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Duan Zhengyuan's Moral Studies Society and the Political Imagination of a Religious Enterprise*

Sébastien Billioud**

Abstract

This paper focuses on Duan Zhengyuan 段正元 (1864–1940) and his Moral Studies Society, one of the important redemptive societies with a Confucian orientation of the Republican Period. It provides a brief introduction to Duan's thought and more specifically to his main defense of the "unity of morals and politics" (*zhengdeheyi* 政德合一) at a time when many intended to relegate the Confucian tradition to the dustbin of history. It also shows how Duan managed to link his political thought to concrete actions and projects, both at the top (interactions with political elites) and at the grassroots level of society (organization of *jiaohua* 教化 groups), thus promoting a Confucian political imagination still considered relevant to a modern context.

Keywords: Duan Zhengyuan, Moral Studies Society, redemptive societies, Confucianism, *jiaohua*, He Jian

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** Sébastien Billioud is a Professor of Chinese studies at Université de Paris and a member of the French Research Institute on East Asia (IFRAE, INALCO, Université de Paris, CNRS, F-75013 France). E-mail: sebastien.billioud@univ-paris-diderot.fr

1. Introduction: Confucianism and Redemptive Societies

For a long time—maybe too long a time—prevailing westernization and modernization narratives relegated Confucianism to the dustbin of history.[1] This is no surprise considering the magnitude of the changes that affected China after the demise of the Empire and for a long time thereafter (e.g., Maoism, etc.). The problem is that these narratives largely hindered our understanding of the transformations, re-inventions, and reconfigurations of Confucianism in the modern and contemporary periods. Hence there has been a relative lack of scholarly interest in tracing back Confucianism's various modern and contemporary fates that, in particular, include its transformation in "philosophy," its appropriation by religious groups, its perpetuation in educative projects, or its ideological and political uses.[2] This is all the more regrettable since these pieces or fragments of the Confucian heritage, though bereft of the holistic dimension that Confucianism largely held at the end of the Empire, continued to play a crucial role throughout the Republican period and even later on, at least in some polities of the Sinicized world. Ongoing multi-faceted developments in China (e.g., the "Confucian revival") can just be considered, for better or worse, some of the latest manifestations of the enduring vitality of such a tradition today (Billioud 2016, 767-805).[3]

This paper tackles Confucianism in Republican China through the lenses of one of the important redemptive societies of the Republican period, the Moral Studies Society and its founder Duan Zhengyuan 段正元 (1864–1940).

Redemptive societies are religious groups; scholars have started to pay attention to such organizations since the beginning of the 2000s. As a historical category, the label primarily describes religious organisations that emerged after the demise of the empire and

1 See for instance Levenson (1958–1965). In this work, the modern fate of Confucianism largely appears to be its relegation to the Museum.

2 Some of the modern fates of the Confucianism (e.g., what we could call its "philosophical turn") are nevertheless much better documented than others.

3 For a detailed study of today's Confucian revival, see Billioud and Thoraval (2015).

were active in the Republican period. More often than not, they shared a number of prominent features (e.g., some amount of syncretism inherited from the "unity of the three teachings" tradition, an eschatology, a strong charismatic leadership) and managed to attract a massive following. Some had in fact millions of adepts. But some scholars are of the view that the label can also be understood as a sociological category: in that case, it potentially encompasses a number of groups still emerging or operating today.[4]

Among redemptive societies, a certain number asserted or still assert an obvious Confucian identity. This is for instance the case of the Way of Pervading Unity (*Yiguandao* 一貫道), probably one of the most powerful groups in the 1930s and 1940s that has now turned into a cross-national organization operating, mainly from Taiwan, in thousands of places of worship worldwide. Despite its blatant syncretism, the Yiguandao nevertheless claims to be "primarily Confucian" (*yiruweizong* 以儒爲宗).[5] Some other groups active in Republican China had an even more pronounced Confucian flavor. Such was the case for the Universal Morality Society (*Wanguo daodehui* 萬國道德會), founded in 1921 by Jiang Shoufeng 江壽峰 (1875–1926) in Shandong in 1921 and of which Kang Youwei 康有爲 (1858–1927) served as President in 1926–1927. Such was also the case for the Moral Studies Society that will be discussed in the current paper.

If redemptive societies matter so much for the field of Confucian studies, it is first because for a long time they have been a sort of missing link or dead angle: without taking them into account, it is in fact not possible to get a fair understanding of how Confucianism continued to be influential at the grassroots level throughout the Republican period and even afterwards, especially in Taiwan. But beyond their influence "among people" (*minjian* 民間), redemptive societies and their leaders could even sometimes exert some influ-

4 In an increasing body of literature on redemptive societies, see for instance: Duara (2003), Goossaert and Palmer (2011, 91-122), Ownby (2008, 24-44; 2016, 685-727), Palmer (2011, 24-28), and Broy (2015, 145-185). The distinction between historical and sociological categories is developed in Palmer's article.

5 I have explored the contemporary situation of the Yiguandao, including today, in Billioud (forthcoming).

ence in political circles and articulate a worldview that clearly took politics into account. The case of Duan Zhengyuan, introduced in this paper, exemplifies this situation.

I will try to show in the following paragraphs that Duan Zhengyuan's writings and practical actions (i.e., his religious, moral, and civilizational projects) are, first, completely integrated with each other and, second, intended to constitute a response to all those who, after the demise of the Empire, proclaimed the demise of the Confucian value system and its irrelevance in a new Republican political order. His writings and actions are also a response to a troubled era of division and warfare. Furthermore, although Duan certainly did not aspire to return to a by-gone order (imperial system, examination system, etc.), his deep critique of Western modernity, be it explicit or implicit, makes him partake in a broader global historical countercurrent whose influence endured, in a variety of forms, throughout the whole of the twentieth century. In order to tackle these points, I will first discuss some aspects of Duan Zhengyuan's political thought or "political imagination"; afterward, I will introduce how he translated his ideas into very concrete projects, both in elite circles and at the grassroots level.

2. Duan Zhengyuan and His Political Thought

Duan Zhengyuan 段正元 (Duan Dexin 段德新), founder and leader of the Moral Studies Society, was born in 1864 in Weiyuan 威遠, Sichuan province.[6] Like many charismatic religious group leaders (e.g., Yiguandao's patriarch Zhang Tianran 張天然, 1889–1947), hagiographic accounts of his birth, but also of his youth, associate it with a number of auspicious signs and posit that as a child Duan already had a clear awareness of having a life mission. His youth seemed to have been difficult; he was repeatedly struck by the death of family members and experienced poverty, which obliged him to make a living through all kinds

6 This biographical paragraph is primarily based on Fan (2017, 137-160; 2011, 161-203) and Jin (2014, 13-16).

of activities. At the age of 15, he went to Mount Xiaolaojun 小老君山 in order to find some doctors able to cure his severely ill mother. It is there that he encountered his teacher, Long Yuanzu 龍元祖 about whom very little is known but who managed to heal his mother and exerted a decisive influence on the young Duan. Long Yuanzu convinced Duan that self-cultivation and the aspiration to attain sagehood should be tightly connected to practical action in society. He saw in Confucianism and especially in the resources provided by one of its central texts, the *Daxue* 大學 (Great Learning), a means to promote self-cultivation and, beyond that, the redemption of the world. Duan's training was organized by Long. Hagiographic accounts mention that he was sent to build a hut on Mount Emei's (峨眉山) highest summit, Wanfoding (萬佛頂), and that he stayed there for three years of self-cultivation. He came back, got married, but quickly returned to his mountain life for four extra months before heading, at age 19, to Mount Qingcheng (青城山), not far from Chengdu, where he was taught by his Master. On the side, he probably developed some healing skills that would later prove useful to attract high-ranking officials to the Moral Studies Society. The subsequent two decades were primarily marked by his involvement in helping to propagate his Master's way all over Sichuan (Jin 2014, 13-14). In 1909, he encountered, in Beijing, a civil servant, Yang Xianting (楊獻廷), who became his disciple and would later serve as assistant to Hunan governor He Jian (see Section 3.1). Yang backed him in his projects to create grassroots *jiaohua* organizations (i.e., organizations promoting moral education and moral transformation of the people), both in Sichuan and in Beijing, which will be discussed later in this paper.

2.1. The Unity of Politics and Morals 政德合一

Duan Zhengyuan was the author of an astounding intellectual production amounting to thousands of pages. Interestingly, some of these texts include discussions about society, economics, and of course politics. In that later realm, Duan's thought obviously contrasts with the main trends of the time, including the May Fourth Movement and the total westernization stance (*quanpan xihua* 全盤西化) of some of its

proponents or the emphasis put by many on democracy. But more generally, it also contrasts with one of the main trends of (Western-inspired) modernity, that is, the separation or "autonomization" of different spheres of human activity. In brief, suffice it to underline first that Duan is much less interested in the institutional nature of the regime than in what he believes to be central to "the political," that is, its intertwinement with morals. Thus, he firmly advocates the necessity of continuing to "unite the political and the moral" (*zhengdeheyi* 政德合一) in the new Republic. The formula echoes other formulas such as the "unity of the political and the religious" (*zhengjiaoheyi* 政教合一) or the "unity of the political and the sacrificial" (*zhengjiheyi* 政祭合一), a "constellation of notions" that may be helpful to rethink the way Duan but, beyond him, a broad political milieu of the time (Beiyang militarists, warlords and so on) related to the political. We will see later that such an understanding (*zhengdeheyi*) of the political has two main consequences: on the one hand, it reflects a system of political thought in which institutional forms of the political may adapt to changing historical conditions but should remain subsidiary to the leadership prerogatives of virtuous leaders (*xianzhe* 賢者, *junzi* 君子); On the other hand, this intertwinement of the moral and the political also needs to translate into *jiaohua* 教化 enterprises. Whereas Confucianism-inspired *jiaohua* previously partook in the fabric of the imperial order through a number of official institutions, the end of the imperial system and the attacks against classical education created a vacuum. New instruments had to be devised to fill such a vacuum and this is precisely the reason why Duan Zhengyuan also involved himself in very concrete *jiaohua* project, including the creation of the Daode Xueshe 道德學社.

2.2 Morals as the Condition of Legitimacy of the Political

In order to introduce some central aspects of Duan's political thought, I will base myself on some of the ideas introduced in his book *Zhengzhi datong* 政治大同 (The Great Unity in the Political Realm) published in 1930 (Duan 2017, 25-94), knowing that many of the ideas discussed in that work were also tackled in numerous writings before. Duan

was not only a religious leader but also a prolific writer who produced dozens of volumes, that are often highly repetitive. This immediately raises the question of the status of such a literature. Neither merely religious nor really philosophical, the "thought" conveyed in these texts mainly serves the purposes of edification and the rhetorical promotion of a political imaginary or, in Eske Møllgaard's words, a Confucian political imagination[7] at a time: (a) when "tradition" was under severe attack by part of the westernized intelligentsia; (b) but when the political imagination associated with Confucianism still constituted the basic mental framework and worldview of a large part of a political and military elite which was, therefore, predisposed to appropriate it.

Very classically, Duan Zhengyuan emphasizes both the centrality of morals in his thought and claims that the latter inherits an ancient orthodox tradition:

> China has an orthodox moral thought that has been interrupted after Yao and Shun, Yu the Great, Tang, Wen and Wu, the Duke of Zhou and Confucius. My thought is inheriting this orthodox moral thought. (Duan 2017, 33)[8]

Whereas the appeal to antiquity and tutelary figures of Chinese civilization is a recurrent pattern of most Confucian discourses, the specific interpretation of the "line of transmission of the Dao" (i.e., claimed Confucian orthodoxy) is here interesting in that Duan emphasizes the

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7 Mentioning here a political imaginary, I have been inspired by the recent book of Eske Møllgaard (2018). Møllgaard's basic understanding of Confucian discourse is that it is a political imaginary (and no philosophy) that became dominant across Chinese culture, up to this day. Although I disagree on many of points with him, since I believe that his understanding of Confucianism does not render justice to the variety of what may be encompassed under this label, I certainly acknowledge that it is also a powerful (and useful) analysis and critique of some types of Confucian political discourses. The discourse of Duan Zhengyuan, and to a large extent the discourse of the warlords and officials he was in contact with, can largely be understood as the assertion across thousands of highly repetitive pages of a Confucian political imagination, that is, of the possibility of "an imaginary counter-state to compete with the actually existing state."(Møllgaard 2018, 11)

8 中國有一個正統的道德思想, 自堯舜禹湯文武周公孔子而絕. 我的思想, 就是繼承這一個正統的道德思想.

fact that the Confucian tradition largely went astray after Confucius. This valorization of antiquity and lesser attention paid to the subsequent development of Confucianism largely reflects his Master Long's view that "The Han dynasty Confucian style of textual criticism (*kaoju* 考據) as well as the Song dynasty neo-Confucianism (*lixue* 理學), were both limited to the study of texts. They had little to say about human nature and the way of heaven."[9]

This being said, such a critical appropriation of the tradition has its limits since Duan nevertheless emphasizes the importance of the three bonds (*sangang* 三綱), that is, of the three types of fundamental relations (ruler/minister; father/son; husband/wife) that have been asserted and promoted by Confucians first during the Han dynasty and constantly later on throughout imperial history (increasingly associated with the "five constants" especially starting with the Song dynasty).

> The three bonds are things that our contemporary fellows consider to be the most autocratic, obscurantist, and unequal teachings of rites that are (in fact) sacrificing people. But who knows the true meaning of these three bonds? They are not only non-autocratic, but point in reality to the ultimate freedom; they are not only non-obscurantist, but embody in reality the utmost (form) of civilization; they are not only not-unequal but represent in reality the utmost equality. In order to unfold, true humanism necessarily needs to start from their realization. (Duan 2017, 47)[10]

In an iconoclastic context towards Confucian culture, Duan here frontally opposes the modernist tide and slogans understanding Confucianism as autocratic, obscurantist, and unequal and strongly posits that these traditional bonds or mainstays (the ruler is the mainstay of his minister, the father of his son, the husband of his wife), far from being outdated, endure and remain as important as ever. Interestingly from a rhetorical viewpoint, Duan's discourse does not criticize the

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9 *Shizun lishi chugao* 師尊歷史初稿, 8-9, quoted by Fan Chunwu and translated by David Ownby, in Fan Chunwu (2017, 140).

10 語云, 君爲臣綱, 父爲子綱, 夫爲妻綱, 此今人所訾爲最專制, 最黑暗, 最不平等的殺人之禮教也. 豈知三綱正意, 不但不專制, 而實最自由, 不但不黑暗, 而實最文明, 不但不非不平等, 而實最大平等. 真正的人道主義, 必定有此完成而進化.

catchwords of the modernizers (e.g., freedom, equality) but appropriates them to posit that the three bonds constitute their utmost expression (e.g., they are not only non-autocratic, but point in reality to the ultimate freedom. . .). In fact, the three bonds form the ritual and behavioral cornerstone of Duan's favorite –ism (and a formal concession to a time that cherished –isms so much), that is to say, humanism (*rendaozhuyi* 人道主義) or the humane way, a form of pan-moralism pervading his whole worldview and thought system. Apart from the three bonds, Duan Zhengyuan's pan-moralism is also visible in the Great Unity of the Political Realm through the importance ascribed to the "eight virtues" (*bade* 八德).[11]

In Duan Zhengyuan's opinion, morals need to be constantly re-asserted: modern ideologies cannot ignore them and the forms of the political (monarchy, republic, etc.) cannot live without them. Two short excerpts illustrate this point.

> If you aspire to the World's Great Unity, to freedom and equality, morals should provide a direction and this would even make things much easier: Rather than relying on law, the unity of the nation could be achieved thanks to morals; Rather than relying on politics, the rights of the people could be advocated thanks to morals; Rather than relying on economics, the well-being of the people could be sustained thanks to morals. (Duan 2017, 56)[12]

Here, Duan Zhengyuan alludes to Sun Yat-sen's Three Principles of the People (*sanminzhuyi* 三民主義)[13] even though it does not seem that his argument specifically addresses the work published in 1924

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11 The eight virtues are: *li* 禮 (propriety), *yi* 義 (right conduct), *lian* 廉 (integrity), *chi* 恥 (sense of shame), *zhong* 忠 (loyalty), *xiao* 孝 (filiality), *ren* 仁 (benevolence), *ai* 愛 (love). The association of these different elements can be traced back to the Ming dynasty. Compared to Duan Zhengyuan's previous writings, Fan Chun-wu (2015, 244-259) emphasizes the specific importance of these eight virtues in Duan (2017): they are considered "pillars supporting Heaven" (*chengtianzhu* 撐天柱).

12 欲求世界大同, 自由平等, 必根據道德, 乃能事半功倍. 民族之團結, 以法律團結之, 不若以道德團結之. 民權之提倡, 以政治提倡之, 不若以道德提倡之也. 民生之維持, 以經濟維持之, 不若以道德維持之也.

13 *Minzuzhuyi* 民族主義 (nationalism), *minquanzhuyi* 民權主義 (democracy), and *minshengwhuyi* 民生主義 (the well-being of the people) simply appear here as *minzu*, *minquan* and *minsheng*.

(where, for instance, the rejuvenation of ancient morals is also advocated). Rather, his discourse seems to be more generally orientated against projects carried out by those reformers whose ambition was to modernize the country by putting primarily emphasis on legal procedures, types of polity, and economics but neglecting morals, deemed to be the backbone of Chinese civilization. It is noteworthy that Duan's position largely resembles that of late Qing modernizers distinguishing between a Chinese moral and spiritual "constitution" (*zhongti* 中體), to be preserved and Western "function" (*xiyong* 西用) to be appropriated even though the scope of what is meant by constitution (*ti*) or function (*yong*) is not necessarily the same.

> If importance is ascribed to law and not to men . . . no society, whatever the country, can be ruled properly. The great war (WWI) that broke out in Europe or all the disorders that have struck us since the start of the Republican era have much to do with talk about law and with devilish men. Therefore, in terms of political action, whatever the state model [*guoti* 國體: republic, monarchy, etc.] or political system [*zhengti* 政體: autocratic, constitutional, etc.], there is no absolute superiority or inferiority. Only if those in office are moral men, wise and able, then it will afterwards be possible to adapt to circumstances of the time and to legislate accordingly. . . . (Duan 2017, 62)[14]

It is well-known that the First World War and its ravages had an immense impact in the ranks of many reformers, throughout the world, who had somewhat previously idealized Western modernity (and power) and struggled to import it into their own countries. To some extent, an age of delusions quickly followed an age of illusions and fueled forms of cultural nationalism and critiques of stereotypes of Western modernity. Duan's discourse certainly belongs to this brand of critical discourses that also laments China's unstable situation. This excerpt strikingly underscores Duan's relative indifference to the type of polity implemented in China ("whatever the state model or

14 若重法而不重人. . . 任何國家社會, 無一而可治者. 歐洲大戰之產生, 民國以來之個亂象, 即口法而人爲鬼蜮也. 故國家政治作用, 不論何種國體, 何種政體, 亦無絕對的優劣, 總要當國家政治之居者, 爲賢明有德之人, 然後因時制宜, 因事立法.

political system, there is no absolute superiority or inferiority. . .''). He does not dream to return to an imperial order since the form of the political regime is for him secondary in importance. He can certainly live with a republic or a constitutional monarchy. The crux of the matter is not here: whatever the polity, the legitimacy of the political is anchored in its link with morals. And morals are not considered to be the emanation of society's values at a given point of time (in Marxist terms, morals are certainly no superstructure for Duan): they are not relative and context-dependent, they have their own transcendent and ontological basis. In that sense, Duan understands the political as being, by nature, some sort of "theologico-political" or "politico-religious" order led, directly or indirectly, by those—the sages, the sage-kings—capable of actualizing the ultimate moral structure of the universe. Here, we are fully in the realm of what Møllgaard presents as Confucianism's political imagination.

2. 3. Rethinking the Conditions of Possibility of the World as One Community (Tianxia weigong 天下爲公) *Utopia*

Considering all that has been said up to this point, it is no wonder that Duan dedicates a part of his book to the selection of the "virtuous and capable." These elements are discussed in a section of the book commenting on one of the usual shibboleths of the Confucian political imaginary,[15] the world as one community, that appeared in ancient texts, including in the *Liyun* 禮運 (Evolution of Rites), a chapter of the classical *Liji* 禮記 (Book of Rites). Duan's discussion is in fact directly based on a few characters (*xuanxian* 選賢, *yuneng* 與能, *jiangxin* 講信, *xiumu* 修睦) appearing in this classical text.[16] But of course, his

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15 Other formulas of the Confucian imaginary discussed by Duan include the Great Unity and World Peace.

16 The *Liyun* text is the following: *Dadao zhi xingye, tianxia weigong. Xuanxianyuneng, jiangxinxiumiu* 大道之行也, 天下爲公. 選賢與能, 講信修睦. Legge's classical translation is the following: "When the Grand course was pursued, a public and common spirit ruled all under the sky. They chose men of talent, virtue and ability; Their words were sincere and what they cultivated was harmony." Chinese Text Project, https://ctext.org/liji/li-yun?filter=521742.

position and comments are not that of a philologist but that of a religious leader. The context in which he advocates "the world as a community" is the China he lived in, struck by all the catastrophes of warlord politics and division, a country in which trust of the people towards politicians was low and where, in his opinion, particular private interests prevailed.

Duan underlines a difference between the "virtuous" (*xianzhe* 賢者, that is, the Confucian gentlemen *junzi* 君子), involved in self-cultivation and self-transformation dynamics (of which filial piety is a blatant manifestation) and the merely "capable" (*nengzhe* 能者)—one would maybe speak today of highflyers or those with high potential—whose top abilities may be used in totally inappropriate ways. In order to avoid this and produce capable officials (*nengchen* 能臣) Duan emphasizes that the virtuous should control those who are simply "capable" (2017, 68).[17] In his system, the virtuous should be selected by . . . their virtuous peers (who other than the virtuous is legitimate for the task of understanding and identifying virtue. . .?) and have the power of nominating the merely capable (2017, 68-69).[18]

These excerpts can also be read in relationship to another aspect of Duan's thought, that is, his emphasis on the role of moral Masters that, he believes, has been neglected after Confucius and Mencius. Thus, Jin Xiaodong highlights that Duan broadened the classical understanding of the three bonds (*sangang*) and the Confucian five archetypes of human relationships (*wulun*) so that they become four bonds and six archetypes (*sigangliulun* 四綱六倫). In each case, the new dimension is the relation between the Master and his disciples or students (e.g., the Master becomes the mainstay of the student *shiweishenggang* 師爲生綱) (Jin 2014, 175-184, 205-207). I will not delve here into the way Duan thinks of this relationship in general but merely underscore that, as we will see later, he largely positioned himself as a master of powerful warlords and officials of his time (while emphasizing his financial independence in order not to be

[17] Another way of expressing the supremacy of the the Way and morals over the political is to say that "the transmission of the Way conditions political transmission" (*daotong zhiyue zhengtong* 道統制約正統). (Jin 2014, 169)

[18] The text is not specific about the way the virtuous should be practically selected.

instrumentalized). Without being yet able to provide definite evidence on the point, it is at least possible to advance the hypothesis that he would easily see himself as a kingmaker of the new republic.

Ascribing power to the virtuous is for Duan all the more necessary because the roots of society's problems are embedded in a crisis of confidence of the people toward corrupt politicians unable to align their discourses with practical action (2017, 69-70). Hence the necessity to be able to speak truthfully (*jiangxin* 講信), the risk being otherwise to generate non-harmonious relations (*bumu* 不睦) at all levels:

> Nowadays, the difficulties between capitalists and the workforce are linked to the lack of harmony between the two; the fact that the people want to overthrow warlords is also linked to this lack of harmony.[19]
>
> The means to eliminate this lack of harmony crystallizes on one word: restoration/cultivation (*xiu*)[20]. . . . Therefore, ancient sages, pondering on the word harmony and the way to achieve it, used another word, the word restoration/cultivation (*xiu*) that includes the idea of integrating morals and politics. What is a moral politics? It means implementing a politics of filial piety and brotherly respect. . . . If the virtuous are in power, it will be like unifying the sovereign and ministers with masters and Confucian scholars. (2017, 70)[21]

These lines do not require much comment since we fall back on the integration of morals and politics already introduced before. Let us simply complement this by saying that in his comment, Duan also insists that those in charge are capable of serving as moral exemplars (*yishenzuoze* 一身作則).

> Selecting the virtuous, appointing the capable, speaking truthfully, and restoring harmony: No matter how the political regime is transformed and society reformed, if we forget these eight characters, no one will succeed.[22] (2017, 71)

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19 像現時勞動者和資本家爲難, 就是勞資不睦, 民眾要打倒軍閥, 就是軍民不睦.

20 修睦的修字, 是物舊重修的意思.

21 化除不睦的辦法, 重在一個修字. . . 古先哲對於睦字的辦法, 下一個修字. . . 就含有德政在內. 德政是什麼, 德政就是實行孝悌之政. . . 如果選得賢者在位, 就是君相師儒合一.

22 選賢與能, 講信修睦: 無論政體如何變化, 社會如何改革, 要想離開這八個字, 誰都辦不成.

This concluding sentence encapsulates the core of Duan's political thought by differentiating between what he understands as constant truths ("the political" needs to be anchored in "the moral" under the leadership of sages) that should prevail and changing historical circumstances that cannot question or challenge these truths. Writing in the 1930s, that is to say, during a period when the future was increasingly gaining importance in order to retrospectively think the present—suffice it to mention, on the one hand, the influence of the modernization/westernization paradigm, the belief in the progress of history or the influence of all sorts of teleologies including the Marxist one, and, on the other hand, all the attacks against things old—Duan largely remained a man driven by a "regimen of historicity" (i.e., a way of articulating the past, the present, and the future) where the past kept relevance to think the present and to envision the future.[23] It is however noteworthy that this relevant past was probably much less for him history in itself than the enduring validity of a more general worldview (and cosmology) that borrowed its orientations from the ancient Confucian symbolic matrix. This might explain his degree of acceptance of social and political changes (the aforementioned excerpts show that institutional changes did not matter so much for him) as long as they could remain compatible with his value-system.

Far from mere intellectual speculations, Duan attempted to contribute to the realization of his ideals through very concrete actions and projects, a point to which we now turn.

3. Contributing to a New Society and Political Order

One of the remarkable traits of Duan Zhengyuan's action is its double orientation: on the one hand, toward circles of politicians and military men and, on the other hand, among the people (*minjian*), at the grassroots level.

[23] On the notion of "regimen of historicity," see the seminal work of French historian François Hartog (2003).

3.1. Involvement in Circles of Power

I previously wrote about Yiguandao's patriarch Zhang Tianran, a prominent religious leader in the 1930s and 1940s (Billioud 2017, 209-240). Zhang had an incredible impact and turned the Yiguandao into a mass organization. However, it is difficult to find solid evidence or even traces of his relationship to important social and political figures of the time. This might be linked to the fact that Yiguandao is a group for which politics certainly matters but that does not aspire to reshape the social and political order. Its horizon is the longer time span of its millenarian eschatology. The situation is completely different for Duan Zhengyuan whose action is much more linked to the historical context in which he lived and to his ambition to contribute to the perpetuation of a moral and political order at a time of historical uncertainties.

Involvement in circles of power translated into numerous interactions with powerful people of the time, some of whom took him as their Master or, at least, consulted him about political matters. From this perspective, it is possible to understand why some contemporary revivalists call him "the Confucius of Modern China" (*xiandai Zhongguo Kongfuzi* 現代中國孔夫子). Not unlike Confucius travelling across the kingdoms of ancient China, he frequently travelled across the polities or fiefdoms of warlord China in order to give his advice about how the country should be managed and peace restored.

Duan Zhengyuan had for instance some exchanges in 1924 with warlord Wu Peifu 吳佩孚 (1874–1939), a prominent leader of the so-called Zhili clique, about the way to pacify and unite China. Invited by Wu in Luoyang, he tried, without success, to convince him to appropriate his ideal of the unification of morals and politics and give up the recourse to mere military might (Jin 2014, 128). In 1930, he also tried to convince Chiang Kai-shek to rule the country "by the means of moral politics" (*yidezheng zhiguo* 以德政治國) (Baoju 2015, 15). However, one of the most interesting cases of his relationships with warlords is perhaps his relationship with He Jian 何鍵 (1887–1956).

He Jian was born in 1887 in Hunan province in a modest family that nevertheless valued education and had produced some imperial

examination degree holders in previous generations. He received a combination of modern and traditional schooling, including at Changcha's Yuelu academy (McCord 2014, 113) and finally embraced a military career in the context of the 1911 Revolution. He participated to the KMT's Northern Expedition and gained a reputation thanks to his military victories and, later on, because of his anti-Communism. He Jian was able to cleverly navigate the troubled waters of KMT factional politics, earn the trust of Chiang Kai-shek, and consolidate his position as overlord of Hunan province until his demise in 1937.[24] His embrace of traditional culture preceded his encounter with Duan Zhengyuan. Thus, in 1928 He Jian was already involved in the promotion of a movement to "honour Confucius and read the classics" (*zun Kong dujing* 尊孔讀經). At the beginning of the 1930s (1931?), He Jian invited Duan Zhengyuan to visit him in Hunan in order to advise him how to handle problems of "communist banditry" and subsequently took him has his master. He would also implement some policies such as a local "New Life Movement" on the basis of Duan's recommendations (Yang 2005, 479; Fan Chunwu 2017, 147).[25] He Jian's diary regularly mentions Duan Zhengyuan. The following excerpt was part of what he wrote on May 11, 1931 after discussions with emissaries sent by Duan Zhengyuan:

> May 11, 1931, Clear weather.
> 6:30 a.m.: Practice of Taijiquan, Baguaquan.
> 7:40 a.m.: Letter written to Master Duan Zhengyuan.

[24] On He Jian, see McCord (2014, 107-146) and Yang (2005).

[25] I mentioned above the importance of the "eight virtues" (*bade*) in Duan Zhengyuan's *The Great Unity of the Political Realm*. It is noteworthy that the first four of these eight virtues are those that would be at the center of Chiang Kai-shek's New Life Movement launched in 1934. Considering (1) the importance of these virtues in Duan's thought; (2) the proximity between Duan Zhengyuan and He Jian (who actively promoted these virtues in territories he administered, along with the Confucius cult and classics reading); and (3) the exchanges on cultural and moral matters existing between He Jian (who himself wrote a lot about traditional culture and the eight virtues) and Chiang Kai-shek (e.g., in fall 1932 in Hunan), one could ask to which extent Duan Zhengyuan's ideas might have contributed to the New Life ideology of the Chiang Kai-shek's regime. Further research would be necessary to gather evidence on that point. On this point, see also Fan Chunwu (2015, 253).

8:20 a.m.: Master Duan sent Mr. Chen Yaochu, Wang Tunan, and Jiang Zhongru to visit me. The recommendation in terms of priorities for the resolution of the current political situation is to reform politics. The method is the following: (1) promoting the true and original spirit of the Chinese nation, putting into practice moral consciousness, [natural and true morals][26] in order to rectify the humane heart/mind of the people and strengthen the original vitality of the country. (2) Selecting the virtuous and the capable for the sake of a true [implementation] of the ideal of the world as a community (*tianxia weigong* 天下爲公) (3) if the previous recommendations are not taken into account and implemented, then, as a last resort, it will be necessary to consider other good policies to protect ourselves and quietly await an opportunity to be saved.

Besides, there are several means to eliminate noxious red bandits: (1) Face and explain the current situation of banditry so that the Master may [find a way to] exert a subtle influence on it [on us?][27]; (2) summon one's moral heart-mind, display spirit in order to align oneself totally with the Way of the Master so that officers and soldiers of each department also benefit from the warmth of the way; thus, heresies will be swept away and we will return to the right path. Hunan's general policy about how to cope with the current political situation should be: (1) implement the Middle Way; it is explicitly for the people but in fact it is (also) for us; (2) use the force of the central government in order to cope with the armies of Guangdong and Guangxi. This is what is considered appropriate. More than anything else, it is necessary to try our best to deal with the opposite side and only as a last resort use full military force to oppose them. (3) As regards He Jingzhi (He Yingqin), it is necessary to get in touch with him in the spirit of the Way, mentioning the responsibility to implement the Great Unity (Datong). Globally, it seems to me that what

[26] There is probably a typo or a mistake in this group of words: 中天然眞道德.

[27] This sounds a bit arcane and further research would be necessary to clarify the role that Duan could play here. It is well-known that many disciples believed that Duan was endowed with miraculous powers, including the ability to prevent natural disasters. Here it is not impossible to think that He Jian or the envoys of Duan that he had met on that day discussed about some sort of possible miraculous intervention of the master. I do not have any evidence, but this is in any case a possible interpretation of this sentence that would square with miraculous interventions evoked elsewhere. On these points, see Fan Chunwu (2017, 147-148).

> was discussed is the (adequate) treatment to cure the problems of the current period and I take good note of this. I have already sent a telegram to invite the Master (Duan Zhengyuan) to come to Hunan to deliver his advice. (He Jian 1993, 48)

This excerpt, though sometimes arcane (we sometimes lack background information), nevertheless provides a fascinating insight into the influence of Duan Zhengyuan and his Confucianism on prominent leaders of the Republican era, including He Jian but also He Yingqin who was at that time (since 1930) minister for military affairs of the nationalist government. From the perspective of political thought, the ideas summed up in this journal totally reflect Duan's writings discussed above: the *Great Learning neisheng-waiwang* 內聖外王 continuum is emphasized and self-cultivation is reaffirmed as the backbone of political reform ("putting into practice moral consciousness"; "in order to rectify the humane heart/mind of the people and strengthen the original vitality [*yuanqi* 元氣] of the country," etc.); practical measures encompass the selection of the virtuous and the capable, the importance of trust and cultivation of harmony; The political imagination of the Great Unity is emphasized and so is the way of the master (*shidao* 師道), reflecting the superiority of the words of sages over political elites.

Apart from this excerpt, the diary is also interesting in that it shows how a high-ranking official such as He Jian related to Duan Zhengyuan. Thus, he frequently mentions the text of the master that he is reading and on which he is taking notes. He also regularly points elsewhere in the journal to the quiet-sitting sessions (*jingzuo* 靜坐) carried out ahead of these readings. If we include the martial arts (Taijiquan and Baguaquan) practices taking place in the morning, we have in fact a rough picture of the self-cultivation regimen of a prominent disciple of Duan.

Another famous disciple of Duan Zhengyuan, He Yingqin 何應欽 (1890–1987), is mentioned here in He Jian's diary. To a large extent, his relationship to Duan Zhengyuan seems to echo He Jian's. Thus, Fan Chunwu explains that after he had become Duan's disciple, He Yingqin was given pieces of advice by his Master about the way to

get rid of the communist soviet base on the Fujian-Jiangxi border. But we also have elements that potentially further broaden the scope of Duan's involvement in "big history": in a context where, following the Mudken incident, He Yingqin was assuming responsibility for the military situation in Beijing, he seems to have followed Duan's recommendations to look for peace with the Japanese ("Asian countries should no longer fight one another"). Thus, the "armistice" signed with the Japanese (Tanggu truce?) and the conclusion of the "He-Umezu" agreement (何梅協定) signed in Tianjin between He and his Japanese counterparts would have also been advocated by Duan (Fan Chunwu 2017, 146-147).[28]

Duan's political thought was not only an intellectual reaction to a wave of modernization, westernization, and emancipation epitomized by the May Fourth or the New Culture Movements (broadly understood). His discourse was also a timely source of updated symbols—i.e., classical political views and discursive symbols reformulated to take into account the new Republican context—re-invigorating the political horizon and imagination of conservatives whose worldviews had largely remained fashioned by Confucianism and its value system. In fact, the "market" for such a reprocessed classical/Confucian political imagination was broad in Republican China (much broader than what the "total iconoclasm" narrative sometimes leads us to feel) and, delving into the itineraries of warlords and strongmen of the political stage of the time (He Jian and He Yingqin here but also Yan Xishan, Chen Jitang, Chiang Kai-shek, Dai Jitao, Wang Jingwei, etc.), it would probably not be too difficult to show that many—most of them outside of Communist ranks?—were highly receptive to this kind of discourse. A charismatic figure such as Duan had the ability to instill new life into ancient political utopias and turn them into a

[28] The He-Umezu agreement was a secret agreement between China and Japan according to awhich Japan gained a *de facto* control over Hebei province. I do not have so far any solid element to crosscheck the validity of the pieces of information provided in Fan's paper (primarily based on the Moral Studies Society's society literature) and the real importance of the role of Duan Zhengyuan in these negotiations with the Japanese. On He Yingqin, see also Peter Worthing (2016). However, Worthing does not tell much about the relationships between He and Duan Zhengyuan or He and Confucianism.

quasi-religious creeds appropriated and integrated by disciples such as He Jian within their self-cultivation regimen and, afterwards, their political action.

Duan's influence was not limited to circles of power. As mentioned before, his global understanding of the way to save the nation also fueled his *jiaohua* (education/transformation) enterprises at the grassroots level.

3.2 Duan's Jiaohua *Enterprises*

The Daode Xueshe was not Duan Zhengyuan's first *jiaohua* entity. A research society focusing on morals, rites, and human relationships (*Lunli daode yanjiuhui* 倫禮道德研究會) had already been opened in Chengdu in 1912. In a way which is not without formally echoing the Christian model, members gathered each Saturday in order to listen to Duan Zhengyuan's lectures on morals.[29] Before that, they would eat a vegetarian meal and participate in a self-examination session during which they had to recall and ponder over their deeds of the past week, repent and attend a ritual ceremony in front of Confucius's tablet. . . . Things seemed to develop well but in 1914 Duan decided to leave and go to Beijing anticipating that, due to the proximity of all kinds of powerful elites, his enterprise could take a completely different dimension (Jin 2014, 135-136):

> I have heard that today's government intends to reform things that do not work, that the people expect a Republic of the five nations. . . . Not doing this [moving to Beijing] is impossible; I simply have to accomplish my task (Jin 2014, 137).

Commenting on these words of Duan Zhengyuan, Jin Xiaodong (2014, 137) emphasizes that the main incentive to go to Beijing was to implement his ideal of unity of the political and the moral. Beijing would give him the social and political capital lacking in Sichuan and neces-

[29] On the importance of Christianity as a normative model in Republican China, see Goossaert and Palmer (2011, 73-79).

sary for any further expansion while providing a convenient basis for his *jiaohua* activities.

The Daode Xueshe was officially established in 1916 in Beijing with Duan Zhengyuan as its Master. Its Director and patron was Wang Shizhen 王士珍 (Wang Pinqing 王聘卿 1861–1930) who had been Minister of War and Premier of China from 1917 to 1918 (and at some point involved, along with Kang Youwei, in the 1917 attempt by Zhang Xun 張勳 to restore Pu Yi as Emperor). A number of key members of the Daode Xueshe were politicians and military cadres, many of whom had studied in Japan. Among them were Chen Jingnan (Chen Raochu 陳堯初, Chen Quansan 陳全三 1881–?), a graduate from Waseda University who became a member of congress, and Lei Baokang 雷保康 (雷壽榮), a graduate from the Imperial Japanese Army Academy and Lieutenant-General.[30] Fan Chunwu emphasizes that Duan Zhengyuan originally managed to attract a number of Beiyang officials, starting with Wang Shizhen, thanks to his (quasi-magical) healing abilities, which nuances the merely rational image of Confucianism often available in existing research about the society (Fan 2017, 136, 143).[31] Incidentally, one could underscore that the same ability to heal also contributed to popularize the figure of Wang Fengyi 王鳳儀 (1864–1937), the leader of one of the other main redemptive societies with a Confucian orientation of the Republican era, the Universal Morality Society. At a time when "science" was becoming a totem, it is as if quasi-magical healing had also contributed to drive the Confucian modern.

The objectives of the Daode Xueshe were the promotion of the way of Confucius in order to advocate the Great Unity and, ultimately, universal peace. In other words, they perfectly reflected the political imagination developed in Duan's writings throughout the years and that was briefly introduced above. Given the number of high-ranking officials, including military officials, that joined its ranks,

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[30] As mentioned above, other prominent figures of the Republican era such as He Jian or He Yingqin also later took Duan Zhengyuan as their Master but I am not able at that point to clarify to which extent they actively supported or were involved in the activities of the Moral Studies Society. Fan Chunwu (2017, 142-149; 2011, 165).

[31] Fan Chunwu emphasizes the religious charisma of Duan Zhengyuan and the religious dimension of his organization.

the society could have easily benefitted from public funds, but Duan Zhengyuan always refused to proceed in that way and preferred to rely on membership contributions. This probably helped him to keep some independence vis-à-vis the authorities. However, this decision did not stem from any modern concern about the need to circumscribe and differentiate spheres of activities. As was mentioned before, Duan's worldview totally endorsed and even advocated the intertwinement of the moral and the political. Simply stated, morals—and its embodiment, the figure of the sage—should prevail within such an intertwinement. Financial independence was probably the price to pay to protect the sage's role in relation to the political.

From the end of the 1910s to the 1930s, the Moral Studies Society opened branches across the country and, among other places, in Nanjing (1917), Hankou (1918), Zhangjiagkou, Hangzhou (1925), Shanghai and Suzhou (1925), Jiaxing, Ningbo, Xuzhou (1925), Fengtian (1930), Tianjin (1935), Taiyuan (1934), Xi'an (1937) and so on. Altogether, at least 83 branches (in the countryside some were named Yueshushi 閱書室) would have been opened with Beijing as the headquarters of the group (Jin 2014, 137-151, 249-251).

Recorded accounts of people who participated, directly or through relatives in the activities of the society provide insights about how things were organized. Thus, a retired teacher recalls memories of 1946 when he moved to Xi'an with his father, a merchant deeply involved in the society's activities. He mentions a number of branches that were opened in the area along with schools (*zhonghe xiaoxue* 中和小學) where traditional morals and education/transformation (*jiaohua*) could be promoted. It is noteworthy that some of the redemptive societies with a Confucian orientation (here, we have the case of the Morals Studies Societies, but this would also apply to the Universal Morality Society) chose to open schools as a means to expand their activities. Such a pattern is long-lasting since it can still be observed today in the framework of the Confucian revival in China.

The retired teacher also mentioned that among the regular activities the group organized conferences about the Dao (*jiang Dao* 講道) on Sundays that were opened to a large outer public as well as a number of ritual sessions: thus, on the first, eleventh, and twenty-

first days of the lunar calendar, the societies' members (*xueyuan* 學員) all gathered in the main hall of the society's premises and performed kowtow rituals (*sanguijiukou* 三跪九叩) in front of paintings of Confucius, Mencius, and Laozi as well as pictures of Duan Zhengyuan. Meals shared on these days were also vegetarian, as they were in Sichuan a few decades before. Interestingly, a number of the activities of this Xi'an Daode Xueshe group, especially in the educational realm, could continue until 1958 (Jin 2014, 145-147).

The recollections of another elder of the group from the village of Shangyanghua 上陽化 located in the West of Xi'an complements the first account. The local branch of the society was opened in 1937 and activities took place first in a traditional school (*sishu*) operated by one of the members before being delocalized to a local temple. Gathering days, lectures and ritual modalities, refusal to count on any other financial resource than that of the followers, all those patterns corroborate what was already mentioned above. This, group also had its special characteristics: it engaged in operations to suppress opium consumption (lectures and supply of some sort of medicine—the account is not very precise); and also operated a school (*zhonghe xiaoxue* 中和小學). All these activities were not for profit, carried out by volunteers of the group (Jin 2014, 147-150).

Apart from the specific activities of its branches, the Moral Studies Society also operated a publishing house located in Beijing (Dacheng Yinshushe 大成印書社) with local branches. Fan Chunwu's research emphasizes the importance of this activity and the way the society managed to "combine modern, capitalist publishing technologies and marketing systems with the traditional market of morality books" (Fan 2017, 153). In brief, the group was extremely efficient in the massive dissemination of its literature, which was another way of serving its *jiaohua* ambitions.

Conclusion

In the last 15 years quite a lot of research has been produced about "redemptive societies" with attempts to define the category, circum-

scribe its realms of application and, to some extent, differentiate between the different types of groups. The case of the Moral Studies Society and its founder, especially if we compare it with groups such as the Yiguandao, provides some elements that may help us to further refine the category. It seems to me that we could at least distinguish between two types of groups (or two ideal-types of groups) operating in Republican China: (a) those that are primarily conveying an ideology (including an eschatology) where the ultimate ambition is the salvation of mankind; this doesn't mean that these groups are necessarily devoid of any political or social ambition, but at least that they advocate a grand salvation project where a largely ahistorical eschatology and a strong otherworldly dimension prevail; besides, although the historical context may immensely favor their development, they were not emerging as direct reactions against such a historical context. The Yiguandao is a typical example of groups encompassed in such a category; (b) The second type points to those groups for which the immediate objective is less the salvation of mankind before an apocalypse (even though that dimension might also exist) than salvation of the nation and culture at a time of crisis. These groups (e.g. the Moral Studies Society, the Universal Morality Society, the Heart-cleansing Society, the Confucian Religion Association, etc.) primarily have blatant social and political orientations and often (but maybe not always) a very pronounced "Confucian flavor."[32] They are largely reactions—modern reactions, at least to some extent —to a specific historical context that includes the arrival of (Western) modernity with its plurality (some would say its relativism) in the realm of values and process of differentiation in the realm of human activities. In sum, they were both modern fruits of the context (be it formally, in the way they were structured, or due to some of their specific stances, for instance regarding the role of women[33]) and

[32] This in no case means that the first group doesn't promote Confucianism (thus, it is also a central teaching for the Yiguandao).

[33] The work of Prasenjit Duara on the Manchukuo provides some very interesting treatment of the way an organization such as the Universal Morality Society promoted women education (Duara 2003). Duan Zhengyuan also paid a lot of attention to the issue of women.

reactions to this context (especially in the educative, moral, and political realms).

Duan Zhengyuan's thought and enterprises (be it in elite circles or at the grassroots level) not only reflect an opposition to total westernization narratives sometimes typical of some participants in the May Fourth Movement and their heirs. They in fact took shape as a direct reaction against these narratives and against what was perceived as a loss of moral compass. This does not mean that Duan does not garb his promotion of a Confucian political imagination in a veil of modernity. But he belongs to a more global trend of thinkers, political and religious activists who emphasized the limits of Western-style modernization and the need to preserve local spiritual and moral traditions often deemed superior to the overarching Faustian greed of the West. Thus, to some extent, Duan Zhengyuan is also part of a global history that encompasses figures as different as Jamal al-din al-Afghani in the Muslim world, Rabindranath Tagore, Aurobindo Ghose and even Gandhi in India or Liang Qichao and Liang Shuming in China.[34] All of them, though not necessarily to the same extent and with the same means and agendas, both incorporated the Western modernization discourse and tried to oppose its transformative impact on value-systems shaping their worldviews.

Interestingly, there is currently in Mainland China a posterity of Duan Zhengyuan and its Morality Society. It does not take the same popular form as the Yiguandao that now operates again in the country (most of the Morality Society's activities seem to have ceased after 1952) but is obvious in the academic world, especially in those circles where academic activities and Confucian activism overlap. It seems that Duan's thought has become or has the potential to become a source of inspiration for those dreaming to infuse an extra dose of Confucian imagination into the China dream and contribute, by reactivating ancient ideal such as the great unity, to the promotion of a "universality with Chinese characteristics."

[34] On this topic, see Pankaj Mishra (2012).

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