

Martial Agbor Fanga

Atlantic International University, USA

**BOOK REVIEW: SOCIAL DISCIPLINING AND CIVILISING
PROCESSES IN CHINA: THE POLITICS OF MORALITY
AND THE MORALITY OF POLITICS (2024), 236 PAGES** <https://doi.org/10.2478/ppsr-2025-0018>

► Received: 02 August 2025 ► Accepted: 25 September 2025

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-6989-8855> martialfangaagbor@gmail.com

Thomas Heberer's „Social Disciplining and Civilising Processes in China: The Politics of Morality and the Morality of Politics,” published by Routledge in 2024, offers a deep and extensive check of the complexities embedded in China's journey towards modernisation. Heberer, a Senior Professor of Chinese Politics and Society at the Institute of East Asian Studies, University of Duisburg-Essen, superimposes theoretical insights from influential Western sociologists onto the practical realities of contemporary China. The central premise of Heberer's argument posits that the modernisation agenda articulated by the Chinese government in 2017 requires extensive social disciplining—an intricate process more than mere economic policy shifts, extending to the moral framework of the Chinese society. The book thoroughly investigates how the Chinese state frames modernity, not just as a political or economic construct but also as a sociocultural evolution, where discipline, civility, and morality play important roles in shaping the behaviours and minds of its citizens. By using an interdisciplinary methodology that intersects sociology, political science, history, and cultural studies, Heberer emphasizes universal tendencies of societal change while rooting them into the specifics of the Chinese experience (Heberer, pp. 10–11).

The book consists of eight well-defined chapters, each exploring multifaceted dimensions of social disciplining: The first “Covid-19 Pandemic: Disciplined Societies Facing a Predicament” (pp. 1–9), introduces discussion on how the pandemic has laid bare the enforcement of social discipline in public health policy, demonstrating the balance between state authority and public compliance. Chapter 2 “Social Disciplining” (pp. 10–27), defines key terminologies and sets the stage for social discipline as a historical and contemporary phenomenon, referring to the works of Weber and Foucault. Chapter 3 “Disciplining Concepts in Chinese History: Political Culture Matters” (pp. 28–51) explores the historical roots of social disciplining within prominent Chinese philosophical traditions, especially Confucianism, Legalism, and Daoism, showcasing how these ideologies con-

tribute to current statecraft. Chapter 4 “State and Society in China” (pp. 52–72), analyses the relationship between the Chinese state and societal expectations, emphasizing the moral imperative felt by the government to maintain social order. Chapter 5 “Disciplining Efforts During Early Modernising in the 19th and 20th Centuries” (pp. 73–91), narrates the significant social reforms and movements during this period and their relevance in understanding modern disciplinary policies. Chapter 6 “Disciplining Processes Since the Advent of the “Reform and Opening Policies” (Gaige kaifang) (pp. 94–111), examines contemporary policies of social disciplining as a direct consequence of economic reforms initiated in the late 20th century. Chapter 7 “The Power of Morality: Disciplining and Civilising Projects – Four Case Studies” (pp. 112–167), through detailed case studies, illustrates significant projects aimed at moral education and the creation of civilised behaviours among the populace. Chapter 8 “Retrospective and Lessons Learnt (pp. 168–183) summarizes the lessons learned concerning the intersection of social disciplining processes with China’s wider modernisation objectives.

The author integrates a blend of qualitative analysis with historical narrative, permitting for a rich interpretation of social phenomena. By contrasting Western theorists like Foucault with Chinese cultural contexts, he illuminates how traditional ideas have resurfaced with a modern twist within state policies (Heberer, pp. 10–27). The author’s use of case studies, such as the analysis of the „New Life Movement” (pp. 73–91) and contemporary moral campaigns, improves the analytical rigor, offering an authentic representation of China’s attempts in constructing a modern citizenry.

The book’s strengths are found in its comprehensive depth of research and careful analysis of the processes that intertwine political morality with social discipline. Heberer adeptly evokes historical parallels while contextualising them in present-day China, thus addressing the unique characteristics that define Chinese modernity (Heberer, pp. 52–72). The interdisciplinary approach proves especially effective, with sociological theories enriched by empirical case studies, illustrating disciplinary frameworks in the context of real-world policies and societal behaviour. Chapters to emphasize on include Chapter 3: Disciplining Concepts in Chinese History (pp. 28–51) and Chapter 7: The Power of Morality (pp. 112–167). These sections present novel insights into how historical philosophies inform current disciplinary strategies, and distinguishes Heberer’s work from others in the field. The chapter comparing traditional Confucian ideas with the modern social credit system represents a compelling reflection on the evolution of moral governance (Heberer, pp. 168–183).

While the author’s book is remarkable in scope, it may potentially underplay the nuances of local variations and individual responses to measures of state disciplining. Although the book acknowledges the confrontation and tensions arising from social expectations, it is less robust in addressing grassroots resistance or alternative forms of societal organisation that go along with disciplinary policies (Heberer, pp. 94–111). This oversight could present a more dynamic perspective on how citizens engage with government directives above mere compliance or opposition.

Again, some areas, such as ethical dilemmas surrounding the social credit system and its implications for individual liberties, warrant a more critical engagement. Heberer highlights the need for higher accountability within the state while also reiterating that moralising government actions must also align to ethical standards (Heberer, pp. 42–44).

Heberer's exploration of the disciplinary processes selectively intersects with broader discourses in social science literature about statehood, sovereignty, and governance in non-Western contexts. His alignment with theorists such as Foucault and Elias alongside his juxtaposition of historical Confucian norms with modern governance structures skillfully contributes to existing academia. The discourse on "multiple modernities" appears particularly salient, arguing against the linear notion of progress often attributed to Western models (Heberer, pp. 94–111).

The book is primarily targeted at scholars in political science, sociology, and Asian studies, but it is also accessible to practitioners in policy-making and social governance contexts. The depth of analysis provided is rich not only for academic readers but also for policymakers looking to understand the implications of disciplinary measures in the search for societal modernity.

In conclusion, Thomas Heberer's „Social Disciplining and Civilising Processes in China” is a significant contribution to the understanding of China's ambitious modernisation project. The book intricately weaves together historical ideas with contemporary practices of disciplining society, pinpointing the critical role of morality within political narratives. Through its interdisciplinary lens and thoughtful analysis, the author has crowned his work with deep implications for both academia and practical governance. His insights about the inclusion of morality into political structures challenge readers to brainstorm the intersections of ethics, authority, and the future direction of Chinese society as it strives for a modern identity with distinct characteristics.