

Confucian Education and Utopianism: The Classics-reading Movement and its Potential for Social Change

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ABSTRACT: China's contemporary classics-reading movement (*dujing yundong*) has grown significantly since its emergence in the 2000s but remains little researched and is so far only known as part of the revival of Confucianism on the popular level. This study, based on ethnographic field research in ten Chinese cities, discusses the movement's character under the lens of the grounded utopian movement theory and combines this with the civil sphere theory to exhibit the movement's potential for social change under China's specific sociopolitical conditions. While activists hope that reciting and memorising Confucian classics will cultivate virtuous individuals (*junzi*) who will change Chinese society from the bottom up, this study shows that involved parents, teachers, and headmasters have greater potential to bring about social change. The space to induce change, however, is fragile.

KEYWORDS: civil sphere theory, Confucian education, classics-reading education, classics-reading movement, grounded utopian movements, utopianism, social change.

Introduction: Reading the classics and the perspective of utopia in social movements

The study of Confucian classics used to be at the heart of the education of young men in imperial China who aspired to pursue a career in civil service (Lee 2000: 21, 47; Chen 2009: 191-3). In the early 2000s, reading the classics reemerged in the "study halls" (*xuetang* 學堂) and "academies" (*shuyuan* 書院), especially in large cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Chengdu, Xiamen, and Guangzhou.¹ The educational facilities appeared as "reactivated traditional structures" (Billioud and Thoraval 2007: 15; Billioud and Thoraval 2015: 86) and were commonly summarised under the generic term of "traditional-style private school" (*sishu* 私塾). Principles and thoughts of great masters as manifested in classical writings, a modest lifestyle devoted to learning, and cultivating a good character are in the foreground of "classics-reading education" (*dujing jiaoyu* 讀經教育). A morally upright and virtuous person (*junzi* 君子) is the anticipated outcome of classics-reading education (Billioud and Thoraval 2015: 43, 86) and the hoped-for bearer of potential to change Chinese society towards a better future.

Various voices criticised classics-reading as an outdated teaching approach from the past (Cao 2012: 19). Parents who send their children to study halls or academies are sometimes said to be fleeing from public education into a "hidden paradise of peace and prosperity" or "imaginary paradise" (*shi wai tao yuan* 世外桃源)

(Cao 2012: 19; *Young Literator* 2014: 22-3) that is solely based on Confucian thought and isolated from the outer world. Education in such a silo would leave the children unprepared for higher education and life (Cao 2012: 19-20). The term "utopia" is used in this context to express the fundamental mismatch of today's world and the rather misplaced study halls and academies (Cao 2012: 19).

In this criticism, utopia is used as a trope or *thought image* to illustrate the critics' standpoint. Sociological and historical research, however, makes use of utopia as an *analytical category* to explain how this mismatch that is perceptible on the surface can be understood more profoundly:

Utopia is a discourse in two contradictory parts. First, it is a narrative about discontinuity. It is a story through which men and women imagine a radical act of disjunction, enabling people, acting freely and in concert with others, to realize the creative potential imprisoned by the way we live now. But secondly, since the narrative is written by men and women rooted in contemporary conditions and language, it inevitably shows where they are, even as it describes where they want to be (Winter 2006: 3).

1. Urban environments are advantageous in initiating alternative education given their easy accessibility to many people with adequate financial resources. However, more and more study halls that have started in the city move to the countryside, which seems to offer a more ideal environment for traditional Confucian learning (Dutournier and Wang 2018: 267; Gilgan 2020: 55, 129, 153).

Utopian thinking emerges from discontinuities in the past and moments of loss: i.e., lack and emptiness are counterbalanced with rich imaginaries (Bregnbæk and Bunkenborg 2017: 1). It can lead to either escapism or activism. For instance, when utopias are constructed to escape from the present, which is a pure mechanism of coping with something unpleasant, they distract people from their current circumstances and are therefore not constructive for change (Martell 2018: 440). However, utopias that *experiment* with the present and aim at creating *alternatives to the existing material conditions* exhibit a relation to material reality, and they can instigate social change (Martell 2018: 442). Such “current utopias” (Martell 2018: 437) are concrete plans that can be tested and thus create experiential knowledge on what alternatives might look like. They do not rest on individual interests; instead, they are shared hopes and ideals on a societal level (Martell 2018: 436). In their critical discourse with the present, they posit *future progress* and call for change where it is previously lacking (Kenyon 1982: 129, 149). Also, this involves a critical retrospective on the historical developments that led to the current conditions.

This article contends that the contemporary classics-reading movement in mainland China is driven by this *active utopianism*. In Gilgan (2020), the author derived the definition of a grounded utopian movement (GUM) for the classics-reading movement from the grounded theory analysis of research data. This is the first time that the character of the movement has been classified; previous studies only explored the movement’s activism over the pursuit of a common agenda (Billioud 2018: 3, note 6; Billioud and Thoraval 2015: 13). The GUM theory helps to explain movements arising under conditions of oppression and coercion (e.g., those generated through a direct foreign rule) that threaten groups, people, or a community, resulting in the desire to search for an ideal place where this oppression does not exist (Price, Nonini, and Fox Tree 2008: 134). Tradition and ancient customs are used as resources to create this ideal place as well as a new, tradition-based identity. In concrete spatial practice, educators and parents embody values of the past, perform tradition-inspired rituals, and adjust their ways of life according to their knowledge of the past; they ground their hopes for a better Chinese future society on Confucian (educational) tradition. Consequently, their actions become a quest for an ideal future.

Another previously untouched aspect is the classics-reading movement’s potential for change, which should be assessed based on China’s specific sociopolitical structure. To further develop Gilgan’s analysis (2020), this article refers to the civil sphere theory (CST) and contends that the people-to-people network character and informality of the classics-reading movement, which entails an absence of state authority, provide much-needed space for doing things differently and implementing alternatives in the *space among the people*. Therefore, this study ascribes the agency for change not to the children in the classics-reading facilities (as the educators would do in their vision of the future) but to the adults who drive classics-reading education forward, but only in specific types of study halls and facilities.

Data collected through semi-structured interviews involving parents, teachers, and headmasters of 21 full-time study halls and academies as well as participatory observation during ethnographic

field research in China between October 2015 and July 2016 in ten cities (Beijing, Chengdu, Fuzhou, Guangzhou, Qufu, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Suzhou, Taishun, and Xiamen; forming the largest database available to date) and results from the above-mentioned previous analysis form the basis of discussion. The interview excerpts in this article were chosen to illustrate the contradictions and temporal entanglements that are typical for utopianism in social movements. The names of the facilities and interviewees were changed to ensure their privacy protection.²

The intellectual construction behind classics-reading education and its links to history

The landscape in traditional culture education in China is very diverse, yet one prominent figure stands out, and that is the Taiwanese scholar Wang Caigui 王財貴 (born in 1949). Wang is convinced that a comprehensive education must be based on exposure to the wisdom of the sages of the past. Children should learn directly from the sages who are no longer alive but whose wisdom is contained in the classics, the “books of supreme value” (*zui you jiazhi de shu* 最有價值的書) (Wang 2009: 5; Wang *no date*: 11). This is the starting point for classics-reading education. Wang compiled textbooks from the classics (or text excerpts from them) and developed pedagogical approaches for learners of different ages: classics-reading for children (*shao'er dujing* 少兒讀經 or *ertong dujing* 兒童讀經) and for adults (*chengren dujing* 成人讀經) (Billioud and Thoraval 2015: 85; Wang 2009: 6-8, 12-4; Wang *no date*: 12-21). Wang’s endeavours to revive the Confucian tradition through education began with a parent-child initiative on reading Chinese classics, starting with the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語) in Taiwan in 1994, under the slogan “My child, read with me” (*xiaopengyou, gen wo du* 小朋友, 跟我讀) (He 2009: 23). Such activities expanded to mainland China by 1997 and encouraged parents to read Confucian classics with their children after class and on weekends (He 2009: 26; Cao 2012: 18). Soon, full-time educational approaches emerged in private study halls and academies, challenging compulsory education. However, no official statistics exist on the total number of facilities and enrolled students. Scholars only estimate that at the end of the 2000s, tens of thousands of students were enrolled in classics-reading educational facilities (Billioud and Thoraval 2015: 48), and a few million children are generally involved in reading the classics (Billioud and Thoraval 2015: 41; Billioud 2018: 8). The headmaster of an academy in Beijing estimates that about 5,000 classics-reading facilities are found in China.³

According to Wang Caigui, the recitation of the classics can start at the age of 3, and between ages 6 and 13, children should practice frequent rhythmic and fast recitation (*songdu* 誦讀) to imprint the words of China’s sages in memory, ready to unfold lifelong effects. After ideally ten years of recitation, after the age of 13 when the capacity for understanding increases, learners should spend another

2. The names of the facilities have been altered according to the type of facility, place name, and an addition of ‘A’, ‘B’, ‘C’ etc. to distinguish between facilities in one location (e.g., Shenzhen Study Hall A, B, C). The interviewees are mentioned according to their affiliation with the respective facility.

3. Conversation with the headmaster of Beijing Academy A, 20 January 2016.

ten years trying to understand the memorised texts (Wang *no date*: 21; Wang 2009: 16). Children need to study the classics for at least eight hours each day and memorise a total of 300,000 Chinese characters and English words for them to be eligible for further education at Wang's own academy.⁴ Additional subjects, such as calligraphy and classical music instruments, should be offered only at this advanced stage of learning.⁵ This is the basis of Wang's approach of "candid and intense classics-reading" (*laoshi daliang dujing* 老實大量讀經) or "pure classics-reading" (*chun dujing* 純讀經).⁶ Further refinement of the reader's character is ensured through routines in everyday life in study halls and academies, which are permeated by traditional ethics and Confucian ritual.

Wang's approach to education offers parents, teachers, and headmasters in the field of traditional education something they can do concretely and actively in the present to connect with the past in a way that benefits a desired future. Likewise, activists' understanding of the past is a key component in understanding their current action towards creating a better future society, and this is also the core of deciphering utopian thinking – it means understanding how people, anchored in their histories, understand their specific contemporary circumstances and how they interpret their historically developed present under the perspective of a possible future (Gordin, Tilley, and Prakash 2010: 2-4). Confucian activists draw from the past in a twofold way: (1) activists' narratives of the past are stories of discontinuity, caesuras, and sociopolitical upheavals; (2) their vision of a better society is equipped with Confucian traditional values, social relations, and past ways of life. They link their hopes for the realisation of this vision to the training of modern virtuous people (*junzi*); accordingly, they see the graduates of classics-reading education as *agents of change* who will carry the words of the ancient sages and morally sincere behaviour into society and change it towards a better future.⁷

The narrative around caesuras often opens with the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1905, with the abolition of civil service examinations in China, the educational system, which had been at the heart of the societal and intellectual system for hundreds of years, came to an end. As a result of the reforms between 1900 and 1937, no single generation graduated from secondary school in the same system in which they started primary school (Glöckner 2013: 196). These years were the starting point for Wang Caigui's emotion-laden perception of the past and his view of discontinuity with his own tradition. As he explains in a 2015 interview, it was around the age of 16 that he regretfully realised that Chinese people had abandoned their own classics for more than 80 years. Wang links this loss of reading the classics to foreign influence in China at the dawn of the twentieth century, when Western theories on modernity were given priority over traditional cultural resources, and the latter were even set aside and blamed for China's backwardness by the Chinese themselves.⁸ China adopted an educational system oriented towards American educational structures and a pedagogical approach that focused on the preparation of students for the practical side of life and earning a living, which Wang criticises as "American utilitarianism." Children would only learn things at the level of their current understanding, without gaining future-relevant knowledge, and the results of such an educational approach were very poor.

By returning to the classics as the key pillar of education and by transmitting wisdom of the sages of China's past, Wang wants to better prepare succeeding Chinese generations for the future while simultaneously repairing what he thinks went wrong in the course of history:

We need to reverse time (*fan shidai* 反時代); we need to transform this age. How do we do that? Actually, we don't transform it directly, and we don't do the opposite of how it is, but we let time go back to peace and impartiality; we return to impartiality. You have to take the middle [moderate] path, and you cannot claim things from hearsay because you don't have any knowledge. So, I also don't approve of... of course, I am opposed to the May Fourth Movement, but I also don't want to go back to tradition completely. Of course, I am against Westernisation, but I also don't completely reject Western knowledge; I still learn Western knowledge, it's like that. Very liberal, very moderate and impartial, not tending to a certain side, like this, it is this attitude. In the process of becoming a [good] person, we need to have this attitude and think about having such an attitude. I want to educate talented people like this; I want to educate a few thousand or a few ten thousand of such people, and they need to walk into the world, and this way, they could influence the whole world (Wang Caigui, 8 December 2015).

On the one hand, Wang calls himself a disciple of the New Confucian thinker Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 (1909-1995), who with several others advocated the recognition of the cross-cultural value of Chinese tradition, which could contribute in particular to the harmonious coexistence of different societies (Makeham 2003: 28-9; Liu 2007: 8; Liu 2008: 192; Xi 2011: 124). Therefore, a scientific exchange on an equal footing was sought. On the other hand, Wang's call for "reversing time" – i.e., bringing back societal conditions as they used to be before foreign influence – can also be read as sinocentric. Although Western knowledge is welcome, it should only be in the form of classical writings that can be recited, and it needs to suit Wang's framework of classics-reading education. Furthermore, his assessment of the May Fourth era echoes the pre-1980s modern Confucianists' emotional views on this time (Xi 2011: 7, 323).

4. Wenli Academy opened in 2012 in Beijing and moved to Taishun in 2015. In 2015, it exhibited a total student enrolment of 27 (ages 13-24), one teacher (Wang Caigui himself), and one female assistant teacher.
5. Referring to talks with the headmasters of Beijing (23 January 2016) and Shanghai Study Hall (17 June 2016), and Wang Caigui (8 December 2015). Beijing Study Hall operates according to Wang's ideal, while Shanghai Study Hall acknowledges some of his pedagogy. Shanghai Study Hall opened in 1998 in a residential area. Due to legal ambiguities regarding its status, it had to close again, and it reopened in 2005. In 2016, it exhibited a total student enrolment of 70 (ages 4-16) and 13 teachers. Beijing Study Hall opened in 2012 in the outskirts of Beijing. In 2016, it exhibited a total student enrolment of 26 (ages 5-13) and seven teachers.
6. Interviews with the headmasters of Beijing Study Hall (23 January 2016), Shanghai Study Hall (17 June 2016), Suzhou Study Hall A (9 November 2015), and Wang Caigui (8 December 2015).
7. While in the field of reading the classics Wang's way of teaching has quite a number of followers, there is also heavy criticism from within the movement, especially from activists who have chosen their own approach to the classics (Gilgan 2022: 209-11). The criticism goes as far as calling Wang's a "poisonous" method (Wang 2018: 54).
8. Interview with Wang Caigui, 8 December 2015.

The time span around the May Fourth Movement (*wusi yundong* 五四運動)⁹ is not only far-reaching and decisive from Wang Caigui's perspective, but also in the memory of other activists in view of the intellectual discontinuity with Confucian ("the own") tradition and education. Chinese intellectuals found themselves in new institutional and knowledge structures, while seriously struggling with their own identity, as the headmaster of Beijing Academy B and follower of Wang Caigui contends:

With the arrival of modernity, that is, starting from the Republican Era, China faced a period of the severest destruction of Chinese classics within the last 100 years. People thought that Chinese classics were useless – and not only useless but also a hindrance to the process of modernisation. So, they rejected them; they totally cast them aside. What did they learn instead? They learned Western theory and Western culture; people brought democracy and science to China. They believed that China's culture would be an obstacle for democracy and science, that people must adopt democracy and science and cast aside Chinese culture. This is how the people of the May Fourth Movement thought. Such a way of thought looks kind of radical today. [I think that] you can absorb things from Western culture, but you do not need to set aside everything from Chinese culture like you pour away bath water (Headmaster of Beijing Academy B, 21 January 2016).¹⁰

In this narrative, the reintroduction of the classics into Chinese education appears as a correction of a mistake made in the past. The realisation that too much of Chinese tradition was cast aside results in the mission to revive it, at least partially. At the same time, this indicates that activists *construct* a tradition that serves their present needs and future aspirations, rather than reconnecting to something "purely original" as the activists envision. Historian Eric Hobsbawm (1983: 2, 4-5) states that traditions can be constructed, and even invented, as a response to new needs that arise from present changes. In a novel situation, stability can be established by creations related to the past. However, these are different from what is called customs. "New" (invented) traditions emerge when the "old" traditions (customs) have proved unsuitable and the creation of new traditions is a conscious decision to distance oneself from old traditions or previous ways. This shows the extent to which an engagement with the past is connected to the present and the future, which is a crucial element in the utopian character of the classics-reading movement.

The intellectual shifts in the first decades of the twentieth century were soon followed by new ruptures. After the foundation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 and in consultation with the Soviet Union, China's education became "red and expert": schooling and working were combined; the goal of education was to become a productive worker, and students would partly work in their school's factory or garden or only go to school part time to support China's workforce (Glöckner 2013: 198). This mode of learning was completely different from the traditional scholar literati-oriented learning of the classics. People were confronted with new modes and modalities of learning and

developing a perspective on life, which also found its way into activists' perception of history. In addition, the years after the establishment of the PRC saw another disconnection with their own traditional heritage during the Cultural Revolution (Seitz 2000: 188). Educational qualification faded in importance in the face of ideology's growing impetus. Facilities for higher education (universities) were shut down, and educational opportunities were cut down to a minimum. The missed chances for a good education resulted in the Cultural Revolution generation being labelled the "lost generation" (Glöckner 2013: 199).

Classics-reading educators reflect on the many shifts witnessed in the educational system and the political and social struggles experienced in the twentieth century, especially concerning their meaning for their children's upbringing and for their parental responsibilities, as a headmaster and mother in Suzhou emphasises:

Before the new China was established, there were all kinds of battles, no matter if with other countries or within our own country – anyways, everything was at war. In 1949, after the New China was established, it started again, and it lasted until the political upheavals of the Cultural Revolution. The Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, and in 1979, there slowly began a process of reform and opening, and only after reform and opening did Chinese society enter a state of normalcy. Before this, it was some kind of *unnormalcy*. Only after entering normalcy can there be people who can think normally about things they want to do, and those who dare to do things that need to be done. (...) Because I am born in 1981, and basically people from the 1970s to the 1980s are born into a more normal time, these people can do more normal things when they are grown up (Headmaster of Suzhou Study Hall A, 9 November 2015).¹¹

This reading of history is very emotional, and the activist is determined to actively work against what has gone wrong in history. For her, classics-reading education is an *active approach* to bringing Chinese culture back into a *normal* condition and ensuring that normalcy is found in Chinese society.

The narratives above reveal perceptions of history interspersed with personal memories and emotional attitudes towards the past. The activists reflect and process interruptions in social and intellectual life under the influence of "Western modernisation"; they deal with the fate of their own tradition, especially the educational tradition, and process loss and regret through future-oriented alternatives to the status quo. Utopia is not an overt *leitmotif* in activists' narratives that can be easily read off them; rather, utopian thinking can be revealed in the ways people see themselves and their contexts in the present and the way they relate that to the past (in their own perceptions) and to their shared expectations

9. 1919–approximately 1924 (Rahav 2015: 159). The time between 1915 and 1919 in which the path to an intellectual reorientation and transformation in intellectual history was paved is also defined as the period of a "New Culture Movement" (*xin wenhua yundong* 新文化運動).

10. Beijing Academy B opened in 2013 in the outskirts of Beijing, and in 2016 it exhibited a total student enrolment of 100 (ages 4–21) and 18 teachers.

11. Suzhou Study Hall A opened in 2013 in the outskirts of Suzhou, and in 2015 it exhibited a total student enrolment of 40–50 (ages 4–15) and 8 teachers.

towards the future. For classics-reading activists, the years between the fall of the Qing dynasty (1911) and the establishment of the PRC (1949) are reflected in terms of instability in Chinese society, and the Cultural Revolution adds to this, leading to a perceived *unnatural* condition of Chinese society today. This generates a need for correction, for which the activists find solutions in educational measures based on the classics and traditional ways of life. These provide an *active approach* to restoring a *normal* state of affairs in Chinese society for the future. This comes with an ideal image of the future, against which the present is measured.

Activists' critical assessment of the present society and its relation to foreign influence

The ideal images of a future society in utopian thinking embody impressions of lacks or deficits in the present, and they are interwoven with a critical assessment of society (Martell 2018: 436), which should not be mistaken for a coherent diagnosis of the society's condition (Gordin, Tilley, and Prakash 2010: 5). Activists' outlook on a future in which more and more modern *junzi* will be responsible carriers of society also makes them realise that the present is not ideal. China's current society is criticised for its moral decay, materialism, and inadequate education in the public system. A teacher in Beijing Academy A contends that an overall absence of a common set of rules, ethics, or a common faith (*xinyang* 信仰) in Chinese society makes it a dangerous place.¹² The headmaster of Beijing Study Hall asserts that in the current business- and profit-oriented society, people pursue their own benefits, and neglect the effects their actions might have on the health and well-being of others.¹³ He quotes the famous "gutter oil" scandal, in which it was revealed that used oil was collected, processed, and sold as inexpensive cooking oil (Lu and Wu 2014, 135; Liu, Cui, and Liu 2017, 75-8). Wang Canglong (see article in this special issue) argues that classics-reading parents seek Confucian education for their children to enlighten them about the selfish individuals in China's society. This reveals a capitalism- and consumption-oriented critique of society among the proponents of the Confucian tradition. The headmaster of Qufu Academy summarises society's moral decay in the light of marketisation and economic development as follows:

Look, economically, China developed really quickly in the last few years compared to other countries in the world. But other countries don't have trust in China and don't have respect. That is because we developed our economy in the last few years, but have lost our culture, so we Chinese people have a lot of problems in all aspects of cultural cultivation. Look, against the backdrop of such problems, if we are not persistent and don't have moral integrity, we don't fear anything and dare to do everything. We don't have a spirit over our heads, we don't have a god, we can do everything – you say it: how can others trust us? People are like this, and countries and nations are also like this, so our nation needs to have a national culture: only then can we gain the trust and acknowledgement of other nations (Headmaster of Qufu Academy, 8 July 2016).¹⁴

Classics-reading education is used to build trustworthy interpersonal relationships, and thus a trustworthy nation. This is a phenomenon that is also synonymous with the business world. Lan Jiang Fu (see article in this special issue) explains that companies whose leaders claim the title of "Confucian entrepreneur" (*rushang* 儒商) assume social responsibility by offering classics study courses to employees.

State education is not seen as sufficient to address the moral vacuum in society and its orientation towards materialism. Classical texts have certainly been integrated into school curricula as part of education on the Chinese nation's outstanding traditional culture (*Zhonghua minzu youxiu chuantong wenhua jiaoyu* 中華民族優秀傳統文化教育) (Liu and Wang 2014: 3). Cultural education and language skills are also considered relevant for larger political goals; a decent education along Confucian classics could even support the establishment of the "One Belt – One Road" initiative as the Chinese Communist Party sees language as a unifying element of people's hearts and minds (Gilgan 2020: 277-8). However, tradition through the lens of political agendas is not what the classics-reading activists envision for their children's future; they want the sages', not the Party's wording. Furthermore, they still see public school environments as permeated with the criticised "mainstream" society's values of materialism, which is reflected in the way children interact with each other: "They would also compare each other, whose parents are cooler, have a higher position, or more money" (Headmaster of Beijing Academy B, 21 January 2016). Such a social environment is unsuitable for instilling traditional values into children. This is another reason why classics-reading education, as an alternative approach, needs its own space that functions according to its rules in order to have its effect, such as in study halls and academies.

Classics-reading education does not only serve the moral education of children; the adult activists are also beneficiaries. They revert to the classics as a spiritual source and use them to develop ethical life guidelines. As a result, the classics gain a *function* that would have otherwise been ascribed to religion. This is reiterated by a teacher in Xiamen: "Here, we don't have any religion. I have constantly been seeking for a place where I can make my soul feel at home – that means, searching for a religion. Well, or for something that is like a religion" (Leading teacher in Xiamen Study Hall B, 26 October 2015).¹⁵ This resembles the dimension for the spiritual development of a "settlement of mind and life" (*anshen liming* 安身立命) (Billioud and Thoraval 2015: 108-9, 114-6). The space in classics-reading facilities is of great importance for the driving forces of the education movement itself – parents, teachers, and headmasters.

12. Interview with a teacher in Beijing Academy A, 18 January 2016. Beijing Academy A opened in 2006 in the outskirts of Beijing. In 2016, it exhibited a total student enrolment of 169 (ages 4-18) and 100 teachers.

13. Interview with the headmaster of Beijing Study Hall, 23 January 2016.

14. Qufu Academy opened in 2001 in Shenzhen and reopened in Qufu in 2009. In 2016, it exhibited a total student enrolment of 120 (ages 6-18) and 24-25 teachers.

15. Xiamen Study Hall B opened in 2007 in the city centre. In 2015, it exhibited a total student enrolment of 18 (ages 3-7) and five teachers.



Figure 1 (left) and Figure 2 (right). Fuzhou Study Hall.¹⁷ The study hall is located in the mountains and next to a river. Credit: author.

The classics-reading movement's potential for change through the civil sphere

Grounded utopian movements (GUMs) are social movements that strongly relate to cultural, religious, or ethnical oppression and discontinuity of tradition or culture, in either the past or the present, and aim to reactivate cultural and traditional elements to reconnect with a lost tradition by integrating it into the present and thus creating “a more satisfying society” (Price, Nonini, and Fox Tree 2008: 130). This resonates significantly with the objectives of Confucian activists who sought to revive Confucian education in view of China’s path to a “Western” modernity at the beginning of the twentieth century. According to the activists, under the influence of foreign powers, manifested in intellectual and systemic dominance, people decoupled from their own tradition. Activists’ criticism of today’s Chinese society is often linked to the historical origin of these problems. Their way of building a “more satisfying society” is by memorising the Confucian classics and undergoing an educational approach that is enriched with traditional values and images of the way of life before loss and oppression. This is the “grounded” part of GUMs: “By *grounded* we mean that the identities, values, and imaginative dimensions of utopia are culturally focused on real places, embodied by living people, informed by past lifeways, and constructed and maintained through quotidian interactions and valued practices that connect the members of a community, even if it is a diasporic one” (Price, Nonini, and Fox Tree 2008: 128-9).

In the classics-reading facilities, the “groundedness” of the vision is reflected in the learning environment, in routines and rituals, and in the meanings prescribed to them. Ideal environments for and in study halls and academies rest on two pillars: (1) positively designed physical surroundings and (2) tradition-inspired social relations. People’s behaviour is influenced by both structures and features of the physical environment as well as by the people who interact with them. As a teacher in Beijing Academy A puts it, “those who are close to cinnabar will get red, and those who are close to black pigment [for ink] will get black” (*jin zhu zhe chi, jin mo zhe hei* 近朱者赤, 近墨者黑).¹⁶ At the macrolevel, choosing localities according

to criteria resonating with traditional ideals is quite common. A harmonious landscape with mountain and water features, not too close to busy city life, resembles notions of Confucian academies in the past and the scholar’s or civil servant candidate’s learning in solitude (Lee 2000: 216-7). Furthermore, the countryside is depicted as a mystified or sacred site in which Chinese traditions could withstand the turbulent changes of twentieth century history – ancestor worship and shrines were still in place (Billioud and Thoraval 2007: 15)(see Figures 1 and 2 as an example of a study hall in the countryside). City facilities seem to deviate from this ideal; however, spatial isolation and anonymity in building locations try to achieve tranquillity and seclusion in other ways. Examples of this are academies that are located at a street’s dead end, behind large gates, or in high residential towers without putting up a sign.

The traditional lifestyle in the study halls and academies reflects the social critique of the activists. They favour a simple, traditional way of life that is not occupied by consumption, technology, and the media. The classics-reading world (*dujingjie* 讀經界)¹⁸ is characterised by activities such as reading and the appreciation of beauty and nature; social interaction is regulated by Confucian values. Good conduct is achieved through physical discipline, ritualised performance and activities that train the body to cultivate the student and shape the body daily according to a specific set of values. Every class demonstrates a set of rules regulating students’ attitudes, behaviours, and movement in class and their personal hygiene duties. Rituals, such as bowing to the teacher before and after class and paying respect to Confucius (Figure 3), are performed to train respectfulness and politeness towards the institution of the teacher, the sages, and the classical canon:

We bow to Confucius mainly because we want the children to develop a sense of deep respect for the sage’s knowledge, for the classics and for the study hall’s teachers, they have to

16. Interview with a teacher of Beijing Academy A, 18 January 2016.

17. Fuzhou Study Hall opened in 2003 as a small facility in the city centre and later moved to the countryside. In 2016, it exhibited a total student enrolment of 30 (ages 6-17) and eight teachers.

18. The term *dujingjie* is used frequently by Wang Caigui and his close colleagues.

have a heart full of respect. Confucius is everybody's teacher; he is the model teacher of all times and generations. After we have ritually bowed to him, we bow to the teachers, but the teachers also return a bow to the students. This means that we are actually not real teachers; we can't be people's teachers and we can't be teachers for the classical canon. Our level is not good enough (Headmaster of Beijing Study Hall 2016).

Rituals around Confucius tacitly install the teacher in class as the central figure in the social interrelations.



Figure 3. Xiamen Study Hall A during the Confucius ceremony. Credit: author.

Classics-reading education and the associated lifestyle are among the popular grassroots retraditionalisation activities that increased in the 2000s (Billioud and Thoraval 2015: 8; DeBlasi 2015: 67-70). The term "popular" (*minjian* 民間) can have different meanings in this context; it can refer to the administrative level of the movement (non-governmental) as well as to the involved actors ("ordinary people"); it can also denote the social space in which it takes place. Hong Kong based sociologist David A. Palmer describes this *space among the people* (*minjian* 民間) as a *civil sphere*, where people are among themselves and not in hierarchical relations with state authorities (2019: 127). This space is poorly structured but permeated by dynamics of fissured networks (of people-to-people interaction), making it informal and, to a certain degree, invisible. This invisibility allows those in this space to shape and live their own ideals of social solidarity, which is a crucial precondition for the movement's *active* utopianism, i.e., utopianism that drives activism and consists of a dialogue between the alternative ideal and the conditions of reality.

As Charles Price, Donald Nonini, and Erich Fox Tree (2008: 146) point out, GUMs are concerned with networking and promoting group solidarity. This is illustrated well through the classics-reading movement. Educators and tradition-enthusiasts build a well-connected network, which thrives on people-to-people interactions. Diverse activities, such as public lectures, free classic reading classes, and study camps, bring them together and attract others who share their passion for tradition. Communication and information are not channelled or flanked by public media, but by social media e.g.,

chat programmes such as WeChat and QQ (Billioud and Thoraval 2007: 13, 2008: 98). No institutional landscape stabilises these endeavours or supports this kind of social interaction.

Conceptually, Palmer draws from Jeffrey Alexander's *civil sphere theory*, which originally explains ways of achieving inclusion of marginalised groups into social solidarity in American society – e.g., through social movements that challenge the boundaries of the *civil sphere* and give way to social change in(to) non-civil spheres. The American civil sphere is footed on independent institutions and is protected by free media and the legal system. Therefore, public opinion and performance of moral codes can enter into non-civil spaces, such as institutionalised law and jurisprudence, religion (religious institutionalised practice), the market, or the state in general (Palmer 2019: 126). Notably, China lacks this autonomy outside of the sphere of influence of the state. However, Palmer and Alexander (2019: 5) hold that China's "social transformations have led to the growth of lively and diversified spaces of public discourse, forms of social organisation, and cultural movements" with their own unique characteristics. Along with the market transformation, new spaces have opened up and allowed people to explore their individual and collective interests and values, including consumption and new business (models). As Wang (see article in this special issue) notes, the government withdrew from the lives of individuals to allow them to pursue these interests and values. A landscape of new associations, religious communities, networks, and organisations emerged; however, they could not formally register with the state and therefore could not form an institutionalised landscape (Palmer 2019: 137).

Palmer argues that the emergence of a *civil sphere* in China was triggered by Western influence at the beginning of the twentieth century. Modern schools, universities, associations, journals, and political parties came with a new public sphere in which social interaction could be facilitated and shaped by their respective underlying ideas of social solidarity (Palmer 2019: 133). However, outside these circles, interpersonal relationships and social values were still lived in traditional ways (Palmer 2019: 134-5), which explains why Palmer believes that the contemporary *space of the people* would never have developed from traditional Chinese social structures and without the importation of the idea of such a space from the outside. Therefore, it seems contradictory that classics-reading activists today have a space to revive what they see as traditional and "original Chinese" (as opposed to foreign interference) *because of foreign influence*. It is a space that has been opened along China's paths into modernity. Wang (see article in this special issue) argues that individuals use this space to re-embed themselves in traditional values, which in turn can be understood as a mechanism to overcome the ontological uncertainty of individualisation in the modernisation process. This observation also reflects these contradictions.

Study halls and academies under this perspective can be handled as very concrete and localised spaces in people's hands – the so-called *microcivil spheres* (Palmer 2019: 137). Here, norms and lifeways that people negotiate among each other demonstrate the chance to leave the civil sphere and "provide input into noncivil spheres, including the state, the economy, educational and health systems, the family, religion, traditional networks, and so on" (Palmer

2019: 137) – i.e., more or less institutionalised spheres. The activists are convinced that graduated *junzi*, through their good behaviour and the accumulated wisdom of the sages, will radiate goodness into the world and change it slowly but permanently. This could be one way in which impulses pass from the civil to the non-civil. However, this refers to cases when the *junzi* have already left the study halls and academies again. Assessing the classics-reading movement's potential for change should start with the *present* implementation of societal ideals in education as well as the degree to which people experiment with society's *current* material conditions. The diversity of classics-reading approaches needs to be accounted for in this context, as well as the people who shape the framework for these approaches. On the one hand, facilities exist that operate strictly according to Wang Caigui's theory on classics-reading education, and on the other, facilities exist that are quite flexible in their dosage of the classics. For instance, in Xiamen Study Hall B, which targets children aged three to seven, teachers play a lot with the children in between the classics-reading sessions. Many variations are found on this spectrum: Suzhou Study Hall B chose an "only" honest classics-reading (*laoshi dujing* 老實讀經) approach, which means that no subjects other than the classics are taught and the eight hours per day are not mandatory.¹⁹ Xiamen Study Hall A and Shenzhen Study Hall C are led by Buddhist headmasters who share their knowledge on Buddhism and meditate (*jingzuo* 靜坐) with the students.²⁰ The headmasters and teachers choose different paths to reach their shared vision of a better Chinese future.

This exhibits an effect on the children's involvement with society's material conditions. Those children who are educated along Wang's pure classics-reading educational approach are often quite isolated for a long time; they do not learn how to *interact* with society, and they are not and cannot be those who experiment with reality to change it. Notably, criticism is found among the more open classics-reading educators towards the pure classics-reading approach, arguing that among other things, the pure approach affects children negatively, making them lose interest in studying, not develop their own thematic interests, and remain illiterate if they start studying in the study halls at an early age – i.e., they never learn how to write or read properly, they just recite (Gilgan 2022: 211). This does not sound like the modern *junzi* who will change the world. As historians Michael D. Gordin, Helen Tilley, and Gyan Prakash (2010: 2) note: "Every utopia always comes with its implied dystopia – whether the dystopia of the status quo, which the utopia is engineered to address, or a dystopia found in the way this specific utopia corrupts itself in practice." This might just be the dystopia (unintentionally) produced along the classics-reading's utopia.

From this perspective, only the children who study in relatively open facilities or under a headmaster who does not operate closely according to Wang Caigui's approach are in a better position to interact with both worlds or those students who leave a pure classics-reading facility and return to the state education system. If and how they then actually influence society and how their education plays a role in this requires further monitoring of their life trajectories. The field research conducted between 2015 and 2016 did not identify a single student who went through the "New Confucian system" all the way and graduated (Gilgan 2022: 205).

There were many children who came in half-way (after spending a considerable amount of time in the public school system) and/or left halfway and went back to a public high school. The extent to which the stopover version of classics-reading education exhibits an impact on children's development has yet to be investigated. Further insights into children's experiences in classics-reading education and graduates' lifepaths are needed to expose the differentiated landscape of traditional education approaches and its effects on individuals and society as a whole.²¹

It is important to note at this point that parents, teachers, and headmasters, who are the main actors engaged with both the material conditions of society and classics-reading education, are not *trained* to induce future change; however, they demonstrate much more potential as the starting point for change through the civil sphere. They engage actively in alternative educational and social practices and claim a crucial space where they can experiment with their "current utopia" (Martell 2018: 437). The process of its grounding entails the embodiment of identities and values that relate to the Confucian tradition. This defines their micro-civil spheres and influences the non-civil sphere in people-to-people interactions – family life and education are influenced by classics-reading practice since family education concepts and parental roles are renegotiated along the lines of Confucian values and traditional social family constellations.²² Family education used to be an essential part of Chinese culture, and moral education as the core concept of family education was prescribed in family precepts (*jiaxun* 家訓) (Lee 2000: 489-91). Many activists assert that knowledge of family education remains scarce today, and classics-reading facilities therefore also serve as learning spaces for parents.²³ Evening courses and reading sessions on child raising and education are available for this purpose.²⁴ Furthermore, some facilities make it optional for parents to actively get involved in reading the classics and the practice's underlying theory.

On a broader perspective, specific educational cooperation illustrates influence into the non-civil sphere. For instance, in Xiamen, classics-reading educators aim at cooperation with local elementary schools to jointly create a better basic moral education, which goes beyond the patriotic state-prescribed moral education

19. Interview with the headmaster of Suzhou Study Hall B, 17 November 2015. Suzhou Study Hall B opened in 2015 in the city centre. In 2015, it exhibited a total student enrolment of five (ages 5-13) and two teachers.

20. Field observations: Xiamen Study Hall A, October 2015; Xiamen Study Hall B, October 2015; Shenzhen Study Hall C, March 2016. Xiamen Study Hall A opened in 2009 in the city centre. In 2015, it exhibits a total student enrolment of 14 (ages 3-10) and 4 teachers. Shenzhen Study Hall C opened in 2009, in a village close to Mount Wutong (*Wutongshan* 梧桐山). In 2016, it exhibits a total student enrolment of 18 (ages 3-15) and 10 teachers.

21. On a small scale but in a very insightful manner, Silvia Elizondo's (2021) work on traditional culture education does that; it contains thorough reflections on families, children, and personal development in the chosen alternative schools.

22. Interviews with the headmasters of Shanghai Study Hall (17 June 2016) and Suzhou Study Hall A (9 November 2015).

23. Interviews with the headmasters of Beijing Academy A (20 January 2016), Chengdu Study Hall (24 April 2016), Guangzhou Study Hall (5 May 2016), Suzhou Study Hall B (17 November 2015), and a teacher at Beijing Academy A (18 January 2016). Chengdu Study Hall opened in 2010 in a residential area. In 2016, it exhibited a total student enrolment of 44-45 (ages 3-16) and eight teachers.

24. For instance, there is a course on the *Analects'* value for parenting in Xiamen Study Hall B, and a reading class on New Confucian thought for parents in Chengdu Study Hall.

curriculum (Kong 2003: 57). In Fuzhou, a headmaster initiated the first steps for cooperation with a private American university in 2015 to create an alternative path to higher education for study hall graduates. In Beijing, a headmaster of an academy cooperates with the School for Continuing Education (and Teacher Training) at Beijing Normal University (*Beijing shifan daxue jixu jiaoyu xueyuan guoxue jiaoyu zhuanke* 北京師範大學繼續教育學院國學教育專業) to bring their graduates directly into the National Studies Education Programme (news feed on the website of Beijing Academy A) (Gilgan 2020: 270-1), and the first eight students went in November 2016.²⁵

As simple as it may sound, cooperation beyond the circles of classics-reading education represents an interaction with already manifested institutions and actors in society. On this route, classics-reading education has the chance to leave the civil sphere, enter already established forms of education (such as public schooling) and change society on the long run. This potential for cooperation and change lies only in study halls and academies that are on the more open and flexible side of the spectrum of classics-reading education modes. Such halls and academies are able to educate children who *will* be able to do things differently in the future because they get different inputs from which they draw individually and independently. Activists who reject anything beyond the classics have a hard time connecting with reality, which is illustrated by their ideas on what could become of students of pure classics-reading education. Classics-reading graduates do not obtain a formal diploma and are not eligible for regular employment.²⁶ Suggestions for their future include opening a business (preferably in the cultural sector) or taking over the parents' business and being self-employed;²⁷ engaging in vocational training in traditional Chinese medicine (*Zhongyi* 中醫);²⁸ playing traditional instruments (*chuantong de yueqi* 傳統的樂器), e.g., the string instrument *guqin* (古琴), similar to a zither; or engaging in classical painting (*chuantong de shuhua* 傳統的書畫). Detouring the public education system to take the university entrance exam, go to university, and become a teacher, at best for the classical canon (*jingxue laoshi* 經學老師),²⁹ is also mentioned. Children graduate from a "classical education world" and further engage in work that relates to elements of tradition. Whether they can expand this world to the point of exhibiting real impact or whether they will remain isolated in their circles of interest is questionable. If the graduates would continue to see themselves as a community with a certain mission, this might be the case.

Concluding remarks: Limits of change through the civil sphere

Palmer (2019: 127, 143-4) confirms the existence of civil spheres in Chinese society only in a *virtual* mode, i.e., in the above-mentioned micro-civil spheres that are constituted by moral and civil discourses when *minjian* actors come together. However, because they do not exist autonomously on the national level, they exhibit little institutional protection and are so dependent on direct interaction that they "are evanescent and subject to imminent collapse" (143). This can happen when direct interaction of the *minjian* actors is inhibited. In the "Notification for good work

in student enrolment and starting school in regular elementary and high-schools in the year 2019" by the Ministry of Education, educational practice in study halls and academies was, for the first time, addressed using the term "unlawful education."³⁰ The government considers it a violation of compulsory education, and thus of the law, for parents to send their children to classics-reading facilities instead of accredited schools. This shrinks the operational space for classics-reading education in the already fragile Chinese civil sphere. However, GUMs demonstrate network characteristics and rather fluid social formations; they might disappear, simmer below the surface for a while, and reemerge when the conditions are suitable (Price, Nonini, and Fox Tree 2008: 145-9). While some interactions may end, new forms may also emerge. This therefore requires new research data. It may well be that the movement, which looks fragile and fragmented under the lens of the virtual civil sphere, demonstrates the necessary flexibility in this configuration to make it durable.

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25. Universities also form a colourful landscape in traditional culture and education. Billioud and Thoraval (2015: 36-8) describe the ambitions of the Renmin University of China to offer courses in traditional culture, especially for young cadres. Several faculties of Peking University offered courses in national studies (*guoxue* 國學) to businessmen and cadres (Billioud and Thoraval 2015: 39).
26. Wang (2016: 449) spoke with teenage and young adult students of the classics, who revealed their concerns about their future, especially about the possibility of going to university. Many considered returning to the state education system so they could get an education to pursue their future careers.
27. Interviews with the headmasters of Shenzhen Study Hall A (29 December 2015), Beijing Academy B (21 January 2016), and Suzhou Study Hall A (9 November 2015). Shenzhen Study Hall A, opened in 2004 in a village close to Mount Wutong, exhibited in 2016 a total student enrolment of 65-70 (ages 3-17) and 20 teachers.
28. Interviews with the headmasters of Suzhou Study Hall A (9 November 2015) and Chengdu Study Hall (24 April 2016), and teachers in Beijing Academy A (18 January 2016) and Shenzhen Study Hall A (10 March 2016).
29. Interviews with a teacher in Beijing Academy A (18 January 2016), and the headmasters of Qufu Academy (8 July 2016), Beijing Academy B (21 January 2016), and Suzhou Study Hall B (17 November 2015).
30. "教育部辦公廳關於做好2019年普通中小學招生入學工作的通知" (*Jiaoyubu bangongting guanyu zuohao 2019 nian putong zhongxiaoxue zhaosheng ruxue gongzuo de tongzhi*, Notification for good work in student enrolment and starting school in regular elementary and high schools in the year 2019). The Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 21 March 2019. http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A06/s3321/201903/t20190326_375446.html (accessed on 13 September 2021).

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