

How to Read the *Analects* Eight Hours a Day: The Variety of *Dujing* (Reading Classics) Experiences amid the Confucian Revival

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ABSTRACT: Since the 1980s, the Confucian revival in contemporary Chinese society has grown as a local, national, and even global phenomenon (Billioud and Thoraval 2015; Hubbert 2019). While the Confucian revival is often perceived as propelled by the official endorsement of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), this article focuses on a grassroots Confucian movement called *dujing* that is conducted in private settings outside state schools by adherents of the pedagogy, often contradicting the official educational policy and mainstream habit of reading. *Dujing* mobilises students (aged 4 to 18) to spend intensive time (eight hours a day) on repetitive reading aloud of ancient canonical texts without pedagogical exegesis (Billioud and Thoraval 2015; Wang 2018), which entails relinquishing mainstream schooling. Based on immersive and embodied participant observation, this article illustrates why and how students, teachers, and parents have become devoted to the radical practice of reading classics. Combining social study of Confucianism and anthropological scholarship on language and reading, this article articulates how the experiential repetition, long-term commitment, listening, interaction, and discipline in *dujing* schools help participants make sense of the *dujing* reading practice as the pursuit of *dao*, although this reading practice does not involve immediate interpretative labour to make sense of the classical texts being read. By comparing two *dujing* schools that practice distinct methods of reading, this article also shows the internal dynamic that drives the development, split, and reflection of *dujing*.

KEYWORDS: Confucianism, *dujing*, grassroots movement, alternative education, cultural revival.

Introduction: An invitation to *dujing*

Since the 1980s, the Confucian revival in contemporary Chinese society has grown as a local, national, and even global phenomenon (Billioud and Thoraval 2015; Billioud 2016; Stambach and Kwayu 2017; Hubbert 2019). Academic discourse on Confucianism has proliferated (Tu 1994; Makeham 2008). Additionally, political agendas have been discussed and channelled (Jiang 2003; Bell 2010; Dirlik 2011), and temples and ceremonies have been reconstructed (Jing 1998; Sun 2013). Among these phenomena, probably the most socially prominent and popular Confucian revitalisation effort has been various educational ideologies that embrace Confucian elements (Billioud and Thoraval 2007; Yu 2016; Wu 2019; Wang 2020). Often, academic attention has concentrated on official or institutionalised cultural projects of Confucianism, such as the official use of Confucian heritage in educational institutes (Onsman 2012; Walton 2018) and global soft power through Confucius

Institutes (Yang 2010; Sahlin 2015; Stambach and Kwayu 2017; Hubbert 2019). However, it is worth noting that the more socially-engaged revitalised Confucian education refers to the grassroots-initiated, private institutes (*sishu 私塾*) (Dutournier and Wang 2008; Billioud 2010; Wang 2020). The common denominator between these institutes is the practice of reading classical texts, largely the Confucian ones. This reading practice is known as *dujing* 讀經, or reading (*du* 讀) the classics (*jing* 經).

Setting aside the official and academic practice of reading classics, grassroots *dujing* is a multifaceted movement, entangling various branches of intellectual, activist, and spiritual genealogies (Billioud and Thoraval 2015), such as those of Mainland Confucian practitioners Pang Fei 逢飛 and Wu Hongqing 吳鴻清, and Taiwanese spiritual leaders Nan Huaijin 南懷瑾 (1918–2012) and Jingkong 淨空. The focus of this article is the branch initiated by Wang Caigui 王財貴, whose theory emphasises intensive reading of the (Confucian) classics – i.e., reading the classics eight hours a

day without understanding them. Wang has labelled it the *dujing* movement (Wang 2014). Other branches are sympathetic with Wang Caigui's *dujing* theory, but generally do not promote the radical form of reading featured in Wang's *dujing* movement. In this article, I use the term *dujing* movement to refer to Wang Caigui's *dujing* movement.

According to its own estimation (Wang 2014), at one time, the *dujing* movement was drawing about 3,000 *sishu* participants in mainland China. Although this number is dubious (Billioud and Thoraval 2015; see Wang Canglong's article in this special issue),¹ given that alternative education and home-schooling are illegal in China, the mobilisation and persistence of *dujing* can be considered a success. Many people read the *Analects* in contemporary China, but the *dujing* movement requires students to spend years reading Chinese classics full-time, approximately eight hours a day. This entails relinquishing mainstream schooling. How and why do people do this? Moreover, what can they gain from the intensive *dujing* practice?

Drawing on years of field research on *dujing*, this article ethnographically delves into the reading experience of *dujing*. It demonstrates how the reading experience and pedagogical interaction between students and teachers elevates the *dujing* reading practice to achieving the ideal of the *dao* 道 (the Confucian moral wisdom that *dujing* practitioners pursue).²

From a social sciences perspective, labelling *dujing* a "movement" points to its ideal of societal change (see Sandra Gilgan's and Wang Canglong's articles in this special issue), namely confronting existing educational and social systems. However, because of its radical way of reading, the *dujing* movement has been attacked by news media.³ Doubt cast on *dujing* has focused on the efficiency of its special way of reading, its radical claim of replacing all modern educational curricula with classics, and, because of the intensive time *dujing* requires, its conflict with formal education.⁴

Nevertheless, the *dujing* movement has persisted. When I began my fieldwork on *dujing* in 2014, hundreds of *dujing* schools were still operating across China. It had been twenty years since Wang Caigui had founded the *dujing* movement in 1994 in Taipei. At the time of the movement's founding, Wang was a professor of education at National Taichung University. Since then, he had been indefatigably giving lectures as well as disseminating texts and CDs on *dujing* education, inspiring and encouraging parents and followers to establish their own *dujing* schools. Only in 2011 did he start his own *dujing* institute: the Wang Caigui *dujing* Education Promotion Centre (*Wang Caigui dujing jiaoyu tuiguang zhongxin* 王財貴讀經教育推廣中心).

I visited the centre in summer 2014 and was received by teacher M, a thin man in his early thirties. He told me his own *dujing* story. After graduating from college several years ago, he had tried several jobs and found himself lost in the chaos of society. By virtue of a friend's invitation, he had gone to a *dujing* summer camp, read the *Analects* one hundred times and "remoulded" himself. "Why don't you come to our *Analects* 100 summer camp, reading the *Analects* one hundred times within a month?", said M at the end of our conversation. My inquiry into *dujing* led to an invitation to experience intensive *dujing*.

Theoretical framing: Grassroots Confucianism and the anthropology of canonical/classical reading

Multiple studies have surveyed the heterogeneity of the so-called revival of Confucianism. Focusing on private schools that practice *dujing*, the present article benefits from previous research identifying the tension between grassroots Confucian activists and top-down, official, or academic discourses on Confucian revival (Billioud and Thoraval 2015; Wang 2018, 2020). As Billioud and Thoraval (2015: 7) have demonstrated:

Projects launched by the authorities to cherry-pick and rehabilitate specific aspects of the cultural tradition (that could for instance serve as resources for moral and educational indoctrination) only very partially overlap with the objectives and activities of Confucian activists. Those activities do not relate to any abstract ideology but consist in practical projects in which the properly Confucian ideals play a pivotal role.

For the *dujing* movement, its early promotion and development in mainland China were boosted by the support of official institutes such as the project of the recitation of ancient poetry and literature in China.⁵ Billioud and Thoraval (2015) have also noted that some *dujing* schools maintained sound relationships with official and local associations promoting traditional Chinese culture in the 2010s. However, the complicity between grassroots *dujing* and official promotion of Confucianism is fragile, especially for Wang Caigui's intensive *dujing* that this article studies. The aforementioned media exposure regularly puts the radicalism of *dujing* on the public stage, in which *dujing*'s intensive reading practice confronts criticism. Intellectual promoters of Confucianism, while supporting the revival of Confucianism and reading the classics in a moderate way, rarely endorse the radical version of *dujing*, and sometimes even excoriate it (Ke 2016). Official educational institutes also occasionally observe and ban *dujing* schools, accusing them of instigating parents to pull their children out of formal schools so that they may read classics full-time for years on end.

1. See the interviews presented in this article as well.
2. The *dao* is a pivotal concept in Chinese philosophy, especially for Confucianism and Daoism (Fung 1948; Graham 1989; Ziporyn 2012; Cheng 2018). Given its evolving interpretative and practical traditions, it is hard to provide an exhaustive definition of the *dao*. In the *Analects*, the *dao* is discussed as the virtuous ways of personal behaviour, social order, state rule, or the heavens. For a working definition that many scholars agree on, the *dao* is the proper "way" of human conduct and governmental rule (Fung 1948: 8; Graham 1989: 13). This definition of *dao* is close to how the *dao* is commonly understood by *dujing* practitioners, though they operationalise the *dao* as perceptible and cultivatable moral subjectivity; see also Wang Caigui's New Confucian teacher Mou Zongsan (1997).
3. Zhang Rui 張瑞 and Zhang Wei 張維, "十字路口的讀經村" (*Shizilukou de dujingcun*, *Dujing* village at the crossroad), *Southern Weekly* (南方週末), 4 September 2014, <http://www.infzm.com/contents/103904> (accessed on 9 March 2022); Luo Ting 羅婷, Wang Tingting 汪婷婷, and Fu Ziyang 付子洋, "讀經少年: 背了十年書, 識字卻成了問題" (*Dujing shaonian: Beile shinianshu, shizi quechengle wenti*, *Dujing* teenager: Literacy becomes an issue after a decade of memorising), *Bj News* (新京報), 29 August 2016, http://epaper.bjnews.com.cn/html/2016-08/29/content_649957.htm (accessed on 9 March 2022).
4. Formal education refers to the nine years of mandatory education conducted under state-issued curricula, and any ensuing officially recognised higher education in China. This is presented vis-a-vis alternative education such as *dujing*.
5. Xiang Cunren 向村仁 (ed.) 2011. *私塾手冊* (*Sishu shouce*, Handbook of *sishu*). Hong Kong: Huaxia wenyi chubanshe.

The tension between intensive *dujing* and officially and socially acceptable forms of Confucian revival is multi-layered. Previous studies have reported on the anti-intellectual tendency among grassroots Confucianism (Billioud and Thoraval 2015), the legality of *dujing* (see Wang Canglong's article in this special issue), the ambivalent social categorisation of reading classics in between religion and education (Billioud and Thoraval 2007, 2015; Sun 2013), the grassroots movement's mobilisation potential, and its threat to the regime (Ji 2018). Built on these studies, the present article addresses the following question: despite these tensions, why, and how, do *dujing* practitioners still practice *dujing* with such intensity?

Anthropological literature on reading informs the scrutiny of *dujing*'s reading practice. The present study benefits from previous studies of the role of religious language in religious experiences in various "religions of the book" (Boyarin 1993; Harding 2000; Keane 2002; Engelke 2007). Canonical reading is marked by scriptural materiality, voicing, repetition, and orality (Hirschkind 2006; Haeri 2013), which have been argued to be essential for religious ethics (Keane 2002), subjectivity (Haeri 2017), agency (Mahmood 2005), anti-institutionalism (Handman 2015), and authority (Messick 1996; Grafton and Most 2016). In addition to research confined to the religious context, this article also engages with the literature on canonical reading in educational institutes (Wortham 1994; Moore 2006). This body of research focuses on the emergence of identity and community through the classroom activities of reading (Moore 2006), teaching (Fader 2009), interacting with (Wortham 1994), and narrating (Baquedano-López 1997) canonical/classical texts. Addressing the sensuous practice of reading, reciting, listening, and performing canonical texts, as well as the reading experience itself, transports readers beyond a book's denotational content. The literature cited above helps me capture how the *dujing* reading experience differs from reading a normal book, and how the reading experience can help *dujing* practitioners perceive the approximation, or even the fulfilment, of the ideal of *dujing*.

While my project is inspired by this literature, it should be noted that the phenomena these works address are concentrated in established social fields of education and religion, such as the parallel schooling systems (Quranic versus French) in Cameroon (Moore 2006). By contrast, *dujing* is still a nascent movement embraced by the Chinese state's cultural politics, but encumbered by state educational and religious policy, not to mention the complex trans-strait transformation of cultural, educational, and religious politics. Thus, unlike anthropological literature on canonical reading's functionalist juxtaposition of uses of religious and educational language, this article addresses the ambiguous and dynamic nature of *dujing* between spheres (educational, religious, official versus grassroots) (Billioud and Thoraval 2015; Wang 2018).

To do so, I first draw a dialectical conceptualisation of the language ideologies in *dujing*. A concept developed for several decades by linguistic anthropologists, language ideologies are beliefs about and rationalisations of language use (Silverstein 1979). Instead of treating ideology as "false consciousness," the anthropological literature on this concept emphasises the constitutive aspects of beliefs and rationalisations as part of cultural activity and social action (Geertz 1973; Silverstein 1992). As

"regimes of value" (Gal and Irvine 2019), language ideologies also productively engage the larger politics (Schieffelin, Woolard, and Kroskrity 1998; Gal and Irvine 2019), and constitute the efficacy and efficiency of language use (Silverstein 1992). For *dujing*, although it can be rightly differentiated from the academic and intellectual revival of Confucianism, the importance of *dujing*'s own theory should not be neglected. Wang Caigui, founder of the *dujing* movement, is a student of the famous New Confucian philosopher Mou Zongsan 牟宗三, and taught at National Taichung University of Education. He built his theory of *dujing* based on developmental psychology, personal experience reading the classics, and New Confucian philosophy. Since 1994, he and his followers have been promoting his theory of *dujing* through lecture tours and CDs. Some of his *dujing* theory, as well as his followers' interpretations of *dujing* theory, have been published (Wang 2014).⁶ *Dujing* teachers, parents, and sometimes students conceptualise why and how to read the classics from these lectures, CDs, publications, and *dujing* practitioners' own writings from their social media accounts.

The present article draws on the concept of language ideology to illustrate the tension between *dujing* reading and modern habits of reading: modern texts are intelligible, knowledge is within reach, and the experience of reading is ephemeral; *dujing* classic texts are opaque, and the wisdom in them is difficult to access. This necessitates significant time investment for rote memorisation. On the other hand, the tradition of language ideology offers this research a useful toolkit to scrutinise *dujing*'s own theory without reducing its practical dimension and dynamic variety into normative, static claims on why and how to read Confucian classics. As scholars of language ideology have articulated (Silverstein 1979; Agha 2007), language ideologies can direct certain forms of reading practice, and how, through language ideologies, experienceable features of reading practice can be recognised and registered with social value. From this perspective, *dujing* theory not only outlines *dujing*'s advantages over mainstream education; it also operationalises *dujing*'s distinctive intensive, repetitious reading as an experienceable meaningful effort towards the ultimate value of *dujing* education, namely the *dao*.

Above all, by analysing the literature on grassroots Confucianism, and by reading about experience with, and language ideologies of, *dujing*, this article interrogates the experience, e.g., the soundscape, hardship, repetition, and progress; practices of reading, listening, evaluating, and disciplining; local theories and language ideologies that organise the experience and practice of *dujing*; and the dynamics of the *dujing* movement as a grassroots Confucian movement.

Methodology and cases

The present study is based on ethnographic data from two *dujing* schools. Both teach intensive (seven to eight hours a day) *dujing*,

6. See for example the following books: 兒童讀經教育說明手冊 (*Ertong dujing jiaoyu shuoming shouce*, Handbook for children's reading classics), published in 2001 and 教育的智慧學 (*Jiaoyu de zhihuixue*, The study of education wisdom) in 2007, both published by Wang Caigui; 私塾手冊 (*Sishu shouce*, Handbook of sishu) published by Xiang Cunren 向村仁 in 2011; 愛他, 就讓他讀經吧 (*Ai ta, jiu rangta dujing ba*, If you love him, let him read the classics), published in 2017 by Kong Shan 空山.

while their practices of reading bifurcate into the methods of “candidness and intensity” (*laoshi daliang* 老實大量) and “listening and reading” (*tingdu* 聽讀), respectively.⁷ For my ethnography, I spent a month with each *dujing* school. This entailed sitting with *dujing* students and teachers in classrooms for an entire day participating in and observing their reading practices and other activities. During participant observation, I paid special attention to the sensuous dimension of *dujing*, such as spatial-temporal arrangement, soundscape, repetition, interaction, and discipline.

Besides participant observation, I also conducted semi-structured interviews with teachers, students, and parents in the *dujing* schools, especially on the language ideologies of *dujing*: (1) why read the classics? (2) how to read classics? and (3) why classics should be read in this way? Other than Professor Wang Caigui, the names of all *dujing* practitioners and *dujing* institutes have been anonymised.

The first *dujing* school in which I conducted fieldwork was Liqian School. This was in 2015. This is the *dujing* summer camp that teacher M told me about. There were about 200 students in total, divided into six classes. Most were high school or college students, with a roughly balanced gender ratio. The students’ socioeconomic backgrounds and academic performances varied. Most were first-time attendees to *dujing* education, since *Analects 100* is designed to popularise *dujing*. The *Analects 100* at Liqian features the traditional *dujing* method: candid, intensive reading of the classics. Like teacher M, all of the teachers at Liqian were experienced *dujing* practitioners and promoters. Moreover, to provide a complete picture of long-term “candid and intensive” *dujing*, I have drawn upon the extended case of one of my summer camp classmates who pursued long-term *dujing*.

The second *dujing* school is Tiqian School, the most popular *dujing* school, famous for its method of listening and reading. I conducted fieldwork at Tiqian in 2019 and 2020. There were also about 200 students (ages 4 to 18) divided into six classes, roughly half male, half female. Most students and teachers at Tiqian had been participating in *dujing* full-time for two or three years. Although the teachers at Tiqian were not as experienced as the teachers at Liqian, they all followed the method of listening and reading.

Although demographic information from readers from the two *dujing* schools vary, a month at each site ensured that I could document the details and rationales behind their *dujing* practices. Diachronically comparing the cases of Liqian and Tiqian, this study not only offers a comprehensive thick description of the landscape of *dujing* practices and ideologies of reading, but also reveals the movement’s vital, and even radical, evolution.

Case 1. Liqian school, why and how to read candidly and intensively

On 18 July 2015, I arrived in Liqian school. Situated in Fangshan, a remote suburb of Beijing, Liqian used to be a resort featuring agricultural activities. Pools and orchards surround the main building. The closest town is about 20 minutes away by car.

In this environment, students were required to read the *Analects* 100 times a month, not only spending about eight hours a day on

rote reading, but also organising their lives around *dujing*. Most students (or their parents) had been interested in *dujing* before the summer camp, and were willing to experience its “authentic” hardship. I attended the summer camp as a student, sitting in the last row of the classroom. As shown in Table 1, the schedule at Liqian consisted of regimented daily activities. Free time was limited, usually only half an hour or 40 minutes after lunch, dinner, and night washing.

Table 1. Daily schedule at Liqian.

5:20	Waking up, Washing up	Dorm, Bathroom
5:50-6:15	Morning Exercise	Field
6:20-7:10	<i>Dujing</i> Session I	Classroom
7:15-8:00	Breakfast	Dining Hall
8:00-9:00	<i>Dujing</i> Session II	Classroom
9:10-10:20	<i>Dujing</i> Session III	Classroom
10:30-11:30	<i>Dujing</i> Session IV	Classroom
11:30-12:20	Lunch	Dining Hall
12:30-13:50	Nap	Dorm
14:00-15:00	<i>Dujing</i> Session V	Classroom
15:10-16:20	<i>Dujing</i> Session VI	Classroom
16:30-17:30	<i>Dujing</i> Session VII	Classroom
17:30-19:00	Dinner	Dining Hall
19:00-21:00	Lecture, Film, Study	Hall or Classroom
21:00-21:30	Washing, Lights off	Bathroom, Dorm
21:50	Bed Checking	Dorm

Source: author.

The schedule, of course, was centred on *dujing* sessions, seven daily sessions totalling almost eight hours. The daily cycle was centred on the marked, loud, effervescent and more resonant activity of the seven *dujing* reading sessions. Other activities were generally discussed as “rest,” “relaxation,” or instrumental for further *dujing*. Teachers at Liqian were strict about napping and sleeping on time. Many students were used to sleeping in. They would gradually acclimate to going to sleep and waking up early. This was regarded as the first sign of students’ self-control and that they were on the road to cultivating themselves towards the Confucian *dao*.

The students acclimated not only to the everyday schedule, but also to the reader’s relationship with the classical text being read, the wisdom within it, and the special reading method that ensures the reader’s access to the wisdom in the classics. All of these were organised through *dujing* theory, or the language ideology of *dujing*, as I operationalise in this paper.

We (students) learnt the special language ideology of *dujing* in the first week’s evening lectures and learning on *dujing* theories.

7. The promotion group of reading classics candidly and intensively 老實大量讀經宣傳團, “不要問多少人在讀經, 要依理而思依道而行” (*Buyao wen duosharen zai dujing, yao yili ersi yidao erxing*, Don’t ask how many people are reading classics, think with reason and act by *dao*), WeChat account, 26 May 2018, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/fcW3P_xF96_P70oidovclg (accessed on 9 March 2022).

Why do we read the classics? In one of the evening study sessions, we were assigned Wang Caigui's famous *The Study of Education Wisdom* published in 2007 (see note 6). In this book, he argued that the most valuable thing in classics is the perennial wisdom, or unchanged *dao*, which encompasses the temporary knowledge that non-classical books hold. To access this wisdom/*dao*, classics should be reread, rather than just read once (Haeri 2013). And instead of interpreting the text, the best way to access the wisdom is to memorise the classical texts, then wait for their revelation in the critical moments of one's life.

It is important to note that Wang Caigui elaborated on the distinction between the dichotomies of book/classic, knowledge/wisdom, and reading/*dujing* in his earliest writings on *dujing* theory in the 1990s. Skimming his writing chronologically, I find that he gradually pushed his proposal of *dujing* into radical forms, from the earliest plan of partaking in two hours of *dujing* per week during weekend *dujing* sessions (1994), to sparing time (perhaps one hour) from everyday schooling for *dujing* (2007), to the more recent setup of *laoshi* (老實, candid) and *daliang* (大量, "intensive") as the criteria for *dujing* (after he moved his base to mainland China in 2011). Candid is operationalised as purging non-*dujing* curricula from *dujing* schools. Spending eight to ten hours per day on *dujing* can count as "intensive."

All students in my class agreed on the significance of reading classics, but most of them, at the beginning, were hesitant on the idea of reading eight hours a day. Thus, the whole process of gaining confidence in *dujing* was tantamount to being attuned to this mode of reading. Below, I document this socialisation process.

Reading through leading

The first step was to establish a relationship with the text. Figure 1 is the first page of the first chapter of my *Analects*, where we started the first line of our *dujing* odyssey. This edition of the *Analects* is formatted for *dujing*. Wang Caigui describes this edition as "big characters, *pinyin* transcription, no annotation, with both simplified Chinese and traditional Chinese" (Wang 2010). By virtue of big characters and simplified Chinese, this edition of the *Analects* appeared to be quite readable. But without annotations, the readability is merely phonological. For readers who are not familiar with text, the instructor's leading and monitoring are necessary.

Teacher M happened to be my class instructor. To lead our reading, he projected one sentence aloud at a controlled pace. We followed that sentence, trying our best to imitate his vocality and pace. When he led our reading, he would occasionally patrol the classroom, walking the aisles, supervising the students, prepared to wake up the sleeping and distracted students. Besides leading us, teacher M employed another pedagogical method for reading after we had gone through the *Analects* several times. He asked each student to read one or two lines and "pass the reading" to the next student seated behind her or him. This mode of "alternate reading" necessitated each person listening to the other's reading. As I will show, the intersubjective dialectics of reading and listening played an important role in the subsequent reading stages.

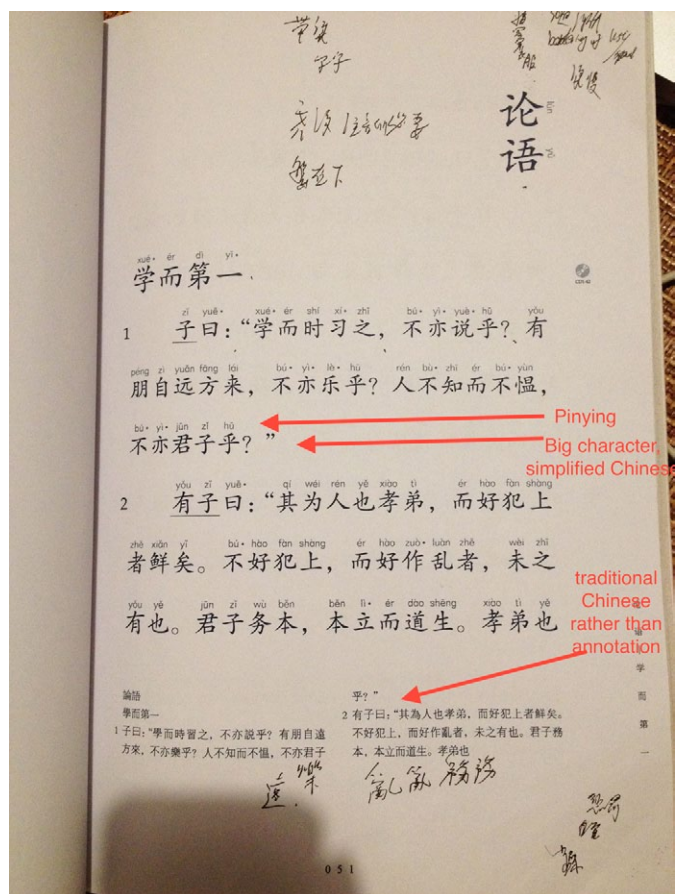


Figure 1. The first page of the first chapter of the *Analects* that was used at the Liqian school. Credit: author.

Simultaneous reading

One week had passed, and teacher M had stopped leading us. However, he would still join in our simultaneous reading. Sensuous common experience emerged and carved out an intersubjective space in which individual agency is absorbed into collective autonomy (Berger and Luckmann 1966). The most salient sensuous aspect of the common experience was the soundscape. The individual reader's voice, pace, and attention may vary, but the collective soundscape remained constant. In my class, there were rebellious students who regularly attempted to sabotage the simultaneous reading by raising the volume or accelerating the pace. However, the collective soundscape was stable and resistant to their disturbance.

The soundscape was not only constant, but intersubjective. There were two kinds of participation in the soundscape: listening and reading. Phenomenologically speaking, listening to the constant, loud collective reading was more sensible than reading alone. Occasionally, due to distractions, breathing, thirst, or fatigue, one might reduce the volume or even stop reading loudly for a moment. Yet, exposure in the maintained soundscape made one feel as though one was still reading. Unlike the first stage, in which students were passively led by teacher M, in the second stage, their simultaneous reading fell between active reading and passive following. It is intersubjectively autonomous. Engaged with the collective reading practice of *dujing*, one got the feeling of simultaneous "doing and being done" (Pagis 2015).

Slowing down, and being more candid and intensive

"Slow down!" Teacher M interrupted us at our 70th reading. The *Analects* consists of 20 chapters, 512 entries, and almost 16,000 characters. In the beginning, we could hardly finish two readings of the whole book each day. Yet, once we established the intersubjective pace of reading, we sped up to three or four times a day. "It's too fast," teacher M continued: "I feel 'zao' in your reading." *Zao* (燥) denotes dryness, heat in the environment, and also emotional unease that usually results from societal anxiety. Loud speech is historically linked with the interaction between hotness and uneasiness. In this case, teacher M had associated our uneasiness in the reading and our inability to resist the August weather with our uncontrolled acceleration. To control our reading means to bodily overcome the external environment through reading.

This is also an ethical issue. During the evening lectures, we were frequently taught that *dujing* is not just reading but also cultivating the self. This is why the sonic dimension is not so prominent in *dujing* at first glance, since we were supposed to learn to control our reading volume and pace rather than simply intensifying the vocality. When teacher M ordered us to "slow down," this dimension of self-cultivation became experienceable and operationalisable for each individual. To slow down, one needed to reclaim her/his subjectivity against the autonomous intersubjective speedy reading. Slowing down also carved out a traceable individual experience of the struggle with the text, which reconciles the doubt in one's accomplishment in *dujing*. On the other hand, this mode of subjectification metaphorically echoed a Confucian embodiment of *dao* against the morally degenerate society.

From zao to dao

At the summer camp, most students cultivated an embodied temporality of reading, a regular schedule, a firm relationship with the *Analects* and Confucius, and the confidence in *dujing* that teacher M had promised. Although most did not continue *dujing* after the summer camp, I came across F, one of my classmates, when I re-entered the field in 2019. After the *Analects* 100, F had dropped out of school and spent three years memorising classical texts. For him, candid and intensive reading meant making progress out of *dujing* beyond the summer camp, and investing years in tedious, repetitious reading. I met F at Xiashang Academy, the "higher *dujing* institute" that Wang Caigui had founded with the *Dujing* Education Promotion Centre. *Dujing* students needed to memorise 20 volumes of classics to be accepted into Xiashang, where Wang Caigui would lead them into further cultivation of the Confucian *dao*.

F told me his story after the *Analects* 100. He had enrolled in Keqian, a *dujing* school famous for its rigorous adherence to candid and intensive *dujing*. The daily routine at Keqian was similar to what I had experienced at Liqian and what I had seen in my visits to candid and intensive *dujing* schools⁸ – reading loudly and intensively, yet with emphatic control of the self.

However, instead of merely overcoming the *zao* manifested in classmates' impatience, the decision to spend years on *dujing* is a more radical one. F's decision to devote himself to *dujing* is complicated, and accentuated by his experience at the *Analects* 100, his poor performance in mainstream schooling, and his parents' contingent encounter with *dujing*. However, the *dao* afforded a framework for him to agentially make sense of this decision. In our discussion of his persistence with *dujing* and many of his *dujing* classmates' pitiful attrition due to societal *zao*, he mentioned the "pursuit of *dao*" to confirm his journey towards Xiashang. For him, to leave school and detach himself from societal *zao* was for more candid and intensive pursuit of the *dao*.

The *dao* is a central discourse with multi-layered meanings in *dujing* education. In Wang Caigui's writings (2014, 2017), the overall telos of *dujing* is the "transmission of the *dao*" proposed by New Confucians (Makeham 2008; Billioud 2012). However, operating as a grassroots educational movement, the *dao* is more frequently evoked to authorise the ends and means of *dujing*. In addition to equating the wisdom in classics with the *dao*, *dujing* practitioners also regarded the *dao* as emergent in students' static but intensive status of reading, and their commitment to reading for years. A compelling and relevant example is a famous talk given by F's teacher H at Keqian in 2018. Titled "Don't ask how many people are reading the classics, think with reason and act by the *dao*," (see note 7) this talk addressed a puzzle that has perplexed students and parents alike: why do they need to spend years reading "candidly and intensively?" In this talk, H first laid out that the aim of education is to achieve the wisdom of life. She argued that reading the classics was the solution. Reading "candidly and intensively" is to enhance one's concentration (against the classroom and societal *zao*). To do so, and to do so for "four or five years," students would be on the way towards the *dao*. The *dao* also authorises and moralises their commitment, like H's quotations of Confucius from the *Analects* (2003):

The gentleman devotes his thoughts to attaining the Way (*dao*), not to obtaining food. (15.32)

Having in the morning heard that the Way (*dao*) was being put into practice, I could die that evening without regret. (4.8)

Case 2. Beyond candid and intensive: Listening and reading at Tiqian

When I re-entered the field of *dujing* in 2019, two crises haunted the *dujing* movement. First, the Chinese government had noticed the magnitude of alternative education in China, and as such was enforcing the Compulsory Educational Law (*yiwu jiaoyu fa* 義務教育法), forcing alternative institutes to close, including those dedicated to *dujing*. At the same time, the method of

8. In addition to the immersive classroom ethnographies in this article, I also had short visits (from two days to a week) at various *dujing* schools, including Riqian and Xiqian in Beijing and Niqian in Zhuhai, that practiced candid and intensive *dujing*.

candid and intensive reading was being harshly criticised by the movement. There were several interconnected reasons for this. The most important was the movement's internal split. The *dujing* faction (e.g., Keqian) employing candid and intensive in the most radical way now veered towards the spiritualism of the famous spiritual leader Nan Huaijin instead of Wang Caigui. Other critiques pertained more to the method itself. Reading aloud and with intensity over protracted time periods hurts children's eyes and throats. It also cannot ensure the quality of the recitation, as some students recite so fast and automatically that nobody, including him/herself, can decipher the words. Wang Caigui now favoured a new method called listening and reading (*tingdu fa* 聽讀法), and authorised it as the pedagogy of *dujing* following the *dao*. This method had been developed by the operators of Tiqian, a couple known as Mr and Mrs I. Thus, Tiqian is now the most popular *dujing* school, hosting almost two hundred *dujing* students in a remote manor in Inner Mongolia.

Mr and Mrs I had previously been teachers in formal schools. As Beijing locals born in the 1970s, they had taught in elementary schools and preschools in South Beijing since the 1990s. Their story follows a typical pattern of *dujing* parents with teaching experience in formal schools. Their daughter had been a bookish girl from a young age. However, her elementary school teacher had not encouraged her enthusiasm for reading. Receiving low scores even in Chinese language and literature, she was regarded as hopeless in schooling. Mr and Mrs I tried to diagnose the problem. Their own professional experience as teachers helped them intuit that instead of it being their daughter's problem, the formal education system was to blame. In 2015, they encountered *dujing* via the promotion of a famous principal in Shandong. They then sent their daughter there to study and read classics ten hours a day. However, when Mr and Mrs I visited her after a year, they found a girl not only versed in reciting Chinese classics, but also pale, hoarse, and near-sighted. They decided to take her home, not as a decision to give up *dujing*, but as a commitment to establish their own school and develop a better method.

Listening and reading was their solution. According to Mrs I, she and her husband had stumbled upon this method by accident. A child at Tiqian had become near-sighted due to previous dedication to candid and intensive reading. The only way they could help him imbue the classics was to give him a *dujing* machine, as a placebo, if not a toy. After a month, they noticed the boy was concentrating on the sound of the *dujing* machine. After two months, the boy could recite the texts to which he had been listening.

As Mr I said:

The method of listening and reading is perfect. It overcomes the problems of candid and intensive reading. It cures eyes and throat. It protects body and spirit. It ensures recitation with high quality. Therefore, it obeys the *dao*.

However, this method is no less intensive than the traditional candid and intensive reading. As the schedule shows, the daily route at Tiqian was similar to Liqian's. As shown in Table 2, students spent almost eight hours reading classics per day.

Table 2. A Typical Daily Schedule for a Student at Tiqian.

5:30	Waking up, Washing up	Dorm, Bathroom
6:00-7:00	<i>Dujing</i> Session I	Classroom
7:15-7:50	Breakfast	Dining Hall
7:50-9:30	<i>Dujing</i> Session II	Classroom
9:50-11:30	<i>Dujing</i> Session III	Classroom
11:30-12:20	Lunch	Dining Hall
12:30-13:50	Nap	Dorm
14:00-15:00	Exercise	Outdoor Space
15:00-16:20	<i>Dujing</i> Session IV	Classroom
16:30-18:00	<i>Dujing</i> Session V	Classroom
18:00-19:00	Dinner	Dining Hall
19:00-20:30	<i>Dujing</i> Session VI	Classroom
20:30-21:00	Washing, Lights off	Bathroom, Dorm

Source: author.

From mechanical reading to machinic listening

What is the method of listening and reading? If reading apparently points to reading classics, then listening to what? Figure 2 shows *dujing* machines. There are several other types of *dujing* machine, but the cuboids are especially popular at Tiqian, probably because they can be conveniently stored together and managed by the teacher. It is merely an mp3 player pre-set with the standard classical text readings. However, since digital products are prohibited in *dujing* schools, due to the potential hazard of addiction, *dujing* machines are normally only used by *dujing* teachers and parents to broadcast classical text readings as background sound. According to Professor Wang's developmental psychology, a child's mind is like a sponge (Wang 2014). Immersed in the broadcasting of classical texts, even in background sound, children can unconsciously absorb the classics. In a traditional *dujing* school, *dujing* machines are only used as background classical players.



Figure 2. *Dujing* machines at Tiqian. Credit: author.

However, the practice of listening at Tiqian is different. A *dujing* machine is the necessary equipment for readers. I purchased two on my first day at Tiqian. One was for listening and reading. The other one was programmed with audible clicks at regular intervals. Functioning as a metronome, it set the pace for reading and reciting.

The listening and reading method is simple. You first listen to a book two or three hundred times. Close your lips. Don't read aloud. Concentrate on listening! Then you open the book. Still focusing on listening, you read the book to build the linkage between the sound and the characters. Then you try to recite, one sentence in advance of the *dujing* machine broadcasting it. Eventually you don't need the *dujing* machine. You can recite perfectly after listening five hundred times. (Mrs I, interview, 2019)

Although Mrs I explained the method of listening and reading with brevity, I soon found that the challenge was to focus on it. It turned out that my progress had lagged behind that of the students at Tiqian. This may have been due in part to my age; I might simply have been too old. However, the more salient reason was the *dujing* teacher's rigid discipline, which shapes the machinic listening and from which I had been exempted.

Listening like a teacher

My role at Tiqian was 70% teacher and 30% student. I was assigned a student to monitor in the classroom at Tiqian. The classroom was separated into clusters, with each cluster monitored by a teacher. As Figure 3 shows, diagonal to me was one of these clusters. Children (about four to six years old) would sit around a desk. The teacher (in black) had her back to me, doing her own reading while supervising the whole desk. Each student had an individualised agenda.

Closer to us, a girl (in red) sat listening in the third row. In my cluster, a boy (in blue) held the *dujing* machine over his shoulder to listen. His book was spread out, suggesting that he was multi-tasking: listening while reading. His deskmate looked sleepy. Yet, he was reading the book at an ordinary volume.



Figure 3. My classroom at Tiqian. Credit: author.

The sleepy boy is a student whose reading I frequently monitor as a teacher. His name is X. Born into a relatively affluent family, X had never attended any formal schooling. Now seven years old, X had attended several candid and intensive *dujing* schools before his mother, a *dujing* enthusiast, had sent him to Tiqian. At Tiqian, he was regarded as having acquired several bad habits from previous *dujing* schools that employed reading candidly and intensively. He had previously memorised many classical texts, including the *Selections of classical Prose* (*Guwen xuan* 古文選)⁹ that he was reading now. Thus, it was apparent that he had passed the listening stage, but his recitation did not meet Tiqian's standards. This called his reading skills as a whole into question, including his sleepiness.

As mentioned in the section above about my Liqian fieldwork, the individualisation of reading refers to the reader's autonomy and indicates the tension between a virtuous individual and a degenerative society. However, to sustain long-term *dujing*, this story was insufficient. Teacher guidance is a necessary element in the storyline. Guiding students' listening and reading is more difficult than guiding students' candid and intensive reading. Unlike teacher M's classroom patrolling, teachers at Tiqian needed to monitor the status of each student's familiarity with the text. In this way, the method of listening and reading redistributes the sociality of reading from the individual-group relationship to the student-teacher dyad. Of note, the bulk of the labour behind "checking the student" is listening to their recitation. Although listening to the machine may sound awkward, listening to students' recitation required teachers' intensive effort, which will be discussed in the next section.

The dao of grinding

Teacher K was the real teacher in my cluster. A short-haired local Beijing woman in her thirties, teacher K had come to Tiqian for the same reason as Mr I and Mrs I: her daughter's education. Choosing to remain at Tiqian as a teacher, teacher K had given up her previous job and left her family. Besides accompanying her daughter, she told me that pursuing a life with the *dao* was also important to her.

"Following Mr I is to follow the *dao*." Noticing I was puzzled and unable to follow the conversation, teacher K explained that the "mind method" (*xinfa* 心法) of listening and reading is "grinding" (*mo* 磨). Grinding refers to checking students' recitation every day, and sometimes multiple times a day. Even when a student was able to recite the whole text, a teacher was supposed to continue grinding him/her, to find errors, to measure the pace, and to correct pronunciation and even accent.

In her notebook, teacher K detailed each student's individualised *dujing* progress. She documented how long they had been listening and reading, when they had done their check-ups, what errors they had made during each check-up, and simply how they read and recited.

To grind X, in September, teacher K read along with him several times to measure his reading proficiency. On October 8, teacher K checked X's reading and marked 1,785 errors. The following days

9. This is a collection of classical prose edited by Wang Caigui.

were filled with dreary listening and reading. By December 6, X's error count had decreased to 8.

Besides omissions and mistakes, many of X's errors were in pronunciation. The issue of pronunciation had not been a major concern for *dujing* until the rise of listening and reading. *Dujing* machines standardised the pronunciation, yet Mr I and Mrs I were Beijing locals. They had not only naturalised the linguistic hegemony of the Beijing accent (Zhang 2017), but also had standardised Mandarin *dujing* pronunciation. However, X came from a business family in Hunan Province. His accent had become a target for grinding. The most tedious grinding process was to correct pronunciation. For X, that meant pointing out the distinction between front nasal consonants and back nasal consonants, dental-alveolar consonants and retroflex consonants, and other minimal pairs that are often confused by southern Chinese.

Thus, grinding blurs the boundary between listening and reading, as the act of monitoring involves both practices. It also blurs the boundary between teachers and students. Unsurprisingly, for teachers, cultivating phonological sensitivity is part of the grinding process. This process usually takes longer for adults than students. As a southern Chinese, I struggled with it during my stay at Tiqian. Teacher D, who also had come to Tiqian to learn listening and reading through interning for teacher K, struggled with it as well. From Zhejiang, she spoke a dialect mutually unintelligible with Mandarin. However, she was assigned the task of grinding X. As the notebook indicates, she had been checking the reading, marking errors, and correcting X's pronunciation for almost a week. Besides being a teaching intern, she had her own *dujing* agenda, and spent a significant amount of time watching Wang Caigui and Mrs I's promotion video. Busy as she was, she rarely looked anxious. When I asked why, she answered:

I learned a lot. Checking his text helps me read the text with more concentration. I'm satisfied every time I find one of his errors and correct it, not just for his progress, but for my own. Just as Mencius said, "The *dao* of learning is none other than this: to seek the lost mind."¹⁰

Her wording explained why grinding is regarded as the mind method of listening and reading. Ultimately, it is a method for guiding *dujing* participants' minds toward the *dao*, whether they are students or teachers.

Conclusion: The variety of *dujing* experiences and the social movement of the *dao*

My participant observations of candid and intensive reading and listening and reading were conditioned by my positionality at Liqian and Tiqian, respectively. Since I was enrolled as a student at Liqian, my *dujing* experience consisted of the experiential temporality of repetition and progress. Tracing the case of F's long-term candid and intensive reading, I have depicted how the *dao* is necessitated by the *zao* in the classroom, and in turn, authorised long-term candid and intensive reading. Employing a role more akin to an intern teacher than a student at Tiqian, I learnt the method of listening and reading through naturalising the machine's voice as the

standardised vocalisation of the classics and grinding over students', as well as teachers', reading and pursuit of the *dao*.

There are multiple ways to answer the question of why people pursue *dujing*. Billioud and Thoraval (2015) interviewed multiple Confucian activists, including Wang Caigui and his followers who had founded their own *sishu*, and delineated their personal trajectories. Wang's study (see article in this special issue) addresses the dimension of schooling choice by showing parents' critical views on the mainstream education system and the legal dilemma they face. What has been understudied is the aspect of reading, *dujing*'s idiosyncratic practice that distinguishes it from other contemporary Confucian practices. Given the official promotion of Confucianism, Confucian classics have proliferated through classroom curricula, corporate culture (see Lan Jiang Fu' article in this special issue), and various public ceremonial activities (Billioud and Thoraval 2015). Answering the question "why *dujing*?" necessitates delving into the "how" question. In order to do so, this article focuses on two major styles of *dujing* intensive reading practice. This illustrates the variety of *dujing* experiences, the collective soundscape, repetition, individual agency, long-term commitment, listening, and grinding. All of these help *dujing* participants make sense of *dujing*'s reading practice, although this reading practice does not involve immediate interpretative labour to make sense of the classical texts being read. Moreover, by virtue of the language ideologies that assign values to reading candidly and intensively and listening and reading, these practices mobilise *dujing* practitioners beyond merely "making sense" of reading classical texts. Investing time and body, and giving up other schooling and profession options, are regarded as the pursuit of the *dao*.

Rather than deciphering what the *dao* is, this article delineates the social conditions and consequences of *dujing* practitioners' understanding and pursuit of the *dao*. The *dao* appears to be both the end (wisdom) and means (authorisation of ways of reading) of *dujing*. The bodily pursuit of the *dao* can be captured by the notion of "cultivation" (*jiaohua* 教化), which refers to the grassroots mode of Confucian educational alternatives to modern schooling (Billioud and Thoraval 2007). However, in addition to revealing how bodily reading experience can construct an alternative sphere of value or *dao*, this article highlights the radical dynamics within the *dujing* movement. The method of listening and reading was invented as a reflexive solution to the traditional method of reading "candidly and intensively," recruiting new *dujing* followers, and distinguishing them from previous *dujing* practitioners who had stopped following Wang Caigui. Although the discourse of the *dao* is utilised to mobilise *dujing* participants to commit to this educational movement, *dujing* promoters often form their own interpretations of the *dao* to serve their own pedagogies (Wang 2018). Confronting internal splits and outside pressures such as the 2019 governmental ban, the actors involved in *dujing* constantly address the question of why and how to read the classics. This generates a new variety of *dujing* theories and practices, while appealing to recruits attuned to the ever-changing movement. In this way, to refer to *dujing* as a grassroots Confucian movement not only highlights its anti-institutional and anti-intellectual tendencies, but also calls for

10. My translation is based on Bloom's (Mencius 2009: 128).

scrutinising the radicalisation, factionalism, and self-reflection that prefigure the movement's vitality.

Lastly, besides shedding light on the dynamic nature of the *dujing* movement and grassroots Confucianism, this article also contributes to the anthropology of reading. The variety of *dujing* reading practices expands the horizon of reading by incorporating elements such as intensive repetition, led reading, collective reading, and machinic listening. Each of these elements challenges the modernist presumption of individual, understanding-oriented reading. *Dujing* demonstrates how, besides the modernist privileging of denotational understanding, the embodied dimension of reading contributes to the meaning-making of reading practice, even in the secular context of contemporary China (Mahmood 2005; Moore 2006; Haeri 2013). Moreover, as a case necessitating the investment of intensive time, discipline, and emotion, *dujing* illustrates the social dimension of reading. Various studies focus on the community foundation of reading practice, in which reading agents gather to read, learn, and search, and create identity and sociality (Boyarin 1993; Baquedano-López 1997). However, *dujing* is a social movement that complicates China's pro-Confucianism policy and causes tension with its compulsory education policy. As such, reading not only involves agential readers, but also mobilises the devotion of other actors (e.g., teachers and family members). This includes Confucian literacy practices such as reading the classics and theories about *dujing*, but also non-reading practices such as accompanying, disciplining, and making radical educational choices. In these interactional practices, the cultural values of *dujing*, especially the *dao*, are demonstrated and substantialised.

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