

Reinventing Confucian Education in Contemporary China: New Ethnographic Explorations

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Since the start of the twenty-first century, China has experienced a growing revival of references to the Confucian tradition in various realms such as politics, religion, social life, and education. Confucianism-inspired education is a central dimension of this “revival” and points to the various educative projects, initiatives, and activities invented and carried out in direct reference to elements of the Confucian heritage. Despite state power’s grip on society, it is noteworthy that ordinary people play a vital role in the implementation of such projects. It is therefore possible to speak of a bottom-up agency originating from grassroots society (*caogen shehui* 草根社會) or from “the space of the people” (*minjian* 民間). Nowadays, people from all kinds of social classes and professional and educational backgrounds produce and invent new practices, discourses, and approaches and associate them with the name of Confucius and, more generally, with the Confucian tradition. In so doing, they attempt to establish direct ways to interact with ancient sages through the study of the classics in a context where, at the same time, the authorities keep on emphasising the value of the “excellent Chinese traditional culture” (*Zhonghua youxiu chuantong wenhua* 中華優秀傳統文化). A body of research based on intensive ethnographic surveys has started to be published on the topic in recent years. It analyses the specificities of Confucian education within the overall framework of Confucian revival (Billioud and Thoraval 2015; Hammond and Richey 2015; Billioud 2018, 2021); the striking diversity of the pedagogical enterprises carried out in the name of tradition (Elizondo 2021); the links between Confucian education and the making of Chinese citizenship (Wang 2016, 2020, 2022c), moral anxieties (Wang 2022b), or utopianism (Gilgan 2022b); and the promotion of Confucian education within religious groups such as the *Yiguandao* (Billioud 2020) and Buddhist movements (Dutournier and Ji 2009; Ji 2018) or within the corporate world (Jiang Fu 2021).

The current development of educational projects is inspired by all kinds of imaginations about the role that “tradition” – in Chinese *chuantong* (傳統) and in our context, an often-ill-defined category encapsulating references associated by those who use the word with a past deemed valuable and inspiring – should play in the future in China. Whereas children are primarily the focus of the new educational enterprises, adults are also widely targeted, be it in their

capacity as parents or in completely different environments such as companies and official institutions. Factually, projects targeting children take either the form of classics-reading classes outside of the school system or that of the opening of alternative schools often presented by their founders as “traditional schools” (*sishu* 私塾),¹ “study halls” (*xuetang* 學堂), or “academies” (*shuyuan* 書院). All these projects are characterised by the centrality that they ascribe to classical texts. Many of these initiatives need to be understood within a broader background of criticism against the state-run school system. This point is reflected in the privatisation trend of the Chinese educational system (Hizi 2019; Lee and Qi 2020), which is now characterised by possible access to a range of alternative educational options. Thus, Confucian schools discussed in three of the articles of this special issue (Gilgan, Wang, and Zeng) belong to the various schooling alternatives to public education in today’s China. The main grievances aired against the state system focus on the flaws and waste of talent in an examination-oriented education model (*yingshi jiaoyu* 應試教育) (Dello-Iacovo 2009; Halskov Hansen 2015). Narratives criticising the mainstream educational system also emphasise the need for a comprehensive education of personhood that should develop or strengthen the children’s “quality” (*suzhi* 素質) (Kipnis 2006; Woronov 2009). The concept of *suzhi* is difficult to translate into some Western languages, but in our context here, the idea is that one should foster a type of comprehensive education that is not merely instrumental, but that also encompasses a dimension of personal (moral) cultivation and cultural maturation. These harsh criticisms of what is perceived as a primarily instrumental education may sound paradoxical considering the emphasis constantly put by socialist regimes, including the Chinese one, on the necessity to shape and mould citizens and, first among them, children (Cheung 2012; Xu 2018). However, these criticisms are pivotal factors explaining the motivations of many of those turning to alternative types of traditional education.

Additionally, the revival of Confucian education can also be understood as a response to what is often perceived or described

1. The Chinese term *sishu* has various translations selected by authors of different articles in this special issue, for example “traditional-style private school” (Gilgan’s article), “old-style private school” (Wang’s article) and “private institute” (Zeng’s article).

as a moral crisis, whose manifestations are selfishness, utilitarian individualism, money worship, and lack of public spirit (Yan 2011, 2021). Such a narrative of crisis is somewhat pervasive in all sorts of social milieus and can also be encountered in official discourses (Billioud 2007). Against this background, many Chinese people turn back to Confucian ethical values and virtues and identify in them the potential to counteract the effects of moral anomie in the current Chinese society. Here, Confucian education extends far beyond its primary focus on children and potentially applies to all strata of the population; its promotion by religious groups or businesspeople clearly illustrates this point (Ji 2018; Billioud 2020; Jiang Fu 2021). Therefore, actors that the reader will encounter in this special issue – headmasters of traditional schools, teaching staff, parents, and Confucian businessmen (*rushang* 儒商) promoting educative projects in their own enterprises – largely share a similar critique of society's moral predicament and the same enthusiasm for Confucianism considered a relevant way to escape from moral anxieties.

At this point, it is probably necessary to emphasise the fact that the "Confucianism" evoked in the four articles of this special issue is not a clearly defined and unanimously shared body of thought and practices but rather a broad reservoir of references in which activists cherry-pick elements they find inspiring for their own projects. In other words, the social phenomenon that we face here is primarily a phenomenon of cultural production, invention, and imagination. This remark applies to the Confucian revival in general but also to its educational dimension that has given birth in the past two decades to a variety of pedagogical forms. Teaching and learning methods observed in fieldwork are far from homogeneous and can be even contradictory. Needless to say, they are also far from always faithful to the ideals of Confucian educators of the past centuries. Besides, the "Confucian education" addressed by this special issue is somewhat reminiscent of another category currently popular in China, that of "national studies education" (*guoxue jiaoyu* 國學教育) (Dirlik 2011), which is nevertheless broader in that it includes a larger scope of references to traditional Chinese culture – this obviously includes the Daoist and Buddhist traditions – and in that it may sometimes also take a much more scholarly turn. In any case, it is clear that the influences of Buddhist groups and Daoist ideals are also tangible in circles of "Confucian" activists.

Looking at 20 years of the revival of Confucian education in retrospect, one may observe different institutionalisation and pedagogical strategies. Institutionally, some projects assert themselves within the space of existing institutions (e.g., opening classics-reading classes in existing public schools), others consist in establishing alternative educational institutions, while still others are carried out in non-academic organisations (Billioud and Thoraval 2015). In this special issue, three studies (Gilgan's, Wang's, and Zeng's articles) focus on the second institutionalisation strategy, and one paper (Jiang Fu) concentrates on the third pathway. Pedagogically, recent research (Wang 2018; Elizondo 2021; Gilgan 2022b) has also paid attention to the ongoing diversification of Confucian education, a process whereby an educational model that was prominent at an early stage has been gradually challenged and sometimes replaced by other approaches. Here, it may be necessary to introduce a name and a pedagogy that the reader will encounter throughout the different papers of this special issue. Wang Caigui

王財貴 (born in 1949) is a famous Taiwanese educator who promoted an educational model actively based on the intensive reading of the classics. His original focus was on children, and he is therefore said to be the originator of the "movement of children reading the classics" (*shao'er dujing* 少兒讀經 or *ertong dujing* 兒童讀經) that started in Taiwan in the mid-1990s and extended to the Chinese mainland in the 2000s. His impact on the two shores of the Taiwan Strait has been enormous (it is claimed that millions of children and many adults, especially parents, have been exposed to his ideas in all kinds of contexts), including in religious groups. However, his intensive classics-reading philosophy (which will be introduced in some of the papers and which originally predominated) is also controversial and has been severely criticised. Other approaches have therefore emerged.

The idea of shaping children, employees, or citizens (when the state intervenes) according to specific standards supposedly legitimised by "tradition" or "history" is related to the concept of *jiaohua* (教化, education for transformation), which entails a double dimension of education (*jiao* 教) and transformation (*hua* 化). Such a transformation sometimes applies to the self (in that case, one approaches the idea of *xiushen* 修身, self-cultivation), but more often than not, it relates to others. The basic idea or ideal underlying Confucian *jiaohua* is that people can transform themselves – or can be transformed – in order to morally flourish and properly contribute to social or community life. The combination of classical texts (and their interpretations) and rites (*li* 禮) constitutes the tools of such a transformation. Obviously, *jiaohua* also raises a number of sensitive issues about power and domination (e.g., who is transforming whom and for which purpose? What is the relationship between a proper contribution to social life and submission to a social and political order?). In our special issue, all these questions will be directly or indirectly addressed through different figures: the master, the students, the company Chief Executive Officer (CEO), and the authorities.

The present special issue is clearly anchored in the social sciences and their empirical approaches. Fieldwork is, in fact, and as we believe, the only means to get a proper understanding of the diversified, complicated, and heterogeneous education practices inspired by Confucianism in today's China. In that respect, the wealth of fresh data presented here and the various theoretical perspectives mobilised to analyse them primarily contribute to the new field alluded to above and unveil the diversity of discourses, practices, and actions carried out by groups of Confucian activists. However, beyond this specific research field, the special issue also engages with a number of questions likely to be of interest to other scholars such as the invention of tradition, citizen agency and the individualisation of Chinese society, utopianism and the relationship to time, entrepreneurship and value-systems, and state-society relationships.

Written by Wang Canglong, the first paper focuses on a group of parents involved in Confucian education and on their educational actions. Building on Chinese society's individualisation theory (Yan 2009, 2010), Wang explores these parental activists' motivations to disembody their children from state schooling and engage in full-time Confucian classical education. He does so by analysing their critique of the state education system as well as their aspirations

for Confucian ethical virtues. These parents become critical individuals who think, speak, and act as *emic* first persons (“I”). They critically reflect on how to choose appropriate alternative forms of education for their children outside of the prevailing state system. Their pursuit of Confucian ethical codes is stimulated by their moral anxiety about Chinese education and society, which itself is rooted in China’s shifting moral landscape driven by the dynamics of individualisation.

However, these emerging critical parents embracing Confucian education cannot completely disconnect from state education. Restricted by factors such as school registration and academic qualifications, many parents end up being forced to return to the state school system so that their children have a chance to sit for the college entrance exams (*gaokao* 高考). This point suggests that current Confucian schools lack channels that would allow the kids to institutionally re-embed themselves within the state education system; such a situation results in parental activists remaining dependent on the state-defined education track to plan their children’s future education. In summary, Wang’s article correlates Confucian schooling with dominant state education, uncovering the moral and institutional paradoxes that individuals have to face when they make choices. While parents acknowledge and embrace the values of Confucian moral cultivation, they have to cling to the state system to arrange their children’s educational prospects. Furthermore, using the individualisation theory, Wang’s paper examines the revival of Confucian education in the conditions of modernity characterised by institutional differentiation and cultural diversification. Thus, it is possible to emphasise the way some social actors understand Confucianism as potentially able to correct the predicaments of individualism, a legacy of China’s pursuit of modernisation since the early twentieth century (Yan 2009).

In addition to parental activists’ dilemmatic educational arrangements, the tension between the revived Confucian education and state education is also reflected in the various approaches to teaching and learning the classics. Using fieldwork data collected in two private 讀經 (*dujing*, reading the classics) schools, Zeng Yukun presents a variety of *dujing* experiences and methods of reading the classics at odds with the modern habits of reading in public schools. The first method is called the “candid and intensive” (*laoshi daliang* 老實大量) method and is popular in the contemporary field of *dujing* education. It requires students to read the classics for eight hours a day mechanically. However, this method may endanger the learner’s voice and eyesight. Thus, a second method has been invented, known as the “listening and reading” (*tingdu* 聽讀) method, which converts mechanical reading into machinic listening. Students are required to spend considerable time listening to classical texts, repeatedly using *dujing* machines until they can recite them. These two methods of reading the classics epitomise the radical dynamics within the *dujing* movement in that through heavy repetition they aim at generating a long-term commitment to reading, listening to, and memorising the classics. Referring to the anthropological literature on language ideologies, Zeng further interprets the pedagogical radicalism of *dujing* to mobilise learners to understand the practice of reading as a means of honing the mind, nurturing character, and ultimately pursuing the 道 (*dao*, way). More broadly, Zeng argues that such radicalism reinforces

the anti-institutional and anti-intellectual tendencies of the *dujing* movement, heightening the tension between *dujing* education and compulsory educational policies.

Parents’ actions and radical *dujing* approaches imply some sort of utopianism that aims at changing education and society towards a better future. Leveraging the grounded utopian movement and civil sphere theories, Sandra Gilgan discusses two interrelated parts of the *dujing* education movement – utopian thinking and the potential for social change. First, Gilgan argues that the contemporary *dujing* movement is inspired by a deep utopianism that engenders forms of activism driven by a dialogue between an alternative idealised future and the conditions of reality. In that context, Confucian educational traditions and customs become a resource for activists (i.e., headmasters, teachers, and parents) to critique current society, create ideal educational spaces, shape a new tradition-based cultural identity, and fuel the quest for a better future Chinese society. Secondly, Gilgan demonstrates that Confucian activists in the *dujing* education movement have the potential to generate societal change through the civil sphere. Thus, they may introduce the *dujing* practice into family education, establish partnerships with local public schools to promote the accessibility of *dujing* courses, and attempt to create alternative pathways to higher education for *dujing* graduates. However, this potential may vary depending on the types of *dujing* methods in use. Gilgan argues that radical classics learning methods are much less likely to have some social impact than the more open and flexible ones that still make it possible for students to interact with society.

In the final paper of this special issue, Lan Jiang Fu shifts the focus from *dujing* education in schooling facilities to the business world, where Confucian educational projects are also carried out. Based on ethnographic work carried out between 2016 and 2020 in three private companies located in different areas (around Dongguan, Suzhou, and Ningbo), her work analyses the implementation of *jiaohua* policies by company management. She introduces the main measures taken in these companies in order to shape and transform the employees’ behaviour and mindset, including both classics reading and a number of symbolic practices and rituals. She also analyses how the educational ambitions of these Confucian entrepreneurs need to be understood within a nationwide educational project carried out by the authorities in order to foster civic morals within society at large. In the current social and political context, Jiang Fu posits that the commitment of private entrepreneurs to “Confucian education” reflects both their contribution to the production of modern citizens and their firm belief that Confucianism provides resources helpful for the construction of ethics of capitalism in China.

To conclude, these four articles offer fresh insights into some of the latest developments in the Confucian education revival in contemporary China. This ongoing revival is not a homogeneous or linear process: some “Confucian” educative projects may die out, whereas others may appear; and despite the twists and turns of the political context, Confucian activists constantly keep on devising and launching new experiments. As this special issue clearly shows, the Confucian imagination is well alive in today’s China, constituting a fascinating case study for all those interested in discussions about the reinvention of traditions.

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