism as classicism.<sup>28</sup> The Confucianism that helped legitimize the Han Dynasty and triumphed by becoming a state ideology was classicism (more precisely, New Text Confucianism). The Confucianism that was promoted by subsequent empires as state orthodoxy was also classicism instead of Confucianism as a philosophy. Accordingly, if the PRC were to consider replacing Marxism with Confucianism, the type of Confucianism it would promote would likely be classicism rather than Confucian philosophy.

Similar to the discipline of Marxist theory, classicism also covers the areas of politics, economics, and government administration. In addition, in imperial times, classicism performed the same functions as today’s Marxism. Classicists elaborated on the classics canonized by political authorities and theorized the power legitimacy of the authorities. More importantly, a large portion of the imperial examination was based on classicism. It required the examinees to memorize terms, lines, and paragraphs from the classics and

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<sup>27</sup> Before 2005, Marxist theory was a second-level discipline under the category of politics. See Jingrong Zhang 張景榮, “Makesi zhuyi lilun yiji xueke jianshe’ yanjiu zongshu” 馬克思主義理論一級學科建設研究綜述 [An overview of “the establishment of Marxist theory as a first-level discipline”], in *Jiaoxue yu yanjiu*, 8 (2006), 77–82.

<sup>28</sup> Whether classicism Confucianism is a form of religion is another complex debate; see Anna Sun, *Confucianism as a World Religion: Contested Histories and Contemporary Realities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013); Yong Chen, *Confucianism as Religion: Controversies and Consequences* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012).

their authoritative commentaries and annotations. In all these aspects, the role of Marxist theory in today's China is equivalent to the role of Confucian classicism in imperial China. To pass the entrance or civil-service examinations in China today, young people memorize the mottos and slogans of state propaganda along with their authoritative interpretations, annotations, and commentaries.

To reclaim the status of state ideology, contemporary Mainland Confucians adopted two approaches, which correspond to their two main reasons for choosing Kang Youwei over Confucius 孔子 (trad. 551–479 BCE), Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200), Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529), and other Confucians. The first approach was to support the creation of local academies for classical studies (*shuyuan* 書院) and classicist institutions in universities and to establish schools of “national studies” (*guoxue* 國學) or “classical studies” (*gudianxue* 古典學) in higher education institutions. This was intended to make classicism institutionally equivalent to the schools of Marxism studies.<sup>29</sup> The other approach involved developing a classicist version of Confucianism that could serve as the basis for “confidence in our theory,” “confidence in our path,” and “confidence in our system” and offer better solutions to China's domestic and international problems than Marxist theory.

In proposing Confucian classicism as the state ideology, the obvious historical references are Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179–104 BCE) and Kang Youwei. The former was a key figure in New Text classicism, which triumphed in the Han Dynasty and theorized the legitimacy of the Han Empire; the latter was a key figure in the 19th century, calling for the revival of New Text classicism to justify not only political reform but also the emperor's position. For the purpose of installing Confucian as the state ideology of the PRC, Kang is a better fit than Dong not only because he provided answers to contemporary problems but also because his Confucianism is a milder deviation from Marxism. Kang Youwei's ideals of “moderate prosperity” (*xiaokang* 小康) and the “great unity of mankind” (*datong* 大同) are obviously in line with current propaganda. The former ideal echoes the domestic policy of “lifting people out of poverty,” while the latter matches the Chinese international relations theory of “community with a shared future for mankind” (*renlei mingyun gongtongti* 人類命運共同體).

Regarding the establishment of classicism in education, Kang Youwei is once more an interesting case study. The first modern Chinese

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<sup>29</sup> Note that I do not suggest that everyone who promotes national studies is a Mainland New Confucian or a Kangist. It should be kept in mind that scattered “calls for papers” that appear here and there in different official speeches or documents produced at different times may result in various responses.

university was established based on Kang Youwei's reform proposal. Ironically, he has hardly been studied in the field of Confucian studies. The main reason is that Confucian studies are conducted in philosophy departments, but Kang's scholarship is better classified as Confucian classicism, which had no corresponding discipline in modern universities until the end of 2020. Establishing national studies or classical studies programs and institutions has been a longstanding struggle. Although many schools of national studies (*guoxue yuan* 國學院) have been created over the past two decades, "national studies" was only decreed to be an official institutionalized discipline in December 2020. Previously, such programs were often organized in the departments of philosophy, history, or literature.<sup>30</sup> However, as national studies scholars have argued, classicism involves interdisciplinary research that covers politics, economics, policy making, and so on. Moreover, according to traditional Chinese knowledge categorization, classicism is hierarchically above philosophy, history, and literature. From this perspective, it makes little sense to assign classicism to these departments. Therefore, some scholars have argued that national studies should be a first-level discipline.<sup>31</sup> However, to become a first-level discipline, national studies must first become an official discipline. To become an official discipline, it must belong to a disciplinary category. Thus, if national studies could not be classified under the category of philosophy (the "most sensible" option in the previous categorization), it needed to become a category of its own or find a new category to which it could belong. In December 2020, the Degree Committee of the State Council (*Guowuyuan xuewei weiyuanhui* 國務院學位委員會) and the PRC Ministry of Education (*Jiaoyu bu* 教育部) eventually announced the creation of the category of

<sup>30</sup> Ting Shen 沈庭, "Sheli 'guo xue' yiji xueke shi dangwuzhiji" 設立"國學"一級學科是當務之急 [It is urgent to establish "national learning" as a first-level discipline], *Guangming ribao* 光明日報 (accessed July 22, 2022), <[http://www.wenming.cn/wmzh\\_pd/ws/gx/zxd\\_t\\_9879/201507/t20150713\\_2726833.shtml](http://www.wenming.cn/wmzh_pd/ws/gx/zxd_t_9879/201507/t20150713_2726833.shtml)>.

<sup>31</sup> Ming Fang 方銘, "Guanyu guoxue ji guoxue yiji xueke sheli de yixie wenti" 關於國學及國學一級學科設立的一些問題 [A few problems with the establishment of national learning as a first-level discipline], *Guoxue wang* (accessed July 25, 2021), <<http://www.guoxue.com/?p=3188>>. Confucians have been asking for the status of a first-level discipline; see, for example, "Rujia xuezhe changyi she ruxue wei yiji xueke, xiang xihua de xueke tixi yao hukou" 儒家學者倡議設儒學為一級學科，向西化的學科體系要戶口 (accessed August 10, 2022), <<https://kknews.cc/culture/jklbl.html>>.



“interdisciplinary research” (*jiaocha xueke* 交叉學科),<sup>32</sup> and national studies finally became an independent discipline under this category.<sup>33</sup>

Kang’s theory possesses numerous features that make it a good fit for developing a kind of Confucianism that would be compatible with Marxism and could make greater contributions to the political agendas of 21st-century China. First, it is compatible with Marxism. Due to his advocacy for “moderate prosperity” and the utopian goal of “great unity,” Kang has rarely been harshly criticized by Red Confucians or Marxist scholars. Second, as mentioned earlier, Kang’s theory aligns well with the propaganda of Xi Jinping’s New Era. More importantly, according to Kangists, Kang’s theory is more helpful than Marxism for contemporary China, as suggested in their controversial and bold claim that “the legislator of modern China is neither Sun Yat-sen, Mao Zedong nor Zhang Taiyan. Kang Youwei is the very legislator of modern China.”<sup>34</sup>

This claim delivers at least two implicit suggestions. One is that the CCP may want to bid farewell to the age of revolution. Kangists and other intellectuals may have good reasons to pursue this new direction. As mentioned earlier, following the success of “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” the poverty gap has become a serious problem. An emphasis on revolution and class struggle may risk further fueling social tensions and ultimately undermining regime stability. The second implicit suggestion concerns the ethnicity issue. The vehement debate between Kang Youwei and Zhang Taiyang (and Sun Yat-sen) represents two opposing standpoints on whether China should embrace the idea of an ethnic revolution and follow the Western path of building a nation state.<sup>35</sup> Kang strongly opposed Zhang’s anti-Manchu revolution (*paiman geming* 排滿革命). Inciting ethnic hatred is indeed an efficient means of political mobilization, but its consequences can be disastrous. The revolution succeeded, and the Qing Empire was overthrown, but as Kang Youwei rightly worried, China soon faced ethnicity

<sup>32</sup> “Jiaoyubu: guoxue, zhongguo wenhua jingdian jiaoyu, shufa deng jiaocha xueke zhengshi chengli” 教育部：國學、中國文化經典教育、書法學等交叉學科正式設立 [Ministry of Education: the discipline of interdisciplinary research, such as national studies, education in Chinese culture and classics, calligraphy studies, have been officially established], *Pengpai* (accessed June 12, 2022), <[https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_10921849](https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_10921849)>.

<sup>33</sup> At the time of writing, it has not yet become a first-level discipline, nor is Confucianism placed under the category of philosophy (even Chinese philosophy is a second-level discipline).

<sup>34</sup> Yang Gan, et al., “Kang Youwei and Institutional Confucianism,” trans. by David Ownby (accessed on September 8, 2022), <<https://www.readingthechinadream.com/kang-youwei-and-institutional-confucianism.html>>.

<sup>35</sup> Chunsong Gan 幹春松, “Minzu, guomin yu guojia — Kang Youwei, Zhang Taiyan guanyu jianli xiandai guojia de fenqi” 民族、國民與國家——康有為、章太炎關於建立現代國家的分歧 [Nation, citizen, and state — the disagreements between Kang Youwei and Zhang Taiyan on the approach to establishing a modern state] (accessed on August 23, 2022), <<https://www.rujiag.com/article/21236>>.

issues after becoming a modern country and inheriting the territory of the Qing Empire. To ease ethnic tensions, Kangists suggested consulting Kang Youwei's proposal to cultivate cultural belongingness. Several of the Chinese empires in the past were not ruled by the Han ethnic group. These non-Han rulers justified their legitimacy and unified the empire by demonstrating their commitment to Confucianism, especially classicism. The imperial examination based on Confucian classics continued to exist until the last empire of China. The Kangist proposal implies that due to China's ethnicity issues, classicism is superior to Marxism at performing the function of justifying power legitimacy. A derivative message is that China as a multiethnic country should have a hereditary ruler whose power comes from his commitment to the ideology of the ethnic majority.

Observing the political and intellectual scenes in 2022, we can see that Kangist suggestions have been minimally accepted. During Xi Jinping's reign, presidential term limits were removed, and traditional Chinese culture has been promoted. However, the approach that Xi has adopted to tackle the problems of the uneven distribution of wealth has involved waging a never-ending large-scale anti-corruption campaign, putting aside the "social harmony" propaganda, and doubling down on the CCP's uncompromised commitment to class struggle and revolutionary spirit.<sup>36</sup> This decision might have surprised those who speculated that the wind would blow in the *right* (*you* 右 or Deng Xiaoping's approach) way and answered the "calls for papers" in the first term of Xi's reign on this speculation. During his first trip after obtaining the presidency for the first term, Xi went on a "south tour" (*nanxun* 南巡).<sup>37</sup> People gauged this trip as a signal of a deepening reformist approach because it seemed to be an implicit reference to Deng Xiaoping. However, after the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, Xi made his first trip to the CCP's base of operations during the war with Japan and the Chinese Civil War in Yan'an. Is this an allusion to Mao Zedong? To respond to new rounds of "calls for papers" in the coming five years, Chinese academics may first want to find an answer to this question.

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<sup>36</sup> See, for example, "Xi Jinping zheyang qiangdiao ganyu douzheng" 習近平這樣強調敢於鬥爭 [Xi Jinping emphasized the spirit of daring to struggle] (accessed on September 7, 2022), <[http://www.dangjian.cn/shouye/dangjianyaowen/202111/t20211129\\_6250590.shtml](http://www.dangjian.cn/shouye/dangjianyaowen/202111/t20211129_6250590.shtml)>; "Xi Jinping: Jianchi ziwo geming quebao dang bubian zhi, bubian se, bubian wei" 習近平：堅持自我革命，確保黨不變質、不變色、不變味 [Xi Jinping: persisting in self revolution to ensure that the party remains its nature] (accessed on September 7, 2022), <<http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2022/0123/c1001-32337511.html>>.

<sup>37</sup> This kind of speculation is also popular in the West; see, for example, "The Symbolism of Xi Jinping's Trip South," in *BBC News* (10 December 2012) <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-20662947>>.

**Conclusion: Propaganda with Chinese Characteristics**

This article analyzed the interplay between the emergence of a new meaning for the expression “Chinese characteristics” and the invisible struggle between Contemporary Mainland New Confucianism and Marxism regarding state ideology. This interplay illustrated the historical dimensions of Chinese practices of state ideology and propaganda.

Many people may believe that state ideology is mainly about a state indoctrinating its people with a system of thought and that propaganda messages aim mainly to influence people’s ways of thinking. It is often overlooked that state ideology in China involves propaganda writings meant to explain the rationale of and underlying theories behind significant policy shifts. A new formulation proposed by party leaders that becomes frequent in propaganda messages involves the launch of “calls for paper,” whose goal is to encourage academics to assist in articulating the meaning of the new formulation, to theorize the content behind the formulation, and to make theoretical or policy suggestions based on their understanding of the formulation.

This article elaborated on the traditional distinction between Confucianism as a philosophy and Confucianism as classicism for civil service examinations and, on a similar distinction, between Marxist philosophy and Marxist theory as state ideology, as illustrated by the case study of Kangist Confucianism. With these distinctions, we can see more clearly that whereas Confucian and Marxist philosophies involve the critical study of the ideas of Confucian thinkers and Karl Marx, classicism and Marxist theory have little to do with changing one’s beliefs or value systems. In the past, when one had to prepare for and take the imperial examination, memorizing the difficult lines from the Confucian classics and their even more complex annotations and paleographic notes did not imply fully understanding or even believing in the obscurities stated there; instead, the point was being able to apply a certain “linguistic code” in relation to contemporary politics. Some types of contemporary Chinese propaganda writings and speeches are no less difficult to understand than Confucian classics. They often appear to be a pile of unnecessarily abstruse mottos and slogans. It is dubious to assume that the government intends to use such coded language to influence people’s thinking. Some Confucian scholars’ reactions to the newly fixed formulations, such as “confidence in our culture” or of “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,” show that new formulations may be better understood as calls for papers or calls for policy suggestions. One aim of these formulations is to encourage scholars to speculate about possible solutions to the country’s problems. However, this

characterization of “propaganda with Chinese characteristics” is a highly preliminary account, and more detailed analyses are needed.

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