

Parents as Critical Individuals: Confucian Education Revival from the Perspective of Chinese Individualisation

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ABSTRACT: This article uses the theory of Chinese individualisation to understand the Confucian education revival by focusing on the rise of parents as critical individuals and a case study of one Confucian private school. Drawing on interview data from parental activists who enrol their children in the study of Confucian classics, this article presents the disembedding actions taken to break attachments to state schools and the paradoxical return to institutional safety. It finds that these parents exhibit ambivalence towards the state education system, and that family relationships affect individual parents' decisions about Confucian education. Furthermore, this study discusses the implications of the individualisation dynamics for Confucian revival in reference to the reflexive conditions of modernity.

KEYWORDS: individualisation, Confucian revival, moral shift, alternative education in China.

Introduction

Understanding the Confucian revival in contemporary China entails clarifying the conditions of modernity that have materialised in present-day Chinese society. Since the early twentieth century, modern China has experienced a dual process that comprises both institutional differentiation and the pluralisation of values (Ji 2008). This dynamic has divided Confucianism into relatively independent realms and has rendered it a “wandering soul” (Makeham 2008) that inhabits differentiated spheres in modern China. This situation has continued since the 2000s, when China experienced a revival of the wandering Confucian spirit via a patchwork of scattered and fragmented Confucian-related activities in education, politics, social activism, and the market economy (Billioud 2010). One striking phenomenon in this period has been the robust bottom-up assertion of agency by ordinary people, in contrast to the top-down power exerted by the state and elites, which has driven Confucian-inspired initiatives outside the Party-state apparatus. This phenomenon has been described as “popular Confucianism” (*minjian rujia* 民間儒家, literally Confucianism within the space of people) (Billioud and Thoraval 2015: 8).

This article focuses on education as a specific dimension of the Confucian revival and explores the ideas and actions of parents-turned-activists (hereafter, parental activists) regarding rejuvenated Confucian educational projects in society. Parents' engagement with

Confucian education¹ may vary, but they all show some degree of activism in the sense that they express their dissatisfaction with the teaching and learning style at state schools, challenge the legitimacy of the state education's dominant status, claim the right to the alternative form of Confucian education outside the state system, and take action to open new spaces for Confucian education (Wang 2022b). Grassroots Confucian education was reborn in Taiwan and Hong Kong in the mid-1990s, before expanding to the Chinese mainland in the early 2000s and to overseas Chinese communities in the 2010s. The emerging Confucian-inspired educational practices have been institutionalised in three different ways (Billioud and Thoraval 2015: 35): they may develop within and complement existing academic institutions; they may involve new educational structures that compete with existing educational organisations; and they may involve non-academic entities, such as companies and official institutions. This study focuses on the second of these three institutionalising strategies by examining the case of a Confucian classical school that presents itself as an alternative to the current compulsory education system. Many such traditional schools are

1. In a broad sense, Confucian education refers to a continuous process of self-improvement and self-cultivation through the study of ancient classics and the practice of rituals in everyday life. Its primary function is to develop the learner into a gentleman (*junzi* 君子). However, the schooling practice in the present study offers a particular approach to the learning of Confucianism in contemporary China. This will be explained later in this section.

labelled *sishu* 私塾 (old-style private school)² and take the form of either home-schooling or formal schooling; however, these are normally illegal under mainland Chinese law. The exception is the handful of traditional private schools approved by local authorities, and their teaching activities must comply with the rules set by the local government. The curricula of Confucian schools vary extensively – some comprise a broad range of classical courses based on traditional Chinese culture (e.g., the study of Confucian doctrine, Chinese zither, and traditional painting), whereas others attempt to combine teachings based on Chinese classics and Western knowledge (e.g., mathematics and science). Beyond their pedagogical differences, Confucian-inspired private schools share a common faith in the profound transformative effects of Confucian classics on students' moral cultivation. Under the umbrella of "Confucianism," they attempt to provide parents and their children with an alternative educational channel to the regular, state education.³

The "children reading classics" movement (*ertong dujing yundong* 兒童讀經運動) is one of the most influential and controversial features of the resurgent field of grassroots Confucian education.⁴ Under the impetus of this movement, Confucian educational projects have developed into diversified forms and practices in the past two decades. Although official statistics are lacking, estimates indicate that more than 3,000 traditional private schools claiming to implement classical education have been established, and that thousands of students of compulsory education age are enrolled in Confucian studies (Wang 2014). However, these figures should be treated cautiously, as they are difficult to verify.⁵ Furthermore, the scope of this phenomenon remains limited not only within the larger Chinese educational system, in which it occupies a very small niche, but also within the broader classics reading movement (Billioud and Thoraval 2015: 48). But the reemergence of Confucian education matters not only because of its proportion in the Chinese educational system but also because "it might produce new generations of Confucian activists" (*ibid.*).

This study focuses on the discourse and action of parental activists and explores the case of a Confucian private school given the pseudonym of "Yiqian School." The curriculum and methods used by this school have been profoundly influenced by the educational thought of the Confucian intellectual and educator Wang Caigui 王財貴, who pioneered the "children reading classics" movement. The pedagogy of classics study proposed by Wang Caigui (2009) emphasises four principles: to read and memorise classics (1) as early as possible; (2) with as many characters as possible; (3) in a simple and sincere manner; and (4) with the ultimate aim of a happy learning process. This particular theory of classical education expects learners (mainly pupils from 3 to 13 years old) to absorb the deep wisdom contained in canonical Confucian texts through repetitive, disciplined memorisation. It has exerted extensive influence on Chinese parents who eagerly seek an alternative education system to improve their children's moral cultivation outside of the state school system. Furthermore, the parents who enrol their children in Confucian schools tend to come from a middle-class background: they typically have a higher education degree and a decent, well-paid job in a city. Additionally, a few parents interviewed for this study disclosed that they had a Buddhist or Christian background. Although religion is beyond the scope of this study, it may provide

an incentive for parents to enrol their children in a Confucian school.⁶

This study analyses why parental activists choose to transfer their children from state schools to Confucian education. Before presenting the research methods and findings, it is necessary to introduce the thesis of individualisation, which is the theoretical framework applied in this research.

Theoretical framing: Individualisation and Confucian education revival

Current scholarship on the individualisation of Chinese society (Yan 2009, 2010; Hansen 2015) has paid relatively little attention to the revival of Confucianism. In recent discussions of Chinese individualisation, Confucianism is usually associated with authoritarian and collective values, codes, and behavioural norms from which Chinese individuals strive to disembed (Yan 2010: 492–3). This assumption makes it inaccurate to explain the current revival of Confucianism in general, and Confucian education in particular, in the context of the rise of individuals as the result of the accelerating dynamics of individualisation since the reform and opening-up policy of the late 1970s. Despite lacking systematic study, a few passing references have suggested how Chinese individualisation may help to explain the Confucian revival. For example, Billioud reminds us that modern Confucian activism should be understood as part of this trend of individualisation, in that it makes it possible for people to affirm their subjectivity through the reactivation of collective links and values in the context of expanding both their "field of experience" and "horizon of expectations" (2016: 793). This study, adopting an evidence-based approach, is committed to exploring this particular issue by focusing on the parental activists who act as critical individuals to enrol their children in Confucian education.

The propositions about Chinese individualisation in this paper are an adaptation of the original individualisation thesis, which was applied to explain Western Europe societal transitions from the first age to the second age of modernity (Giddens 1991; Beck 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). The process of individualisation has three interconnected aspects. The first is that "traditional" values, assumptions, and categories as defined by the first modernity, such as class and social status, gender roles, family, and neighbourhood, have become "zombie categories" – ideas that are sociologically

2. The case school of this study calls itself a *xuexiao* (學校, school) rather than a *sishu* because it is an officially approved educational institution, whereas *sishu* is normally used to indicate a grey-area or illegal institution. Please refer to Dutournier and Wang (2018: 274–7) for a detailed inquiry into the conceptual complexities of *sishu* and the ambiguities of the translation "private school" (*sili xuexiao* 私立學校).
3. While some *sishu* that present themselves as extracurricular courses do not necessarily go against the regular school system, a number of them are attempting to compete with it (Billioud and Thoraval 2015: 51–62).
4. See Chapter Two of Billioud and Thoraval (2015) for a detailed description of this movement and an introduction to Wang Caigui, who is commonly considered a leading figure.
5. Another reason for the impossibility of verifying these figures is the ongoing changes in the situation of Confucian private schools and the number of participants involved. The statistical uncertainty is confirmed by Billioud and Thoraval (2015: 75), who explained that the numbers collected through their fieldwork might be problematic "since the ones who give them are also engaged in the movement and are therefore far from neutral in their assessments."
6. Studies have noted that certain religious groups such as Buddhism (Ji 2018) and *Yiguandao* (Billioud 2020) play a significant role in the Confucian education revival.

alive even though the reality to which they correspond is dead (Beck and Willms 2004: 51-2) – in a second or reflexive modernity constructed by individualisation (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Beck and Lau 2005). This is called the disembedding process; for an individualised person, it results in the proliferation of life choices and an increase of individual agency (Beck and Williams 2004: 24). In this “self-actualizing individualism of personal discovery” (Burgess 2018: 86), we become “what we make of ourselves” (Giddens 1991: 75). However, becoming disembedded from “traditional” categories is always coupled with disenchantment, which is the second dimension of individualisation (Beck 1992: 128). The individualised self, “deprived of a ready-made set of assumptions and norms,” experiences more intense pressure “than ever before, rooted in greater socio-economic insecurity,” and must “confront the uncertainty more alone than in the past” (Burgess 2018: 93). Consequently, there is an urgent search for “re-embedding,” which is the third aspect of individualisation. Two approaches to re-embedding have been mentioned in reference to West European societies: (1) reimposing old social controls and constraints on the individual, and (2) creating new social categories and commitments in civil society to restore a sense of security and safety (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 17, 161).

Although the individualisation thesis has been the subject of criticism (Atkinson 2007; Howard 2007; Dawson 2012), others have argued that it represents a trend worldwide (Beck and Grande 2010), including China (Yan 2009, 2010). However, the Chinese path to individualisation is distinct from its counterparts in Western Europe. For example, Yan Yunxiang conceptualised the individualisation of Chinese society as “party-state managed individualization,” whereby the Party-state “directs the flow of individualization by soft management (...) of the interplay among the players: the individual, the market, social groups, institutions, and global capitalism” (2009: 289). In the same vein, Mette Hansen proposed the idea of “authoritarian individualisation,” emphasising that the Party-state “promotes the rise of the individual in some spheres while holding it back to others, forcing the individual to experiment with appropriate means to simultaneously make a ‘life of one’s own’ and adhere to political authorities” (2015: 16).

This study contextualises the Confucian education revival by highlighting two basic conditions that have been shaped by the process of individualisation: the privatisation of the educational system and the moral shift of Chinese subjectivity. First, the privatisation of the Chinese educational system has been marked by state-sponsored institutional “untying,” a process wherein the socialist state apparatus selectively retreats from the educational field but “force(s) individuals to shoulder more responsibility, to more actively engage in market-based competition, and to assume more risks and to become more reflexive” (Yan 2010: 499). On the one hand, this has directly resulted in a boom in private school enrolment (Egalite and Wolf 2016; Rhinesmith 2017); on the other hand, it has worsened social inequality, insofar as privileged families have more resources and capital to select desirable schools (Kim et al. 2017). That parents send their children to learn Confucianism can be reasonably placed in the broader privatisation of Chinese education. Current scholarship has paid insufficient attention to this phenomenon, particularly to parents’ motivations, feelings, and

actions in “choosing” this private form of Confucian education.⁷

Second, the shifting moral landscape of contemporary China reflects how the general thrust of individualisation has influenced the making of Chinese subjectivity. Post-Mao China has experienced an enormous change in the moral spectrum “from a collective system of responsibility and self-sacrifice to an individualistic system of rights and development” (Yan 2011: 72). Some studies (Liu 2010; Li 2011; Naftali 2016; Gong and Dobinson 2017) have pointed out the negative effects of the spread of individualistic values. Also, modern China has seen an incomplete or unbalanced understanding of individualism, that is, to interpret individualism as a simplistic, utilitarian type that can even devolve into a doctrine of egotism or mere selfishness (Yan 2009). This truncated version of individualism remains an integral element of individualisation in post-Mao China and has helped plant the seeds of public perceptions of moral crisis (Yan 2021). Against this background, many Chinese people have turned to Confucianism and embraced its virtues as an alternative source of moral values to counteract the effects of selfish individualism (Billioud and Thoraval 2015; see Gilgan’s article in this special feature). This point is related to the current research, which emphasises the moral condemnation of state schooling by parents who favour Confucian education, their moral anxiety about society, and their desire for Confucian virtues.

The case study and the research methods

This study takes an empirical approach and makes use of fieldwork conducted at a Confucian school, Yiqian School. Yiqian School is located in a small town surrounded by mountains in a developed province on the southeast coast of China. As one of the earliest established Confucian schools, Yiqian School can trace its history back to 2002, when the school’s founder gathered a few preschool children to read Confucian classics at a private home. In 2010, it was officially given the status of a private school (*minban xuexiao* 民辦學校, “school run by the people”) by the local government. When I conducted fieldwork in 2015, Yiqian School had approximately 120 students divided into six classes according to the duration of Confucian study, and 20 staff members for teaching and administration. Most teaching staff had at least some knowledge of traditional Chinese culture, and a few had previously worked in other Confucian classical schools. Despite being an approved nine-year compulsory school, Yiqian School did not offer the comprehensive state-stipulated curriculum routinely; instead, it required students to read and memorise classics most of the time.⁸ The courses were dominated by memorisation of Confucian classics such as the *Analects* and *Mencius*, and Taoist classics such as *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi*. Chinese martial arts and English classics were also part of the curriculum. In 2015, the school charged an annual tuition fee of 30,000 RMB.

7. One recent study (Elizondo 2021) analyses parents’ motivations for a range of traditional Chinese education projects, including those of Confucianism.

8. But Yiqian School also struggles between the Confucian classics and the national curriculum. As a featured classical school, it is highly regarded by the local government and is allowed a considerable degree of autonomy to offer major courses in the Confucian classics. But as a state-approved private school, it is sometimes required by the local education bureau to teach the national curriculum, even if these classes play only a supplementary role.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 17 parents (6 fathers and 11 mothers) of pupils at Yiqian School. Most informants lived in urban areas, and their educational backgrounds ranged from high school to postgraduate studies. They held a variety of occupations, for example, white-collar employees at private companies, low- and mid-ranking civil servants, self-employed entrepreneurs, full-time mothers, and engineers. I conducted phone interviews from May to August 2015; each interview lasted one to two hours and was audio-recorded with the consent of the informants (all agreed). I also conducted participant observations of one regular class comprising 17 students, four of whom were the children of the interviewed parents; however, this type of data is supplementary to this article, which focuses mainly on the parents. The interviewees were asked a range of questions including: their motivations for getting involved in Confucian education, the difficulties and opportunities they encountered in transferring their children from a state school to the Confucian school, and their children's future education plans. These interview questions were applied due to their relevance to the theoretical framework and their contribution to encouraging the informants to expand on the research topics. For ethical reasons, this article uses pseudonyms for all participants.

I adopted a three-step coding approach to analysing the collected data: "developing categories of information (open coding), interconnecting the categories (axial coding), [and] building a "story" that connects the categories (selective coding)" (Creswell 2007: 160). Three themes are identified to constitute the findings that are presented in the next three sections: (1) the rise of critical parents; (2) parents and their children disembedding from state schools; (3) the return to state schools for institutional safety.

The rise of critical parents

In the Chinese context, the dynamism of individualisation encourages individuals to assert themselves as independent units of action and discourse (Yan 2009; Hansen and Svarverud 2010). This point is in line with my observations derived from interviews with parents, who demonstrated a critical attitude towards state schooling. As revealed in this section, this attitude drove parents to speak and act as critical individuals to transfer their children out of the state education system.

When asked why they enrolled their children in the Confucian school, the majority of parents replied with criticism of state schools, arguing that they unduly emphasise instrumental knowledge and inadequately develop students' moral cultivation. The parents believed that this pedagogical imbalance undervalues students' natural temperaments, aesthetic sensibilities, and character refinement. As they indicated, the regular school system is dominated by examination-oriented education (*yingshi jiaoyu* 应试教育), wherein students are overloaded with schoolwork and endless tests and teachers are obsessed with students' academic results, class rankings, and rates of admission into higher-level schools.

The above moral critique can be understood as part of a broader shift in Chinese education. Although state reforms towards "education for quality" (*suzhi jiaoyu* 素质教育) have continued for the last two decades, these have met with a poor reception from the public because of the stubborn influence of examination-based pedagogies

(Kipnis 2011; Hansen 2015). This poor reception was echoed by the parents of Yiqian School, who disclosed their concern that excessive schoolwork would inhibit students' curiosity about the world and harm their physical and mental health. For example, Mrs Zhu was anxious about her eight-year-old son, who often failed to finish his homework until nine o'clock at night when attending the state school. She feared that the tremendous pressures of studying would turn the child into a passive learner, or even worse, a machine for passing examinations (Mrs Zhu, interview in June 2015).

Parents based their criticism on a dualistic framework in which state education privileges knowledge and Confucian education privileges morality. They argued that their children learned nothing but insignificant knowledge at state schools. They complained that the state-stipulated Chinese language course was too superficial to nurture one's mind and life, and that the mathematics course was so difficult that it exceeded children's natural faculty of understanding. In contrast, they believed that by requiring learners to repetitively read and memorise great books, Confucian education would impart profound wisdom and exert a subtle influence on the characters of their children. This way of understanding education is consistent with the Confucian idea of *jiaohua* (教化, cultivation), which means to transform the self through education (Billioud and Thoraval 2015: 17).⁹

Furthermore, the parents' preference for Confucian education corresponds to Wang Caigui's pedagogy. He claimed that the age range from 3 to 13 years is the golden period of memory, which is characterised by a robust capacity for memorisation but a weak faculty of comprehension; thus, the most appropriate pedagogy for children of this age group is to have them memorise more but understand less, a practice that is supposedly consistent with the law of human nature (Wang 2014: 27-33). Concomitantly, he advocated that children be taught the quintessential wisdom inscribed in the seminal classics of human history, as these books would infuse morals into the learners' mind and develop their sensibility, even if they could not currently understand the deeper meaning of the texts (Wang 2009: 5-6). He also assumed that as the children grew older, their capacity for comprehension would ripen and their life experience would increase, allowing them to gradually grasp the profound implications of the classics. In this sense, memorising the classics in childhood would serve as a kind of moral fertiliser for developing a child's ethical competence, conduct, and character (Wang 2014: 41-66). All of the interviewed parents acknowledged that they had watched Wang Caigui's videos or read his books, and some even quoted him to support their viewpoints. They accepted the method of memorisation, expecting their children to internalise the hidden spirit of classics through repeated readings and thus to cultivate Confucian virtues and enhance their moral qualities.¹⁰

9. This point echoes Lan Jiang Fu's (see article in this special feature), where she reveals the implementation of *jiaohua* policies within companies claiming to be Confucian and how the idea of *jiaohua* contributes to constructing the new identity of "Confucian entrepreneur" (*rushang* 儒商) through Confucian education.

10. Some parents indicated that memorisation should be combined with other learning methods such as singing (*yinsong* 吟诵) and textual interpretation. Also, some studies (Billioud and Thoraval 2015; see also Sandra Gilgan's article in this special issue) reveal critical voices of Wang Caigui's mechanical memorisation among the Confucian activists, and that some Confucian schools are much more creative in adapting classics reading courses to their own distinctive curricula. In recent years, criticisms of Wang's method have appeared not only in Confucian education circles but also in mass media and among intellectuals (Wang 2018, 2020).

The parents' preference for Confucian education was also linked to their desire to counteract the negative effects of selfish individualism. Some informants acknowledged other options for their children's education beyond the regular system, such as international private schools. However, they were induced to give up this option as in their eyes, international private schools resemble state schools in the lack of attention to students' moral cultivation. Therefore, they insisted on Confucian education out of the expectation that their children would overcome any selfish disposition and learn to conduct themselves with propriety through continuous study of the Confucian classics. For example, Mrs Wu proudly spoke of her nine-year-old son's change in character since he began studying the classics. "He has become very sensible and considerate," said Mrs Wu cheerfully. "He now knows how to behave in a modest and courteous manner, and how to consider other people's feelings. (...) I think these are the manifestations of the subtle transformation of his character by the classics." (Mrs Wu, interview in June 2015) This point echoes Sandra Gilgan (see her article in this special article), who finds that Confucian education activists are driven by their perceived moral deficiencies in today's China.

Disembedding from state schools: From straddlers to breakers

Having described the rise of parents critical of the state education system, this section continues to demonstrate their actions to sever themselves from it. These disconnecting actions, which are motivated by a thirst for Confucian virtues, are a form of "disembedding," one of the three components of individualisation. In this study, disembedding is understood as a process whereby parents and their children transform themselves from "straddlers" spanning both regular and Confucian educations to "breakers" who are largely separated from state schools.

In the straddling period, parents asked their children to read Confucian classics as an extracurricular activity while continuing to study at a regular school. The informants described this period as a stage of part-time classics reading, which took various forms such as studying the classics at home with one or both parents, attending a weekend tutorial class, or participating in summer or winter classics study camps. Mr Li, for example, insisted on sending his son to study Confucian classics at a local study hall (*xuetang* 學堂) every weekend until his transfer to Yiqian (interview in July 2015). Some parents even organised parent-child co-reading classes by themselves. Mrs Lu was an organiser of such classes in her community. She clarified that the original purpose was to gather peers with whom her son could learn Confucianism, and to create a home-like atmosphere where children and parents could read the classics in an ambience of mutual encouragement (interview in July 2015).

However, many of the interviewed parents acknowledged that the children's extracurricular classics studies often increased their workloads even as they already suffered from excessive homework at their regular schools. The parents also felt that the part-time approach merely allowed their children to memorise a small number of classics, which was far less desirable. Recalling this experience, Mrs Song mentioned that she had to sometimes ask her son to prioritise

classics reading and to skip regular schoolwork (interview in June 2015). Mrs Fan encountered a similar predicament. She tutored her daughter in the classics after school in Year 4, but this practice aroused her daughter's resistance before long. Mrs Fan said:

My daughter often complained, "My classmates do not read classics, but I have to!" (...) Indeed, she was among the few students who read the classics at that time. (...) She took the teacher's requirements very seriously, so she always tried her best to finish her schoolwork. But I was increasingly concerned that if the situation continued, her time for reading classics would become less and less, and she would become more and more exhausted. (Mrs Fan, interview in June 2015)

How could this dilemma be resolved? One common solution, as the interviewed parents disclosed, was to give up the straddling approach and transfer their children to a full-time Confucian school. As soon as they started to follow this course of action, however, 10 of the 17 interviewed parents admitted to encountering opposition from family members, such as their partners or parents. During my fieldwork, I heard stories from more than one informant about parents who were caught in protracted, bitter quarrels about whether or not to transfer their children out of a state school into full-time classics study. Some of these debates were so severe as to push the couple to the brink of divorce. Speaking of family pressures, Mr Li stated:

I am currently very concerned that my wife and father-in-law (...) will continue to exert pressure, and that this will finally cause me to give up my child's classical education. (...) My wife thinks it is risky to have a child read classics outside the regular school system and ridicules me. My father-in-law (...) does not sympathise with me either. (...) He strongly opposes my decision to take the child out of the state school. (Mr Li, interview in July 2015)

For many informants, disputes with family members continued throughout the entire process of their children's classics study, demonstrating a sustaining influence of family relationships on individual parents' attempts to avoid the regular schooling track. Even so, the informants clarified that family members did not question the value of Confucian classics *per se*, but based their opposition on external factors, such as the accommodations at Yiqian School (a boarding school), the social recognition of Confucian education, and the availability of an academic certificate. Additionally, many parents indicated that the whole family, rather than individual parents, paid the tuition fees for their children's Confucian education. This observation suggests that family relationships contribute to the individual parents' actions of disembedding from state education.

Furthermore, the parents did not completely cast off the control of state power, in particular, the restrictions of the state-defined school system. One example is the parents' concern about authorised student status (*xueji* 學籍), which refers to the official status as a student affiliated with a state-accredited school. This concern may have been more intense among parents who sent their children to

Yiqian School before 2014, when the school had not yet established an online record system of student status. Recalling this experience, Mrs Lan commented:

When I sent my son to Yiqian, the school head told me that their students had no approved student status. This rendered me extremely anxious. Why did I do it so blindly? My friend said this meant that my boy would become an “illegal student.” I was extremely worried. (Mrs Lan, interview in May 2015)

To Mrs Lan, student status matters because it provides institutional permission to move her boy to the next stage of education. This concern about student status reveals the parents’ equivocal attitude towards the state education system. Despite being critical of it, parents were confused about how to obtain state-recognised schooling elements, for example student status, in an alternative Confucian education setting. Their ambiguous feelings about the state education system are reflective of the divided self, a term used by Arthur Kleinman (2011) to describe the ambivalence of contemporary Chinese individuals in their dealings with socialist state power. In interviews, I rarely heard parents complain about the government; neither did they intend to pressure the state to solve the student status problem. In contrast, they likened their children to “lab rats” in an ongoing educational experiment of Confucianism, implying that failure was sometimes inevitable, and that they would have to deal with the consequences. The interviewed parents tended to blame themselves rather than the restrictive political conditions of the Chinese education system for the uncertainties of their children’s schooling. The inward approach to accuse oneself as demonstrated in the present study is not an isolated case; it can be found in some other studies about the rising Chinese individuals (Hansen and Pang 2008; Yan 2014). That the parental activists hardly hold any critical opinion toward the state, despite their disappointment with the state education system, reveals the particularities of China’s “party-state managed individualization” (Yan 2009) or “authoritarian individualization” (Hansen 2015), the two terminologies explained before. Given this, the critical parents must subject themselves to state power to exercise self-choice and autonomy within the political constraints imposed by the Party-state.

Returning to state schools to regain institutional safety

The parents’ ambivalent attitude towards the state education system is further manifested in their plans for their children’s future schooling. This touches on the re-embedding aspect of individualisation, specifically, the approach to re-embedding through reimposing old categories such as state and family. Whereas parents were outspoken in their criticism of state schooling, they acknowledged that regular schools would guarantee their children a secure channel for the next stage of education. The following remarks from Mrs Jin reflect this paradoxical mentality. At the time of the interview, she was already considering taking her 14-year-old son, Xinxin, out of the Confucian school and returning him to the state school. She explained:

Going back to the state school would be nothing more than a compromise in response to the real-world restrictions. If my son wants to survive in society, he has to follow the conventional path, that is, pass the high school entrance examination and then the *gaokao* (高考, college entrance examination). I am reluctant to do this but have to. (Mrs Jin, interview in July 2015)

However, this was not an easy decision to make. On returning to the regular school, Xinxin would enter Year 3 of middle school, as he left in Year 1 and spent two years at the Confucian school. However, he would be unable to catch up with the missing compulsory courses because the Confucian school did not provide them systematically. Although another option was to start at Year 1, this would be a source of shame (*mei mianzi* 沒面子, literally having no face), as he would have to study with pupils two years younger than himself. In the interview, Xinxin shook his head and sighed heavily, his eyes full of confusion about the future. He admitted that he and his mother felt extremely lost about whether or not to return to the state school.

The story of Mrs Jin and Xinxin is not unique. Many other interviewed parents shared similar concerns about their children’s future after Confucian studies. Admittedly, two parents reported no such feeling of anxiety. They explained that their children were in the earliest stage of primary education, and therefore scheduling the next stage was less urgent. To clarify, those who considered returning their children to regular schools still recognised the moral education of classics study but had to give it up mainly because of its failure to guarantee a clear educational prospect. This demonstrates parents’ limited access to alternative forms of education beyond the regular system, particularly to a valid route for further Confucian studies. Therefore, returning to the state education system seems like a “forced choice” to many parents, due to the uncertainties arising from their children’s study at the Confucian school. I discussed this with Mrs Wei, whose 14-year-old daughter had already returned to the state school after one year of study at Yiqian, and who was recommended by one informant as an interview candidate. Regarding the reason for leaving, she said:

I felt terribly uncertain about my daughter’s future after she went to study at the Confucian school. I was concerned about her education and her career prospects, which seemed very dim, hopeless, and remote. I had confidence neither in the Confucian school nor in myself. (Mrs Wei, interview in August 2015)

Such uncertainty about the future was also reflected in some parents’ hesitancy about sending their children to Wenli Academy (*wenli shuyuan* 文禮書院),¹¹ an advanced Confucian institution established in 2012, which was regarded as the ideal place for further

11. The official website of Wenli Academy is <http://www.wenli.ac.cn> (accessed on 4 May 2022). Notably, there is no official student exchange programme between Wenli Academy and Yiqian School. However, the head teacher at Yiqian School explicitly encouraged students to pursue further Confucian studies at Wenli Academy as soon as they would successfully recite 300,000 characters of classics (this is also the official admission requirement of the Academy).

Confucian studies by many parents.¹² With the help of one teacher, I was able to interview Mr Zhong, whose son enrolled in Wenli Academy after years of classics study at Yiqian School. Mr Zhong pointed out that the Academy did not solve the problem of finding a “way forward” (*chulu* 出路) in Confucian studies but merely postponed dealing with it, and he remained anxious about his son’s future education and life. His concern stemmed from the fact that, as a non-mainstream educational institution, Wenli Academy lacked institutionalised connections with the state school system.¹³ Mr Zhong recalled:

The most confusing issue is what kind of life and career the students can achieve as soon as they finish their studies in the Academy. (...) The future mapped out by the Academy appears promising, but we as parents are still unclear how to get there. (...) This has always been the case since the start of classics studies. (Mr Zhong, interview in July 2015)

Furthermore, parents’ anxiety about their children’s future education was associated with the availability of degrees. They worried that their children would lack a university degree if they continued with their Confucian education and therefore would be at a disadvantage in the job market. Mrs Yan stated:

I hope that my child will get a job to support herself after going to university. (...) If I restrict her to the track of Confucian education and prevent her from going to university, how will she find a job when she grows up? Nowadays, Chinese society highly values university degrees, which have become a precondition to embarking on a career and competing in the job market. (Mrs Yan, interview in June 2015)

Some older students were also worried about the lack of a university degree and the impact on their future. In one class discussion, a boy stood up to refute the idea that a company would hire a person with sufficient knowledge and moral cultivation, even if he did not hold a university degree. The student explained:

Today’s high-level companies recruit people with a strong educational background. They do not firstly regard your knowledge, experience, or morality when they are shortlisting; instead, you have to meet the essential requirement of holding a university degree. (Class discussion in May 2015)

As one study revealed, young people tend to envisage well-planned rather than adventurous futures (Carabelli and Lyon 2016). Echoing this point, students at Yiqian School took a realistic, pragmatic approach to their future education; that is, they planned to return to the state school system and then go to university. As they clarified, a state-recognised university degree was an indispensable “stepping stone” (*qiaomen zhuang* 敲门砖) for future career development.

Discussion and conclusion

Drawing on the individualisation thesis and its application to

Chinese society, this article explores how parents become critical individuals in their involvement with the reemergence of Confucian education. It demonstrates parents’ struggle to disembody from the state school system and their dilemma over whether to return their children to the institutional safety of this system. The parental desire to inculcate Confucian virtues in their children involves a reappraisal of the method of memorisation. Valuing the recovery of this particular method, the interviewed parents regarded it as a fundamental approach to improving their children’s moral cultivation.

The practice of criticism, which emerges from and responds to circumstantial sociopolitical conditions, encourages parents to think, speak, and act as critical individuals. According to Foucault, critique is the art “(of not being governed) *like that*, by that, in the name of those principles, with such an objective in mind, and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that, not by them” (1997: 28). This implies that although the modern subject cannot use critique to completely eliminate power relations, it can still actualise a certain degree of freedom in a constraining context by navigating power relations in ways that mediate against and attempt to minimise constraints (Taylor 2011: 180). Based on this, I argue that parents involved in Confucian education use criticism to reflect upon how to not follow the conventional state education, but instead to take up the alternative form of Confucian education.

The liberation of the individual not only is an essential part of the modernisation process in Western Europe (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002) but also is the reflexive outcome of the individualisation of Chinese society (Yan 2009). As Yan Yunxiang pointed out, the rising individuals of today’s China place more value on their self-development, happiness, and security (*ibid.*: 3). This point is reflected in the scholarship on Chinese parenting and childrearing,¹⁴ wherein researchers argue for the emergence of “soft individualism” among young Chinese parents and their children; this term refers to the pursuit of freedom, autonomy, and individual interests (Kuan 2015; Kim, Brown, and Fong 2017; Wang 2022a). Consequently, parents who have enrolled their children in a Confucian school were fighting against the orthodox route of state education and turned to an alternative Confucian style of schooling that they believed could relieve the negative effects of individualism and selfishness. Acting and speaking as an *emic* first person “I,” these parental activists became involved in Confucian education, criticised the examination-oriented regular schools, and claimed the freedom to exercise their choice and self-interest regarding their children’s education.

12. Some studies (Billioud and Thoraval 2015; see also Sandra Gilgan’s article in this special issue) reveal that some parents leave one Confucian school after a while to find other *sishu* that would better match their expectations. There are circulations between traditional schools and reflections among the parents regarding the ideal education. Acknowledging the truth of it, this article, however, adopts a different focus on the circulations between traditional schools and the official system.

13. Many Confucian study halls and academies seek connections with the established educational system (see Sandra Gilgan’s article in this special issue). For example, Wenli Academy has recently encouraged students to earn the higher education degree by taking the self-taught examinations (*zikao* 自考) or applying for degree programmes to foreign universities. But this is done at the individual level, meaning the individual students and their families have to undertake the costs, risks, and uncertainties on their own. The Academy itself has no statutory qualification to award degrees, and therefore lacks a reliable pathway to further study.

14. A detailed, well-organised literature review can be found in Naftali (2016) and Yang (2018).

The emergence of critical parents in the field of Confucian education can be understood as a manifestation of a broader shift in the moral landscape due to individualisation. Parents' challenges to state education were enmeshed with their deep desire for their children's moral cultivation. They wanted their children to learn Confucian virtues and proper conduct by repetitively reading and memorising the classics, and hoped to protect their children from the negative effects of uncontrolled individualism (Yan 2009: 289). This explains why the interviewed parents adhered to the ideals of Confucian education but rejected other non-mainstream forms of education.

However, the practice of critique did not entail a complete break from the state education system; instead, state power continued to haunt parents even after they had abandoned this system. Many parents were ultimately forced to return their children to the state education system due to the lack of stable institutional re-embedding channels for further Confucian studies. In other words, parents still had to rely on the state-defined educational trajectory to pave the way for their children's further education. This is a good example of the "party-state managed individualization," which implies that Chinese individuals are directed by the state to exercise self-management, self-direction, and self-control within the boundaries set up by the Party-state (Yan 2009: 290). Additionally, despite their criticism of Chinese state education, parents did not evince scepticism about the authority of the communist government; instead, they appreciated the regime's support for the Confucian revival and its tolerance of the new Confucian institutions. These findings confirm one central argument that the relationship between the individual and the state (rather than that of the individual and society as in Western countries) is predominant in the process of individualisation of Chinese society, and that the rising Chinese individuals have to deal with the state in one way or another (Yan 2010).

Parents also had to address the opposition of family members to removing children from state schools. In this study, family relationships played a role in individual parents' actions (Hansen and Pang 2008; Yan 2013, 2021). Facing objections, the parents attempted to convince family members not only by clarifying the benefits of classics reading but also by showing them the actual improvement in their children's moral cultivation since they began studying the classics. Many parents reported that they had successfully changed the minds of disgruntled family members, who now supported their choice of Confucian education for their children. This suggests that the functioning of family relationships has been redefined from an individualistic perspective, insofar as parents' resort to their family networks to pursue their own interests or what they claim to be in their children's interests. This finding echoes the theory of Chinese individualisation, which holds that family relationships become practical resources for individuals to reshape their identities (Yan 2009: xxiii). The agency of the parent, who acts as an individual rather than as a representative of the family, has recently gained momentum in educational practice in China.¹⁵

Additionally, the study results demonstrate the intensified desire of parents for their children to cultivate Confucian individual values. This offers an excellent chance to revisit the unbalanced understanding of individualism (Yan 2021). Confucian-inspired individual values differ from neoliberalism, which despite the apparent common emphasis on free choice, self-governance, and self-responsibility

involves the sanctification of market competition and the pursuit of self-interest (McGuigan 2014; Ball 2016). Neoliberalism has resulted in the unchecked spread of selfish individualism, as can be observed in present-day China (Yan 2013). This study found that parents conceived of Confucian individual values as an alternative spiritual resource to counteract the negative effects of selfish individualism associated with neoliberal marketisation. In light of this, I disagree with the argument that China must undergo "individualization without individualism" (Yan 2009: xxxii), which will lead to the appearance of "uncivil individuals" (Yan 2003: 226).¹⁶ At least, the rejuvenated Confucian individual values, along with the rise of critical parents, draw our attention to indigenous cultural resources that may enrich the underdeveloped understanding of individualism that has held sway since the early twentieth century.¹⁷ Post-Mao China has seen a rapid decline in the power of a totalising morality, and several value systems may compete with each other in a changing society (Yan 2014). This tears an opening for Confucianism to contend for moral authority. Therefore, the fate of Confucianism as a moral resource has to be observed and studied in the larger context of the Chinese moral landscape, which is undergoing a process of multi-layered and multi-directional changes rather than a linear development (Yan 2009, 2010).

In light of this, it would help to link the findings of this study with the reflexive conditions of modernity. The process of individualisation emphasises the agency of individualised actors in actualising social initiatives. In this way, it serves to corroborate the situation of modernity, which is marked by institutional differentiation and cultural diversification. The dynamic of modernity has resulted in the disintegration of comprehensive Confucianism (Ren 2018) into a patchwork of scattered and fragmented activities (Billioud 2010). Against this background, the revival of Confucian education since the early 2000s, which is part of the broader picture of popular Confucianism, is no more than one domain where the wandering soul of Confucianism may return for reinstitutionalising. Recent educational projects that claim the inheritance of Confucianism have varied considerably since 2015, and some even contradict each other in terms of curriculum, methodology, composition of students and staff, organisational size, and legitimacy. For example, some Confucian schools have abandoned the mechanical memorisation method and have adopted an alternative pedagogy that blends memorisation and comprehension for teaching and learning the classics. Other schools go even further to de-emphasise classics reading but focus on learning from the ancient Chinese tradition of *sishu* education (Wang 2018). Moreover, under the socialist regime's

15. One recent interesting study that evidences this aspect discusses the adaptive changes of Chinese motherhood towards "educational agency" in the context of market-oriented education (Yang 2018).

16. This point is also consolidated by Rolandsen's study on the volunteerism of Chinese youth, which argues that "the reaction to the process of individualisation does not necessarily take the form of increased self-centredness and atomisation of the individual" (2008: 105).

17. This is a complex, meaningful issue that deserves an exclusive exploration, despite the space limitation to expand it in the present study. However, recent literature by Yan (2017) reveals that Confucianism is still regarded as a moral resource to deny and oppress individual desires and self-interests, and serve to achieve a higher goal for the collectives (family, kinship, or nation-state). This reflects part of the truth of Confucianism, whereas it simultaneously overlooks the positive side of Confucian values to stimulate an individual's social actions to create new spaces for Confucian initiatives. Further relevant studies are required in the future.

campaign to inherit and develop China's excellent traditional culture, Confucian classics are institutionalised as part of the official curriculum but work as a tool to strengthen the moral and patriotic education defined by the socialist state. Therefore, it is almost impossible to depict the general landscape of Confucian revival with reference to only one specific domain, given the many distinct logics involved in various divisions. Accordingly, we should take the findings of this study cautiously and avoid sweeping generalisation. But it is still worth noting that the profound process of individualisation as a force of modernity continues to influence the revival of Confucian education. Continuous differentiation and diversification can be expected in future.

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