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The Rise of a "Fudan Goddess": Cultural Entrepreneurship in China Between Moral Education and Popular Culture

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Abstract

This article investigates the trajectory of Chen Guo, a successful moral educator who became an internet celebrity and bestselling author of self-help books thanks to the originality of her teaching methods. The article reveals that Chen Guo's contributions as a state teacher and as a popular cultural producer, rather than being at odds with each other, are to a very large extent unified, as she has managed to create a moralising but depoliticised approach to teaching which encourages personal self-improvement and social awareness by drawing from the principles and practices of self-help literature. Chen Guo's career and work thus offer a unique case to investigate the interactions and the intersections between official and popular culture in contemporary China, in particular, by observing how the current party-state's ideological apparatuses incorporate the creative use of popular cultural forms in their message with the aim of enhancing the efficacy of the official ideological education.

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Keywords

Contemporary China, moral and ideological education, popular culture, self-help literature

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This article traces the career of Chen Guo, a lecturer in "moral education" (德语, *deyu*) at Fudan University who between 2010 and 2019 became an "internet celebrity" (网红, *wanghong*) and an author of popular philosophical writings thanks to the creativity of her teaching enterprise. A "designer of the self" (自我设计者, *ziwo shejizhe*), as a Fudan professor once described her to me, Chen was a "cultural entrepreneur" inasmuch as she was a creative individual involved in the commercialisation of her cultural products. She managed to satisfy "popular taste and consumer demands" and extract "maximum market value from [the mechanisms of] cultural production and consumption" (Berg and Strafella, 2017), including by skilfully navigating the new internet-based media platforms.

More precisely, Chen's specific mark of creativity consisted in her ability to innovate regarding her teaching content and methods in order to make them palatable for consumption in the classroom, the book market, and for internet audiences. She can thus be seen as a cultural entrepreneur in that she represented "an individual who built [her] own personal brand of creativity as a cultural authority and leveraged it to create and sustain various cultural enterprises" (Rea and Volland, 2015: 5). Nonetheless, it is worth noting that her cultural activity was situated in a very peculiar field: Chen, since the beginning of her career, had always been before everything else an instructor of "ideological/political theory" (思想政治理论课, *sixiang zhengzhi lilun ke*), specialised in teaching a course named "Ideological/Moral Cultivation and the Basics of Law" (思想道德修养与法律基础, *sixiang daode xiuyang yu falü jichu*). A key pillar of the university-based ideological/political education curriculum that students must normally attend during their first year, the course had as its primary goal, as the government phrased it in 2005,

> To impart an education on socialist morality and law, helping students to enhance their notions of the socialist legal system, raise their ideological and political quality (素质, *suzhi*), and solve the practical problems they face in the process of growing up and developing their talent. (Central Propaganda Department and Ministry of Education, 2005)

In short, we are talking about one of the most important components of the school-centred state "catechism" in China – a course proverbially hated by students and fairly notorious for putting them to sleep.

How, then, did Chen succeed in making this course so popular that some students were even willing to wait years to attend it? How did she harmonise her creative drive as a commercial cultural producer with her more formal obligations as a transmitter of state-sanctioned values and norms, becoming an authoritative and popular teacher both in the classroom and in the market simultaneously? What are the specific ingredients that made her teaching successful? And, in general, what does Chen's specific case tell us about the interaction between the official ideological culture promoted by the state and the commercialised popular culture produced by the market? In other words, "what kind of creativity" (Keane, 2013: 49) would be unleashed by Chen's ventures as a state "catechist" *cum* "Internet celebrity" and cultural entrepreneur? These are the issues addressed in this article, in an attempt to shed light on the creative strategies via which, in recent years,

the Chinese state has tried to exploit the appeal of certain commercial cultural practices in order to enhance the "popularisation" of its own core educational messages.

Usually, when the issue of the relationship between the cultural dynamics promoted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and those favoured by the market is addressed in Western scholarship, the dominant approach taken has long been to focus on tensions or reciprocal conflicts here. Foregrounded almost by default therein are the idiosyncrasies between a culture that seeks to control and constrain and one that contrariwise seeks to break free and innovate. In his 2013 book, for example, Michael Keane notes that "tensions are continuing to play out between political culture and commercial creativity in China" (Keane, 2013: 4), underlying in several passages of his study the "problematic" relationship between the authoritarian legacy of the socialist state and the values of freedom and originality entailed in the processes of commercial creation. More emphatically, Shaun Chang, in a 2009 essay on the reforms of the Chinese "cultural industry," pointed out the "contradictions" – as well as "clashes" and "battles" – between "the top-down party control model of state-run media" and the "commercial interests and consumer demands" constituting "the driving forces to push for a more diverse and creative Chinese society" – one where the "dominance of the party monopoly," however, is "challenged by creative entrepreneurs empowered by powerful consumers demanding creative content without state interference" (Chang, 2009: 263–264).

While this approach certainly highlights a key dynamic at play, it also overshadows another pattern that is at least as significant – if, indeed, not more so. As Daria Berg and Giorgio Strafella remind us, it should be borne in mind how the CCP's cultural authorities have, since the establishment of the "socialist market economy" in 1992, always typically called on commercial cultural producers to deliver "social benefit" while producing "economic benefit" – albeit with the recommendation, however, to put social benefit first. If this did give rise to tensions or even conflicts, it also certainly triggered many instances of convergence and cooperation. Processes of cultural production and experiences of cultural entrepreneurship have been hereby favoured, with creativity being put in the service of creating products able to accommodate and blend both the positive educational messages advocated by the state and popular content meant to satisfy consumers' cultural tastes – and, as a result, align with the commercial interests of their producers (Fumian, 2016).

It is the CCP, after all, that created and orchestrated the "socialist market" with the intention of harnessing it for the goals of the socialist state and that, to this end, also took it upon itself to co-opt successful entrepreneurs – celebrating them not only as spearheads of economic success but also as "models for appropriate behavior and ideals" (Davies, 2010: 202). This also included the so-called cultural entrepreneurs (文化企业家, *wenhua qiyejia*; or more often 商业文化人, *shangye wenhuaren* in the popular discourse), celebrated by the political and cultural establishment for their bold, creative contributions that, on the one hand, "add splendor to the indigenous culture of their time" and, on the other hand, "inspire and stimulate their contemporaries" (Zhang and Lu, 2016). As to the rise of Chinese celebrities, Louise Edwards and Elaine Jeffreys point out, in the introduction to the volume *Celebrity in China*, how this phenomenon –

"while also mirroring some aspects of global celebrity culture" – is "marked by the influence of the party-state and a fusion of culturally embedded and socialist values" (Edwards and Jeffreys, 2010: 15). Moreover, the various contributions to this volume significantly "highlight the diverse interactions between the party-state and the commercial celebration of public individuals in China today" (Edwards and Jeffreys, 2010: 15), illustrating in vivid ways how commercialised entertainment in contemporary China has often displayed the tendency to incorporate the pedagogical proclivities typical of the "exemplary society" (Bakken, 2000).

This will and capacity on the side of the party-state to co-opt China's cultural producers – moulding to its advantage their public image and their products' socially received meanings – strongly suggests that we should look, more than at the existing "tensions," instead at the osmotic processes of mutual permeation between state and market as the most significant forces in processes of Chinese cultural production. Likewise, the most characteristic – and, perhaps, most socially productive – acts of creativity and cultural entrepreneurship might be those in which state-approved views and values and commercial cultural creations tend to converge – at least to some extent. Chen Guo's career is an illuminating example here.

As a teacher of moral education, Chen managed to create a very popular method of teaching that first made her famous among her students and then, after they shared videos of her classes online, all over the internet. Later, after she was discovered by the media, she began to use her cultural capital as a teacher from one of the country's most renowned universities to market a series of popular cultural products. Herewith she gained the status of "celebrity teacher" (名师, *mingshi*), also epitomised by the nickname "Fudan goddess Chen Guo" (复旦女神陈果, *Fudan nüshen Chen Guo*) first ascribed to by her online fans and then later echoed by the media, too. Chen's creative parable, in the end, was rewarded with her consecration by the top national authorities (Xi Jinping himself): in 2019, she was temporarily elevated to the status of being a national model teacher, as intended to make her creative and innovative methods of teaching an example of how the party wanted teachers of ideological/political education nationwide to be creative and innovative in their approaches. This parable, in which Chen's creative enterprise was from the start embedded in and supported by a system of cultural production (schools, media outlets and private cultural firms) dominated or supervised by the party at all levels, shows how the ultimate stakeholder – or "business angel," one could say – in such creative enterprise was to a significant extent the CCP itself.

Since the 1990s, when the rise of the socialist market prompted a drastic reconfiguration of social values and attitudes so as to align them to the goals of the new socio-economic paradigm, a widespread rhetoric of "creativity" began to be promoted by China's educational authorities (see, for example, Chumley, 2016). This was exemplified by the increasing ubiquitousness of the character *chuang* (创, create) in Chinese schools and media alike: teachers were invited to teach "in creative ways" (有创造力的, *you chuangzaoli de*), students were supposed to acquire an "innovative spirit" (创新的精神, *chuangxin de jingshen*), magazines and television shows began to celebrate "creators

of businesses" (创始人, *chuangshiren* and 创业者, *chuangyezhe*), while companies and professionals were encouraged to develop "creative ideas" (创意, *chuangyi*). This discourse, largely bent on pinning the meaning and value of creativity to the practising of neoliberal entrepreneurship, was also applied to the domain of the university-based ideological/moral education in the attempt, on the one hand, to find creative ways to make it more effective by bringing Chinese students to "freely" internalise its educational messages and, on the other hand, to help students valorise their subjective faculties and creative attitudes as part of their social ethos. Chen was an emblematic case of success precisely in this regard, insofar as she created a depoliticised and individualised form of moral education of great appeal not only among her students but also suitable for export as popular culture on the internet and via the book market. As such, Chen's state-approved moralising was able to spread more easily across Chinese society.

In reconstructing Chen's career, highlighted are the distinctive principles and methods of her teaching, focusing on the aspects that made the latter popular across the different domains of Chinese society. As a PhD student of Christian Philosophy, Chen revealed an early interest in the pastoral dimensions of Christian education, finding in it useful elements to be applied to the teaching of moral education within the Chinese university system. Even more significantly, her actual teaching consistently exhibited the patterns of self-help culture, especially in the emphasis on the importance of self-examination and self-transformation as ways to achieve personal success, well-being, and harmonious relations. This blend of ingredients turned her teaching into a representative case of what Michel Foucault described as "pastoral power": that is, a type of governmentality focused on directing the moral behaviour of its recipients in aiming to serve both the "individualising" spiritual needs of the subjects and the "totalising" demands of the collective (Foucault, 1982: 782–783; 2009: 128).

This was probably the only possible recipe for a successful "moral education" suitable for the socialist market society, a society marked by a noticeable process of "individualisation" embedded within the collective structures of the socialist state (Hansen and Svarverud, 2010), in which the pressure placed on the youth to struggle for the nation (Fumian, 2021) is meshed with a widespread culture of desire (Rofel, 2007) and the self-centred "structures of feeling" of the only-child generation (Fumian, 2010). The exploitation of such an individualised and depoliticised method of teaching, however, was not without its contradictions, as the excessive visibility granted by Chen's popularity in a period in which the party was promoting a reaffirmation of its official ideology, as we will see later, eventually created a short-circuit that caused Chen's "fall" as a public figure. This suggests that official education and popular culture are not so easy to harmonise, after all.

How a Celebrity Teacher Became a National Model

Born in Shanghai in 1981, Chen Guo spent her entire academic career at Fudan University, first doing a BA in Humanities then an MA in Western Philosophy, before finally specialising, as noted, in Christian philosophy as a PhD student – writing a

thesis about early Christian influences on Hegel's thought. Her most notable endeavour, however, soon appeared to be that of borrowing insights from Christian education in order to improve the teaching experience vis-à-vis moral education within the Chinese university system. It was probably for this reason that she was immediately hired, on the completion of her PhD in 2008, as a lecturer of ideological/moral education by the Department of Basic Social Sciences (later renamed the College of Marxist Studies) of her alma mater.

These efforts can be grasped in the first two (and last) academic contributions she wrote while still a PhD student. The first is a commentary on an article written by two United States scholars and religious educators advocating for a "recovery" of Christian moral education in the American higher education system (Chen, 2007). The second is an analysis of the rhetorical features of the Gospels, wherein she praises the language of Jesus for its power to "touch the hearts" of the people thanks to its simplicity, vividness, and rich imagination (Chen, 2008). It is not hard to see, in these twin early reflections, the two fundamental preoccupations that would guide her research on moral education from the very beginning. On the one hand, as she claims in her commentary, her original commitment is to find – in an age characterised, as she says, by an unprecedented "democratic spirit" – "individual freedom" and a multiplicity of cultural values, a path for a moral education that is neither perceived as "indoctrination" nor based on "moral relativism."

Instead, her purpose is to sketch the contours of a moral education aiming to transmit certain shared values while respecting her students' freedom, helping them become "complete and healthy individuals" able to "give value to their inner life" and at the same time "correctly fulfil their responsibilities" (Chen, 2007: 146). On the other hand, we can see how Chen's most significant aspiration is to find in the practices of Christian moral teaching (or more precisely, preaching) a popular and effective style of communication capable of delivering the desired messages not by doctrinal inculcation but by inspiring individuals' own natural moral identification. While Chen does not appear to be interested in teaching specific Christian principles and values, her paying close attention to Christianity appears to be marked more concretely by her ongoing wish to borrow insights from its pastoral practices: that is, those practices related to the ways by which the "shepherd" ministers the faith, guiding the spiritual growth and moral conduct of the members of the "flock."

These would, indeed, be the two basic ingredients of her teaching, ones later developed into a more articulate (and secularised) exposition in a little book of theory published in 2016 – *Dong ni: Daode jiaoyu de yuyan yishu* (懂你: 道德教育的语言艺术, *Understanding you: The art of language in moral education*). Here, drawing on her experience accumulated during eight years of teaching, Chen explains first of all her understanding of what "moral education" should be, pointing out the difference between her views and the dominant approach typical in China's school system. As she writes in the preface,

> Many people understand morality as a set of rational principles and norms of behavior that must necessarily be adopted to protect social order. But in truth, the essence of morality is the care of a person for another person, understanding of a heart for another heart. (Chen, 2016: 1)

As morality surges forth from the heartfelt experience of the individual in their mutual interactions with others, and not from some external norms imposed from above, the aim of moral education should be to make different "individualities" (个性, *gexing*) find their "common universal base" (共性, *gongxing*) – therewith fostering positive moral behaviour out of feelings of empathy based on mutual recognition. The main reason why Chinese moral education is not able to trigger this sentiment in earnest, however, is that it is too "rational" (理智, *lizhi*), based as it is on a language overly reliant on the cold exposition of norms, distant from students' emotional demands, and incapable of ever winning their hearts. The key goal of her book is, therefore, "to explore and discover another kind of language for moral education" (Chen, 2016: 2) – in developing, as she puts it, a new "art of language" (语言艺术, *yuyan yishu*) that, on the one hand, does not reject the rational forms of communication but, on the other hand, seeks simultaneously to emphasise with the "non-rational" (非理性, *fei lixing*) or "emotional" (感性, *ganxing*) aspects thereof, too.

As to the exact elements of this "art of language," which she illustrates in the remainder of the book via a wealth of offered examples, they are first of all: a "language of faith" (信仰语言, *xinyang yuyan*), or a language capable of inspiring the innermost beliefs of the individual – not understood here in any specific religious way but rather as an intimate adherence to one's ideas and commitments; a "language of poetry" (诗歌语言, *shige yuyan*), or a language characterised by its emotional, expressive, and imaginative qualities, with the power to evoke "sympathy" (同情, *tongqing*) or "emotional resonance" (情感的共鸣, *qinggan de gongming*) between different persons; and a "figurative body language" (形体语言, *xingti yuyan*), referring to all kinds of non-verbal communication used by the teacher to elicit the desired psychological responses from students.

This effort to carve out a consciously crafted emotional language is already recognisable in Chen's early teaching, as it appears from the first two videos of her classes that were posted online in 2010 – allegedly by a student who loved them so much that he wanted more people to share in their lessons. Indeed, it is not difficult to see from these two videos why her classes would become so popular. Engaging directly with her students, Chen stands in front of the class gesturing nimbly and talking passionately in an endless flow of inspiration, while the topics she talks about are not the trite prescriptions of "socialist morality" but the refreshing and enticing themes of her "philosophy of life" (人生哲学, *rensheng zhexue*) that soon will make her famous. Namely: "solitude," described as a positive condition to cherish as it is by learning to be alone that the individual finds one's true self and learns to be a "thinker"; "friendship," which is something that should not be regarded "instrumentally," as an ally is not someone to take advantage of but a peer who helps you gain more freedom by knowing yourself better; or "love," which does not mean to seek other people's approval but to learn how to give, growing one's inner strength and gaining happiness in the process.

Rather than merely passing on ready-made principles and values, Chen appears to make a genuine effort to share with her students certain reflections on the spiritual and moral dilemmas of life – on the one hand, drawing constantly on her life experiences, on the other hand, relating in anecdotic ways the words and deeds of a number of

famous writers and philosophers. Once published online, the videos of these two classes would quickly garner millions of views, being shared and commented on by students declaring that they wished they had a teacher like Chen, demanding more of their current ones, or arranging Chen's "famous sayings" (名言, *mingyan*) into pages of quotations where her words would be turned into aphoristic pearls of wisdom. This, in turn, attracts the attention of the official media, who begin to mention her case in their reports – praising her both for the popularity of her teaching and the feminine charm of her ways, for example, underlining that besides being a successful teacher her students also nicknamed her "sister model" (模特姐姐, *mote jiejie*) having done some amateurish modelling during her school years (*Xinhuanet*, 2010).

Only in 2013, however, would Chen be finally "discovered" as a budding cultural celebrity, with her authority as a charismatic young teacher coming to be celebrated nationwide through her participation in the popular CCTV-1 show *Kaijiang la!* (开讲啦！, *Let's begin class!*) – a programme whose aim is "to invite some exemplary models from the heart of the Chinese youth so that they can share their insights about life, offering genuine discussions and spiritual nourishment" (Let's begin class!, 2012). Here, Chen's persona as a model and celebrity teacher is first framed by the host, who introduces her saying that watching the videos of her classes "overturned all impressions rooted in my mind about university teachers." Then, her public image is further pinpointed by recorded footage played to the viewer, wherein she is described as "tall and slender, with graceful manners; she can both model and talk about big truths, she has been labelled as the most stylish Chinese female university teacher" (Let's begin class!, 2013).

Thereafter, it is now Chen's turn to show that this extensive praise is merited, giving a taste of her skills with a short inspirational lesson. And she does not disappoint, proving an exceptional communicator capable of mastering the stage like a consummate actor as she regales the audience with her philosophical reflections on "curiosity." The latter, so the gist of her message goes, is the wellspring of one's love for life and the source of human inspiration, but unfortunately, it is all too often suffocated in a person becoming overwhelmed by the practicalities of adult life. It is thus all the more important to cultivate this "sacred but fragile sprout," as she underlines in quoting a number of masters, in order to keep alive one's continued inspiration. Finally, to conclude the process of her being branded a celebrity teacher – one capable of both inspiring and entertaining, thanks to her simultaneous teaching talent and sexualised charm – she is asked to give a sample of her catwalk skills in front of the audience before being invited by the host for a chat on some personal matters and a round of Q&A with students.

Despite this important national recognition, not until 2016 would Chen really begin to capitalise on her fame. In that year, as noted earlier, she releases her first book-length publication, a short theoretical treatise aiming to establish her as an authority in the field of moral education. Simultaneously, she also begins to build a public profile on social media, setting up, in particular, a public WeChat account via which she showcases her initiatives and achievements and occasionally posts some of her philosophical meditations – branding herself a "PhD, doctor of philosophy" (哲学博士, *zhexue boshi*).

This lays the grounds for her first concrete steps as a cultural entrepreneur, taken a year later when she publishes her first commercial book – a self-help volume titled *The Good Solitude*, written with the intent to "collect together the attainments she achieved as a teacher of moral education at Fudan University since 2008" in summarising "the best of her thinking" (Chen, 2017).

Given the success of the book (going through three reprints in its first month alone, before later being published in Taiwan and South Korea, too), she would author in 2018 another volume meant to expand on the topics addressed in the first of her written works. *The Good Love*, also proving rather successful, sells 150,000 copies within its first two months of publication. Her most remarkable exploit – the one finally earning her the title of "Internet celebrity" – is, however, the production of an online audio course named "Chen Guo's classes on the philosophy of happiness: Life is so different." It would be released shortly after *The Good Solitude* and distributed on the web by the channel Ximalaya; according to one source, it had received more than four million clicks by January 2018 (Phoenix Culture, 2018).

How do these profit-seeking activities sit with her role as a party member and educator? Apparently very well, as Chen – who in 2012 had already won the first prize of the first edition of the contest on "the teaching of ideological/political university classes" promoted by the city of Shanghai – would in 2017 be awarded the newly inaugurated national prize of "most beautiful teacher of ideological/political education." She received in the same year the title of "outstanding young Chinese talent" for her research on the teaching of Marxist theory. Not to mention that, while her first commercial book *The Good Solitude* had been published by Jiangsu Fenghuang Wenyi Chubanshe, the second would be printed by the *People's Daily* own publishing house.

Another sign of the official support given to her work as a popular commercial producer is the report dedicated to her by the major CCTV news programme *Xinwen Lianbo* (新闻联播, *News Simulcast*). Aired in January 2018, Chen is praised herein as a teacher of ideological/political education both for her methods of instruction, which enable her to "transform the fixed teaching materials into topics that satisfy students' psychological needs," and for her status as a "celebrity teacher," effective in "bringing life into her ideological/political classes." The report also presents *The Good Solitude*, explaining that she "wrote it in order to share her teaching achievements with more teachers and students, so as to contribute to shaping their spiritual growth." In the interview, Chen confirms that her commercial books form part of her work as a moral educator – clarifying that

> The purpose of ideological/moral education is to make students grow into persons endowed with inner strength who, no matter what difficulties they may encounter, do everything they can to create happiness for themselves, and on this basis bring happiness to more and more people.

Having outlined how bridging the gap between official education and popular culture is the essence of Chen's teaching activities, it is now useful to have a brief look at what

the specific elements are of an individual's "spiritual growth" – defined as the core goal of her moral education. To this end, we can start from the notion of "solitude" – not by chance, the key concept in her first commercial book. "Solitude," as the book's cover states, "hides an enormous spiritual strength that will bring you to an entirely new life if you can find it." Even though it can be a painful state, people should learn to cultivate solitude because it can help them build dialogue with themselves, thereby enriching their spiritual life and developing their capacity to think independently. In short, solitude's main function is to help us find our "true self," which according to Chen is the key to the individual's self-improvement as well as moral development.

Indeed, "knowing oneself" is the foundation of Chen's whole teaching architecture, a commandment that she never tires of prescribing as it is deemed the source of all self-transformation, the road that must be taken en route to the goal of "perfecting oneself" (完善自己, *wanshan ziji*) and becoming a "whole person" (完整的自己, *wanzheng de ziji*) (Chen, 2017: 7). "Self-knowledge" (自知, *zizhi*) is thus the first unavoidable step if one wants to find the right pathway to success, which consists not only of overseeing material achievements – though these are also important and should not be undervalued – but, more importantly, of cultivating a healthy personality, gaining full mastery of oneself, and achieving self-confidence (自信, *zixin*) as a consequence. Self-knowledge is also a preliminary condition to the attainment of freedom, another goal pivotal to Chen's discourse. Freedom, however, does not mean simply doing whatever one wants, following wantonly one's passions and desires, but rather eventually fully grasping what one can and cannot do, learning to restrain oneself through "self-discipline" (自律, *zilü*) – gaining, as a result, a "heart in peace" (心安, *xin'an*).

Freedom, according to Chen, is a process made up of three successive steps: (1) "clearly know yourself"; (2) "make brave choices"; and (3) "take responsibility," with a peaceful mind and no regrets. This means that, to be truly free, one also needs to accept whatever outcome, positive or negative, stems from your voluntary actions – "be it a success or a failure: you chose, you bear the burden, you are at peace with yourself" (Chen, 2018: 67–68). But self-knowledge is not only the source of one's personal achievements; it is also the condition for the sprouting of "virtue" (道德, *daode*), and, consequently, for the recognition of the "other" as a moral extension of the "self." Virtue, Chen Guo explains, is not a "constraining force" that comes from without and limits our freedom – as much as society undeniably needs to enforce some baseline norms here. Morality, instead, comes from within – as a "child of human nature" (Chen, 2018: 102) that lies naturally inside each and every one of us. However, the premise for actualising such inner morality is the conscious examination and painstaking transformation of one's soul.

This leads to her elaboration on the theme of "love," the other central preoccupation of her teaching that is more widely covered in the second of her books. While, for her, love means primarily a genuine and mature attachment to one's neighbours – friends, family and partner – the most important expression of love, as the source of all other forms thereof, is "self-love" (自爱, *zi'ai*), which in turn is also the result of self-knowledge. Indeed, self-love is simultaneously the source of one's personal actualisation as well as of realising one's feelings towards the other:

> Once you love yourself, you can make yourself become more genuine and magnanimous, braver in facing the instabilities of life and the uncertainties of fate, stronger and more capable of governing your life, so you will not be tossed around by the whims of the tide […]. Imperceptibly, your self-love will make of you a more respectable and lovable person, able to attract those who truly love you, and will bring you real and beautiful love. When you treat other people in the same way as you love yourself, this will be the most basic source of love, either for a partner, a friend, a member of your family or the entirety of mankind. (Chen, 2018: I–II)

This makes clear the basic formula underpinning her moral philosophy: whatever accomplishments you have achieved in making an effort to work on yourself (self-knowledge, self-love, self-respect, and so on) will naturally expand and be transferred to others, creating in this way a seamless moral continuum between self, neighbour, and society. This belief is also expressed in her 2016 theoretical book *Understanding You*. Herein, she affirms that the goal of moral education in the Chinese school system should be

> To bring some positive influence to students' inner life and self-cultivation as much as to their interpersonal relations and the development of society, so as to make them healthier and more balanced individuals, their interpersonal relations more amicable and sincere, and society more just and harmonious. (Chen, 2016: 5)

Rather than drawing on any readily identifiable Christian principles or values, Chen borrows mainly from two other philosophical sources instead. One is the Socratic tradition focused on the inquiry into truth as it is held within the soul of the individual, with the conviction that knowledge and virtue are intrinsically related – as evidenced by her frequent mentioning of Socrates as well as of the Delphian commandment "know thyself." The other is the moral idealism of the Mencian Confucian tradition, based on the notion that since the human being is inherently good, one's moral development mainly springs from sincere commitment to their self-cultivation. The idea here is that the task of the individual, as she says in elaborating on the teachings of the *Great Learning*, is first to expand one's moral consciousness and then "make an effort to enlighten and renew the spiritual attitudes of the people" (Chen, 2017: 99–100).

Or, as she more modestly claims in commenting on the Confucian classic, one should first find inner balance, before then "producing positive energy" (制造正能量, *zhizao zheng nengliang*) for those around you (Chen, 2017: 104) – clearly, an echo of President Xi's distinctive exhortations to increase self-confidence both at the personal and collective level as a way to boost the rejuvenation of the nation. This belief in the power of self-cultivation is ultimately the fabric of what she describes, in the last pages of *The Good Love*, as the "faith of the Chinese people." Rather than having as its goal salvation in the afterlife, this faith is quintessentially preoccupied with achieving "self-salvation" (自我拯救, *ziwo zhengjiu*) through one's worldly activities and efforts in the course of everyday life. To understand this faith, she says, should be the responsibility of every Chinese person.

This reference to salvation as the ultimate aim of the individual ultimately brings us to the notion of "pastoral power." The "pastor," as Foucault (1982, 2009) put it, leads the whole community, having in mind its collective well-being. But they take care of the flock by looking after every single individual, guiding each and every person to obtain salvation by paying attention to their own conscience. Thus, in its secularised transformation presided over by the modern state, "pastoral power" becomes an individualised form of governmentality that, by instructing individuals on how to pursue their own well-being and take care of themselves in this world, ultimately promotes self-reflexive and self-governing subjects in the interest of the state.

But this "pastoral" governmentality, we may add, is akin to that expressed by the "self-help" literature, a contemporary form of writing that, according to Heidi Rimke (2000), on the one hand, functions as a "technology of the self" meant to help the individual gain mastery and control over their own life, while on the other hand, working as a "strategy" to produce autonomous and responsible citizens capable of governing themselves in the individualised modern society. Mainly emerging in the modern US, where it found its roots in the Puritan traditions (McGee, 2005), and is considered by several scholars a typical expression of American culture (Dolby, 2005), such self-help literature began to spread massively since the 1990s. Also, in China (Hendriks, 2016), where for many years it was usually called *chenggongxue* – the "science of success" or "successology" – simply because the most compelling preoccupation of the Chinese self-help industry was by some distance that of giving advice on how to strengthen one's professional capacities in order to achieve economic success in the hyper-competitive domestic market society. Over the years, however, this content also began to include, in line with the "therapeutic turn" occurring in Western self-help culture in the last couple of decades (Madsen, 2014), more diverse publications focused on giving advice on how to achieve spiritual and psychological well-being while adapting to all sorts of social pressures and demands, often drawing from Chinese indigenous philosophical traditions – as with Yu Dan, the most well-known example hereof (Alvarado et al. 2016: 54–74).

There are many connections to be found between the principles of self-help culture and Chen's own work. Self-help teaching, first of all, aims to guide the individual to pursue self-improvement with the eventual aim of achieving one's core goals – alternatively conceived in terms of economic success, personal happiness, or the pursuit of a balanced relationship with oneself and the world. The premise for realising these aspirations, however, is invariably the willingness of the individual to work on one's own self, embarking therewith on a process of self-discovery, self-examination, and self-transformation aimed at gaining self-mastery and developing the capacity to adapt to the external world. Given this centrality of the self, the teacher is obviously not envisioned as a superior authority transmitting ex cathedra certain objective truths or behavioural norms. Rather, they constitute a friendly figure: namely, a guide or a "coach" whose task is to help the individual discover these truths and norms subjectively for oneself, offering the necessary motivation and inspiration to find the required attitudes and values to accomplish the aspired-to goals.

At the same time, this emphasis on the self – and especially on the power of individual will and "faith" in oneself as the only truly significant forces determining one's achievements – means that the social horizon, with its objective structures embedding human action, tends in the self-help literature to be blurred or erased. The individual is herewith left as the only party responsible for the success or failure of their actions. This is the inherent logic of "positive thinking," described by Barbara Ehrenreich as a quintessentially American "ideology" promoted as much by US corporate culture as by the theology of the Christian right – namely, in educating people to think that happiness and wealth are the necessary result of one's self-induced optimism. In fact, though, it also teaches them that failure is but the consequence of one's negative attitudes, thus becoming "useful as an apology for the crueler aspects of the market society" (Ehrenreich, 2009: 8; Bakken and Wang, 2021).

These principles are clearly echoed in Chen's own teaching. On the one hand, as we have seen, her main endeavour is to find a horizontal channel of communication with her students, one that with its emphasis on emotional sharing as equals dissimulates her superior position as the teacher (in her *Xinwen Lianbo* interview, e.g., she mentions proudly that some students call her "big sister Guo," or "Guoguo"). On the other hand, in her optimistic celebration of the power of a self-conscious and self-confident individual to provide "positive energy" for oneself and for those around them, she completely obfuscates how society, as a web of complex forces, constrains personal choices and fundamentally shapes moral behaviour. Society, in her discourse, is turned into something completely nebulous with which the self-conscious and self-confident individual can harmonise with ease, not encountering in the process significant obstacles to his or her self-actualisation. Or, should that happen, any frustrating outcome can be readily accepted with a "heart at peace," thanks to one's inner balance.

Nor do we find, in her teaching, any explicit reference to the official politics and ideologies of the Chinese state. We hardly hear, for example, Chen mention words such as Marxism, socialism, collectivism, and so on; we never hear her speaking directly about the obligations and responsibilities of her students towards the country and the nation, either. This may be surprising, considering Xi's energetic attempts to revive CCP official thought in order to re-legitimise the party and re-assert its voice in every corner of domestic society. But, after all, Chen's method has a strong and sound rationale to it, considering that the key goal of the state – in its striving to promote the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation through the creative expansion of the "socialist market" – has for many years been that of tapping into the energy of the individual, educating them to view themselves as autonomous and enterprising subjects responsible for their choices and respectful of the social order.

This was also, for example, the opinion expressed by Xiao Gongqin, a long-time advocate of "new authoritarianism" and sympathiser of Confucian ethics who explained in an interview that he appreciated Chen because she "opened up a new path" for political/ideological education by turning its instruction into "classes of self-cultivation." Herein, value consists of "unearthing the subjective spiritual resources of the individual" (Xiao, 2019). In this context, the individualised and depoliticised moral teaching of Chen, magnifying the subjectivity of each person while obscuring the objective constraints of society, is perhaps the only kind of moral education that can be willingly accepted by the students.

Conclusion

As a sign of the increased importance attached to the work of the CCP's ideological/political education, in March 2019, President Xi Jinping convened in Beijing a "symposium for teachers of ideological/political theory." In the course of this event, he gave a long speech delivering his instructions on how to improve the effectiveness of this teaching work (Xi, 2020). Reminding his audience that the fundamental mission here is to "establish virtue and foster upright people" (立德树人, *li de shu ren*), he stressed the vital role of teachers in the achievement of this task, asserting that the "key to doing well in the classes of ideological/political theory consists in giving full play to the enthusiasm, initiative, and creativity of the teachers." Thus, according to Xi, those responsible for imparting ideological/political education were not only required to possess strong political knowledge and faith but were also called on to be inspiring. That is, capable of moving students, innovative in their thinking and teaching methods, and upstanding and charismatic in their behaviour so as to attract and positively influence the next generation.

Moreover, Xi also stressed the need to promote "reform and innovation" (改革创新, *gaige chuangxin*), underlying the importance for China's schools of experimenting with different modes of teaching – with the goal of increasing the appeal, and therefore the persuasiveness, of their educational endeavours. To signal that the purpose of the symposium was precisely to encourage teachers and schools to be creative and innovative in this key educational task, eight teachers from different national institutions, selected as outstanding educators in the field, were invited to attend the event and express their views at the end of Xi's speech. Chen Guo was one of them, thereby proving that her creative enterprise had the endorsement of the party and was actually regarded as a model worthy of being disseminated and emulated across the country.

But this invitation, besides proving the party's approval of Chen's initiatives both as a moral educator and cultural entrepreneur, also points to another key issue. Precisely, the issue of the exact circumstances in which Chen's career was moulded: how did her particular inventions as an educator and cultural entrepreneur relate to the party's calls for teachers to be creative and innovative? In other words, how was Chen's own creativity nurtured considering that the party's own related calls, which certainly became more forceful after Xi's rise to power, were in fact already audible from much earlier on in time – that is, at least from midway through the first decade of the new millennium and thus before Chen had even started out on her journey as a teacher of moral education (CCP Central Committee and State Council, 2004)? Indeed, while Chen's particular style of teaching would be the brainchild of her own inventiveness – her borrowings from Christian pastoral culture, her keenness to master the art of communication, her appropriation of inspirational approaches typical of self-help culture, all the way through to the commercialisation of her teaching brand – it is also quite clear, as my reconstruction of her career trajectory has sought to illustrate, that her creative efforts were embedded in and sustained by an institutional arrangement that first elicited them, then encouraged them, and finally rewarded them – hence giving impulse and direction to Chen's specific endeavours.

Her experimentation in the field of moral education, to begin with, had its birth in a top national university that had already taken very seriously the party's exhortations to innovate regarding ideological/political education practices, and that later, when Chen became famous, took pride in her success – boasting it was a sign of the university's cutting-edge teaching methods in the field. While her exploration of Christian culture's potential application in moral education stemmed from research activities carried out under the auspices of Fudan University's Department of Philosophy, her 2016 theoretical book, *Understanding You*, was produced with the support of the so-called Sunshine Plan (阳光计划, *Yangguang jihua*). A foundation managed by the Shanghai Municipal Educational Commission (SMEC) established this scheme with the purpose of fostering talented teachers of ideological/political education, awarding the most outstanding ones the title of "Sunshine scholars" (阳光学者, *Yangguang xuezhe*).

Indeed, this is witness to the existence of a structured system of awards, reinforced in the last few years, established both at the national and the local levels in order to encourage the creative activities of teachers of ideological/political education while also enhancing their visibility and prestige. For example, one 2011 document issued by the SMEC mentions among its recommended measures on reforming the classes of ideological/political theory the fostering of a number of "celebrity teachers" (名师, *mingshi*). The most successful ones should be rewarded, accordingly, through public initiatives, among which is also listed in the Sunshine Plan (SMEC, 2011).

From the beginning of her career, Chen would be the beneficiary of this system on a number of occasions, receiving prizes for her "shining" performances. But even her apparently most original innovation, namely the elaboration of patterns of instruction akin to those of self-help culture, does not seem accidental or merely the offspring of her personal research findings. As I have noted elsewhere, self-help literature – already popular among Chinese readers from the late 1990s – first set foot in China's universities in the early years of the new century (Fumian, 2021), when it began to be seen favourably by many higher education authorities as a tool deemed useful for developing the creative and competitive qualities of future graduates (Liang, 2003). Several educationists even went as far as proposing to use *chenggongxue* in their teachings on "ideological/moral cultivation," precisely for these methods' apparent capacity to inspire students by triggering their own intrinsic motivation to self-improve, and thus to develop the desired social qualities on the basis of their subjective inclinations. As one advocate of using such material in these university courses wrote,

> *Chenggongxue* encourages (people) to pursue some (positive) undertakings and seek a "good" (美好, *meihao*), "individualised" (个性化, *gexinghua*) life; this is at one with the overall goals of the socialist market economy, in accord with the demands of contemporary Chinese development and unified with the values of the new period. (Zhou, 2010)

This, it should be added, is also in line with Chen's early interest in finding a path for moral education based on the freedom of the individual and at the same time capable of producing a shared moral consensus and commitment without being perceived as indoctrination.

As to her rise as an internet celebrity, this certainly began as a spontaneous phenomenon – ignited because of the popularity of her methods among her students, who contributed to promoting her on the web by posting videos of her classes. But then this appeal was intercepted, reinforced, and repackaged by the media, helping shape her image as a "celebrity teacher" – also by leveraging her feminine looks – in the promotion of a form of teaching that until then had hardly been viewed as popular. It is plausible to think that Chen would have not made such a bold jump into commercialisation if she did not feel that she had strong institutional backing behind her.

Finally, after she reached the climax of her career in being recognised both as a national educational authority and a popular self-help "philosopher," she was invited to sit face-to-face with Xi in person at a key official political event – an occurrence that should not just be considered as her final consecration on the part of the CCP's top leadership, but also as the conclusive operation by which the party came to cash in on its investment in Chen's creative enterprise. This signalled how the experimentation she conducted on behalf of the party was a successful product that could be used in the national marketisation of moral education – an innovative formula worthy of being reproduced, at least to some extent, by other agents in the same field of cultural production.

This is to say that if Chen became a "cultural entrepreneur," it happened because she was backed by a powerful institutional sponsor – one that, over the years, sought to turn its work into ventures based on mechanisms of market creativity, competition, and promotion to make ideological/political educational enterprises more effective and palatable vis-à-vis Chinese society – or, what we could rightly call a "creative industry." Chen's case is certainly in some regards unique, and it should not be overgeneralised as a universal paradigm of cultural production in today's China. But, at the same time, it should also be seen as a representative case of how official culture – in this instance, the CCP's ideological/political education – attempts to feed on commercial popular culture, and how, once fed in such a way, that official culture then makes its return to society in the guise of commercial popular culture itself. Hereby, an osmotic cultural terrain is created in which official and popular cultures coalesce into something hardly distinguishable from one another.

Further evidence of this is that there was another teacher among those invited to the above-mentioned symposium, Xu Chuan, whose career seems to have followed the same pattern as Chen's. Winner of the "Top 100 Online Positive Energy Role Models" award in 2018 and the title of "most beautiful teacher" in 2019, Xu is, like Chen, the author of a number of books presenting an innovative mix between political education and self-help motivational teaching. The cultural repertoire "created" by Chen is thus a win–win situation all around, in which the official education of the party becomes acceptable and even enjoyable for those who are meant to receive it, while the "catechism" of the state is able to reach undisturbed the shores of society, saturating it with its moralising elements.

What Chen's case has taught us, however, is that the condition for achieving this goal is the erasure of official ideological discourse from the fabric of a depoliticised and

individualised "moral" education. An operation that, in the age of official CCP ideology's renewed sacralisation, obviously raises doubts about the sustainability and replicability of Chen's devised model of teaching. How can an official moral education that completely eliminates the voice of the state maintain its authority once it spreads out in society? And, for how long can a popular culture that has so clearly revealed the marks of the party's blessing remain genuinely appealing to society at large?

Up until a certain point in time, the alliance between official and commercial popular culture that Chen represented seemed to function very well, perhaps because it was conducted discreetly in not drawing too much attention to itself. But then, eventually, the whole mechanism suddenly backfired. In the weeks immediately before and after her participation in the national symposium, Chen began to receive stinging criticism from droves of netizens, who accused her of being superficial, incompetent, ambiguous, and, much worse, of propagating a "poisonous chicken soup" that was not just useless but outright harmful. This backlash went so far that, in September 2019, rumours began to spread online that Fudan had banned her from teaching, prompting the university to reply with a public statement denouncing these whispers as a fabrication and denying that such a thing had ever occurred. But despite her alma mater's support, Chen – who had initially, albeit half-heartedly, tried to counter her detractors' accusations – then disappeared completely from public view, ceasing to even update her WeChat account. The only information available about her ongoing activities remained a note stating that she was going to publish a book in 2021.

So far, it has yet to materialise. Was Chen's withdrawal from public life a choice of her own making? Was it because she was short of new arguments and her philosophy of life already exhausted? Or, was she advised by Fudan University's authorities to keep a low profile – to focus more earnestly on her work as a teacher of "Marxist theory," especially in a period during which the party has been growing increasingly wary of Chinese celebrities' independent status (Stevenson, Chang, and Li, 2021)? Did the nature of her classroom teaching after this incident undergo some kind of revision, perhaps retreating to more orthodox methods and themes?

Resolving these unexplained circumstances is beyond the scope of this article. Regardless, what this conclusion suggests is that official culture and popular culture are seemingly not ready-made bedfellows after all. To be sure, Chen's status as an internet celebrity, which she acquired in full in the course of 2018, did win her a lot of fans among those eager to follow her and engage with her popular image – for example, in reposting short clips of her classes and "famous words" on Douyin. This, however, eventually also made her more exposed, now being vulnerable to hundreds of thousands of netizens' scrutiny, mockery, and criticism.

Meanwhile, it was probably her encounter with the highest echelons of the party, brushing shoulders with Xi himself, that contributed to suspicion or even hostility being stoked, seeing a short-circuiting of her public image. For one thing, it suddenly became impossible for her fans to see her as a well-meaning "big sister" philosopher devoted only to caring for their emotional well-being, thus ignoring her role as an apostle of state ideology. For another, supporters of CCP orthodoxy could no longer

turn a blind eye to seeing the party's ideological/moral education reduced to a poisonous "chicken soup for the soul." It is currently difficult to say whether Chen will enjoy a comeback as a cultural entrepreneur or whether the new book she promised will ever be published. For sure it will, should it ever come out, be interesting to read, because the book will have a lot to say on the evolving ways in which the party conceives of the contents and methods of its desired "moral education."

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