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Resurgence of Confucian education in contemporary China: Parental involvement, moral anxiety, and the pedagogy of memorisation

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ABSTRACT

The resurgence of Confucian education in present-day China has received increasing academic attention over the last two decades. However, certain aspects of this trend remain poorly understood, particularly parents' involvement in their children's Confucian education. Based on a qualitative study conducted at a Confucian school, this article sheds light on why some Chinese parents today send their children to learn the Confucian classics. The parents interviewed criticised China's examination-oriented state school system, which they regarded as too practically oriented to realise students' personal and moral development. Instead, they wanted their children to cultivate Confucian virtues and moral *suzhi* ('quality'). Also, Wang Caigui's theory of 'children reading classics' education strengthened the parents' confidence in the Confucian pedagogy of memorisation. Based on these findings, the article argues that using the critique tool, parents who advocate Confucian education have emerged as critical citizens who reflect on how *not* to be governed by the mainstream state education.

KEYWORDS

Parental involvement; *suzhi*/quality; Confucian education; critical citizen; moral shift; Chinese learners

Introduction

The resurgence of Confucian education in present-day China has received increasing academic attention over the last two decades. However, certain aspects of this trend remain poorly understood, particularly parents' involvement in their children's Confucian education. Based on the data collected in fieldwork at a Confucian school, this article aims to shed light on why some Chinese parents today send their children to learn the Confucian classics. In the Introduction section, I present the background of Confucian education revival and its relevance for Chinese educational reform, and then clarify the research question.

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Confucian revival and its educational implications

Confucianism¹ held a dominant status in ancient China's culture, society, and politics. But since the end of the nineteenth century when Western powers pounded open China's door with their 'solid ships and effective cannons', modern science, and political institutions (J. Li, 2012, p. 10), Confucianism, being considered by many Chinese intellectuals as a backward, outdated ideology that had little reference with modern times, was blamed for China's social, political, and economic ills (Billioud & Thoraval, 2015; Sun, 2013). When the communist regime was founded in 1949, the Confucian tradition was abandoned by the government; for Chinese people, it was just good enough to be relegated to the museum (Billioud, 2021).²

In the last few decades, China has seen the overall revival of Confucianism (Billioud, 2010; Hammond & Richey, 2015). Confucian revival in contemporary China can be understood as both a top-down (government-driven) phenomenon and a bottom-up (grassroots-driven) movement. Regarding the top-down approach, the Chinese party-state has been increasingly open in its support for Confucianism since the early 2000s (e.g., Chia, 2011; Yu, 2008). In 2014, President Xi Jinping delivered the keynote address at an international academic symposium convened to mark the 2,565th anniversary of Confucius's birth. This was the first time that China's supreme leader had spoken at this annual symposium. His speech was interpreted by academics and the mass media as a sign of the socialist party-state's mission to promote the comprehensive revival of Confucianism (Hammond & Richey, 2015).³ Alongside this top-down agenda, mainland China has experienced a bottom-up grassroots revival of Confucianism, featuring the rise of the popular Confucianism (*minjian rujia* 民间儒家) since the early 2000s. Popular Confucianism refers to 'nonofficial activities' conducted 'outside the party-state apparatus' and by ordinary people (Billioud & Thoraval, 2015, p. 9). Over the last two decades, popular Confucianism has extended to various strata of Chinese society and gained political, religious, and educational dimensions (Billioud, 2010).

Here, I focus on the educational dimension of the revival of popular Confucianism. The Confucian education tradition, profoundly institutionalised by the imperial examination system (*keju zhi* 科举制)⁴ in ancient China (Lee, 2000, p. 657), still influences present-day China, particularly the Chinese learners' learning models, cultural beliefs, and learning processes (J. Li, 2012, p. 63). Generally, Confucian education emphasises the life-long exercise of self-cultivation (*xiushen* 修身), aiming to educate a person on five constant virtues, i.e., benevolence (*ren* 仁), righteousness (*yi* 义), ritual (*li* 礼), wisdom (*zhi* 智), and trustworthiness (*xin* 信). Confucian self-cultivation must address five cardinal human relationships (J. Li, 2012, pp. 37–39), i.e., parent-child relationship, sibling relationships, husband-wife relationship, basic economic relationship (employer-employee or supervisor-subordinate), and friendship, respectively corresponding to five virtues of filial piety (*xiao* 孝), respect (*jing* 敬), sibling love and responsibility (*ti* 悌), loyalty (*zhong* 忠), and trustworthiness. Of all these Confucian virtues and moral principles, the concept of benevolence or humanity is regarded as the highest level of self-cultivation, leading one to become a superior person (*junzi* 君子), the ideal personality of Confucianism. Moreover, the Confucian education tradition embraces a core set of learning virtues such as sincerity, diligence, endurance of hardship, perseverance, concentration, respect for teachers, and humility (J. Li, 2012, p. 49).

Nowadays, tens of thousands of people in China have begun to take part in Confucian education (Billioud, 2011). Many Chinese parents not only learn about traditional Chinese culture themselves but also arrange for their children to study the Confucian classics.⁵ The scope of Confucian education remains light-weight within the larger Chinese educational system on account of the relatively small number of pupils engaging in the study of classics; however, as noted by Billioud and Thoraval (2015), it matters because ‘it might produce new generations of Confucian activists’ (p. 48). Confucian teaching and learning take various forms in China today. While millions of children occasionally learn classics at home or part-time study halls (*xuetang* 学堂), hundreds of educational institutions associated with Confucianism offer full-time classical education to small cohorts of students (Billioud, 2021). The emerging Confucian schools experimented with distinct alternative pedagogies: while some radical ones solely emphasised the memorisation of Confucian classics all day long, others adopted more liberal, balanced approaches to education, where students learned not only classics but also science, mathematics, nature, and English, and where students do all kinds of activities such as music and art (both Chinese and Western), poetry, archery, tea ceremony, and ritual propriety.⁶

I focus on one of these forms—‘children reading classics’ education (*ertong dujing jiaoyu* 儿童读经教育), which is perhaps the most controversial as it has incurred widespread criticism from intellectuals and the public in terms of its content of courses, teaching methods, and learning style (Wang, 2018). Wang Caigui, a Confucian academic and educator from Taiwan, played a key role in campaigning for this type of Confucian education and crafting an appropriate pedagogy. Wang initiated the promotion of Confucian education first in Taiwan in the mid-1990s by establishing a private academy to organise children to read classics together. As one of the earliest Confucian activists, Wang’s endeavours had a significant impact on the expansion of Confucianism at the grassroots level. In 2001, Wang delivered a speech on guiding children to read classics at Beijing Normal University. Praised by Confucian education practitioners as ‘the sensation of the century’, this speech came to be understood as the trigger for mainland China’s classical education movement. Influenced by Wang’s ideas, numerous old-style private schools (*sishu* 私塾) were established and an increasing number of parents started transferring their children to these schools from the state education system since the early 2000s.⁷

Wang (2014, pp. 41–66) proposed a comprehensive theory of children’s classics study, with three key principles. First, the teaching content must be Chinese canonical texts (e.g., Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism), prioritising the Confucian classics. Second, the basic pedagogy should be mechanical memorisation. Third, children younger than 13 have a robust memory but weak comprehension ability. Accordingly, Wang (2014, pp. 6–15) recommended that from an early age, children should be guided to read and memorise the classics extensively, simply, candidly, and joyfully. He argued that learners who faithfully follow this pedagogy in their classics study would effectively absorb the wisdom inscribed in these seminal works and achieve personal and moral development. Wang’s educational theory significantly impacts many parents who desire an alternative form of education to develop their children’s moral cultivation, particularly intensifying their confidence in the memorisation method for classical learning.

The intellectual background regarding the Chinese learners would help make sense of Wang's pedagogical emphasis on memorisation. The current body of research (see, e.g., Chan & Rao, 2009; Watkins & Biggs, 1996) has debunked the myth that Chinese students are rote learners who follow the pedagogical dichotomy of memorisation versus understanding. Rather, researchers have uncovered that Chinese students intertwine memorisation and understanding to learn and employ meaningful memorisation and repetition to lay the foundation for developing learning virtues deemed necessary for serious life-long education. Furthermore, the truth that memorisation and understanding are complementary in Chinese students' learning process is associated with the new understandings about Confucian beliefs (J. Li, 2012, pp. 63–67). Specifically, in contrast to the old view of the Confucian-heritage culture causing the passive Chinese learner, Confucianism nowadays is regarded by some scholars to encourage active participation among learners and combine with novel pedagogical practices in the changing context of Chinese education (J. Li, 2012, pp. 63–67). I will expound on Confucian education practitioners' preference for the memorisation method in the Results section.

Confucian education and Chinese educational reform

In addition to considering the background of the overall revival of Confucianism, I understand the resurgence of Confucian education as an intrinsic part of Chinese educational reform after 1978, featuring a shift from examination-oriented education (*yingshi jiaoyu* 应试教育) towards quality-oriented (*suzhi* 素质) education. Confucian education has ideological and pedagogical overlaps with both educational approaches but is not synonymous with them.

The examination-oriented approach to education can be dated back to the imperial examination system in ancient China (Lee, 2000, p. 657) and has retained profound effects on modern China and East Asia's schooling practices.⁸ Scholars (J. Li, 2012, pp. 67–68) explained that East Asian people and societies uphold the exam-based system mostly out of concern for educational equality and fairness.⁹ Examination-oriented education is characterised by standardised testing, the pursuit of high scores and university admission, and learning by rote (Dello-Iacovo, 2009). It has been criticised for adversely affecting students' development by focusing primarily on intellectual ability (*zhiyu* 智育) and neglecting other essential qualities, such as moral, physical, and aesthetic abilities (Lou, 2011; Yi, 2011). Examination-oriented education has also been widely condemned for imposing excessive academic pressure, suppressing students' creativity, ignoring their practical competence, and discriminating against those with low test scores (Hansen, 2015). It is noted that the method of memorisation accompanies the learning of Chinese classics in the contemporary revival of Confucian education.

In contrast to examination-oriented education, *suzhi* education¹⁰ is a more recent approach. The initial idea of *suzhi* education was proposed by Chinese intellectuals in the 1980s as a remedy for the perennial problems arising from Chinese examination-oriented education.¹¹ In the early 1990s, a national campaign for *suzhi* education was launched by the government to cultivate all-round talents with five essential qualities: moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and manual (Yi, 2011). *Suzhi* education was institutionalised as a national policy of educational reform in the late 1990s.

Relevant to the present research, I primarily focus on the moral aspects of *suzhi* education. Moral teaching has a long history in China thanks to the deep influence of Confucianism,¹² and the socialist regime of China has reformulated a moral education system that combines the Confucian tradition of *jiaohua* (cultivation 教化, literally ‘to transform through education’) with socialist, collective values (M. Li, 2011). According to Confucianism, the essence of the self is not fixed but can be transformed through education that fosters civility and virtues (Chen, 2012; Hwang, 2013). In this context, ‘the object described by *suzhi* is “correctable” or “improvable”’ (Lin, 2009, pp. 289–290), suggesting that people have the potential for development and enhancement.

Despite being implemented for decades, the efficacy of the *suzhi* education campaign has incurred nationwide criticism. Kipnis (2011) indicated two contradictory discourses accommodated by the project of *suzhi* education to explain the poor practical achievement. The first is the neoliberal discourse, stressing the need to remake school children as autonomous subjects ‘who will be entrepreneurial, democratic, and law-abiding, and take responsibility for their own health and welfare’ (Kipnis, 2011, p. 291). The second is the authoritarian discourse, which requires subjects to ‘obey the whims and dictates of a sovereign, in this case the CCP [Chinese Communist Party]’ (Kipnis, 2011, p. 291). With pervasive disappointment in *suzhi* education, many alternative forms of education, Confucian education being one type of them, have begun to appear to seek better ways of teaching to improve students’ qualities and capabilities.

Notably, there are two key differences between *suzhi* education and alternative Confucian education. First, Confucian education emphasises students’ moral cultivation, whilst *suzhi* education prioritises creativity and innovation. Second, Confucian education promotes the method of memorisation, this making it like but not synonymous with the examination-oriented approach, whilst *suzhi* education is designed to dismantle rote learning. Ironically, advocates of Confucian education have used the discourse of *suzhi* to defend the pedagogy of memorisation as an effective and efficient way to improve pupils’ moral quality (Wang, 2014), as discussed in the following sections.

In summary, the revival of Confucian education has received much attention, but parents’ engagement in Confucian education, particularly their motivation to choose to enrol their children in Confucian schools, has been relatively understudied.¹³ Given that parents’ endorsement and support are vital to the revitalisation of Confucian education, I address the following research question in this study: Why do some parents in China send their children to learn the classics at Confucian schools? This question can be reframed as: What elements encourage parents to choose Confucian education for their children as an alternative to the mainstream state school system?¹⁴ To explore this question would not only contribute to further understanding the Confucian revival in today’s China, particularly the bottom-up agenda of popular Confucianism but also to revealing the complexities of Chinese educational practice and discourse. To respond to the research question, the present study demonstrates findings according to the fieldwork data collected at one Confucian school. The main argument is that parents of Confucian education have demonstrated a critical attitude towards the state education due to the moral anxieties about their children and have emerged as critical citizens who reflect on how *not* to be governed by the mainstream state education. Before moving to the findings, I will describe the research method issues in the next section.

The scene and the research methods

By collecting fieldwork (interview) data at a Confucian school ('X School' thereafter), this study aims to shed light on why some parents in China send their children to learn Confucian classics. The teaching at X School is directly influenced by Wang Caigui's pedagogical philosophy and practice. The school's founder Mr Chen and the head-teacher Mrs Zheng are loyal followers of Wang. Being one of the earliest individuals who practised Confucian education since the early 2000s, Mr Chen started teaching his four-year-old son to learn Confucian texts at home by using the practice recommended by Wang. Also, Mrs Zheng clarified to endorse Wang's Confucian education theory in public. She, along with some teaching staff at X School, explicitly encouraged students to read and memorise classics extensively and even to seek further Confucian studies at the academy established by Wang in the future. In addition, X School welcomes new parents interested in Confucian education to visit the campus anytime throughout the academic year. Mr Chen or Mrs Zheng may hold an informal meeting with the visitors to introduce Wang's educational ideas and the school's actual practice. In so doing, X School can recruit potential parents to engage their children in the study of classics.

X School is located in a small town in a remote rural area in a developed province on the southeast coast of China. One important reason to choose this specific school for the present study is because of its history—being one of China's earliest established Confucian private schools in the contemporary era, X School's history can be traced back to 2002 when its founder gathered a few preschool children to read Confucian classics at a private home. Another consideration of choosing X School is its status—it was awarded the official private school status in 2010, thus differentiating it from many other forms of Confucian education such as homeschooling and those in the 'grey areas'. When I visited the school in 2015, it had approximately 120 students and 20 staff members for teaching and administration. Most of the teachers knew about traditional Chinese culture, and some had worked at other classics-oriented schools. Although X School is an approved provider of nine-year compulsory education, as legally mandated in China, it does not offer a comprehensive state-stipulated curriculum; instead, its curriculum follows the Confucian style, focusing on canonical literature. Students are required to read and memorise classical texts for the whole school day. Most of their reading materials are Confucian classics, along with some Taoist and Western texts.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 17 parents of students at X School, comprising six fathers and 11 mothers. I recruited the parental participants by snowball sampling. Most of the informants lived in urban areas, and their educational experience ranged from high school education to Master's degree level. In terms of occupation, the informants included white-collar employees at private companies, low- and mid-ranking civil servants, self-employed entrepreneurs, full-time mothers, and an engineer. The parents were affluent enough to pay the high tuition fee, RMB 30,000 (equivalent to \$4,700) per year, charged by the Confucian school in 2015. A few of the parents described themselves as Buddhist or Christian. Although religion may be an incentive for some parents to choose Confucian education for their children, this is not the topic of the present article.¹⁵ Instead, I emphasise the role of education-related anxiety in stimulating

parents to switch to the non-mainstream mode of Confucian education, particularly parents whose children have experienced academic frustration or suffered discrimination at public schools.

I conducted telephone interviews to collect data from the parent informants because X School is a boarding school and students must spend most of the year on campus, except official school holidays. It would have been unpractical to conduct face-to-face interviews because I had limited access to the parents. I conducted telephone interviews from May to August 2015. Each interview lasted for one to two hours, and all interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the informants (all agreed). I also conducted participant observations of one regular class comprising 17 students aged 12 to 16 at X School from March to July 2015, four of whom were the children of the interview parents. I aimed to compare their views with those of the parent informants. All students and their parents or guardians completed the consent forms. I asked parents a list of semi-structured interview questions, including: How did you know Confucian education and this Confucian school? What do you think of Confucian education ideas and styles? Why did you send your child to this school? What changes do you think classic reading has brought to your child? How do you evaluate these changes? How do you see the current state education? Why? The student participants were asked a wide range of questions on topics such as their opinions, feelings, and experiences about learning Confucian classics and the difficulties they encountered in transferring from state schools. These questions are produced because of their relevance to the research question and their effectiveness in prompting the participants to discuss the research topics. For ethical reasons, I use pseudonyms for all the participants in this article.

The interviews and participant observations were conducted in Mandarin. I transcribed the audio-recorded interviews. This study adopts a constructivist epistemology¹⁶ that uses critical discourse analysis of the interview data to generate data-driven categories and themes. When analysing the data, I edited the collected materials, saved them in hundreds of numbered documents, and imported them into NVivo for coding. I clarify that this study is not based on grounded theory; neither does it follow the full procedures for conducting grounded theory research. But it uses the three-step coding method for critical data analysis: ‘developing categories of information (open coding), interconnecting the categories (axial coding), [and] building a “story” that connects the categories (selective coding)’ (Creswell, 2007, p. 160). In the process of data coding, I repeatedly read the fieldwork notes and interview transcriptions, while three themes gradually emerged and clarified, constituting the next Results section: (1) moral criticism of state education and desire for Confucian virtues; (2) challenge to the examination orientation of mainstream schools through the discourse of *suzhi*; and (3) confidence in the method of memorising classics.

Results

Criticising state education, moral anxiety, and Confucian virtues

When asked why they had moved their children to a Confucian school, the interviewed parents generally began by criticising the state school system. Mr Li, whose son was 12 years old and had studied at X School for two years at the time of the interview, bluntly

expressed his hatred of state education, which he even described as a ‘fiery pit’ for children. Mr Li had worked as an information technology engineer since graduating with a Master’s degree at a top Chinese university in the early 2000s. Whilst acknowledging that higher education had given him the knowledge and skills needed to survive in society, he maintained that the state education system had failed to teach him how to *zuoren* (做人, ‘to become human’); that is, how to get along well with people and develop moral rectitude. He asserted that ‘state schooling does nothing but encourage people to focus on their own interests’. Going even further, he argued that ‘the state school system is a complete failure in terms of moral education’, vowing that ‘I would never let my son return to such a school’. Mr Zhong, another parent I interviewed, had graduated from university in the mid-1980s when university graduates were rare in China. He outspokenly criticised state schools that they ‘fail to give students either the moral knowledge required to become human or ethical guidance on doing good to other people’.

The above two examples, echoing many others presented here, demonstrate the parental informants’ critical attitude towards state education. They regarded state schools as too instrumentally oriented to develop students’ moral character and emphasised that the transformative dimension of moral education should take precedence over indoctrinating students with purely instrumental knowledge. They thus described state education as ‘education for knowledge’ and Confucian education as ‘education for morality’. The latter, they argued, is superior, as it prioritises moral cultivation, self-transformation, and the refinement of one’s moral character. They claimed that students at state schools learn nothing but incidental knowledge and gain only vocational skills, whilst Confucian education gives students the chance to imbibe the profound wisdom of canonical literature and achieve continuous moral enhancement.

The parents also criticised state schools’ curriculum and textbooks. They described the state-stipulated Chinese language textbooks as boring and superficial. They were also dissatisfied with the compulsory mathematics modules at state schools, arguing that their content far exceeds students’ natural capacity for understanding. In short, the parents interviewed were adamant that their children should not waste time on gaining practical knowledge devoid of cultural value; instead, they should focus on the classics to accomplish the moral transformation.

Parents’ yearning for their children to gain Confucian virtues through classic reading was epitomised in their description of a Confucian version of moral *suzhi*—*zuoren* (‘becoming human’). Three aspects of their notion of *zuoren* emerged from the interview data. First, *zuoren* means engaging with a set of relations-based practices to transform the self. Through the constant study of Confucian classics such as The Four Books¹⁷ that convey the fundamentals of Confucian ethics and indoctrinate learners the tenets of *zuoren*, one not only cultivates oneself but also seeks cultivation by others to develop a kind-hearted, altruistic personality, learn to treat people with respect and sincerity, and develop appropriate manners in social interactions. An example is provided by Mrs Liu, whose son had studied the Confucian classics at X School for five years. To her delight, she said, studying the classics had improved her son’s character and developed his social skills:

Nowadays, many children are self-centred and do not care about other people. [...] I feel that studying Confucian classics has changed my son’s personality and way of perceiving things. He has become a more patient, polite, and considerate person, and his social

relationships have improved. For example, every time he comes home from school, he greets his parents and grandparents and shows interest in family matters. So rarely do children today behave and speak like this. It has reassured me.

Second, according to the parent informants, *zuoren* means adhering to the ethical code of conduct associated with one's multiple roles and relationships, particularly those relevant to family life. Mrs Lan had two sons. The younger one (13 years old) was studying at the Confucian X School, and the older one (15 years old) was studying at a state school. Comparing her two sons' day-to-day behaviour, she asserted that through learning about Confucian culture, the younger boy had become more polite, sensible, obedient, and willing to do housework when he returned home from school. In contrast, she was cross with her older son, whose improper behaviour she ascribed to his state school. The older boy 'never cares about what his parents say', she reported. Instead, he 'just plays on the computer, striking the keyboard loudly', and 'has no interest in talking with people'. The transformative effects of Confucian schooling suggested by her younger son's improved behaviour reassured Mrs Lan of the value of classical education. Mrs Lan's sentiments were echoed by many of my other informants. When asked about the effects of reading the classics, several of the parents I interviewed mentioned that their children had become more dutiful and begun to show more care for their parents. For example, Mrs Wei reported that 'learning Confucianism has transformed my daughter's temperament', adding that,

She has learnt to stand in other people's shoes and consider their feelings instead of merely focusing on her own interests. She performs very well in terms of respecting the teacher and following her parents' instructions. She shows love and care for family members and always treats her elders with respect. Once I unintentionally raised my voice when speaking to my own father. She reminded me, 'Mom, you should not speak to grandpa like that'.

Finally, the interviewed parents' notion of *zuoren* implies an individual orientation, highlighting inwardly focused self-based virtues such as self-control and remaining true to the self. For example, Mr Zhong explained why he had urged his 11-year-old son to study Confucian culture:

[My son] was one of the top students at his state school, but this inadvertently made him arrogant – so much so that he could not bear criticism from anyone. At that time, I was concerned that he would be unable to endure frustration in life when he grew up. [...] I believed that every single sentence of the classics would play a significant role in his moral cultivation, teaching him the truth of life and how to become an authentic person.

As indicated here, Mr Zhong, along with many of the interviewed parents, prioritised the notion of *xue* (学, literally 'learning'), specifically referring to the memorisation of Confucian classics. These parents believed that through repeatedly reading and memorising classical texts, their children would internalise the texts' profound wisdom, gain spiritual development, and enhance the moral qualities of self-discipline and self-reliance.

Challenging examination-oriented education through the rhetoric of *suzhi*

The parents' critique of state schooling was associated with their second reason for transferring their children to a Confucian school: their scepticism regarding examination-oriented education. All the parents reported that their children had been burdened

by excessive examinations and homework at state schools. Moreover, most of their children had shown middling to low academic performance at these schools; some were even at the bottom of the class. The parents admitted that their children's poor academic performance within the state system had directly led them to seek an alternative mode of education. The communications with students at X School provided further evidence of this point. The students recalled being berated by teachers at their state schools for various reasons, such as failing examinations, breaking class rules, or neglecting their homework. Concomitantly, the parents said that their children at state schools 'had no interest in what was taught' (quoted from Mrs Liu), 'were very undisciplined in their studies' (Mrs Lan), 'did not have a happy childhood at all' (Mr Yan), 'suffered from psychological problems' (Mrs Zhao), and 'were bullied by classmates' (Mr Wu). Some of the parents had been urged by the headteachers of their children's state schools to supervise their children's learning more strictly. The headteachers had warned that their children's poor academic performance was dragging down the grades of the whole class.

As previously mentioned, studies have cast doubt on the value of examination-oriented education due to its excessive focus on students' intellectual competence and neglect of other essential qualities (see, e.g., Yi, 2011). This criticism was echoed by the parents I interviewed, who were concerned that the excessive schoolwork set at state schools would harm their children physically and mentally. For example, Mrs Zhu recalled that as a Year Two student at a state school, her eight-year-old son was often unable to complete his homework before 9 pm. 'I heard that the study load would increase in Year Three', said Mrs Zhu. 'I was unsure whether he could bear the overwhelming study pressure'. Another mother frankly acknowledged that her main reason for sending her 11-year-old son to the Confucian school was that he would 'not have to do so much homework'. Furthermore, the parents were concerned that the pressure of schoolwork would reduce students' personal interest in learning and ability to learn autonomously, as well as suppress their imagination and curiosity. Mrs Zhu, for example, feared that the tremendous study pressure imposed by state schooling would make her child a passive learner or simply a machine for taking examinations, lacking self-consciousness and independence. Therefore, she allowed her son to ignore unnecessary schoolwork. Mr Li even encouraged his 12-year-old son to fool around at his state school. Another mother with a university background, whose 13-year-old son had studied at X School for more than five years, was shocked that state schools provide standard answers for reading comprehension tasks in Chinese language courses. She said: 'As I see it, every single person has his or her distinctive life experience, so every single student should be encouraged to generate his or her own understanding of the same piece of reading. It is nonsensical to offer standard answers!'

Similarly, many of the students I interviewed expressed their discontent with examination-oriented state education. They generally described their experience of studying at state schools using negative words such as 'boring', 'uninteresting', 'disappointing', 'stressful', and 'depressing'. They also described how to resist the strict discipline imposed by state schools, such as failing to complete schoolwork, skipping classes, fighting with classmates, and quarrelling with teachers. Not all of the students reported experiencing academic frustration or discrimination at their state schools; a few had been seen by their teachers as 'good students'. However, not even these students had enjoyed their state

school experience, and their parents continued to worry about their academic performance. Heavy schoolwork combined with numerous after-school tutorial sessions had kept the students busy around the clock, even to the point of exhaustion. As her mother, Mrs Fan, recalled, Xiaoxiao, who had excelled academically at her state school, ‘once hid in bed crying because her grades had dropped slightly’. The parents of academic over-achievers, like those of underachievers, were anxious that ‘the excessive examinations and assignments set at state schools would injure pupils’ physical and mental well-being’ (quoted from Mrs Zhao).

A few parental informants acknowledged the merits of China’s compulsory education. Some even defended the system, arguing that it gives students the knowledge they need to survive within and integrate into mainstream society. One father, Mr Yan, said: ‘If something goes wrong, we should first look for the problem to the particular person in charge rather than the system itself.’ Nevertheless, all the parents I interviewed—even the few who recognised the benefits of the state system—were critical of the examination-oriented nature of state education. They confirmed that this was their most fundamental reason for transferring their children to a Confucian school.

Parental confidence in Confucian pedagogy of memorisation

This section addresses the third and final reason for the preference for Confucian education expressed by the parental informants: their confidence in the pedagogy of memorisation, which was entangled with their sense of national identity. As Dryburgh (2011) indicated, Chinese identity is rooted in shared traditions that are most visibly shaped by Confucian thought. Given this, the parents’ engagement with Confucian culture can be ascribed to a nationalistic sentiment of cultural shame arising from their lack of access to Confucian education when they were young. Mrs Fan, for example, stated:

I, as Chinese, did not study the classics of our great ancestors when I was a child. Currently, I not only read classics myself but also require my daughter to do the same. [...] The more I read, the more I can absorb the wisdom of life from the classics.

Similarly, Mr Yan wanted his 11-year-old son to learn the classics because they ‘are insightful and thought-provoking, but we adults had no access to them when we were kids. What we did not learn must be learned now’. In multiple conversations, the parents explicitly conveyed their regret that Confucianism had been abolished from the official educational institutions in the early 20th century, which they regarded as having deprived citizens of an essential part of their cultural inheritance. In the words of some interviewed parents, ‘the classics are good things’ (Mrs Liu), ‘Chinese traditional culture is a priceless treasure’ (Mr Li), and ‘it is worth learning what has been handed down by our ancestors’ (Mrs Hua). The parents’ working towards cultural preservation can be understood as inherent in globalisation, which dialectically ‘evokes localisation as its counterforce’ (Hermans & Dimaggio, 2007, p. 32). Thus, actors living in a globalised world have to dynamically recover/reshape local values in order to encompass global values (McKenzie, 2020).

The parents’ feelings of cultural shame and condemnation of the deprivation were translated into their urgent pursuit of Confucian education for their children. More than one parent described feeling a sense of desperate urgency on first encountering Wang

Caigui's classical education theory. Two aspects of this theory strengthened the parents' confidence in the Confucian pedagogy of memorisation. The first was the timing of education. According to Wang (2014, pp. 104–106), the years before 13 are a 'golden' period for memory that one is unlikely to regain; therefore, children must make full use of this time to memorise as many classics as possible. One of the parents I interviewed, Mrs Liu, described her sense of urgency as follows:

My son was already nine years old when I happened to learn the theory [proposed by Wang Caigui]. [...] As soon as I heard it, I became apprehensive that my boy would miss the golden period of memory if I didn't send him to read the classics right now! I was concerned that it might be too late for him to memorise the classics at the age of nine.

Mr Zhong reported a similar experience:

As soon as my son started the second semester of Year Five at the state primary school, I developed a powerful feeling of urgency and felt compelled to do something about his education. This feeling arose from one sentence spoken by Wang Caigui, who said that if a child does not read the classics before the age of 13, he will have no hope of memorising these texts later. Inspired by this argument, I persuaded my wife [that our son needed to receive Confucian schooling] and decided to transfer my boy out of his state school.

The second factor strengthening the parent informants' confidence in the memorisation pedagogy relates to the teaching content. In a speech, Wang (2014, pp. 55–57) criticised China's modern vernacular education, arguing that it does nothing but waste teachers' time and ruin children's lives. He proposed to replace it with Confucian education as classical Chinese is a high-level language enabling learners to grasp the profound wisdom it describes. One interviewed mother, Mrs Chen, spoke out her personal response to such point below, her voice trembling:

Over and over again, I watched the videos of Wang Caigui's speeches. The more I watched, the more desperate I felt. He said if your child can read through the state-stipulated Chinese language textbook in one week and then recap it fluently, you will be unable to teach her anymore – to teach her would be to harm her. I was shocked by what he said and became extremely anxious. [...] My daughter does have an excellent memory. She could read through her entire Chinese textbook in only one day and repeat the content very easily! [...] I told myself that a child like my daughter could no longer be wasted! Therefore, I started looking for a full-time Confucian school for her to read classics.

The notion of *fuqi* (福气, literally 'good fortune' or 'benefit'), which frequently appeared in Wang's speeches, also strengthened the parents' confidence in Confucian education. Wang clarified the relationship between *fuqi* and parents' educational responsibility as follows:

One's extent to involve in classic reading depends on how much of his *fuqi*. If a child has a lot of *fuqi*, he will be able to read many classics; if he has some *fuqi*, he will be able to read a few classics; but if he has hardly any *fuqi*, he will have no chance to read classics at all. [...] An adult can certainly produce *fuqi* by himself. But parents are responsible for making *fuqi* for their children. (Wang, 2014, p. 62)

Wang used the idea of *fuqi* to encourage parents to take responsibility for their children's education, such as to transfer their children from the state system to Confucian schools. Influenced by this point, the parental informants emphasised the extensive memorisation

of Confucian classics to promote their children's educational success. For example, Mrs Chen agreed with what Wang said that as long as a child can memorise 300,000 characters of classics, she will have laid the solid foundation to become 'a great cultural talent' (*wenhua dacao* 文化大才). On repeating this point, said Mrs Chen, 'I came to dream that my daughter could achieve academic success like this.' She continued to explain that to educate her 13-year-old daughter to become a great cultural talent of the kind described by Wang, she had the unshakable duty to make *fuqi* for her daughter and never give up halfway. In the same vein, another mother I interviewed, Mrs Liu, was confident that her son would become 'a person who rides the wave of success in the future' as long as she insisted that he receive Confucian education.

Admittedly, a few parent informants expressed concerns about the memorisation-based pedagogy at X School. They worried that children who spent all their time merely memorising the classics in an isolated schooling environment (X School is a boarding school) would ultimately be excluded from mainstream education and society. This concern was clearly voiced by Mrs Hua, who had returned her son to the state school by the time of her interview. She criticised the memorisation method of X School, fearing that it would marginalise her son educationally. She noted that the goal of this pedagogical approach is to cultivate Confucian scholars (*rushi* 儒士), who were in the minority in ancient China and remain so today. Despite the scepticism of some interviewed parents, however, most did not question Wang's ideology. Indeed, through reading his articles and watching his speeches, the parents imitated Wang's rhetorical style, copied his words and phrasing, and advocated his recommended method of memorisation.

Discussion and conclusion

Based on a qualitative study at a Confucian school, the present research has revealed three key reasons why the parent informants had sent their children to learn the Confucian classics. Drawing together the findings of the data analysis, I show that the parent informants' moral anxiety and their desire for their children to develop Confucian virtues shaped their preference for Confucian education. Due to their deep concern about moral *suzhi*, they had formed a critical attitude towards state education. They criticised state schooling for its over-emphasis on examinations and practical knowledge. The role of such critique in shaping the parents' mentality regarding education deserves attention. As Foucault (1997) explained, critique is the art '[of not being governed] *like that*, by that, in the name of those principles, with such and such an objective in mind and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that, not by them' (p. 28; original italics). Whilst modern subjects cannot use the tool of critique to extricate themselves completely from power relations, they can still achieve a certain degree of freedom by navigating power relations in ways that attempt to minimise constraints (Taylor, 2011, p. 180). In light of this, I argue that using this tool, parents who advocate Confucian schooling emerge as critical citizens who reflect on how *not* to be governed by the power of state education (but may still be governed by other forms of power, for instance, the power of Wang Caigui's Confucian education theory). In this sense, critique is an 'emancipatory practice' (Taylor, 2011, p. 180) through which parents articulate their aversion to state schools, cast doubt on the value traditionally ascribed to mainstream schooling, and actualise their commitment to an alternative mode of education, Confucian schooling. I emphasise

the theoretical significance of the rise of ‘critical parents’. Critical parents are not uncommon in China, most of whom afford to send their children to international schools within and outside China as a pathway to Western universities. But it is important to understand the critical parents involved in Confucian education because their criticism of state education is entwined with their desire for their children to develop moral *suzhi*, a quality inspired by Confucianism.

The parents’ pursuit of Confucian virtues and associated moral anxiety can be better understood with reference to widespread public perceptions of the moral shift in present-day China. Since the late 1970s, Chinese society has experienced an ethical shift from a collective values system to a more individually oriented one (Yan, 2011, p. 72). As a result, it has suffered adverse consequences due to tension between readings of individualism as utilitarian and simply selfish (Yan, 2009, p. 289). I argue that this background has intensified parents’ anxiety about their children’s moral *suzhi*, leading to a renewed emphasis on Confucian virtues to ease the widespread sense of moral crisis. The process of globalisation also bears the potentiality to generate this dialectical consolidation of local Confucian values, which in turn push parents back against the negative effects of individualism inherent in globalisation (Hermans & Dimaggio, 2007; McKenzie, 2020). Confucian philosophy prioritises learning about proper interpersonal relationships, emphasising that ‘true goodness exists only as it is manifested in relation to others and in the treatment of others’ (Gardner, 2014, p. 22). While the vitality of Confucian teaching lies in its deep understanding of human relationality, e.g., mutual support, respect, and responsibility, the globally circulated notion of individualism from the West tends to prioritise the values of independence, self-reliance, and self-responsibility. The preference for Confucian ethics is epitomised in this study by the parent informants’ yearning for the virtue of *zuoren* and their attachment to the approach of classics memorisation. Particularly, they expected the classics memorisation would help their children gain the knowledge of how to conduct properly in social life and develop their fortitude and empathy so as to counteract the effects of negative individualism (see also, Billioud & Thoraval, 2015, p. 11).

The theory of classical education proposed by Wang Caigui strengthened the parent informants’ confidence in the Confucian pedagogy of memorisation. The informants disclosed strong feelings of cultural shame in relation to their (lack of) personal experience of the Confucian classics. I interpret these complex emotions as a manifestation of the ethos of cultural nationalism featuring the paradoxical feelings of cultural inferiority and national pride in modern China (Yi, 2011). Furthermore, parents’ cultural shame implies their condemnation of being deprived of access to Confucian education, which they thought should be their birthright, during their own schooling time. They were determined not to have the same deprivation on their children. Thus, following Wang’s educational principles, parents believed they must shoulder the responsibility for their children’s education by transferring them from the state system to Confucian schools. They urged their children to read and memorise classics extensively, believing that this approach would lay a foundation for children’s character development and moral cultivation. In short, the parental informants’ sense of cultural nationalism along with the condemnation of the deprivation seems to be a strong driving force behind their decision to enrol their children in a Confucian school. Despite such parents being in a small number compared to those represented in state schools and those who send their

children abroad, their sentiments, reflections, and actions still need to be acknowledged. Additionally, parents' firm belief in the educational efficacy of the method of memorisation contributes to the scholarship about the Chinese learners' cultural beliefs and learning processes by showing that Confucian memorisation is used as the first step to achieve moral enhancement and self-perfection (J. Li, 2012, pp. 73–75).

To conclude, I demonstrate in this article that parents advocating Confucian schooling have emerged as critical citizens in today's China. They reject the mainstream state school system, yearn for Confucian virtues out of moral misgivings, and focus on the pedagogy of memorisation to actualise the educational and moral expectations of their children. Other aspects of parents' involvement in their children's Confucian education deserve further exploration in the future, such as parents' plans for their children's next stage of education and the effects of parents' economic, social, cultural, and religious backgrounds on their preference for Confucian over other alternative forms of education.

Notes

1. Confucianism is a system of thought, behaviour and politics originating in ancient China. It is variously described as a philosophy, a religion, a social ethic, a way of governing, or simply a way of life. For a detailed introduction of Confucianism, please refer to Gardner (2014).
2. Notably, the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) saw the height of the anti-Confucian sentiment when 'Confucianism was again vilified as the foundation of malevolent traditional "feudal" values' (Sun, 2013, p. 22).
3. The official Communist ideals of personhood are infused with the ideals of self-restraint, self-cultivation, self-assertion and relational responsibility, which are self-oriented values sharing ideological affinities with Confucianism. These norms have comprised the genetic basis of Chinese political culture since the self-strengthening movement of the 1860s, and today have found expression in the Party culture of Xi Jinping. Although this topic is not the focus of the present study, it offers one explanation for the Communist regime's support for the revival of Confucianism.
4. In ancient China, the imperial examination system required students to recite Confucian classics for the purpose of securing leadership positions at the court from the seventh century to 1905, when this system was abolished.
5. Despite lacking official statistics, estimates indicate that over 3,000 traditional private schools have been established in the 2010s and that thousands of students are enrolled in Confucian studies (Wang, 2014). But these figures should be treated cautiously, as they are difficult to verify. Billioud and Thoraval (2015) explained that these numbers might be problematic 'since the ones who give them are also engaged in the movement and are therefore far from neutral in their assessments' (p. 75).
6. Some recent case studies (Billioud & Thoraval, 2015, Chapter Two; Dutournier & Wang, 2018; Gilgan, *in press*) have presented some interesting Confucian teaching and learning facts, revealing the complexities and varieties of classical pedagogies in contemporary China.
7. See Billioud and Thoraval (2015, Chapter Two) for a detailed description of this movement and an introduction to Wang Caigui.
8. Criticising it as the 'examination hell' (Ichisada, 1974), many East Asian educators have attempted to reform the examination-oriented education by introducing Western learning ideas such as active engagement, exploration and inquiry, critical thinking, creativity, and self-expression (J. Li, 2012, p. 108). Nonetheless, this notorious exam-based system remains or even flourishes today.

9. According to Li (2012, pp. 67–68), without impartial test scores, the rich and powerful people would gain educational resources more easily, whereas the poor and other disadvantaged groups would become more incompetent to compete for education advancement.
10. The word *suzhi*, literally ‘quality’, refers to ‘the innate and nurtured physical, intellectual and ideological characteristics of a person’ (Murphy, 2004, p. 2).
11. Drawing on the discourse of *suzhi* (Kipnis, 2006), intellectuals criticised the examination-based education, arguing that students ‘who focus solely on passing examinations in fact become uncreative, not well-rounded, “low quality” adults’ (Kipnis, 2001, p. 11).
12. Scholars (Dello-Iacovo, 2009) pointed out that the ethics-oriented approach to education never disappears in contemporary China but is often overshadowed by examination-oriented education due to the fierce educational competition among pupils and schools.
13. One recent study (Elizondo, 2021) explores parents’ motivations for a range of traditional Chinese education projects, including those of Confucianism.
14. Parents may indeed have other alternative options such as international private schools, which some of the interviewed parents mentioned. However, parents are induced to give up this option and choose Confucian education by a desire to enhance their children’s moral qualities with Confucian virtues, as in their eyes, international private schools resemble state schools in the lack of attention to students’ ethical practices and moral transformation.
15. Studies have noted the intertwining of Buddhism and Confucianism, indicating that Buddhist religious groups have been central to the Confucian education revival since the early 2000s (see, Billioud & Thoraval, 2015; Ji, 2018).
16. Based on constructivist epistemology, this study adopts qualitative research methods to explore parents’ motivations to engage in Confucian education, focusing on their discourses to criticize the state education and pursue Confucian virtues. It assumes that parents create the meaning of reality (i.e., their understanding of why to engage in Confucian education) through social relationships and interactions. Correspondingly, the parental informants were the narrative subjects, and their narrative agency was respected. The researcher (me) encouraged the informants to disclose themselves in interviews and narrate their ‘stories’ as much as possible. A couple of methods were used to evaluate the validity of the data. For example, the researcher asked at least three informants about one same problem/issue/point to check the validity or shared the initial findings with the informants to collect their feedback.
17. The Four Books include *The Great Learning*, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, *The Analects of Confucius*, and *Mencius*.

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