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Canglong Wang



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Diversification of Confucian Classical Education in Contemporary China

CANGLONG WANG

ABSTRACT: This article discusses the ongoing debates about classics reading (*dujing* 读经) in the revitalisation and diversification of Confucian classical education in mainland China. It begins by reviewing two disputes about *dujing* in modern Chinese history and then turns to the contemporary debate, focusing on how one professional and experienced practitioner expounded on the disparities in practicing classical education. The author summarises three controversial issues—(1) the relationship between the educative principles and methods, (2) historical legitimacy, and (3) the linguistic nature of Chinese language. Based on these, this paper reflects on the current *dujing* movement by concluding that the diversification of classical education has complicated the authenticity of “Chineseness” and rendered it a debatable public issue.

KEYWORDS: Confucian revival, *dujing*/classics reading, classical education, Chineseness.

Introduction

Since the mid-1990s, mainland China has experienced a growing revival of Confucianism, which rapidly expanded to different strata throughout society and took on various forms in such areas as politics, religion, and education (Billioud and Thoraval 2007). This reflects the overall resurgence of “popular Confucianism” (*minjian rujia* 民间儒家), which, as Billioud and Thoraval have indicated, has gained apparent vitality since the first decade of the twenty-first century in China. This conception refers to Confucianism relevant to both “nonofficial activities carried on outside the party-state apparatus” and ordinary people (Billioud and Thoraval 2015: 9). As an essential part of the panorama of Confucian revitalisation, Confucian-inspired educative projects are considered to encompass all activities relevant to learning national studies (*guoxue* 国学) (Gong 2008: 1). This article does not aim to address a broad category of Confucian-related education, but instead narrows its scope to a specific but extraordinarily influential type—Confucian classical education (*rujia gudian jiaoyu* 儒家古典教育),⁽¹⁾ which itself can be divided into various particular forms but embraces the commonality of reviving the role of classics reading (*dujing* 读经) (especially Confucian classics) in cultivating one’s personality.

Among the various kinds of Confucian classical education, the most powerful is widely referred to as the education of children reading classics (*ertong dujing jiaoyu* 儿童读经教育), or *dujing*⁽²⁾ education. As argued by Dr. Wang Caigui 王财贵, the theoretician of *dujing* education, a child under the age of 13 should simply and extensively (*laoshi daliang* 老实大量) read/memorise classics⁽³⁾ without having to understand the texts, because he is in a golden period with a solid ability to memorise but a relatively weak capacity for comprehension (Wang 2014: 41–66). Dr. Wang summarised his pedagogy in a six-word mantra (*liuzi zhenyan* 六字箴言)—“All students! Read after me!” (*Xiao pengyou gen wo nian* 小朋友跟我念). Through this mode of *dujing* education, a person is supposedly nourished with the wisdom of ancient Chinese sages, which may contribute to his/her moral enhancement and polished integrity in daily experience.⁽⁴⁾

Dr. Wang has contributed enormously to the development in contemporary China of the *dujing* movement,⁽⁵⁾ one prominent feature of which is

the establishment of old-style small private schools (*sishu* 私塾)⁽⁶⁾ by individuals in civil society (*minjian shehui* 民间社会). The *dujing* movement was initiated by Wang Caigui in 1994 in Taiwan (Wang 2009: 194–6) and soon expanded to mainland China. On 15 July 2001, Wang gave a speech at Beijing Normal University that was later entitled “One Speech, A Centenary Shock” (*Yi chang yanjiang, bainian zhenhan* 一场演讲, 百年震撼). *Dujiang* practitioners universally regarded this speech as a milestone that formally drew back the curtain on the *dujing* campaign in contemporary China (Wang 2014: 17–38). Since then, the *dujing* movement has developed to a remarkable degree and has attracted more than 100 million people, including both children and adults, to reading classics all over the world (*ibid.*: 13–6). Moreover, many full-time *sishu* were established to initiate Wang’s *dujing* ideas⁽⁷⁾ and moved towards autonomisation, becoming rival institutions to official schools even though local authorities are far from recognising them (Billioud and Thoraval 2007: 8–10, 2015: 279–86). The resurgence of modern *sishu* has deep popular roots. Most teachers in *sishu* come from modest

1. It is worth noting that Confucian classical education has formed two senses in the contemporary Chinese context: the broad sense refers to the generic category of classical education, whereas the narrow sense signifies the more specific education of children reading classics. For the sake of avoiding misunderstanding, this article will use the term “*dujing* education” to represent the narrow sense of classical education throughout the following sections and “classical education” to suggest the broad sense.
2. “*Dujiang*” as the abbreviation of “reading classics” will be applied in the rest of this paper in for the sake of succinctness, and will be combined with other words as necessary to compose such phrases as “*dujing* education,” “*dujing* movement,” “*dujing* campaign,” “*dujing* theory,” etc.
3. According to Wang Caigui, “classics” primarily refers to Confucian classical literature but also includes part of Taoism and Buddhism, and even some Western great books such as selected portions of the Bible and William Shakespeare’s Sonnets, among others.
4. For more details on how children read classics in contemporary classical schools, see Billioud and Thoraval (2015: 89–99).
5. Wang Caigui himself does not agree with calling his educational propaganda a “movement,” saying a movement is usually of short duration and has a political purpose. However, many practitioners of *dujing* education and public media call the phenomenon a “movement.”
6. In the following sections, I will use “*sishu*” as the Chinese abbreviation of “old-style small private schools” for the sake of conciseness.
7. There are no official statistics on the specific number of modern *sishu*. According to a news article in 2014, about 3,000 *sishu* have been established since 2004; see Zhang Rui, “十字路口的读经村” (Shizi lokou de dujingcun, Village of classics reading at the crossroad), *Nanfang Zhoumo*, 5 September 2014. During my fieldwork in 2015, the number frequently cited by teachers working in *sishu* was 1,000.

backgrounds—they are working class, peasants, white-collar, self-employed entrepreneurs, or even school dropouts. In this regard, the *dujing* movement as well as the reappearance of *sishu* can be seen as a bottom-up campaign initiated by popular endeavour (*pingmin* 平民) rather than a top-down one led by the academic or political elite (*jingying* 精英) (Billioud and Thoraval 2007: 10, 2015: 100-2).

However, criticism of Wang's *dujing* education has never ceased, either in mass media⁽⁸⁾ or among scholars (Liu 2004; Liu 2011). Two recent but significant events are worth mentioning in this regard. The first is a news report published in a mainstream Chinese newspaper, *Southern Weekly* (*Nanfang Zhoumo* 南方周末), on 5 September 2014,⁽⁹⁾ which revealed that the *dujing* movement suffered a clear decline in student enrolment due to its failure to cultivate in students the expected qualities of superior persons (*junzi* 君子). Showing that numerous *sishu* gave up Wang Caigui's *dujing* theory after years of practicing it, the report concluded that the contemporary *dujing* movement had reached a crucial turning point. The second incident creating a predicament for *dujing* education was incited by a Chinese professor of Confucian studies, Ke Xiaogang 柯小刚. He directly and publicly attacked Wang Caigui's *dujing* theory for over-emphasising the educational function of rote memorisation and denounced this *dujing* as a "poisonous" method of reading classics (Ke 2017: 284-305).

These two events served as the direct and immediate triggers of intensive debate about *dujing* in contemporary China. However, as I will describe in this article, the controversy can be traced back to a more distant period. I argue that a historical review of *dujing* may contribute to a more profound understanding of the ins and outs of the contemporary debate, but this aspect has by and large been underestimated in the existing literature. More importantly, both incidents were ignited by criticism not from within the domain of classical education but from *outside*, one from mass media and the other from a scholar. However, this paper will argue that practitioners *inside* the classical education domain already attempted to challenge Wang Caigui's pedagogy even before 2014, but this dimension did not come to the notice of academia. This paper is committed to filling in these two gaps.

In the following sections, I will first review two notable contentions surrounding *dujing* in modern China, one in 1934 and one in 2004, that may serve as a historical reference to the contemporary debate. I will then switch to the dispute *inside* the domain of classical education by drawing upon the discourse of Mr. Zhao Shengjun 赵升君,⁽¹⁰⁾ an influential practitioner and promoter of classical education, who once firmly adhered to Wang Caigui's pedagogy but turned against it later on to seek an alternative Confucian-inspired teaching system.

The necessity and usefulness of *dujing*: Two debates in modern China

Since the early twentieth century, *dujing* has been a highly debatable issue in China and has been closely connected with grand narratives of national survival and state modernisation. Influenced by stubborn anti-traditional ideology since the early 1900s, the ideological trend of pursuing modernisation and eliminating Confucian classics dominated the ethos (Gong 2008: 2). *Du-jing* was abolished with two milestone occurrences: (1) the abolition of the imperial examination system (*kejuzhi* 科举制) in 1905, which meant that Confucian intellectuals lost their institutional route to upward mobility via classical education; and (2) the abrogation of requiring students to learn classics in primary schools in 1911, which officially negated the legitimacy of

Confucian education (Wang 2009: 4). Further destruction of classical education resulted from the launch of the New Culture Movement in the mid-1910s, when Chinese intellectuals condemned Confucianism (*dujing* included) as "feudalistic," "backward," and "decayed." In brief, classical education was seen as an impediment to saving the Chinese nation (*zhonghua minzu* 中华民族), and China could therefore only achieve modernisation by excluding it.

Although Confucian education encountered a severe challenge at the dawn of the twentieth century, which resulted in the creation of new-style modern schools, there still remained a considerable number of *sishu* that occupied an essential position in the primary school system, particularly in the vast, remote rural areas, although they suffered from innovative reform to integrate elements of "traditional and modern, old and new, and Western and Chinese" (VanderVen 2012: 56; see also Jia 2002). Relevant to this, supporters of *dujing* never disappeared. In 1913, some Chinese intellectuals such as Kang Youwei 康有为 and Chen Huanzhang 陈焕章 submitted a petition to the Senate and the House of Commons and formally proposed that "Confucianism must be designated as the state religion in the Constitution" (Zeng 2013). While the parliament ultimately rejected this proposition, it promoted the first influential movement of esteeming Confucius and reading classics (*zunkong dujing* 尊孔读经) in modern China. From then on, Chinese intellectuals were increasingly aware of the positive value of Chinese traditional culture (Billioud and Thoraval 2015: 31-2), and this trend was apparently different from the original anti-traditional ideology. This change of cultural attitude was related to the political contingencies at that time. In 1931, the 18 September Incident, in which Japanese troops invaded and occupied Northeast China, made many Chinese people pessimistic about their national fate. On this occasion, conservative intellectuals thought of adopting *dujing* as an educational approach to restore national confidence,⁽¹¹⁾ but this immediately incurred objections from liberalists. Consequently, a national debate erupted over the necessity and usefulness of *dujing*.

In 1934, He Bingsong 何炳松, a historian who worked as editor-in-chief of *Education Magazine* (*Jiaoyu zazhi* 教育杂志), sent more than 100 letters to educational experts soliciting their views on *dujing*. He later compiled more than 70 replies into a special issue of *Education Magazine* in 1935, and summarised the responses as follows (He 2008: 10):

All people agree that *dujing* can be a specialist study but do not think it necessary to make it a compulsory subject in either primary or secondary schools.

- See, e.g., Cai Yiwen, "读经少年通向圣贤之困" (Dujing shaonian tongxiang shengxian zhikun, The predicaments of young readers of the classics in their encounter with the sages), *Pengpai Xinwen*, 22 September 2016; Dai Zhiyong, "争议读经：古典教育要与现代相融通" (Zhengyi dujing: guodian jiaoyu yaoyu xiandai xiang rongtong, Classics-reading education in debate: (Classical education should be compatible with modern education), *Nanfang Zhoumo*, 1 September 2016; Jia Dongting, "那些读经的孩子们" (Naxie dujing de haizimen, Those children who read classics), *Sanlian Shenghuo Zhoukan*, August 2016; Wei Xing, "读经村挣扎史" (Dujingcun zhengzha shi, One village of classics reading in struggle), *Nanfang Chuang*, September 2016; Yao Xiaodan, "游走在灰色地带的私塾书院" (Youzou zai huise didai de sishu shuyuan, *Sishu* and *shuyuan* in grey areas), *Guangming Ribao*, 12 October 2016; Zhang He, "如此读经为何只能造就庸才?" (Ruci dujing weiheshi zhineng zaojiu yongcai? How does such way of reading classics only create mediocrity?), *Renmin Ribao*, 8 September 2016.
- Zhang Rui, "Village of classics reading at the crossroad," *op. cit.*
- This is a real name approved by Mr. Zhao himself for use in this article with his explicit consent.
- Billioud and Thoraval point out that the changing political circumstances also generated new attempts to use Confucianism as a tool of social and ideological control. One typical example is the New Life Movement (*Xin shenghuo yundong* 新生活运动), which was launched by the Nanjing nationalist government in 1934, with the primary aim of cultivating behavioural standards and civic responsibility among citizens through the re-appropriation of traditional Chinese moral values. They indicate that the broad debate on *dujing* in 1934 was within the context of the New Life Movement (Billioud and Thoraval 2015: 33-4, 181-2).

Referring to the discrepancies mentioned above, He classified the comments into three broad categories: absolute proponents of *dujing*, relative proponents or relative opponents, and absolute opponents. There were merely ten “absolute proponents” or “absolute opponents,” whereas the relativists were the majority but varied in degree. As He explained (*ibid.*): “While some proposed that [students] start reading classics in primary school, others [supported students engaging in classics reading] starting in secondary school or even university.” Regardless of the nuances of these categories,⁽¹²⁾ most commentators focused on the value of classical literature *per se* and disagreed over the necessity or usefulness of reading classics. Their fundamental divergence rested on “whether classical texts still have a moral attribute” (You 2008: 423).

Echoing the 1934 debate, another nation-wide discussion about *dujing* occurred in 2004. I argue that the two contests share conspicuous similarities regardless of their different historical conditions. The more recent dispute was ignited by the publication of a 12-volume series called *Chinese Cultural Classical Textbooks for Elementary Education* (Zhonghua wenhua jingdian jichu jiaoyu songben 中华文化经典基础教育读本) in late 2004, edited by Jiang Qing 蒋庆, a representative scholar of so-called Mainland Neo-Confucianism (*Dalu xinrujia* 大陆新儒家). Once published, the textbooks soon stirred up a national debate about *dujing* in academia, mass media, and civil society. Opponents of *dujing* criticised proponents for “cultural conservatism towards ignorance” and argued that the mechanical approach of learning classics would merely turn students into “nerds” (*shudaizi* 书呆子) (Xue 2005). On the other hand, advocates of *dujing* satirised their adversaries for “obscurantism under the guise of modernisation” and “rational vainglory and ego-centricity,” and as merely inheriting the anti-traditional stereotype since the May Fourth Movement (Qiu 2005).

I summarise four features shared by both parties in the 2004 debate. Firstly, comments on both sides were based on a dual framework of enlightenment (*qimeng* 启蒙) versus ignorance (*mengmei* 蒙昧) with the content of classical literature at the core. Secondly, both parties located arguments in the intellectual history of modern China and struggled to discover the touchpoint of “traditional” *dujing* and modern values. Thirdly, most discussions had a philosophical flavour, lacking sufficient attention to the pedagogic practice in actual *dujing* institutions. Fourthly and lastly, the disputes mainly occurred in mass media such as newspapers, and the majority of participants were scholars.

Linking the two debates in 1934 and 2004, I refer to the following passage by Billioud and Thoraval (2015: 34), who show that both controversies reflect

(...) tension between shaping the child and a liberal education; tension between the authoritarian *jiaohua* of the citizen and ideals of construction of the self-anchored in modern and humanistic Confucianism; finally, tension between intellectual and practical ways of relating to appropriated Confucian texts.

I suggest two more specific points that are related to this article. First, I find that both debates paid extensive attention to the values of classical texts *per se* as well as their potential interlocking with building a powerful and modern China. It is true that there were indeed comments criticising the method of obliging children to memorise classics mechanically in the 1934 debate (*ibid.*). A few commentators also raised the methodological issue in 2004.⁽¹³⁾ Nonetheless, participants involved in the two debates, whether proponents or opponents, optimists or pessimists, generally took

it for granted that ancient “Chinese” or “Confucian” education⁽¹⁴⁾ must employ a homogeneous teaching approach, that is, rote memorisation. The second point is that arguers in both debates presupposed that *dujing* was tantamount to the entire system of traditional “Chinese” or “Confucian” education⁽¹⁵⁾ (regardless of their different attitudes towards traditional texts), notwithstanding that the former should actually be part of the latter. When participants mentioned *dujing*, it was as if talking about the sweeping category of “Chinese” or “Confucian” education. For example, in the 1934 debate, conservatives regarded the revival of Confucian and Mencian teachings (*Kong Meng zhi Dao* 孔孟之道) through *dujing* as a good recipe for rescuing society from moral decline and the state from national crisis (Billioud and Thoraval 2015: 33); meanwhile, opponents raised critiques that did not discriminate between *dujing* and ancient “Chinese” or “Confucian” education as a whole (You 2008: 424). The same situation occurred in 2004, when both sides treated *dujing* as a synonym for ancient “Chinese” or “Confucian” pedagogies.⁽¹⁶⁾

However, the above two points have been challenged in the contemporary debate. Two tit-for-tat arguments are raised. The first is that the methodological uncertainty of how to read classics has turned into the predominant issue throughout the most recent controversy. In particular, rote memorisation is blamed for going against the principle (*dao* 道) of ancient Chinese education. Second, the current debate explicitly differentiates the single part of *dujing* from the comprehensive system of ancient Chinese education, indicating that the latter actually covers a broader range of content than merely reading classics. I will expound on these arguments in the following sections.

Methodology and the case

The contemporary debate about *dujing* occurs not only in academia but also extends to civil society and involves individual citizens of different social strata. Many participants are practitioners of classical education, including teaching staff working in *sishu*, parents who teach their children to read classics, and the youths who read classics when they were younger but have now grown up. They commonly believe in the cultural and educative values of classical literature, arguing that *dujing* definitely contributes to one’s moral enhancement and personal perfection. Nonetheless, they are far from agreeing on what methods are best for students to approach the learning of classical literature. I do not suggest that this methodological contention appears for the first time in the contemporary debate, but rather that it stands out much more conspicuously than in 1934 and 2004.

It is important to mention that Wang Caigui’s *dujing* theory has profoundly influenced an extensive number of practitioners involved in the recent debate. Many even implemented this kind of educational “experi-

12. Billioud and Thoraval present a more detailed introduction to both positions in the 1934 debate (Billioud and Thoraval 2015: 33-4).
13. See for example Wang (2005: 84-7). Additionally, Xue Yong’s reply to Qiu Feng implied the importance of turning attention to the pedagogic methods of reading classics but did not receive the latter’s direct response. See Xue Yong (2005: 48-50).
14. The reason why I put the two terms in quotation marks is that, as I will show in the following analysis, so-called “Chinese” or “Confucian” education is more of an assertion or imagination of identity than an objective reality.
15. Admittedly, ancient “Chinese” education cannot be equated with “Confucian” education, as the former also includes pedagogies of Taoism and Buddhism, which corresponds to the fact that Chinese culture comprises not only Confucianism but also Taoism and Buddhism. However, I do not see disputants show any explicit intention to differentiate between “Chinese” and “Confucian” education in their discourses.
16. See Xue (2005: 42); Qiu (2005: 45).

ment”⁽¹⁷⁾ from as early as 2002, shortly after Wang’s aforementioned “centenary shock” speech in 2001. However, after years of practicing his *dujing* education, quite a few practitioners ultimately gave it up because of insurmountable difficulties they encountered in teaching; they turned instead to pursue alternative types of Confucian-inspired pedagogy.⁽¹⁸⁾ When involved in the debate, they point out the merits and drawbacks of *dujing* education primarily based on their years of educational practice. I emphasise this as one fundamental feature that makes the current debate somewhat different from those in 1934 and 2004, when scholars (rather than practitioners of classical education) raised arguments based on philosophical knowledge (rather than hands-on teaching experience).

This article aims to go beyond an overall and sweeping picture of the heterogeneity of the recent debate in order to reveal its complexities and nuances. I therefore take the approach of focusing on one representative practitioner of classical education, Mr. Zhao Shengjun, and analyse his discourse of criticising Wang Caigui’s *dujing* pedagogy, which he once loyally followed. I selected Mr. Zhao firstly because he is among the earliest practitioners of Wang’s *dujing* theory in mainland China. As early as 2002, he began to engage his son with classics learning by following Wang’s pedagogy, that is, to read classics simply and extensively. A few years later, he opened up a small *sishu* enrolling full-time students to read classics. As a loyal follower of Wang Caigui, Mr. Zhao accumulated a wealth of practical experience in *dujing* education, enjoyed firm prestige within the *dujing* domain, and was even praised by Wang Caigui in public speeches. Secondly, he pioneered the current debate. Since autumn 2012, he has been rethinking the problems that emerged in his practice of *dujing* education. In 2013, he posted a few articles on a BBS called Global Classics Reading Education (*Quanqiu dujing jiaoyu* 全球读经教育),⁽¹⁹⁾ an important virtual space in the *dujing* domain, founded by Wang Caigui, in which Zhao incisively pointed out the flaws of Wang’s theory and the adverse results of it.⁽²⁰⁾ His critical comments soon caused widespread debate within the domain of classical education. He subsequently gave public speeches all over China, calling on all practitioners to reconsider the previously adopted teaching pattern influenced by Wang Caigui. More importantly, by rejuvenating the ancient Chinese *sishu* educational inheritance system (*gudai Zhongguo sishu jiaoyu chuancheng tixi* 古代中国私塾教育传承体系), Mr. Zhao emphasised that this type of classical education would make up for the deficiencies of *dujing* education. Consequently, influenced by Mr. Zhao, many *sishu* practitioners gave up their previous teaching style and changed to the *sishu* education he proposed.⁽²¹⁾ In this respect, I argue that Mr. Zhao has made an original contribution to promoting the diversification of Confucian classical education in contemporary China. It is true that rote memorisation and Wang Caigui’s *dujing* theory have been criticised for years, but Mr. Zhao is among the first, and possibly the most contentious, to attack what he had done and firmly believed for years, and more importantly, to explore an alternative classical pedagogy and promote it throughout the country.

I first met Mr. Zhao in 2012 and did further interviews in 2013, 2015, and 2016. Most of our talks were informal and unstructured, like everyday chats, while a few were formal and semi-structured. These interviews constitute the primary data for this article. Additionally, given that the recent debate inevitably involves Wang Caigui’s *dujing* theory, I refer to some of his written materials. Most of these materials are public speeches collected in published books, and they may serve as a comparison with Mr. Zhao’s arguments. In the following sections, I will analyse the discourse of these interviews and documents and unfold the intricacy of the current debate.

Debatable Chineseness: The debate over *dujing* in contemporary China

Based on what I will show in this section, I argue that the core issue of the current controversy over *dujing* since 2010s lies in the debatable Chineseness, that is, what type of classical education is imagined to be “authentically” Chinese. Mr. Zhao’s argument serves a perfect example in this regard. He states clearly that the *dujing* method proposed by Wang Caigui, the one characterised by prioritising the simple and extensive memorisation of classics, did not correspond to the principle (*dao* 道) of ancient Chinese *sishu* education, and therefore was not an authentic style of Chinese education. I summarise Mr. Zhao’s arguments into two points. On the one hand, he criticised Dr. Wang’s pedagogy, which did nothing but force students to mechanically memorise classics, as going against human nature and being consistent with the logic of examination-oriented education (*yingshi jiaoyu* 应试教育). This type of classical education was therefore the product of Westernisation (*xihua* 西化) in modern Chinese history and had nothing to do with the ancient Chinese *sishu* educational inheritance system. On the other hand, he stressed that genuine ancient Chinese education must be premised on the principle of teaching students according to their natural abilities, or simply put, individualised teaching (*yincai shijiao* 因材施教). He believed this principle accorded perfectly with both human nature and ancient Chinese *sishu* education.⁽²²⁾

Mr. Zhao’s personal reflection on classical education can be divided into three more specific topics—(1) the relationship between principles (*dao* 道) and methods (*shu* 术), (2) historical legitimacy, and (3) the linguistic nature of Chinese language. All three aspects, which I will discuss in the following sections, demonstrate the complexity of debatable Chineseness and to some extent show the overall tendency toward diversification and heterogenisation in the domain of Confucian classical education in today’s China.

Principles and methods

Laying the premise for his arguments, Mr. Zhao distinguished two “principles” concerning Confucianism. The first is “the principle of culture” (*wenhua zhi dao* 文化之道), the core of which he stated as benevolence (*ren* 仁) and righteousness (*yi* 义) and which he believed would never fade away. He argued that the educational reform launched in his classical school since 2012 aimed not to go against the “principle of culture” but rather to promote it. However, Mr. Zhao advocated radical changes on the second

17. During my fieldwork, this word was frequently used by informants to describe what they were doing, implying that this movement of *dujing* education is still in development and far from reaching a final verdict.
18. See Wu Yabo 吴亚波, “我为何反对纯读经?” (Wo weihe fandui chun dujing? Why do I object to the mode of pure *dujing*?), 24 June 2017, <https://www.rujiagz.com/article/id/11532/?from=singlemessage> (accessed on 10 November 2018); Wu Yabo 吴亚波, “现代私塾教育之我见” (Xiandai sishu jiaoyu zhi wojian, My view on modern *sishu* education), 2016, <http://www.djwcg.com/content/?727.html> (accessed on 10 November 2018).
19. The website is <http://bbs.gsr.org.tw> (accessed on 10 November 2018).
20. For instance, students were unable to read characters or write essays after years of mechanically memorizing classics, became weary of classics learning, failed to cultivate the ability to learn by themselves, and so on. See also the discussion in the next section.
21. However, this educational reform resulted in shrinking the student population of *sishu*. Also, it is the direct reason for what *Nanfang Zhoumo* reported in 2014, as mentioned earlier. See Zhang Rui, “Village of classics reading at the crossroad,” *op. cit.*
22. Interviews, June 2015. Unless otherwise specified, all information regarding Mr. Zhao comes from multiple interviews in June 2015 at his classical school located in Laizhou City, Shandong Province.

principle, “the principle of education” (*jiaoyu zhi dao* 教育之道), the core of which was to perfect humans (*chengren* 成人) via classical learning. He realised that the crux of classical education should be *how* to perfect humans, and that this would necessarily involve teaching and learning techniques and methods (or *shu*, as Mr. Zhao termed it). Regarding the relationship between the principle and the method in the domain of classical education, Mr. Zhao said:

Principle separate from method is definitely not a genuine principle. No principle can be independent of method, and no method can be divorced from principle. If someone cut off the articulation between principle and method, it would prove nothing but that he knew little about principle, as it is necessarily and always embodied by method.⁽²³⁾

Regarding the interlocking of principle and method, Mr. Zhao blamed himself for mistakenly separating principle from method in his previous practice of *dujing* education. As he stated,

Nowadays so many people are talking about how to read classics through the simple and extensive approach (...) and even claiming a person can use any method to recite the classics. It’s totally wrong! Let me ask if I can make a wooden table by any method? No! Similarly, there must be a feasible and suitable way to tackle *dujing*. [In other words,] the principle must suit the method.⁽²⁴⁾

He criticised himself for wrongly treating the simple and extensive approach of classics memorisation as a specific teaching method without realising that this approach was actually the ultimate purpose and more importantly the subjective expectation of teachers and parents toward students. He argued that there should be various approaches to achieving this purpose, among which the best must accord with the principle of individualised teaching. As Mr. Zhao pointed out,

The fundamental principle of education is individualised teaching. As long as we talk about education, it [necessarily involves] individualised teaching, which is the principle of treating students as the authentic subject (*zhuti* 主体) in the learning process. This is the core issue. Everyone should be taught in accordance with what he is good at.⁽²⁵⁾

Mr. Zhao continued to explain that the individualised principle was completely consistent with the nature of human development and respected individual differences. Based upon this, he considered the method of “one (teacher) on one (student)” (*yi dui yi* 一对一) to be the most appropriate approach under the guidance of individualised teaching.

[Let’s say there are] two pupils studying together in the school. Even if they learn the same content on the first day, their progress will definitely vary sharply ten days later. It is therefore impossible to teach them with the same method. Theoretically, the teacher must educate pupils according to their natural abilities.⁽²⁶⁾

Mr. Zhao clarified that the purpose of individualised pedagogy was to enhance students’ learning autonomy and cultivate them into authentic sub-

jects able to regulate, manage, and supervise the study process on their own. He repeatedly emphasised the importance of respecting students’ learning agency. For example, as he explained,

If a child makes a mistake, just let it be. He will realise on his own how to correct it and learn a lesson from it later on. Unfortunately, [today’s mainstream education] does the opposite, doing nothing but to tell him a standard answer, a “right” answer to follow. This is indeed a bad education.⁽²⁷⁾

In contrast to the principle of individualised teaching accompanied by the one-on-one method, Mr. Zhao stated that the simple and extensive manner of classics memorisation that he practiced for years was profoundly influenced by the thought of examination-oriented education. He even labelled this method as “one (teacher) for all (students)” (*yi dui zhong* 一对众, in sharp contrast to the afore-mentioned “one-on-one”). This label referred to a collective and uniform way of teaching and learning that contradicted the principle of individualised education. He criticised this collective fashion of *dujing* education for assuming that students are passive learners who merely follow what the teacher requires. In this regard, Mr. Zhao argued:

In the past few years, if you ask me what changes I’ve made, [I would say] I find that Professor Wang [Caigui]’s⁽²⁸⁾ *dujing* theory is exactly the same as the examination-oriented education in the mainstream compulsory schools. (...) Both “All students! Read after me” [in classics-oriented *dujing* schools] and “All students! Listen to me” [in examination-oriented state schools] assume that students are passive followers in the learning process.⁽²⁹⁾

It is noteworthy that while Mr. Zhao complained that the collective one-for-all method violated the principle of individualised teaching, he admitted the reasonableness of memorising classics as the purpose of classical education. He claimed to replace the collective learning approach, which he felt went against human nature, with the individualised one, which he argued tallied with the diversities of human personality.

I compare Mr. Zhao’s interpretations of Wang Caigui’s *dujing* theory with those of Wang’s followers. Both sides hold the common ground that extensive memorisation of classics is the direct goal of Confucian classical education, whereas they disagree with what specific means should be taken to achieve it. Unlike Mr. Zhao’s emphasis on the individualised method, Wang Caigui and his followers have enhanced authoritarian pedagogy by proposing “the method of double-ten *dujing*” (*shuangshi dujing fa* 双十读经法), that is, to encourage students to read classics for ten hours every day and continue for ten years.⁽³⁰⁾ Wang Caigui even suggested 200,000 Chinese

23. Interview in Laizhou City, Shandong Province, 5 June 2015.

24. *Ibid.*

25. Interview in Laizhou City, Shandong Province, 6 June 2015.

26. Interview in Laizhou City, Shandong Province, 7 June 2015.

27. Interview in Laizhou City, Shandong Province, 5 June 2015.

28. This refers to Wang Caigui, as he was an associate professor when retired from National Taichung University of Education. Mr. Zhao seldom called him by name during interviews but instead addressed him as “Professor Wang,” which shows respect for him.

29. Interview in Laizhou City, Shandong Province, 5 June 2015.

30. Wang Caigui indicated that the double ten method was not required for everyone but served to strengthen the educational idea that the more classics one read, the more moral enhancement one would receive. See Wang Caigui, “读经教育的基本原理” (*Dujing jiaoyu de jiben yuanli*, Principles of *Dujing* education), 2010, <http://www.aidujing.com/a/150.html> (accessed on 10 November 2018).

characters plus 100,000 English words as the bottom-line criterion for extensive memorisation. He asserted that as long as one student succeeded in reciting that number of classics, he was confident he could train him or her to become a great cultural talent (*wenhua dacao* 文化大才) (Wang 2014: 114). According to the whole-course plan of *dujing* education drawn up by Wang Caigui, memorising 300,000 characters and words is just the first stage of the entire learning program, and he suggested that this stage should ideally last for one decade; once the first stage was completed, Wang encouraged students to pursue more advanced Confucian education at Wenli Academy (*Wenli Shuyuan* 文礼书院), a Confucian-inspired educational institution that Wang himself founded in autumn 2012 as a place where students are expected to spend another decade on interpreting the already memorised classics and then widely reading great books of both the Oriental and Occidental traditions (Wang 2014: 107-19).

What is worth noting is the point of time at which the disagreement occurred, and this is crucial to understanding the development of classical education in contemporary China. It is since the end of 2012 that the diversification within the domain of classical education has intensified and also since then that the gap between Zhao Shengjun and Wang Caigui has increasingly widened.⁽³¹⁾ Wang Caigui's *dujing* theory at one point achieved such tremendous and extensive influence that it even became a synonym for Confucian classical education, which is actually a generic category. However, since late 2012, Wang's *dujing* theory has gradually lost its popularity, and various forms of classical education have begun to emerge, the *sishu* education advocated by Mr. Zhao being one influential type (as discussed below).⁽³²⁾ Consequently, as the following section will reveal, the *dujing* education proposed by Wang Caigui has been downgraded from an overarching generic category to a specific type, and contemporary Confucian classical education shows an evident trend of diversification.⁽³³⁾

Historical legitimacy

Historical legitimacy constitutes the second aspect of debatable Chinese-ness in the diversification of Confucian classical education in contemporary China. Mr. Zhao's argumentation for an individual-oriented type of classical education is not based on knowledge of Western education but on his rethinking of ancient Chinese education history. To this end, he proposed the term "*sishu* education" to support his criticism of Wang Caigui's *dujing* education. From a historical perspective, *sishu* education can hardly be separated from the *dujing*-based pedagogy of ancient China. I clarify that *dujing* education here refers to a unique form of classical education advocated by Wang Caigui rather than the generic category of classical education (see Figure 1), and its fundamental feature is to memorise classics simply, extensively, and mechanically. This signifies that in the remaking of classical education, *sishu* education emerges as the opposite of *dujing* education and is aimed at remedying its shortcomings.

Mr. Zhao compared *sishu* education to the stage of enlightenment education (*mengxue* 蒙学) in ancient China, similar to primary schooling in the modern education system, set up and operated by individual Confucian intellectuals, and located in local communities. Unlike Wang Caigui, who suggested that children start with classical works directly, with *The Analects of Confucius* recommended first, Mr. Zhao argued that students involved in *sishu* education should initiate their study of the classics with simpler enlightenment textbooks such as *Three Character Classic* (*San Zi Jing* 三字经), *Book of Family Names* (*Bai jia xing* 百家姓), *Thousand Character Classic*

(*Qian Zi Wen* 千字文), and the like, because all these books would provide pupils with rudimentary knowledge and lay the foundation for everyday life and further studies. Unlike Wang Caigui's *dujing* education, which focuses primarily on memorisation of classics, Mr. Zhao claimed that *sishu* education is a comprehensive system that enables students to learn varieties of knowledge including literacy, recital, and poetry. Mr. Zhao argued that *sishu* education adopts the one-on-one method, which proves that it is authentic Chinese education insofar as it perfectly accords with the principle of individualised teaching and learning. Furthermore, he attempted to prove the legitimacy of *sishu* education in terms of historical inheritance and criticised his previous practice, influenced by Wang Caigui's *dujing* theory, as actually the product of Westernisation and in conflict with the ancient Chinese educational inheritance system. As he stated,

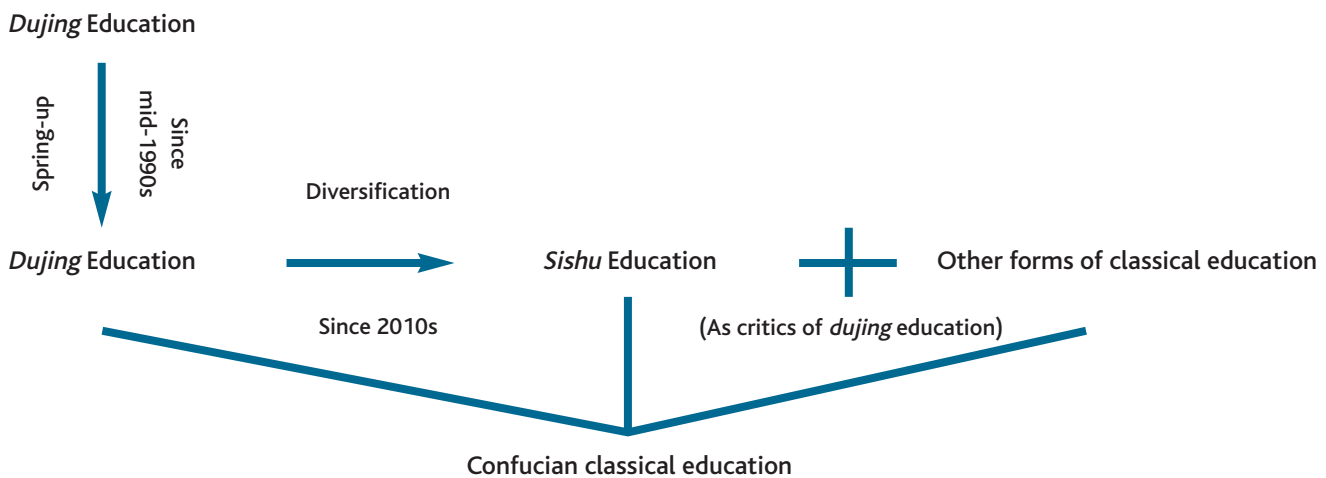
Professor Wang invented [the pattern of *dujing* education] out of thin air, without any foundation of inheriting [the ancient Chinese education system]. (...) There is no such way of learning classical books as he advocated throughout the entire history of China. "All students! Read after me" never appeared in ancient China because it is a Western notion by nature. Chinese people never applied this collective one-for-all pedagogy. In other words, we are born in an era in which the Chinese educational system and social ethos have been profoundly westernised for over a century. Professor Wang's way of thinking is also westernised.⁽³⁴⁾

What Mr. Zhao meant by the term "westernised" is further explained in his critique of *dujing* education. He denounced it as implying a strongly instrumental way of thinking like the examination-oriented education in mainstream compulsory schools. Even though the tradition of examination-oriented education occupied a significant position in Chinese history, especially as reflected in the entrenched imperial examination system (*kejuzhi* 科举制) (Lin 2011; Wu 2014), Mr. Zhao selectively ignored this aspect but emphasised that the examination orientation in contemporary Chinese education suffers excessively from the imported Western notion of pragmatism. He alleged that the *dujing* education proposed by Wang Caigui was not Chinese but rather Western in form and was thus inconsistent with the ancient Chinese educational inheritance system, and therefore ultimately lacked historical legitimacy. Conversely, he regarded *sishu* education as genuinely Chinese because it carried on the individualised principle and method in accordance with ancient Chinese pedagogy. He stated:

The Chinese *sishu* education system (...) has been constantly taking shape throughout the length of history and has been able to correct

31. I have two pieces of evidence to prove that the time point "end of 2012" is important for the development of contemporary classical education. The first is, as I mentioned in the section *Methodology and the case*, that Mr. Zhao's educational reform began in autumn 2012 and has become increasingly influential since then, so much so that nowadays many small private classical schools have established their own teaching system based on the individualised principle and the "one-on-one" method advocated by him. See Wu Yabo, "My view on modern *sishu* education," *op. cit.* The second evidence is that Wenli Academy was established in autumn 2012, a milestone event that has promoted the emergence of more private classical schools in Wang Caigui's *dujing* education style. Therefore, roughly since late 2012, classical schools of the two types have confronted each other and constantly reiterated the legitimacy and truth of their own educational philosophies. See Kongshan (2017: 46-94).
32. In addition, the broad and narrow senses of classical education referred to previously also reflect the differentiation of the domain of Confucian classical education in contemporary China.
33. See also Wu Yabo, "My view on modern *sishu* education," *op. cit.*
34. Interview in Laizhou City, Shandong Province, 7 June 2015.

Figure 1 – Diversification of Confucian classical education in contemporary China



Source: author.

and adjust itself according to historical conditions. It has proved to be an authentic and effective education. (...) There are always “ancient times” for each dynasty in China’s 3,000-year history, but the inheritance system [of *sishu* education] has never disappeared. Just let the unchanged remain constant. (...) This is the meaning of an eternal principle (*changdao* 常道), which should not be violated.⁽³⁵⁾

According to the existing literature, *sishu* education in ancient China did not exist in a homogenous or fixed manner but varied in teaching content and methods during different historical periods (Jiang 2015; Qin 2007). Also, it is easy to find evidence that the ancient Chinese *sishu* education system was interrupted and destroyed in the modern era (Hao and Wang 2005; Tian and Yang 2005). Despite this, the key point that Mr. Zhao underlined is that over the course of thousands of years in ancient China, *sishu* education has evidenced its historical legitimacy by what it achieved in cultivating generations of talent. As he argued,

We can easily make a long list of great figures throughout the 3,000 years of Chinese history, and this proves that *sishu* education is indeed an efficient, valuable, and successful system. Some may counter this point by indicating that there were quite a few illiterate people in ancient China, but [they still have to acknowledge that] so many remarkable intellectuals were cultivated by *sishu* education.⁽³⁶⁾

Furthermore, Mr. Zhao attempted to prove the irrationality of *dujing* education by criticising its failure to attract students to learn classics gladly. He said:

[For more than a decade,] so many students have memorised classics but forget them after a certain period of time and then have to memorise them again. Suffering from all the torment and boredom, students become disgusted with learning classics, and many even refuse to stay on in the classical school. Doesn’t it sound exactly like what their peers experience in mainstream examination-oriented schools?⁽³⁷⁾

Mr. Zhao’s highlighting of historical legitimacy reflects another essential aspect of the contemporary development of Confucian classical education,

that is, to seek a touchpoint in traditional Chinese pedagogy for the self-claimed educational concept. Interestingly, Mr. Zhao and Professor Wang Caigui and their respective followers all underscore that their pedagogies are in line with historical truth. For example, supporters of Wang Caigui’s *dujing* theory assert that the pedagogy of requiring students to memorise classics simply, extensively, and mechanically conforms to the historical reality of ancient Chinese *sishu* education and is also a creative product that combines traditional and modern education types (Kongshan 2017: 63-7, 76-9). This is obviously different from the stance of Mr. Zhao, who excludes Wang’s *dujing* theory from the Chinese educational tradition. That being so, I raise the argument that so-called “ancient Chinese education” has become an imagined and ad-hoc category, and an exclusionary notion. It is construed by practitioners of various types of classical education in an effort to construct their own classical pedagogy and play down other alternatives. No matter what different forms of classical education they are involved in, arguers seem able to find convincing evidence from ancient Chinese educational literature to prove the historical legitimacy of their own classical education. In the remaking of historical legitimacy, teaching principles and methods have become increasingly diversified in the domain of Confucian classical education.

The linguistic nature of Chinese language

The debatable Chineseness represents itself not only in the arguable relationship between principles and methods and in the diversified construing of historical legitimacy, but also in the very specific linguistic aspect of Chinese language. According to Mr. Zhao, the disparity between the *sishu* education proposed by himself and the *dujing* education proposed by Wang Caigui results from controversial understandings of *memorisation*. Unlike Wang Caigui’s obsession with rote memorisation, Mr. Zhao, referring to research by Professor Xu Jianshun 徐健顺, maintained that it is singing (*yinsong* 吟诵) rather than reading monotonously (*pingdu* 平读) that counts as the genuine Chinese version of memorisa-

35. Interview in Laizhou City, Shandong Province, 7 June 2015.

36. Interview in Laizhou City, Shandong Province, 6 June 2015.

37. Interview in Laizhou City, Shandong Province, 7 June 2015.

tion.⁽³⁸⁾ Mr. Zhao went on to explain that it is nothing but a stereotype to imagine rote memorisation as the basic method in ancient Chinese education, and that this stereotype shows the public's widespread ignorance of what constitutes authentic *sishu* education. Instead, he offered an alternative interpretation of memorisation:

Why are Chinese people good at memorising? And why do they love to learn through memorisation? (...) It is because the Chinese language is one of melody. [When ancient Chinese people memorised classics,] they were actually singing. They were not learning by rote; they were singing.⁽³⁹⁾

Mr. Zhao contended that the critical point that differentiates singing from mechanical memorisation is that singing is always accompanied by more or less understanding of the classic texts. The teacher must lead students to acquire comprehension of the literal passage at first in order for them to consolidate the understanding and memorisation through singing it. In tandem with this, Mr. Zhao explained why Westerners do not excel at memorising, and that this is related to the disparity between Chinese and Western languages.

Western language does not have a melody. It is a stress language without four tones that the Chinese language has. As a result, [Westerners] are unable to sing the texts in their own language.⁽⁴⁰⁾

Based on linguistic differences, Mr. Zhao emphasised singing-based memorisation rather than mechanical memorisation as the authentic Chinese approach to learning traditional culture, which perfectly unifies the individualised teaching principle with the one-on-one learning method. That being so, he criticised the previous practice, the one guided by Wang Caigui's *dujing* theory and the way of mechanical memorisation, for doing nothing but forcing students to read classics mechanically in a monotonous tone, in this way completely violating the melodic nature of the Chinese language. He clarified that the popularity of mechanical memorisation in a monotonous tone was actually a result of the modern linguistic movement aimed at transforming the polysyllabic tonal Chinese language into a monosyllabic stress type similar to Western language. He believed that this movement, which occurred in the early twentieth century, left a huge negative impact on the practice of contemporary classical education. He said:

A perplexing problem has now emerged. (...) Some classical schools force students to memorise poems and songs mechanically, but students hate to do this. I bet nobody would like mechanical memorisation. However, Chinese ancients all enjoyed learning classics! Why? (...) [It's because] Chinese language is a melodic language and is quite suitable for chanting to memorise. In this case, if you turn Chinese language into a monosyllabic stress language, it becomes unsuitable for memorising by recital.⁽⁴¹⁾

It is certainly impossible to verify whether "Chinese ancients all enjoyed learning classics,"⁽⁴²⁾ but the above quote draws our attention to the relationship between comprehension and memorisation, which may be the most challenging issue in the contemporary debate about *dujing*. Wang Caigui asserts that the optimal time for education is before the age of 13,

which is a golden period when the learner is best at memorising and therefore must devote as much time as possible to memorising classics and as little time as possible to understanding them (Wang 2009: 15–26). Mr. Zhao was once a devout believer in this theoretical assertion and practiced it without question for years,⁽⁴³⁾ until he had to admit that many students reported forgetting what they already memorised after a period of time, even if they indeed had successfully recited the entire book. Wang Caigui acknowledged this kind of occurrence, but claimed that even if classics were forgotten completely they would still play a subtle and positive role in transforming the learner's habits and attitudes in his or her life experience. Mr. Zhao did not go along with this. He argued that once the classical texts were forgotten, they would disappear from the learner's mind forever, without any influence on his or her moral cultivation or personal development. As he said,

[The theory of Professor Wang Caigui implies] a dualistic thinking. That one's memory ability is strong and comprehension faculty is weak before the age of 13 does not mean that he has only memory without any capacity for comprehension. (...) Well, I have to say this is nothing but a Western style of dualistic thinking, but the authentic Chinese way of thinking is just the other way around.⁽⁴⁴⁾

In tandem with this, Mr. Zhao raised the idea that memorisation and comprehension must be synchronised throughout the entire educational process. He argued that such a holistic way of thinking nurtured the genuine Chinese version of pedagogy. As he stated,

When someone is memorising the classical texts by singing them out, he must have gained a bit of understanding of them in the meantime. The understanding here basically refers to knowing the literal meaning of characters. Likewise, when someone tries to understand a classical passage, he must have memorised at least part of it. In such a synchronous process as a whole, he is able to comprehend the implicit principles of the texts.⁽⁴⁵⁾

Mr. Zhao classified the comprehension of classics into two relevant but different levels: the lower level is to understand the literal meanings of characters (*zìyì* 字义), whereas the higher level is to interpret the profound and implicit principles (*yìlǐ* 义理) of classical literature. He stated that while char-

38. See Xu Jianshun 徐健顺, "我所理解的中国古代教育" (Wo suo lijie de Zhongguo gudai jiaoyu, Ancient Chinese education in my view), <http://bbs.gsr.org.tw/cgi-bin/topic.cgi?forum=6&topic=4638> (accessed on 10 November 2018). Professor Xu together with his research team spent several years interviewing about 1,000 elderly people throughout China, who once studied in *sishu* when they were young, which allows him to suggest that nowadays so-called *du* (reading) is actually singing in ancient China. Following this, he has argued that ancient Chinese scholars did not read classics in a flat tone but sang.

39. Interview in Laizhou City, Shandong Province, 7 June 2015.

40. *Ibid.*

41. *Ibid.*

42. Some criticize Mr. Zhao's conception of ancient *sishu* as a "romantic imagination," arguing that in ancient *sishu* there were also students weary of learning (Kongshan 2017: 76–9).

43. When I first visited his school in 2012, the school was applying a method of "memorising an entire book" (*baoben* 包本) to maximise students' memorisation, which specifically means requiring students to memorise an entire classic such as *The Analects* within a given period. Following this pattern, students were often forced to achieve the aim of *baoben*, which generated much pressure.

44. Interview in Laizhou City, Shandong Province, 7 June 2015.

45. *Ibid.*

acter meanings are explicit and easy to understand, the grasp of textual principles must deepen along with the accumulation of life experiences and is bound to vary from person to person. Mr. Zhao argued for the necessity of learning character meanings before going on to learn and memorise classics, because Chinese character meanings have changed constantly throughout history, and later generations may find them hard to understand. He therefore emphasised grasping character meanings in the first stage, which would give the learner a solid foundation for comprehending the profound philosophy of the classical texts in the next stage. As Mr. Zhao stated,

The colloquial language of our own times is exact and definite, as it was at Confucius's time. So why has it become difficult for modern people to understand Confucius's spoken language, which was actually so easy to comprehend in his time? It is because the language [that Confucius spoke] has changed dramatically today, rather than because the moral principles implied by his words are too profound to grasp.⁽⁴⁶⁾

This argument directly challenges Wang Caigui, who implies a hierarchical notion of classical and modern writings. As Wang explained, classics are written in classical Chinese (*wenyan wen* 文言文), which is a written language that accommodates “superior” cultural values; thus by reading classics over and over again, learners will naturally and easily be able to understand pieces written in vernacular Chinese (*baihua wen* 白话文), because the latter is merely a spoken language of “inferior” cultural value (Wang 2014: 55-8). Mr. Zhao did not agree with Wang Caigui in this regard and took an example from *The Analects*:

[This book] is a collected record of what Confucius *said* instead of what he *wrote*. If his spoken words had philosophical connotations, his disciples would take note of them because these sentences contained profound cultural value; otherwise, they would not record them at all. So it has nothing to do with whether the language is spoken or written.⁽⁴⁷⁾

Linguistic hierarchy is also shown in the discourse concerning the relationship between the fundamental (*ben* 本) and the incidental (*mo* 末). In Wang Caigui's view, the fundamental in his proposed *dujing* education is to simply, extensively, and mechanically memorise classics, whereas other items, for example, recital, literacy, and understanding, which all constitute the basic curriculum of the *sishu* education Mr. Zhao advocates, are merely the incidental (Wang 2009: 21-5). Wang Caigui suggested that learners spend some time on the incidental if possible, on the condition that classics memorisation be given the priority, but disagreed with reversing the order (*ibid.*). In contrast, Mr. Zhao opposed this hierarchical notion of the fundamental and the incidental and criticised it as assuming a dualistic mode of thinking. Instead, he argued that the fundamental and the incidental make up a whole, although Wang Caigui mistakenly supposed them to be separate. Nonetheless, Mr. Zhao admitted that fundamental issues absolutely outweigh the incidental, and he emphasised the significance of educational sequence (*jiaoyu cidi* 教育次第):

Dujing is indeed very important, but this does not necessarily mean we have to do it first. (...) The colloquial language has become entirely different from what it was in ancient times. (...) This has led to

an issue of educational sequence. This issue must be understood from the history of Chinese educational inheritance, and from there we know that the most appropriate sequence of learning is to first learn the literal meanings of characters, and then move on to intensive reading of the classics.⁽⁴⁸⁾

Conclusion

Since Confucian classical education reappeared in mainland China in the late 1990s, controversy about it has never ceased. The public space where the debate occurs has shifted from academia and media to within the domain of classical education, and the participants have therefore changed from scholars to classical education practitioners. This does not mean that scholars and media are no longer involved in today's debate. On the contrary, since May 2016, criticism of Wang Caigui's *dujing* education triggered by the joint efforts of scholars and media have had a momentous impact on society. On the surface, the recent debate looks similar to those in 2004 and 1934 insofar as scholars played a prominent driving force. However, this article has revealed that before academics intervened in the current debate, there was a social trend of criticism against Wang Caigui's *dujing* theory within the popular domain of classical education. This social force was primarily initiated and promoted by practitioners of *sishu* education such as Mr. Zhao Shengjun, featured in this article.

By analysing the discourse of Mr. Zhao, this paper has shown controversial nuances within the still-forming domain of Confucian classical education. I admit that this case study, which focuses on only one figure, may undermine descriptions of the overall picture. But by comparing Mr. Zhao's arguments for *sishu* education with Wang Caigui's influential *dujing* theory, we can peek into some fundamental issues, especially the fine points under debate at the moment. I believe that all of this to a certain extent mirrors broader trends in classical education in contemporary China.

The first controversial issue in the current debate is the relationship between principles and methods in the educational process. According to Mr. Zhao, *dujing* education adopts a principle of dualism whereby the collective and authoritarian one-for-all teaching approach is separated from and violates the individualised tenet of teaching and learning. Meanwhile, Mr. Zhao calls for drawing lessons from ancient Chinese *sishu* education so as to combine the individualised teaching principle with the one-on-one method. Secondly, by drawing upon the notion of historical legitimacy, Mr. Zhao argues that his proposed *sishu* education is the authentic Chinese education because it perfectly conforms to the inheritance system of ancient Chinese pedagogy, whereas Wang Caigui's *dujing* education is merely a product of westernisation and is therefore incompatible with Chinese educational tradition. The range of learning in *sishu* education, as Mr. Zhao indicates, is far more extensive than reading the classics, and this point breaks through the assumption of equating the single element of *dujing* to the entire system of ancient Chinese education. Thirdly, the legitimacy of *sishu* education is consolidated by the linguistic nature of Chinese language. Mr. Zhao argues that Chinese language is melodic and suitable for memorisation by singing rather than reading in a flat tone. Memorisation and comprehension of classic texts can be achieved simultaneously when the learner sings them out.

46. *Ibid.*

47. *Ibid.*

48. *Ibid.*

In light of this, as Mr. Zhao concludes, mechanical memorisation, which is universally assumed to be the dominant method in ancient Chinese education, actually goes against the melodic nature of Chinese language and is therefore not an authentic Chinese way of education.

This paper has argued that modern Chinese classical education presents a conspicuous trend of diversification, that is, it is gradually splitting from the overarching identification with Wang Caigui's *dujing* education into the co-existence of various forms of classical education. Due to the continuing diversification process, Wang Caigui's *dujing* education and Mr. Zhao's *sishu* education are both merely two specific types of Confucian classical education; there is no longer one educational model that can be widely recognised as representing the generic category. I have argued that the diversification of classical education, along with the resulting differentiation of the domain and the intensification of debate, is a fundamental feature of the rejuvenated Confucian education in today's China. Be that as it may, the recent debate is not without consensus, that is, the implicit recognition of the value of Confucian classics. I argue that this bottom-line consensus serves as the common ground for diverse debaters, no matter how different the types of classical education they engage in, and regardless of how much they disagree over teaching methods.

Comparing the current debate with those in 1934 and 2004, we may find that *dujing* is no longer merely an intellectual issue among scholars but has also become a practical matter in civil society. The focus of debate at the moment puts greater emphasises on the methodological issue of *how* to read classics, though many people, particularly those outside the domain of Confucian classical education, still remain sceptical of the necessity and accessibility of reading classics. While the methodological dimension of classical education indeed appeared in the 1934 and 2004 debates, it has become the central issue in the current debate—involved participants who are striving to map out a systematic approach to learning classics by taking in the experience of ancient Chinese *sishu* education. I emphasise that this point is reflected not only in the story of Mr. Zhao but also in the endeavours of other practitioners to reconstruct other types of classical education.⁽⁴⁹⁾

It is interesting to note that these new forms of classical education emerge directly from their practitioners' dissatisfaction with Wang Caigui's original *dujing* theory. They criticise Wang's authoritarian fashion of classical education for forcing children to merely follow the teacher and memorise classics mechanically while inhibiting the enhancement of their learning autonomy, moral independence, and other qualities such as reading and writing. Thanks to the endeavours of these critical practitioners, classical education at the moment has been able to get rid of Wang's authoritarian framework and embrace a more individual-oriented style.

Finally, I would like to return to the original topic mentioned at the beginning of this article: what is genuine "Chinese" (or "Confucian") education? This is a rather controversial question, given what has been presented above. Provided that classical education is no longer taken for granted as having a self-evident definition, the notion of "Chineseness" has become a debatable issue in the domain of classical education. For example, going against Wang Caigui's argument that mechanical memorisation is consistent with traditional Chinese pedagogy, Mr. Zhao contends that the authentic Chinese method of learning classics is singing, which can facilitate learners to produce emotional resonance with classical texts and achieve a certain understanding of them. He challenges the stereotype that regards ancient Chinese education as rigid, authoritarian, and repressive; instead he outlines an al-

ternative picture of child-centeredness that follows the principle of individualised teaching and focuses on student autonomy in the learning process.⁽⁵⁰⁾ In brief, so-called "Chinese" or "Confucian" education has become a mixture of various pedagogic patterns, some of which are mutually contradictory in principle and method, even though their practitioners always succeed in finding evidence from ancient Chinese education experience to prove the historical legitimacy of these forms.

■ Canglong Wang is postdoctoral fellow at the School of Governance, Sun Yat-sen University.

School of Government, Sun Yat-sen University, No. 135, Xingang Xi Road, Guangzhou, 510275, P. R. China (honghugaoxiang@163.com).

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49. For example, another type labelled "*chongru* education" (education of respecting Confucianism) has begun to develop since 2017 and had become increasingly influential in the domain of classical education. *Chongru* education has many similarities to Mr. Zhao's *sishu* education. It claims to recover the teaching method of ancient Chinese *sishu* and take it as the guideline, to follow the individualised principle of education, and to suggest initially learning traditional Chinese culture from enlightenment textbooks rather than classical literature for laying the foundation of literacy and composition. The difference between the two lies in the content of teaching and the order of learning. See Wu Yabo, "My view on modern *sishu* education," *op. cit.*

50. See also Wu Yabo, "My view on modern *dishu* education," *op. cit.*; Xu Jianshun, "Ancient Chinese education in my view," *op. cit.*

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