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***The Making of the Confucian Individual:***  
**Morality, Subjectification, and Classical**  
**Schooling in China**

A Dissertation

Submitted in Fulfilment of the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

by

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## ***Declaration***

I declare that this thesis was composed by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where stated otherwise by reference or acknowledgement, the work presented is entirely my own.

Canglong Wang *Canglong Wang*

Date 12/12/2018

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## ***Abstract***

This research explores the complexity of Confucian schooling in the context of contemporary China. Based on fieldwork in a Confucian-style classical school (given the pseudonym Yiqian School), the thesis reveals why parents choose Confucian education, how the school seeks to cultivate children as Confucian autonomous, learned individuals and what sense parents, students and teachers make of this schooling.

Theoretically the thesis draws together three strands of scholarship—research on Chinese education and the rhetoric of *suzhi*/quality, the individualisation thesis as it applies to China, and governmentality and subjectification in the context of China. The study is ethnographic, drawing on participant observation and formal and informal interviews. Conducted in 2015, the fieldwork took place over six months in Yiqian School, a classical school with a student population spanning seven to 15 years.

The research demonstrates the complexity of parents' decisions to withdraw their children from state schools and in planning for their future education. These parents had contradictory dispositions towards the state school system: while many criticised compulsory schooling, at the same time they also recognised the importance of the state-defined educational track in awarding academic certificate. The parental desire for their children to receive Confucian classical education was deeply influenced by anxiety about morality and a belief that classical education would enhance children's moral status. As most parents came from middle-class families, their stress on Confucian ethical virtue can be interpreted as an attempt to distinguish their children from other social groups through a Confucian-inspired distinction between good/bad manners, high/low qualities (*suzhi*), and superior/inferior civilities (*wenming*).

The thesis also explores the specific educational practices and techniques used in the Confucian school. While Yiqian School aimed to cultivate students as autonomous, learned individuals through the approach of "individualised memorisation," this process is subjected to disciplinary power in two conflicting types of memorisation-based pedagogy, an individualistic and an

authoritarian mode. This meant the subjectification of the students involved a contradiction between autonomy and coercion.

By showing how Confucian individuals are shaped within the education system, the thesis reveals what Confucian education tells us about the Chinese path to individualisation. The making of Confucian individuals in the school is not completely “dis-embedded” from the “traditional” categories such as family relations, the state school system and social class. The tension between parents and their children in planning for the latter’s future education indicates how strongly the Confucian youth pursue personal aspirations. Furthermore, while parents were free to take their children out of the state school system and choose Confucian education, they had to face the risks resulting from the ambiguous status of Confucian education, particularly the lack of certificate-granting powers and the marginalisation of the Confucian educational experience.



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## ***Chapter 1 Introduction***

On September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2017, two years after my fieldwork, I was invited to attend the 8<sup>th</sup> Session of the World Confucian Conference in Qufu City, the hometown of Confucius, who is the recognised founder of the Confucian school in China.<sup>1</sup> The Ministry of Culture of the People’s Republic of China and the Shandong Provincial Government jointly sponsored the conference. Apart from the 300 scholars from all over the world, the attendees included the vice chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress, the Minister of Culture, and the Secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Shandong Provincial Committee, demonstrating open support for Confucianism from the socialist political authority.

Two things impressed me strongly at this conference—(1) the positive attitude of the CPC government towards Confucianism, and (2) the contestation about the nature of Confucian education, both of which will be exemplified in this doctoral thesis. First of all, in the opening ceremony the conference published the “Top Ten Hotspots of Confucian research from 2015 to 2017,” one of which was the issuing of the document *Suggestions on Implementing the Inheritance and Development Project of the Chinese Excellent Traditional Culture* by the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For details about the conference, see

<http://history.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0920/c198221-29547712.html>.

<sup>2</sup> This is the second time that the World Confucian Conference has released hot spots of Confucian studies in the past two years since 2015. The selection of these topics was completed by an ad hoc group, which was based on the editorial board of an authoritative Chinese Confucian research journal called *Wen, Shi, Zhe (Literature, History & Philosophy)*. The group first solicited opinions from the broad Confucian research academia, both domestically and abroad, to suggest a long list of hot issues of Confucian study in the past two years. Then it organized a smaller expert committee constituted by authoritative researchers related to Confucian research and invited them to finalize ten topics that most concentrated scholars’ opinions. According to the ad hoc group, the release of the top ten hotspots aims to reflect the trend of Confucian studies and

The conference committee interpreted the event as a milestone in the renaissance of Chinese traditional culture represented by Confucianism that has been formally promoted as the overall strategy of the ruling party and the central government, and therefore the situation where the anti-traditionalism that dominated the party ideology since the first half of the twentieth century has officially ended.<sup>3</sup> This made me realise the extent to which the socialist party-state (Y. Yan 2009b & 2010)<sup>4</sup> has changed its attitude towards the Chinese traditional (Confucian) culture—from the radical criticism in the Maoist era to the appreciation and promotion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The socialist party-state has increasingly shown open support for Confucianism since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For example, when first held in 2007, this conference was achieved through the joint sponsorship of the socialist government and the Confucian-related academic community. Also, in the first decade of the new millennium, the socialist party-state issued the national strategy of “Constructing the Harmonious Socialist Society” (*Goujian shehui zhuyi hexie shehui*) (CPC Central Committee 2006) and “Socialist Conceptions of Honor and Disgrace” (*Shehui zhuyi rongruguan*) (Xinhua News Agency 2006), both of which are profoundly influenced by Confucian ideas. Starting in the 2010s, the appreciation of the socialist government for Confucian culture has become increasingly prominent. For example, President Xi Jinping visited the Confucius Institute in 2013<sup>5</sup> and in 2014 he attended the international academic symposium in memory of the 2565<sup>th</sup> birthday of Confucius, where he delivered a keynote speech (which is the first time in

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influence academia and society. See

<http://news.takungpao.com/society/topnews/2017-09/3492445.html>.

<sup>3</sup> For details about the claim, see [http://guoxue.ifeng.com/a/20170920/52089329\\_0.shtml](http://guoxue.ifeng.com/a/20170920/52089329_0.shtml).

<sup>4</sup> I choose the term “socialist party-state” here and throughout the thesis to characterize the current regime in China by referring to Yunxiang Yan (2009b & 2010), who has argued that the state dominated by CPC in today’s Chinese socialist regime acts as the manager of the interplay among various players—individual, society, market, and global capitalism.

<sup>5</sup> See news report at [http://www.chinakongzi.org/dajiatan/201403/t20140310\\_7693.htm](http://www.chinakongzi.org/dajiatan/201403/t20140310_7693.htm).

history that the supremo of the socialist polity had done so).<sup>6</sup> These actions are regarded by both intellectuals and the mass media as the official declaration that the socialist party-state plans to promote the revival of Confucianism (Xinhuanet 2013). Xu Jialu, a privileged former senior official and Confucian scholar, suggests that these political activities signal the beginning of putting wrongs to rights (*boluan fanzheng*) in humanities and social sciences after Confucian culture was suppressed and criticised for a century (Yang 2014).

In line with this, the increasing fervour for the study of Chinese traditional culture (*guoxue re*) has attracted a growing number of Chinese people to engage with Confucian culture in various areas of education, culture and society (see Angle 2012; Bell 2015 & 2016; Hammond and Richey 2015; Moore 2015; Murray 2015; Richey 2015). More importantly, the revival of Confucianism has laid a foundation for the development of Confucian classical education, which is the focus of this thesis (see Billioud & Thoraval 2009 & 2015; Changping 2008; S. Jia 2013; Zhao & Zhang 2014). Chinese parents are increasingly attracted by Confucian-inspired education and desire to have their children learn classics and part-time or full-time classical schools are experiencing rapid growth.<sup>7</sup> According to incomplete statistics from Confucian education institutes and relevant news reports,<sup>8</sup> by 2008 there were at least 50 million students engaged in learning Confucian classics all over China (Caigui Wang 2009a: 3), and the

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<sup>6</sup> See news report at <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2014/0925/c1001-25731171.html>.

<sup>7</sup> A typical example here is the increase of classical schools in Shenzhen Wutongshan in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which has formed a village famous nationwide for classics reading (*dujing cun*) (Yu Liu 2010).

<sup>8</sup> There has been no official complete investigation of how many students read classics accurately or how many Confucian schools exist in China. The numbers listed here are approximate estimations. One reason is that there are no official or non-official institutions to do such statistics. Moreover, this may be related to the mobility of students participating in classical education, and also due to many classical education institutions existing in the form of home schooling, which is currently not recognised by Chinese law. It is true that the data sources of Confucian educative institutes and news reports may affect the credibility of the statistics, but in the absence of comprehensive survey data, it is expedient to rely on them.



number had doubled by 2014 (Caigui Wang 2014a: 13-16). Additionally, based on a news report (R. Zhang 2014), about 3,000 Confucian-inspired private schools (*sishu*) have been established since 2004. Another estimated figure from the interviewed practitioners of classical education is there were about 1,000 full-time Confucian-style private schools all over China by 2015.

Despite this apparent enthusiasm from party and Chinese populace, the second issue that struck me was the fierce debate centred on Confucian classical education at the conference. The conference held a panel specifically reflecting upon the pros and cons of classical education in contemporary China,<sup>9</sup> and participants included scholars, practitioners and parents involved in classical education. In the panel discussion, some people expressed serious concerns about the method of mechanically memorising a large number of classics – a key practice of Confucian education – although Professor Caigui Wang<sup>10</sup> (the most influential pioneer in advocating Confucian classical education, and an invited speaker at the conference) still firmly believed in the soundness and reasonableness of the pedagogy he has proposed for years. Both sides reached stalemate. In fact the debates on Confucian classical education have continued for years in contemporary China, both amongst scholars (see, e.g., Xiaodong Liu 2004 & 2005 & 2008; Xiufeng Liu 2011; Canglong Wang 2016a & 2016b & 2017) and in the mass media (see, e.g., Cai 2016; Dai 2016; D. Jia 2016; Wei 2016; Yao 2016; He Zhang 2016; R. Zhang 2014). Especially since 2013, the disagreements have focused on the pedagogy of “simply and extensively reading classics” (*laoshi daliang dujing*) advocated by Professor Wang. While its proponents defend the

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<sup>9</sup> This is the direct reason why I attended the conference. Since 2016, I have published several articles on contemporary Confucian classical education, which have attracted the attention of educators and scholars in the field of Confucian learning. Thus I was given the opportunity to participate in this conference to report my research findings, at the invitation of a Chinese professor who is engaged in both Confucian studies and the current debate on classical education.

<sup>10</sup> This is a real name, as is *Wenli Academy* that will be mentioned later. It is necessary to note that all names but the two in this thesis are pseudonyms. A fuller discussion around pseudonyms will be elaborated on in the methodology chapter (Chapter 4).

merits of the mechanical memorisation of classics (see Kongshan 2016; Caigui Wang 2016b; X. Wu 2016), opponents argue that a good Confucian education should not be limited to merely memorising classics (see Dai 2016; Fang 2016; He 2016; Ke 2016 & 2017). The divergence of views extended to the panel in 2017. In light of these, I came to realise that this is an area where social scientists could make a contribution through conducting empirical investigations on the issue (see also Billioud and Thoraval 2015), particularly through exploring the views, experiences and actions of the students, parents and teachers involved in Confucian classical education.

The above discussion provides a background to the present research and suggests two significant aspects: (1) the relationship between the socialist party-state and the revival of Confucianism (including Confucian classical education), and (2) the debated practices of Confucian classical education. Additionally, there is a third relevant aspect—the relationship between the reappearance of Confucian classical education and social transformation in contemporary China.

On the first aspect, the existing research shows that the socialist government intentionally deploys Confucianism as an ideological instrument to solidify Chinese people's nationalistic identity and as a supplement to the declining socialist-collectivist values (see Bell 2016; Billioud 2011; Billioud and Thoraval 2007 & 2008 & 2015; Dallmayr 2003; Dryburgh 2011; Fukuyama 1995; Murray 2015; Nuyen 2009; Richey 2015; Sung and Pascall 2014; Y. Yan 2010). However, we still lack understanding of the specificity of how the rejuvenated domains of Confucianism, including Confucian education, interact with the state. More importantly, there have been few studies that examine either specific Confucian educative institutions or individuals involved in such educational practices (for relevant works see Billioud 2010; Billioud and Thoraval 2007 & 2015; Canglong Wang 2014 & 2015a & 2016b).

On the aforementioned second point, the controversies caused by the practices of Confucian classical education are focused on the ancient Chinese teaching method of *memorisation*. It has been assumed to be an authoritarian approach by which students are subject to a passive and non-critical learning model (Chan 1999; Clark and Gieve 2006; Grimshaw 2007; Gu and Schweisfurth

2006; Kennedy 2002), following the authority of parental, collective and national leadership (Chao 1994; Chua 2011; Hansen 2015: 87-88; C. Li et al. 2017; Naftali 2016; X. Wang 2017). However, research suggests such assumptions may ignore the individual-focused side of Confucian pedagogy, which has the potential to promote values such as independence, autonomy, freedom, free will, aspiration, self-determination, self-improvement and self-responsibility (see Angle 2012; Bakken 2000; X. Chen 2014 & 2015; de Bary 1983; Hwang 2013; Kipnis 2011b; Minghui Li 2005; X. Sun 2017; W. Tu 1985 & 2002; Canglong Wang 2015b & 2016a; H. Zhang 1989).

It is, however, essential to relate these pedagogic controversies in the domain of Confucian schooling to the broader context of Chinese education. The Chinese educational system has been undergoing reform from an examination-oriented to a quality-oriented education system (see Jacka 2009; Kipnis 2006 & 2007 & 2011b; D. Lin 2017; Thogerson 2000; Woronov 2009; J. Wu 2016a; Yi 2011b). The so-called examination-oriented education (*yingshi jiaoyu*) refers to an educational system that emphasises preparing for standardised examinations, seeking high scores and enrolment rate, and the approach of learning by rote (see Dello-Iacovo 2009; Hansen 2015; Lou 2011; Zhu et al. 2006). As an antidote to examination-oriented education, the quality-oriented education (*suzhi jiaoyu*) aims to cultivate all-round talents through developing five major qualities: *de* (moral), *zhi* (intellectual), *ti* (physical), *mei* (aesthetic) and *lao* (manual dexterity) (CPC Central Committee 1999; see also Yi 2011b). However, the actual effects of the *suzhi* education national project have been widely questioned insofar as it fails to educate students' comprehensive capabilities but is constrained by the examination-centred pedagogy (see Kipnis 2011a & 2011b; D. Lin 2017; Lou 2011; S. Guo and Guo 2016b).

Such educational reform is rooted in significant and widespread discussion about how to improve students' overall capabilities and skills, particularly their moral character and innovative spirit, so as to meet the demands arising from increasing global economic competition (see, e.g., D. Lin 2017; H. Liu 2013; Y. Liu 2013; Pan 1997; Yimin Wang and Ross 2013; J. Wu 2012 & 2016a & 2016b; Yang 1995). This is related to the discourse of *suzhi*/quality, which works as the

thread throughout the entire educational reform. The word *suzhi* refers to “the innate and nurtured physical, intellectual and ideological characteristics of a person” (Murphy 2004: 2). According to Qinghong Lin (2009), the notion of *suzhi* suggests essential human qualities are something to be civilised, (re)shaped or transformed in order to make a human being human (p. 290).

The rhetoric of *suzhi* is what actors (parents, teachers and students) involved in Confucian education frequently use in discourses. It was just at the time when the examination-oriented education was encountered with most criticism that Confucian classical education began to emerge in the early 2000s, during which time its advocates creatively used the discourse of *suzhi* and *suzhi* education to legitimate the significance of memorising Confucian classics in enhancing children’s moral qualities (see Caigui Wang 2009b & 2014a). This thesis explores various practices based on memorisation in Confucian education and the relevance of the *suzhi* discourse to the broad Chinese education context.

The last point is regarding the relationship between Confucian classical education and broad social change in China. The revival of Confucian education occurs against a background of the transformation of Chinese society, which, as many scholars argue, is profoundly shaped by the process of individualisation (see Delman and Yin 2008; Hansen 2013 & 2015; Hansen and Svarverud 2010; Ong and Zhang 2008; Canglong Wang 2016b; Y. Yan 2009b & 2010 & 2011 & 2013). Many Confucian schools are privately established institutions practising outside the state-sponsored school system and adopting a pedagogical framework that differs significantly from compulsory education (see also Billioud and Thoraval 2007 & 2015). In view of this, can we use the individualisation thesis, particularly as it applies to China, to enhance the understanding of the reappearing practices in private Confucian schools? And, conversely, what potential insights might the Confucian pedagogy revival offer into the nature of individualisation in the Chinese context?

In light of this, the present study aims to understand the complexity of Confucian teaching practices and their relevance to the making of individuals in post-Mao China, which serves as the overarching research theme. The thesis offers an ethnographic analysis of a classical education school to understand what took place in the school and how parents, students and teachers accounted

for the pedagogic practices. It aims to explore parents' choice of and desire for Confucian classical education, the contradictions of memorisation-based teaching practices, the subjectification<sup>11</sup> of parents and children, and their planning of future education.

The specific research questions guiding the thesis are as follows:

1. How do parents account for their choice of private Confucian classical school outside the state education system? What actions do they take to make such choice? And what difficulties, if any, do they face?

2. What teaching practices are adopted in the Confucian school to educate students? How do those involved – students, parents and teachers – experience and understand these practices?

3. How do parents map out their children's future education? What do students think of such plans? What barriers, if any, do parents and students face when planning and how do they deal with these challenges?

Through answering the above questions, the thesis will aim to contribute to the literature on Chinese education through exploring the implications of parental choice of Confucian schooling and the significance of discourses of moral *suzhi*/quality. By engaging with broader literature on the Chinese path to individualisation, the research will aim to make sense of students' self-making, parents' moral anxieties and plans for future education, and the ambivalent relationship of the Confucian school with the state education system. Also, looking to the scholarship on governmentality and subjectification in the context of socialist China, the study will uncover what practices inside the Confucian school suggest for understanding the shaping of the subjectivity of Confucian individuals and the relationship between the individual and the nation-state.

The thesis has seven chapters in addition to this Introduction. I begin in Chapter 2 by reviewing relevant literature and building the theoretical framework for the data analysis. This chapter addresses three areas of sociological literature—(1) research on Chinese education and the rhetoric of

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<sup>11</sup> The term "subjectification," according to Foucault (2003: 146), refers to a process created by the intertwined technologies of power and technologies of self. Chapter 2 will offer a more detailed explanation.

*suzhi*/quality, (2) the individualisation thesis as it applies to China, and (3) governmentality and subjectification and their relevance to China.

Chapter 3 sets the scene of Confucian classical education in China. This chapter firstly offers an introduction to Confucian education in ancient and modern China and then focuses on describing the movement for “children reading classics education” (*ertong dujing jiaoyu*) that has arisen in contemporary China. It also provides an overview of the teachers and students of Yiqian School (the Confucian school with which the present research is concerned) as well as some other necessary background information. In the last part of Chapter 3, I address the overall controversies in the general domain of Confucian classical education, and then summarise inconsistencies and hybridization of two Confucian pedagogies in Yiqian School—the authoritarian and the individual-oriented.

Chapter 4 explains the methodology used to explore the research questions and meet the research aims. The overall framework for this study is ethnographic, drawing on participant observation and formal and informal interviews for data collection. Also, this chapter describes the considerations involved in choosing the research site and how to gain access, and the strategy of data analysis. Ethical considerations, which are particularly significant for research that involves children, are discussed in detail in the last section of this chapter.

Data analysis is presented across three chapters. Chapter 5 explores how parents come to choose the Confucian classical school in the context of contemporary China, primarily drawing on interviews with parents and children. It shows how parents use the technique of critique, drawing on the key concept of moral *suzhi* (quality) to formulate their determination to have their children leave compulsory state education and transfer to the private Confucian school. Through analysing parents’ accounts of educational choices, I argue that while many parents maintain a critical attitude towards the state school system, they paradoxically also demonstrate dependence on, or obedience to, the socialist political authority in making this choice.

Chapter 6 focuses on the specific practices of cultivating the Confucian autonomous, learned individual in Yiqian School, through which students are

shaped and self-shape to become self-directed and self-disciplined persons. I argue that this is a contradictory process of subjectification, embedded in the hybrid pedagogical approach of “individualised memorisation” formulated in the Confucian school and described in Chapter 3. This chapter reveals various but conflicting forms of practices of discipline, punishment and resistance. Consequently, becoming a Confucian-inspired autonomous, learned individual is shown to be a highly complex process.

The penultimate chapter, Chapter 7, considers how students and parents at Yiqian School think about the future. It explores two options of future education planning—(1) returning to the state compulsory schools and (2) going for further Confucian studies in the Confucian-style *Wenli Academy* (*Wenli shuyuan*). The first half of the chapter draws upon the three interlinked reasons why parents pursue their children’s return to state schools. The second half reveals the contradiction between students and their parents in whether to target the *Wenli Academy* as the next step in their education. I argue that students form a subjectivity of the individual self through which they demonstrate strong desires for individual aspiration, self-development and self-realisation.

The conclusion in Chapter 8 connects the findings of the thesis and reflects upon its limitations but also its implications for future research on Confucian education, individualisation and governmentality/subjectification in socialist China.

## ***Chapter 2 Literature review: Suzhi discourse, individualisation, and governmentality in China***

In this thesis, I offer an ethnographic analysis of a Confucian classical education school and through this reveal potential insight into the complexities of the Confucian classical education revival happening within the broad landscape of contemporary Chinese social transformation.

To pave the way for the empirical analysis, this chapter will establish a theoretical framework by addressing three areas of sociological literature, as the following three sections present respectively. The first section offers substantive background of studies on Chinese education, in which the revival of Confucian classical education is embedded. It situates this doctoral research in China's educational reform from examination-oriented to quality-oriented education and informs the association with the wider discourse of *suzhi*/quality. The second part in this chapter touches on the individualisation thesis and its application in China. This section highlights two aspects—the proliferation of school choices of Chinese urban middle-class parents, and China's moral shift. The two points provide theoretical hints to understand the rejuvenation of Confucian education in contemporary China. The third section reviews the research on governmentality and subjectification in particular involving Foucault's analysis of power and their relevance to China.

The thesis takes in the two theories of individualisation and governmentality/subjectification simultaneously because they fit together in some crucial aspects in the context of China. For instance, the complexity of the Chinese path to individualisation reverberates the ambivalence of socialist-neoliberal forms of political rationality in post-Mao China. Also, the heterogeneities of China's moral shift echo the subjective duality of neosocialist individuals. Besides, the individualisation of Chinese society has produced increasing pressure on the socialist regime to create new tactics of governmentality to face the proliferation of new challenges in social and political conditions. All of these are expanded in Section 2.3.3. They theoretically inform the empirical findings in this doctoral research, for example, the shaping of parental desire for Confucian education (Chapter 5), the making of Confucian



autonomous, learned individuals (Chapter 6), and how the private Confucian school addressed the relationship with the local government (Chapter 7).

## **2.1 China's *suzhi* education reform and the discourse of *suzhi***

As we will see in later empirical chapters (Chapter 5, 6 and 7), the contemporary revival of Confucian classical education is related to China's educational reform from an examination-oriented education system (*yingshi jiaoyu*) to a quality-oriented one (*suzhi jiaoyu*) in the post-1978 era. This is one central issue among the widespread discussions about how to improve students' overall capabilities and skills, especially their moral character and innovative spirit (see, e.g., D. Lin 2017; H. Liu 2013; Y. Liu 2013; Pan 1997; Yimin Wang and Ross 2013; J. Wu 2012 & 2016a & 2016b; Yang 1995). It is worthwhile to note that similar reform of educational systems since the 1990s has also extended to many other East Asian societies, such as Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan etc. All these reforms, as Yasemin Soysal (2015a) has argued, have stressed "individual agency and capabilities, individual self-development, and reflective and critical thinking" (p. 8).

The so-called *yingshi jiaoyu* in the Chinese education context refers to an educational system that emphasises preparing for standardised examinations, seeking high scores and enrolment rate, and the approach of learning by rote (see Dello-Iacovo 2009; Hansen 2015; Lou 2011; Yi 2011b; Zhu et al. 2006). China's *yingshi jiaoyu* has a long history that goes back to the Sui Dynasty (581-618) when the *keju* examination system allowed the state to introduce examinations as a means of selecting government officials (Kipnis 2011a: 121-4; see also X. Lin and Ghail 2017). While the imperial examination system was abolished in 1905, there is still "substantial residue even today of a system of learning by rote" (Postiglione 2011: 81). This is reflected in today's disputes surrounding the stereotype of the "Chinese learner" characterised by a lack of critical thinking, an inadequacy of learner autonomy, and reliance on rote memorisation (see Clark and Gieve 2006; Grimshaw 2007; Jin and Cortazzi 2006; D. A. Watkins and Biggs 1996 & 2001). Today, many scholars in China argue that

*yingshi jiaoyu* has a detrimental impact on students because it only focuses on intellectual quality (*zhiyu*) and neglects other attributes, such as the moral, the physical and the aesthetic (B. Liu 1995; Pan 1997; Ping et al. 2004; Yi 2011b). Moreover, *yingshi jiaoyu* has also been widely criticised for mounting academic pressure, suppressing students' creativity and originality, ignoring their practical capabilities, and discriminating against those who cannot achieve high scores in examinations (see Dello-Iacovo 2009; K. Han 2000; J. Wu 2012 & 2016a; Yang 1995; Y. Zhao 2014).

As an antidote to *yingshi jiaoyu*, the term *suzhi jiaoyu* (education for quality) was coined by Chinese intellectuals, suggesting that "students who focus solely on passing examinations in fact become uncreative, not well-rounded, 'low quality' adults" (Kipnis 2001: 11). The word *suzhi*, literally translated as "quality," refers to "the innate and nurtured physical, intellectual and ideological characteristics of a person" (Murphy 2004: 2). According to Qinghong Lin (2009), embedded in the idea of *suzhi* is that "the object described by *suzhi* is 'correctable' or 'improvable'" (p. 289), implying that qualities of human essence (*ren benzhi*) have the potential for future development and enhancement (p. 290). Thus the notion of *suzhi* suggests essential human qualities are something to be civilised, (re)shaped or transformed to make a human being human (Ibid).

The term *suzhi jiaoyu* first appeared in Chinese educational journals in the 1980s, but throughout the 1990s was widely used among educators and officials and went beyond the confines of formal education to embrace various kinds of educational practices intended to raise children's "qualities" (Woronov 2009). In 1993, the *Outline for the Reform and Development of China's Education (Zhongguo jiaoyu gaige he fazhan gangyao)*, issued by the CCP Central Committee and State Council, clearly stated that primary and secondary schools should shift track from "examination-oriented education" to the comprehensive improvement of citizens' intellectual, personal and emotional qualities. In 1999, the Ministry of Education codified a formal policy of education for quality, the *Decision on Deepening the Education Reform and Promoting Quality Education (Guanyu shenhua jiaoyu gaige quanmian tuijin suzhi jiaoyu de jueding)*. This 1999 Action Plan articulated the aim of cultivating all-round talents who develop five major qualities: *de* (moral), *zhi* (intellectual), *ti* (physical), *mei* (aesthetic) and *lao*

(manual dexterity) (Yi 2011b). In line with the promotion of *suzhi jiaoyu*, the Ministry of Education of China introduced the New Curriculum Reform (NCR) in June 2001, first piloting in several selected schools and then in all schools nationwide in 2007 (S. Guo and Guo 2016a: 4). The basic reform trend of NCR is to change the teacher-centred pedagogy into a student-centred one (Lou 2011; J. Wu 2016a), and to enhance students' comprehensive abilities of innovative and critical thinking, and of autonomous, active, participant and cooperative learning (see Carney 2008; Guan and Meng 2007; Tan and Reyes 2016; Yin and Lee 2012).

However, the actual effects of the *suzhi jiaoyu* national project have been widely questioned (Kipnis 2011a & 2011b; D. Lin 2017; Lou 2011; S. Guo and Guo 2016b). As Dello-Iacovo (2009) pointed out, one of the most perplexing aspects of the *suzhi jiaoyu* policy is the apparent widespread support for *suzhi jiaoyu* ideals in theory coupled with widespread resistance in practice (p. 244; see also Hansen 2015). The *suzhi jiaoyu* proves to be powerless in practice because it is a contradictory regime that produces two opposing discourses (Kipnis 2011b): one is the *neoliberal* discourse that aims to remake schoolchildren as autonomous subjects/citizens “who will be entrepreneurial, democratic, and law-abiding, and take responsibility for their own health and welfare,” while the other is the *authoritarian* discourse that desires subjects to “obey the whims and dictates of a sovereign, in this case the CCP” (p. 291). Likewise, Woronov (2009) also revealed that while creativity, initiative and entrepreneurialism are espoused as “qualities,” they must be controlled and managed by state agents (p. 585). Consequently, the growing disappointment in the ineffectiveness of *suzhi jiaoyu* has caused the decline of its popularity from 2000 onwards (D. Lin 2017).

Interestingly, it was at the time when the educational reform from *yingshi jiaoyu* to *suzhi jiaoyu* was encountered with most criticism that Confucian classical education began to emerge. The advocates of Confucian education creatively used the discourse of *suzhi* and *suzhi jiaoyu* to legitimate the significance of memorising Confucian classics in enhancing children's moral qualities (see Caigui Wang 2009b & 2014a). There are two differences worth noting between Confucian education and *suzhi* education, as we shall see in Chapters 5, 6 and 7. First, Confucian classical education primarily focuses on

cultivating students' moral qualities, which differs from the emphasis on creativity and innovation in the *suzhi jiaoyu* project. Second, contemporary Confucian education recalls and affirms a memorisation-based pedagogy but rejects the examination-oriented approach—an approach the ideology of the *suzhi jiaoyu* program is designed to dismantle.

However, there have been few empirical studies on Confucian education in contemporary China. Among the limited relevant works, the ethnography-style studies of Billioud and Thoraval about the Confucian revival in today's China deserve attention (see Billioud 2007 & 2010 & 2011; Billioud and Thoraval 2007 & 2008 & 2009 & 2015). They address three dimensions—education, religion, and teaching of rites, to illuminate the main orientations of the new “popular Confucianism” (*minjian ruxue*)<sup>12</sup> since the 2000s in mainland China. Particularly, on the part of Confucian education, they propose a retrospective outlook of Confucian education during the twentieth century, map out the new institutionalisation of Confucian education, and figure out a prevailing feature of anti-intellectualism in such a revival (see Billioud and Thoraval 2015: Chapters 1, 2 and 3). Their studies showcase the overall picture of different fields of rejuvenated Confucianism since the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and so are not merely confined to Confucian education. Therefore they are lacking in sufficient details regarding the teaching practices in classical schools and their empirical investigations have not paid enough attention to the experiences and voices of students, teachers and parents involved in Confucian schools. In this sense, this doctoral research can make a contribution by providing an ethnographic analysis of the heterogeneity of the pedagogic practices and the contradiction of the making of Confucian-inspired moral subjects in the domain of Confucian education.

To illuminate the complicated relationship between the Confucian classical

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<sup>12</sup> The so-called “popular Confucianism” is the concept used by Billioud and Thoraval (2015) to describe the Confucian revival that has happened in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. According to the two authors, the term indicates “the Confucianism in *minjian*” where *minjian* has two meanings—one designates “nonofficial activities carried on outside the party-state apparatus,” while the other is “in reference to ordinary people” (p. 8).

education and the ideology of *suzhi jiaoyu*, it is necessary to place the national project within a broader socio-political context. Specifically, *suzhi jiaoyu* should be viewed as an expansion “of the prominence of the general trajectory of *suzhi* discourse” (Q. Lin 2009: 290). *Suzhi* discourse has pervaded a wide spectrum of social life, for instance, parenting practices (J. Huang and Prochner 2003; C. Li et al. 2017; Naftali 2010a & 2010b & 2014 & 2016), urban youth culture (F. Liu 2008 & 2009 & 2010), and migrant workers in the neoliberal market economy (Kipnis 1995 & 2007 & 2008; H. Huang 2016; Jacka 2009; Lan 2014; Murphy 2004 & 2008; Woronov 2004; H. Yan 2003; Yi 2011b). In particular, *suzhi* discourse has been used by middle-class families to enhance their civilities (Crabb 2010; T. L. Liu and Liu 2010; Rocca 2015), allowing them “to be distinguished from the other social groups by imposing norms on the other classes” (Rocca 2017: 124-5).

As Kipnis has argued (2006 & 2007), amongst the three structuring circumstances to contextualise *suzhi* discourse in the post-Mao era, one significant factor is the Confucian tradition of cultivation (*jiaohua*),<sup>13</sup> which “included physical, musical, ritual, intellectual and moral training” (Kipnis 2006: 307). The concept of *jiaohua* in the Confucian tradition is made up of two interrelated notions: to realise the transformation of individuals (*hua*) through education (*jiao*) (Billioud 2011: 286; Billioud and Thoraval 2015: 13). This coincides with the idea of *suzhi* that implies human essence has the potential to be improved, transformed, and civilised (Q. Lin 2009: 290). In this regard we can draw on what Qinghong Lin (2009) has said:

Being a worthwhile citizen in post-Mao China [...] entails the cultivation of oneself to become a particular type of individual. A citizen is not simply someone who possesses inalienable rights but someone who, through education and practice, can learn to possess certain qualities that are beneficial to society. (p. 298)

Furthermore, according to Lin (2009), one resource of citizen transformation in post-Mao China is related to Confucian political thought, which can be described as “the unity of politics, education and transformation”

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<sup>13</sup> The other two factors are the authoritarian linguistic environment of the PRC and the reform-era birth control and education policies. See Kipnis 2006.

(*zhengjiao heyi*) (p. 299). Confucianism presumes that the human essence is not fixed in nature but instead individuals can be educated by Confucian pedagogy and achieve self-transformation through embodying civilities and virtues (X. Chen 2012 & 2014 & 2015; Hwang 2013; Ivanhoe 2000; S. Kim 2009). Also, Confucianism argues for “inner sageliness and outer kingliness” (*neisheng waiwang*) (Angle 2012; Canglong Wang 2015b; D. Lin 2017), which means the individual moral enhancement inside may promote the benefits of the political community outside. This argument is in line with the logic of *suzhi* discourse that assumes the compatibility of personal *suzhi* and collective interests.

To conclude this section, *suzhi* discourse acts as a broader context where both China’s educational reform towards *suzhi* education and the revival of Confucian education are embedded. It suggests a thread to link another two theories this research draws on, the individualisation thesis and the conceptual terms of governmentality and subjectification. First, among various forms of *suzhi* discourse, the one involving “moral quality” is of salience, in particular in Confucian education (as we will see in empirical Chapters 5, 6 and 7). This is against the background of broader social transformation and moral shift in today’s China, and this transitional situation is being shaped profoundly by the dynamics of individualisation. Following this, the next Section 2.2 will review the literature on the individualisation thesis. Second, *suzhi* discourse has played a central role in formulating the dynamics of governmentality and subjectification in China (D. Lin 2017). In Section 2.3, I will sort through the studies on governmentality and subjectification, first to introduce Foucault’s terminologies and then to focus on arguments in relation to the context of China.

## **2.2 Individualisation and Confucian education**

The individualisation thesis serves as the essential part of the theoretical framework for the present thesis. Specifically, in this doctoral research, I discuss the parental choice of a private Confucian-style classical school, the individualised manner of teaching practices based on memorisation, and the educational planning of parents and students. I first describe the primary arguments and debates about the individualisation thesis and their relevance to

China, and then touch on two particular aspects resulting from the dynamic of individualisation: (1) privatisation of the Chinese education system and (2) moral shift in contemporary China.

### ***2.2.1 Individualisation thesis, the Chinese path, and critiques***

Although the term “individualisation” can be found in various sociological works including Marx, Simmel and Parsons (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: xxi), the thesis of individualisation is more recent, developed most systematically by Ulrich Beck (see Beck 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Beck and Williams 2004) but also by Zygmunt Bauman (2001 & 2002) and Anthony Giddens (see Beck et al. 1997; Giddens 1991). While these theorists vary in some aspects, including how they understand individual biography (Howard 2007c), what they have in common constitute the general definition of individualisation theory (Dawson 2012: 306). Beck’s triple definition (1992) is one way in to explaining the basis of individualisation thesis:

[D]isembedding, *removal* from historically prescribed social forms and commitments in the sense of traditional contexts of dominance and support (the “liberating dimension”); the *loss of traditional security* with respect to practical knowledge, faith and guiding norms (the “disenchantment dimension”); and – here the meaning of the word is virtually turned into its opposite – re-embedding, a *new type of social commitment* (the “control” or “reintegration dimension”). (p. 128; italics in original)

The individualisation thesis implies a crucial transition from the first modernity to the second or late or reflexive modernity in Western European societies (Beck 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Beck et al. 1997; Giddens 1991). In the first modernity period, individual identity was a “given” defined by “traditional” pre-ascribed values and nationally-bounded categories (see, e.g., Atkinson 2007; Bauman 2000; Dawson 2012; Y. Yan 2009b & 2010). But all the “traditional” assumptions and categories, for instance class and social status, gender roles, family and neighbourhood, are becoming increasingly fragile and disintegrated in the reflexive phase of modernity owing to the dynamism of individualisation (Beck 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Beck et al. 2003; Beck et al. 1997; Beck and Lau 2005). As a result of individualisation (Dawson

2012: 313), individuals have access to a proliferation of life choices and individual agency (Beck and Williams 2004: 24), gain “a self-actualising individualism of personal discovery” (Burgess 2018: 86), and become “what we make of ourselves” (Giddens 1991: 75). Correspondingly, the devalued “traditional” concepts such as family and marriage, social class, politics and religion (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 202-13), turn into “zombie categories”—ideas that are sociologically alive but the realities to which they correspond are dead (Beck and Williams 2004: 51-2).

In addition to the disembodiedness character of individualisation, “disenchantment” is another aspect referring to the prevailing risks and uncertainties (Beck 1992: 128; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). Being “deprived of a ready-made set of assumptions and norms,” the individualised self experiences more intense pressure “than ever before, rooted in greater socio-economic insecurity,” notwithstanding he/she has to “confront the uncertainty more alone than in the past” (Burgess 2018: 93). Consequently, looking for means of “re-embedding,” which is the third dimension of individualisation, becomes necessary and two approaches are mentioned in the Western context: (1) to re-impose old social controls and constraints on individuals, for instance the state, religiosity, nationalism and economic measures (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 17) and (2) to create new social categories and commitments in civil society for retrieving the sense of security and safety, for example more emphasis on aspirations of the individualised individual (Ibid: 161).

Some researchers argue that individualisation as a social process is a global trend (Beck and Grande 2010; Beck and Williams 2004), China included (Burgess 2018; Y. Yan 2009b & 2010). Nevertheless, the individualisation thesis, when it was initially proposed, was sociologically defined as having close connections with the late/second modern conditions of Western European societies, such as cultural democracy, the welfare state, and classic individualism (Bauman 2001; Beck 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Beck et al. 1997; Beck and Williams 2004; Giddens 1991). A new convention, however, has been forming in sociological studies of modern China, applying the individualisation thesis in discussion of social consequences of the neoliberal market



transformation since the late 1970s (see Hansen 2015; Hansen and Svarverud 2010; Kipnis 2012; Y. Yan 2009b & 2010 & 2011 & 2012; Ong and Zhang 2008). This is manifested in such aspects as the institutional untying of the labour market (Barbalet 2016; Q. Gong and Dobinson 2017), the privatisation of education systems (S. Guo and Guo 2016a; Koinzer et al. 2017), the greater choice for individual agents (Hansen and Pang 2008; M. Wu 2013), the intensification of citizenship rights consciousness (Z. Guo and Guo 2015; Janoski 2015; Naftali 2014), the shaping of public/private boundaries (Delman and Yin 2008; Naftali 2010a), sexual freedom and more individual-oriented family life (Burgess 2018; Li and Jankiowiak 2014; Li and Lamb 2015; Qi 2016a; Zang 2011), and the making of the liberal subject and individual self (Hanser 2001; F. Liu 2010; Ong and Zhang 2008).

However, there have been critiques of the individualisation thesis in current scholarly literature, both in general and specific to China. One general controversy lies in whether or not the “zombified categories” would be completely abandoned and torn up through the individualisation (e.g. Atkinson 2007; Burgess 2018; Dawson 2012; Howard 2007a). As Howard (2007b: 20) pointed out, debates about inequality surrounding the individualisation thesis can be summarised as “whether or not traditional patterns of stratification have been erased by the rise of reflexivity.” Many researchers believe the significance of “traditional” social categories will continue, such as social class (Anderson et al. 2006; Atkinson 2007; Barbalet 2016; Dawson 2012), family relations (Burgess 2018; Crabb 2010; Hansen and Pang 2008), religiosity (Pollack and Pickel 2007), standardised life course within the nation-state boundary (De Beer 2007; Elchardus and Smits 2006), job-seeking model (Fevre 2007) and political participation (Anderson et al. 2006; Gaiser et al. 2010). Dawson (2012) classified the proponents who hold the above stance against individualisation thesis as *Modernists* who are apt to stress “the lack of originality within individualisation claims” (p. 308), and who criticise individualisation theory because it merely “produces the simplistic presuppositions about individualistic actions and abstract collective order” (Alexander 1996: 135). Another stance that challenges the individualisation thesis, suggested by Dawson (2012), argues that not only do “zombie categories” determine inequalities but also identification still comes

about following these categories (p. 311).

Similarly, there remains scepticism about whether China is really experiencing the process of individualisation. As Barbalet (2016) argued, the factors used to evidence Chinese individualisation, such as family obligation and rights awareness, are either ambiguous or counter-indicators (p.9). Likewise, Qi (2016a) emphasises the stubbornness of family bonds and commitments even in the reform era of marketisation, arguing that one drawback of applying the individualisation thesis to the Chinese context is the failure of addressing how filial obligation is reinterpreted and renegotiated (Qi 2016b). Moreover, lineage practices and kinship connections play an essential role in promoting the small and medium private businesses (see Faure 2006; Yi-min Lin 2010: 78; Peng 2004). We can easily find family loyalty in migrant workers' everyday experiences (Goodburn 2016; Huang and Zhan 2008; Murphy 2008; Xiong 2015). Also, the *guanxi* (relations) networks serve as a significant intervening mechanism for individuals' employment and entrepreneurial activities (Bian and Huang 2009; Stockman 2000: 85-90). And social class, the category presupposed to be zombified in the individualisation thesis, continues to play an essential part in reproducing new hierarchies in various aspects of today's China, including education, employment, migration, lifestyles and discourses (Goodman 2016; He Li 2006; T. L. Liu and Liu 2010; Rocca 2015 & 2017). To conclude, critics suggest that rather than claiming Chinese individuals are dis-embedding from the social categories of "family, kinship, and state institutions" (Y. Yan 2010: 505), it would be more fruitful to understand the Chinese social transformation as "changes in the ways in which individuals relate to others in the arrangements of the institutions and organisation which provide their social existence, including family, kinship, gender and class" (Barbalet 2016: 11).

While it is too early to judge if the "traditional" categories have become "zombie categories" in China, as Barbalet suggests, it might be unwise to deny they have been increasingly "eroded" or "loosened" in Chinese society by the profound processes of individualisation (see also Burgess 2018; Hansen 2015; Hansen and Pang 2008; Hansen and Svarverud 2010). The crux of the matter lies in the distinctiveness and particularity of the Chinese path to individualisation (Y. Yan 2009b & 2010). The Chinese case and other East Asian societies are

undergoing “compressed modernisation” (Chang 1999 & 2010; see also Beck and Grande 2010), meaning that China for instance, according to Yunxiang Yan (2008: 9 & 2010: 510), “simultaneously demonstrates pre-modern, modern, and late-modern conditions and the Chinese individual must deal with all of these conditions simultaneously.” Thus we can interpret Chinese individualisation as a specific strategy taken by the socialist state to pursue modernity in complicated circumstances (Y. Yan 2009b: 291). In this sense, Yan argued that Chinese individuals, while increasingly demonstrating independence and self-determinacy, have to simultaneously “take more responsibility and proactive actions for the sake of achieving the wealth and power of the nation-state, namely, the modernisation of country” (Y. Yan 2010: 509).

Yunxiang Yan (2009b: 289 & 2010: 509) coined the conception “party-state-managed individualisation” to represent the complexity of contemporary China. This term has three basic implications: (1) the socialist party-state acts as the initiator of the process of individualisation and the manager of the interplay among various players (individuals, society, market, and global capitalism) (Y. Yan 2010: 509); (2) “the individual remains a means to the end of modernisation,” meaning the smaller individual self must be subordinate to the bigger, collective and national entity (Ibid); and (3) “the disjunction between the public and private spheres,” which means “the individual arises mainly in the sphere of private life” but gains “only limited space and rights in public life” (Y. Yan 2008: 6). “Party-state-managed individualisation” reveals that it is the change of the individual-state relationship rather than the individual-society that serves as the central axis of Chinese individualisation (Y. Yan 2009b & 2010).

The position of Yunxiang Yan on Chinese individualisation continues in another similar concept proposed by Mette Halskov Hansen (2015: 174-85), “authoritarian individualisation.” As Hansen argued, it is through authoritarian individualisation that the state “promotes the rise of the individual in some spheres while holding it back to others, forcing the individual to experiment with appropriate means to simultaneously make a ‘life of one’s own’ and adhere to political authorities” (Ibid: 16). Different from Yunxiang Yan’s preference to the institutionalised side of China’s party-state-managed individualisation (though

it does not mean he has no attention to the subjective side), this conception emphasises the subjective domain of (re)making Chinese individuals. It reveals the hybridity in creating neosocialist citizens (Pieke 2009), whose private self-interest, self-reliance, self-improvement, and self-responsibility are different from but co-exist with the public building of political loyalty and “acceptance of the party’s monopoly on truth” (Hansen 2015: 182).

To conclude this section, the two conceptions theoretically inform the present thesis. The more nuanced accounts offered by them do reflect the complexity of contemporary China and as such offer useful framing for thinking about key social practices, including Confucian education, the centre of my research.

### ***2.2.2 Privatisation of the Chinese education system, school choice, and urban middle-class families***

This section goes beyond the review of the individualisation thesis and its application to China to discuss individualisation in the context of education in general and then in relation to China. The profound dynamics of institutional individualisation have served to promote the privatisation of educational systems in the global context. The privatisation of education can be defined as a state-sponsored institutional “untying” change where, as Yunxiang Yan (2010) argues, the state retreats from the monopoly of all educational affairs but “force[s] individuals to shoulder more responsibility, to more actively engage in market-based competition, and to assume more risks and to become more reflexive” (p. 499). Some researchers have argued that the privatisation of education has become a global phenomenon over the last two decades (see Ball 2009; Burch 2009; Davies and Bansel 2007; Dýrfjörð and Magnúsdóttir 2016; Forsey et al. 2008; Koinzer et al. 2017; S. Guo and Guo 2016a; Tan and Reyes 2016; Verger et al. 2017). One of the most immediate consequences of this is the boom in parents’ choices of private schools (see Ben-porath 2012; Egalite and Wolf 2016; Forsey 2015; Kosunen and Carrasco 2016; Rhinesmith 2017).

There have been constant controversies about parental choice of school based on two dimensions—*freedom* versus *equality*—in existing literature about

both Western and Chinese societies. In Western societies, from the perspective of educational *freedom*, it is argued that the expansion of parental choice of private schools contributes to reducing state intervention, improving the overall level of education (Ball 1993; Cucchiara and Horvat 2014), promoting students' academic performance (Robert 2010), and raising parents' satisfaction with schooling (Kosunen 2014; Kosunen and Carrasco 2016; Rhinesmith 2017).

A similar situation happens in the Chinese context, although with noticeable distinctions. The privatisation of the Chinese education system has opened up space for the entry of for-profit institutions in the education field and extended the freedom and opportunities for parental schooling choices (see Koinzer et al. 2017; Y. Yan 2009b & 2010). The rapid growth of educational opportunities in China follows China's unprecedented transition to the market economy in the post-1978 era (S. Guo and Guo 2016a: 1) and is inseparable from the increasing demand for labour (Postiglione 2011: 83). Privatisation, being the core of Chinese educational reform in Post-Mao China (L. Yan 2007), is reflected explicitly in the state-sponsored educational retrenchment, which fundamentally changes the nature, value and formation of education "from a public good to a private one" (pp. 14-20). In addition to parents' multiplied school choices for the most desirable education for their child (Crabb 2010; Koinzer et al. 2017: 2; L. Yan 2007; Xiong 2015), there are other changes associated with the privatisation of the Chinese education system. For example, curriculum reform to foster creativity and innovation skills for students to meet global competition (Law 2016; Ross and Wang 2013; Tan and Reyes 2016; Y. Wang and Ross 2010; J. Wu 2016b); the emerging private tutoring market in urban areas (S. Guo 2016; Y. Guo 2016; Y. Wang and Chan 2016; W. Zhang and Bray 2016); and the market-orientation of higher education (L. Bai 2016; Y. Lu and Zong 2016; Postiglione 2011; Shan and Guo 2016; H. Wang 2013; F. Yan et al. 2016; Lei Zhang et al. 2016).

However, there have been evident educational *inequalities* among social classes as a result of the proliferation of school choices. The privatisation of schooling systems in the West has exacerbated inequalities with families from privileged class backgrounds having more resources and capital to choose desirable schools than lower class families (see Angus 2015; Ball 1993 & 2009;

Ben-porath 2012; Carlson and Hans 2017). Similarly, many studies demonstrate that the market-based expansion of school choices in China, especially opportunities for elite schools or *key schools*, benefits primarily urban middle-class families,<sup>14</sup> whereas working-class and rural families remain disadvantaged (see, e.g., Crabb 2010; Kim et al. 2017; F. Liu 2008; Sheng 2012; X. Wu 2008 & 2012 & 2013). The privatisation of the education system reinforces the superior status of urban middle-class families who have their children enter the key schools by, for example, “buying houses near preferred schools, paying choice fees or co-founding fees, giving donations” (X. Wu 2008). The privileged class parents also allow their children either to attend chargeable private tutoring classes or to spend their spare time having various skills training sessions, through which their children can develop overall *suzhi*/qualities and increase the chances of winning in the education competition against pupils in state schools (Y. Wang and Chan 2016; X. Wu 2008 & 2012; W. Zhang and Bray 2016). The urban middle class becomes the new “winner” in the education competition, whereas the working-class families are disadvantaged (X. Wu 2012: 363). In spite of this, the strong desire for education is commonly shared by both working-class and middle-class parents (Hong and Zhao 2014; Kipnis 2011a; Y. C. Wang 2014).

Narrow the lens to Confucian education, which the doctoral thesis addresses. Many Confucian-style classical schools, including the one at the centre of this thesis, are private educational institutions and offer a curriculum different from

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<sup>14</sup> Although the middle class in China has various definitions in contemporary sociological studies (Y. Chen 2006; Hong and Zhao 2014; L. Li and Li 2007; Q. Li and Wang 2017; X. Liu 2007; L. Sun 2009; G. Zhu 2007; Zhou 2005), there is still no authoritative definition (Rocca 2017: 234; see also Goodman 2016). In general, there are two common criteria that describe what middle class is in China: the objective criteria, “such as education, income, occupation and level of consumption,” and the subjective criteria, “such as lifestyle, manners, political ideas and identification with a social figure” (Rocca 2017: 3; see also J. Liu and Li 2005; T. L. Liu and Liu 2010). In the post-1978 reform era, the middle class has increased becoming “a politically and economically stabilising force,” “promoters of advanced culture” and “represent moderation and rationality” (X. Lu 2006: 21-23; see also Yingjie Guo 2012; He Li 2006).

the state-stipulated programme. Private Confucian schools usually charge high tuition fees and provide parents and their children with additional choices beyond the compulsory school system. As Billioud and Thoraval (2007 & 2015: 35) pointed out, while some of *sishu* (Confucian-inspired private schools) struggle for independence from, or indeed struggle against rivalry from the compulsory school system, others have to (re)assert themselves within the very space of the current state education institution.

The parental choice of Confucian schools has been largely neglected in current studies on school choice specifically in the context of China (for relevant works see Billioud and Thoraval 2015, as explained in Section 2.1). There has remained an inadequate understanding of the complexity of how parents choose Confucian schools and how this links to social class inequalities in Chinese society (though see, e.g., Billioud 2007 & 2010 & 2011; Billioud and Thoraval 2007 & 2008 & 2009 & 2015; Rocca 2017; E. Tan 2003; Y. C. Wang 2014). As Billioud and Thoraval (2015) indicated, the urban middle-class elites have played a crucial role in promoting the re-emergence of Confucian education/culture in contemporary China, which consists of “enterprises able to mobilise both economic resources of consumer society and official support that, in the end, serve the emergence of a new middle class” (pp. 300-1). The elite-based dynamic implies that contemporary Confucian education/culture has been intentionally engineered by (political, economic and intellectual) elites to “shape model citizens and, beyond, to reproduce new elites” (p. 301). This is echoed by Rocca (2015 & 2017), who believes that the urban middle-class people are actively invoking Confucian symbols and representations to improve their qualities (*suzhi*) and civilities (*wenming*) and create new lifestyles. There has, however, been a lack of empirical research on the relationship between urban middle-class families and contemporary Confucian classical education in practice. The present research aims to contribute to analysing the discourses and practices of parents (mostly from urban middle-class families) choosing Confucian schooling.

### ***2.2.3 Moral shift and revival of Confucian education***

To explore in this thesis either specifically middle-class parents' choice of Confucian classical education or broadly the Confucian (education) revival, it is necessary to discuss the changes in the moral landscape of contemporary China (Billioud and Thoraval 2015: 10-11). As a reflection of the individualisation of Chinese society, post-Mao China has undergone a tremendous shift in morality, which can be summarised by the following passage from Yunxiang Yan (2011):

The ethical shift from a collective system of responsibility and self-sacrifice to an individualistic system of rights and development is the key to better understand the changing moral landscape in post-Mao China. (p. 72)

This highlighting of individualistic values alongside the decline of socialist-collective morality has been argued in many studies (see Gong and Dobinson 2017; W. Lee and Ho 2005; M. Li 2011; P. Li et al. 2004; F. Liu 2008 & 2009 & 2010; Naftali 2010a & 2014; Soysal 2015a & 2015b). In line with Borge Bakken (2000), present-day Chinese moral education “lies between disintegrating selfishness and integrating sacrifice” (p. 109). The moral change indicates that the Chinese individual is going through a dramatic shift in the subjective domain, namely, “a re-formation of the self and a search for individual identity” (Y. Yan 2010: 504).

The concept “divided self,” proposed by Arthur Kleinman (2011), corresponds to the contradictions of Chinese individualisation mentioned above and helps understand the complexities of the Chinese self. This is a term to describe the ambivalence of how contemporary Chinese individuals deal with the power of the socialist state. It suggests that “personal ‘transcripts’ in China are not only or primarily about acts of resistance; they are also acts of accommodation and collaboration that enable ordinary people to negotiate China’s social reality in such a way as to open or protect the individual’s space while getting on with life lived in an authoritarian society” (p. 231). As this concept suggests, the dividing line even within the self is blurred “between what is deeply personal and what is an intrusion of the authoritarian state into speech and behaviour” (p. 232). In this sense, it echoes the making of governable neosocialist subjects in post-Mao China that I will review in section 2.3. The



individual self of today's China may be the product of being governed by the socialist party-state through internalising the state's power by self-discipline and self-censorship (p. 231; see also Hansen 2015: 172-3; Y. Yan 2010: 504). This term, the divided self, is relevant to this doctoral thesis by illuminating varieties of subjectivity in the context of China. The present research talks about how actors (parents, students and teachers) involved in Confucian education form subjectivity and what strategies they take to deal with the power of the socialist party-state, which has increasingly shown an appreciative attitude towards Confucianism (see D. Lin 2017; Hammond and Richey 2015; X. Wang 2017).

The emerging individual-based values in post-Mao China do not completely deviate from the traditional dual framework for understanding Chinese social relations of *dawo* (great self) and *xiaowo* (small self). In this conceptual duality, the *xiaowo* or the individual is sacrificed for the sake of the *dawo* or the collective; and any overexpression of the individual *xiaowo* is seen as deviant, since it may damage the benefits of the collective *dawo* (see Cao 2009; Cheng and Bunnin 2008; Fei 1992; Z. Guo and Guo 2015; Hsu 1985; Moore 2005; Pye 1991; Canglong Wang 2014; Y. Yan 2009b & 2010). Nevertheless, it has to be acknowledged that contemporary China has increasingly legitimated and emphasised the significance of privacy, emotionality, desire, the pursuit of individual success, and the spirit of entrepreneurship (see L. Hoffman 2006 & 2010; Lamont and Molnár 2002; Rofel 2007; Rose 1989 & 2007). Thus the individual small self is progressively highlighted in the profound process of individualisation as an integral part of producing neosocialist individuals (Hansen 2015; Ong 2006; Pieke 2009).

Further, the prominence of individualistic morality has engendered some negative consequences, the most obvious one being the proliferation of selfish individualism (see Billioud and Thoraval 2007 & 2015; Y. Yan 2009a & 2009b & 2010). This is on the one hand related to the rise of consumerism, the highlighting of individual choice, freedom and desire, the collapse of collective norms, and the subsequent common perception of "moral crisis" or "moral vacuum" in the market-based transitions (Gong and Dobinson 2017: 9). But on the other hand, as Yunxian Yan (2009) has pointed out, post-Mao China's individualisation embraces an incomplete or unbalanced understanding of

individualism, even referring to it as utilitarian individualism or simply selfishness (p. 289). This has led to the rise of the “uncivil individual” (Y. Yan 2003: 226; see also Y. Yan 2009a), not only making “the individual egotistic and uncivil,” but also amplifying “the negative aspects of individualisation, such as the relentless individual competition and the decline of social trust” (Y. Yan 2009b: 289). Although there are still controversies over whether China has experienced a moral crisis in seeking modernity (see Hansen 2015; Kipnis 2015), many writers insist that the moral landscape is shaped by the self-centred and egoistic values of negative individualism during the period of rapid market-based transitions (see Ci 2014; Hansen 2013; Hansen and Pang 2008; Kleinman 2011; H. Lee 2014; Maosen Li 2011).

This is the social context of the Confucian (education) resurgence (see also Foster 2015; Gong and Dobinson 2017; Hammond and Richey 2015: 4; R. Moore 2015; Richey 2015).<sup>15</sup> While recognising the risk of oversimplification, the following passage helps clarify the relationship between Confucian revival and moral imbalance in the process of individualisation of Chinese society:

[Since the early 2000s,] popular Confucianism has developed in a context often described—both in official discourses and within the population—as a time of moral crisis driven by egoism and its manifestations: the cult of money, selfishness at the expense of justice, neglect of the common good and development of private desires, and so on. [...] However, these destructive tendencies have also been somewhat counterbalanced by a reverse trend focusing on the promotion of “things collective.” [...] People and projects associated with Confucianism are also part of this countercurrent. (Billioud and Thoraval 2015: 11)

There has been little empirical research on Confucianism particularly as an educational practice in current literature (though see Billioud and Thoraval 2015, as explained in Section 2.1). Also, there shows ambiguous understandings of the relationship between Confucian morality and the individualisation of Chinese society. On the one hand, as mentioned above, Confucianism is believed by some researchers to remedy the negativity of selfish individualism and is considered

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<sup>15</sup> For specific features of the revival of Confucianism in modern China, please refer to Billioud and Thoraval 2007 & 2015: 1-16; Hammond and Richey 2015: 1-9.

as an alternative base of moral values (see Hammond and Richey 2015). On the other hand, in the existing discussions on Chinese individualisation, Confucianism is often uncritically presumed to represent “authoritarian” and “collective” values, codes and behavioural norms, from which the Chinese individual strives to dis-embed to pursue modernity (Y. Yan 2010: 492-3).

So, the individual-oriented side of Confucianism (see Billioud and Thoraval 2015; Chaibong 2001; X. Chen 2012 & 2015; Ivanhoe 2000; J. Li 2016; C. Tan 2017; W. Tu 1984) has been largely overlooked in present literature. For example, William de Bary (1983) argued that there is “Neo-Confucian individualism” that embraces the notions of *ziren* (“taking it upon oneself” or “bearing the responsibility oneself”) and *zide* (“getting it by or for oneself” or “learned to one’s satisfaction”) (pp. 45-6). Xunwu Chen (2014) characterised Confucian ethics as those concerned with the self, which is “about how to realise a self as fully self-conscious being-for-itself of definite character, substance, and personality” (p. 67).

It has been nascent to explore the relationship of the Confucian version of individualism with Chinese individualisation characterised by “incomplete or unbalanced understanding of individualism” (Y. Yan 2009b: 289). Given this, the present doctoral thesis, through doing an ethnographic study in a Confucian classical school to explore the practices of making the Confucian-inspired individual, may offer insight into the relationship between Confucian morality and individualisation in post-Mao China.

## **2.3 Governmentality, subjectification, and power**

This section aims to contextualise Confucian classical education, the centre of the present thesis, in relation to the academic literature on governmentality and subjectification. Governmentality, as defined by Foucault (1982), refers to “the conduct of conduct,” involving “all endeavours to shape, guide, direct the conduct of others [...] and to govern oneself” (pp. 220-21). Governmentality has an intimate relationship with another concept “subjectification” (Foucault 1983). Subjectification means “the interrelation among scientific modes of classifying people, the dividing practices of governments, and the means by which human

beings objectify and act upon themselves, that is, see and create themselves as particular types of human subjects” (Rabinow 1984, as cited in Kipnis 2011b: 289).

In earlier Section 2.1, I mentioned the connection of *suzhi* discourse (including *suzhi jiaoyu*) with the tradition of Confucian cultivation (*jiaohua*). This section will go further to discuss the association of *suzhi* discourse with governmentality and subjectification in socialist China. As some researchers have argued, *suzhi* rhetoric plays a central role in formulating contemporary Chinese governmentality. It legitimates and reproduces social and political hierarchies of all sorts by showing and anchoring the inadequacy of individual qualities, such as a lack of civility, “culture” and morality (Anagnost 2008; Hansen and Woronov 2013; Jacka 2009; Ling 2015; W. Sun 2017; Woronov 2004 & 2009; Xiong 2015; H. Yan 2008), “with those of ‘high’ *suzhi* being seen as deserving more income, power and status than those of ‘low’ *suzhi*” (Kipni 2006: 295).

The concept of governmentality is important for the present thesis not only because it relates to the Confucian tradition of cultivation and *suzhi* discourse but also because, in terms of Kipnis (2011a), the subjects of governmentality not only include the state but also teachers, parents, students—everyone. Also, the perspective of governmentality “opens up consideration of specific disciplinary techniques as well as governmental manipulations of a wider social environment” (Ibid: 5-6). The following sections address the literature review first by seeking Foucault’s interpretations of governmentality and subjectification and then situating the two concepts into the context of Chinese society.

### ***2.3.1 Conceptualisation of governmentality and subjectification***

The study of Chinese governmentality can be traced back to Foucault’s study of western liberal governmentality, where he elaborated it as “not necessarily a particular ideological or social formation” but rather “a way of doing things” or “a common set of technical mechanisms” (Collier 2005: 11; see also Kipnis 2008; Larner 2003; H. Yan 2003). Governmentality is a concept to imply “a means of understanding shifts in relations between knowledge, power and subjectivity in

the context of early modern Western societies” (Sigley 2006: 490). As Lemke (2001) indicated, governmentality has two interlinked sides—one the specific form of *representation*, “government defines a discursive field in which exercising power is ‘rationalised’”; the other, the forms of *intervention*, “a political rationality is not pure, neutral knowledge [...]; instead, it itself constitutes the intellectual processing of the reality which political technologies can then tackle” (p. 191). Governmentality or the “government of self and others” (Foucault 1988a) has the population as its object and “ask[s] the best ways to exercise power over conduct individually and en masse so as to secure the good of each and all” (Rose 1999: 23). The notion of governmentality allows for “coupling forms of knowledge, strategies of power, and technologies of the self” to achieve “a more comprehensive account of the current political and social transformations” (Lemke 2002: 54).

Moreover, governmentality is concerned with how individuals or groups constitute themselves in power relations to become governable subjects by techniques of government (Dean 1999: 17). This is what is called “subjectification” (Foucault 1983). In Dianna Taylor’s view (2011), subjectification is a two-way process: on the one hand, we constitute ourselves as subjects (we are enabled) by way of various “practices of the self”; on the other hand, we are constituted (we are constrained) in so far as the way in which we undertake these practices is shaped by the institutions, norms and values of the society (p. 173). In this sense, the governmentality of self means individuals constitute themselves as subjects in order to gain access to the truth about themselves by way of a set of practices that subordinate them to authority (see Besley 2005; Deacon 2002; Foucault 1988b & 2011; Stone 2011).

Furthermore, subjectification can be understood as a process created by the intertwined technologies of power and technologies of the self, as Foucault (2003) pointed out:

Technologies of power, which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, and objectivising of the subject [...] technologies of the self, which permits individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom,

perfection, or immortality. (p. 146)

The terms of governmentality and subjectification have been widely used by scholars in critical analysis of various forms of Western neoliberal governing practices, through which a common thread is to create self-responsible, self-caring, self-reliant, self-motivated, entrepreneurial and autonomous subjects, who are assumed to have responsibility for social risks such as disease, unemployment, poverty and education, all of which stem from the state's retreat from these areas (see Ball 2016; Ball and Olmedo 2013; Y. Cheng 2016; Davies and Bansel 2007; Joseph 2013; Kipnis 2008; Lemke 2002; Peters 2007; H. Yan 2003).

However, the governmentality and subjectification may be of complexities in the context of China particularly regarding educational practices. As Andrew Kipnis (2011b) has pointed out, it is "far from an easy task" to discern "the types of subjects that are being produced in China's classrooms," and the "subjectifying rhetoric and practices in China's classrooms" are always "a contradictory mix" (p. 289). This is relevant to this doctoral thesis, since among its primary aims is to explore what practices are used to create what type of subjects through the memorisation-based pedagogy in the Confucian school.

### **2.3.2 Power**

In addressing the making of subjects and tactics of governmentality in the Confucian schooling practices (see Chapter 6), the present thesis also involves Foucault's interpretation of power. Foucault expanded the traditional understanding of power as descending from the top of a pyramid, and reconceived it to arise "in all kinds of relationships, and can be built up from the bottom of a pyramid (or any structure)" (Lynch 2011: 13). It is "something that is always exercised and circulating" (Lilja and Vinthagen 2014: 108). He identified various modern forms of power such as "disciplinary power" and "bio-power,"<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Bio-power is the form "to foster life or disallow it to the point of death" (p. 138). As Foucault indicated, this type of power would deal "with living beings, and the mastery it would be able to exercise over them would have to be applied at the level of life itself: it was the taking charge of life, more than the threat of death" (pp. 142-3).

and the pre-modern form of “sovereign power”<sup>17</sup> (see, e.g., Ball 2013; Foucault 1979a & 1980; Harwood et al. 2014; M. Hoffman 2011; Hope 2016; Lemke 2001; Lilja and Vinthagen 2014; Lynch 2011; Peters 2007; Rabinow 1984; C. Taylor 2011; Tyler 2010). Some researchers regarded the three forms as a “triangle” of power (Dean 2010: 122), which “emerged in different historical phases of modernity, but did not replace each other” (Larsson et al. 2012: 9-10).

Of the three forms of power identified by Foucault, this doctoral thesis mostly concerns with the disciplinary power in analysis of students’ practices of memorising classics. Disciplinary power concerns individuals (Foucault 2006: 75). As Foucault (1979) argued, “[T]he chief function of disciplinary power is to ‘train’ [...] Discipline ‘makes’ individuals; it is the specific techniques of a power that regards individuals as objects and as instruments of its exercise” (p. 170). The purpose of disciplinary power is to make the individual body “more obedient as it becomes more useful” (p. 138). It exercises through several basic techniques—hierarchical observation, normalising judgment, and the examination (pp. 172-192). Disciplinary power theoretically informs the empirical findings of how students were examined, monitored and regulated in classics learning in the Confucian school.

Also, this thesis addresses the resistance of students against disciplinary practices in the Confucian school. This is another aspect where the literature on power and resistance may shed light. Foucault (1990) argued that resistance is a structural feature of power, “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (p. 95). As some researchers have argued, disciplinary power attempts to resolve the issue of resistance (Ball and Olmedo 2013; M. Hoffman 2011; Hope 2005 & 2013; Lilja et al. 2017; Pandya 2016). Andrew Hope (2013) summarises several practices of resistance used by students against surveillance

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<sup>17</sup> Sovereign power is a classical, juridico-legal form of power that appeared in the premodern era, whose focus lies in the right of subtraction (C. Taylor 2011: 42). As Foucault (1990: 136) argued, “The sovereign exercised his right of life only by exercising his right to kill, or by refraining from killing; [...] The right which was formulated as the ‘power of life and death’ was in reality the right to take life or let live.”

in schooling contexts—false conformity, avoidance, counter-surveillance and playful performance (p. 45).

### ***2.3.3 Governmentality and subjectification in Chinese context***

Governmentality and subjectification may differ in non-Western or non-liberal contexts such as China (Kipnis 2006 & 2011a; Sigley 1996 & 2006).<sup>18</sup> The following summarises two arguments about Chinese governmentality and subjectification in the socialist party-state conditions out of the existing literature. They serve to illuminate the complexity and heterogeneity of producing the Confucian individual through classics memorisation in the present research.

The first holds that post-Mao China's practices of governmentality are undergoing a "neoliberal turn" similar to that of Western societies, thus resulting in the shaping of neoliberal subjects (Harvey 2005 & 2007; Hoffman 2010; Jacka 2009; Ong 2006; W. Sun 2017; H. Yan 2003; Ong and Zhang 2008). Advocates of such an argument believe that China is creating a new neoliberal political agenda where it attempts to shape Chinese society through "the educated and informed choices of active citizens, families, and communities" (Rose 1996: 20). For example, the forming of a new middle-class (the social class with which this thesis is concerned) is actively produced by China's policies of making families and consumption desires as the "entrepreneurial subject, responsible for his/her own 'profits and losses' [...] whose identity as a rights-bearing subject is defined in terms of being a consumer" (Anagnost 2008: 515). In particular, *suzhi*, as some researchers have argued, has a central role in the Chinese neoliberal fashion of governmentality/subjectification and global capitalism. It manifests not only in legitimating the exploitation of so-called "low-quality" workers but also in masking social inequalities (Anagnost 2004; Kipnis 2007; H. Yan 2003).

In addition to the neoliberal rhetoric of governmentality and subjectification

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<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, some researchers have commented that from the perspective of governmentality both China and Western Europe are a hybridity of neoliberal and authoritarian governmentality practices (see Gong and Dobinson 2017; R. M. Taylor 2017; Lemke 2001 & 2002 & 2007 & 2012).



in the Chinese context, many researchers, however, advocate a second argument that Chinese governmentality and subjectification are characterised by mixed socialist and neoliberal rhetoric (see Gong and Dobinson 2017; Y. Huang 2008; Kipnis 2011a & 2011b; Nonini 2008; Ong 2007; Rocca 2017: 229; W. Sun 2009 & 2017; Y. Yan 2010). In the words of Sigley (2006), the governmentality practices in post-Mao China “involve a creative blending of neoliberal rationalities and revitalised forms of socialist rationalities” (p. 504). As some researchers suggest, this is the *neosocialist* rhetoric of Chinese governmentality/subjectification, which combines neoliberal capitalist economy with socialist authoritarian political system (see Hansen 2015; Pieke 2009). The key difference from the neoliberalist rhetoric is that the neosocialist one stresses the prominence of China’s party-state in doing the tactics of governmentality and making neosocialist subjects (Liew 2005; Logan and Fainstein 2008; So 2005; Y. Yan 2009b).

Thus Chinese governmentality is marked by pro-growth authoritarianism (Lai 2010); and the socialist state, which is not “retreating” but rather “regrouping” during the reform era, intervenes in the reorganisation of forces, plans and people in order to promote economic development and social reforms (Sigley 2006: 497). Moreover and paradoxically, the neoliberal rhetoric in the neosocialist governmentality even “assists an authoritarian state in its management of inequality” (W. Sun 2017: 4). In line with this, even the urban middle-class individuals who are increasingly becoming consumer-citizens (Anagnost 2008), are still in the regulation of state policies and official power (Crabb 2010; see also Goodman 2016; Naftali 2014) and hence have to simultaneously assume the national responsibility and obligation, cultivate the spirit of patriotism and obey the collective order (Brownell 2009; Cen 2008; H. Li and Tan 2017; Nie 2008; Tse 2011; Vickers 2009; Z. Zhao 2014).

The hybridity of socialist-neoliberal forms of political rationality in post-Mao China can be vividly illustrated by the aforementioned concepts of Chinese individualisation, the “party-state-managed individualisation” (Y. Yan 2009b: 289 & 2010: 509) and the “authoritarian individualisation” (Hansen 2015: 174-185). As Hansen (2015) noted, the practices of governmentality and subjectification in reform-era China aim at creating the new neosocialist

individual who, on the one hand, has a high degree of self-control and self-discipline and “is knowledgeable of his or her own rights and obligations as set within the limits of the law”, whereas, on the other hand, “respects the fact that the party-government provides the true interpretation of it” (p. 94) and “remains loyal to political authorities” (p. 172).

The profound processes of individualisation have brought new challenges to the practices of governmentality and subjectification in socialist China. The institutionalised individualisation leads to a loosening of the “traditional categories” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Beck and Williams 2004), the rise of the individual as an independent unit of action and discourse, and the enhancement of citizenship rights consciousness (Hansen and Svarverud 2010; Y. Yan 2009b & 2010). All these require the socialist state to transform the forms of governmentality in order to create new subjects. A crucial change is the subjects of governmentality are no longer limited to the state but extend to the non-state agents such as organisations and individuals (see, e.g., Foucault 1979b; Kipnis 2008; Lemke 2012; Rose et al. 2006). I follow Kipnis (2011a) by stating that the subjects of the practices of governmentality in this doctoral research involve teachers, students, parents and everyone in the Confucian schooling space. I argue that individualisation serves the fundamental driving force for the diversification of subjects in reform-era China. However, as mentioned earlier, the Chinese path to individualisation has never been out of the management and control of the state and instead serves as the means by which the socialist state pursues modernisation (Y. Yan 2009b & 2010). So the individual-state relationship still lies at the core in the case of Confucian education as addressed in the present research.

The subjective complexity of neosocialist individuals, moreover, also echoes the heterogeneity of China’s shifting moral landscape. This is reflected by the term, “patriotic professionalism,” coined by Lisa Hoffman (2006 & 2010). This concept refers to “a self-enterprising subject that is at once autonomous from state planning agencies and still tied to the nation through strategic expressions of patriotism” (Hoffman 2006: 565-6). According to this concept, choice and autonomy constitute a new significant aspect of producing Chinese individual subjects in late-socialist China (p. 550), reflecting “a sense of responsibility not

just to self-advancement but also to the nation” (Hoffman 2010: 83). While the neoliberal style of values such as individual freedom, self-determinacy and self-reliance have been circulated transnationally in global societies (Soysal 2015b), the nationalistic or authoritarian values take a prominent role in the Chinese context. Therefore, the subjectivity of the contemporary Chinese individual displays a hybrid late-socialism-cum-neoliberalism (Sigley 2004: 566), and a self-enterprising individual thus can be nationalistic as well (Y. Yan 2010: 504).

Likewise, through unpacking the heterogeneity of the discourse of *suzhi jiaoyu* (education for quality), where socialist and neoliberal rhetorics co-exist (Q. Gong and Dobinson 2017), we can also confirm the hybridity of Chinese governmentality and subjectification. *Suzhi jiaoyu* can be understood as a set of techniques of governmentality and subjectification and is constituted by the opposing neoliberal and authoritarian discourses and practices, which result in neither a coherent model of government nor a single form of subjectivity (Kipnis 2011b; see also Kipnis 2011a; Hansen and Woronov 2013; Woronov 2004 & 2009). In this sense, *suzhi jiaoyu* may be better understood “as an ever-ongoing project of meaning-making that aims to form a body of knowledge in China’s exploration of new paradigms of governance” (Yi 2011b: 330); and the new paradigms of governmentality may be an assemblage of authorities, knowledge, and techniques that homogenizes as well as individuates children (Woronov 2009: 585). Correspondingly, the practices of governmentality/subjectification children in today’s China present the contradiction between autonomy/the neoliberal and obedience/the national-collectivist (Naftali 2016). The present research will offer empirical evidence to illuminate such paradoxes in a Confucian school, where students are cultivated to become autonomous, learned individuals through the individualised pattern of classics memorisation but at the same time are subject to the collective and nationalistic goals of Confucian education.

## 2.4 Summary

The first section of this chapter described the background of Chinese education through reviewing the scholarship on both the specific national project of *suzhi jiaoyu* (education for quality) and the general trajectory of *suzhi* discourse. Also, it suggested that *suzhi* discourse is deeply rooted in the Confucian tradition of cultivation (*jiaohua*).

Following the scholarship on *suzhi* discourse, this chapter discussed another two strands of sociological scholarship that this doctoral research draws on. One is the individualisation thesis as addressed in the second section. This part provided a critical review of the individualisation thesis and its application in the Chinese context. It first offered a brief overview of the crucial elements of individualisation thesis—dis-embedding, disenchantment and re-embedding—and re-examined the controversies surrounding them; and then revealed the ambiguities of the Chinese path to individualisation.

Based on the review, this section moved to two specific aspects relevant to the present research. Firstly, the individualisation thesis provides an illuminating perspective from which to study the privatisation of the Chinese education system and the proliferation of the middle-class parents' choices of private schools. However, there has been insufficient research on the parental choice of private Confucian schools, and hence there has been a lack of understanding of how parents' desire for Confucian education is associated with the production of social class inequalities in Chinese society. Secondly, the individualisation thesis also throws light on the hybridity of China's shifting moral landscape, which constitutes one theoretical background for the present research, particularly why Chinese parents desire to regain Confucian morality through engaging with the classical education. Also, this section revealed the scholarly gap in the individual-oriented side of Confucianism that has been largely neglected in existing literature on the individualisation of Chinese society. This doctoral thesis will make a contribution by providing empirical evidence in relation to this.

The third section presented the conceptual terms of governmentality and subjectification. It first discussed Foucaultian conceptualisation of

governmentality, subjectification, and power, and then unpacked the interpretations of them in the Chinese context. This section revealed the practices of governmentality and subjectification in post-Mao China have mixed socialist and neoliberal rhetoric. The complexity of Chinese neosocialist governmentality reverberates what has been addressed in the two earlier sections, the heterogeneity of *suzhi* discourse, the ambiguity of Chinese individualisation, and the ambivalence of moral landscape.

Overall, three strands of scholarship—*suzhi* discourse, Chinese individualisation, and governmentality/subjectification, frame this chapter, and set down the theoretical foundations to understand the following empirical chapters.

The following chapter, *Setting the Scene*, will begin with a brief overview of the Confucian classical education in ancient and modern China. After having introduced the movement of “children reading classics education” in contemporary China, the rest of the chapter will illustrate the different but conflicting Confucian pedagogies in classical schooling.

## ***Chapter 3 Setting the scene: Confucian classical education and Yiqian School<sup>19</sup>***

The primary purpose of this chapter is to introduce the context of this research. Since this is an ethnographic study based on a specific Confucian classical school, it is necessary to present the general background of Confucian traditional education in China, especially in contemporary China, which can provide us with a broad perspective to review the school at the heart of this study. In the first section of this chapter, therefore, I will draw on the introduction of Confucian classical education in ancient and modern China and then focus on reviewing the movement of “children reading classics education” (*ertong dujing jiaoyu*) that has arisen in contemporary China. I will offer insight into how this education movement has appeared and developed and summarise the contents of the guiding theory, which, as proposed by Professor Caigui Wang, a principal promoter of Confucian classical education, serves as the ideological basis on which contemporary classical education depends. The second section will provide an overview of the local context—the teaching staff and students of Yiqian School and describe the high turnover of both populations. The third and final part of this chapter will first address the overall controversies in the general domain of Confucian classical education, and then summarise the specific inconsistencies of two Confucian pedagogies in Yiqian School.

### **3.1 Confucian classical education in ancient, modern and contemporary China**

#### ***3.1.1 Confucian classical education in ancient and modern China***

Confucian education dates back to 2,500 years ago to Confucius (551 BC to 479 BC), the founder of Confucian education and culture in China. The Confucian style of teaching and learning were broadly carried out in the educational institution usually called *sishu*, a Confucian-inspired form of private schooling

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<sup>19</sup> Yiqian School is the pseudonym given to the Confucian classical school which this research focuses on.

See Chapter 4 *Methodology* for more discussion about anonymity.

that focused on learning and memorising the classics. The *sishu* were widespread and constituted the main body of the education system in ancient China. In terms of the education level, *sishu* is equivalent to today's primary school and children usually attended from the age of six (X. Xiong 2000). Ancient Chinese *sishu* can be divided into three types of school (G. Jia 2002): *jiashu* (private family school), *sanguan* (private school charging tuition fees) and *yishu* (private school charging no tuition fees).<sup>20</sup> The teaching contents covered a broad range of knowledge in ancient *sishu*, including classics memorisation, literacy, day-to-day manners and courtesy, and moral cultivation (see Hao and Wang 2005; G. Jia 2002; Jiang 2011 & 2015; Tian and Yang 2005; Xiong 2000). As some researchers have argued, old Chinese *sishu* attached great importance to the individualised teaching approach and emphasised educating pupils according to their aptitude; it also paid attention to cultivate children's ability to learn independently and to give them timely guidance when necessary (see G. Jia 2002; Xiong 2000). In the long history of China, *sishu* played a key role in preserving cultural heritage, popularising knowledge, eliminating illiteracy, and cultivating talents (see Hao and Wang 2005; Jiang 2011 & 2015; Tian and Yang 2005).

However, in the late nineteenth century, Chinese intellectuals began to criticise Confucianism as an impediment to China's pursuit of national survival and state modernisation (see H. Zhang 2000; H. Wang 2000; Z. Li 2000; Y. Lin 2000; Xu 2014; Y. Yu 2012 & 2014). Against this background dramatic changes took place in Chinese education—so-called new modern schools framed by western pedagogies were established, while *sishu* was faced with the fate of either being transformed or eliminated (see, e.g., Hao and Wang 2005; G. Jia 2002; Jiang 2011 & 2015; Tian and Yang 2005). The Confucian classical education was officially deprived of legitimacy (although continued to exist) in the early 1900s with two pivotal events: (1) the abolition of the imperial

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<sup>20</sup> Specifically, *jiashu* was where affluent families engaged private teachers (who usually were intellectuals trained in accordance with Confucian classical education) to educate children at home. *Sanguan* was where teachers recruited children from neighbouring families but charged a small tuition fee, and taught Confucian classics in, for example, ancestral halls, temples, or the teacher's house. And *yishu* was where the gentry provided free education to all the school-age children in the particular clan (G. Jia 2002).

examination system (*keju zhi*) in 1905, which signified that Confucian intellectuals were denied the institutional route to upward mobility via classical education, and (2) the cancellation of classics-related curriculum in primary schools in 1912, which formally undermined the validity of Confucian education (Caigui Wang 2014a: 21-22).

While there were still a number of voices that argued for the continuation of Confucian education specifically and Confucian thinking generally (see Gong 2008), further destruction of Confucian culture and classical education resulted from the May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement in 1919, when modern Chinese intellectuals attacked Confucian thinking and attempted to replace it with the values of science and democracy (see, e.g., H. Zhang 2000; Y. Lin 2000; Xu 2014; Y. Yu 2012 & 2014). Particular impact was felt in 1920, as the government compelled primary school students to shift their readings towards writings in vernacular Chinese (*baihua wen*) and away from those in classical Chinese (*wenyan wen*) (Caigui Wang 2009a & 2014a & 2014b). In spite of this, as new modern schools were primarily concentrated in urban areas, *sishu* still existed in the large rural regions, where new schools hardly extended their influence (see Hao and Wang 2005; G. Jia 2002; Jiang 2011 & 2015; Qu and Wang 2008).

However after the socialist polity governed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was founded in 1949, the remaining Confucian-style private schools in rural areas were also eliminated (G. Jia 2002; Jiang 2011; Qin 2007; Tian and Yang 2005). From the early 1950s to the late 1970s, Confucianism was further regarded as the equivalent of backwardness and ignorance and therefore was put in opposition to the socialist state (D. Yu 2014). Consequently, the Confucian culture was utterly excluded from mainland China, although it still survived in Hong Kong, Taiwan and the United States.

### ***3.1.2 Revival of Confucian classical education in contemporary China***

Since the mid-1990s, mainland China, however, has experienced a revival of Confucianism that has taken on various forms (Billioud and Thoraval 2007 & 2015). Many scholars have argued the economic take-off in China and even the



broader East Asian area since the late 1970s is related to the revival of the spirit of Confucian ethics (see Chia 2011; Chong 2002; Dalton and Ong 2005; de Bary 1998; Englehart 2000; Park and Chesla 2007; W. Tu 1992: 330). In contrast, researchers suggest the economy and politics of the western world have plunged into chaos since the early 1980s and attribute this to the rise of a new form of Western imperialism (see Cha 2003; Ess 2006; Kim 2010; Nuyen 2002; O'Dwyer 2003; Yi 2011a). In light of this, Chinese people have begun to question the value of Western modernity, as well as to reassess the values of Confucian culture.

Being an essential part of the Confucian revival in contemporary China, Confucian educative projects whose core is classics reading (*dujing*) are linked to the increasing popularity of Chinese national studies (*guoxue*) (see Gong 2008: 1; Hammond and Richey 2015; Moore 2015; Murray 2015). Another social context for Confucian education revival is the shift in Chinese education system from examination-oriented education (*yingshi jiaoyu*) to education for quality (*suzhi jiaoyu*). As noted in the last chapter, although the national strategy of *suzhi*/quality-oriented education reform has been drawn upon as an antidote to examination-oriented education (Dello-Iacovo 2009), its actual effects have been widely and deeply questioned (see Hansen 2015; Kipnis 2011a & 2011b; D. Lin 2017; Lou 2011; S. Guo and Guo 2016b). Interestingly, it was just at the time (since the late 1990s) when educational reform was being criticised that Confucian classical education began to reemerge, with its advocates creatively using the rhetoric of *suzhi* and *suzhi* education to legitimate the significance of memorising Confucian classics in enhancing children's moral qualities (see Caigui Wang 2009a & 2009b & 2014a).

Although there are various types of Confucian education in resurgence,<sup>21</sup> all forms emphasise the central role of classics (*jing*) (especially Confucian classics)

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<sup>21</sup> For example, two more influential forms are as follows (both are real names): one is *Taihu Daxuetang* (Taihu College) (<http://www.wtis.cn>), which emphasizes the combination of learning classics with natural science; the other is *Lujiang Chuantong Wenhua Jiaoyu Wuxiao* (Lujiang School of Traditional Culture and Education) (<http://www.ljctwhjyxx.com>), which stresses the discipline of one's speech and behaviour in daily life in accordance with the book *Norms for Students (Dizi gui)*, a Chinese enlightenment book for children written during the Qing Dynasty.

in teaching and learning, among which the most influential type is widely recognised as “children reading classics education” (*ertong dujing jiaoyu*), which is the focus of the present thesis. Such a particular form of Confucian classical education, simply referred to as *dujing*<sup>22</sup> education, was initially advocated by Professor Caigui Wang from Taiwan, a well-known theoretician of Confucian pedagogy as well as one of the most renowned intellectuals of modern Neo-Confucianism.<sup>23</sup> In 1994, Caigui Wang founded the Huashan Forum in Taiwan, where he guided children to recite the Chinese (Confucian) classics (see Caigui Wang 2009a: 194-196). Later with the help of Huaijin Nan, a specialist and propagator of Buddhism, Caigui Wang quickly expanded the promotion of *dujing* education from Taiwan to Hong Kong and then extended it all over China. On 15<sup>th</sup> July 2001, he gave a speech, later popularly appraised as “the sensation of the century” (*bainian zhenhan*), in Beijing Normal University (Caigui Wang 2014a: 41-77), which was seen by numerous *dujing* practitioners as a milestone in initiating the movement of children’s classics-reading education in mainland China. Since then, he has devoted himself to actively propagating the Confucian-inspired *dujing* education by giving more than a thousand public speeches throughout China and the world (Caigui Wang 2014a: 17-38).

Consequently, a large number of full-time Confucian-inspired private schools were established to put into practice Caigui Wang’s *dujing* theory, more commonly called modern *sishu* in comparison with the traditional one that existed in early twentieth century China (as illustrated in the previous section). Many modern *sishu* sought autonomy from the state and even rivalled the state school system, while others had to strive for approved status from local education authorities (see Billioud and Thoraval 2007: 8-10 & 2015: 35). One

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<sup>22</sup> For brevity’s sake, “*dujing*” as the Chinese abbreviation of “read classics” will be applied in the rest of this chapter and might be added to other terms such as “*dujing* education,” “*dujing* movement,” “children *dujing*,” “*dujing* campaign,” “*dujing* theory,” “*dujing* practitioners,” etc.

<sup>23</sup> Modern Neo-Confucianism (*xiandai xinrujia*) refers to a group of scholars who believe in the eternal values of Chinese Confucianism since the New Culture Movement (around the time of the May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement in 1919) in China. Caigui Wang is one student of Mou Zongsan, the most widely recognised philosopher of modern Neo-Confucianism.

point worth mentioning is that the resurgence of modern *sishu* has deep popular roots. Most teachers in today's Confucian private schools come from modest backgrounds; many of them are working-class, peasants, or even school dropouts. Therefore, it has been argued that contemporary *dujing* education is a socio-cultural movement initiated by popular endeavour (*pingmin*) instead of a top-down one led by the academic or political elites (*jingying*) (see Billioud and Thoraval 2007 & 2015). However, many students who engage in *dujing* education, according to fieldwork and interviews, come from urban middle-class families and transfer from the state school system. Additionally, while there are many smaller part-time *dujing* classes and full-time family *dujing* institutions in urban communities, some larger *dujing* schools are located in the rural areas or townships (see Caigui Wang 2014a; Yang 2011).

### **3.1.3 Theory of children reading classics education**

Caigui Wang, the above-mentioned educator, proposed a systematic theory of children reading classics education, which has been adopted by a growing number of classical schools and individuals engaged with *dujing* education (see Fu 2014; Yu Liu 2010; Yang 2011; Q. Zhang 2014; R. Zhang 2014). His theory can be summarised in three points (see Caigui Wang 2009a: 2-26 & 2014a: 41-66): firstly, he argues that the textbooks in Confucian classical education must be classics (both Chinese and western classics) that are regarded as “the most valuable books in human history” (Caigui Wang 2009a: 5-6)<sup>24</sup>; secondly, the fundamental approach to learning classics in his theory is mechanical

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<sup>24</sup> Professor Caigui Wang compiled a series of classic textbooks for *dujing* education, in Chinese and in English, which are universally used by *dujing* schools. The Chinese classics refer to mainly Confucian classics, including the “Four Books” (*The Great Learning*, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, *The Confucian Analects*, and *The Works of Mencius*) and the “Five Classics” (*The Book of Songs*, *The Book of History*, *The Book of Changes*, *The Book of Rites*, and *The Spring and Autumn Annals*), all of which are commonly recognised as the representative works of Confucianism. In addition, the masterworks of Daoism such as *Lao Zi* and *Zhuang Zi* and some selected classics of Buddhism are also included in his recommended textbooks. Also, he assembled textbooks of Western classics, including *Selected Excerpts of Bible*, *Selected Works of English Masterpieces*, and Shakespeare's *Sonnets* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

memorisation through reading over and over again; and the third and final point stresses that the ideal students for classics reading education are children under the age of thirteen, as he argues children at this age are in the golden period of memorisation, but weak in comprehension.

Based on the three points, Caigui Wang (2008 & 2009a) put forward four principles of classics-reading education—to read classics (1) immediately, (2) extensively, (3) simply and sincerely, and (4) happily. To unpack the specific connotations of the four, (1) “to read classics immediately” (*dangxia dujing*) means anyone (both children and adults) is obligated to read classics as soon as they come to know *dujing* education; (2) “to read a great volume of classics” (*daliang dujing*) suggests a person does his/her best to memorise classics for at least four hours per day and strive to recite 300,000-character classics within ten years; (3) “to read classics simply and sincerely” (*laoshi dujing*) implies learners are responsible for learning classics by rote, but they do not have to interpret them and one must be honest to oneself in reading/memorising classics; and (4) “to read classics happily” (*kuaijie dujing*) works as the overarching criterion in *dujing* education, that is, to make learning classics a happy process. Caigui Wang (2014a: 41-66) summarised his memorisation-based pedagogy in a simple six-word mantra (*liuzi zhenyan*): “*Xiao-peng-you, gen-wo-nian!* (All students! Read after me!)” Through the pattern of *dujing* education, he assumed learners would be nourished by the wisdom of the sages and devote themselves to moral cultivation.

## **3.2 Overview of Yiqian School, teachers and students**

Having introduced the broader context, this section and the next will turn to the local context of Yiqian School, the particular Confucian classical school on which the present thesis focuses. I will start by offering some details about Yiqian School, and then draw an overview of the school’s teaching staff and students.

### **3.2.1 Yiqian School**

Yiqian School is an approved nine-year compulsory education school,

albeit one characterised by Confucian classics reading education. This means that, ideally, students can study there from the first grade of primary school until graduation from middle school, that is from age 6 to age 15, although in practice very few students do so (see Chapter 7 for specifics). As one of the earliest Confucian-inspired classical schools in contemporary China, the school was founded in 2006 and the student and teacher population expanded rapidly in the initial years of its establishment. It is a full-time private boarding classical school with a population of 119 students, 19 teaching staff and 12 administrative and logistical staff (as of July 2015). The tuition fees charged to the full-time students are the primary channel of gaining income; also, the school holds a summer school every year to attract students from state schools to read and memorise classics for a month-long period, which is another way of making profits.

The Confucian school charges 30,000 RMB (amounting to 3,000 GBP) for tuition fees per year, plus 2,000 RMB living expenses. It has no regular scholarships for students but would occasionally grant some discount in tuition fees to a few, but only if they had been studying in school for several years. Compared with the free of charge state public schools in China, the high tuition fees suggests the families of the attending students are economically affluent. In addition, the education and occupational background of the parents also reveal that the majority of students in the Confucian school come from urban middle-class families. Of the 17 interviewed parents for example, their highest levels of education include high school, three-year vocational college, four-year bachelor, and two- to three-year master degrees. The varieties of occupations of the interviewed parents include white-collar employees in private companies, low and mid-ranking civil servants, self-employed entrepreneurs, a full-time mother, an engineer, and a founder of one small Confucian-style home schooling institution. Among the parental interviewees, three were once teaching or administrative staff at Yiqian School, who may contribute to providing both stories of educating children as parents and work experience as school staff.

Yiqian School is located in a southeast province in China. The school is situated in a remote, small township adjacent to the countryside in the interior

of the province. The economy here is not as developed as other areas and is poor in terms of transport links, but the ecological environment is pleasant. Despite the remoteness of its location, the Confucian school attracts a number of teachers and students from inside and outside the province, who have to board on the school grounds for most of the year, except during the limited holidays. Boarding schools are also common in the Chinese state school system, even at the primary education level (see also Hansen 2015).

Students usually attend classes in a dedicated four-level teaching building (*jiaoxue lou*). In front of the teaching building there is a small open space where students can play games during break time. Behind the teaching building is the dormitory area, where two adjacent but separate halls stand for boys and girls respectively. The school cafeteria and playground are about fifty meters away from the teaching building. There is also a big communal shower room next to the cafeteria. Generally speaking, the layout of the school's building is rather compact, which is convenient for teachers and students in their everyday lives.

In the next two sections, I offer an overview of the school teachers, and then provide a general description of the student population.

### **3.2.2 Teachers**

The teaching staff at Yiqian School came from all over the country. According to the fieldwork (as of July 2015), there were a total of 19 teaching members, of which seven were from Zhejiang Province, five from Shandong Province, three from Guangdong Province, two from Sichuan Province and two from Henan Province. There was high staff turnover at the school: teachers' average year of working in Yiqian was 23 months (less than two years); the longest-serving teacher had worked there for four years and five months while the shortest had been there only four months. If we exclude the three teachers who worked there the longest, respectively four years and five months, four years, and three years and ten months, the remaining 16 would have a duration of employment at the school of only 18 months.

When I conducted the PhD fieldwork at the School in 2015, compared to

my first visit in 2012,<sup>25</sup> all but the three longest serving teachers were new. The high rate of staff turnover resulted in an apparent instability in the school's teaching order; when the experienced teachers left, this meant the loss of the accumulated teaching experience. During the fieldwork, I heard stories about students who were saddened and frustrated by the departure of their favourite teachers, and by the splitting apart and reassembling into different classes.

Among the total of 19 teaching staff, there were eleven males and eight females. The average age was 26.7, the oldest 43 years old whereas the youngest was only 19. If we remove the oldest teachers (both 43 years old), then the average age of the remaining teachers was 24.8. There were six regular classes in Yiqian School, and each one was taken charge of by one homeroom teacher (*banzhuren*, usually assumed by more experienced teachers) and one or two assistant teachers (generally by younger or new teachers). In addition, there were two martial arts teachers and one English teacher, all of whom taught independently from the six regular classes.

In terms of the educational background, four teachers held a middle school diploma, six had a three-year vocational college diploma, six had a bachelor's degree, and three had a master's degree. The four who had graduated from middle schools had dropped out of compulsory education when they were young and transferred to Confucian education in the full-time private classical school firstly as students and then to work as teachers. According to the *Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China* (*Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Yiwu Jiaoyu Fa*), the teaching staff employed by schools in compulsory education (such as Yiqian School) are obliged to hold teacher certification (*jiaoshi zige zheng*) as proof of professional competence. But of the 19 teaching members in the Confucian school, there were only 7 with the certificate (based on the 2015 data). This figure was even lower in previous years. Since the local education bureau called for an increase in the proportion of "teachers with the teacher certification" (*chizheng jiaoshi*), the

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<sup>25</sup> I visited Yiqian School twice before the PhD fieldwork, once in 2012 and once in 2013, to collect data for my master's research project.

School had recruited several members with the certificate, and at the same time encouraged the existing staff to register for the teacher certification examination. The School even promised to increase the salary of any teachers who obtained the certificate. No teacher had any work experience in state schools, and only three once worked in other Confucian schools.

Before working in Yiqian, the occupational background of the teaching staff was diverse: university graduates, self-employed storekeepers, a fitness instructor, entrepreneurs of classics-reading schools or housewives. This is reflective of the rise of popular Confucianism, a term suggesting the rejuvenated Confucianism in relation to nonofficial activities and ordinary people (Billioud and Thoraval 2015: 8), as mentioned in Chapter 2.

The above demographics are typical in the domain of today's Confucian classical education, where recruiting teachers has been a thorny issue not only for Yiqian School but also for many other classics-reading schools. In Yiqian School, the difficulty is partly due to its location in a remote, mountainous small township. But the institutional factors may outweigh the geographical—Yiqian School as a private and non-mainstream school cannot compete in recruiting teachers with the local compulsory schools, especially the public ones who would offer the teaching staff stable and favourable salaries and benefits. “Teachers will give priority to work in the state-maintained schools but not come to us here,” explained Mrs. Ziqing Zheng, the principal of Yiqian School. Therefore when engaging teachers, Yiqian School did not value too much the applicants' academic qualifications, professional capabilities or work experience; instead, it emphasised that candidates must love Chinese traditional culture, identify with the School's education ideas and teaching approach and enjoy working with children. The School also paid attention to encouraging older students who learned classics for years to serve as teachers to make up for the shortage of teaching staff, such as the previously mentioned 4 teachers with a junior high school diploma.

### ***3.2.3 Students***

As with the teachers, the student population of Yiqian School also came



from a wide geographical area and was always changing. According to one document that records the basic information of student groups, as of July 2015, there were in total 119 students in Yiqian School. However, the teachers told me that the School had a student population of as many as nearly 250 in 2013. In other words, the number of students in 2015 was less than half of what two years previously. I had direct personal experience in this regard. When I conducted fieldwork in 2015, the school provided me with a separate room located on the third floor of the male student dormitory building where no students resided. But when I visited the school in 2012 and 2013, the entire third floor was full of students.

The source of the student population is extraordinarily diverse, with the majority of families not from the local area. The diversity and distance of the geographical distribution of the student population played a crucial role in determining the Confucian school to adopt a full-time boarding form of schooling, where students had to be separated from their families and parents and spend most of their time within the enclosed school environment. For the students, they had to endure missing their parents, occasionally so intensely that they could not concentrate on classics recitation. For parents, there was no choice but to send their children to a classical school at a distance from home because such schools were not located in their neighbourhood (see more in Chapter 5). All this can be seen as a reflection of the process of individualisation in contemporary China noted in the last chapter (see Beck 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Y. Yan 2009b & 2010; Hansen 2015).

Students were assigned to six single-gender classes, including two female classes and four male classes. As Table 1 shows, out of the total 119 students (by July 2015), there were 81 boys (68.1%) and 38 girls (31.9%). A possible explanation for the gender disparity is due to the difference in academic performance of boys and girls in state compulsory education. As I will discuss in Chapter 5, the vast majority of students in Yiqian School dropped out of the state school system because they encountered obstacles to their studies and then transferred to Confucian education. According to the investigation at Yiqian School, boys appeared to struggle more with the schooling pattern in compulsory education than girls did (see also Martino et al. 2005; X. Lin and

Ghail 2017; Ringrose 2007; Warrington and Younger 2001). Another guess is that Confucian culture is historically male dominant and parents prefer boys rather than girls to learn Confucian culture. Consequently, more boys than girls transferred from the state schools to the Confucian school.

As for the reason behind non-mixed classes, Principal Mrs. Zheng explained that this was for the convenience of managing the student population. For example, the single-gender class arrangement could effectively prevent early love (*zaolian*) amongst adolescents. The explanation provided by Mrs. Zheng did make sense in Yiqian School, which is a full-time boarding school, where the separation of boys and girls would be conducive to the daily management of both teaching and living activities. Additionally, according to my observations at the School, there were gender differences in the daily teaching practice. For example, boys were encouraged to become courageous, while girls were trained with the qualities of gentleness and quietness (*wenjing*) in mind. However, gender difference is not the primary theme of the thesis, which nonetheless might pull it out where relevant in data analysis chapters.

**Table 1: Students' gender, age, and study length at Yiqian School (July 2015)**

		Qishun	Qibo	Qili	Qijing	Qile	Qizhi	Total
		Class	Class	Class	Class	Class	Class	
Gender	Male	22	22	0	19	18	0	81
	Female	0	0	17	0	0	21	38
Average Age (year)		9.7	13.5	13.8	8.3	10.9	8.8	10.8
Age group (year old)		6-12	13-17	13-17	6-9	7-12	6-12	6-17
Average length of reading classics (month)		14.7	30.5	28.6	24.2	26	17.8	23.4

Note: This table is formulated by the author based on the collected documents in fieldwork.

While the age bracket of all students across the School spanned a

relatively broad range, from 6 to 17 years old, the average age was 10.8 years (see Table 1), which is equivalent to Year Five in primary school in China. Specific to the six classes, one was constituted by older girls named Qili Class, whose average age was 13.8, spanning from 13 to 17 years old; one by younger girls named Qizhi Class, whose average age was 8.8, spanning from 6 to 12 years old; and one by older boys named Qibo Class, whose average age was 13.5, spanning from 13 to 17 years old. There were also three other younger boys' classes—Qijing Class, Qishun Class, and Qile Class, whose average ages were 8.3, 9.7 and 10.9, respectively located in the age groups of 6-9, 6-12 and 7-12. Most students in Qili Class and Qibo Class (in the age group of 13-17) were in the junior high school (*chuzhong*) stage, while most of the others (in the age group of 6-12) were at the level of primary school (*xiaoxue*). Additionally, by July 2015, the students' average length of reading classics in the Confucian school was 23.4 months (about two years), but the student who had been there longest had been studying for more than six years. The students from Qibo and Qili Class had learned classics the longest on average, respectively 30.5 and 28.6 months, while those from Qishun and Qizhi class had the shortest average length, respectively 14.7 and 17.8 months. This level of description is necessary for the present study, which is first reflected in the research methodology—I will discuss in Chapter 4 that I chose three of the six classes for participant observation primarily based on students' age, gender and length of time studying. Moreover, in data analysis chapters (Chapter 5, 6 and 7), I will also show that students of different ages, genders, and lengths of study have both differences and commonalities in the experience of reading classics and the understanding of teaching practices inside the school.

### **3.3 Two Confucian pedagogies at Yiqian School**

Having presenting the overall picture of Yiqian School, I will turn to describe the pedagogical disputes in current domain of Confucian classical education in this section. Although Caigui Wang's theory of children reading classics education has influenced the pedagogies of numerous Confucian-inspired private schools and institutions, including Yiqian School, it has provoked huge debates

not only amongst scholars (see, e.g., Fang 2016; He 2016; Ke 2016 & 2017; Xiaodong Liu 2004 & 2005 & 2008; Xiufeng Liu 2011; Canglong Wang 2016b & 2017) but also in the mass media (see, e.g., Cai 2016; Dai 2016; D. Jia 2016; Wei 2016; Yao 2016; He Zhang 2016; R. Zhang 2014). Since 2013 a few classical schools that once firmly believed in and practiced his theory embarked on a different direction by employing alternative pedagogies (see also Caigui Wang 2016a & 2016b; Y. Wu 2017).<sup>26</sup> Yiqian School was one such school—while Wang’s pedagogy that centered on the method of “simply and extensively reading classics” that once dominated the teaching of Yiqian School, the School later criticised the pedagogy as being too authoritarian to accommodate the pupils’ disparities and thus tried to replace it with an individual-oriented approach.

This last section addresses the two pedagogies that co-existed in Yiqian School and shows how the School implemented the teaching reforms. The discussion here offers an overview of the teaching principles and practices, a necessary first step in order to fully understand the empirical chapters (Chapter 5, 6 and 7). In general, there are two key periods to anchor the course of pedagogical transition in Yiqian School: one is March 2013 and the other September 2014. Based on these, the evolution of the pedagogies can be divided into three time periods: before March 2013 (dominated by the authoritarian pedagogy), from March 2013 to September 2014 (transformation to the individual-oriented teaching), and after September 2014 (a mixture of the two). In what follows, I will elaborate on each.

### ***3.3.1 Authoritarian pedagogy: before March 2013***

Before March 2013, the educational programming proposed by Caigui Wang played the predominant role in shaping the authoritarian and collective approach to teaching and learning at Yiqian School, insofar as the School forced students to obey the common method of mechanically memorising Confucian classics, namely, to read and recite original texts of classic books by rote without

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<sup>26</sup> Many newly established private classical schools do, however, still adhere to Caigui Wang’s theory and maintain the fundamental approach of memorising a large number of classics mechanically.

having to understand them. Students were expected to follow such an educational path, in the first phase to memorise a great volume of classics in the classical school, preferably up to 300,000 characters, and in the second stage to seek further Confucian studies in the *Wenli Academy*,<sup>27</sup> a Confucian-style academy established by Caigui Wang himself, where students would learn how to interpret the previously memorised classic literature. The authoritarian and collective style of memorising Confucian classics was what Professor Caigui Wang has promoted for years,<sup>28</sup> and it was the dominant pedagogy at Yiqian since it was founded.<sup>29</sup>

To make feasible the authoritarian education pattern of reading classics, Yiqian School applied a systematic approach of collective memorisation known as “Seven Sections Five Rounds” (*Qijie Wulun*). Here is a description of how it worked. The so-called “Seven Sections” (*Qijie*) referred to the division of a

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<sup>27</sup> Professor Caigui Wang established the *Wenli Academy* in the autumn of 2012. Many parents and teachers involved in Confucian classical education recognise the Academy as the “cultural shrine” (*wenhua shengdi*), which shows the high prestige this Confucian-style higher education institution enjoys. According to the whole course of classics-reading education prescribed by Caigui Wang, a child is expected to prioritise being able to recite at least 300,000 characters of Chinese and Western classics, and then to seek further studies in his *Wenli Academy*. The principal of Yiqian School, Mrs. Ziqing Zheng, fully accepted the education blueprint. Therefore, she exerted pressure on students and even coerced them to recite a large number of classics in a mechanical way, hoping they could complete the programmed character number and then go to the Academy. More detailed discussions of this lie in the empirical chapters (Chapter 5, 6 and 7). The official website of *Wenli Academy* is <http://www.wenli.ac.cn>.

<sup>28</sup> Caigui Wang praised such teaching methods so highly that he later developed a more advanced model called “pure approach of reading classics simply and extensively” that highlighted the word “pure” whose specific meaning was “nothing to teach but memorise classics mechanically” (see Caigui Wang 2016a & 2016b). It is noteworthy that although such *pure* teaching pattern appeared around 2014 and was adopted by many newly established private Confucian classical schools, Yiqian School did not move in this direction but towards the opposite—a more individual-oriented approach. .

<sup>29</sup> That the schooling was profoundly influenced by Caigui Wang is shaped by the fact that both founders of Yiqian School were once his devout followers. They set up the Confucian school to fulfil his educational theory, as the two have indicated in multiple interviews.

classical book into seven sections by an equal range of pages. The School split the whole day into seven classes, one class per section, for students to read classics over and over again. “Five Rounds” (*Wulun*) referred to splitting the entire procedure of reading classics into five rounds: in the first round, the teacher led the whole class to read a certain part of a classical book; in the second round students read the part aloud by themselves; the third round was to recite the specific part, the fourth round to put all parts together into one section, and the fifth and final round to cover the whole book. As a collective method of memorisation, “Seven Sections Five Rounds” was adopted to create an atmosphere whereby the whole class would read classics together at the same rate of progress and collectively accomplish memorising the total number of characters demanded by Caigui Wang’s form of Confucian education.

However according to Mr. Xiamin Chen, one of the two founders of Yiqian School who played a leading role in shaping and transforming the schooling approach, the collective fashion of classics memorisation inhibited the agency of students and impaired their initiative and enthusiasm in learning. He indicated that the systematic model implied a hierarchical and authoritarian ideology insofar as it presumed the students were not active subjects but passive objects. As he reflected upon the issue in multiple interviews in 2015, the method “Seven Sections Five Rounds” did not fully consider the individual differences in students’ memorising ability, although to a large extent it contributed to creating a positive atmosphere in the classroom where students would be pushed to move forward together with classmates in classics reading. “In the bones,” he argued, “[This approach] assumes students as passive learners,” thus failing to cultivate their learning autonomy. Therefore, he judged the uniform model of reading classics that once dominated the School as responsible for establishing homogeneous standards as the overriding teaching objective. For instance, all students, as noted, were expected to recite the entirety of classical books, as many as 300,000 characters, or were induced to pursue their educational future at *Wenli* Academy. Furthermore, as I understood what Mr. Chen recounted, the authoritarian pedagogy and collective standards implicitly assumed a hierarchical ideology, tending to place the students at a lower grade who were treated as merely passive followers, whereas the teachers were on a higher level

and were endowed with the absolute authority to discipline students in the process of classics learning.

### ***3.3.2 Pedagogic individualisation in a radical manner: from March 2013 to September 2014***

March 2013 to September 2014 was the vital period when Yiqian School initiated the pedagogic individualisation, which I call a *radical* period of individualisation in Confucian schooling in contrast to the subsequent *moderate* one. The radicalness of the teaching reform lies in the fact that it completely rejected the previously dominant authoritarian and collective pattern of learning classics and turned to adopt an alternative pedagogy that gave prominence to the individuality and autonomy of the learners. The pedagogic reform as argued for by the school leaders identified with the individual-oriented practices in ancient Chinese private schooling that lasted for more than 2,500 years since the time of Confucius. These practices drew upon the core Confucian individualised education principle—teaching students in accordance with their aptitude (*yincai shijiao*), and applied the fundamental teaching method—one (teacher) for one (student) (*yiduiyi*). The so-called *yiduiyi* literally is understood as “one teacher educates one student” in the teaching process but substantially implies that, according to Principal Zheng, teachers differentiate and personalise the teaching contents and approaches precisely based on students’ natural ability.

On the specific practices in the pedagogic transformation, the School was scheduled not to exert coercive pressure upon students or compel them to approach mechanical memorisation with profound Confucian classics, but instead to begin their classical study with the enlightenment materials (*mengxue jiaocai*) in order to lay the foundation for them to move on to the learning of more advanced Confucian classics (*jing*) such as “The Four Books.” Different from classics, the so-called enlightenment materials refer to the primary and original books with which a child initially engaged in education in ancient China, for instance: *Three Character Classic*, *Thousand Character Classic*, and *The Book of Family Names*, all of which played a role in literacy education in Chinese history; *Enlightenment Book of Sound*, whose education function was to cultivate students’

phonological sense and laid the foundation for composing poems; and *Standards for Students*, which was the primary textbook to discipline children's civility and courtesy in daily life. Mr. Chen argued that the truth of learning Chinese in ancient times lies in that people did not begin education with memorising a number of profound works of Confucian classic literature, but instead went through a preparatory stage of enlightenment study that lasted two to four years, when students learned to read and write, to cultivate phonological sense and compose poems, to know history, and to develop behavioural appropriateness in daily life. Once completing all these, students would move to the next stage of classical studies (*jingxue*) where they were required to recite a large number of classics. Yiqian School emphasised that learning enlightenment materials should be an individual-oriented and self-directed process where students were encouraged to understand the connotations of the classic literature apart from memorising them; where the uniform standards were dropped, such as the collective requirement of specific character numbers, and where the importance of *Wenli* Academy was downplayed for students and parents in planning the next stage of their education.

However, the individual-oriented reform in teaching did not last long. It stopped abruptly in September 2014 when Mr. Chen left the school, which resulted in a substantial loss of students whose parents did not identify with the new individualised teaching model. Besides, the personalised form of education caused new problems—as some interviewed parents and teachers indicated. For example, the deliberate reduction in discipline and regulations resulted in more confusion in the classroom order and the reduced success of students learning classics (see more in Chapter 6).

### ***3.3.3 Hybridity in pedagogy: since September 2014***

Since the autumn semester in September 2014, Principal Zheng took over control of the school with the departure of Mr. Chen. Although she did not hold an utterly opposing stance to Mr. Chen and she agreed to take a shot at the pedagogy experiment, she was unsure about the radical manner of the school's transformation and especially disagreed with entirely breaking away from



Professor Caigui Wang's authoritarian style of learning classics. She did two things to re-adjust the teaching methods. First of all, to a considerable extent she restored the authoritarian pedagogy and required students again to mechanically memorise a large number of classics in a simple manner. And second, she reformulated the "return" of authoritarian and collective pedagogy by mixing it with the core principle of individualised education, that is, to teach students according to their natural aptitude (*yincai shijiao*), and juxtaposed it with the "one-for-one" (*yiduiyi*) method.

So how can we understand the hybridisation of the two authoritarian and individualistic pedagogies? According to my investigations in 2015, more than one teacher at the School recognised the pedagogic accommodations as going back (*daotui*) to the earlier education philosophy of reading classics simply and extensively, the viewpoint that even Principal Zheng also acknowledged. However, she suggested another standpoint in interviews to explain the "return" as a "reconstruction" of the schooling pedagogy, that is, to suit the mechanical approach of classics memorisation with the individual-oriented principle of education. In the end, Yiqian School formed the hybrid pedagogy of what I call "individualised memorisation," which was distinguished from the previous pattern of "collective memorisation" (see more in Chapter 6).

The hybrid pedagogy was full of contradictions in both teaching principles and practices. The inconsistency first lay in the fact that the School sought to put the two conflicting pedagogies in a single basket, the authoritarian and the individual, of which the former supported teachers as the superior authority to take coercive measures upon students and to compel them to learn classics by rote, whereas the latter defended the individuality and autonomy of students. When I came to Yiqian School in 2015, it displayed a composite picture of the two different pedagogies; in the meantime, it also struggled to integrate the two into a single teaching system. In the subsequent empirical chapters (especially Chapter 6 and 7) we will see what sort of self the students shape through classics memorising. The hybrid pedagogy described here is critical to understanding the practices described in the empirical chapters.

### **3.4 Summary**

This chapter has set the scene of Confucian classical education in China. It has offered an introduction to ancient Chinese Confucian education and described the historical changes in the modern period. Then it has illustrated the movement of children reading classics education that has arisen in contemporary China, and outlined the theoretical framework of the memorisation-based pedagogy proposed by Professor Caigui Wang. In the second section, I have provided an overview of the teachers and students of Yiqian School, the Confucian school on which this thesis concentrates, as well as some other significant facts about the school.

Although Caigui Wang's theory has influenced the pedagogies of numerous Confucian-inspired private schools and institutions, including Yiqian School, this philosophy has become controversial since 2013. The conflicts in pedagogy have been addressed in the third and final section of this chapter, where I have engaged with not only the overall debates in the domain of Confucian classical education but also the ambivalence of two pedagogies that co-exist in Yiqian School. I have argued that the Confucian school formed the hybrid pedagogy of "individualised memorisation," which was distinguished from the previous pattern of "collective memorisation." As I have indicated, the hybrid pedagogy full of contradictions in both teaching principles and practices offers a background to understand the discussions in chapters 5 to 7.

## ***Chapter 4 Methodology***

In deciding on a methodological approach, I drew on Silverman's (2005: 112) argument that "there are no right or wrong methods" but only methods "that are appropriate to your research topic." This research adopted an ethnographic approach, as I am interested in exploring the specific practices of how parents, students and teachers account for choosing classical schooling, and *do* Confucian classical education. While a variety of methods are used in this study, some chapters focus on interviews primarily as this structure can help make sense of the emerging themes. This chapter will describe the research design, including the decision to do an ethnography, the considerations of selecting the research site and how to gain access, methods of data collection, the strategy of data analysis, and some ethical considerations and issues of reflexivity.

### **4.1 Why ethnography?**

In this thesis, I investigate one Confucian classical school to unveil how the rejuvenated Confucian education works in practice in today's China and what sense different actors make of it. Qualitative methodology embraces a subjectivist and interpretive rather than objectivist and positivist perspective of the social world, regarding the social world as something established "through people's actions and thoughts" rather than something natural or objective "waiting to be discovered" (Chesebro & Borisoff 2007: 11). Thus in qualitative research, the researcher is not a pure observer, recorder, or analyst of the data, but a participant as well as an observer interacting and cooperating with research participants (Ibid). The relationship between the researcher and participant plays a key role in producing meanings in social interactions and helps understand better the perspectives of different participants (Brownlie 2011).

The specific approach adopted in this research, ethnography, is "a qualitative design in which the researcher describes and interprets the shared and learned patterns of values, behaviours, beliefs, and language of a culture-sharing group" (Harris 1968, as cited in Creswell 2007: 68). Rhodes

(2015) classifies ethnography into the naturalist and the interpretive types, where the former regards ethnography as the systematic approach of data collection, while the latter is a way of recovering and rebuilding meanings (pp. 172-3). It is true that ethnographic research covers a range of tools for collecting data, and thus offers multiple perspectives for the researched (see Delamont 2004). But some researchers argue that ethnography is not just a complex of methods (see, e.g., Foley 2002; McDermott and Raley 2011; Woronov 2004) but a praxis, “because it forces us to question our theoretical presuppositions about the world, produce knowledge that is new, was confined to the margins, or was silenced” (Shah 2017: 45). Interpretive ethnography makes more sense given that what ethnographers do is to write “our own construction of the other people’s constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to” (Geertz 1993 [1973]: 9). Therefore researchers must remain reflexive in the face of whatever they have encountered during the fieldwork, particularly the power relations in the daily interactions with participants, and use the knowledge of reflection to challenge the hegemonic conceptions or authority (see Norris 1993; Ong 1999; Rhodes 2015; Shah 2017).

This research involved ethnography in a school context. Ethnography has been widely used in social science research within school settings (see, e.g., Frye 2012; Hansen 2015; Hoffman 2010; Kipnis 2011a; McDermott and Raley 2011; Naftali 2014 & 2016; Ogbu 1981; Sewell 1997; Skeggs 1997; Soysal 2015a & 2015b). As Pykett (2009: 819) states, school ethnography can give credit to the terms in which people related to the educational site understand themselves and the way in which they actively constitute themselves. This helps to avoid interpreting their actions in terms of categories and definitions imposed too inflexibly from above, and allows for the richness and complexity of schooling practices. One significant aspect of conducting ethnographic research in the schooling context is, as Haudrup (2004) indicated, to recognise children’s social agency and active participation in study, but doing so through hearing their voices and entering into their cultures of communication (see also Alanen 2011; Benwell 2013; Christensen and James 2017; Naftali 2010b; M. Tu 2017).

The approach of ethnography also “entails the creation and maintenance of favourable and cooperative field relations,” so that the researcher is enabled to

personally experience the participant's world (Xi Wang 2013: 763). This is particularly meaningful in the school context, because the researcher has to engage with multiple relationships and roles. As Xi Wang (Ibid) stated in her reflection upon the construction of research-researched relationships in a China's school field,

[A]s a community member in the field, my role as a researcher is combined with the roles of students' friend, teachers' colleague and the manager's subordinate. Within the multi-faced relationship networks, both the participants and I were faced with various expectations and demands on the one hand, and adopted various strategies to influence others while pursuing our own interests on the other hand. (p. 777)

Eisenhart (2001) highlighted the salience of ethnography in today's social and schooling conditions, because everyday life, including life in schools,

[S]eems to be faster paced, more diverse, more complicated, more entangled than before. The kinds of personal and social relationships, exchanges, and networks we participate in seem to be taking new forms, tying together otherwise disparate people, and demanding some new ways of thinking about what to research and how to do it. We need ethnography to help us grasp these new forms. (p. 24)

In order to gain insight into people's experiences, this research adopts participant observation as the main method of data collection throughout the entirety of the fieldwork. This, however, does not mean that the "artificial" interviews organised by the researcher are not also illuminating (Silverman 1993: 91). I conducted semi-structured interviews with parents and local officials outside the school and semi structured interviews but also informal daily chats with students and teachers inside the school. Besides, I used the technique of group interviews with students and collected documents in the fieldwork as well. All of these will be discussed in the following section.

## **4.2 Data collection**

My ethnographic research applies multiple methods for data collection as in the words of Mason (2006), "social experience and lived realities are multi-dimensional" and "social lives are experienced and enacted simultaneously on macro and micro scales"(pp. 10-2). In this section, I first explain why I chose

Yiqian School as the fieldwork site and how I gained access to it; then, I introduce the four methods of data collection, respectively participant observation, interviews (semi structured and informal), group interviews and document gathering.

#### ***4.2.1 Research site and gaining access***

The fieldwork was conducted in one selected Confucian classical school that I gave the pseudonym, Yiqian School. While a detailed account of the School has been provided in Chapter 3, I will offer a brief explanation of why I choose Yiqian as the case study for the thesis. There are three reasons why Yiqian School allows insight into the complexities of the broader landscape of contemporary Confucian and Chinese education.

Firstly, the School is one of a few private classical schools in mainland China that are authorised by the local education bureau to recruit students in the compulsory education stage (both primary and secondary education). By contrast, the majority of Confucian-inspired educational institutions are not officially approved. While the status of Yiqian School endows it with the official license for education provision, the school suffers, however, from the institutional constraints imposed by the local government on teaching activities (for example the conflicts between classics-reading courses and state-stipulated curriculum, which I will describe in Chapter 7). This ambivalent situation may help unveil how the private Confucian classical school struggles to survive in an environment dominated by state provision of compulsory education.

Secondly, the School is one of the largest Confucian schools in contemporary China and plays a substantial role in promoting the movement of Confucian classics reading education. For example, leaders of the School are among the earliest practitioners of classical education who have engaged with the enterprise for almost a decade and experienced the long process of Confucian education revival in contemporary China.

Last but not least, before my fieldwork in spring 2015 the School underwent a pedagogical reform starting in 2013, the core being to practice the individualised principle of teaching students according to their aptitude (*yincai*

*shijiao*) (as described in Chapter 3). However, the individual-oriented teaching reform contradicted the authoritarian pedagogy that had previously dominated in the Confucian school, resulting in the predicament of autonomy against coercion in teaching process (as I will discuss in Chapter 5, 6 and 7). The case study, whose aspects are unusual, including this hybrid approach, at the same time gives the opportunity to engage with classical schools in the wider context of the Chinese education system.

Access to the research site is crucial to ethnographic research, where the gatekeepers can play a vital role. A “gatekeeper” is a person “who is a member of or has insider status with a cultural group” and works to lead the researcher to other participants (Creswell 2007: 125). The term can also be fairly narrowly defined as someone who controls “opportunities to interact with others in the chosen research site” (Hay 2000, as cited in S. Turner 2010: 127). In this sense, the role of gatekeepers is closely intertwined with the power relations in the interactions of the researcher and participants. It was my third stay at Yiqian School when I did the PhD fieldwork in 2015, as I had spent time on data collection in 2012 and 2013 for my master’s dissertation. Since the first two visits, I had kept in contact via social media and phone with Mr. Xiamin Chen and Mrs. Ziqing Zheng (both pseudonyms), the two establishers of the Confucian school, and a few homeroom teachers. All of them acted as the gatekeepers to help me gain access to the school and other participants. At the end of 2014, before the fieldwork, I contacted Mrs. Zheng and asked her if I could go back to the school to collect data for my doctoral thesis. I received positive feedback and a warm invitation from her. I will go back to this issue in Section 4.4 to reflect upon how the gatekeepers exerted power in controlling the fieldwork.

#### ***4.2.2 Participant observation***

As indicated by Gobo (2011), ethnography is primarily regarded as “a methodology based on direct observation,” and “what most distinguishes ethnography from other methodologies is a more active role assigned to the cognitive modes of observing, watching, seeing, looking at, gazing at and scrutinizing” (p. 15). Participant observation is a process of “spending long

periods watching people, coupled with talking to them about what they are doing, thinking and saying, designed to see how they understand their world” (Delamont 2004: 218). So participant observation covers a mixture of observation (what people do) and interviewing (what people say). The researcher engages in observing what people do at work and watching them play in leisure time. “Participant” does not imply that the researcher has to do “what those being observed do,” though some researchers may do the same things, but to interact “with them while they do it” (Ibid). In addition, the researcher also talks to the actors and listens to their opinions in everyday interactions. These informal chats can facilitate the researcher’s understanding of how the people think, feel and experience, and promote the emergence of themes in the fieldwork (Ibid). In the present research, I spent a whole semester living with the students and teachers in the Confucian school, participating in their everyday activities, observing the teaching processes and interactions, chatting with them, interpreting what is seen and heard, and talking to people to check the emerging interpretations.

Participant observation served the purpose of producing thick descriptions (Geertz 1993) of what happened inside the Confucian school, demonstrating the specific practices of memorising classics and making the research rich and vivid. In the fieldwork, I kept notes on the observation and fieldwork experiences every day, which assisted me with reflecting on my research identities and how it might have an impact on the research process (see Section 4.4 in relation to this). The field notes can also be used as a type of data in thesis writing in combination with interviews and document analysis (see also Cui 2015; Rhodes 2015; Thøgersen and Heimer 2006).

I lived at the school during the fieldwork. As noted, Yiqian School is a full-time boarding school where students only go home for a limited number of holidays in the year. The school provided me with a room on the third floor of the male student dormitory building (the female students lived in another adjacent building) where no students resided—all male students lived on the ground, first and second floors. Living on campus brought a lot of benefits to the fieldwork, one of which was to be involved in the intensive interactions with teachers and students in daily life and to establish rapport and trust with them.



Drawing on Goffman's concepts of "onstage" and "backstage" (Goffman 1969), living on campus enabled me to enter the backstage area of the participants, access different kinds of accounts by communicating with them in an informal way, and learn about the private, personal experiences that might only be accessible backstage. This may involve some ethical risk when students did not realise I was always "on" as a researcher even backstage. This situation did possibly happen because students might treat me more as a "teacher" rather than a researcher, and regular teachers regarded me as a "colleague." The multiple roles empowered me to enter the backstage of people to look at some practice and discourse that did not display onstage. To offset the likely ethical risk, I mentioned my researcher identity in chats with people and reiterated that they had the right to stop my observation at any time if my presence caused their discomfort.

I participated in various activities in classrooms, dorm rooms, the cafeteria and the playground. I attended a variety of classes to observe the ways in which students interacted with peers and teachers and the practices of learning and teaching classics. I ate three meals every day with students in the school cafeteria, where I was able to observe their dining discipline and table manners. I also spent time watching play in the grassy playground. Additionally, I took part in teachers' regular meetings every week (but after the third time this was stopped by the principal, see details in Section 4.4), the school's Monday morning assemblies, the whole school's theatrical performances, and so on.

As the school had six classes in total and a student population of over 100, it was impossible to cover the entire scope of students in observation in just one semester (5 months). Out of the challenges of collecting detailed data over a limited time, the pragmatic strategy was to select one or two classes for participant observation. In order to achieve diversity of age, length of reading classics, and gender, I picked Qishun Class as the primary field, in which I was immersed in observing for a whole semester, plus Qili Class and Qibo Class as two complementary fields, where I spent two weeks in each. As pointed out in Chapter 3, the Confucian school assigned all students to six single-gender classes, including two female classes and four male classes. I selected Qishun Class because it was made up of 22 boys aged between 6 and 12 (being in the primary

school stage), most of whom had learned classics for one or two years. Qili Class and Qibo Class were on the target because they were made up of 17 girls and 22 boys respectively, all aged between 13 and 17 (being in the junior and senior high school stage). Students in both classes had spent more than two years memorising classics, a few over five years. I played a similar role as the regular teacher<sup>30</sup> to participate in the ordinary teaching activities in the classroom and to take part in frequent daily chats and conversations with students and teachers.

Participant observation can be done either overtly or covertly (see, e.g., Bulmer 1982; Homan 1980; Lugosi 2006; Schwartz & Schwartz 1955; Winsler & Naglieri 2003). For my research project, I carried out overt participant observation by clearly informing participants about my research identity and asking them for consent (see Appendix 1-6 for informed consent sheets). My identity as a researcher helped me to establish a relationship of trust with research participants and ensure my immersion in the field. As participants might be curious about my identity (a PhD student who studies abroad in a western country) and my research (which focuses on the Confucian classical education with which they were engaged), it was a good chance to initiate conversations when they asked me questions. However, as mentioned previously, I simultaneously played another role as a teacher in observation, which would contradict the role as a researcher in the whole fieldwork (see Section 4.4).

I used Evernote (a note-taking app on smartphone) more often than notebooks to take notes of what I observed. This proved to be an effective way during fieldwork to facilitate observation and capture the details in everyday interactions and verbal communications. One benefit of taking notes on a smartphone is that I did not need to carry a notebook and pen all day walking through the classroom and the campus. Mobile phone use by teachers was common in the school. So when I took notes on mobile phone instead of notebook, it did not attract students' attention and helped avoid creating a sense of discomfort among them when they were being observed. In the fieldwork, I

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<sup>30</sup> See the following Section 4.4 for ethical considerations about the dual roles I played in the fieldwork, both as a researcher and a teacher.

took out my smartphone from my pocket anytime and anywhere to record what I saw and heard from the participants, or the instant ideas came to my mind, or reflections upon the emotional and social involvement in the research process.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, some related ethical issues should also be treated seriously. I sometimes felt like an undercover ethnographer lurking in the classroom, watching participants, and taking notes as detailed as possible. At the earliest point when I started conducting fieldwork, I informed participants that I would take notes on mobile phone and I obtained their consent. I reassured them to feel free to stop me doing this whenever they felt uncomfortable. During the fieldwork, I reminded them of this point on many occasions.

### **4.2.3 Interviews**

The second method of collecting data was interviews, specifically two types—informal unstructured interviews or chats and semi-structured in-depth interviews (see Appendix 7 for Interview Guide Outlines). I conducted the informal and semi-structured interviews with teachers (n=9), students (n=12), parents (n=17) and local officials (n=2).

There are different reasons for selecting the different types of key informants for more structured interviews. The selection of parents was first based on their response to the informed consent sheet (see Appendix 2) and then achieved by the approach of snowball sampling. The chosen school staff either acted as homeroom teachers or had extensive experience in teaching or administration. Students (8 boys and 4 girls) were selected as the key informants because they stayed in the Confucian school for an extended period and showed either positive or negative attitudes towards the Confucian classical education. Finally, I interviewed two officials who were responsible for compulsory and private education in the local government. I contacted one official when I visited the local Education Bureau, and he introduced me to another.

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<sup>31</sup> In addition, because Evernote can synchronise between the mobile phone and laptop computer, the notes taken on the phone could be displayed on a WiFi-connected laptop as soon as they synchronised, which is convenient for adding extra notes and reflections using the laptop keyboard and screen in a timely manner.

The ethnographic interview usually refers to unstructured informal interview, which allows the researcher to “adopt a non-directive almost conversational style that allows the interviewee largely to determine the course of the discussion” (Miller & Brewer 2003: 167-8). Unstructured interview is useful to collect data in a new field or with new informants because it assumes that interviewers do not know in advance what all the necessary questions are (Silverman 2011: 168) and allows the interviewer to access the setting, understand the language and culture of informants, decide on how to present themselves, locate an informant, gain trust, establish rapport and collect empirical materials (Fontana & Frey 1994: 366-8). Through analysis of unstructured interview data, the research questions would become gradually explicit, the research topic centrally focused, and new questions increasingly produced (Glaser & Strauss 1967).

Unstructured informal interviews can be thought of as daily conversations. As Spradley (1979) states, ethnographic interviews can be defined as “a series of friendly conversations into which the researcher slowly introduces new elements to assist informants to respond as informants” (pp. 58-9). By virtue of daily conversations, the researcher can access the interviewees’ perspectives (Seidman 1991). The process of the ethnographic interview should be regarded as constructing meanings by both informants and social scientists, and the researched should not be viewed “as stable entities but as actively constructed through their answers” (Silverman 2011: 7). Accordingly, open-ended questions are significant to encourage interviewees to tell their own stories, albeit ones shaped by the relationship to the researcher. Moreover, the significance of informal conversations lies in the fact that ethnographers commonly encounter something unexpected or accidental in fieldwork so to be inspired with new questions and new directions in chats with informants. It is thus necessary to take notes and/or make audio recordings of daily talks.

The semi-structured interview played a critical role in my research as well. In line with Miller and Brewer’s idea (2003), semi-structured interviews “involve the interviewer deciding in advance what broad topics are to be covered and what main questions are to be asked” (p. 167). Some findings emerge in daily chats that can be further developed through in-depth interviews. Similarly, some

themes mentioned by key informants in semi-structured interviews can be pursued and checked in later informal conversations. What the researcher discovers through interviews may act as clues to guide the observation and vice versa. The interplay between different types of interviews and between interviews and participant observation can promote to mirror the multidimensionality of the culture the researchers are studying and capture diversified aspects of the living in field (see Brownlie 2011).

During my fieldwork, the semi-structured interviews were conducted through the face-to-face approach and by phone. The former was with teachers and students in the school and officials of the local education bureau, whereas the latter was with parents outside the school. Parents lived far away from the school location so they could not be interviewed in person. The absence of face-to-face contact may make the building of rapport more challenging. But my identity also as a “teacher” at the school might have helped to increase the trust relationship with the interviewed parents. I usually began phone interviews with not only explicitly revealing my researcher identity but also explaining to the interviewees that I had a teaching role at Yiqian School. This turned my identity from an “outsider” researcher to an “insider” of the school, thus contributing to parental trust, although there are potential ethical risks resulting from dual roles (see also Cui 2015; and Section 4.4). Moreover, I was introduced by one of the school’s teacher into the parents’ WeChat group,<sup>32</sup> which also facilitated the establishment of the trust relationship. The phone interviews with parents were conducted in the summer holidays (most from July to August in 2015) after the fieldwork in the school was over. All interviews lasted 1-2 hours and were recorded on a voice recorder with the consent of the interviewees (all agreed). Please refer to Section 4.2.6 and Table 2 for more details.

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<sup>32</sup> WeChat, literally “micro-message” (*weixin*), is a Chinese multi-function social media mobile application software developed by Tencent Company. It offers the service for individuals to easily form or join groups on WeChat, where people can quickly share text messages, hold-to-talk voice messages, photographs and videos.

#### **4.2.4 Group interviews**

Conducting group interviews with pupils in the classroom is the third method of collecting data. Investigators have long considered the technique of group interview as a primary approach for gathering data in educational settings to uncover the processes and practices of educational life (see, e.g., Brannen and Nilsen 2005; Grasmuck and Kim 2010; Knox and Burkard 2009). According to Parker and Tritter (2006), group interviews are “premised on the mechanics of ‘one-to-one’, qualitative, semi-structured, in-depth interviews being replicated on the broader (collective) scale” (p. 26). However, we cannot assume to equate individual interviews with group ones. One reason is that group interviews request to consider not only the relationship between the researcher and the interviewees but also the interaction amongst group members, whereas the latter is not necessarily involved in one-to-one interviews. In group interviews, the researcher plays an “investigative” role through “asking questions, controlling the dynamics of group discussion, often engaging in dialogue with specific participants” (Ibid). The method of group interviews sometimes is seen as synonymous with focus groups, but the two are different in some fundamental aspects. For example, unlike the researcher’s investigative role in a group interview, the researcher in a focus group acts as a facilitator or moderator between participants but “not between her/himself and the participants” (Ibid).

The group interview was a complementary approach to collecting data from the older students who have studied classics for years. It is significant to investigate the thoughts of the senior students because they are directly relevant to the educational plan of the Confucian school, that is, students are expected to continue further Confucian studies in *Wenli* Academy after years of memorising classics at *Yiqian* School. I conducted two group interviews each in *Qibo* Class and *Qili* Class (four in total), the only two classes consisting of older students. Each group interview lasted for 40-60 minutes and was done in the absence of the regular teachers. I recorded all group discussions on audio-recording equipment and did the transcriptions promptly (for the sake of identifying speakers in the discussions). Group interviews were carried out at the later stage of fieldwork, by which time I had established a trust relationship with students

in both classes and obtained the informed consent from students, teachers and parents.

#### **4.2.5 Document gathering**

Gathering documents has become significant in contemporary ethnographic fieldwork, which now often “takes place in literate societies, in organisational or other settings in which documents are written, read, stored and circulated” (Atkinson & Coffey 2011: 77). Summarised by Bowen (2009: 29-30), there are five specific functions of documentary material: documents can (1) provide data on the context, (2) suggest some questions, (3) provide supplementary research data, (4) provide a means of tracking change and development, and (5) verify findings or corroborate evidence from other sources. Besides this referential view of documents, there is the representational claim that documents, like interviews, constitute the world they are describing (see Moore et al. 2016). Similarly, Atkinson and Coffey (2011) have indicated that documents should not be treated as “neutral, transparent reflections of organisational or occupational life” but rather as something constructing “the very organisations they purport to describe” (p. 77).

Specific to this thesis, the documentary analysis provides contextual and substantive information about both Confucian classical education in contemporary China and about Yiqian School. On the one hand, documents offer contextual materials for understanding the principles of classical education. For example, the personal blog of Professor Caigui Wang, the most influential figure in the promotion of contemporary classics-reading education, includes comprehensive and updated documents about the proposed theory of Confucian classical education.<sup>33</sup> Another way of gaining access to materials is the BBS forum *Website of Global Classical Education Communication (Quanqiu Dujing Jiaoyu Jiaoliu Wang)*,<sup>34</sup> where practitioners of classical education all over the country, including those from Yiqian School, were involved in discussing and

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<sup>33</sup> The website of Caigui Wang's Sina blog is:

<http://blog.sina.cn/dpool/blog/u/1699902830#type=-1>.

<sup>34</sup> The website to the online forum is: <http://bbs.gsr.org.tw/cgi-bin/leobbs.cgi>.

debating important issues about this form of education. They also shared a large number of articles both on the theories and teaching practices of classical education. All these documents informed my understanding of Confucian classical education but were not analysed as data in their own right.

I also collected documents about Yiqian School during the fieldwork as well, including printed and electronic copies of the school's regulations, brochures, teaching materials, class schedules, students' study plans, daily examination forms, etc. Moreover, I collected the monthly self-summaries written by students that were published on the school's official website. Some documents were of the electronic version, which I directly copied onto a USB flash disk, while some were paper versions, which I took pictures of by smartphone. Before collecting any documents, I asked the relevant personnel for his/her permission. These collected materials were analysed as documentary data in their own right to illuminate some of the themes in the present thesis. In this sense, I argue that they contribute to offering multidimensional views as well as giving space to the jagged or competing findings arising from different methods (see Section 4.3 in relation to this).

#### ***4.2.6 Sampling overview***

The data collection of the research began in March 2015 and lasted until August of the same year. Participant observation in the schooling context was conducted throughout the whole semester from March to July 2015.

The sampling for this study includes students (both older and younger, boys and girls), parents, teachers, and local government officials (see Table 2 & 3). For younger children, I collected data through participant observation and daily chats; whereas for adolescent students, both boys in Qibo Class and girls in Qili Class, I later selected some individual members as the key informants and had multiple interviews and conversations with them, or they "chose" me as someone with whom they shared personal experiences and feelings. In each of the two older student classes, I conducted two group interviews as well (four in total). I held multiple conversations with the teaching staff (including homeroom and assistant teachers) in all the three classes, plus interviews with the two



founders of the Confucian school on several occasions. I interviewed a total of 17 parents, including six fathers, ten mothers, and one child’s aunt. At the end of fieldwork, I interviewed two officials of the local County Bureau of Education.

The following two tables provide an overview of the sampling:

**Table 2: Sampling overview: participant observation**

Context	Population	Days in total
Qishun Class	22	Approx. 105 days (7 days/week for one semester)
Qibo Class	22	Approx. 14 days
Qili Class	17	Approx. 14 days
Dining hall/dormitory/ playground		Approx. 105 days (7 days/week for one semester)

**Table 3: Sampling overview: interviews**

Informant type	Semi or unstructured interviews	Group interviews
Male students	8	22 taking part in 2 group interviews
Female students	4	17 taking part in 2 group interviews
Parents	17	0
Teachers	9	0
Local officials	2	0

### 4.3 Analysing the data

The process of data analysis throughout this research can be divided into two phases, one along with data collection and one in thesis writing.

In qualitative (ethnographic) research, data analysis begins when the process of data collection is initiated. Ezzy (2002) has emphasised the importance of data analysis during data collection. He argued that “if data analysis begins only after the data have been collected, researchers will have missed many valuable opportunities that can be taken only *at the same time* as they are collecting their data” (p. 61; original italics). As a result, certain issues of great importance would “not be pursued during the data collection and cannot be pursued in any depth during the data analysis” (Ibid). During the fieldwork, I paid attention to avoiding this by writing analytical memoranda promptly. By taking notes at any time on Evernote, I was able to capture new ideas that came to mind and sort out the intricacies of thinking. This proved to be an effective method to prevent the fleeting disappearance of any novel ideas and assist me with adjusting the focus of observations and interviews in due course.

As Rosaldo (1989: 7, as cited in Ezzy 2002: 62) said, “ethnographers beginning research with a set of questions, revise them throughout the inquiry, and in the end emerge with different questions than they started with.” Therefore, during the fieldwork, I strived to integrate data collection with data analysis through utilising the following techniques suggested by Ezzy (2002: 65-73): supervision meetings, checking interpretations with participants, transcribing, reading and coding early data, and writing memos. Specifically, during the fieldwork, I kept in contact with supervisors by email and discussed with them what had been done and listened to their suggestions via Skype. I also communicated with the schoolteachers and students what I observed and listened to their opinions, which facilitated my reflection on the validity of the collected data. In addition, part of the data (such as those from group interviews) was promptly transcribed in the field, and I wrote memos as well for preliminary data analysis.

More intensive data analysis was done after fieldwork. As mentioned, there are various types of data in this doctoral research, including observation data, interviews, field notes, documents, photos taken, etc. They not only provide multidimensional perspectives of the “realities” found in the Confucian school but also compare the validity of the data. This multidimensional approach by necessity “involves working with different types of reflexivity” (Brownlie 2011:

478), for instance, the reflexivity of the participants and the researcher as embodied in my research. In this way, the multiple methods may strengthen the analytical claims and help explore “the ragged, sometimes indeterminate, edges between methods” (Ibid: 462). For example, although the conception of teaching students by their aptitude was inscribed in various forms of documents, this conflicts with the truth revealed by the observation and interview data, as we will see in Chapter 6. As another example, from students’ monthly self-summaries, we can find out the actual feelings and experience of the pupils in the process of memorising classics, which however is inconsistent with the individualised education purported by the school leaders (see Chapter 6 and 7).

On the data analysis procedure, I first edited the collected data and saved them in hundreds of documents that were numbered, and then imported them into NVivo for coding. On the coding method, while it should be emphasised that my research is not based on grounded theory, and neither does it follow the procedures for conducting grounded theory research, I did draw on the three phases of coding in grounded theory “for developing categories of information (open coding), interconnecting the categories (axial coding), [and] building a ‘story’ that connects the categories (selective coding)” (Creswell 2007: 160). In the process of data coding through NVivo, I repeatedly read the observation notes and interview transcriptions, and the research themes and categories gradually emerged and clarified. Since the interview materials took time to transcribe, I coded the observation data first and then the interviews once the transcription was done.

Through further coding, and with the research questions for the thesis in mind, I focused on data analysis in relation to (1) the parental choice of Confucian classical education, (2) the memorisation-based practices of cultivating the Confucian individual in the classical school, and (3) the future planning of education.

#### **4.4 Ethical considerations and challenges**

As a significant aspect of contemporary social research, research ethics “is concerned with respecting research participants throughout each project, partly

by using agreed standards” (Alderson & Morrow 2011: 3). As Creswell (2007) indicated, “Regardless of the approach to qualitative inquiry, a qualitative researcher faces many ethical issues that surface during data collection in the field and in analysis and dissemination of qualitative reports” (p. 141). Thus it is necessary to address some general and particular ethical issues in the present ethnographic research. It is worth noting that before the fieldwork I submitted the ethical review form for level 2 that was approved by the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Edinburgh in December 2014. And in the complete process of data collection and thesis writing, the research has abided by the university’s Level 2 ethics guidelines.<sup>35</sup>

#### ***4.4.1 Anonymity and confidentiality***

It is required by ethical standards to prioritise the respect and protection of the participants’ anonymity, privacy and confidentiality throughout the research project. According to the *Statement of Ethical Practice* (British Sociological Association 2017), sociologists “should strive to protect the rights of those they study, their interests, sensitivities and privacy” (Article 12). While the difficulty of keeping complete anonymity in a qualitative research study should be recognised, as data collection through methods such as in-depth interviews requires the significant involvement of the interviewees’ life stories, some techniques suggested by BSA can be used to preserve anonymity, “including the removal of identifiers, the use of pseudonyms and other technical means for breaking the link between data and identifiable individuals” (Article 31). Through the writing of the doctoral thesis, I give pseudonyms to both the Confucian school and all participants/informants and try to restrict as much as possible the information that may identify them. I also anonymised the exact location of the Confucian school. I took precautions to guarantee the security and confidentiality of the collected data. I keep them in a computer folder that requires a PIN number for entry and only the author had access throughout the research process.

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<sup>35</sup> See the website link:

[http://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/research/ethics/postgraduate\\_research\\_ethical\\_procedures](http://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/research/ethics/postgraduate_research_ethical_procedures).

#### ***4.4.2 Informed consent***

To acquire participants' informed consent is the most fundamental of ethical concerns. In terms of BSA ethics guidelines, "participation in sociological research should be based on the freely given informed consent of those studied" (British Sociological Association 2017: Article 18). In this research, I strictly abided by the guidelines and asked for the participants' consent to observations and interviews. Since there were various types of participants in the present research including school staff, parents, local officials, and children, I provided tailored informed consent sheets for each group (see Appendix 1-5). In the sheets, I introduced the research purposes, contents, methods, procedures, anonymity and confidentiality of personal identity information, how the collected data will be used and protected, and the request for their consent to be involved in the study. I distributed a copy of the information sheet to every potential participant and/or gave them a verbal introduction to the research and responded to their possible questions and concerns. I was careful about providing the information whether orally or in writing through "transparent discussion" about the research project with the aim of facilitating a genuine negotiation (Gallagher et al. 2010). When I wanted to record the interviews on an audio-recording device, I sought the consent of the interviewees. I informed them that they had the right to refuse to participate in the research and opt out of it at any point during the process and for whatever reason.

Considering that my research involves children and adolescents, the ethics of research involving children should be given particular attention. Good practice with children in school requires not only obtaining the consent of schoolteachers and parents but also the children's own permission (see British Sociological Association 2017: Article 30).

It is critical to access children by obtaining the consent of their "gatekeepers" (both teachers and parents), who "attempt to safeguard the interests of others and who can give formal or informal permission for research to proceed" (Greig et al. 2007: 177). Once I arrived at the Confucian school, I met Principal Zheng, gave her a printed informed consent sheet, and verbally introduced her to my research in detail. Once orally granting me the formal

consent, Principal Zheng presented me to Mr. Faqian Sun, the homeroom teacher in charge of Qishun Class and a 25-year-old man who had graduated from university two years before. I gave Mr. Sun a detailed introduction to my research and requested his consent for gaining access to the class. He verbally agreed that I could research his class. Moreover, at one regular meeting all teaching and administrative members attended, I was introduced by Principal Zheng to the entire faculty and staff. I presented a detailed account of myself and my research, sent them copies of the informed consent sheet, and finally acquired their permission to research their classes.

I also sought the informed approval of the parents. In my research, I first approached parents to request their consent before asking the children for permission (see Appendix 6 for specific procedures). When seeking the consent of parents and students, I adopted the opt-out approach. First, I asked the homeroom teachers to include me in the WeChat groups made up of parents, where I introduced my research to all parents and asked them if they would agree to include their children in the study.

I also took another approach to obtaining parental consent as well, considering that some parents possibly did not access WeChat and that the message I sent in the virtual groups was quickly overwhelmed by chats and shared information. Taking advantage of the ten-days spring holiday when all students went back home, I printed out the informed consent sheets (see Appendix 2 & 3), put them in envelopes, and asked students to take them back home to their parents (but did not disclose to students the contents or what I did this for). According to the opt-out approach, I asked parents to contact me through the email address or telephone number given on the consent sheet if they did *not* grant me permission to observe or interview their children. I explicitly explained that it would be seen as tacit consent if there were no response (this was noted expressly on the sheet).

The opt-out approach to seeking parents' consent has been commonly and successfully applied in various studies with children and young people (see, e.g., Cribari-assali 2014; Naftali 2016; Punch et al. 2007). This is partly because the opt-in frameworks have often proved unworkable for research particularly in classrooms with a large-scale student population, given the low response rate

(Cribari-assali 2014: 62). Moreover, acquiring parental consent by the opt-out approach would remind the parents to pay attention to their children's wish to participate, in turn endowing the children with more power to decide on their own (Ibid; see also Heath et al. 2007).

While the opt-out approach does work better in increasing the response rate, a potential ethical risk lies in the indeterminacy of whether the parents' *no response* is equivalent to their *informed consent* (see Hope 2016; Lilja and Vinthagen 2014; Heath et al. 2007). For example in my study, it might be difficult to pinpoint how many parents did read the consent sheet taken back home by the children. The problem of the opt-out approach was I took the risk of treating parents who might not have read the consent sheets (thus the result was also *no response*) as giving consent. It might be another ethical risk to ask students whether or not they gave their parents the consent sheets because it would render them to feel the pressure of moral obligation from the researcher.

For the three classes selected for observations, there was no adverse response from parents in Qishun Class and Qili Class, and only one parent gave a negative reply at Qibo Class. Thus I did not include the child in the observations, interviews, field notes, and recordings. However, I was careful to make sure the student did not feel excluded because of this.

Following the parents' consent, I informed students and asked for their permission. In this research participation was the child's decision (Greig et al. 2007; Heath et al. 2007). I wrote the information sheet (see Appendix 4) and verbally introduced my research in a way that children could understand, to help them determine on their own if they wanted to take part in the research. As a researcher, it was vital to respect children's agency, protect their rights to confidentiality and privacy, and discover their own views (Alderson 2004: 104-5). The specific procedures for seeking children's consent are shown in the flowchart in Appendix 6. One point to emphasise is that I was cautious to ensure students did not feel pressured or excluded from their peers by saying "no" to my research. I explained to them that they had no obligation to participate in the research and could always change their mind. I guided children to practice several times saying "no" to the researcher before asked them for consent. While no students responded negatively in Qishun Class and Qibo Class, there was one

girl who gave a “no” reply in Qili Class.

#### ***4.4.3 Reflexivity on the researcher’s insider-outsider identities***

A fundamental challenge for ethnographers lies in the space between being an insider and an outsider. As Maykut and Morehouse (1994) pointed out, ethnography requires the researcher to keep acutely attentive both “to the experiences and meaning systems of the other” and simultaneously “to be aware of how one’s own biases and preconceptions may be influencing what one is trying to understand” (p. 123). The traditional reaction to the paradox of the researchers’ identity is a dichotomous perspective—either an insider or an outsider. Nevertheless, a dialectical approach raised by Dwyer and Buckle (2009: 54) proposes that researchers can “occupy the position of both insider and outsider rather than insider or outsider.”

This makes sense especially in the Chinese context (thus in the present research), because Chinese culture is featured with the salience of *guanxi* or relations, meaning that Chinese people are inclined to shape one’s identities through a relational rather than individualistic perspective (Ames 2011; Y. Han and Altman 2010; Hong and Zhao 2014; L. Lin 2011). The *guanxi*-oriented nature of Chinese society would influence the researcher’s identities and his/her rapport with research participants (see also Cui 2015). Take my fieldwork experience as an example, where I maintained an awareness of the dual roles I played in the Confucian school, one as a *researcher (an outsider)* and the other as a *teacher (an insider)*. As a researcher, my necessary work was to observe and record the activities of the students as much as possible and avoid interfering in the teaching and learning processes.

However, when I came to the school, I was assigned another role by the school to work as a teacher. Principal Zheng suggested the assumption of the role of a teacher so that I would get along with students and teachers in everyday life and experience and understand the school’s pedagogy profoundly and comprehensively. She also expected me to exchange with students some experience of my study abroad and teach them how to learn English. Being a “teacher,” I was expected by both students and regular teaching staff to engage in



the routine teaching practices that a regular teacher was obligated to do. For example, in the same way as my “colleagues”, I was responsible for examining students’ classics memorisation, overseeing how they dined in the cafeteria and behaved in the dormitory, and participating in the collective activities at school. And students, teachers and parents called me “Teacher Wang,” which is a commonly accepted practice in the Chinese schooling context, where it might be seen as offensive to address an adult by his/her name directly.

How the researcher balances the dual identities of teacher/insider and researcher/outsider involves the operation of power relations between the researcher and participants. It is true that the researcher-participant relationship in fieldwork is the outcome of constant interaction, negotiation and renegotiation (see Cui 2015; Liang and Lu 2006; Thøgersen and Heimer 2006; Xi Wang 2013), but this is not always an equal process. In the following, I will explore the unevenness of the researcher-participant power relations in three aspects through the doctoral research: the relationships with (1) gatekeepers (school managers or teachers), (2) students, and (3) parents, all of which refer to my dual identities.

First, the research participants, especially school managers or teachers acting as gatekeepers in school ethnography hold more power and exert influence on the research process, sometimes attempting to intervene in the data collection and redefine the research direction (see Heath et al. 2007; Turner 2010).

Principal Zheng was one such gatekeeper in my fieldwork. She was the first person I visited when I arrived at Yiqian School in 2015. She played a significant role in introducing me to the homeroom teachers of all the classes, selecting the classes she thought were “suitable” for observations, and offering suggestions on observation focuses, research topics and even alternative research sites that she considered valuable. There was an incident in the middle of the fieldwork showing the inequality of power between the gatekeeper (Principal Zheng) and the researcher (me). As the following field notes described,

It was the regular meeting of all school staff on Monday. [...] Once the meeting was over, Principal Zheng asked me to go to her office. After chatting a few words, she turned to say in a soft but firm voice, “Could you no longer attend the teachers’ regular meeting from now on?”

This made me somewhat surprised, but I quickly adjusted emotions and replied, “Sure, if it makes you uneasy.” She explained, “You are a researcher. When you are sitting there and taking notes, I feel it affects other people’s willingness to talk.” “OK. I get it.” I said.

(Field notes, 27<sup>th</sup> April 2015)

I accepted her request and did not attend the subsequent teacher meetings but her words made me realise the tension of the dual roles I played during the fieldwork as a researcher (outsider) and as a teacher (insider). On the one hand, I was allowed to attend the first three meetings, which gave me a sense of belonging that “colleagues” accepted my identity as a “teacher.” Just like all other teachers, I sat at the desk in the meeting, listened to everyone’s comments, and kept records of what they said. However, on the other hand, my “real” identity as a researcher rendered me an outsider to the regular teaching staff. I explicitly demonstrated to participants my role as researcher from the first day of fieldwork and repeatedly reminded them of this throughout the data collection. This means that I was also consciously maintaining my identity as a researcher as well as the boundary between the participants (as insiders) and me (as an outsider).

Fieldwork embedded in any cultural contexts has to involve relational practices, but I stress the researcher-participant power relations in Chinese society are *context specific* and will be altered and adjusted along with the fieldwork processes (Cui 2015: 367; Thøgersen and Heimer 2006). For instance, before being excluded from the teachers’ regular meeting, I felt Principal Zheng was treating me as “one of us” (*zijiren*), the contextual implication being she supposed me as someone on her side or as her friend (but not critic) who appreciated her schooling practices. I think the perception is a product of a long-term relationship—I met with Principal Zheng in 2012, when I first undertook fieldwork in Yiqian School. Since then we have stayed in contact through WeChat and sent messages of greetings to each other at festivals like the Chinese New Year. It could be this long-term personal relationship that allowed Principal Zheng to treat me as an insider, thus helping me to enter the school in 2015. I acknowledge the advantages in accessing the field and the participants who perceive me as an insider, but there exists a challenge for the researcher to maintain a reasonable distance from the participants.

Further, I argue that the way in which the gatekeepers perceive the researcher's insider-outsider identities can change over time (see Cui 2015). When Principal Zheng became concerned about my being "on the scene" at the teachers' regular meeting, my insider identity was overshadowed by the researcher/outsider identity. The latter implies the researcher should remain reflexive about his relationship with participants. The key question is: what made Principal Zheng concerned about my identity as a researcher that would lead her to exclude me from the teachers' meeting? While she framed her concern as one of making others feel uncomfortable, it is possible she was also trying to manage the researcher's impression of the Confucian school. Impression management the fieldwork, I argue, is a practical process whereby participants or gatekeepers intentionally use their power to guide the researcher to see some (good/positive) information but conceal or downplay some other (bad/negative) aspects (see also Cui 2015; Thøgersen and Heimer 2006; Turner 2010). At the teachers' regular meeting, teachers would report problems in students' daily learning and life, which were what Principal Zheng did not want me (as an outsider/researcher) to know. In an everyday conversation, she admitted to me that she initially thought my study was intended to appreciate the practices in the school, to foster and enhance Confucian classical education, and to let people all over the world know and praise it. However, with the increase in communication with me, she gradually realised that I was not only concerned with the "good side" of the classical education but also with the "bad side." She acknowledged the existing problems in the Confucian school, but emphasised that they merely resulted from the inadequacy of *practicing* the theory of classics-reading education proposed by Professor Caigui Wang and that the *theory* itself was flawless. Therefore she hoped I would not confuse the two aspects of practice and theory. She described the school as an "experiment" in classical education that was still in progress, and it was far from the time of "producing results" (*chu chengguo*). She repeatedly stressed to me not to mix up the problems of the as-yet, in-process school with the final results of Confucian classical education. Her intervention in the research process can be understood against this backdrop.

Second, the power relations between the adult researcher and children are crucial in this *school* ethnography, so to be addressed cautiously. I admit that my identity as a “teacher” played a significant role in building a rapport with the students. As explained earlier, it is a conventional practice in a China’s school field that students regard an adult as a “teacher.” For example, several students in Qishun Class asked me the same question many times at the beginning of the fieldwork, “Teacher Wang, will you always be in our class?” They had this kind of concern because there were once regular teachers who worked in their class for a short period but transferred to other classes. This question by students indicates that in their eyes I was no different from the regular teacher though I repeatedly reminded them of my researcher identity. For students, as I interpret it, identifying me as a “teacher” could help them adapt to an outsider’s entry into their schooling life. For my research, I acted as a “teacher” to get along with the pupils, so to access their experiences, feelings and voices as well as to enter the “backstage” to observe their daily activities and practices.

However, the potential risk of doing so is that students tended to obey the authority of my role as a “teacher,” and this could result in an unbalanced power relationship between the students and me. My teacher role empowered me not only to observe but also to manage the activities in the classroom. As mentioned earlier, I performed the same duties as a regular teacher in the field, for instance, examining the students’ memorisation, supervising them on self-study, signing their study schedules, and so on. These practices in turn constructed and maintained the authority of my teacher role. To reduce the unevenness of power relations caused by the identity as a “teacher,” I intentionally reminded the children of my role as a researcher many times during the fieldwork and prompted them I was a not regular teacher. Also, I explained to them that the observation and interview data I collected from them would be used in my research project. I chatted with children in an equal manner, listened to their voices, and played with them in break time.

In addition, I was concerned about the possible emotional impact upon students generated by the role I played as a teacher. For example, students might feel saddened when I, seen as a regular teacher in their eyes, left the school, especially in the context of high turn over of teaching staff described in Chapter 3.

To reduce the possible anxiety of students, I reminded them several times throughout the research of my status as a researcher and my purpose of doing doctoral research, and informed them that I would leave the school at the end of the semester.

Third and lastly, my dual identities of researcher-teacher may have the potential to impact on the relationship with parents. On the one hand, the status as a teacher could increase parents' willingness to have conversations with me. Because of the role, they might also assume I was someone familiar with the situation of the school and the performance of their children. A few parental interviewees even asked me to describe or evaluate how their children performed in school. To address this I explicitly discussed with parents my identity as a researcher through every interview, and intimated to them the purpose of the study. My status as a researcher meant that I was not a regular member of the school, and as such I encouraged parents who were willing to be interviewed to more confidently express their views on the school and disclose their children's experience of learning classics. Despite this, the opposite situation could also occur—some parents rejected my request for an interview, possibly because of their concerns about the potential consequences for their child of revealing their opinions of the school to me.

## **4.5 Summary**

This chapter has offered an overview of the methodology of the research. In the first section, I have argued that the ethnographic approach is an effective means to generate rich data and serves the research aim of unveiling how the rejuvenated Confucian education works in practice in today's China. The second section has addressed different methods of collecting data during fieldwork. I have argued that the interplay of multiple approaches to data collection would offer multidimensional aspects of the field and participants. The third section has described the approaches of data analysis both in fieldwork and in thesis writing.

The fourth section of this chapter has explored ethical considerations and challenges that were especially pressing when working with children. I have described how I obtained informed consent from parents, teachers, and children,

and offered reflexivity on the researcher's insider-outsider identities. I have elaborated on how I struggled to balance the dual roles of teacher/insider and researcher/outsider in the classical school embedded in the broad Chinese context, and how it involved the power relations between the researcher and participants.

The remaining chapters of the thesis will present the findings from analysis based on my research in the Confucian classical school. The first of these, Chapter 5, will elaborate on parental choice and desire for Confucian education against the (contested) backdrop of individualisation in today's China as outlined in Chapter 2.

## ***Chapter 5 Choosing Confucian education: Critique, moral suzhi, governmentality, and dis-embedding***

### **5.1 Introduction**

Being a state-sanctioned but outside-the-system (*tizhiwai*) school, Yiqian School and its Confucian pedagogy are a far cry from that of the mainstream, inside-the-system (*tizhinei*) schools, characterised by the state-stipulated compulsory curriculum. Yiqian seldom provides comprehensive compulsory courses,<sup>36</sup> and students mechanically memorise the classic texts (mainly of Confucianism and parts of Taoism and Western literature) all day long but with two additional daily courses—calligraphy writing and physical education. Why did parents of pupils at the School choose this kind of education for their children?

In this chapter, I investigate parents' accounts of choosing Confucian classical education and draw on theoretical accounts of social change in China, introduced in Chapter 2, including in relation to individualisation and the role of the Chinese state (see Beck 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Beck and Williams 2004; Y. Yan 2009b & 2010 & 2011; Hansen 2015; Hansen and Svarverud 2010), to help make sense of these "choices." I will show the technique of critique the parents used, drawing on the keyword of moral *suzhi*/quality to frame their determination that their children should leave the state-sponsored compulsory schooling system and transfer to the private Confucian education. As Hoffman (2010) has argued, the individual choice in post-Mao China may be understood as shaped by relations to the state and thus apparently autonomous decisions actually imply "a sense of responsibility not just to self-advancement but also to the nation" (p. 83). In light of this, I view parents' choice as something that helps constitute, and is constituted by, a particular understanding of Chinese subjectivity (Hoffman 2006: 550).

Drawing upon interviews with parents and children primarily, this chapter will reveal how parental desire for Confucian education is generated in the

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<sup>36</sup> The Confucian school indeed tried to offer such curriculum but encountered many difficulties; see details in Chapter 7.

constrained circumstances of the Chinese education system. It is divided into two parts. In the first part, I explore the complexities of the accounts the parents produced when discussing their choice of the Confucian school. This has three sections: first, parents' critique of state education based on its anti-instrumentalism, which intensifies the desire for Confucian moral cultivation; second, the concern about children's poor performance at state schools, which leads to criticism of the examination-oriented education; and third, the aspiration for Confucian pedagogy's early years memorisation. In the second part, the chapter discusses what specific actions parents took to achieve their educational choices.

## **5.2 Criticising the state education: instrumentalism and Confucian moral cultivation**

When I asked all 17 interviewed parents for their initial reasons for wanting their children to study Confucian classics in the full-time classical school, the most common account they gave was based on a critique of state education. Often in an unreserved and resolute tone, they expressed disappointment with the state school system. Another parent, Mr. Li, whose son was twelve years old and had been studying at Yiqian School for two years, bluntly said, "I have a deep-seated hatred for the state education," and judged that the compulsory schooling was nothing less than a fiery pit. Except for the five who recognised the state-maintained compulsory education has its merits in certain aspects, the remaining twelve participants all took a critical attitude towards it. So why did parents take such a negative attitude towards the state school system?

The critical remarks directed at the state education system firstly come from the parents' reflections upon their own education experience when they were at school. Take the aforementioned Mr. Li for example. He held a master's degree from an elite Chinese university and became an IT engineer after he graduated in the early 2000s. Although he acknowledged that his experience of postgraduate education, being part of the state education system, indeed taught him the expertise to survive in society, he felt rather frustrated and disappointed about it because, as he argued, what the state education taught him was *not* "how



to be a human,” “how to get along with people,” “how to develop one’s moral rectitude” or “how to repay society,” but instead to be a person who “does not know how to be grateful” and who “only looks after his own interests.” Therefore he judged that “my education is a complete failure,” and vowed, “I will never let my child go this way.” Likewise, another interviewed father, Mr. Zhong, who with his wife graduated from university in the mid-1980s, an era when university graduates were very few, straightforwardly criticised the state schooling as “an education lacking morals” (*quede jiaoyu*) that offered students neither the moral knowledge to be a human nor the principle of interaction with others. The above are just two examples of parents’ critical comments, suggesting critique based on moral concern plays a role in shaping their attitudes towards state education.

Further, there is an implied criticism of the compulsory education as being too instrumental to concern pupils’ moral development. This critical point is based on the ideology of anti-instrumentalism, emphasizing the *transformative* and *moral* dimension of education should take precedence over the pure indoctrination of instrumental knowledge (see also Billioud and Thoraval 2015: 83).<sup>37</sup> To understand this critique, we can draw on the concept of *jiaohua* in the Confucian tradition, which is made up of two interrelated parts—to realise the transformation of individuals (*hua*) through education (*jiao*) (see also Billioud 2011: 286; Billioud and Thoraval 2015: 13). This coincides with the idea of *suzhi* that implies human essence has the potential to be improved, transformed, and civilised (Q. Lin 2009: 290).

We can easily find criticism of the state school as instrumentalist in many discourses adopted by the Confucian school’s parents. They were inclined to reduce compulsory education to an overly simplified practice of “education for knowledge” (*zhishi jiaoyu*), which as they argued was committed merely to imparting instrumental knowledge that had nothing to do with the moral transformation of human life. Conversely, they set a high value on the “education for morality” (*daode jiaoyu*), which aimed at improving one’s moral cultivation. In their eyes, education for morality, embodied by the Confucian education based

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<sup>37</sup> It should be indicated that Billioud and Thoraval used a different concept “anti-intellectualism” to imply the similar meaning, a term however being a bit ambivalent and polemical as I see it.

on memorising classics, was superior to education for knowledge, which was equivalent to the state-sponsored compulsory education. They argued that what students learned in state schools was nothing but insignificant knowledge for future professions, whereas in Confucian education, students could acquire the wisdom they could use for moral enhancement throughout whole life. Parents complained that the state-stipulated Chinese language curriculum was too boring and too simple, wasting children's lives. They also expressed dissatisfaction with the mathematics curriculum at compulsory schools, whose degree of difficulty, as they argued, was far beyond the children's capability of understanding. Therefore, the parental interviewees believed that children should not spend time on merely acquiring the knowledge without cultural nutrition but instead on repetitively reading and memorising the (Confucian) classical literature through which they would achieve moral transformation.

These cultivation and transformative ideas about education have a strong echo in the theory of children reading classics education proposed by Professor Caigui Wang, which was introduced in Chapter 3. He claimed that children from four years old to thirteen are in the golden period of memory, characterised by a robust capacity to memorise but a weak capacity for comprehension; the most appropriate approach to teaching children in this period must allow them to memorise more but understand less, which he argued is consistent with the law of human nature's development (Caigui Wang 2014a: 27-33). He thus advocated that children deserve to accumulate fundamental knowledge that has "a high degree of cultural quality [*wenhua hanyang*]," "cultivate the depth and breadth of the heart-mind," "develop one's rational sensibility" and "edify the moral sprouts within the human nature," even if they cannot comprehend it for the time being (Caigui Wang 2009a: 5-6). In his opinion, ancient classics are the treasured cultural resources from which fundamental knowledge comes, thus they deserve full attention, through memorisation, from all humans, especially children. He supposed that as children grow older, their capacity for comprehension would mature, life experience would increase, and they would gradually understand the connotations of the classical texts, which thus would become intelligible resources throughout their lives to control, discipline and civilise their daily manner of speech and action (Caigui Wang 2014a: 41-66).

The marked dissociation of memorisation from comprehension proposed by Caigui Wang has had a huge influence in shaping parents' critique of the state education.<sup>38</sup> All the interviewed parents acknowledged that they watched videos of Wang's speech or had read his books many times and more than half frequently quoted his original words to support their viewpoints. With the exception of one father, all parents expressed no doubt about the theoretical argument that memorisation needs to be separated from and should be conducted before comprehension (see Caigui Wang 2009a & 2014a). In light of anti-instrumentalist ideology, parents turned to embracing both a Confucian version of moral *suzhi* (quality) and a Confucian pedagogy of producing moral subjects to underpin their critique of the state education. They regarded Confucianism as a type of moral education where the person learns how to be a human. This is a term not only frequently referred to by the informants but also popularly used to generalise the features of Confucian (Chinese) moral values (see X. Chen 2012 & 2014 & 2015; W. Tu 1985).

According to the interviews with parents, to be a human or *zuoren* implies a relation-based practice of ethical transformation, where a person is cultivated as well as cultivates himself (herself) to become a benevolent, altruistic, anti-self-centred, and otherness-oriented human, to treat people with respect and sincerity, and to develop appropriate manners in complex interpersonal interactions. In this respect, I quote one mother, Mrs. Liu (whose son was 15 years old and had learned Confucianism for five years), who felt relieved and delighted to see that learning Confucian classics transformed her son both in disposition and social ability.

Nowadays, children are somewhat self-centred and do not consider other people. [...] I feel my son since he learned Confucian classics [has changed] in personality and his way of viewing things. He's not impatient and is becoming considerate of others, so his relationship with people has become much better. Indeed, he does this: every time he called [home from

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<sup>38</sup> However, this "theory" is not necessarily legitimised by historical precedent (Billioud and Thoraval 2015: 88), but evokes widespread disputes in public media (see, e.g., Cai 2016; Dai 2016; Fang 2016; He 2016; D. Jia 2016; Ke 2016 & 2017; Xiaodong Liu 2004 & 2005 & 2008; Canglong Wang 2016a & 2017; Wei 2016; Yao 2016; He Zhang 2016; R. Zhang 2014).

the school], he asked with concern if everything was going well in the family, how was father and if he worked too hard. He's become a person who thinks of others. Such words would seldom come out of the mouth of today's children. This makes me really relieved and delighted. [He has achieved these changes] certainly because of the Chinese culture he is learning, the teachers' education at school and the comprehensive impact of his classmates, [all of which] result in his more profound understanding of people, affairs, things and social relations other than with his peers.

(Interview, Parent, Mrs. Liu, July 2015)

Other parents mentioned similar situations, where what they saw egoistic individualism tamed by the Confucian ethics of *zuoren*. Another mother, Mrs. Wu, recounted that the basic reason for her son to study Confucian classics was "he was very rebellious [*panni*] when in the state school and followed nothing you told him to do, [...] without any conception of respecting people, always being self-centred." This is similar to Mrs. Jiang, who believed that accepting Confucian education would allow children to behave properly and correct their self-oriented dispositions. Moreover, Mrs. Zhu described her nine-year-old son becoming a little big man since he learned Confucian classics. "He becomes very sensible [*dongshi*]," said she in a cheerful tone, "he knows how to behave in a modest and courteous manner, how to consider other people's feelings. [...] These are the manifestations of the subtle transformative influence of the classics on his character." To summarise, it was striving for such moral qualities against egotism that led parents to choose Confucian education.

In the eyes of parents, the ethics of *zuoren* is not only the socialising practice that directly goes against egocentrism and selfish individualism but also a practice to recognise, distinguish, internalise, and perform one's particular roles embedded in the complex web of social relationships, of which the family relationship is the most fundamental (see Ames 2011; Nuyen 2009). One interviewed mother, Mrs. Lan, had two sons, of whom the younger (13 years old) was studying in the Confucian school while the older (15 years old) in the state compulsory school. She attributed the difference in the two boys' everyday performance to whether or not they had read Confucian classics. According to her descriptions, it was because of learning Confucian culture that the younger son became polite and obedient, was sensible to care towards parents when

called home away from school, communicated with them and did housework when returned home. In contrast, she described the older one who did not learn Confucian classics “never cares about what we [parents] do when at home,” “just plays on his computer and strikes the keyboard very loudly,” and “has no any interest in talking with parents.” Based on Mrs. Lan’s description, the younger son since engaged in reading Confucian classics performed the Confucian ethical virtue of filial devotion (*xiaoshun*), which, as I explain, suggests that he clearly knew or at least increasingly became aware of what specific relationship he ought to have with his parents, what concrete roles, status, and obligations he had in such a relationship, and how to put it into practice in ordinary life. On the other hand, the older son who studied in the state school, as the mother stated, showed a lack of due respect for parents, which, in academic language, obscured the ethical and normative roles he should have performed, and led to a neglect of family duties and obligations (Ames 2011: xvi-xvii). Mrs. Lan claimed that the transformative effects of Confucian schooling embodied by the younger son reassured her about the decision of choosing Confucian education. She also disclosed her regrets about not having her older son read classics, and would consider sending him to the school someday.

In the discourses of the parents, the transformative practice of Confucian role ethics centres on the child’s emotional attachment to parental authority and his/her showing love to the elder members of the family. The “docility” (*tinghua*) a child performs therefore means, according to parents, not only to comply with the authority of the elders but also to sympathise with their situations (see also Dalton and Ong 2005; Fei 1992; Fong 2004; Kim 2008; Kipnis 2009; Shi and Lu 2010; Sung and Pascall 2014; Canglong Wang 2016b; M. Wu 2013; Y. Yan 2011). When it came to what positive transformations the children achieved through reading classics, many of the interviewed parents mentioned that their sons or daughters had cultivated a dutiful disposition to care for parents, to be aware of adults’ feelings, and to show consideration for the elders. The following comments from one mother were fairly representative. “Learning Confucianism has transformed my daughter’s temperament,” she said:

She becomes a person who cares for others. In our big family [*jiazu*] there are two other children in her generation, both of whom were her aunt’s kids but studied in the [state

schooling] system. However, she does the best out of the three in such aspects as respecting the teacher and following parents' instructions. She does better than most people to stand in the other person's shoes and gives more consideration to his or her feelings rather than merely caring about her own interests. She cares for her family, parents and grandmother and does good for all the elders. I think she performs very well in all these aspects. Sometimes when I unintentionally raise my voice to my parents, she would remind me, "Mum, you should not do it this way. You should not speak to grandpa like this."

*(Interview, Parent, Mrs. Wei, August 2015)*

Emotions have become a form of capital or resource in these accounts. Drawing upon the notion of emotional capital, Patricia Allatt (1993) defined it as "emotionally valued assets and skills, love and affection, expenditure of time, attention, care and concern" (p. 143). Diane Reay (2000) adds to this definition a focus on how such resources "passed on from mother to child through processes of parental involvement" (p. 569). The (re)production of emotional capital as we see here in Confucian education results from learning and memorising classics, so passing on from the ancient (Confucian) classics to the modern learners. Many parents admitted there was a lack of Confucian cultural and, hence, emotional capital within the families as they themselves had not learned Confucian classics when they were young (see also section 5.4). Conversely and consequently, they emphasised the significance of their children absorbing Confucian wisdom directly from classics memorisation.

In the parents' discourses concerning the transformative practices of how to become human, we can find an individual-oriented dimension which attaches great importance to self-cultivation and self-discipline, or in terms of Tu Weiming (1985), to selfhood as a form of creative transformation. With regard to the notion of *zuoren* in the individual dimension, I refer to the explanation of Chen Lai, an influential contemporary Chinese Confucian scholar, who argues that becoming fully human is "the cultivation of persons who take personal excellence as their ultimate value and in so doing raise above all that is vulgar and common in their conduct" (L. Chen 2016: 93). Parents' interviews echo this argument. For example, when Mr. Zhong explained why his eleven-year-old son insisted on learning Confucianism for years, he said:

[My son] performed excellently in academic study when at the state-maintained school,

but this inadvertently fuelled his arrogance, so much so that he could not bear any critical comments from other people; that is to say, he was unable to stand up to any obstructions or frustrations. However, I did not think he should be like that. [...] I felt the words in classics play a part in improving children's moral cultivation, teaching people about the truths [*daoli*] about gentlemen and villains [*junzi he xiaoren*] and repeatedly teaching you how to be a human.

*(Interview, Parent, Mr. Zhong, June 2015)*

Thus, parents emphasised the necessity of “learning” (*xue*), or more specifically, reading Confucian classics. As Kipnis (2011) indicated, the Chinese word *xue* means “to imitate a model in a process of internalisation—mental or bodily memorisation” (p. 91). So education serves as a tool for teaching the individual how to learn by modelling (Bakken 2000: 8). In line with this, parents expected children to understand and internalise the profound wisdom of classical literature through repetitively reading and memorising the texts, so as to develop the capacities of self-discipline, self-control, and self-mastery.<sup>39</sup> As the parents narrated, a self-disciplined Confucian individual is a person who can exercise restraint in selfishness, control his or her behaviour, adjust behaviour to get along with people and treat others with a sincere attitude. They expected their children to become moral individuals guided by the Confucian tradition of cultivation. To have the capabilities, in the words of parental interviewees, a person has to purify his mind through the study of Confucian classics, to get rid of his animalism (*dongwu xing*), to obtain spiritual pleasure, to formulate self-guided aspirations, and finally to achieve autonomous learning and thinking. For example, a father who had worked as a civil servant at a county-level government reflected upon his work experience lacking true happiness and only served to accomplish the tasks assigned by superiors. Therefore, he revealed the expectation for his twelve-year-old son to enjoy learning Confucian classics, the books he regarded through which people could experience profound spiritual happiness and make it meaningful to be a human. Importantly, this is an echo of

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<sup>39</sup> However as we will see in Chapters 6 and 7, there are contradictions between parents' expectations and the school's pedagogy because of children failing to understand what they read and recited.

the Confucian notion of *zide* whose basic meaning is that of “learning or experiencing some truth for oneself and deriving inner satisfaction there from” (de Bary 1983: 45-46).

To summarise, the first reason given by parents for having children learn Confucianism in the classical school is the criticism of state education as too instrumental to involve one’s moral development. Parents argued for the significance of Confucian morality, concerned with how to be a human. Relating it to the wider context of Chinese education, this is further echoed by the discourse of *suzhi*, which as Kipnis (2006; see also B. Wu and Devine 2017) argued, has profound roots in the Confucian tradition of cultivation. The rhetoric of *suzhi* has the embedded idea that qualities of human essence have the potential to be improved and corrected (Q. Lin 2009: 290). Furthermore, parents’ critique of state education and their aspiration for Confucian moral *suzhi* are consistent with the larger sociopolitical landscape in post-Mao China, described in Chapter 2, where to be a citizen “entails the cultivation of oneself to become a particular type of individual” (p. 298). Though it also needs to be noted that most interviewed parents come from urban middle-class families. Their call for Confucian emotional capital, embodied by classical virtues of *zuoren*, thus can be further interpreted through this classed lens. The emerging new middle-class parents in urban China resort to Confucian moral resources for civilising their children, where the discourses of quality and civility play a crucial role in not only transforming and improving their children but also distinguishing them from other social groups (Rocca 2015 & 2017).

### **5.3 Challenging the examination-oriented education by rhetoric of *suzhi***

The critique of state education as instrumentalist is closely connected to the second reason for parents choosing Confucian education, which is the critique of the examination-oriented education. While China has initiated the national project of *suzhi* education to counteract the detrimental impact of the memorisation- and examination-based education, the actual effects of this reform have been widely and deeply questioned (Kipnis 2011a & 2011b; D. Lin



2017; Lou 2011a; S. Guo and Guo 2016b). One of the most perplexing aspects is that despite the fact that *suzhi* education has received widespread support as an ideal, the heritage of examination-oriented education remains influential in practice (Dello-Iacovo 2009: 244; Hansen 2015: 128-150; Postiglione 2011: 81; J. Wu 2012;). This is directly reflected by the children and their parents' personal experiences in compulsory schools. Of the seventeen interviewed parents, sixteen admitted that their children frequently faced the pressure of homework and examinations when in the state school system, but their achievement, in their terms, "was very average" or "was not good." Parents revealed that this was an immediate factor to compel them to look for alternative education for their children. Students of Yiqian, the majority of whom had once studied in the state schools,<sup>40</sup> provide further evidence of this. As they revealed to me, most of their academic performance in compulsory schools ranked in the middle and lower reaches of the whole class, or even the bottom few. There was only one student in Qili Class (17 female students in total) and Qibo Class (22 male students in total) who told me they were among the best in their academic results at the compulsory school. In Qishun Class (a total of 22 male students), only two advised that they did not come to learn classics because of poor study grades. However, most students had either average or poor academic records in compulsory education.

According to the parents, most of their children were criticised or punished by teachers in mainstream schools either for not finishing homework or failing the examinations or violating the class rules. All but one of the interviewed parents told me that their children had such negative experiences when studying in state schools as, in words of separate interviewees, they had "no interest in what was taught," they were "very undisciplined [*sanman*] in study," did not have a "happy childhood," they suffered "with a lot of psychological problems," and they were "bullied by classmates." Given the poor performance of the

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<sup>40</sup> Take the three classes in which I conducted fieldwork as examples. In Qishun Class (22 males) and Qibo Class (22 males), all students came from the state schools; while of the 17 female students at Qili Class, only one 14-year-old girl had learned Confucian classics since the age of five and never attended the state school.

children at the state schools, some parents referred to a common experience of being told by the homeroom teachers, who reminded them in a disciplinary tone that their children's poor academic performance would drag down the whole class, and urged them to step up supervision of their children's study. However, this practice made them feel no face (*mei mianzi*, ashamed).

Although the Chinese educational reforms for *suzhi* education and burden reduction (*jianfu*) of homework on children have lasted for decades, many Chinese parents, teachers, and scholars are frustrated and dissatisfied with the current situation in schooling (Hansen, 2015: 5; Kipnis 2011b; Tang 2011; Yi 2011b). In the case of the parents at Yiqian School, they condemned the compulsory system as utilitarian examination-oriented education, where students are overloaded with homework, have to cope with endless examinations and tests, and the purpose of teaching is for instrumental focuses such as study results, class rankings and rates of admission into higher schools.

This is echoed by many scholars who argue against the examination-oriented education that only focuses on the academic quality but ignores cultivating the comprehensive qualities of students, such as the moral, the physical and the aesthetic (B. Liu 1995; Pan 1997; Ping et al. 2004; Yi 2011b). Reflecting these concerns, more than one of the parents disclosed that they were care-laden when their child was in compulsory schools. First, they worried that the highly intense amount of homework would do harm to children's physical health. For example, as Mrs. Zhu said her eight-year-old boy in Year Two could often not finish his homework until nine o'clock at night, and "it is said that the workload will be even greater in the third and fourth years," "[I] really worry about if his body could withstand it." Another mother said bluntly that one of the most immediate reasons for having her eleven-year-old son learn classics in the Confucian school was "he no longer has to do so much homework." Second, parents were concerned that the excessive assignments would possibly prevent students from developing other essential qualities, such as an interest and initiative in study, curiosity and imagination about exploring the world, and the ability of autonomous learning and thinking. The above-cited Mrs. Zhu argued that even a child who had enjoyed learning would be turned into a passive learner under the tremendous learning pressure in compulsory schools, or be a

mechanical machine just for examinations but lacking self-consciousness, independence and autonomy. It was based on this judgment of education that she even allowed her son not to do any repetitive and undue schoolwork such as oral calculation, writing English words from memory or practising Chinese copybooks for calligraphy. This is echoed by Mr. Li, who outspokenly “encouraged” his twelve-year-old son to fool around (*hunong*) in a state-sponsored primary school, that is, to spend as little time as possible on schoolwork of no value. Also, one highly educated interviewed mother whose thirteen-year-old son had been studying in Yiqian School for more than five years puzzled about the state education ironically providing standard answers for the reading comprehension practices in primary school Chinese curriculum. “As I see it, people’s social conditions and life experiences vary too much, so that each child must have his or her understandings of even the same article. So how can there be standard answers?!” She therefore feared the state schooling would depress students’ learning autonomy, inhibit creative thinking, and impair their ability to think independently.

Even though students may be reflecting the awareness of their parents’ dismay about the state schooling, many if not all, especially the older ones aged over 13, were also outspoken about their dissatisfaction with the instrumentalism of examination-oriented education and thereby extended the criticism to the entire state school system. Mentioning why they were transferred to Yiqian School for Confucian education, most of them referred to the unhappy experience in state schooling and described it in such negative terms as “boring,” “uninteresting,” “disappointing,” “stressful,” “depressing” and the like. Just as the interviewed parents did, many students complained that it was the fundamental reason of the overload of homework and endless examinations and tests that made them depressed, frustrated, and weary of study in state schools.

These negative emotions led to resisting practices against the examination-oriented schooling including, as students summarised, not doing homework, skipping classes, cheating in examinations, fighting with classmates, or arguing with teachers. The action of resistance always accompanies power and works as a technique for shaping conduct through the alteration of power

relations (Foucault 1990: 95). The power of the examination-oriented education created a school hierarchy based on test scores and rank in class, which not only classified the learners into different result-based categories but also hierarchised them in the classroom social network. To illustrate this point, I use a passage from a group discussion with the students in Qili Class, where two girls named Yanran and Xinyue criticised the score-based classification in compulsory education in terms of “good” and “bad” students:

Yanran [girl, 14 years old]: *The compulsory school [is somewhere] students evaluate and treat each other by test scores. If you scored high, they would play with you; but if you were amongst the bottom [in score], the good students who achieved high scores would despise you and regarded you as bad. The teacher allocated the front desks to the good ones but arranged the bad students to the rear. A sentence the homeroom teacher of my class often said is: “I don’t like you such bad students, and I wish you all were expelled,” and moreover, “It is your low test scores that pull down my wages.”*

Xinyue [girl, 13 years old, nod at Yanran]: *And the top students would pull up together to form an exclusive camp of their own.*

*(Group discussion, Student, Qili Class, June 2015)*

Another eleven-year-old boy shared a similar experience. He cried when telling his story of being in the compulsory school, where students were divided into several groups according to their academic results, and teachers treated good students who achieved higher scores much better than the bad ones whose grades were lower. As his examination scores always ranked the last in class, he was often despised, neglected and even cursed by the teacher. He had no friends at the compulsory school because, as he interpreted, “no one would play with a bad student.” He expressed his fears that he would possibly commit a crime or suicide if he stayed at the school any longer.

However, as mentioned earlier, not all students encountered academic barriers in state schools, and there were indeed a handful of them with good results. Nonetheless, this does not mean that the “good” students did not have a similar unhappy experience as the “bad” ones; and neither does it imply that their parents were not worried about their study performance. For example, the few “good” students admitted that sometimes the heavy schoolwork, tests, examinations and after-school classes made them feel overwhelmed, similar to

how their “bad” peers felt. As her mother, Mrs. Fan, recounted, Xiaoxiao, who excelled in study at her state school, once hid in the quilt at night secretly crying just because of decline in academic results, feeling guilty of disappointing her mother. So parents, even though their children did well at compulsory schools, were still worried that the excessive learning tasks and examinations would hurt their children’s physical and mental health.

Similarly, some parents acknowledged the compulsory education had merits. For example, some parents defended the state schools by arguing that students there could learn ordinary knowledge, which would help integrate them into the mainstream societal environment. So they did not think it appropriate to blame all education problems on compulsory schools; on the contrary, as one father justified, the state education was a mature education system, “If something goes wrong, it is because of people rather than the system itself.” Nevertheless, almost all parents and students, including even those who recognised the positive value of the state schools, criticised the examination-oriented education as too utilitarian or instrumental and viewed it as one of the essential reasons for choosing the Confucian education of classics reading.

That parents turned to Confucian classical education as an alternative choice to state education seems to suggest an assumption that Confucian education could help children get rid of the examination-oriented schooling system. Paradoxically, however, the Confucian pedagogy of the classical school shares much in common with the state school concerning rote learning, memorisation and imitation. The key to understanding the contradiction lies in unpacking the implication of *suzhi* discourse. As noted, the rhetoric of *suzhi*, rooted in the Confucian tradition of cultivation, always prioritises the transformation of the individual (see Brownell 2009; Jacka 2009; Kipnis 2006; D. Lin 2017; B. Wu and Devine 2017; Yi 2011b). As the parents argued, the examination-oriented compulsory education enforces students to spend too much time on merely competing for *external* scores and rankings, but fails to transform their *inherent* morality, creativity, learning enthusiasm and independent thinking. They believed, therefore, as I interpret, that Confucian classical pedagogy, which revives the traditional governing practices through

memorisation and repetition (Bakken 2000), and which consequently shifts the education focus onto the inherent cultivation of moral subjectivity, would contribute to promoting the transformation of students.

#### **5.4 Confidence in Confucian pedagogy: nationalism, civility and middle-class families**

The final key element of parental accounts of choosing to have their children study classics is a belief in how Confucian education is practised. While I will give a more detailed exploration of the Confucian pedagogy as a governing practice in the schooling domain in Chapter 6, I stress here that it is the theory of children reading classics proposed by Dr. Caigui Wang that produces and intensifies parents' confidence in Confucian pedagogy. As a result, parents desired children to read and memorise a large number of classics as early as possible, and believed such rote learning would lay the foundation for cultivating and transforming one's moral personality.

The attraction to Confucian pedagogy and the sense that this education needed to begin as a matter of urgency is first of all related to the parents' understanding of Confucian culture. In the context of China, Confucian culture is always connected with national identity. As Dryburgh (2011) indicated, Chinese identity is rooted in shared traditions that are most visibly shaped by Confucian thoughts (p. 11). Interestingly, parents' nationalistic identification with Confucian culture often manifests itself as shame or regret at not having received Confucian classical education when they were young. Take one mother, Mrs. Fan, as an example: "I, as a Chinese, have never learned the stuff [classics] left by our ancestors. So I read it not only myself but also require my daughter to learn. [...] The more I read, the stronger I feel the truth out of it." Similarly another mother, Mrs. Liu, when explaining why she wanted her son to learn Confucian classics, recounted, "I think today's children have been estranged from the Chinese traditional culture and they have not learned what they should have learned. So I want him [son] to learn [classics]." One father, Mr. Yan, asserted a firm belief in his eleven-year-old boy to learn classics because "[Chinese classics] are good, but we have never learned them before, so what we have not learned must be

learned.” Moreover, in multiple conversations, many other parents expressed disappointment about traditional Chinese/Confucian culture being abolished in the modern period since the early twentieth century and regretted that the system of cultural inheritance was interrupted. As separate interviewees asserted, “Classics are good things,” “Chinese traditional culture deserves our learning,” and “learning what was left by our ancestors is absolutely worthwhile.”

This sense of national pride evoked by the parents towards Confucian culture is turned into a sense of anxiety about children’s education. More than one of interviewed parents confessed that they experienced a desperate sense of urgency once they learned Wang’s theory. As one parent said, “I just felt there would be not enough time if my child didn’t learn classics immediately.” Specifically, two points of Wang’s theory played a crucial role in producing the parental desire for Confucian pedagogy. The first is the timing of education. As previously mentioned, Caigui Wang (2014a) claimed that the age period before thirteen was an irreversible “golden age of memory” of which a child must make full use to memorise classics; once missed, it would be impossible to make it up (pp. 104-6). Influenced by this notion, one mother, Mrs. Liu, described her feeling of urgency in this way: “By then [my son] was already nine years old. [...] I was worried about him if he would miss the optimal memory period. I was anxious about if he would be too late to memorise classics after the period.” Another father, Mr. Zhong, shared a similar experience:

[When my son] was in the spring term of the fifth grade [in primary school], I felt he could not go on like this because as Professor [Caigui] Wang argued, if a person did not read classics before the age of thirteen, they would be of no value in his memory development. Therefore I discussed with my wife to let [him] drop out of the state school.

*(Interview, Parent, Mr. Zhong, June 2015)*

The second point relates to the content of education. In his speeches Caigui Wang (2014a) lashes out at the modern education of vernacular Chinese (*baihua wen*), which does nothing but to “waste teachers’ time, kill children’s lives” (pp. 55-57). Alternatively, he advocates that the classical Chinese (*wenyan wen*) must be taught instead because it is a “high-level language” and enables humans to “absorb the wisdom of the ancestors” (Ibid). A mother, Mrs. Fan, recounted this

argument in a trembling voice:

I watched one video of Professor Wang giving a speech over and over again, but the more I watched, the more desperate I felt because of one sentence he said that, once the textbook [in compulsory school] was distributed, your child finished it in only one week and was even able to retell it, then you did not teach her any more; to teach her was to hurt her. I became extremely anxious [*hen zhaoji*] when I heard this. [...] [My daughter] has an excellent memory. [...] She could read the whole Chinese textbook in only one day, [...] and then repeated the articles to me! So how could I be not anxious? [...] I told myself that a child like my daughter could not be delayed anymore! Then I began to think if I could send her to read classics in a full-time [Confucian school].

*(Interview, Parent, Mrs. Fan, August 2015)*

These parents' anxiety, shaped by Caigui Wang's theory, is intertwined with the socialist polity's ever-increasing public appreciation of the traditional/Confucian culture. Some researchers argue that the revival of Confucianism has been made use of by the socialist party-state to fill an ideological vacuum and to legitimate the power of the government (see, e.g., Billioud 2007; Billioud and Thoraval 2007 & 2015; Gong and Dobinson 2017; Hammond and Richey 2015; D. Lin 2017; X. Wang 2017; B. Wu and Devine 2017). Many parents involved in the Confucian school approved of the governmental support of Confucian education. Some of them celebrated President Xi Jinping's visit to the Confucius Institute in 2013,<sup>41</sup> and interpreted it as a strong indication that the socialist government would step up its efforts to develop traditional culture. They also discussed how state-sponsored compulsory schools are paying increasing attention to traditional culture and raising the proportion of ancient Chinese poetry in the compulsory curriculum. And several informants felt encouraged that Tsinghua University, one of China's two top universities, has started to conduct independent recruitment of "special students for national studies" (*guoxue techang sheng*) in 2015.<sup>42</sup> The appreciation of the

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<sup>41</sup> See <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2014/0925/c164113-25731729.html>.

<sup>42</sup> The so-called "independent recruitment" means that some Chinese HE institutions are authorised to come up with a maximum 5% of the total undergraduate admission plan each year to conduct a separate selective examination of high school graduates before the national college entrance examination. Students



parents for the socialist state's positive attitude towards Confucianism reinforces their identification with classical education. For example, one father, Mr. Feng, concluded that having his son learn Confucian classics was "in line with the current governing ideology of the Chinese Communist Party" and therefore was "absolutely a correct and sound decision." He had a conviction that the decision not only "accords with the future trend of government" but also "steals a march on others by engaging with Confucian education so early."

The parents' commitment to Confucian education is, as noted in Chapter 2, also interlocked with the rising new middle-class families and their desire for educational success. Caigui Wang (2014a) claimed that classics-reading education is to "foster cultural giants" (*peiyang wenhua juren*), targeting three specific types of "cultural talents"—philosophers or thinkers, politicians and entrepreneurs (pp. 41-77); but across all of these, learning and memorising classics as early as in the "golden age of memory" is the fundamental approach to improve students' moral cultivation and establish within them "the foundation to be both humans and talents" (pp. 119-20). The attractive blueprint he outlined for producing "cultural giants" through as simple a method as classics memorisation exactly accords with the middle-class parents' strong desires for children to succeed in their future education. For example, Mrs. Fan, when she read about Caigui Wang in an article that stated that as long as a child recited 300,000 characters and words of classics, Wang was absolutely confident to cultivate him or her into a cultural talent, responded by saying, "I indeed have a dream in my heart; that is, I desire my daughter to succeed." She explained that

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with varieties of special talents are highly favoured in the separate examination. Anyone who succeeds in the examination can acquire the pre-admission qualification with the university. Starting from 2015, Tsinghua University initiated one more specific selection of "special students for national studies" in the overall independent recruitment program, with no more than ten people. See [http://join-tsinghua.edu.cn/publish/bzw/7545/2015/20150305154132965889617/20150305154132965889617\\_.html](http://join-tsinghua.edu.cn/publish/bzw/7545/2015/20150305154132965889617/20150305154132965889617_.html). However, this policy does not directly target classical schools, nor does it give privileges to students there. If students in classical schools want to compete for self-enrolment, they are required to take the college entrance examination (*gaokao*) as the prerequisite as all other students outside classical schools do. For this reason, they usually have to go back to state high schools to prepare for *gaokao*.

to educate her 13-year-old daughter to become a giant talent, she as a parent must endure all kinds of temptations and not be half-hearted but instead be completely firm in her conviction to insist on her child reading classics. She articulated the expectation upon her daughter to become a Confucian-inspired scholar or businesswoman in the future, but whatever she would become, she emphasised her daughter “must prioritise classics reading sincerely and obediently in the next few years,” because only through this would she “lay a solid moral foundation for either being a human or doing things or engaging in study.” She was confident that her daughter would become a person of high moral cultivation after years of learning Confucian classics and would therefore definitely achieve career success in the future. Another mother, Mrs. Liu, using the similar language, repeatedly affirmed the choice to have her son read classics was absolutely right and argued that she was “very determined in her heart [that her child] will surely be a person to ride on the crest of success [*chunfeng deyi de ren*] in the future,” as long as she—and he—did not give up on classics-reading education. She expected her son to become a person with profound ethical virtues, to set a good example for other children who would learn classics later, and to achieve professional success someday.

It looks like some form of indoctrination from the two cited mothers using the exact same language as Caigui Wang. I interpret this as parents’ imitation of Wang’s ideology, which is influenced by the tradition of China’s exemplary society that has lasted for thousands of years (Bakken 2000). Through reading his books and watching his speeches over and over again, they imitated his language style and words and followed the approach he suggested to send their children to full-time classical schools. The indoctrination of Wang’s educational ideology constituted a crucial means to attract parents to engage with classical education.

Furthermore, how can we understand the parents’ desire for their children’s education success? While both working-class and middle-class families commonly share this in today’s China (see Hong and Zhao 2014; Kipnis 2011a; Naftali 2016; Y. C. Wang 2014; B. Wu and Devine 2017), it is true that the middle-class families do have more economic, social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984 & 1986) than the working-class to win out in the education

competition (see Carlson and Hans 2017; Murphy 2013; Sheng 2012; X. Wu 2008 & 2012 & 2013). The majority of the interviewed parents came from middle-class families who had a good education background, identified with Confucian culture and had sufficient finances to send their children to private Confucian schools that charge expensive tuition fees. As indicated previously, the basic starting point for the middle-class parents to choose Confucian education is the expectation for children to cultivate good manners and etiquette through Confucian education and improve their moral qualities and social civilities. However, through doing so these elites are producing new social differentiation and hierarchy (see also Billioud and Thoraval 2015: 301). In terms of Rocca (2015), the rise of middle-class elites is intensifying the interest in traditional culture, which is reflected by their appreciation of classical ethics and aesthetics, consumption of traditional cultural products, attending fee-paying courses of national studies, and living a Confucian style of life (see also Hammond and Richey 2015a; Murray 2015). Through all of these pursuits, middle-class individuals attempt to improve their *suzhi* and *wenming* (civilities), and to assert their identity and distinction from the working-class (Rocca 2015: 90-91). In the present research, there is no data where parents acknowledged this explicitly in terms of class, which as I assume may be relevant to the unease or unaccustomedness of discussing class in ordinary life in China. However, as the presented data show, the middle-class parents indeed implied to regard it as the fundamental criterion of education success for a person to cultivate good manners through classics memorisation and through doing so reinforce social distinction, where

The distinction between bad and good manners follows the line of social hierarchy. Bad manners are those displayed by people at the bottom of the society and good manners those displayed by people situated above. (Rocca 2017: 125)

In this sense, it can be argued that middle-class families in China are participating in an ongoing process of civilisation (Elias 1991). Through participating in the revival of Confucianism, where both the distinction of social categories and the classification of individuals within social categories are simultaneously produced (Rocca 2017: 125) through (re)producing the lines of good/bad manners, high/low *suzhi*, and superior/inferior lifestyles.

## 5.5 Leaving the state school: from “straddlers” to “breakers”

I have described and explained three essential aspects of the middle-class parents’ choice for Confucian classics-reading education—anti-instrumental critique of the state education system, challenge against the examination-oriented compulsory schooling, and confidence in Confucian pedagogy. Building on this, this section focuses on how parents then achieved the transfer of their children from the state schools to Confucian education.

In general, leaving the compulsory school system and turning to the Confucian system is a process whereby many parents and students gradually transformed themselves from “straddlers” spanning both compulsory and Confucian education to “breakers” largely (but not completely) separating from the state schools. The straddling period when parents had their children read Confucian classics while they continued their study at compulsory schools usually lasted for a few years, and parents described it as “part-time classics reading” as opposed to the “full-time classics reading” exclusively in full-time Confucian school. There are various forms of part-time classics reading reported by the parental interviewees, for example children reading classics at home with the supervision of parents (usually the mother), or attending free weekend classics-reading classes or fee-paying summer camps for classics reading.<sup>43</sup>

Some parents also developed parent-child co-reading classes (*qinzi gongdu ban*) on weekends. For example, one interviewed mother of a nine-year-old boy, Mrs. Zhu, organised a free public class where parents and their children read and learned classics together every Saturday. She told me the initial goal of having the classics-reading class was to find companions for her son, who was in the compulsory school by then, and create a collective environment where children

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<sup>43</sup> For example, every summer from July to August Yiqian School organised a one-month summer camp for classics reading, attracting students from the compulsory schools to intensively learn and memorise classics in an enclosed school environment (5,000 RMB for one month, including tuition, board and lodging fees). Many students attended the summer camp before joining the school full-time to adjust to the pedagogy and campus life.

read classics together with mutual encouragement and supervision. Another father, Mr. Li, who claimed to hold a firm belief in Confucian education, had insisted on sending his son to a local part-time classics-reading study hall (*xuetang*) every weekend for five years until the boy transferred to Yiqian at the age of twelve. "I read classics as well, so did he," he said. "Regardless of the weather, we went there every Saturday and Sunday." Later he even worked as a volunteer staff member (*yigong*) in the study hall.

However, there increasingly appeared to be a sharp contradiction between part-time classics reading and compulsory schoolwork in the straddling phase. On the one hand, parents felt that reading classics merely in spare time was far from the character number of classics they expected children to be able to read and recite. On the other hand, many interviewed parents revealed that as children were already assumed to have a great deal of homework from the compulsory school, reading classics in spare time would undoubtedly increase the study burden upon them. Recalling this paradoxical experience, a mother, Mrs. Song, stated that she demanded her son, who was in Year Two at the time, to read classics two hours a day, one hour in the morning before school and one at night after school. Initially the boy did not like to read and could not even sit still, so she had to strengthen the supervision of his classics learning. However, because classics reading was occupying much of his time, her son found it difficult to handle the assigned homework from the compulsory schoolteachers and often finished it as late as after 10 o'clock in the evening. Faced with this situation, Mrs. Song asked her son to prioritise classics reading, even if at the expense of skipping schoolwork. Later on, she realised that merely reading classics at home could not guarantee enough time to inscribe classics into his mind. Therefore she started looking for a full-time Confucian school by searching on the Internet and finally sent her son to Yiqian School.

Mrs. Fan encountered a similar dilemma. She supervised her daughter to spend after-school time memorising classics from Year Four, but very soon she noticed that her daughter was struggling with a heavy load of schoolwork and so less time to read classics. Therefore she, as Mrs. Song did, told her daughter, "Classics reading was something you must keep on, but I allowed you to leave the schoolwork aside." Nevertheless, this approach aroused her daughter's

resistance:

She [daughter] often complained, “Look, none of my classmates read it [classics] except me!” [...] Indeed in the whole school, only she read classics. [...] But children would always take the teacher’s words as the imperial edict [*shengzhi*], so she would definitely find a way to finish the schoolwork. I was concerned that her time for classics reading would be less and less and she would be much exhausted if the situation continued.

(Interview, Parent, Mrs. Fan, August 2015)

Facing this dilemma, many parents decided to end the straddling period of learning classics in spare time and transfer children to the full-time Confucian school. In this regard, Professor Caigui Wang’s theory of classics reading, as mentioned as well in sections 5.2 and 5.4, plays a key role in governing parents’ final decision to leave the state school and choose the Confucian education. Specifically, he drew upon the following notion of *fuqi* (good fortune or blessing) to urge parents to take actions to choose the most appropriate Confucian classics-reading education for children. As he said,

Whether or not [a child has a chance to read classics] extensively [*daliang*] and how much is defined as “extensive” is closely associated with his *fuqi*. As I frequently mentioned, if a child does have much *fuqi*, he will be able to read many classics; if he only has less *fuqi*, he will not read many; but if he has no *fuqi*, he will have no chance to read classics at all. [...] A person can certainly produce *fuqi* by himself, but when he is a child, parents are responsible for making *fuqi* for him. (Caigui Wang 2010)

In the above passage, the notion of *fuqi* has two implications—it is both an occasion of fortune and luck and a state of happiness and wellbeing. On the one hand, it manifests one’s good luck if he/she has a chance to read classics. But more importantly, once a person has enough fortune to meet with classics-reading education, he is responsible for taking the initiative to produce his own blessings. This echoes the Confucian individualistic idea of *zide*, literally “getting it by or for oneself” (de Bary 1983: 45). Here we can see how the individual-oriented Confucian value reified as the discourse of *fuqi* shapes parents’ actions. Specifically, the notion of *fuqi* through associating the individual initiative with the sense of educational obligation implies that parents are endowed with an obligation to produce blessings for their children by active and autonomous actions. It looks like but in essence does not equate the neoliberal

rhetoric of parenting, which argues for parental responsibility and self-sufficiency, emphasises parenting quality, and assumes a causal relationship between parenting and outcomes (Budd 2005; Vincent 2017; Vincent et al. 2017).

The claim for parents' intense commitment to their children's education also echoes the broad cultural shift of parenting towards "intensive parenting," which means to require the enactment of parenting behaviours at the individual level, and which "is often presented as a conscious/willing adoption, whereby parents choose to parent in a particular way" (Smyth and Craig 2017: 107). It has been argued by some researchers that intensive parenting reflects middle-class values (see, e.g., Klett-Davies 2010; Vincent and Ball 2007; Vincent et al. 2017; Vincent et al. 2004; Shirani et al. 2012). As Vincent (2017) pointed out, middle-class parents living in welfare state and neoliberal age are "commonly assumed to be powerful and effective in the field of schooling" whereas working-class parents are presumed to be powerless and ineffective (p. 541). Relevant to the parents involved in the Confucian school, most of them come from middle-class families. Caigui Wang exhorted that whether their children have the luck to read classics or how many classics they happen to read, depends on whether parents have the courage and belief to stick with classics-reading education (in his words, to produce *fuqi* for children). In this way, parents assume an irreplaceable responsibility in the matter of children's education. Relying on the notion of *fuqi*, the theory of classics-reading education shapes parents' attitudes and actions towards (Confucian) education (as seen in previous sections).

However, ten out of the seventeen parental interviewees admitted they had encountered opposition from family members in making the final decision of breaking through the boundaries between the compulsory and Confucian education, either from partners or children's grandparents. Some disputes were fairly fierce. During the fieldwork, I was told by more than one informant this kind of story where both parents were caught in protracted and bitter quarrels surrounding the issue of whether children should leave the state education system and transfer to the full-time Confucian school, so severely that some families went on the brink of divorce. For example, Mr. Li acknowledged the

huge pressure from family members in the issue of his son's learning classics. As he said,

I am concerned about nothing other than this matter [letting the child read classics] will last long. My fear is that my wife and father-in-law [...] may give me tremendous pressure and cause me to do it half-heartedly. [...] My wife thinks that it is too risky [to let the child read classics] and judges me to be crazy. She cannot understand why I am so different from other parents. My father-in-law [...] does not understand it either. [...] He disagrees with the necessity of having the child leave the state school to learn classics.

(Interview, Parent, Mr. Li, May 2015)

Similarly, an interviewed mother, Mrs. Hua, took her boy back home two years after the child's full-time study in the Confucian school because she and her parents-in-law (*gonggong popo*) had spoken first—they would only let the child stay in Yiqian School for two years, and after that he must go back home and return to the state compulsory school. Another father, Mr. Zhong, mentioned that the relationship with his son's grandfather had deteriorated because of Mr Zhong's forcing the boy to leave the state school to learn Confucian classics. According to some parents, the disputes with family members, especially children's grandparents, barely stopped during the entire process of reading classics. Thus, parents had to spend plenty of time persuading other family members to understand and accept the classics-reading education. Here we can see that, implicitly or explicitly, family members were affecting the plans, desires, and expectations of parents for children reading classics. Even so, no interviewees reported that family members objected by questioning the values of Confucian classic literature in itself, but instead because of some external reasons, for example, concerns about children eating and sleeping far away from home at a boarding school, the status and qualification of the Confucian school, and the availability of academic certificates.

More importantly, while the individual will of the mother or father does play an important or even crucial role in adhering to the children's full-time reading classics, the significance of the opinions and attitudes of family members cannot be ignored. In this sense, even though it appears to be the autonomous actions of individual parents to have children leave the state schools, the process does have an impact on wider family relations. Not least for many parents who were



interviewed, it is the family, not the individual, who assumed the responsibility for the high tuition fees for the Confucian education. The dynamism of individualisation noted in Chapter 2, therefore, has not yet resulted in families becoming a fragile and disintegrated category, which as some researchers argue has happened in western societies (Beck 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Beck et al. 1997 & 2003; Beck and Lau 2005). In contrast, family bonds, obligation and commitment still play a fundamental role in shaping the actions, subjectivity, manners, social relations and moral values of today's Chinese individuals (Barbalet 2016; Faure 2006; Goodburn 2016; Yi-min Lin 2010; R. Murphy 2008; Peng 2004; Qi 2016a & 2016b; Stockman 2000; Xiong 2015; Y. Yan 2008 & 2009a & 2010 & 2011).

Besides family relations, another dimension from which parents do not completely dis-embed is the state-maintained education system in their seemingly self-directed choice of Confucian education, although they did have their children “leave” the compulsory schools. An example to illustrate this is the concern about the authorised student status (*xueji*). Almost all interviewed parents admitted that either they or other members of their family were worried about this issue when children were transferred from the compulsory school. The so-called *xueji* or student status refers to one's approved status as a student affiliated with a school and recorded in the official school system. Anxieties about the student status are most apparent among parents who sent children to Yiqian School in the early days when the school had not yet set up the official management system of student status. A unified student status information management system for all primary and secondary schools all over China was not established until September 2013.<sup>44</sup> In the system, every student has an exclusive, lifelong student status number, which will go with the pupil whenever he/she transfers to another school. Following this, Yiqian School completed the management system of student status in November 2014 with the supervision of the local education authority. However, prior to the year 2014, according to Mr. Huang, who worked as a section chief (*kezhang*) in the education bureau of the county (*xian*), “As the [Yiqian] School did not yet have the management system of

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<sup>44</sup> See [http://china.cnr.cn/ygxw/201308/t20130822\\_513390152.shtml](http://china.cnr.cn/ygxw/201308/t20130822_513390152.shtml).

student status information by then, it often encountered difficulty in operating the transferring.” Consequently, many students at Yiqian School had no student status for a long time. Moreover, as Mr. Huang revealed, Yiqian School did not have an independent management system for student status owing to the small size of the student population (a total of fewer than 120 students) but was affiliated with (*guakao*) one local public primary school.

In light of this, it is not difficult to understand why Mrs. Song, an interviewed mother, mentioned that she and her husband “did have concerns about the availability of student status.” Similarly another parent, Mrs. Lan, speaking of her anxiety about student status, said

When I sent him [son] there [at Yiqian], the School told me there was not yet student status. Once heard that I became extremely flustered. Damn, how could I send my son there so blindly?! There was no student status! Someone from the compulsory school explained this meant my child was an “illegal student,” having no student status [in Yiqian] and being kicked out of the compulsory school as well. [They said] my child was like a “black household” [*heihu*]. What a bad mood did I have at that time! I was extremely concerned.

(Interview, Parent, Mrs. Lan, July 2015)

This mother even tried to persuade the state compulsory school where her son had attended previously to keep his student status but failed. She acknowledged valuing the student status and the bundled study certificate (*xueli*) because she considered them as the institutional preconditions to continue the next stage of education. It is the case that a very small number of parents indicated they did not care about the issue of schooling status or certificate at all and admitted they had no plan for an exit route (*tuilu*), but for the majority concern about education status and certificate did influenced parents’ plans for their children’s future education, as will see more in Chapter 7. Here we see the complexities of parental attitudes towards state education system—even though they maintained a critical stance to it (as discussed in previous sections), they were perplexed about how their children could maintain the state-recognised schooling elements (student status or study certificate) in a different educational setting. If the critical discourse empowered them to break with the disposition of sending children to the compulsory education, a practice commonly taken for granted, their confusion and hesitancy also pointed to their dependency upon it.

These are reflective of the divided self, a term presented by Arthur Kleinman (2011) and introduced in Chapter 2 to describe the ambivalence of how contemporary Chinese individuals deal with the power of the socialist state. In interviews, I hardly heard any expression from parents to press the government to carry out reforms to solve their anxieties about student status. Some parents even compared their children to “white mice,” a metaphor of trial targets that would inevitably be imperfect or even encounter failure, as being in the early stage of Confucian education revival. More importantly, almost all interviewed parents showed an explicit tendency to blame themselves for the possible consequences and uncertainties of children’s educational choices rather than the restricted political conditions of the Chinese education system. In light of this, I emphasise that this introspective way of dealing with one’s self and political authority is precisely reflective of the Confucian notion of *ziren* (de Bary 1983: 45), which means one must take full responsibility for one’s own actions.

In brief, while parents are determined to break the monopoly of the public state school system and have children study in the private Confucian schools, they cannot totally disrupt their and their children’s association with the state school system. In light of this, it is a rather self-contradictory action for parents to “leave” the state compulsory schools—it seems to be the parents’ autonomous choice but to a certain extent is still managed and controlled by the state education regime. This point once again takes us back to thinking about the Chinese path to individualisation. The reliance upon the state education system and the adherence to family relations discussed in the above indicate that (1) it is indeed too early to judge these “traditional” categories as “zombie categories” in China; and (2) the individualisation of China is an authoritarian process (Hansen 2015: 174-185) and is subject to the management of the party-state (Y. Yan 2009b: 289 & 2010: 509).

## **5.6 Conclusion**

This chapter highlights the complexity of parents’ choice and desire for Confucian classical education. Through describing the accounts and actions parents took to actualise the choice of Confucian classical education, I show that

while interviewed parents maintained a critical attitude towards compulsory education, they paradoxically demonstrated dependence on the state school system.

On the one hand, parents raised critical comments based on instrumentalism to challenge the state compulsory school system and its examination-oriented education. The technique of critique plays a significant role in shaping their resistant mentality to the state schools and governing the action to leave compulsory education. As Foucault (1997) explained, critique is an 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). In other words, while the modern subject cannot use the technique of critique to extricate oneself from power relations completely, they can yet achieve a certain degree of freedom in a context of constraint through navigating power relations in ways that attempt to minimise constraints (D. Taylor 2011: 180). In light of this, I argue that it is through employing the techniques of critique that parents of the Confucian school reflected upon how *not* to be governed by the power of the compulsory school system and questioned its legitimacy, which has been commonly and broadly taken for granted. In this sense, the critique of the compulsory schooling works as an “emancipatory practice” (Ibid), which provokes the critical parents to embrace the spirit of individuality, to break out of the fixed path towards compulsory-style state schooling and to make a choice for Confucian education.

However, the practice of critique does not result in the entire separation of parents from the state education system, and the seemingly autonomous actions of leaving the compulsory school and choosing the Confucian education are *not* entirely separated from either state power (in the field of schooling) or family relations. Most interviewed parents were perplexed by children’s student status and study certificate, so seriously that they were cautious about having their children transfer to the full-time Confucian school. Even though they criticised Chinese education policy, they did not show scepticism about the CCP government, but instead appreciated the positive and tolerant attitude of the socialist party-state towards Confucianism and Confucian education. In addition, parents as individuals had to face the obstruction of other members in their

families on the issue of children leaving the state schools, and their justification for this issue was familial as well, for instance, to shape children who are caring not selfish. These suggest that family relations and values play a substantial role in parental choice of Confucian education. In short, the critical attitude of parents towards the compulsory education is intertwined with their dependence upon the state school system. With this we see how parents involved in Confucian education in post-Mao China become critical and self-determined individuals who nevertheless are not divorced from the “traditional” categories of family relations and the state.

Another factor showing the contradiction of the Chinese path to individualisation is social class. The majority of interviewed parents come from urban middle-class families. I argue that their call for Confucian classical virtues can be interpreted as the emerging new middle-class elites resorting to Confucian resources to civilise their children, while the discourse of *suzhi* plays a crucial role in not only transforming and improving them but also distinguishing them from other social groups by producing new hierarchies and lines of civility (Rocca 2015 & 2017).

The middle-class parents’ desire for Confucian moral qualities is deeply embedded in the public sense of moral anxiety that has permeated Chinese society. As a result of individualisation dynamism in the market-based reform era post-1978, China has been experiencing a moral shift away from collective values of responsibility and self-sacrifice to a more individualistic morality that emphasises rights and self-cultivation. Scholars have argued that the conflicts between individualistic and collective values have resulted in the widespread social sensibility of moral crisis (Kleinman et al. 2011: 8; see also Kleinman 2011; Y. Yan 2008 & 2009a & 2011). However, as the individualisation of Chinese society embraces an incomplete or unbalanced comprehension of individualism and partially understands it as utilitarian individualism or simply selfishness, it not only makes Chinese individuals egotistic and uncivil but also amplifies “the negative aspects of individualisation, such as the relentless individual competition and decline of social trust” (Y. Yan 2009b: 289). It is in such a context of moral shift that the traditional Confucian pedagogy of memorisation and repetition (Bakken 2000) is revived. Children would cultivate Confucian

ethical virtues and discipline and transform their manners and civility so as to counteract the effects of negative individualisation in contemporary China (see also Billioud and Thoraval 2015: 11).

Finally, we see (and will see more in Chapter 6 and 7) a Confucian version of individualism emerges in parents' accounts of why they chose Confucian education. In this chapter it is shown by the Confucian notion of *zide* (getting it by or for oneself), reflected in the confidence in Confucian classics-reading education as understood by Caigui Wang's theory of classics reading, and of *ziren* (bearing the responsibility oneself), reflected by the parents taking the responsibility for any possible consequences of their children learning classics in a full-time Confucian school.

Following this, I refer to the individual with Confucian values as the "Confucian individual," which is broadly defined as someone who is not only indoctrinated and moralised by Confucian creed but also practises as an individual actor in Confucian domains such as the newly formed one of classical schooling. The Confucian individual refers not only to the Confucian-inspired parents but also to the Confucian-educated students. So what specific teaching practices and processes exist in the Confucian school for cultivating students into autonomous, learned Confucian individuals? This question is explored further in the next chapter.

## ***Chapter 6 Cultivating the Confucian autonomous, learned individual: Memorisation, power and contradiction***

### **6.1 Introduction**

Anyone who entered Yiqian School would see a big poster pasted onto the wall of the Teaching Building. On the poster is a brief introduction to Yiqian School including its missions, qualifications, targets, principles and spirit, school motto, regulations of study, information about school administration, and the names of the teaching team. Alongside there are photographs exhibited of visits from officials of the local Education Bureau, group photos of all six classes, and pictures of smiling students dressed in traditional Han Chinese costumes. By demonstrating these literal and visual symbols, the Confucian classical school intends to make an impression on visitors of the high quality of professionalisation in classics teaching, the intimacy of the school with local officials, the solidarity of teaching staff and the happiness of students.

When I initially saw the poster, I was struck by a sentence that clarified the principle of teaching in this Confucian school:

The school devotes itself to educating students in accordance with their natural ability, and applies the individualised approach to teaching as best adapted to them.

*(School Poster, April 2015)*

The above stated teaching principle is the literal translation of the Chinese phrase “*yincai shijiao*” (YCSJ), which implies to suit the teaching to the ability of the pupils, or put it simply “individualised education.” YCSJ, which was initially proposed by Confucius, the recognised founder of Confucianism, has been a fundamental principle of Confucian education throughout Chinese history. Notwithstanding, I found the fact that this phrase was on the poster at the school unusual because in the past century-long period, the condemnation of Confucianism by both intellectuals and political campaigns has produced a stereotype that Confucianism is an authoritarian ideology that represses individuality and therefore Confucian classical education ignores learners’ aptitude. This is clearly reflected in the discussion on Chinese individualisation,

where Confucianism is often presumed to embrace the absolute primacy of the collective over the individual, being something from which the Chinese individual strives to dis-embed to pursue modernity (Y. Yan 2010: 492-3 & 2011: 43).

However, Yiqian School's claim of rejuvenating the YCSJ teaching principle evokes an individual-oriented side to Confucianism. In addition to the above-quoted poster, the notion of YCSJ was inscribed in various documents. For example, it was described in the rules for Qibo Class in this way: "Hope all students [...] develop the capability of self-disciplining, study independently, improve oneself to a greater extent, and achieve self-perfection gradually." Either on the official website of the school, or in the brochures to parents, or in the annual reports to the local Bureau of Education, the idea of YCSJ was explicitly written as the primary teaching principle. The highlight of individualised teaching resulted from the pedagogic individualisation reform in Yiqian School since early 2013, as mentioned in Chapter 3. While the personalised pedagogy was finally mixed with the authoritarian one in September 2014, the School kept stressing the importance of YCSJ since then.

But how did the Confucian school actualise YCSJ? What concrete methods, techniques and processes did the school take to educate students in accordance with it? What was the outcome and efficacy of the teaching and learning practices? What kind of subject were the students cultivated to be? And did they resist such subjectification? To explore these questions, this chapter will engage with Foucault's concepts of disciplinary power and subjectification, whose meanings have been given in the literature review chapter. Particularly, disciplinary power, which works through getting subjects to regulate oneself by surveillance and eventually self-surveillance, offers a productive approach to analyse how children were cultivated to become autonomous, learned persons through supervision and examination in classics reading.

The present chapter bases itself on observation and interview data to discuss various types of practices in the Confucian school, focusing on how students are shaped as autonomous, self-disciplined individuals. In the following sections, I will first describe the practices of memorising classics practices which aim to cultivate students as autonomous learners and which can be understood



through Foucault's concept of disciplinary power. Before reaching a conclusion, I will discuss what participants (teachers, parents and students) thought of the mechanical approach of memorising classics, reflect upon their arguments about the subjectification processes of students, and reveal how students resisted the coercion of this pedagogical approach.

## **6.2 Becoming the autonomous learner: memorisation, discipline and punishment**

### ***6.2.1 Memorisation: an individualised approach?***

To draw a general picture, according to my fieldwork at Yiqian School and multiple interviews with participants, the school regarded its primary goal as being to cultivate students to become autonomous learners capable of memorising a large number of classics. The schoolteachers articulated their expectation for pupils to acquire consciousness of self-discipline and self-management in reciting classics, to enhance the capability of self-regulation and self-control in moral cultivation, and finally to create themselves as autonomous learners who studied for themselves (*weiji zhixue*) rather than for anyone else.

We can gain an understanding of the emphasis of contemporary Confucian education on learner autonomy by embedding it in a broader background. Although the cultivation of autonomy especially in personality and morality has been a central goal of western liberal education (see Bonnett and Cuypers 2003; Dearden 1972; Hand 2006; Levinson 1999), it is the other way round in modern Chinese education (Halstead and Zhu 2009; Littlewood 1999). However, since the reform era of post-1978, this situation has begun to change with the rise of *suzhi* (quality-oriented) education, although Chinese education reform increasingly focuses more on learner autonomy than personal autonomy—the aim of the former is limited to encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning (Littlewood 1999: 71), whereas the latter refers to “the capacity of the individual to make free, informed, rational decisions and thus to take responsibility for his or her own life” (Halstead and Zhu 2009: 444). Despite this, even learner autonomy is hardly a reality in the classroom owing to the

residual impact of *yingshi* (examination-oriented) education (Dello-Iacovo 2009; Hansen 2013 & 2015; Halstead and Zhu 2009; Kipnis 2011b; D. Lin 2017; Lou 2011a& 2011b).

This is reflected in the interviews with Mrs. Ziqing Zheng and Mr. Xiamin Chen, both being the founders of the Confucian school and having the most profound influence on the pedagogy formation and daily schooling. They gave critical comments on the current state-sponsored compulsory education by arguing that it failed to develop students' independent thinking and autonomous learning.<sup>45</sup> Hence, they drew the idea of individualised education from the Confucian educative principle of *yincai shijiao* and proposed the corresponding teaching method of "one teacher for one student" (*yi-dui-yi*).<sup>46</sup> Notably, the individualised principle of teaching was even applied to reform the previous approach of repetitive memorisation of classics, which the two founders argued was no different to the examination-oriented mainstream education but assumed students as passive and submissive conformists rather than active and autonomous learners. In this regard, Mr. Chen said:

I find that [our previous practices of classics reading] had the same teaching principle and methods as the mainstream examination-oriented education, except that the educational content was changed from the state-stipulated textbooks to Confucian classic literature. Let us say on the teaching principle, [we guided pupils to read classics like as,] "All attention! Read after me!" May I ask who the master of the study is here? It's the teacher! So the students become merely followers. Isn't it the same as the test-oriented education? In the mainstream schooling, the basic teaching method is "All attention! Listen to me!" In the same way do the students become passive followers whereas the teacher acts as the leader! Therefore, what we did previously was in principle to assume students as passive and compliant, merely dragged along by the teacher in the learning process and not feeling happy at all.

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<sup>45</sup> Similar criticisms can be found in Chapter 5, where parents drew on anti-instrumentalism to criticise the examination orientation of today's Chinese education system.

<sup>46</sup> The so-called *yi-dui-yi* is literally understood as "one teacher educates one student" in the teaching process. It does not mean to assign one exclusive teacher to take care of one student but implies that, according to Mrs. Zheng, teachers should differentiate and personalise the teaching contents and approaches exactly in accordance with the students' natural ability.

(Interview, Teacher, Mr. Chen, May 2015)

Mrs. Zheng, who held the post of principal in Yiqian School, agreed with the individualised principle in teaching and learning but defended the method of “reading classics extensively” (*daliang dujing*). As described in detail in *Setting the Scene*, Chapter Three, the method was proposed by Dr. Caigui Wang and served as the dominant pedagogy in Yiqian School for a long time, but was attacked by Mr. Chen when he initiated his version of Confucian individualised education. However, since Mr. Chen left the school in 2014, Mrs. Zheng resurrected the mechanical memorisation of classics and tried to combine it with the individualised teaching principle. As she argued, while the Confucian school still targeted students to memorise a large number of classics, it strived to achieve the goal with an individualised but not collective approach. Consequently, Yiqian School created a new method of what I call “individualised memorisation,” whose basic idea is to vary the arrangement of workload and content in classics learning based on the pupils’ capabilities in memory. The purpose of such individualised pedagogy was, as Mrs. Zheng recounted, to reduce the enforcement upon students and to intensify their self-directed learning capability. She noted,

In ancient China, teachers taught students according to their natural ability. What does it mean? [Let’s say,] if a child is able to read ten characters, but the teacher teaches him only eight; if he can read a hundred, but the teacher just allows him to learn eighty. In addition, let’s say two children who study together in the same class, even if they learn the same contents in the beginning, their progresses will definitely become sharply different ten days later. Therefore, theoretically, the teacher cannot organise students to learn classics in a uniform way. He must educate them according to their merits and use the teaching methods as the best adapted. It has been such an educative style since the ancient times in China, that is, one teacher to teach one student.

(Interview, Teacher, Principal Zheng, June 2015)

The above analysis by Principal Zheng implies the affinity of classics memorisation with learning autonomy. As Confucian education includes the tradition of cultivation (*jiaohua*, to transform someone by education) (see Culp 2006; Hwang 2013; Ivanhoe 2000; Kipnis 2006 & 2011; J. Li 2016; D. Lin 2017; Wu and Devine 2017), this means the practice of memorisation serves as a way

to improve autonomy in both learning and personality/morality. According to Bakken (2000), memorisation and rote learning enable the educated individuals to enhance the “constancy of mind and self-control” (p.143) and to develop “a constant attitude towards the norms, thus ensuring proper conduct even in the absence of direct surveillance” (p.169). As I have argued in Chapter 5, the achievement of learning and moral autonomy is one of the reasons why parents chose the Confucian education for their children. Also, this is echoed by the following words from the school poster, which stress the integration of learning (memorising) classics with moral improvement.

To seek knowledge and to learn how to be a decent human should go hand in hand.

Students are obligated to merge classics learning with ordinary life practices and to make inner cultivation and academic performance into one.

*(School Poster, April 2015)*

However, as we will see in the following sections, the so-called “individualised memorisation” approach is achieved in practice through disciplinary power. Consistent with what has been elaborated in Chapter 3, this chapter will evidence that such an approach is a hybrid pedagogy that leads to autonomy/individuality *and* coercion/authority.

### ***6.2.2 Training the learning autonomy***

As Dianna Taylor (2011) indicated, subjectification is a two-way process: while we constitute ourselves as subjects (we are enabled) by way of various “practices of the self”, simultaneously we are constituted (we are constrained), in so far as the way in which we undertake these practices is shaped by institutions, norms and values of the society (p. 173). In this section, I turn to describe what specific practices the Confucian school invented to cultivate students as subjects of autonomous learners who undertook the claimed individualised manner of classics memorisation. I primarily use the observation data collected in Qishun Class, one of the total of six classes at Yiqian School, made up of 22 boys aged from six to twelve.

In the following parts, I will describe five types of practices through which the school produces autonomous learners through classics memorisation:

minimum memorisation, making the study schedule, examination, competition, and mutual surveillance. These practices are mostly consistent with disciplinary power. The function of disciplinary power, as Foucault (1979) indicated, “is to ‘train.’ [...] Discipline ‘makes’ individuals; it is the specific techniques of a power that regards individuals as objects and as instruments of its exercise” (p. 170). Disciplinary power yields effects by targeting the body, exerting control over bodily activities, and making it “more obedient as it becomes more useful” (p. 138). The exercise of discipline requests a coercion mechanism by means of observation, normalisation and examination (p. 184). In this sense, disciplinary power involves (re)shaping the non-corporal soul, personality and consciousness more than exerting physical violence upon the body, and therefore it refers to the discourse of scientific knowledge (p. 29). The individuals are trained in repetitive practices according to norms and learn to control and regulate one’s own behaviours and attitudes through the external surveillance (p. 176-7).

#### 6.2.2.1 *Minimum memorisation*

I start this part with the following piece of field notes.

“The Master Confucius said, ‘There may be those who act without knowing why. I do not do so. Hearing much and selecting what is good and following it; seeing much and ...’ Uh ... and ...” Again, Wenbo was stuck for the third time that day when he tried to recite in front of the teacher the given section of Book VII *Shu Er* of *The Analects of Confucius*, a fundamental classic in Confucianism. His face turned red, eyes tightly closed, brows knitted in a frown, as if he was exerting all his mental strength to retrieve the text. He was used to putting two index fingers over his ears when reciting, apparently in order to stop the noise from the outside and to help him to concentrate on memorising the passages written in classical Chinese. Struggling for 20 seconds, he opened his eyes, loosened brows, put hands down from ears, and looked at the teacher anxiously.

The third failure rendered him rather frustrated. It was the third class of the day, but he recited less than 100 characters. He had a minimum character number for memorisation every day, which was 220 words, just as all other students did, but whose numbers varied according to their evaluated different abilities in memorisation. Miss Xu, the teacher who was

sitting in front of a desk and facing all of the students, a portrait of Confucius hanging on the wall just behind her, did not blame Wenbo. She shut *The Analects of Confucius*, the book on which her eyes had been focused when Wenbo was reciting, and said in a patient tone:

Wenbo, do you know why you cannot recite? [That's because] you have not read the texts enough times. Do not force yourself to memorise, and do not cram. Slow down and be patient. Just do the best as you can. Read the section at least 20 times, and you will naturally be able to recite.

Wenbo nodded slightly, the look of anxiety much alleviated. He picked up the textbook on the desk and gently bowed to the teacher, saying "Thank you, teacher," and returned to his seat to embark on reading the given section aloud again and again.

(Field notes, Qishun Class, April 2015)

The pressure that Wenbo suffered came from the difficulties in practising the technique of "minimum memorisation." In Qishun Class, the daily task of classics recitation was divided into two parts: one was the *minimum number of characters*, which was the compulsory task and constituted the main content of everyday study; and the other was the *additional characters*, which were added to students' workload once they completed the minimum. In the view of Mr. Sun, the homeroom teacher of Qishun Class, the separation of the minimum and additional tasks signified the practical operation of the individualised principle of teaching and learning. On the one hand, as he explained, *the minimum task* was based on the evaluations of the disparities of students' memorisation ability. The basic assignments that varied from person to person aimed to, in the words of Mr. Sun, achieve such a state whereby students would be able to "eat something" but not enough, insofar as they would keep the motivation to "eat" (memorise) more. On the other hand, *the additional part* for memorisation was set to stimulate the students' agency in order to maximise their potential in classics recitation and actualise the goal of "abundantly reading classics" (*daliang dujing*).

How did teachers identify the minimum character number for each student? Firstly, the teacher asked students to suggest the number that they believed most corresponded to their self-assessed memorisation ability. The teacher then reassessed these numbers and might make corrections according to his or her judgment of the students' performance in classics memorisation. In addition, the

minimum character number for memorisation was not static but would be adjusted each month. Table 4 displays the minimum character numbers of all students in Qishun Class in April 2015.

**Table 4: Minimum character numbers of all students in Qishun Class (April 2015)**

Students Represented by Capital Letter	Minimum Character Numbers
A	300
B	260
C	400 (650)*
D	200
E	300 (350)
F	500
G	350
H	1,600 (700)
I	300
J	700 (600)
K	200
L	400
M	300
N	280
O	260
P	500
Q	450
R	650
S	350
T	100
U	370
V	200

\* The numbers in parentheses refer to the characters reported by the students before the minimum numbers were finalised. Students were also allowed to modify the initial

self-proposed minimum characters after consulting with the teacher.

Note: The table is made by the author.

Table 4 shows how the idea of the individualised memorisation approach was put into practice in Qishun Class, and manifests the fact that the class did respect students' differences in memorisation, as the minimum characters varied considerably. Based on the table, of all the students, the lowest number is 100 while the highest 1,600. The student with the lowest number was the youngest in the class, only six years old. As the teacher thought he was too young to be sufficiently able to do much self-study, it was not appropriate to assign him an excessive workload beyond his capabilities. And the pupil who set 1,600 as the minimum number for memorisation self-reported 700 in the beginning but increased this following the suggestion of Mr. Sun. The boy admitted no difficulty in completing the minimum task because the figure 1,600 contained both the characters for memorising new contents and reviewing those already recited. Moreover, the average minimum character number for the whole Qishun Class was 408 in April 2015, but if we take out the highest, the mean value comes to 350.

The technique of minimum memorisation produced two outcomes. On the one hand, as most pupils in Qishun Class reported having no difficulty in accomplishing the minimum assignment, they felt that Mr. Sun assumed that they had not "eaten" enough. For example, some boys often asked for additional tasks, as many as double the minimum. But on the other hand, the minimum recitation put pressure on a handful of students like Wenbo, the boy mentioned above who encountered difficulty in finishing even the bottom line of daily memorisation. In this case, the teacher would continue to encourage the student to try his best and make use of the rest of the day to complete the minimum memorisation. And if necessary, the teacher would reduce the minimum character number to the extent that the student was able to reach, so as not to dampen his enthusiasm and interest in memorising classics.

Having described the practice, I argue that it involves disciplinary power through presupposing norms and coercion to create students' two attitudes towards learning. Firstly, the compulsory minimum task reinforced students to



be honest to their memorisation results and encouraged them to constantly assess and adjust their learning abilities. Secondly, the additional task motivated students to do their best to recite as many classics as possible. It is true that the disparities in students' memorisation ability were respected in the teaching and learning process. We can see this in students' great difference in the characters of the two divided tasks. But some coercion still existed and all pupils had to follow the same pattern of first completing the minimum task and then the additional one.

### *6.2.2.2 Study schedule and examination*

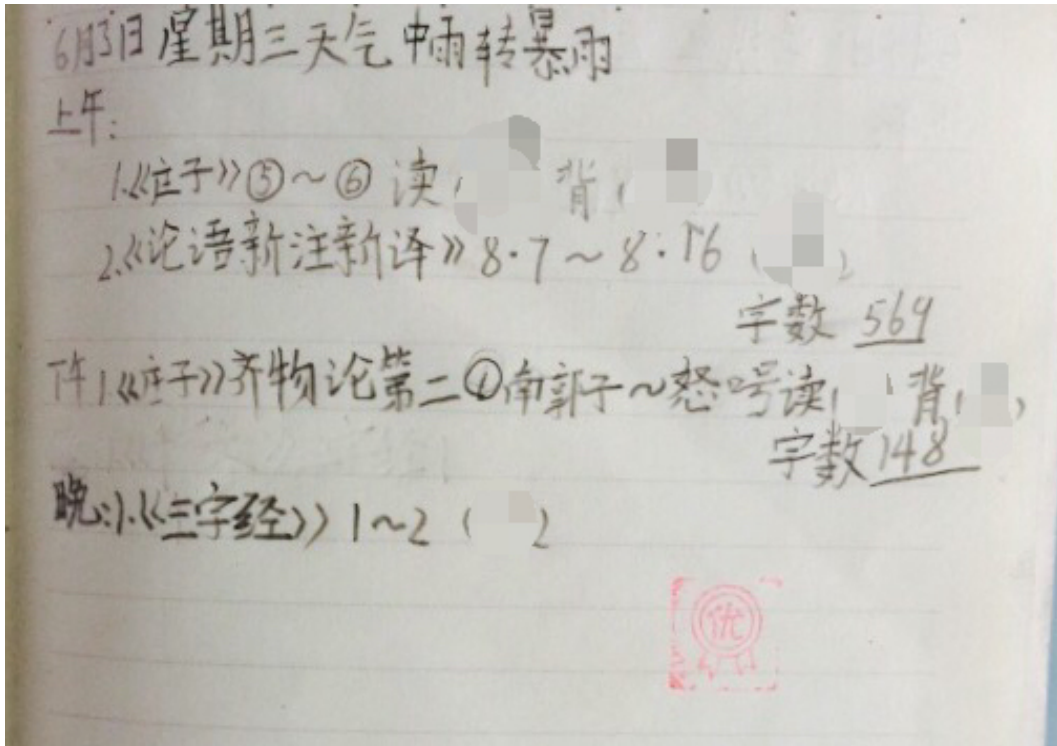
Following a study schedule alongside the daily examination of memorisation is the technique students were encouraged to apply in the classical school. It is through practising such a technique that students would routinise the everyday memorisation tasks—both the minimum and the additional. The primary purpose of this practice is, similar to the above minimum memorisation tasks, to allow students to cultivate the consciousness and capability of supervising themselves in the process of learning classics, so as to become autonomous learners. According to the fieldwork in Qishun Class, all students began each day with making a study schedule.

“Attention, please! Please take out your schedule notebook and begin to write your study plan for today!” Said Miss Yang, loudly, while students were still chatting. With these words, the noise immediately disappeared and students obediently embarked on what Miss Yang asked and took their schedule notebooks out of the desk drawers.

*(Field notes, Qishun Class, April 2015)*

It was the first class of the day, also the preparation class for students to develop a study schedule for the whole day. I give an example of one student's self-study schedule on 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2015 (see Figure 1). While the specific tasks in study plans varied from person to person, the schedule had a common structure—it was divided into three parts, the morning, the afternoon and the evening, and was titled with the date, day of the week and the weather, all of which made it look like a diary. The main contents of the scheduled tasks included memorising classics (written in classical Chinese, *wenyan wen*),

reciting annotations (written in modern vernacular Chinese, *baihua wen*), and practising calligraphy (*shufa*).



**Figure 1: One student's self-study schedule (Image taken in June 2015)**

Memorising the original classics written in classical Chinese but without any interpretations was the first and most essential task, whose range was marked from one specific sentence to another, specified with character numbers. Memorisation was separated into two procedures, “read” (*du*) and “recite” (*bei*), so that students had to first read one passage a certain number of times (at least 20) and then recite it. The school and the class specified the first step, “read,” as the precondition to achieving the “natural” completion of the second step, “recite.” Students were discouraged from rashly reciting without reading a sufficient number of times. This is similar to the practice of memorisation-based teaching in ancient China. For example, according to Bakken (2000), Zhu Xi, a representative of Neo-Confucianism who lived in the Song Dynasty (1130 to 1200), admired the method of repetition and recitation and advised students to read a book “from front to back over and over again, to the point of ‘intimate familiarity’” (pp. 142-3). In the view of Zhu Xi, the repetitive practice of reading

and memorising classics “serves to clear one’s mind, and to make the social rules a part of oneself and one’s own body” (p. 143).

We can also draw the approach of Erving Goffman to interpret the memorisation practice of reading classics. The methods of repetition and recitation that students used involve the conceptual terms of routinisation and ritualisation. According to Goffman (1971), individuals in highly *routinised* environments are concerned with the rule of self-respect and protect one’s own image. They restrain their emotional involvement so to behave according to situational properties (demeanour) (Ibid: 62). However, in highly *ritualised* environments, individuals are not only concerned with the rule of self-management but also take into consideration the thoughts of others so to maintain another’s image (deference) (Goffman 1967). The Confucian school expected students to cultivate a self-disciplined personality and become “well demeaned individuals” (Ibid: 37) through repeatedly reading and memorising classics, as well as to keep a reverent attitude towards the classic literature and ancient sages. There is no space to develop in detail work on ritual and routine here, but I do acknowledge its relevance to the data analysis.

Memorising the annotations (*zhujie*) written in modern vernacular Chinese was not included in classics learning at the school until 2015. The primary reason for its inclusion is that the Confucian school was criticised for having students mechanically memorise the classic esoteric literature, but they had no idea of its meaning. Reflections on this issue resulted in a radical pedagogical shift in the Confucian school from 2013 to deal with the problem (see Chapter 3). Later, when Principal Zheng attempted to reconcile the contradiction between individualised teaching and classics memorisation following the approach of “individualised memorisation,” memorising annotations was included as part of the solution. However, in the view of the teachers in Qishun Class, the rote learning of annotations did not contribute to students’ understanding of the classics, because pupils were still only memorising them mechanically. Ancient Chinese intellectuals since Confucius have developed a systematic methodology of interpreting the classical texts, by which individuals can create new ideas from critical analysis of the old classics (Z. Wu 2011 & 2014; see also T. Bai 2011; Deng 2011; Hayhoe 2014; Kipnis 2011b; S. Tan

2011). But this was hardly included in the teaching practices in Yiqian School.

Of the three tasks listed in Figure 1, the third and last is calligraphy practice, which includes two types: while the young students wrote with the hard-tipped pen (*yingbi*), the older practised with the soft brush pen (*ruanbi*). The pupils followed the method of *linmo* in writing practice—first, to trace in black ink over a few given characters printed in red on paper (which is called *miaohong*) and do it again and again; finally, to imitate the characters in the spaces without the red trace. As Bakken (2000: 137-141) has argued, the practices of repetition and imitation, along with the memorisation of classics, have continued for centuries in the history of Chinese education and been viewed as the instruments of subjectification through the logic of exemplarity.

The technique of designing a study schedule worked as a quantifiable practice for students to govern themselves as well as to be supervised by the teacher, through making the everyday learning process calculable and standardised by numbers of words, page numbers and the number of times of reading and reciting. It classified the study procedure into concrete step-by-step parts, where students were expected to manage and regulate the rate of advance on their own. The pupils marked all tasks in numeric sequence, as specific as characters and pages, and worked independently to complete the serialised assignments (see Figure 1).

Teachers were responsible for examining every item on the self-study plan. The students had to pass the oral examination by reciting all the required passages. The examination technique worked as follows. First, the student must take the initiative to walk to the teacher and politely remind the teacher that they had completed some part of the memorisation and had come for the examination; then, the student handed the book to the teacher in a respectful manner and repeated classics from memory. When reciting each time, the student could only be prompted on the forgotten characters twice at most. Once the student passed the examination, the teacher would sign their name in brackets, usually only their surname, which indicates the section was completed; however, if the student did not pass, they would be asked to read the passage more times and wait for the next-round of checks. For every check, the section to recite must be no less than 100 characters, as the school stipulated. Once the

minimum assignment was completed, students were encouraged to decide by themselves how many extra tasks to add to the schedule (here it links with the previous mentioned technique of minimum memorisation). When all schoolwork was done, the student could ask for a stamp at the end of the study plan that read “Excellent,” “Work harder,” “Recitation done,” “You are great,” “First rate,” “Read over,” “100 points,” and the like. Sometimes the teacher made comments about the student’s recitation performance and signed their name and the date in the given area.

Besides the everyday examination, the school adopted another practice to examine students’ recitation of an entire classic book (*baoben*). This is an approach by which a student recites a classic book from the first character to the last in one go without getting stuck in the middle. Once a student finished the memorisation of a whole classic book, he or she would be required to spend an exclusive period of time reviewing each part of the book and connecting them all together to recite. The school considered *baoben* as an indicator of showing educational achievement, and even recorded the process of the student reciting an entire book into a VCD and sent it to his or her parent.

The quantifiable self-study plan provided the teacher with an open-and-shut picture of what tasks were included and how and when the students were scheduled to finish them. So it allowed the teacher to observe and control the entire learning process. The technique of examination, which Foucault (1979) regarded as a practice of facilitating the exertion of disciplinary power, incorporates hierarchical observation and judgment into a “normalising gaze” (p. 184). Foucault indicated that disciplinary power manifests its potency by arranging objects, and “the examination is, as it were, the ceremony of this objectification” (p.187). In implementing the method of examination, the teacher served as the judge of classics memorisation and acted as a reminder to urge students to keep on learning when they slackened. Simultaneously, the students were thus turned to become objects subjected to surveillance and examination.

### 6.2.2.3 Competition

The third type of practices for cultivating learning autonomy is to create a competitive environment in classics memorisation. Although external rivalry with others often manifested as competition, the Confucian school emphasised that the ultimate goal was to guide students to compete with oneself and achieve constant self-transformation and self-improvement, which therefore conforms to the Confucian tradition of self-cultivation (Kipnis 2006 & 2011b; D. Lin 2017; W. Tu 1993).

One way to foster a competitive atmosphere among students was ranking by the memorisation character numbers. The teacher in Qishun Class published the top five students who most excelled in classics memorisation every week and wrote their names and character numbers on the blackboard. In the meantime, the results of the memorisation exams were announced in the social media WeChat group, made up of all parents of the students in Qishun Class, and students were also told that their parents would be informed of how they performed at school. The top five in the weekly ranking could get material rewards, for example snacks, toys or the privilege to have delicious food. For those who were not in the top, the teacher encouraged them to work harder and to strive to be on the list next week.

As the homeroom teacher, Mr. Sun, explained, the competition in classics memorisation was not meant to produce inequality or discrimination among students, but to stimulate their inner strength to become autonomous learners. In several interviews, he repeatedly stressed the importance of cultivating an honest attitude towards oneself in learning, and thus asked students to treat themselves with authenticity. He reminded them that the aim of the ranking system was not to tempt them to the *external* rivalry with others but to improve one's *internal* cultivation, as well as to achieve the consciousness of learning classics for one's own sake. He, therefore, encouraged students to become responsible for their own learning and exert their best efforts in memorisation. This responds to the Confucian individualistic notions of *zili* (self-discipline) and *zide* (self-realization), which allow an individual to devote oneself to the moral cultivation *inside* instead of the utilitarian result *outside*,

so as to go towards a true self (de Bary 1983: 45; see also L. Chen 2016; W. Tu 1979 & 1985 & 1989).

To explore whether competition achieved its intended purpose, I draw on one story and one practice. First, to compete for better rankings and the subsequent material rewards, some students motivated themselves to surpass their rivals' numbers in the recitation of characters. Xingjian and Kangshuo were the two most outstanding students in classics memorisation in Qishun Class and often competed with each other. One day, during the first evening class, Mr. Sun asked students how many characters they memorised that day. Xingjian and Kangshuo respectively reported 2,000 and 1,000 characters, two figures that went well beyond all other students, so much so that it provoked light applause in the classroom. However, Xingjian was not satisfied with this and tried to recite more. When I asked him his reason for doing this, he said, "Because Older Brother Kangshuo is reciting more." It is noted that students in Qishun Class were asked to call their classmates not directly by the name but add "older brother" (*xiong*) or "younger brother" (*di*) before the first name. The purpose of doing this, as Mr. Sun explained, was to cultivate closer fraternal ties and affection among the boys. When Xingjian saw Kangshuo stand up and go to Mr. Sun for another recitation check, he added in a defiant tone, "I must surpass him!" The background to this was that Kangshuo recited 7,285 characters last week and ranked No. 1 in the whole class, whereas Xingjian finished 4,703, a number more than other students but much less than Kangshuo. Consequently, Xingjian set "defeating" Kangshuo as his target, so as to stimulate himself to work harder and memorise more. Here we can see a competitive environment was formed among students and the aspiration for the best result in classics memorisation served as the impetus for Xingjian to transform himself to become a more diligent and active learner.

Competition was also relevant to the practice of signing the military order (*junling zhuang*), a practice that guided students to divert their energy from the external competition with others to the internal competition against oneself. "Military order" was in ancient China a guarantee signed by the commander to promise the completion of a certain important military task. It originated from wars in ancient times and worked as a technique to impose

unquestionable power to reinforce the shaping of the commander's sense of responsibility. Some punitive measures were combined with such an order: once the commander who signed it failed to accomplish the task by the deadline, he had to be punished according to the codes of military law. Mr. Sun borrowed the technique as a way to motivate students to recite entire classic books.

It was in the middle of the spring semester at the end of May in 2015, a time less than one month before the summer vacation, when Yiqian School began to stimulate more students to recite at least one entire classic book. Instead of forcing students to do this, Mr. Sun encouraged them to recommend themselves to finish the task within one week and sign a military order as a resolute promise. Here is how the military order read,

#### **Military Order**

Today, I solemnly sign this military order and vow to complete Book One/Book Two within this week. If I violate it, I will submit to any punishment.

\_\_\_\_\_ (Signature)

It is noted that the "Book One" in the illustrated format of military order referred to a collection of books: *The Classic of Filial Piety, Standards for Students, The Three-Character Classic, The Book of Family Names, and The Thousand-Character Classics*, and the "Book Two" referred to another collection of *The Great Learning, The Doctrine of Mean, and The Analects of Confucius*. To recite one of the two was scheduled as the teaching goal and task for Qishun Class in the spring semester of 2015, so students had been reading and memorising them since the beginning of the semester.

Eight of the total 22 students offered to take the responsibility of completing the recitation of Book One, whereas two promised to finish Book Two. The other students who did not sign the order continued to follow the routine study schedule to accomplish the minimum recitation every day. It is crucial to our understanding of this technique to note that students offered themselves to sign the order, rather than being urged by coercion. However, once they signed it, they would be subjected to punishment or enforcement if they failed to achieve it.

The practice seemed to have immediate effects. In contrast to the idleness



before signing the military order, the “warriors” who signed it became much more diligent and active in memorising classics. Many times I saw them read classics even in lunchtime. After one week had passed, half of the ten challengers succeeded in fulfilling the signed commitment and were praised by the teacher in front of the whole class, but another half who failed could not escape being punished, either to recite twice as many characters as the given or to study overtime under the surveillance of the teacher.

It should be noted that the technique of military order served the collective goal of memorising entire classic books but through individuating students and maximising their personal capacity. By the end of the semester, all ten challengers completed the order ahead of schedule; in the period, more “warriors” followed suit and signed military orders, and those who finished the initial order willingly took another pledge to recite one more book. When the students were inspired to take on the signed tasks, they were subjected to the norms and disciplines and regarded the agreed punishment beforehand. Consequently, the teachers were “authorised” by the signed promise to put more pressure on the pupils and coerce them to study overtime, even after the evening classes.

#### *6.2.2.4 Mutual surveillance in groups*

By dividing students into several study groups and changing the spatial arrangement of the classroom, Qishun Class introduced a new model of student interactions where they engaged in mutual surveillance for the cultivation of learning autonomy. The group approach was invented by Mr. Sun, who classified the whole class into four groups, five students in each with an appointed leader (see Figure 2). Each group functioned as a self-governing unit, where students not only governed themselves but also were monitored by the group leader and other members. The group leader had the responsibility for reminding members to focus on their study when they were distracted and took charge of examining their recitation, so as to reduce the workload of the teacher. As the group leader was *in* but not *out of* the group, sitting in front and directly facing other members, he could easily see how they performed even with half an eye on them. The

leader was assumed to set an example for other members of the group not only in classics memorisation but also in behavioural self-discipline. Also, the group members could exert surveillance upon the leader by observing how he performed and by reminding him to concentrate on study if he was distracted. Furthermore, members were responsible for watching each other and reporting to the leader when other students behaved inappropriately.



**Figure 2: Groupings of students at Qishun Class (*Image taken in June 2015*)**

According to Foucault (1979 & 1982), the surveillance power techniques aim to produce rational self-control through regulating the body and correcting the behaviour (see also M. Hoffman 2011; Power 2011). Surveillance rests on individuals, but its functioning, as Foucault (1979) indicated, “is that of a network of relations,” which “‘holds’ the whole together and traverses it in its entirety” (pp. 176-7). With the group practice, mutual surveillance was a group activity. The intensive interactions of “seeing” and “being seen” generated disciplinary power in both the group leader and members. In the end, the students learned how to manage themselves in the learning process by internalising and complying with the disciplinary power exerted by the mode of mutual surveillance.

## 6.3 Educating “great cultural talents”: coercion, authority and resistance

Having outlined the specific practices of surveillance and coercion in Yiqian School, this part will move on to discuss what participants (teachers, parents and students) thought of the mechanical approach of memorising classics and reflect upon their arguments about the subjectification processes already presented in the last section. Even though the Confucian School was committed to cultivating students’ learning autonomy and through this achieving broader moral autonomy, it had never given up the goal of training pupils to become “great cultural talents” (*wenhua dachai*) and the pedagogy to achieve it—individualised memorisation. I have shown that the school proposed such pedagogy and emphasised its individualistic aspect so as to target students to ideally recite a large number of classics in a self-directing rather than a coercive way. However, I have argued that, in practice, students had to be forced by the authoritarian aspect of such pedagogy, which highlighted the entire recitation of classic books (*baoben beisong*) and obedience to disciplines and norms. This section will deepen the understanding of the discrepancies of the individualised memorisation method by drawing upon the interview data with different informants. Also, it will show the specific practices of how students resisted the coercion of such a pedagogical approach.

### 6.3.1 Coercion against autonomy

It is true that the approach of individualised memorisation indeed increased some students’ daily character numbers in reciting classics. In the following extract a fourteen-year-old female student, Juanran, admitted that she was able to recite far more than she previously did since she was allowed to make and follow her own study schedules.

When I came here [to the Confucian school in 2011], the school adopted the approach of uniform reading [*qidu*] by which we were asked to read certain given passages all together more than 300 times. Even if someone was already able to recite in the middle, she had to continue to read until she reached 300 times. In this way, we could recite three

or four thousand characters in a month. Later, the school changed to encourage the method of self-reading [*zidu*], so we no longer read together. Instead, we read by ourselves and developed our own study plans. In this way, I was able to recite more than ten thousand characters in only one month! This was a huge number that I dared not imagine [I could achieve] three years ago!

*(Class discussion, Qili Class, Student, Female, Fourteen years old, June 2015)*

Some other students had a similar experience. In the group discussions in Qili Class, many students reported that the individualised way of memorising classics improved their character numbers of recitation significantly. Also, in Section 6.2.2.3, I mentioned that students in Qishun Class competed for rankings in recitation and some were able to memorise an incredibly large number.

However, students still had to subject themselves to teacher's authority in the process of memorising classics. To this end, I refer to the following passage from another girl, Linxuan, who was the classmate of Juanran:

Miss Hou [the homeroom teacher of Qili Class] actually does not design the study according to personal variations. Anyway, in her point of view, all you need to do is just to recite, the more the better. [...] She allows me to count the character number every day and asks me to learn by rote, but I quickly forget them and fail to recite. [...] I do have my own study plan, but she frequently disrupts it and requires me to review what I've already recited. Many times I asked for her permission to read a few more times but she just said no, no, no! She simply denied my thoughts every time! [...] Consequently, I become rather annoyed and bored, having no idea whether I should review the old lessons or learn the new.

*(Class discussion, Qili Class, Student, Female, Thirteen years old, May 2015)*

Immediately after the girl finished, I asked other students if they shared a similar experience, and they all answered with a "Yes!" in unison. They complained how often the homeroom teacher, Miss Hou, intervened in their making of self-study schedules and imposed upon them far more assignments that were beyond their capabilities. For example, immediately following Linxuan's comments, Zitong conveyed a similar sentiment:

Last semester, the teacher frequently assigned more tasks [than I was able to do]. I was scheduled to complete the *Book of Changes* at that time and divided the task into small

steps day by day. Let's say, when I finished the minimum recitation in the second class [four classes in total for classics memorisation in one day in Qili Class], well, it seemed acceptable if Miss Hou gave me extra assignments. But if I finished at the end of the third class and she still imposed three hundred more characters, I would be definitely unable to make it. Even though the school claims to educate students according to their natural aptitude, I feel it's quite the opposite! What I feel actually is the teacher forces me to recite more than I can.

*(Class discussion, Qili Class, Student, Female, Fourteen years old, May 2015)*

Likewise, another female student, Lanxin, confessed the same experience of being “forced” to read classics:

As far as I feel, what the teacher does is nothing but to force us to recite. If you finish assignments for today, she asks you to do more for tomorrow. Anyway, she just requires you to keep reading and reading all the time! If you are distracted for even a moment, the teacher will immediately remind you to get your attention back. It may be helpful to remind me occasionally, but what she does goes far beyond the limit! She keeps on forcing me to read more, which makes me rather stressed.

*(Class discussion, Qili Class, Student, Female, Fourteen years old, May 2015)*

The experience of the students as shown above is similar to what they experienced in the state compulsory education (see Section 5.3 in Chapter 5), where they had to deal with an overload of schoolwork; in the same way, they struggled with the burden of excessive memorisation in the Confucian school. Also, they had to obey the authority of the teacher and follow his or her instructions. To respect the authority of the teacher is essential part of Confucian thinking (L. Chen 2016; see also C. Li et al. 2017; Page 2017; X. Wang 2017), but what is of particular note here is not “respect” for the teacher but “obedience” to him/her. Interestingly and paradoxically, Yiqian School claimed to promote the teacher having a facilitating role to merely accompany but not dominate students in classics memorisation, and conversely attached much importance to the learner's self-direction in study. However, as shown here, the students complained about the teacher's undue interference in their learning process.

This suggests that the pedagogy of “individualised memorisation” at the Confucian school encountered a tension between autonomy and coercion. While the school claimed to cultivate autonomous, learned individuals in classics

reading, it simultaneously worked for the collective goal of abundant memorisation and implicitly allowed for the intervention of the teacher, even at the expense of impairing students' learning autonomy.

That the teacher compelled students to memorise classics could be seen not only from the older students' complaints in Qili Class, but also from the mandatory rules upon the younger in Qishun Class, where the completion of the minimum recitation was linked to some other activities. According to the document *Rules of Comprehensive Inspection for Learning Management (Xuexi Guanli Zonghe Pingbi)* promulgated by Qishun Class in May 2015,

Students cannot have lunch or dinner until they have completed the minimum required tasks. Once they finish the compulsory basic assignments of the day, students will be given the privilege of reading extra-curricular books in night classes.

*(Collected documents, Qishun Class, 2015)*

Binding classics memorisation together with activities of having meals and reading extra-curricular books, the rule provides more evidence to display the tension between the practice of minimum memorisation and the principle of individualised education. As Mr. Sun, the homeroom teacher of Qishun Class, indicated in a critical way:

Absolutely it is correct to teach students according to their natural capabilities, [...] but the authentic individualised education is not simply to recite classics. [...] As I see it, such way of reading classics and then forgetting and then re-reading and re-memorising, also even the way of reciting the entire classic books, I cannot even figure out any meaning! [...] The coercive way of teaching would harm children's mind and body [...] and only produce more and more problems.

*(Interview, Teacher, April 2015)*

So, how did the contradiction between autonomy and coercion come into being in the practices of classics memorisation? Miss Hou, the teacher who was the subject of the complaints mentioned above, admitted that she was aware of students' dissatisfaction with her coercive style of teaching. In an interview, she disclosed that she felt helpless to obey what Principle Zheng requested of her. She indicated that it was the principal who asked her to impose pressure upon students and force them to recite more. According to multiple interviews with Principal Zheng, she explained that the reason for doing so was out of her belief

in Confucian education, that is, the more classics a person recited, the more moral qualities he would achieve, and finally the more likely it was that he would become a “great cultural talent.” As I recounted in Chapter 5 (Section 5.4), Dr. Caigui Wang (2009a & 2009b & 2010 & 2014a) identified it as the goal of his theory of reading classics education to cultivate children as “great cultural talents” by rote learning of classics. Consistent with this, the Confucian school defined the “great cultural talents” as individuals who are profoundly learned (*manfu jinglun*). As Principal Zheng told me in various interviews, the Confucian culture disappeared in China for decades, which has led to contemporary Chinese people being alienated from the classics; and only by nurturing such “great cultural talents,” who have profound moral cultivation and cultural capacity to assume the responsibility of revitalising traditional Chinese (Confucian) culture, can we make up for the cultural shortcomings.

Additionally, Principal Zheng had a more specific desire for students to, once completing classics recitation in Yiqian School, go for further studies in *Wenli Academy*.<sup>47</sup> According to the admission standard of *Wenli Academy*, students have to complete the recitation of at least 300,000 characters of classics. In light of this, Principal Zheng proposed the requirement upon students to memorise classics and hoped them to meet the admission standard as early as possible. Through forcing students to achieve the goal of studying in *Wenli Academy*, their learning autonomy appeared to be undermined by the restrictive and coercive practices.<sup>48</sup>

Parental expectation for the Confucian school acts as another equally significant factor that shaped the authoritarian mode of abundantly memorising classics. To some extent, it was to satisfy the parental desire for education that

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<sup>47</sup> Please refer to Chapter 3 for the introduction to *Wenli Academy* and its relationship with Yiqian School.

<sup>48</sup> In addition, students were also sharply opposed to their parents on the issue of whether or not to go to *Wenli Academy* for future education. Although many parents expected their children to go to the Academy, it was against the students’ will and desire. For more details, please refer to Chapter 7.

Principal Zheng regarded the Academy as the immediate goal of the Confucian school. The following passage from the teacher, Mr. Sun, shows this:

We always encounter a contradiction when teaching students in accordance with their aptitude. The parents desire to see the [teaching] achievements, but what achievements do they want? The character numbers! Thus the school has to require students to memorise a large number of classics.

*(Interview, Teacher, April 2015)*

Some interviews from parents support Mr. Sun's statement. For example, in an interview with a mother, Mrs. Song, whose son had learned classics for five years at Yiqian, she regarded the recitation of classics as the fundamental and right way to cultivate students in Confucian classical education:

Only through the approach of simply and extensively memorising classics can a child settle down his heart-mind. [...] If the school disregarded the approach, I would feel extremely concerned. If someone expects to accumulate some knowledge, he must make the best of the golden period for memory in his life [before the age of 13] and memorise as many classic books as he can. I would feel it a pity if he missed this period.

*(Interview, Parent, Mrs. Song, July 2015)*

Out of the seventeen interviewed parents, more than half (nine) expressed their explicit agreement with the approach of memorising classics simply and extensively. While other parental interviewees held reservations or made critical comments about the approach, they admitted it did "work as a simple but effective criterion to measure the achievement of classical education" (quoted from a mother). In similar fashion, another parent, Mrs. Fan, mentioned Yiqian School once gave up the pedagogy of requiring students to memorise a great volume of classics and described her experience at that time:

It was really painful and I was extremely anxious in those days. The character number my daughter [fourteen years old, who had read classics for two years] memorised was very low during the entire semester. [...] I was sure she was playing at school. I know how many characters she could recite because I taught her to read classics since she was a kid. [...] [I was worried that she did nothing at school but to] waste her life. [...] I felt helpless but frequently asked myself: what could I do?

*(Interview, Parent, Mrs. Fan, August 2015)*



However, not all of the interviewed parents endorsed the authoritarian pedagogy of abundantly reciting classics. About half of the sample opposed the school's approach of placing excessive emphasis on memorisation (but they were not against the approach of memorisation itself), as they argued the coercive teaching style would inhibit students' development of autonomous personhood. Mr. Qian recounted a story about his eight-year-old son who had read classics for two years, and the story rendered him rather uneasy. He stated that his son bruised his head by knocking it on his desk just because he failed to recite one book and thus, as Mr. Qian assumed, "must be angry with himself." This incident made the father realise that "my child is not happy at the classical school." He confessed that he did not care about how many classics the boy could memorise, but instead,

I am really disgusted with the practice [that the teachers put pressure upon the students to recite classics]. Something must be going wrong if my child feels unhappy in classics learning. He told me some days ago that staying at school was just like being in a jail! The sentence may sound no big deal to other people, but to me it suggests a truth that he is not happy in the school! [...] The school purports to carry on the individualised teaching, but does it really make it? If it does, why is my child still unhappy? Why did he show such extreme behaviour [knocking his head on the desk]? [...] How to develop the interests and hobbies of the children, and how to nurture their individualities and personalities, so that they learn classics happily and healthily, these are what really matter.

*(Interview, Parent, Mr. Qian, July 2015)*

Another parent, Mrs. Jin, when talking about the compelling approach of classics memorisation, argued that the teaching method was not suitable for the wellbeing of older students such as her fourteen-year-old son. "[Because they] have already formulated their own thoughts and do not want to be forced by parents or teachers." As she continued,

Nowadays, children cannot just memorise classics but have to learn many other skills. They deserve to be happy, to be delighted, and their individualities cannot be suppressed. [...] Sometimes the teacher exerts too much intervention but the children are still not clear in mind. Consequently, they just perform obediently and submissively in front of the teacher, but quite the opposite in their actual thoughts.

*(Interview, Parent, Mrs. Jin, August 2015)*

To sum up, the controversies over the practices of classics memorisation revolve around themes of autonomy vs. coercion, individuality vs. collectivism, and independence vs. obedience. These are relevant to the complicated situation shaped by the processes of “state-managed individualisation” (Y. Yan 2009b: 289 & 2010: 509) in contemporary China. The institutional individualisation and the rise of individuals have produced and intensified Chinese people’s craving for individual-oriented values, which is evident in the domain of moral education (Cheung and Pan 2006; Feng and Newton 2012; Lee and Ho 2005; M. Li 1990 & 2011; P. Li et al. 2004; Qi and Tang 2004; Reed 1995; Tse 2011; Ye 2014; Zhan and Ning 2004). For Chinese children, they are experiencing “the growing empowerment and individualisation [...] within the family and society”, which is “one of the most important developments in the modern era” (Naftali 2016: 118). However, the renewal of Confucian education and memorisation-based pedagogy has rationalised the coercion of forcing children to extensively recite classics so to become “great cultural talents.”

### ***6.3.2 Resisting the mechanical memorisation***

This part turns to practices students engaged in to resist the coercion of the authoritarian approach of mechanical memorisation. Resistance, as noted in Chapter 2, always accompanies the practice of power. As Foucault (1990) suggested, “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (p. 95). Some sociological studies have explored the children’s resistance in the schooling context. For example, Andrew Hope (2013) revealed how students resisted observational practices in schools through false conformity, avoidance, counter-surveillance and playful performance (pp. 45-8). Students’ resistance to the surveillance curriculum (Hope 2010) and challenging schools’ surveillance technologies (Hope 2016) are also discussed in the existing literature.

The “regime” of cultivation based on mechanical memorisation aroused students’ dissatisfaction and resistance in the Confucian school. Although it recognised the significance of learning autonomy, the school lacked deep

reflection on the method of rote learning. Teachers were not allowed to explain the annotations of the elusive classic literature, nor to tell stories or play games. There were no critical discussions of the classic texts either. What the students did was to read the classics simply—no need to understand them—over and over again. As a result, many students reported that they had such feelings of boredom, anxiety, lack of interest, disappointment and depression. Based on the fieldwork in Qishun Class, I describe two resisting practices that students applied most often—seeking loopholes (*zuan kongzi*) and dawdling (*mo yanggong*). Both terms were used by the teachers to describe how students acted against mechanical memorisation of classics in everyday life.

Seeking loopholes was one practice students at Qishun Class most frequently adopted to escape from the disciplinary power they experienced in the rote learning of classics. They were sophisticated in discerning the loopholes and making use of them flexibly but secretly. In the first few days when I came into the class, I, being a newcomer who was not yet familiar with the teaching schedule and recitation contents, was unfortunately exploited by several sharp-witted children seeking opportunities to escape doing recitation.<sup>49</sup> Some students intentionally picked out shorter passages of only fifty or sixty characters to recite, as they knew the fewer the words, the easier to memorise, although it went against the requirement of at least 100 characters for each task. I did not realise I was being “taken advantage of” until later on. In addition, some pupils relied on my ignorance to recite easier contents, replacing the more difficult ones. One day, for example, a boy asked me to examine his recitation of *Thousand Character Book (Qian Zi Wen)*, a readable primer for kids written in simple Chinese, but did not tell me he had not completed the assigned memorisation of *The Analects*, a great book of Confucianism more profound than

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<sup>49</sup> As I have explained in Chapter 4 *Methodology*, I acted two roles at the same time in Qishun Class—one as a researcher and the other as a teacher. While my job as a researcher was to observe and record the activities of the students, I was quickly “assigned” by the school to work as a teacher, which implied that I was expected by students to fulfil the responsibilities that a regular teacher should do, for example, to examine how students recited classics.

the former. On another occasion, one student tried to make use of my ignorance of the class regulations for his own benefit. When I had just arrived in the class, he repeatedly asked me if he could play Chinese chess during the class breaks and I agreed. It was only later on that I learned that students were prohibited from playing chess. This example also reflects what strict discipline students were experiencing in the Confucian school, so rigorous that even playing chess was restricted.

In addition to “exploiting” me, students also took advantage of the loopholes in the communication among teachers and attempted to muddle through the recitation examination. For example, a student wrote a monthly summary (*yue zongjie*) to review his recitation performance but was marked as a failure by the teacher, Miss Xu, and was told to rewrite it. However, when the homeroom teacher, Mr. Sun, who knew nothing about the issue came around, the student took the same piece of writing to him and sought to obtain his pass. He did not succeed in the end as Mr. Sun had a talk with Miss Xu and laid bare the loophole-seeking action.

Dawdling is another action the students in Qishun Class took to resist the rote learning of classics. Since the school did not abandon the idea of individualised teaching and thus argued for a free and relaxing environment for study, this, however, created the conditions for students to dawdle in the classroom. For example, as mentioned before, while students were required to develop study plans in the first class of the day, a few of them, particularly the three or four regular procrastinators, just sat still in their seats and dawdled for so long that they didn’t take their notebooks out of the desk drawer until the teacher reminded them to do. Sometimes I observed the “dawdlers” focused not on classics reading at all in the total of three classes in the morning, but either were staring blankly, fighting with desk mates for fun, or just lying on the desk to doze off. All these behaviours can be seen as the students’ reaction to the Confucian school’s repressive and monotonous pedagogy. Furthermore, we can discover how students killed time in classics reading in their monthly self-summaries. Here follows a few extracts (*italics added*).

(1) Mum is extremely dissatisfied with my conduct and attitude, [...] but I did not feel a sense of crisis from her words and increasingly became presumptuous. [*What I did was just to*]

*kill the time in class and I felt trapped in a daze and was crazy thinking about chasing pop stars.*  
(A 13-year-old girl, March 2015)

(2) *Recently, I am very easily disturbed in class and often look around.* The learning efficiency is not high. I am trying to figure out this matter. I want to learn classics but I always feel something problematic, maybe lacking something, but there's nothing to find out at all. (A 12-year-old boy, April 2015)

(3) *In recent times, I often fall asleep in the first two classes of the day that are considered the best time for memorising classics.* The teacher reminds me hundreds of times, but I'm extremely regretful [for it]. What a loss of two classes! (A 16-year-old boy, April 2015)

(4) The teacher requested me to recite the entire section *Teng Wen Gong II* of *Mencius* but I refused *because I wasted too much time in the past.* I think I could make it if I did not waste so much time. (A 12-year-old boy, May 2015)

It has been argued that the school context may breed cultures of resistance that have a purpose in broader society (Willis 1977; Xiong 2015), so resisting school surveillance might equip students for future life in a surveillance-saturated society (Hope 2013: 46). However, we need to avoid overestimating the significance of *resistance* in shaping the subjectification of students in this Confucian school. Neither seeking loopholes nor dawdling negates the Confucian memorisation-based cultivation "regime." The students' resisting practice is not so much a matter of "overthrowing," as it merely momentarily "challenges" or makes bearable the regime of cultivation. In other words, they do not directly confront the authority of Confucian pedagogy but only challenge it subtly and "create room for themselves without getting into trouble (Hansen 2015: 61). Therefore, these actions should be interpreted "as a means of negotiating self and self-interests" (Ibid: 35) within the context of the organised school. Also, they are perfectly echoed by the notion of divided self (Kleinman 2011), which has been introduced in Chapter 2 but deserves to repeat here. This conceptual term suggests that contemporary Chinese personal "transcripts" are about the "acts of accommodation and collaboration that enable ordinary people to negotiate China's social reality" (p. 231) but without explicit defiance of the authoritarian structure.

## 6.4 Conclusion

To conclude this chapter, I have shown that while Yiqian School claimed to cultivate autonomous learners through the approach of “individualised memorisation,” in practice, this process is subjected to disciplinary power and teachers’ forcing. The subjectification of students demonstrates a contradictory process between autonomy and coercion in the Confucian school.

While the Confucian school attempted to apply the practices of learning classics under the umbrella of the individualised principle and respect pupils’ differences in memorisation ability, it simultaneously attached much importance to coercing students to recite as many characters as they could, or even the entire classic books. I have described the following practices of disciplinary power in training learning autonomy—minimum memorisation, making study schedule, examination, competition, and mutual surveillance in groups.

The findings highlight the authoritarian aspect of Confucian pedagogy in shaping the learners’ obedience to the collective pattern of classics memorisation. As some students complained, teachers frequently intervened in their self-made study plans and coerced them to memorise classics more than they wanted. I have revealed that the coercive practices imply the profound cultural anxiety of some teachers and parents, who supposed these practices served the direct goal of cultivating “great cultural talents” who could assume the responsibility of revitalising traditional Confucian culture.

The development of the students’ resisting practices against the mechanical memorisation may further evidence the authoritarian approach of classics learning in the Confucian school. Although students adopted actions of seeking loopholes and dawdling to express their dissatisfaction with the memorisation-based “regime” of cultivation, they did not mean to overturn it but merely to momentarily challenge/avoid it. Neither did their resistance lead to direct confrontation of the pedagogic authority; instead, they only opposed it in a subtle way without getting into trouble (see also Hansen 2015: 61).

All in all, the conflicting practices of memorising classics as shown at Yiqian School indicate that the revived Confucian classical education in practice is fluctuating between autonomy/individualism and coercion/collectivism in

educating autonomous, learned individuals. In the next chapter, I will continue to discuss such contradictions through a focus on the educational re-embedding of the students at the Confucian school.

## ***Chapter 7 Planning for future education: Educational re-embedding, state, and self***

### **7.1 Introduction**

Having explored why parents chose the Confucian classical school (Chapter 5) and the various practices of developing autonomous, learned Confucian students inside the school (Chapter 6), in this chapter, this thesis progresses to explore how students and parents think about the future of their education. I begin this chapter with the following story.

“My son tells me he wants to go back to the compulsory middle school and won’t read classics any longer,” Mr. Li said with a deep sigh, clearly revealing his anxiety and disappointment, “I really do not know what to do now!”

(Field notes, May 2015)

Something happened beyond Mr. Li’s expectation just a few days before the interview, when his twelve-year-old son Yangyang, who was preparing for the middle school entrance examination, called him from the school. Mr. Li made a great effort to keep Yangyang reading Confucian classics. Two years ago, in the face of considerable opposition of his wife and parents, he insisted that his son, who was in the fourth grade of primary school, drop out of compulsory state education and transfer to Yiqian School for full-time study in Confucian classics. He was determined that Yangyang would keep going on the road of Confucian classical education, firstly to complete the recitation of 300,000 characters of classics, and then to go for further studies at *Wenli Academy*.<sup>50</sup> Mr. Li admitted that he never thought of returning his son to the compulsory school and would never do so. However, Yangyang did not agree with this. The full-time study of classics memorisation over the past two years had left him tired and bored. He felt that completing the 300,000-character classic recitation was out of reach and

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<sup>50</sup> As mentioned in Chapters 3 and 6, to recite at least 300,000 characters of classics, including 200,000 characters of Chinese classics and 100,000 words of foreign classics, is the admission standard of *Wenli Academy*.



he did not in any case have much interest in the educational programme drawn up by his father. In multiple daily conversations with me, Yangyang disclosed that he aspired to go back to state school for middle-school education, as he would like to go to high school in the future and then to university.

Yiqian School was an approved nine-year compulsory school, albeit one characterised by Confucian classics reading education. This means that, ideally, students could study there from the first grade of primary school until graduation from middle school, although in practice very few students did so. In fact, a significant proportion of students left the Confucian school and returned to mainstream education as early as finishing primary-school education. This was directly related to the fact that the school had not provided the comprehensive compulsory curricula since its establishment, as I will discuss below.

Another option was for students at the Confucian school to go to *Wenli* Academy, to finish the phase of classics memorisation and continue the next-stage of Confucian education. It is true that many students would leave for the state schools after a couple of years of classics learning in Yiqian. But there were also a few parents who aspired for their children to go to the Academy, particularly those who had their children learn classics in the early period and were profoundly influenced by Caigui Wang's educational theory. These parents, being a minority compared to the majority who expected their children to return to state education, usually pinned hopes for their children's further education on the whole-course programming of classical education proposed by Dr. Caigui Wang (2014a: 81-120). Wang argued that once a student achieves the recitation of the given number of characters of classics, which is the first phase of "reading classics," he or she is welcome to apply for *Wenli* Academy to pursue advanced Confucian studies, which is the second phase of "interpreting classics" (*jiejing*). But based on my fieldwork, only a minority of students expressed an interest in the Academy, whereas most of them contradicted the educational expectations of their parents (as illustrated by the case of Yangyang), which will be discussed in detail in Section 7.4. In addition, a very small number of students were engaged with other alternatives for the future, such as transferring to other Confucian-style private schools (*sishu*) or study halls (*xuetang*), serving as

teachers or teaching assistants in these institutions, or going back home to prepare for the self-taught higher education examination<sup>51</sup> in order to acquire a university or college diploma.

In brief, it is the disagreement about the future direction of education that brought Yangyang and his father into conflict. I do not suggest that all parents and children are necessarily in conflict about the future, but the interview responses indicate that for the vast majority of the parents and students, there were concerns about future educational plans. Even the children who seemed “obedient” in relation to parental authority still reported anxiety about their educational prospects.

This thesis draws upon one essential aspect of individualisation, re-embedding, to elucidate these experiences. According to Beck (1992), re-embedding refers to “a new type of social commitment” and signifies the control or reintegration dimension of individualisation in modern societies (p. 128). As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) pointed out, there are two means of “re-embedding” in the individualisation thesis: (1) to re-impose old social controls and constraints on individuals, for instance, the state, religiosity, nationalism and the economic (p. 17); (2) to create new social categories and commitments in civil society, for example, the fractured sets of values and more emphasis on aspirations of the individualized individual (Ibid: 161). Specific to the context of classical education in this research, one way of re-embedding is for students and parents to go back to the “old” state compulsory schools, whereas a “new” way to re-embed is to go for further studies at *Wenli Academy*, which

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<sup>51</sup> The self-taught higher education examination, in short self-taught examination (*zixue kaoshi*), is a form of higher education that integrates self-study, social study, and national examinations. It is a form of open education whose enrolment targets are considerably wide—candidates taking part in the self-taught examination are not subject to discrimination based on gender, age, nationality, race, or education background. There are more than one hundred majors for self-taught examinations, which means that candidates can choose majors according to their own interests. Through systematic studies, the self-learner candidates can apply for a bachelor’s degree after successfully passing the dissertation and then are qualified to continue to pursue a master’s degree and doctorate.

produces tensions between parents and their children.

In the following sections, I will first in Section 7.2 describe why and how students and parents at Yiqian School chose to re-embed into the state school system. Next, in Section 7.3, I will discuss how the Confucian school failed to institutionalise the compulsory curriculum as part of its regular teaching schedule, and then analyse what influence this had on the individual's re-embedding into the compulsory system. This chapter will also explore the tensions between parents and children in relation to attending *Wenli* Academy in Section 7.4, revealing the complexity of shaping students' individual self.

## **7.2 Returning to state compulsory schools: uncertainty, diploma and marginalisation**

Returning to the state-maintained compulsory school system emerged as a critical concern for parents and children at Yiqian School, even though they initially intended to disassociate themselves from state education. Many students (especially those older than thirteen) and parents were reluctant to go back to compulsory schools. On the one hand, as I discussed in Chapter 5, parents were dissatisfied with compulsory schooling, particularly examination-oriented education, and expressed direct criticism based on ideologies of anti-instrumentalism. These critiques served as an impetus for parents to dis-embed from the state schools and then to choose full-time Confucian classics-reading education. However, on the other hand, they (the same parents as in Chapter 5) acknowledged that the compulsory school system implied "a secure road of education," which would provide students with a regular channel of next-stage education. Mrs. Jin's remarks reflect the contradictory mentality of parents. Her fourteen-year-old son, Xin Zheng, had been studying at Yiqian for two years. At the time of interview, they had already begun to discuss the possibility of withdrawing from the Confucian school and returning to compulsory education.

Going back to the compulsory school would be a compromise to me because of realistic circumstances. Because if he [son] wants to survive in real life, that is to say, for example, if he wants to learn his favourite major, he must go through the way of passing the high school

entrance examination [*zhongkao*] and university entrance examination [*gaokao*]. So it [returning to the compulsory school] is indeed a reluctant move.

*(Interview, Parent, Mrs. Jin, August 2015)*

However, how easy would it be to return to the state school? Xin Zheng told me that he was transferred to Yiqian two years ago after graduating from primary school; thus he would have been in the third year in the state middle school if he returned the following year. However, in his two years at the Confucian school, he hardly studied the compulsory curriculum because the school did not offer it, which made him extremely anxious about making up the courses once he went back to middle school. As he said: “If I return directly for the third year [in the middle school], I would be definitely unable to catch up [on the courses]; if I failed to catch up, it would be [very challenging] for the future university entrance examination [because there would be the least possibility] to be admitted to a good university.” A more realistic solution was he could start with the first but not the third year of middle school, which, however, also caused him stress. As he stated, “If alternatively I started in the first year, that is, to study with students who are one or two years younger than me, it would be equivalent to say that I suspended two years of schooling and went back to continue. This would make me very distressed.” With a heavy sigh, Xin Zheng shook his head, his eyes full of confusion about the future. He admitted that both his mother and he felt “very conflicted” about whether or not to return to the compulsory school:

My mum is very conflicted and I am more conflicted than her. [...] Nowadays, parents always make comparisons [between their own child and others'] at the compulsory school. So if I went back, relatives and friends would criticise my mum by saying, for example, I achieved nothing in classics reading but just abandoned it after two years. They might comment that it was no big deal at all to learn Confucianism.

*(Interview, Student, Male, Fourteen years old, July 2015)*

The indecision and anxiety that Mrs. Jin and her son Xin Zheng experienced when facing the serious issue of whether to go back to the state schools after Confucian education is not an isolated case. Many of the interviewed parents and older students (older than 13) had similar concerns about the future of their education after classics reading. Nonetheless, a minority of interviewed parents

reported that they did not have such uneasy experiences. One reason, as they recounted, is their children were still very young and at the stage of primary school education, which made them less anxious about planning their children's future education. Another potential reason could be, as I have already pointed out in Chapter 5 (Section 5.5), that a very few parents were reluctant to confess the direct purpose of returning to compulsory education was to obtain the academic qualifications, which they claimed not to care about. Consequently, they did not discuss any plan to facilitate returning their children to the state schools. But the majority of interviewed parents disclosed that they were perplexed by the uncertainties about the future of Confucian classical education. One point, however, seems clear: those parents who expected children to go back to compulsory schooling did so *not* because the system itself met their desires for moral education but because it provided students with a secure and steady path to the next stage of their studies. Correspondingly, although parents still identified with Confucian education, they described having to give it up because it failed to guarantee pupils definite and stable education prospects. This indeed sounds a bit instrumental, similar to parents' instrumentalist critique of state education as presented in Chapter 5. But I emphasise it showcases parents had no alternative but to return their children to state schools in the absence of a sound system for future classical education.

Three interlinked aspects of this decision will be elaborated in the following sections: first, the uncertainty about the channels for next-stage education in the domain of classics-reading education; second, the concern about the academic qualification; and third, anxiety about the marginalisation of the educational experience.

### ***7.2.1 Uncertainty about the prospects arising out of the Confucian education***

As mentioned above, most interviewed parents felt uncertain about the prospects offered by the classics-reading education. As children grew older, they experienced more and more urgency to rethink the next-stage of their education and the potential risks of continuing the classical education. According to the

interviews with parents, the return to state education seemed a “forced choice” when they were confronted with the uncertainties and unknowns of what might happen after their children’s Confucian education. Many interviewed parents used the word “perplexed” (*mimang*) to express their feelings when talking about their children’s futures after classical education. For example, Mrs. Jiang, whose thirteen-year-old son had been studying for four years at the Confucian school, said:

As far as I know, many parents are very perplexed. [...] What is the purpose for children to learn classics? In the beginning, parents might be guided by a kind of enthusiasm, just feeling classics are good and thus having children to read them. However, the problem lies in that there has as yet been no formal Confucian school that can give parents the confidence in going step by step [in education promotion]. [...] My son’s father once asked me when would the classical education be ending, but I had to say I did not know either!

*(Interview, Parent, Mrs. Jiang, August 2015)*

Mrs. Wei had a similar experience to Mrs. Jiang. When she was interviewed in 2015, her fourteen-year-old daughter had already returned to the compulsory school after just one year of classics learning in the Confucian school. She was introduced by another participant and did her interview over the phone. As to why her daughter left the school, Mrs. Wei explained one reason was that she felt “unsure in the heart” about the next step after classical education: “Anyway, I felt perplexed about what my daughter would do when she graduated from the [Confucian] school. I felt unsure about her prospects, which seemed to me dim and remote. Thus I started to lose confidence, having confidence neither in the school nor in myself.”

The uncertainty about the future afforded by classical education is also reflected in the parents’ hesitation in whether or not to have their children study at *Wenli* Academy. In the domain of Confucian classical education, the Academy, since established in 2012, has been regarded by parents (including some interviewed) who have a strong belief in classics-reading education as their children’s optimum choice for advanced studies in Confucianism. However, not all parents followed this path. For example, Mrs. Jin, the mother mentioned above who discussed the educational future with her son Xin Zheng, immediately ruled out *Wenli* Academy because in her view it was a place dedicated to

cultivating scholars specialising in Chinese classical literature studies, which was inconsistent with her son's interests in pop music and screenplay writing. She said: "If I forced my son to do [academic research in Chinese classics], he would be doomed to working on something without value because he dislikes it. [It is essential to] cultivate a person according to his personality and aptitude." The words of Mrs. Jin correspond to the individualised teaching principle of the Confucian school as discussed in Chapter 6. Similarly, Mr. Qian did not plan to have his son learn Confucian classics for the duration of his education either, but instead expected him to develop his own interests and hobbies. Thus Mr. Qian did not think it optimal for his son to go to *Wenli* Academy but rather pinned his hopes on university. He said, "When you study at university, you will have opportunities to broaden your worldview, come into contact with different people, and develop your own interests. All of these would never be accessed if you simply shut the door to the outside world to read classics."

With the help of a teacher working in Yiqian School, I was introduced to another parent, Mr. Zhong, whose son had attended *Wenli* Academy after several years of memorising classics in the School. However, he still expressed concerns about his son's educational prospects in the phone interview. While he said he was a firm believer in the Confucian education of classics reading, Mr. Zhong admitted that the founding of the Academy only solved the problem of a "way out" (*chulu*) for Confucian study temporarily. He still felt very perplexed about the issue of what would happen when the students graduated from the Academy, and what prospects they would have in further education and future careers. He confessed:

The most perplexing problem is what course do the students follow once they have finished studying in the Academy? [Once they have] spent another decade [in the Academy],<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> According to the programme of *Wenli* Academy proposed by Caigui Wang (2014a: 81-120), once students complete the 300,000 characters of classical recitation, they will be qualified to apply for the Academy, where they are expected to receive ten years of training in expounding the memorised classics and extensively reading great works of Chinese and non-Chinese literature. However, Wang also explicitly reminds parents that students who study at the Academy cannot obtain any diploma.

how would they integrate into the mainstream school system? Or how would they make contributions to society? This has always been a concern for parents! The planning [drawn up by the Academy] may be promising but we are still very perplexed about what is the next. [...] The most difficulty [I am having now] is there is no direction. I'm feeling lost. [...] I have no idea of what would happen if we continue the road [of classical education]. This has always been [the case] from the beginning until now.

*(Interview, Parent, Mr. Zhong, June 2015)*

Mr. Zhong's concern stemmed from the lack of institutionalised links between *Wenli Academy* as a non-mainstream educational institution and the mainstream state school system. It has been a global issue to deal with the relationship between mainstream and non-mainstream schools (Koinzer, Nikolai, and Waldow 2017). For example, specialist schools in the UK, once being a non-mainstream type of education, may specialise in certain areas of the curriculum, for instance, arts, humanities, science, engineering, sports, etc., but must meet the full requirements of the English national curriculum rather than radically depart from the existing statutory provision (Exley 2017: 36-40). Also, the government is required to fund the specialist schools to support staffing and professional development.<sup>53</sup> But the situation of classical schools that specialise in Confucian studies is different, many of which have even not obtained the governmental approval. Those approved such as *Yiqian School* and *Wenli Academy* have not provided the state-stipulated curriculum (see more in Section 7.3), nor have they received the government grant. In other words, the current Chinese classical schools are excluded from the mainstream national education system, lacking institutionalised connection with the latter, which has caused the deep anxiety of Mr. Zhong and many other parents involved in classical education.

### **7.2.2 Concern about the academic qualification**

The indeterminacy of the prospects of Confucian classical education is closely related to the concern about academic qualification. Going back to

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<sup>53</sup> See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Specialist\\_schools\\_programme](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Specialist_schools_programme), by retrieving the term "Specialist schools programme."



state-maintained schools and then taking the university entrance examination is a steady and institutional way of obtaining the university diploma. However, owing to the fact that *Wenli* Academy has not yet acquired the approved qualification to issue diplomas, it is thus impossible to address the students' progression to higher education. As a result, even if students spend a few more years studying in the Academy, they would still have no authorised academic certificates.

Among the interviewed parents and students, many of them admitted that the absence of academic qualification associated with continuing the education of classics reading was one essential consideration for their return to compulsory schools. There were two arguments in this regard: a minority of parents argued that diplomas are not important, whereas the majority held the opposite position. On the one hand, among the few who rejected the significance of diploma, they did not completely negate its value but emphasised there was something else more important than the certificate itself such as one's moral cultivation and ethical virtues, social experience, socialising skills, professional capability, critical thinking and physical and mental wellbeing. All these factors also constituted the parental critiques of instrumentalism against the state education, which served as the motivation for parents to transfer their children to the full-time classical school in the first place (see Chapter 5). Both interviewed parents and students furthermore took the employment difficulties of university graduates as an example of the devaluation of academic diploma in today's China. This corresponds to broader social changes, namely that since the expansion of higher education in the late 1990s (H. Liu 2013; Postiglione 2011; Ross and Wang 2010; Q. Wang 2016; Y. Wang and Ross 2010 & 2013; F. Yan et al. 2016; Zhang et al. 2016), Chinese universities have risked the weakening of undergraduate and postgraduate education and graduates have to face the challenges of an increasingly competitive job market (Davey et al. 2007; Hoffman 2006 & 2010; Shan and Guo 2016).

However, on the other hand, most parents believed in the necessity of academic certificate. They worried that if children persisted in reading classics but did not go to university and thus would have no university certificate, they would possibly be disadvantaged in job-hunting in the future. Mrs. Wei, though

chose the classical school due to the critique of instrumental state education system, had returned her daughter to the compulsory school because, as she said:

As a parent, I hope my child will acquire a job and have the capacity to feed herself after completing her education. However, I feel [the financial situation of] my family cannot guarantee her a very bright future, that is to say, she has to rely on herself to fight for everything in the future. If I kept her reading classics instead of going to university, and if she consequently had no university diploma, what job would she find? [...] I think today's society recognises the diploma very much. A person must have a diploma if she wants to develop in career. Also, many companies require diploma as a prerequisite for job application.

*(Interview, Parent, Mrs. Wei, August 2015)*

Many interviewed parents expressed similar anxiety about the perils of children being excluded from the job market owing to lack of university diplomas. One point to clarify is that parents' acknowledgement of university degree did not mean they identified with state education, but on the contrary, they maintained the instrumental criticism of it as shown in Chapter 5. While they supported the necessity of diplomas, they still expected a moral education to improve their children's personality. However, when there was a contradiction between academic qualification and moral cultivation, the majority of parents chose the former, which was generally obtained through returning to state schools, rather than continuing to stay in classical schools.

Likewise, students were also worried about the acquirability of university certificate. "After all, it depends on the diploma when looking for jobs nowadays," as one fourteen-year-old boy put it, "And even if you graduate from the [*Wenli*] Academy, you would have to hold a diploma for job hunting." Another male student supported this view. After one classmate argued in one of the group interviews that the company would hire a person as long as he had "knowledge" (*xuewen*) and "capacity," the boy refuted this by saying

There are some higher-level companies that require a very high degree of education background, and they will not look at how [good] your knowledge is, but instead, you have to first meet the requirement of having a diploma and then possibly get the qualification for an interview. So without diploma, even if your knowledge is excellent, you cannot even get into the threshold of the interview.

(Class discussion, Qibo Class, Student, Male, Fourteen years old, May 2015)

As some studies have argued, young people tend to envisage rationally calculated futures rather than adventurous ones (Carabelli and Lyon 2016; see also Lyon and Crow 2012). Echoing this, many students involved in this Confucian school explicitly expressed the desire to return to the compulsory school system and then to go to university. As they explained, through attending university, a person would be awarded a recognised higher education degree, which worked as the “stepping stone” (*qiaomen zhuan*) or “passport” (*tongxing zheng*) for both further study and job hunting, both terms used by students. In summary, the concern about the academic qualification for both parents and students constituted a driving force to their return to the state schools.

### ***7.2.3 Anxiety about the marginalisation of educational experience***

Concern about academic qualifications is also associated with an anxiety that the classical school educational experience in general might not be valued by society more generally. In the opinions of most interviewed parents, going back to compulsory education meant re-embedding into “mainstream” education, through which their children were able “not to derail [*tuogui*] from society” (as one informant said). While affirming and praising the Confucian classical education for its role in shaping one’s moral personality and self-cultivation, a majority of parents articulated their concerns that children would be marginalised and fail to integrate into mainstream society if they stayed in the Confucian school. For example, in the conversation with Mr. Qian, he repeatedly emphasised the point that classics reading must be accommodated within mainstream social life. He was concerned that if students read classics in a remote but monotonous schooling environment, but neither learned any other knowledge nor touched the outside world, they might be isolated from mainstream society. As Mr. Qian indicated, “To learn classics is good. I totally agree with a classical education. [...] However, what should we do if our children were unable to fit into social life once completing Confucian education? [...] They indeed learn a lot of knowledge, but [the knowledge] must be compatible with society.” Out of this concern, as he admitted, he was thinking of withdrawing his

nine-year-old son from the Confucian school and transferring him to the compulsory education.

Mrs. Hua expressed a more outspoken critique of Confucian education. In order to accompany her eight-year-old son to learn classics in Yiqian School, Mrs. Hua even quit her job and worked inside the school as a homeroom teacher. When I interviewed her over the phone in 2015, she had left the school, and her child returned to a compulsory school as well after two years of classics reading.<sup>54</sup> Like most of the interviewed parents, Mrs. Hua engaged her child in classical education primarily because of the instrumental criticism of state education, the topic that has been addressed in Chapter 5. However, in the two years of her child's learning classics and her work at Yiqian School, she had a comprehensive knowledge of the real situation of the School and the idea of classical education, which finally led to shifting her thinking on this kind of education. Particularly, she acknowledged in the interview that she would never consider sending her son back to Yiqian if the Confucian school retained the method of mechanically memorising classics because, as she argued, this teaching and learning process would exclude the mainstream compulsory curriculum, marginalise students' educational experience, and finally render them to be "non-mainstream" (*fei zhuliu*) people. She explained:

The compulsory schooling teaches pupils common-sense knowledge that could be used in ordinary life. If someone completely abandoned [such knowledge] and just learned classics, he or she would *be as if isolated to live in another, different world*, just like some students [at Yiqian] who had little educational experience in the compulsory schools. The [Confucian] school artificially creates an unusual world that is separate from the mainstream social environment. This runs counter to my expectation because I suppose today's society is a pluralistic community, and therefore *I hope my child will be part of mainstream society instead of being excluded to non-mainstream*. [...] *I wish my son not to be thrown into a non-mainstream*

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<sup>54</sup> The first contact with Mrs. Hua was through WeChat when I posted the information sheet in the WeChat group consisting of all teaching staff of Yiqian School. Mrs. Hua (who remained in this online group) contacted me actively and expressed her willingness for interview. Also, she said she was gratified by my study of classical education and hoped to let more people know the truth of this school.

*state from an early age, where he would later find it tough to accommodate mainstream society.*

*(Interview, Parent & Teacher, Mrs. Hua, August 2015; Italics by the author)*

According to Mrs. Hua, the teaching mode of Yiqian was a minority (*xiaozhong de*) method that “is very difficult to integrate with the mainstream [compulsory] education.” She estimated that while there have been at least 1,000 students admitted to the Confucian school since its establishment, the number who finally completed classics memorisation according to the school’s whole-course programming was quite small. “The number,” she indicated,

[Is] even less than one percent of the total [one thousand]. Even if we take it as one percent, it means ninety-nine percent could not make it. [...] Most students, just like my son, spent one or two years reading classics in the school and then turned to various other teaching patterns: some transferred to other Confucian schools and continued the classical education; some went to vocational-technical schools; but the majority returned to the compulsory school system and then embarked on the path towards university. [...] In light of this, I think the educational approach [of Yiqian School] cannot be popularised.

*(Interview, Parent & Teacher, Mrs. Hua, August 2015)*

For Mrs. Hua, the pedagogy of Yiqian School was aimed at cultivating “Confucian scholars” (*rushi*) who were just a minority group in ancient China and will also be in the future. She thus argued that contemporary Confucian education should embrace diversified goals and modes of teaching and not be limited to educating Confucian scholars; otherwise, it would only become a non-mainstream form of education.

Many interviewed parents expressed similar misgivings about children’s educational experience. The aforementioned Mrs. Jin, took the same position as Mr. Qian and Mrs. Hua, sharing the instrumental critique of state education but emphasising that students must not isolate classics learning from ordinary social life. Otherwise, as Mrs Jin pointed out, “[They would form] a way of life completely different from the mainstream world outside. One day when they went into society, they would find themselves uncomfortably incompatible with people, either to the point of derailing from [mainstream life] or [one’s personality becoming] distorted.” She suggested that a comprehensive education would not make pupils “read classics only” but simultaneously teach them basic social skills. “Even the children who are learning classics at the school are

seriously painful in the heart and mind,” She stated, “[Because they live in school,] an entirely hollow environment.”

Additionally and finally, economic pressures may serve as another factor in shaping the desire to return to compulsory education in the future, but this affected only a very handful of interviewed parents. Only one parent stated that her family, subject to limited economic resources, was under pressure to pay the tuition fees (30,000 RMB one year) for Confucian schooling. Another two interviewed mothers confessed that while they might not interrupt their children’s classical education in next few years, the high tuition fees caused them to frequently think of returning them to state schools (compulsory public schooling is free in China). Except for these three, however, the other parents reported that tuition fees did not constitute an obstacle to their children’s educational prospects.<sup>55</sup> It is indeed possible that parents were not willing to share financial concerns in the interviews. But this may reinforce the sense that the majority of interviewed parents who came from urban middle-class families could absorb the economic costs, as revealed in Chapter 5 .

In sum, the discussion in this section shows that the state education system plays a crucial role in the re-embedding approach of parents and students involved in the Confucian school. Whether the indeterminacy of the prospects offered by the Confucian education, or anxiety about the acquisition of academic qualifications, or concern about broader marginalisation as a result of the unique educational experience, all suggest parents and students’ dependence on the state-maintained education system. The Confucian classical school adopted teaching methods and contents that were independent of compulsory education, which resulted in students and parents struggling to find connections with the

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<sup>55</sup> On the issue of tuition fees, the Confucian classical school faced a public welfare dilemma. On the one hand, Yiqian School as a privately run school charged much higher tuition fees than the state-sponsored public compulsory schools, which are free of tuition fees. On the other hand, some of the parents, most of who were Buddhists, argued that the Confucian-inspired school should grant the disadvantaged students relief from tuition fees. The school did grant some discount (but no exemptions) in tuition fees to some students from poor families, but only if they had been studying in the school for several years.

state school system, even though it was the very specificity of the Confucian education system that attracted the same people in the first place.

The individualisation thesis may help to deepen our understanding of the above. On the one hand, the processes of individualisation deconstruct the ready-made set of presumptions and norms, which leads to new possibilities, including new schooling options but also uncertainties (Beck 1992: 128; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). As a result, parents and students in the domain of Confucian education experience pressure rooted in greater social insecurity (Burgess 2018: 93). Re-embedding into the state-maintained school system helps retrieve a sense of security, safety and stability. As pointed out by Yunxiang Yan, individualisation in China is controlled, guided and managed by the state (Y. Yan 2010: 510), and individuals must be self-motivated within the boundaries set by the political authority (Y. Yan 2009b: 289-290). Likewise, the Chinese individuals in the Confucian school cannot exist independently of the state school system.

### **7.3 Failing to provide compulsory curriculum: governing and re-embedding**

In this section, I return to one fundamental issue mentioned at the beginning of this chapter—the fact that the Confucian school at the heart of this research did not comprehensively provide a compulsory curriculum since its establishment, even though it was nominally an approved nine-year compulsory school featuring Confucian classics reading. This is a critical dimension that directly affects the three aspects summarised above. I will first describe the specific practices of how the school attempted to provide compulsory courses but failed. This exploration will speak to a form of Chinese governmentality that mixes neoliberal and authoritarian rhetoric. Then I will turn to highlight the implications of the school's struggle in routinising the state-stipulated curriculum for parents' programming of their children's next-stage education. This may elucidate some arguments of the individualisation thesis regarding mobility, dis-embedding and re-embedding.

### ***7.3.1 Dilemma of routinising compulsory curriculum: independence or obedience?***

On the first day after the May spring holidays in 2015, the Confucian school started to implement a new teaching “reform”—to add the compulsory curriculum into the routine teaching schedule. All teachers were required by the school to develop teaching plans for the compulsory curricula and finish them in just one week. There were a total of eight courses: Chinese Language, Mathematics, English Language, Science, Moral Education, Music, Fine Arts, and Physical Education. Faced with such a pressing task, teachers responded by downloading off-the-shelf teaching plans from the Internet and then handed them over with only a few corrections. Quickly, the school adjusted the regular teaching arrangements: while the three classes in the morning (for Chinese classics memorisation), the class at noon (for calligraphy exercise) and the first two classes in the afternoon (for English classics memorisation and martial arts) remained unchanged, both the third class in the afternoon and the two classes in the evening were rescheduled for compulsory courses (previously for self-study). As to what concrete subjects would be taught, the school allowed the teachers of each class to decide for themselves. It can be seen from the adjustment that the school merely complemented the compulsory courses in the existing daily teaching arrangement and still retained the classics-centred curriculum framework.

However, the “teaching reform” of routinising the compulsory curriculum lasted less than one month. Here is a passage from the field notes I recorded in early June 2015 that documents what happened:

The routinisation of the compulsory courses initiated in early May has almost been suspended. In the evening I met Miss Yang [a teacher of Qishun Class] and asked her whether she continued to teach Chinese language course later on, since she gave two lectures at the beginning. Immediately she answered “no” and then complained about how busy she had been in recent days with handling taxing work, so she had no spare time for teaching the course! [...] In fact, not only the Chinese language, but the English course also is not established because Mr. Meng, the only English teacher at Yiqian, has left the school. Consequently, the English classes (both English classics memorisation and compulsory



English course) have entirely ceased. [...] Courses of mathematics and science are never included in the daily teaching schedule.<sup>56</sup> [...] The courses that have not yet been stopped include fine arts, music, and physical education.<sup>57</sup>

(Field notes, Qishun Class, June 2015)

This was not the first time that such a situation had occurred. As the schoolteachers revealed, in the past few years the Confucian school tried to launch compulsory courses several times but failed to routinise them in the teaching schedule in the end. Consequently, the compulsory curriculum had been “shelved” (*gezhi*)—the term was used by Principal Zheng, which implied that the school had never given up on providing comprehensive and regular compulsory curriculum<sup>58</sup> but temporarily laid them aside because the time and conditions were not suitable yet. Why was this the case?

The following three accounts are offered to help explain not only why the “teaching reform” failed but also why the compulsory courses were “shelved” for so long. First, the “reform” was, in essence, a contingent “coping” (*yingfu*, the teachers’ terminology) strategy in light of the inspection of the local Education Bureau. It was owing to the pressure from the Education Bureau that the school had to initiate the “teaching reform” hastily. A few teachers (including Principal Zheng) confessed that there were parents who complained to the County Education Bureau that Yiqian School did not provide the compulsory curriculum (some parental interviewees also mentioned this). Therefore the local

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<sup>56</sup> According to the schoolteachers, the school did have regular mathematic classes before 2015. But during the fieldwork in the spring semester 2015, I did not find mathematics was included in the daily teaching schedule for all students, but merely for a small number in the graduation class (*biye ban*) who were preparing for the primary school graduation examinations.

<sup>57</sup> The course of physical education (specifically, martial arts) was what the school provided all along, one lesson for each class per day. In contrast, the courses of music and fine arts were never offered in the school. But the workload of preparing the two was relatively light—there was respectively only one lesson for each class per week. The school arranged two teachers for each of the two courses.

<sup>58</sup> Indeed, to provide the state-stipulated compulsory curriculum was clearly stated in the school’s various versions of brochures, some of which I collected during the fieldwork.

government urged the school to open up state curriculum within the required time and stated it would conduct a surprise inspection. The school successfully passed the inspection; however, once the pressure from the local government had reduced, the school seemed to lose the impetus to continue these courses. In this sense, the “education reform” could be understood *not* as a sustainable change but a forced expediency in order to cope with the inspection by the local Education Bureau—when the government stepped up its supervision, the “reform” was launched; but when the intensity of checks decreased, it was suspended.

The second explanation for the failure in compulsory course provision is that the Confucian school was severely short of teaching staff to provide instruction on the state-stipulated curriculum. Take the mathematics course as an example. Over the past few years, the school attempted to develop a “bank of mathematical exercises” (*shuxue tiku*), which was designed to include exercises for all knowledge points in compulsory mathematical textbooks. By such a knowledge and question database, the school aspired to realise the “one-to-one” learning process in the particular area of mathematics. The approach of applying the system would be that, as Principal Zheng explained, students could firstly extract from the “bank” the exercises of different degrees of difficulty on the basis of their various levels of capability in mathematics; and then through practicing the questions that accorded with their aptitude, students were expected to gradually improve their expertise in the subject. However, the exercise system had not been put into practice when I left the school. The teacher, Mr. Sun, who was in charge of developing the mathematics database, signified that no exercises were imported yet, although its framework had been constructed; the task required a great deal of workforce and material resources to complete, but there was a severe shortage of staff to engage in it.

In fact, the existing workload had already made Mr. Sun exhausted. Working as the homeroom teacher of Qishun Class, he was responsible for the daily teaching and administration of the whole class; also he was entrusted with the responsibility of administering the provisional graduation class and teaching mathematics in the class. Moreover, if the school happened to organise a collective performance (which I experienced twice during the one-semester long

fieldwork), Mr. Sun had to assume the roles of planner and director. All the work consumed plenty of time and energy and caused him to be so exhausted that I often heard him complain “There is no spare time to do the question bank!” Or “I am going to be utterly worn out!” In addition to mathematics, since Mr. Meng left the school, there was no qualified teacher to undertake the teaching of English language. Even more of a problem, the school faced considerable difficulty in hiring new teachers for compulsory courses; and, as noted in Chapter 3, the turnover rate of teaching staff stayed at a high level.

The third reason for failing to provide the state-stipulated courses lay in the contradiction between the compulsory curriculum and the existing education system of the Confucian school. The school already established a teaching framework based on the individualised manner of memorising classics (see Chapter 6), which served to maintain the “Confucian” uniqueness of the school, and which resulted in students spending most of their time reciting classics instead of learning compulsory courses. Therefore, when the compulsory curricula were added to the school’s existing educational framework, they would inevitably take time from classics memorising. During the fieldwork, several students from the graduation class admitted that learning the compulsory courses did delay the progression of classics memorisation, as the teacher banned them from learning classics.

In this respect, the most typical example may be the compulsory English course that displayed the incompatibility with the school’s Confucian pedagogy. Mr. Meng, the only English teacher at the school and a man in his early forties, showed me a copy of English teaching materials he compiled for the school, which was a booklet of less than twenty A4 pages but where all fundamental knowledge from the state-stipulated English textbooks from the Third Year to the Sixth was extracted and then reorganised. However, on the other hand, the English teaching in the Confucian school had always been based on the approach of memorising English classics, through which students were required to read and recite the English classic textbooks such as *Selected Works of English Masterpieces* (*Yingwen mingzhu xuan*) and Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, all of which were compiled by Professor Caigui Wang. Consequently, Mr. Meng’s English handout was hardly used in daily teaching. When the “teaching

reform” started, the school demanded him to use neither the English classic books nor the self-compiled booklet but the state-stipulated English textbooks. Although he felt bewildered, he had to follow the new regulation to teach English in accordance with the compulsory teaching materials.

In brief, routinising the compulsory curriculum in the Confucian school falls between independence and obedience, which is to say between the Confucian school adhering to the independence of the existing teaching system and obeying the authorised provisions of the national curriculum structure. The contradiction is also directly reflected in the relationship of Yiqian School with the local government. On the one hand, as a nine-year compulsory education institution approved by the state, the Confucian school had to abide by the regulations of the local education department and obey its management regarding the curriculum, teaching activities, student status and so on. According to the interview with Mr. Cheng, a section chief of the local Education Bureau, Yiqian School was obliged to accept the inspection of the local government and submit an annual self-examination report that covered a wide range of contents, including the teaching, students, faculty and funding. Only after the Education Bureau approved the report would the school be entitled to undertake the teaching activities for the next year. However, on the other hand, Yiqian School struggled to maintain its independence and autonomy in pedagogical practices. In particular, it took strategies to cope with the inspections of the local government, whose purpose was to preserve the integrity of the whole-course planning of classical education with classics memorisation as the core, so as to achieve the ultimate goal of training students as “great cultural talents.”

The local educational authority recognised the independence of teaching activities in Yiqian School. As the officer Mr. Cheng pointed out, the local Education Bureau approved the Confucian school to arrange the teaching primarily based on Confucian classics-memorising courses but supplemented with compulsory courses. However, he continued to emphasise that, either because of administrative requirements or parental complaints, the local government still exerted pressure on the Confucian School to comprehensively set up the compulsory curriculum. This is echoed by some researchers who argue that Chinese governing discourses and practices combine both the

neoliberal and the authoritarian rhetoric (Anagnost 2008; Crabb 2010; Goodman 2016; Hansen 2015; Naftali 2014; Pieke 2009; Sigley 2006; W. Sun 2017), particularly with the emphasis on the central role of CCP in governance (Liew 2005; Logan and Fainstein 2008; So 2005; Y. Yan 2009b). Specific to current Confucian schools in China, while they have a strong desire for being independent of the compulsory education, they have yet to (re)assert themselves within the very space of state-maintained school system (see also Billioud and Thoraval 2015: 35).

### ***7.3.2 Implications for re-embedding in state education***

As the compulsory curricula, especially mathematics and English,<sup>59</sup> had been “shelved” in the Confucian school, students had no chance of sufficiently learning the relevant knowledge in the school’s teaching timetable. As a result, many pupils reported challenges in following the teaching once they returned to the compulsory schools, with some reporting feeling depressed and frustrated. Mrs. Hua had a profound experience in this regard. Her son learned classics for two years but went back to a state primary school for Year Four. However, in the initial stage after returned,

He was unable to catch up with the compulsory curriculum, and his study outcomes ranked the last few in the class. [...] After all, [it is because] my son experienced a gap of two years in compulsory schooling. [In the two years,] he did not learn much mathematics; neither did he study Chinese language. The English teaching in the [Confucian] school was entirely paralysed, so he learned nothing in English language.

*(Interview, Parent & Teacher, Mrs. Hua, August 2015)*

Similarly, the concern about the negative impact on the compulsory curriculum study if children merely memorise classics for a prolonged period served as one important factor to push Mrs. Wei to return her daughter to the state-maintained school after only one year of classics learning at Yiqian School.

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<sup>59</sup> Here were two of the most worrisome courses mentioned by parents and students, who revealed that when students returned to the compulsory school system, they often encountered academic frustration. Parents and students did not explicitly convey worries about learning the compulsory course of Chinese language.

The age of the child played a key role in this case. When her daughter graduated from primary school, Mrs. Wei transferred her to the Confucian school. As Mrs. Wei acknowledged, if her daughter were younger, she would have her learn classics for a few more years: “Because the courses in the primary school stage were much easier and the schoolwork was not much. [...] However, in the middle school, she had quite a few courses in one semester. So it would be much harder to make them up if she did not return as early as possible.”

This concern of parents can be further evidenced by the interview with Mr. Cheng, the section chief of the local education sector. “Some parents asked for [opening compulsory courses],” he said, “[Because] when they sent children to study [in Yiqian School], they, on the one hand, aspired for them to learn classics, but on the other hand did not want them to fall behind too much in compulsory courses once they returned [to the state schools] after one or two years.” This reminds us of the finding in Chapter 5 that many parents had removed their children from state schools because of poor grades. As indicated here, parents nevertheless exerted pressure to the Confucian school and pushed it to provide the compulsory curriculum by filing a complaint with the Education Bureau, even after they engaged in classical education.

The concern that the long-term study of classics caused the delay of or difficulty in learning compulsory courses contradicts the educational claims of Yiqian School, which asserted that classics memorisation was not an obstacle but a facilitator for the study of compulsory curriculum. Influenced by Professor Caigui Wang’s (2009a & 2014a) educational theory of children reading classics, the Confucian school advocated the idea that a child would be bound to improve his or her memory as long as he or she recited a significant number of classics; and the enhancement of memory would inevitably bring about the development of understanding, which would consequently make it much easier to learn compulsory courses (such as mathematics, Chinese language and English language). However, what many parents and children reported they experienced was the opposite.<sup>60</sup> Not only that, the schoolteachers did not think the

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<sup>60</sup> Billioud and Thoraval (2015) also described the paradoxes between memorising classics and learning compulsory courses such as mathematics in the Confucian education. As they analysed

perception of the effects of classics reading was consistent with their actual teaching experiences. For example, in multiple daily conversations with Mr. Sun, who was in charge of the school's mathematics teaching, he pointed out that only reading classics would not necessarily improve the learner's logical thinking, nor did it make mathematics study much easier. He said:

Let's say, well, the classical education constrains the teaching and learning contents only to classics, but abandons the courses of mathematics, physics and chemistry. It is quite apparent that students [who learn classics only] are extremely poor at logical thinking when they engage with mathematical issues. [...] I feel most of them are weak in thinking capabilities of, for example, analysing, programming, and reasoning.

*(Interview, Teacher, Mr. Sun, April 2015)*

Mr. Sun provided more evidence by taking the students of the graduation class as an example. As he indicated, those who had studied classics for many years encountered significant difficulties in learning mathematics. Several older students in the graduation class had already memorised classics for more than five years since they gave up primary education as early as in Year One. Inferring from the above-mentioned educational claim by the Confucian school, we may assume that these students would undoubtedly be able to make up the mathematics in a short period and achieve excellent examination results. However, Mr. Sun revealed quite the opposite reality. Although the students could handle some simple mathematical knowledge of Year One and Year Two, they encountered a considerable difficulty when learned courses of Year Three and above. Many of them did not understand what Mr. Sun taught in maths class; neither did they work out the exercises; consequently, they often failed the examinations (scored less than 60 points out of the total 100). In addition, based on the interview with the local government official, Mr. Cheng, the average result of the graduating students of Yiqian School ranked the last out of all county

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the discourses in one Chinese classical school, the teachers, on the one hand, criticised the centrality of mathematics in the compulsory curriculum and considered it "both useless and difficult to understand" (p. 97). But on the other hand, they claimed that reading classical texts would enable the learners to develop the intellectual agility for solving the most complex mathematical problems (Ibid).

primary schools in the subject of mathematics. As he said, “[The examination scores] are far behind those of other compulsory schools.”

To conclude, it is clear that there were many examples of parents who returned their children to the state school system out of concern that the Confucian school did not provide a stable and comprehensive compulsory curriculum. Especially in the period after graduating from primary education, many students would leave Yiqian as soon as they had attended the final graduation examinations and go back to state schools for middle-school education. When I was about to finish the fieldwork, at least five students aged above twelve years old informed me that they would not return to Yiqian next semester; and a few more admitted they were “uncertain” about the next step of their schooling. By the end of the semester, many older students asked each other one question: “Will you stay here next academic year?” It sounded like a farewell.

Returns to compulsory schools were responsible for the high dropout rate at the Confucian school. At the beginning of the autumn semester of 2014, nearly thirty students (out of the total 119) did not go back to Yiqian—most returned to the compulsory school system while a few transferred to other Confucian-style private schools. The number of students leaving was close to twenty in the autumn semester of 2015, based on information shared by some teachers after my fieldwork ended. I myself had experience of the high turnover rate of students during the fieldwork. When I visited the school for the third time in 2015,<sup>61</sup> I was surprised that I did not see most of the students I had met in the previous fieldwork. The teachers told me that more than half of the student population was new in 2014.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> As already explained in Chapter 3, the other two times I visited the Confucian school were in 2012 and 2013, both before the PhD fieldwork in 2015.

<sup>62</sup> There are different factors that led to the instability of the student population. The most immediate one was the pedagogic reform before the autumn semester of 2014 (as illustrated in Chapter 3), which resulted in a considerable number of students and parents who did not identify with the newly introduced pedagogy dropping out. But since the autumn semester in 2014 the school suspended the pedagogic reform and created the method of “individualised



Such a high turnover rate reflects the increasing mobility in the domain of Confucian classical education, and this mobility is one notable feature of the changing social structure in China (Y. Yan 2009b: 276). On the one hand, mobility serves as an essential agent of transformation as it enables disembedding, making it possible for the individual to break out of the shadow of the various sorts of collectives (Ibid: 278). However, on the other hand, students and their parents could not settle down finally in the classical school—subject to institutional restrictions in, for instance, educational prospects, diploma and social integration, they had to keep on looking for the most appropriate education, which directly resulted in the high fluidity of the student group.

Another point is that many students who returned to compulsory schools but faced obstacles in study performance would have to receive private tutoring. Parents called this stage the “adaptation period” that usually lasted for six months to one year, occasionally even longer, and the private tutoring would be expensive. In addition, as mentioned in Section 7.1, a few students planned to obtain a university diploma through the self-taught higher education examination, the family bearing the incurred expense. As students withdrew from the Confucian school and returned to compulsory education, they had to a considerable degree to rely on their families to take on the costs for re-embedding into mainstream state education. This point is echoed by Yunxiang Yan’s (2009) description of the process of individualisation in Chinese society: “To seek a new safety net, or to re-embed, the Chinese individual is forced to fall back on the family and personal network or *guanxi*” (pp. 288-289).

## **7.4 Going to *Wenli* Academy? Contradictions in shaping students’ individual self**

In this section, I will turn to the second of the two primary plans for future education by parents and students of the Confucian school: that is, to seek

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memorisation” that attached importance to recite a great number of classics, which made the student population not as turbulent as before. Nevertheless, many students still had to drop out of the Confucian school because concerns about the failure to offer compulsory curriculum were not mitigated.

further studies in *Wenli Academy*, which may be understood as both a way out of the phase of “reading classics” at Yiqian School and a continuation to the next stage of “interpreting classics” (Caigui Wang 2014a: 81-120). The discussion in this section will focus on the shaping of the “individual self,” a subjectivity demonstrated by the students of the Confucian school. I define the term “individual self” as a social and psychological disposition to pursue one’s interest and personal development, follow one’s own will and aspiration and guide oneself by self-determination and self-dependence. It is clarified that “individualism” does not mean here “egoism or the doctrine that an individual is an isolated, atomic being that owes society nothing but contempt,” but refers to “the doctrine that emphasises individuality, self-consciousness, and self-realisation” (X. Chen 2014: 73). I will first describe the tension between the pursuit of *Wenli Academy* and students’ thinking of personal aspirations, and then turn to students’ resistance to the sage discourse and parental authority. The discussion in this part may bear out the conflicting processes of shaping the individual between individualism and authoritarianism in the Chinese path to individualisation and evidence the complexities of the parent-child relationship.

#### ***7.4.1 Pursuing Wenli Academy or individual aspirations?***

One day in May 2015, Yiqian School organised a group of students to visit *Wenli Academy*. The visit had a strong educational purpose, which as Principal Zheng explained was to motivate students to set the Academy as the goal for the next-stage of study so as to devote the whole mind to memorising classics. Quite a few students had heard of the Academy before but had never visited it. The school hoped the trip would convince them to go there for further studies. The school selected the most outstanding students to make up the visiting group, most of who were over thirteen and had learned classics for at least three years.

I was permitted by the school to visit *Wenli Academy* with the students as an accompanying teacher. The Academy is located in a remote mountainous area, sparsely populated, surrounded by dense forests and rolling hills that stretch to the horizon. The visit was divided into two parts: in the first part Professor Caigui Wang gave a lecture to the students and answered their questions,

prepared in advance, and during the other part, the visitors had a chance to discuss with the attending students of the Academy.

In the week following the visit, at the regular Monday morning assembly, the school invited three students from the group to stand on the rostrum and share their experiences and thoughts about visiting the Academy with their schoolmates. Everything looked satisfactory—in the students' speeches, they all indicated that *Wenli* Academy was the “cultural shrine” (*wenhua shengdi*) they dreamed about for further studies, and expressed their admiration and gratitude for Professor Caigui Wang's efforts to promote classical education for decades. They even claimed that as students they should make every effort to complete the entire recitation of classic books, so to be well prepared for shouldering the great mission of revitalising Chinese traditional culture in the future.

After the morning assembly, I had multiple chats with some of the visiting students and also held group discussions in their classes. However, in contrast to the above-mentioned public expressions, the private chats revealed students' a different impression of *Wenli* Academy and their ideas of future education.

Lanxin, a fourteen-year-old girl, was one of the visiting students and also one of the three who made public speeches at the morning assembly. In a private conversation, she told me in a soft but firm tone that what she addressed in the speech was not her real thoughts. “The sentences I spoke are all false,” she said, “The homeroom teacher asked me to say so. [...] I feel how dishonest I am!” I was so shocked when heard this because based on my knowing of Lanxin, I assumed she would be a “good student” who was determined to go to *Wenli* Academy.

Why did I presume this? Though Lanxin was very young, she had been learning classics for seven years. What is unique about her educational experience is she had been educated in several Confucian schools since childhood and had never spent a single day in a compulsory school. This was so because her mother was a steadfast believer in Caigui Wang's educational theory and strongly yearned for her to keep on with Confucian education and to pursue advanced studies in *Wenli* Academy. From Lanxin's educational background, I supposed that she must be the kind of person who followed her mother's expectation and obediently determined the Academy as the goal for future education. My speculation was not without basis because Lanxin's education

experience meant that, drawing on the words of some teachers and parents in Yiqian, she was not “polluted” at all by the mainstream schooling so that “the heart and mind are more simple and pure.” This suggested that, in my own words, the girl was much more easily disciplined and shaped by the ideology of the Confucian education.

Nevertheless, she described how the visit not only failed to give her a longing for the Academy but also left her disappointed. The disappointment partly came from the impression of the students at the Academy, some of whom she had known for years. As Lanxin said,

I feel that the ideal is full, but the reality is empty. Well, they [the attending students of the Academy] stayed there for one year or two, but I cannot see any advancement they’ve achieved. [...] Take Qin Liu [a friend of Lanxin, who once learned classics at Yiqian School and had studied at *Wenli* Academy for two years] for example. Well, I feel she has shown no improvement at all. So I’m a bit sceptical [of the Academy].

*(Interview, Student, Girl, Fourteen years old, June 2015)*

A majority of interviewed students shared similar thoughts. Take the students of Lanxin’s Qili Class as an example, a class made up of seventeen older girls, all of who were over the age of thirteen and had learned classics for more than three years, and half of who visited *Wenli* Academy. Except two they all explicitly expressed their limited interest in the Academy for future education in class discussions with me, one after another complaining: “I previously had no plan to go to the Academy, and now I dislike it even more”; “I would rather die than go there”; “It is useless to me to study in the Academy”; “How disappointed I was when I heard the lecture of Professor Wang”; “I just feel disillusioned with the dream.”

There were two specific reasons given by the girls. First, they felt defeated by the admission criterion of *Wenli* Academy—to accomplish the recitation of at least 300,000 characters of classics. More than one student indicated that when she heard Caigui Wang emphasised they were obligated to finish the recitation as the precondition of applying for the Academy, they felt it a tricky task to complete. “My hair would have turned grey when I finished reciting all the books!” Some of them exclaimed, “I would rather die than memorise the 300,000 characters of classics!” A few others criticised the admission standard was too

restrictive to maintain the inclusiveness for enrolling talents with multiple aptitudes. As one argued with a rhetorical question, “Should not it be the kind of people who are excellent in all aspects who are admitted by the Academy?”

The second and more meaningful reason was that students found *Wenli* Academy not in line with their personal interests or aspirations. Lanxin, the girl mentioned earlier, confessed that she had no intention to continue her Confucian classical studies and was not interested in going to the Academy. In contrast, she stated,

I think going to university is an inevitable way out; it is best to go abroad. Indeed, quite a few people do nothing but drift along at university, but many others do work hard and learn something. As I feel, the Academy is not very consistent with my aspiration because, well, different people have different hobbies and interests. Anyway, I am not interested in engaging in scholarship [*zuo xuewen*], so the Academy is not my cup of tea.

*(Interview, Student, Girl, Fourteen years old, May 2015)*

At Qili Class, many students had the same perception as Lanxin. They argued that university would provide them with a wide range of courses to select according to their individual interests; they would make friends with people from all over the country and seek advice from respected professors; the academic atmosphere was free in the university; however, *Wenli* Academy could offer none of these benefits. This was echoed by another girl who asserted no interest in the current courses provided by the Academy such as classics memorisation and interpretation:

I look forward to learning a lot of different things. They [students of *Wenli* Academy] told me they would learn five languages, two musical instruments and other knowledge. However, the courses provided at present are merely classics memorisation and interpretation, plus a bit of philosophical study and German language. They did not learn Chinese zither [*guqin*] until very recently and had no calligraphy class either. Therefore I suppose I am not interested [in studying in the Academy].

*(Class discussion, Qili Class, Student, Girl, Thirteen years old, June 2015)*

Reflecting this gap between *Wenli* Academy and the young people’s individual aspirations, the older male students expressed similar feelings and thoughts to those of the girls. Xin Zheng, the fourteen-year-old boy mentioned in Section 7.2, clearly stated that *Wenli* Academy did not fit his life plan. During the

fieldwork, I frequently heard him complain, “I totally have no idea of the value of memorising classics!” He specified that when he initially transferred to the Confucian school two years ago, he was full of enthusiasm and longing for *Wenli* Academy and even regarded it as the ideal destination for the next stage of Confucian education. However, two years later, he increasingly suffered from the boredom and monotony of learning classics by rote. Many times I saw him sitting at his desk but staring blankly during the class, occasionally reading classics but not learning them by heart. In a conversation he said, “Reading classics is not suitable for my life planning, and I just feel there is no sense in doing it.” His life planning was to engage in creating musical and writing dramas. Thus he aspired to go to university to learn the majors he was interested and then to pursue his career ambition and do what he individually enjoyed. He judged that he neither had the interest in nor the talent for academic research, so he concluded *Wenli* Academy was not suitable for him.

Other older boys shared with Xin Zheng a lack of fit between *Wenli* Academy and their individual life planning. Ge Ren was the most unexpected one. This thirteen-year-old boy studied extremely hard and achieved surprising results in classics memorisation. For example, he was the only one in the whole school who completed reciting three entire classic books in just one semester. His classmate Jie Wu described him in this way: “He keeps reading and memorising classics all the time, even in holidays, just as if he was obsessed.” The school, therefore, set Ge Ren as the role model for all students. However, on the day following the visit to the Academy, he informed me in conversation that he had no desire to pursue further studies at *Wenli* Academy. Interestingly, he first quoted four sentences of Zhang Zai, a famous Confucian scholar who lived during China’s Northern Song Dynasty (1020—1077), to explain the general understanding of the mission of Confucian intellectuals: “To set the mind for heaven and earth; to set life for ordinary people; to inherit the sage’s knowledge; and to initiate peace and security for all ages.” Confucian intellectuals have long regarded the four points clarified in the quotation as the perfect interpretation for the pursuit of the sage realm throughout Chinese history. By devoting themselves to achieving these four aspects, Confucians strived to endow their lives with greatness, sacredness, values and significance. Additionally, teachers of the Confucian school also

quoted this passage for educating students to be conscious of the importance of memorising classics.

Nevertheless, Ge Ren expressed confusion and doubt over the four sentences, confessing that he did not want to dedicate his entire life to their pursuit. On the contrary, he aspired to do what he felt interested in, to pursue his own ambitions, and to create the life course that belongs to him. He confided that he would like to partake in promoting the Confucian education and making people aware of the advantages of reading classics, but was not ready to take it as his entire life enterprise. So he concluded that *Wenli* Academy would not be the next step of his education.

To sum up, it can be seen from the above that older students of the Confucian school (whether girls or boys) conveyed limited interest in the Confucian *Wenli* Academy. Specifically, of the 51 older student participants, only 4 stated that they wanted to go to the Academy, whereas the majority rejected it because they did not think it agreed with their interests or life orientations. Here we see students of the Confucian school showcase a distinctly individualistic outlook on the self, which is characterised by self-determination and self-pursuit for personal aspirations. This kind of individual self is relevant to what Fengshu Liu (2008) has argued—contemporary Chinese young people have adopted “an individualised approach” in planning their lives and “a form of the self consistent with the autonomous, self-authoring and individualistic neoliberal subject” (p.193). However, it is also noted that the individual self of the Confucian school’s students implies an association with Confucian values of personal aspiration and authenticity. On the one hand, Confucian education attaches great importance to how a high and firm aspiration (*zhixiang*) plays a role in shaping an authentic Confucian self (X. Chen 2015). On the other hand, students demonstrated the self in specifying their own various life plans.

#### ***7.4.2 Individual self: resisting the sage discourse***

The resistance to the authoritarian fashion of sage discourse also intensified the students’ self-concept. I define the “sage discourse” as a set of Confucian-style authoritarian rhetoric through which the individual achieves moral cultivation

and arranges one's own life according to the model of Confucian sages and dedicates oneself to being part of the collective grand cause. The most typical expression of the sage discourse is the previously mentioned four sentences of Zhang Zai quoted above. As I revealed in Ge Ren's story, he straightforwardly rejected the discourses and confessed his limited interest in pursuing the sacred realm of saints; instead, he was eager to create his own life and pursue what he loved to do. However, when sharing this thought in a class meeting, he was stopped by the homeroom teacher. I took the following observation notes on this matter.

[When Ge Ren was speaking,] the homeroom teacher Miss Cai wrote a line on the blackboard: "The high covers the low." [When Ge Ren finished speaking,] Miss Cai explained to all students that Professor [Caigui] Wang proposed the ambition "to set the mind for heaven and earth," which is a grand goal and a high realm but he did not ask everyone to do it. However, targeting such a grand goal and high realm as one's life aspiration can cover all small goals and low realms. In this way, even if a person fails to reach the grand goal, he/she can still achieve a relatively higher one than that of merely pursuing a small one. Miss Cai spoke a bit emotionally, confessing that it took her a long time to realise this point and hoped Ge Ren could understand it someday. However, when Ge Ren raised his hand to give the teacher a sign that he wanted to make more comments, Miss Cai made a "stop" gesture and said, "We had better not spend any more time discussing this issue but leave it in private."

*(Field notes, Qibo Class, May 2015)*

The words of Miss Cai plunged Ge Ren into deeper confusion about his future education and life. He felt such a grand realm as "to set the mind for heaven and earth" was so abstract, high, distant and sacred that in his words, "only the saints could achieve it," but he was an ordinary person who "just wants to live a mediocre life."

Similarly, Yangyang, the student mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, also felt defeated by the sage discourse. The twelve-year-old boy, being one of the students who visited *Wenli* Academy, started to learn Confucian classics in kindergarten. In a chat with me, he referred to the remark made by Caigui Wang during the visit, when urged all students to work hard on classics memorisation and not to be a "stingy and narrow-minded" (*xiaoli xiaoqi*) person but a qualified successor of Confucian culture so as to shoulder the great mission of



rejuvenating Chinese traditional culture. However, Yangyang commented on it in this way:

I have no such high and far plan for life; neither do I ever think of a lofty aim or aspiration like this. I just want to live a simple and happy life. It is true that “everyone has a certain responsibility for the rise and fall of the country” [*tianxia xingwang pifu youze*], but is it possible to achieve it with just a few of us? Cultural renaissance takes a long time and requires the striving of generations of scholars and intellectuals. However, sorry, I am not one of them. I am a person who is merely concerned with trivial matters, for example, finishing the required memorisation tasks, receiving a letter from home or having tasty meals. Therefore, I do not think I deserve to be a great person to revive Chinese traditional culture, which is an extremely honourable and selfless enterprise. I am actually a stingy and narrow-minded person and always live for today, even if I have desperately finished reciting the entire *Book of Changes* this month.

(Interview, Student, Male, Twelve years old, June 2015)

As discussed in Chapter 6, Yiqian School, in identifying with Professor Caigui Wang and his method of mechanical memorisation, has been driven by a sense of cultural nationalism to cultivate “great cultural talents.” In this regard, the authoritarian sage discourses are wrapped up in the ethos of cultural nationalism. In the lecture given by Caigui Wang on the visit, he encouraged all students to follow the example of the sages and regard the memorisation of classics as a means to achieve moral improvement, cultivate a Confucian selfhood or *junzihood* (the selfhood of the superior person), and prepare to contribute to the revival of Confucian culture. According to Bakken (2000), we can interpret the sage discourse based on the logic of exemplarity, which emphasises a human cultivates virtuous ethics and proper conduct by recitation, repetition and imitation of the wisdom of the sage, as embodied by the classical texts (p. 169). However, it is clear that students such as Yangyang and Ge Ren did not support this authoritarian sage discourse but instead deconstructed and challenged its legitimacy. They sought to recover the subjectivity of self-reliance, self-determination and self-mastery and produced individualistic discourses in their pursuit of personal interests and aspirations. The following female student, who did not think classics reading was a great cause but understood it from a more practical perspective, can moreover evidence this.

[It is said that to read classics is] “to inherit the sage’s knowledge and to initiate peace and security for all ages.” [...] But if I really believe it, it would be nothing but self-deception because I am not so great and I’m not sure how long it would take to realise it in the development of classics-reading education. After all, society would not cease for a small number of people like us, and people’s thinking will only go ahead but never fall back. [...] I do not think reading classics is a sublime or exceptional way, nor is it a way of promising people a bright future.

*(Monthly Self-summary, Student, Girl, Thirteen years old, July 2015)*

Here we can see that students showed their sense of inferiority and conveyed anxiety about not measuring up to the high demands set by Confucian education. I argue that this is also one aspect of what drove students’ individualism—that retreating inwards might offer them a way of dealing with what they perceived to be the impossibility of what was being asked of them as part of a collective national project.

Nonetheless, while many students were sceptical about the “sanctity” or “greatness” of Confucian classical education, so they explicitly rejected *Wenli Academy* as the next stop of their education, some parents took the opposite stance. Take Mr. Li, the father of Yangyang, as an example. As a staunch supporter of Confucian classical education, Mr. Li articulated his expectations of his son in such a way by using the term “mission” (*shiming*):

I always believe my son must be born into this world for a certain great mission. [...] Can he achieve the realm of “setting the mind for heaven and earth”? Well, let’s say do I have such an expectation? [...] Yes, I do! [...] It may be true that ninety percent of the total population in this world do not think so and will not do so either. But there are still ten percent who take on the mission. Maybe my son is one of the ten percent. [...] I believe he has a mission.

*(Interview, Parent, Mr. Li, May 2015)*

Therefore, Mr. Li conveyed hope for his son to pursue further studies in *Wenli Academy* because he viewed the Academy as the optimal and sacred place for someone to fulfil the great mission and become a great cultural talent, though it did not match Yangyang’s personal interests.

In brief, the sage discourse indeed stressed the significance of the high and firm aspiration, but the students viewed it too abstract and sacred to reach. The students’ resistance to the sage discourse reinforced their sense of a self, whose

benchmark of aspiration is not sacredness but whether it is consistent with their sense of themselves and their own desires.

### ***7.4.3 Individual self: resisting parental authority***

The resistance to parental authority is another aspect that intensified students' opposition to the self constituted by the Academy. Although a majority of parents felt hesitant about setting the Academy as their children's next stop for education (as mentioned in Section 7.2.1), a few indeed expressed the yearning for it. Based on the fieldwork, the tension between students' self-pursuits and their parents' expectations was evident, and as a result, parents and children frequently fell into disagreements and even quarrels on the matter of going to *Wenli* Academy.

The disagreement between Mrs. Fan and her fourteen-year-old daughter Keke concerning her educational prospect had lasted for two years. Mrs. Fan was always determined to send her daughter to *Wenli* Academy since Keke had left the compulsory school and engaged in Confucian classics-reading education. However, Keke did not entirely agree with this educational blueprint drawn up by Mrs. Fan. In the past two years, Mrs. Fan attempted to change Keke's opinion but encountered numerous quarrels. "I have always tried to guide her and often talked to her about *Wenli* Academy," said Mrs. Fan,

But every time I spoke of it, she turned a bit angry and said, "I don't want to go to *Wenli* Academy!" Also, she visited the Academy some time ago, and the conditions there are not as perfect as she imagined. [...] Her head is full of fancies, for example, to go for a free trip or wherever she aspires.

*(Interview, Parent, Mrs. Fan, August 2015)*

Nonetheless, Mrs. Fan argued her daughter was too young to have her thoughts fixed. She believed that as long as she kept the faith of keeping her daughter learning classics, she would surely influence Keke to change her mind. She told Keke that she would not make any concession in insisting on classical education:

One day my daughter asked me how long she would have to read classics. I told her just to keep it going. Immediately she burst into tears. [...] She knows my determination is

steadfast and nothing would shake it. She has been aware of this since she was young. [...] [She knows that] no matter how much she cries and screams, I would never make any concession on any matter of principle.

(Interview, Parent, Mrs. Fan, August 2015)

Faced with her mother's imposed programming of her future education, Keke had no choice but to do what was demanded of her. However, this led her into a paradoxical situation. Although she was not willing to go to *Wenli* Academy, she had to obediently stay in the Confucian school to memorise classics day after day just "in order not to disappoint mum," as she said. In a class discussion, she confessed she had nothing in mind but to complete the recitation of 300,000-character classics as soon as possible and then go to the Academy, because mother promised her as long as she was admitted by the Academy and studied there for two years, she would afterwards be free to choose her own future career and do whatever she wanted.

Many older students experienced a similar contradictory situation, which can be further evidenced by the group discussions in Qili Class. For example, Lanxin, who was Keke's classmate, indicated that while she had no desire to attend *Wenli* Academy, she confined herself to reading classics in the Confucian school to meet her mother's expectation. "I do not want to disappoint my mother," said Lanxin, the same words as Keke. The contradiction was not limited to girls. In a daily conversation, Jie Wu, a sixteen-year-old male student, recounted that his father did not compel him to go to the Academy for the next-stage education, but hoped he could prioritise finishing the memorisation of classics and then do what he individually aspired to do. Like many other students, Jie Wu felt bored about learning classics by rote, but had to push himself to continue just not to let his father down.

"Do not let parents down" was an account shared by many students who used it to justify the paradoxical situation they faced—to keep learning classics in Yiqian School but without aspiration for *Wenli* Academy. We can see that obedience to parental authority conflicted with the individual interests and self-pursuits. On the one hand, students displayed the virtue of filial piety to parental authority by struggling to live up to the imposed expectations. Being filial in the Chinese context usually means that the child is obligated to listen to

the parents' orders, take care of them, and maintain respect or *mianzi* for parental authority (see, e.g., Deutsch 2006; V. Fong 2004; Ikels 2004; Kipnis 2009; Y. Zhang 2016). But on the other hand, to prioritise parental expectations over their own interests directly contradicted the students' self-development. Consequently, they quarrelled with their parents, expressed their personal opinions and resisted parental coercion.

Resistance was not always as ineffective as Keke experienced. By contrast, many students reported that their resistance seemed to open up some space for negotiating personal choices for future education. In discussions with the girls in Qili Class, several admitted that the uncompromising attitude of their parents diminished as a result of their repeated objections to the Academy. "When I was at home, mum persuaded me by saying, 'You must go to the Academy and do not let me down,'" a girl recounted. "Then I cried and screamed, shouting 'I don't want to go there! I don't want to go there!' Then a big quarrel followed. After several times like this, my mum changed to say, 'Whatever, as you will.'" Similarly, there was another girl who said:

My mother indeed expects me to attend *Wenli* Academy. [...] On one occasion, I told her I did not want to go there but looked forward to studying in Japan. Then she began to list the disadvantages of studying in Japan. [...] But some days later she changed her mind and said, "Whatever, as you will." Now she still expects me to study at the Academy but does not force me as much as before.

(*Class Discussion, Qili Class, Student, Girl, Fourteen years old, May 2015*)

On the other hand, resistance by children also made parents realise the necessity of respecting children's opinions and giving them the power to decide on their own. Similar to Mrs. Fan, Mrs. Song expressed the strong expectation for her fourteen-year-old son Jianjian, who had been learning Confucianism for five years, first to complete the classics memorisation and then go for further studies at *Wenli* Academy. "But even now when you ask him if he wishes to go to the Academy," said Mrs. Song, "He will definitely give a 'no' answer." In the past few years, she has had countless quarrels with Jianjian on this issue, which caused her to realise her overhasty persuasion placed much pressure on him. She changed her approach later on:

Now I will not compel him to do anything because he has grown up. I hope to give him

some space to think independently of his own future. Perhaps it has not yet been the appropriate time for him to think of this [going to the Academy]. [...] So I tell him it is up to you whether or not to study in the Academy, but to recite the entire classic books is what you are obligated to do for now.

(Interview, Parent, Mrs. Song, July 2015)

The self-reflection of some parents made them more tolerant of children making their own choices and doing what interested them. Speaking of the future education of her ten-year-old son, Mrs. Wu argued that a child at this age “is still rather vague in thinking about the life direction.” Like Mrs. Song, Mrs. Wu learned to stop coercing her child to go to the Academy, but instead turned to encourage him in the following way:

[I tell my son that] it is well enough to do what you like as long as you make efforts. [...] If I set it up for him [and require him] to go to *Wenli* Academy, he would be stressed out, or perhaps he could not actually achieve it [the requirement]. It is not something to make happen by coercion. So I do not give him too much pressure. This is a change in myself, my true personal experience as well, in a word, to respect the child.

(Interview, Parent, Mrs. Wu, July 2015)

Several more interviewees emphasised it was essential to respect children in determining their future education. They took it as their duty (*benfen*) to provide economic conditions for children seeking further studies in the future,<sup>63</sup> but also accentuated children’s power and independence in deciding on their own life. “Just to follow the child’s own decision, his own choice; just as he will, whatever he thinks,” said Mrs. Zhu about her nine-year-old son’s next-stage education, which echoes the words of another mother, Mrs. Lan, who said, “If he [son] is determined to go to the Academy, I will absolutely support him. However, I still respect his will. Well, he is now thirteen years old and becoming more and more sensible. He knows many things now, perhaps even more than I know. He has already formed his own ideas.”

From a broader perspective, the complexity of the parent-child relationship

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<sup>63</sup> This is echoed by what Andrew Kipnis (2009) has pointed out—that, contemporary Chinese parents purposefully devote much “human feeling” to their only one or two children, so that the child will be filial when they are older (p.214).

as revealed in this part corresponds to what Naftali (2016) argues—that Chinese parents nowadays are “in the rather difficult position of having to reconcile these contradictory themes of obedience and autonomy in their everyday interactions with children” (p. 120). On the one hand, both the individual self demonstrated by the children and the parental orientation to respect the child’s will reflect the general social process of “the growing empowerment and individualisation of Chinese children within the family and society” (p. 118; see also Fowler et al. 2010; F. Liu 2008 & 2009 & 2010; Naftali 2010a & 2010b). On the other hand, children are still obliged to obey the authority of the parent and the nationalistic discourse because of the implicit influence of Confucian ethics (such as filial piety) and national-collectivist values (such as emphasis on memorising classics for rejuvenating Chinese traditional culture) (see Kipnis 2009; V. L. Fong 2004 & 2011 & 2004; S. won Kim et al. 2017; Qi 2016a; X. Wang 2017; Y. C. Wang 2014).

Furthermore, changes in contemporary Chinese parenting practice may be relevant to this discussion. The traditional parenting style in China is described as controlling, restrictive and authoritarian (X. Chen et al. 2010; Chua 2011; Kim et al. 2013; C. Lin and Fu 1990). Some scholars suggest the term *guan* (training) to characterise Chinese parenting practice, which is a form that integrates care with discipline, and love with governing, requiring parents (especially mothers) to engage in enormous devotion and sacrifice (see, e.g., Chao 1994; C. Li et al. 2017). However, along with the rapid transformation of Chinese society, which has been shaped by the profound process of individualisation, Chinese mothers, especially the urban middle-class ones (as are many interviewed parents in the present research), explicitly and increasingly show a child-centred orientation by valuing open communications with their children, allowing them to make the final decisions and attempt to improve their independence and autonomy so as to decrease the power differential between parents and children (C. Li et al. 2017: 500; see also Evans 2007; Juan Huang and Prochner 2003; S. Y. Kim et al. 2013; Y. Yan 2003). It can be argued that what we have found in this section is the specific reflection of this broad social shift.

## 7.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I describe two approaches towards future education of Yiqian students: (1) returning to the compulsory schools and (2) going to *Wenli* Academy. Even though a majority of students returned to state schools after a few years of classics learning in Yiqian School, their parents argued this was not because state schools would meet their desire for moral education but otherwise could provide their children with academic qualifications and a clear path to the next stage of education. Many parents admitted that they would have their children spend more time in the Confucian school if it could offer institutional ways for educational progression.

In Chapter 5, I discussed the parents' critical attitude towards the state school system, which constituted one essential motivation to “dis-embed” from state education. However, we see a different situation in this chapter—parents had to “re-embed” their children to compulsory schools after years of reading classics. In this regard, I analyse three interlinked aspects: uncertainty about the prospects offered by the Confucian education, concern about the academic qualification, and anxiety about the marginalisation of the educational experience. Related to the three points was a fundamental fact that the Confucian school did not provide the state-stipulated compulsory courses in the regular teaching schedule. Many parents thus withdrew their children from the Confucian education once they finished primary education at Yiqian School and returned them to the state system, which resulted in the high dropout rate of student population in the Confucian School.

The second option for future education was to go to *Wenli* Academy, which is also understood as a continuation of the next-stage Confucian education. Compared with returning to state education, there were fewer parents and students committed to this choice. This chapter has demonstrated an explicit tension between some students and their parents in deciding whether to target the Academy as the next stop for education—where some parents placed expectations on their children to continue the Confucian education in the Academy after completing the recitation of 300,000 characters of classics, but most of the students were not interested in such an educational blueprint. The



majority of interviewed students instead expressed a strong desire to go to university and study majors linked to their interests, to pursue self-determined life aspirations, and to do what they genuinely wanted. I have presented that this finding reverberates the argument that young people's orientations to the future go through a mode of present-future navigation (Carabelli and Lyon 2016; see also Lyon and Crow 2012). In terms of this, students in the Confucian school resisted the sage discourse put forward by parents and schoolteachers and rejected the parental authority, which in turn intensified a subjectivity shaped by discourses of self-control, self-determination and self-realisation. These findings may serve as new proof for the rise of the "me-generation" (F. Liu 2010) among Chinese youth, as well as for the increasing highlighting of child-centred discourses (A. Kipnis 2009) in parent-children relationships.

We can draw upon some points from the individualisation thesis to further understand findings in this chapter. I argue that the simultaneous demonstrations of pre-modern, modern, and post-modern conditions (Y. Yan 2009b & 2010) in the Chinese path to individualisation is reflected in the complexities of the accounts students presented in planning and pursuing future education. First of all, some students manifested a *pre-modern* aspect of the self, meaning that in order to live up to their parents' expectations, they stayed in the Confucian School to continue the memorisation of classics. Even a handful of students were subject to the educational program drawn up by their parents, that is, going for further studies at *Wenli* Academy, which nonetheless contradicted their own desires. However, on the other hand, many students resisted the expectations of parents and schoolteachers and rejected the authoritarian style of sage discourses. They were eager to decide their own life and future, to follow their interests and arrange the next stage of their education, and to look forward to becoming independent and self-determined individuals. This substantiates the individual self as described above, which reflects a *post-modern* dimension of the self characterised by individual choice or preference, wish for the achievement of individual aspirations, and a desire for developing oneself (see also Hansen 2015: 171). Nevertheless, other students, as individuals who pursued self-development and personal interests, still had to find a way out of Confucian education through the state system. They had to go

back to the state-maintained schools and strove to pass the university entrance examination in order to obtain university certificates, which appeared to be a prerequisite for some students and parents to gain steady jobs in the competitive market economy. Here these students displayed a *modern* dimension of the self.

Consequently, the individualised students and parents at the Confucian school were caught in a profound dilemma between freedom and risk in looking for ways to re-embed in education, which reflects the dynamics of individualisation in today's China. Specifically, while they were *free* to leave the state-maintained school system and choose the Confucian education (as discussed in Chapter 5), they had to face the *risks* resulting from, for instance, the lack of academic certifications and the marginalisation of educational experience. As a result, they had to rely upon the state as well as the family to pursue their future education; in other words, they had to re-embed into these "traditional" social categories (Y. Yan 2009b: 288-289). *Freedom* or *risks*, the dilemma experienced by parents and students of the Confucian school, reflects the complexity of individualisation in today's Chinese society.

## ***Chapter 8 Conclusion***

Guided by the research aims and questions specified in the introduction chapter (Chapter 1), this research has sought to explore the complexity of Confucian teaching practices and how they contribute to the making of Confucian individuals in the socialist party-state China. Through ethnographic fieldwork in a Confucian classical school in contemporary China, the thesis has revealed how parental choice and desire for Confucian education are produced and enacted, what specific practices are used to cultivate the Confucian individual in Yiqian School, and how parents and students plan for the next-stage of children's education. The research contributes to our understanding of Confucian education in China, individualisation in the Chinese context, and subject making in the socialist state. In this concluding chapter, I will tie the findings of the thesis together and summarise them in three sections. After discussing the limitations of the research, I will identify the implications of this study as well as make suggestions for future directions.

### **8.1 Making the desire for Confucian education: choice, dependency and hierarchy**

I have argued that parents chose Confucian classical education for their children in the constrained socio-political circumstances that have been profoundly shaped by dynamics of individualisation in post-Mao China (Chapter 5), and have revealed the complex process of parents imagining and planning for the future education of their children (Chapter 7). These findings highlight that the act of choosing Confucian education by parents indeed reflected a cultivated form of personhood, which was shaped by relations to the state (Hoffman 2010: 82). And their seemingly "autonomous" planning for the next stage of education, whether their children are going for further studies in the Confucian *Wenli* Academy or returning to the state compulsory schools, manifest a sense of responsibility for their children, family and nation. In light of this, I argue that the interviewed parents displayed an ambivalent disposition towards the state education system—being critical towards it while also demonstrating their

dependence on it.

On the one hand, parents adopted the technique of critique to resist state schools and took actions to have their children leave such institutions (see Chapter 5). I argue that it is through employing the technique of critique that parents questioned the legitimacy of the compulsory schools and intensified the spirit of individuality, so as to break away from the fixed path of state education and take an alternative way through Confucian education. This resonates with the findings in Chapter 7, where I described how some parents articulated the expectation for their children to go for further studies in the private Confucian *Wenli* Academy beyond the state school system. Though the fact that the Academy has not yet acquired the approved qualification to issue academic certificates did shake some parents' determination, there were still a few who confessed they did not care about the diplomas and would insist on having their children learn classics at the Academy in the future.

However, on the other hand, the practices of criticising the state education and striving to leave it did not result in a complete break from such schools. In contrast, many interviewed parents were somewhat worried about children's student status (Chapter 5) and academic qualification (Chapter 7), so severely that they were either cautious about removing their children from the full-time Confucian school (Chapter 5) or hesitant about the future in the *Wenli* Academy (Chapter 7). Also, it has been shown in Chapters 5 and 7 that even though parents criticised Chinese education policies and examination-oriented schooling practices, they did not criticise directly the socialist party-state and its role in relation to education, but instead appreciated its positive and tolerant attitude towards Confucianism and Confucian education. This could reflect the notion of the "divided self" (Kleinman 2011), which suggests that ordinary people in contemporary China not only take acts of resistance but also acts of accommodation that enable them to negotiate China's social reality (p. 232). In this regard, my research addresses gaps in our knowledge of Chinese governing and subjectifying practices by sociologically examining the interplay between the state education system and individuals involved in the rejuvenating domain of Confucian education.

The research has also suggested that parental desire for Confucian

education is connected to issues of national identity. It has been described how some parents expressed regret about the disruption of Confucian culture in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and how they felt ashamed not to have received a Confucian classical education when they were young (Chapter 5). Also, it has been demonstrated that this kind of nationalistic sentiment shaped parents' sense of urgency for their children to receive a classical education. Parental perceptions of education were influenced by the Confucian pedagogy of having children memorise a great volume of classics before the age of 13, which they believed to lay the foundation for cultivating and transforming one's moral personality.

The finding related to parental urgency for Confucian education shaped both by cultural shame and by Caigui Wang's theory of a "golden age" also offers insights into the (re)production of social hierarchies in contemporary China. Most of the interviewed parents came from urban middle-class families (see Chapter 3, 5 and 7) and their call for Confucian virtues of *zuoren* (to be a human) could be further interpreted as an attempt by an emerging group to distinguish their children from other social groups, reproducing the original Confucian-inspired distinction of good/bad manners, high/low qualities (*suzhi*), and superior/inferior civilities (*wenming*) (see also Billioud and Thoraval 2015: 301; Rocca 2015 & 2017).

## **8.2 Memorisation-based pedagogy: moral anxiety, disciplinary practice and resistance**

This thesis has provided a detailed discussion about the memorisation-based pedagogy involved in Confucian education, not only showing its relevance to parents' moral anxiety, which may further the understanding of their educational choice, but also describing how it worked in practice to cultivate students' moral *suzhi* in Yiqian School.

On the one hand, I have suggested that critical comments parents raised against the compulsory school system and its examination-oriented education revealed their moral concerns and constituted the substantial motivation for them to embrace both a Confucian version of moral *suzhi* and a Confucian memorisation-oriented pedagogy of producing moral subjects (Chapter 5). I

explained how parents regarded Confucianism as a type of moral education where the person learned how to be a human. Also, I interpreted Caigui Wang's appeal for mechanical memorisation of Confucian classics as the reincarnation of Chinese governing practices through exemplary models (Bakken 2000), where a moral subject is formed by the techniques of imitation, repetition and memorisation (p. 131). In this sense, I argued that parents' agreement with Wang's theory implied their approval of the rote learning of classics as a way of cultivating Confucian-style moral persons (Chapter 5 and 6). And the approach of classics memorisation, as I have illustrated, was aimed at helping students get closer to the wisdom of Confucian sages, follow the models of superior persons (*junzi*), develop a stable disposition towards norms, and finally guarantee a constant and predictable social order (see Bakken 2000: 9). Furthermore, I highlighted that this was echoed by the notion of transformation implied by *suzhi* rhetoric (D. Lin 2017), which as Kipnis (2006) further argued has profound roots in the Confucian tradition of cultivation (*jiaohua*, to transform the self through education) (see also B. Wu and Devine 2017).

As indicated in Chapter 5, that parents turned to Confucian classical education suggested an assumption that Confucian education would help children escape the examination orientation of the state schooling and achieve a genuine education for quality. However, on the other hand, when we take a closer look at the teaching and learning practices in Yiqian School, as described in Chapter 6, we may find that the Confucian pedagogy that parental actors were thirsty for shared much in common with the compulsory education, particularly in rote learning and imitation. This is relevant to the actual practices the Confucian school used. I demonstrated how autonomous, learned individuals were cultivated in Yiqian School through the hybrid approach of "individualised memorisation" (Chapter 6). This approach was characterised by a contradiction, in that while the Confucian school claimed to practise classics learning under the umbrella of the individualised principle of teaching in accordance with pupils' differences in memorisation ability, it simultaneously coerced students to recite as many characters as they could or even the entire classic books. Consequently, students were expected by the school to constitute themselves as autonomous individuals through classics memorisation but simultaneously they (also

teachers) were subject to the collective pedagogy that highlighted obedience to authority and rules and crucially targeted for rote learning.

The complexities of cultivating the autonomous, learned individual in the Confucian school revealed two co-existing but conflicting sides of the memorisation-based Confucian pedagogy, the authoritarian and the individualistic (T. Bai 2011; Bakken 2000; Billioud and Thoraval 2015; Hayhoe 2014; Kipnis 2011a; Naftali 2016; C. Tan 2017; S. Tan 2011; Z. Wu 2011 & 2014), insofar as individualism is meant as individuality, self-consciousness, self-discipline and self-realization but not “egoism or the doctrine that an individual is an isolated, atomic being” (X. Chen 2014: 73; see also X. Sun 2017).

On the one hand, as we have seen in Chapter 6, the Confucian school implemented teaching and learning practices centring on the cultivation of learning autonomy but on the other the research revealed disciplinary practices including minimum memorisation, study scheduling, examination, competition, and mutual surveillance.

These coercive practices were rooted in the deep anxieties of both the Confucian school and the parents about the historical fracture of Chinese traditional culture. The practices were assumed as the way to train students as “great cultural talents” to shoulder the national responsibility of Confucian revitalisation, which furthermore corresponded to the parents’ desire for Confucian education as illustrated in Chapters 5 and 7. At the same time the research showed how students resisted the authoritarian dimensions of the memorisation approach. It suggested that students who adopted the resisting actions did not mean to defy the memorisation-based cultivation “regime” directly but to oppose it subtly without getting into trouble (see also Hansen 2015: 61).

The findings provide insights into current debates on the memorisation-based pedagogy in the domain of Confucian classical education (see Chapter 1 and 3). The Yiqian School data suggests that disputes about classical education result from the pedagogy itself fluctuating between autonomy and obedience, independence and coercion, and individuality and collectivity.

### **8.3 Confucianism and Chinese individualisation: between freedom and risk**

The findings in the thesis contribute to our understanding of the relationship between the Chinese path to individualisation and the domain of Confucian education. To my knowledge, there have been few empirical pieces of research addressing the relationship between the two. The data analysis in the substantive chapters of the thesis helps address this scholarly gap.

While it might be assumed that Confucian education promotes collectivism and hierarchy, it could be read as fostering, and being rooted in individualisation in the Chinese context. A critical thread throughout this project has been the complicated relationship between Confucian education and the process of individualisation. On the one hand, I demonstrated some factors that served individualisation, for example the emergence of Confucian-inspired individual-oriented values (Chapter 2, 3, 5 and 7), the schooling activities centred on the Confucian individualised education principle of “teaching students in accordance with their aptitudes” (*yincai shijiao*) (Chapter 6), and the subjectifying of autonomous learners (Chapter 6) and individual self (Chapter 7). On the other hand, I indicated how the opposite elements in the domain of Confucian education complicated the process of Chinese individualisation. For example, the production of new hierarchies by the emerging middle-class families who resorted to Confucianism for moralisation and civilisation (Chapter 5), the dependence on the state school system (Chapters 5 and 7), the collective and authoritarian pedagogy of memorising the entire classic books used by the Confucian school (Chapter 6), and the sage discourse and parental authoritarianism (Chapter 7). In this regard, I would suggest more research in the future could draw upon re-evaluating the relationship between Confucian education and the thesis of individualisation in the Chinese context.

Additionally, I have proposed that Confucian individuals cannot be completely “dis-embedded” from the “traditional” categories such as family relations, state school system, and social class (Chapters 5 and 7). For example, I demonstrated that many parents were perplexed by the disputes with family members, especially children’s grandparents, on the issue of removing children



from the state school system (Chapter 5). Based on this, I argued that while the individual will of the mother or father did play an important role in children adhering to full-time classics learning, parents could not shake off the influence of family relations.

I have illustrated how the state (education system) played a direct and essential role in the “dis-embedding” (Chapter 5) and “re-embedding” (Chapter 7) processes of the parents and students of the Confucian school. I showed that whether because of the indeterminacy of the prospects offered by the Confucian education, anxiety about acquiring the academic certificate or concern about the marginalisation of educational experience, parents remained dependent on the state-maintained education system (Chapters 5 and 7). A similar situation occurred in the relationship of the private Confucian school with the local government. By describing the dilemma of routinising the compulsory curriculum (Chapter 7), I pointed out that the Confucian school was caught between adhering to the autonomy of the existing classics memorisation-based teaching system and the approved provisions of the national compulsory education framework.

Furthermore, I argued that the simultaneous demonstrations of pre-modern, modern, and post-modern conditions in the Chinese path to individualisation (Y. Yan 2009b & 2010) were reflected in the complexities of the self-concepts students presented in their hesitations about attending the *Wenli* Academy as the next stage of their education (Chapter 7). I demonstrated that on the one hand, students, particularly the older ones went against parents who expected them to attend the Academy for further studies, because they did not think it agreed with their interests or life orientations, showing a distinctly individualistic outlook on the self that featured self-determination and self-pursuit. On the other hand, they had to obey the authority of parents and continue with classics memorisation in the Confucian school.

Overall the thesis suggests that what was found in Yiqian school echoes the descriptions of “state-managed individualisation” (Y. Yan 2009b: 289 & 2010: 509) and “authoritarian individualisation” (Hansen 2015: 174-185). Influenced by the complex processes of individualisation, the students and parents at the Confucian school were caught in a profound dilemma between freedom and risk

in choosing and planning education. Specifically, while they were free to leave the state-maintained school system and choose the Confucian education, they still had to face the risks that resulted from, for instance, the uncertainty of the education status of the classical school and the marginalisation of the educational experience. As a result, they had to rely upon the state as well as the family to pursue the next step of education, which in other words means they had to re-embed into the “traditional” social categories (Y. Yan 2009b: 288-289). Freedom or risk, the dilemma experienced by parents and students of the Confucian school highlight the complexities of individualisation in today’s Chinese society.

## **8.4 Limitations, implications and future directions**

The main criticism of qualitative work, and thus possibly also of the present research, is the problem of the generalizability of the findings. In this thesis, I focused on the experiences of parents and students and the specific teaching practices in one Confucian classical school. With the sample size of 17 parents, 51 students and 9 teachers in Yiqian School plus two officials of the local education bureau, it is clear that my findings are not representative of all parents, students and teachers’ experiences in the domain of Confucian classical education in contemporary China but these findings in their richness do offer insights that can be used to illuminate this wider social landscape. The limited time of the fieldwork is another problem that may constrain the findings. Although I did my best to collect various types of data in as much possible, I acknowledge that if there had been more time for fieldwork, it would necessarily augment my understanding of the Confucian school. Given more time, I would interview more parents, follow the education migration track of some key student informants, and the role of the local authority officials. While the arguments presented in this thesis may be limited in terms of their generalizability and fieldwork time, the data collected through ethnographic methods in the school do offer insights into the making of the Confucian individual that are unlikely to have been achieved with other methods. As Pykett (2009) stated, school ethnography can shed light on the terms in which people

related to the educational site understand themselves and the way in which they actively constitute themselves. It can also help to avoid interpreting their actions in terms of categories and definitions imposed too inflexibly from above and give a fresh and full story in terms of the richness and complexity of schooling and citizen formation. By taking seriously participants' accounts and actions, this thesis has offered a detailed exploration of the experience of Confucian individual. The richness of the ethnographic findings that have emerged from the present research will hopefully encourage future research on Confucian education or even the widespread Confucian-related social phenomena in contemporary China.

The present thesis has made a methodological contribution insofar as it takes an ethnographic approach to study the revival of Confucian classical education in contemporary China. Being one of the first school ethnographies on this topic, this research offers a case study by exploring the heterogeneity of the pedagogic practices and the contradiction of making Confucian-inspired moral individuals inside the school. To my knowledge, there have been few ethnographic studies investigating the subjective views of students, parents and teachers in Confucian classical schools. Among the limited relevant works, for example, the ethnography-style studies of Billioud and Thoraval about the emergence of popular Confucianism since the 2000s deserve attention (see Billioud 2007 & 2010 & 2011; Billioud and Thoraval 2007 & 2008 & 2009 & 2015). However, their research aims to showcase the overall picture of diverse fields of Confucian rejuvenation and is not merely confined to Confucian education, thus lacking sufficient details regarding teaching practices inside classical schools. Their empirical investigation has not paid enough attention to experiences, voices and actions of students, teachers and parents involved in Confucian schools. In this regard, my research has provided rich descriptions of a Confucian school, documented the practices and discourses of different participants, and revealed their relevance to the broad socio-political circumstances.

Also, this research addresses theoretical gaps in the current studies of Chinese individualisation by revisiting the relationship between the rejuvenated Confucianism and the socialist party-state. My research has contributed to the

areas of Confucian education, individualisation and subjectification in contemporary socialist China. It helps deepen our understanding of China's broader educational context, where the dissatisfaction of the state school system and the examination-oriented education is growing, and the desire for humanist education beyond instrumentalism and pure knowledge indoctrination is strengthened. In this way, diverse educational forms that give more emphasis on moral enhancement, such as the Confucian classical education discussed in this thesis, are sprouted and expanded in the social space of China. In addition, this thesis has shown the variability of parent-child relationships in the context of Chinese education—although parental authority is still substantial in enacting the responsibility for their children's education, the children's self-consciousness of autonomy and independence is becoming more powerful and evident than before. We may also have seen the complication of the teacher-student relationships in contemporary Confucian education in this research—the authority of the teacher is intensified to some extent by the resurrected sage discourse, whereas both teachers and students are subject to the school's disciplinary power.

In addition to the academic contribution, this thesis may have practical implications by offering further insights into the current debates surrounding the Confucian memorisation-based pedagogy, which have caused widespread concerns in the public domains of mass media, education and civil society but remained understudied in social sciences. The research contributes to this field by introducing empirical data to often abstract philosophical debates on Confucian pedagogy.

Regarding future research, I would suggest two directions: the extension of research participants and the extension of research topics/themes. First of all, I think it is necessary to explore different forms of Confucian classical schools that have reappeared in contemporary China. There are a large number of Confucian-inspired educational institutions that differ in teaching methods, educational principles and the size and age of the student population; and while some schools may combine the Confucian classics learning with the state compulsory curriculum, others separate the two. In fact, Yiqian School is just one of numerous Confucian education institutions. A thorough exploration of the

varieties of the Confucian classical schools will require expanding the number of case studies. Guided by the research aims and questions, the present research, moreover, focused more on the discourses and practices of students and parents than those of the teaching staff in the Confucian school. But this does not imply that the teachers' experiences are not valuable; instead, I would suggest future studies pay more attention to the feelings and voices of teachers involved in the pedagogic practices in Confucian schools. There is also a need for additional studies that would explore how the local government and socialist state govern the practices and discourses in the domain of Confucian classical education.

Extending the research topics/themes is the second direction I propose for future research. Generally speaking, this thesis is devoted to the broad issues of Confucianism, individualisation, subjectification and governmentality in socialist China, which are promising areas of research but still in their infancy and this research, given its empirical starting point, was not able to develop these theoretical possibilities in depth. I recognise there is a considerable amount of future work to do for making sense of these theoretical framings in the context of Chinese classical schools. For example, one possibility would be to draw on Foucault's conceptual "toolkit" including techniques of the self, disciplinary power, governmentality and subjectification, to reveal the complex interactions of Confucianism and the heterogeneous political rationalities of the socialist regime in the domain of classical education. Also, the perspective of cultural citizenship may serve as an inspiring alternative approach to associate the cultivation of Confucian individuals with the notion of Chinese citizenship, to explore the production of "Confucian citizens" in socialist China. Moreover, the view of the body may provide another promising future trajectory, from which we can discuss how modern subjects reading Confucian classics reshape the self by disciplining and civilising the body. Another essential but understudied topic that requires additional empirical studies is to reveal how the emerging new middle-class families intentionally engineer Confucianism (education) to reproduce new elites and create new social hierarchies and discrimination. Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction and arguments about various forms of capital may illuminate this research direction. All these perspectives have theoretical potential to develop the studies on Confucian classical education, so

deserves to continue to explore in future research.

## *Appendixes*

### **Appendix 1 Informed consent sheet for interviewing and observing school staff**

To whom it may concern,

My name is Canglong Wang, a second year PhD student in the Department of Sociology at the University of Edinburgh. I am currently in XXX (name of the classical school) as part of my study for my PhD thesis. The reason I am contacting you is to ask you to grant me an interview and the opportunity to observe. The interview should take about one hour of your time; and the observations will be carried out during this semester when I live on campus. I am very interested to hear about your experience and opinions, and would be very grateful if you would consider taking part. To help you make this decision, I would like to explain a little about my thesis.

My PhD thesis focuses on the revival of Confucian classical education in contemporary China. I would like to understand more about this education. To help me do this, I will be observing and doing interviews within one case classical school, to understand what Confucian classical education is, how citizens are being made by Confucianism, what the relationship between classical education and maintained education is, and how educators see classical education.

I will keep all research information confidential. In other words, anything relating to the interview and observations will be securely stored and no one will have access to them, other than myself. In accordance with my university's regulations and research ethics guidance, I will not identify you in my research. If I do use anything you have told me in my thesis or other writings, I will not use your real name or identifying details. I will keep the data for ten more years after the project is finished in order to publish articles and books.

If you agree to participate in the research, please note that you should feel free not to answer any questions that you prefer not to answer. Also, you may end the interview or observations at any point. Furthermore, if after the research you change your mind about participating in the study, you can contact me and I will not use the material you have provided. In order to transcribe the interview, I would like to make an audio recording of it. Nobody else except me will have access to the recording.

Should you wish to take part in the research or indeed ask any questions, please leave your contact information (phone number or WeChat or QQ) at the bottom of the line. I will get in touch with you later. Thank you very much!

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Yours sincerely,

Canglong Wang

[My address in Edinburgh UK; my contact information in China; my supervisor's contact information]

您好！

我叫王苍龙，目前在英国爱丁堡大学社会学系攻读博士。为了完成博士研究项目，我将在 XXX 读经学校收集材料。之所以与您联系，是想请您接收我的采访，采访时间约为一小时。您的观点将非常有助于我的博士论文研究，在此向您表示感谢！下面，请允许我向您介绍我的研究。

我的博士论文主题是读经教育在当代中国的复兴。我想了解推动传统儒家教育重新出现的原因是什么，以及这个过程是怎样的。民间力量在这场儒家教育复兴中起到关键作用，因此我很想了解究竟是什么原因推动人们参与这场读经教育运动，人们面临什么样的社会条件和现实状况。读经教育目前受到了一些质疑和批评，那么：读经教育究竟是什么样子的？它是如何培养人才的？它与公办体制教育之间究竟是什么关系？读经教育者们是如何看待这种教育的？为了了解上述问题，我希望采访您。



关于此项研究的所有信息都将保密，也就是说，与采访有关的所有资料都将妥善保存，除了我本人以外的任何人都不会获知访谈内容。根据我所在大学的规定和研究伦理守则，我不会公开您的名字和身份。如果我在论文中使用您所讲的内容，我不会使用您的真实姓名，也不会公开您的相关身份细节。为了方便资料整理，我还想对采访进行录音，录音资料也将绝对保密，希望您能同意。采访资料将仅用于学术研究。

此外，我还想对您的日常教学情况进行观摩，相关信息也将保密。您有权在观摩期间拒绝回答我提的任何问题，也可以随时中止我的观察或采访。如果日后您觉得某些材料不想被使用，请您告知我，我将不会使用它们。

如果您同意接受我的采访，请在下面横线处留下您的联系方式（手机号码/微信/QQ皆可），我将与您取得联系。非常感谢！

---

非常感谢您的配合和帮助！

王苍龙

地址：XXXXXX 邮编：XXXXXX

电话：XXXXXXXXXXXX 微信：XXXXXX

本人邮箱：XXXXXX 导师邮箱：XXXXXX

## ***Appendix 2 Informed consent sheet for interviewing parents***

To whom it may concern,

My name is Canglong Wang, a second year PhD student in the Department of Sociology at the University of Edinburgh. I am currently in XXX (name of the classical school) as part of my study for my PhD thesis. The reason I am contacting you is to ask you to grant me an interview. The interview should take about one hour of your time. I am very interested to hear about your experience and opinions, and would be very grateful if you would consider taking part. To help you make this decision, I would like to explain a little about my thesis.

My PhD thesis focuses on the revival of Confucian classical education in contemporary China. I would like to understand more about this education. To help me do this, I will be observing and doing interviews within one case classical school, to understand what Confucian classical education is, how citizens are being made by Confucianism, what the relationship between classical education and maintained education is, and how parents see classical education.

I will keep all research information confidential. In other words, anything relating to the interview will be securely stored and no one will have access to what is said in interviews, other than myself. In accordance with my university's regulations and research ethics guidance, I will not identify you in my research. If I do use anything you have told me in my thesis or other writings, I will not use your real name or identifying details. I will keep the data for ten more years after the project is finished in order to publish articles and books.

If you agree to participate in the research, please note that you should feel free not to answer any questions that you prefer not to answer. Also, you may end the interview at any point. Furthermore, if after the research you change your mind about participating in the study, you can contact me and I will not use the

material you have provided. In order to transcribe the interview, I would like to make an audio recording of it. Nobody else except me have access to the recording.

Should you wish to take part in the research or indeed ask any questions, please leave your contact information (phone number or WeChat or QQ) at the bottom of the line. I will get in touch with you later. Thank you very much!

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Finally, please put this sheet in the envelope and remind your child to take it back to school. Much appreciated for your kind cooperation and help!

Yours sincerely,

Canglong Wang

[My address in Edinburgh UK; my contact information in China; my supervisor's contact information]

您好！

我叫王苍龙，目前在英国爱丁堡大学社会学系攻读博士。为了完成博士研究项目，我将在 XXX 读经学校收集材料。之所以与您联系，是想请您接收我的采访，采访时间约为一小时。您的观点将非常有助于我的博士论文研究。在此向您表示感谢！下面，请允许我向您介绍我的研究。

我的博士论文主题是读经教育在当代中国的复兴。我想了解推动传统儒家教育重新出现的原因是什么，以及这个过程是怎样的。民间力量在这场儒家教育复兴中起到关键作用，因此我很想了解究竟是什么原因推动人们参与这场读经教育运动，人们面临什么样的社会条件和现实状况。读经教育目前受到了一些质疑和批评，那么：读经教育究竟是什么样子的？它是如何培养人才的？它与公办体制教育之间究竟是什么关系？家长们是如何看待这种教育的？为了了解上述问题，我希望采访您。

关于此项研究的所有信息都将保密，也就是说，与采访有关的所有资料都将妥善保存，除了我本人以外的任何人都不会获知访谈内容。根据我所在大学的规定和研究伦理守则，我不会公开您的名字和身份。如果我在论文中使用您所讲的内容，我不会使用您的真实姓名，也不会公开您的相关身份细节。

如果您同意参与我的研究，您有权拒绝回答任何您不愿意回答的问题，并且可以随时中止访谈。如果访谈后您改变主意不想让我使用访谈资料，您可以通过下面的通信方式告诉我，我尊重您的意见。此外，为了方便资料整理，我还想对采访进行录音，录音资料也将绝对保密，希望您能同意。所有采访资料将仅用于学术研究。

如果您同意接受我的采访，请在下面横线处留下您的联系方式（手机号码/微信/QQ皆可），我将与您取得联系。非常感谢！

---

最后，请您将这份材料重新放回信封，并在开学时由孩子带回学校。

再次感谢您的配合和帮助！

王苍龙

地址：XXXXXX 邮编：XXXXXX 电话：XXXXXXXXXXXX

微信：XXXXXX 本人邮箱：XXXXXX 导师邮箱：XXXXXX

## ***Appendix 3 Parental informed consent sheet for observing children***

To whom it may concern,

My name is Canglong Wang, a second year PhD student in the Department of Sociology at the University of Edinburgh. I am currently in XXX (name of the classical school) as part of my study for my PhD thesis. The reason I am contacting you is to ask you to grant me permission to undertake 'participant observation' within XXX. In other words, I would like to observe and study daily life of students including your child. I would be very grateful if you would help. To help you make this decision, I would like to explain a little about my thesis.

My PhD thesis focuses on the revival of Confucian classical education in contemporary China. I would like to understand more about this education. To help me do this, I will be observing and doing interviews within one case classical school, to understand what Confucian classical education is, how citizens are being made by Confucianism, what the relationship between classical education and maintained education is, and how practitioners see classical education.

I will keep all research information confidential. In other words, anything relating to the observation will be securely stored and no one will have access to it, other than myself. In order to transcribe interviews, I would like to make some audio recordings, and nobody else except me has access to them. In accordance with my university's regulations and research ethics guidance, I will not identify the observed in my research. If I do use anything the observed have told me in my thesis or other writings, I will not use real names or identifying details. I will keep the data for ten more years after the project is finished in order to publish articles and books.

If you agree to let your child participate, please note that I will also explain my research and procedures to your child. I will explain that your child can refuse to

answer any of my questions he/she does not wish to answer, and can end the interview at any time. You can also ask at any point that I stop my observations of your child, either altogether or for a while. If after the research you change your mind about allowing your children to be observed in the study, you can contact me and I will not use the material.

If you do not grant me permission to observe or interview your child or indeed have any questions about my research or methods, please contact me through the email address or telephone number below by [the date after 2 weeks]. If I do not hear from you, I assume to have your consent to include your child in my research.

If you wish to talk to someone else about my research or have any concerns about it, please contact my supervisor [details].

Yours sincerely,

Canglong Wang

[My address in Edinburgh UK; my contact information in China; my supervisor's contact information]

您好！

我叫王苍龙，目前在英国爱丁堡大学社会学系攻读博士。为了完成博士研究项目，我将在 XXX 读经学校收集材料。之所以与您联系，是因为我希望对读经学校的学生进行“参与观察”，就是说考察一下学生们的日常学习和生活情况，这其中包括您的孩子，因此希望征求您的意见。您的帮助将非常有助于我的博士论文研究。在此向您表示感谢！下面，请允许我向您介绍我的研究。

我的博士论文主题是读经教育在当代中国的复兴。我想了解推动传统儒家教育重新出现的原因是什么，以及这个过程是怎样的。民间力量在这场儒家教育复兴中起到关键作用，因此我很想了解究竟是什么原因推动人们参与这场读经教育运动，人们面临什么样的社会条件和现实状况。读经教育目前受到了一些质疑和批评，

那么：读经教育究竟是什么样子的？它是如何培养人才的？它与公办体制教育之间究竟是什么关系？读经个体是如何看待这种教育的？

关于此项研究的所有信息都将保密，也就是说，与观察有关的所有资料都将妥善保存，除了我本人以外的任何人都不会获知观察内容。为了方便资料整理，我还想做一些录音，录音资料也将绝对保密。根据我所在大学的规定和研究伦理守则，我不会公开被观察者的名字和身份。如果我在论文中使用被观察者所讲的内容，我不会使用真实姓名，也不会公开相关身份细节。观察资料将仅用于学术研究。另外，我也将会向您的孩子解释我的研究，并征得他（她）的同意。您有权随时让我暂停观察。而且，如果日后您觉得某些材料不想被使用，请您告知我，我将不会使用它们。

如果您不同意我对您的孩子进行观察，请您在 X 月 X 日前通过末尾的方式联系我，对此我予以充分尊重和理解。如果届时没有收到您的回复，我将默认您同意我对您的孩子进行观察。关于我的研究主题和方法，如果有任何问题，您也可以随时联系我或者我的导师。

非常感谢您的配合和帮助！

王苍龙

地址：XXXXXX            邮编：XXXXXX  
电话：XXXXXXXXXXXX 微信：XXXXXX  
本人邮箱：XXXXXX    导师邮箱：XXXXXX

## ***Appendix 4 Informed consent sheet for students***

Hi!

I'm Canglong Wang, now studying in Edinburgh University in UK. This time I come to your school in order to do a research about Confucian classical education, and will write a book about your school. That is to say, I would like to hear what you think about your school and reading classics. To do this research, I will stay for a while in your class, and leave at the end of this semester. During this time, I hope you could take part in my research, that is to say, I might ask you some questions, and hope to read with you. I promise to keep all you tell me private; I will not tell anyone else, including other teachers and your parents. The only time I would have to tell someone else, like a teacher, something you told me would be if I were worried that you or another child might be being harmed. If that happened, I would let you know that I was going to do this.

If I use what you tell me in anything I write in the future, I will make up a different name for you as if I was writing a story, so people will not be able to find out what it was that you told me. Moreover, in order to transcribe interviews, I would like to make some audio recordings, and nobody else except me has access to them. I will ask for your consent before I record. However, if you would not like to take part, do not worry---- just tell me, that will not a problem. And if you do take part and then change your mind, it is also not a problem. Even after the research you change your mind about participating in the study, you can contact me by yourself or by your parents or teachers, and I will not use the material you have provided.

The following is my contact information. If you have any question, feel free to contact me.

Mobile: XXXXXXXXXXXX Wechat: XXXXXX Email: XXXXXX

Would you like to join my research?



Canglong Wang

小朋友，你好！

我是王老师，现在正在英国读大学。这次，我来到你的学校是想做一项关于读经教育的研究，就是说，了解一下你在读经过程中有什么感受，有什么有趣的故事，和老师、同学和爸爸妈妈的关系怎样，等等。将来我会写一本关于你们学校的书。为了做这项研究，我会在你的班级里待一段时间，这个学期结束后就会离开。在这段时间里，王老师希望能得到你的配合，也就是说，王老师会问你一些问题，你来回答；还希望你和你一起读书和生活，和你做好朋友。而且，我保证你告诉王老师的的所有信息，王老师都不会告诉别人，包括其他老师、爸爸和妈妈，但有一种情况例外，那就是当你或其他小朋友受到伤害时。王老师离开学校后要写文章，如果到时候使用了你所讲的内容，我不会使用你的真名，别人也不会文章中认出你来。而且，为了整理资料，我还想做一些录音。我会在录音前问你的意见，录音资料不会被别人听到。当然，如果你不愿意，那也不要紧，直接告诉王老师就好；但如果你后来改变主意想参与这项研究，那也直接告诉我，我也非常欢迎！而且，哪怕这项研究结束了，但如果你觉得有些材料不想被我使用，也可以通过父母或者老师告诉我。

下面是王老师的联系方式。如果你有任何问题，可以自己也可以让老师或爸爸妈妈和我联系：

电话：XXXXXXXXXXXX 微信：XXXXXX 本人邮箱：XXXXXX

你愿意帮助王老师吗？

王苍龙

## ***Appendix 5 Informed consent sheet for interviewing officials***

To whom it may concern,

My name is Canglong Wang, a second year PhD student in the Department of Sociology at the University of Edinburgh. I am currently in XXX (name of the classical school) as part of my study for my PhD thesis. The reason I am contacting you is to ask you to grant me an interview. The interview should take about one hour of your time. I am very interested to hear about your experience and opinions, and would be very grateful if you would consider taking part. To help you make this decision, I would like to explain a little about my thesis.

My PhD thesis focuses on the revival of Confucian classical education in contemporary China. I would like to understand more about this education. To help me do this, I will be observing and doing interviews within one case classical school, to understand what Confucian classical education is, how citizens are being made by Confucianism, what the relationship between classical education and maintained education is, and how local officials see classical education.

I will keep all research information confidential. In other words, anything relating to the interview will be securely stored and no one will have access to what is said in interviews, other than myself. In accordance with my university's regulations and research ethics guidance, I will not identify you in my research. If I do use anything you have told me in my thesis or other writings, I will not use your real name or identifying details. I will keep the data for ten more years after the project is finished in order to publish articles and books.

If you agree to participate in the research, please note that you should feel free not to answer any questions that you prefer not to answer. Also, you may end the interview at any point. Furthermore, if after the research you change your mind about participating in the study, you can contact me and I will not use the

material you have provided. In order to transcribe the interview, I would like to make an audio recording of it. Nobody else except me have access to the recording.

Should you wish to take part in the research or indeed ask any questions, please leave your contact information (phone number or WeChat or QQ) at the bottom of the line. I will get in touch with you later. Thank you very much!

---

Yours sincerely,

Canglong Wang

[My address in Edinburgh UK; my contact information in China; my supervisor's contact information]

您好！

我叫王苍龙，目前在英国爱丁堡大学社会学系攻读博士。为了完成博士研究项目，我将在 XXX 读经学校收集材料。我的研究受到国家公派留学基金委的资助。之所以与您联系，是想请您接收我的采访，采访时间约为一小时。您的观点将非常有助于我的博士论文研究。在此向您表示感谢！下面，请允许我向您介绍我的研究。

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如果您同意接受我的采访，请在下面横线处留下您的联系方式（手机号码/微信/QQ 皆可），我将与您取得联系。非常感谢！

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非常感谢您的配合和帮助！

王苍龙

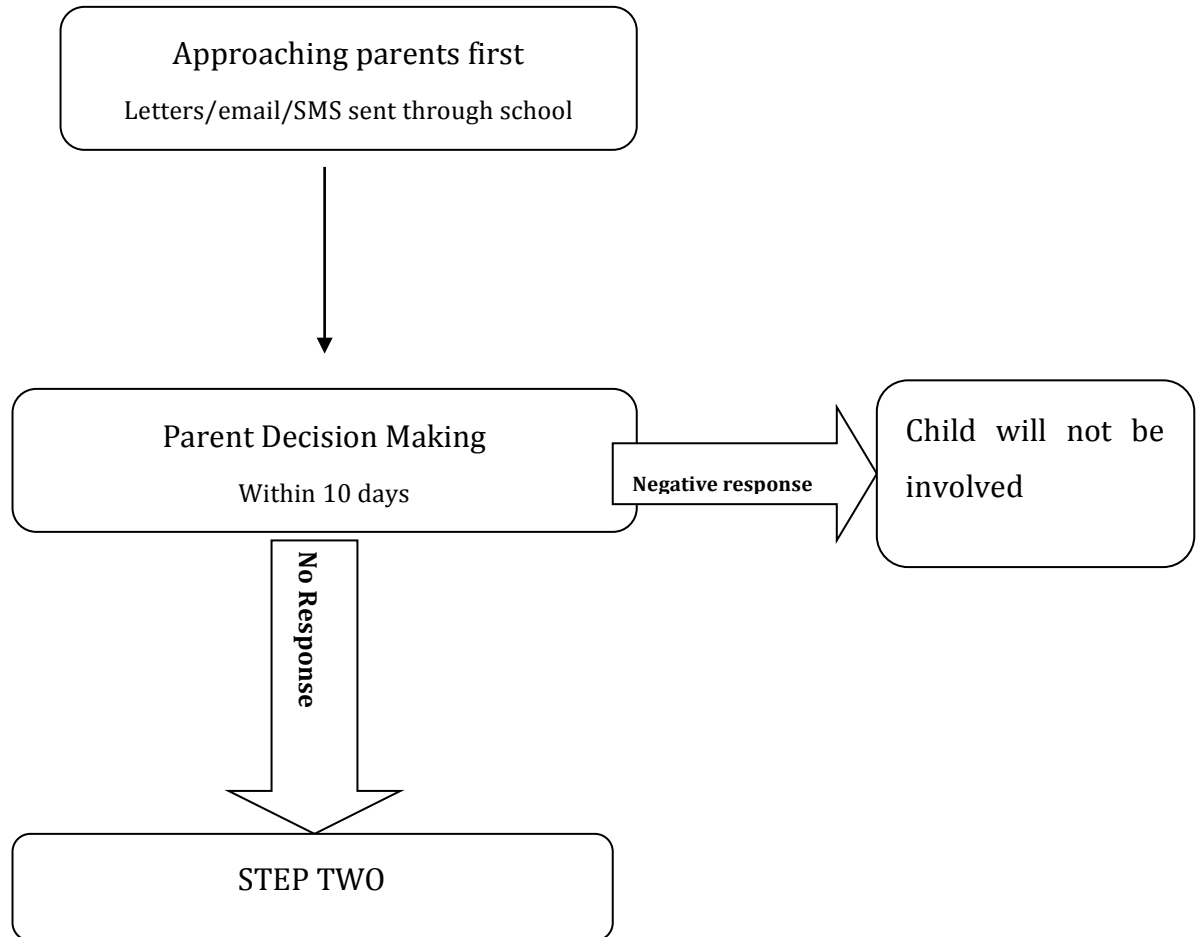
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电话：XXXXXXXXXXXX 微信：XXXXXX

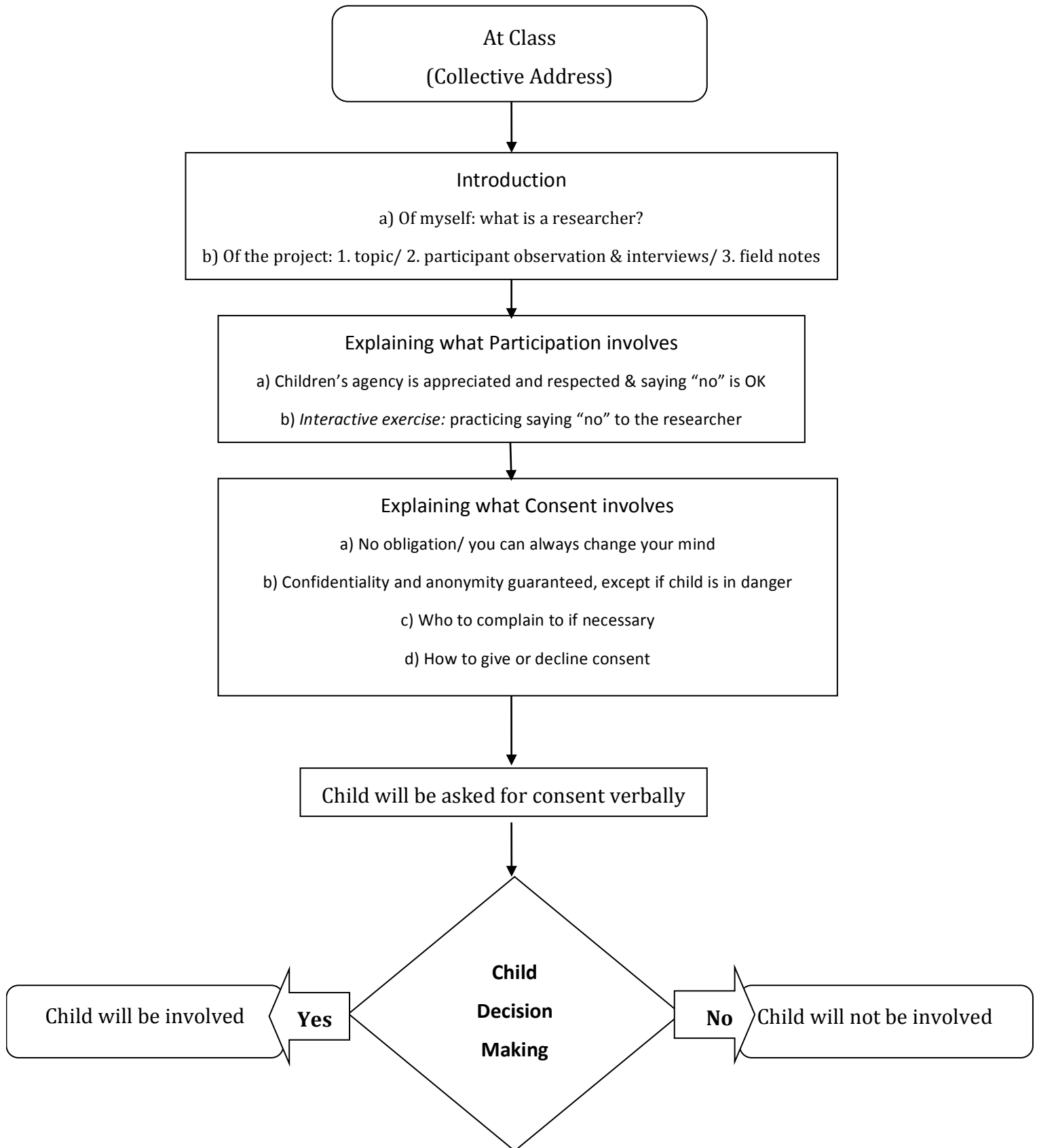
本人邮箱：XXXXXX 导师邮箱：XXXXXX

## Appendix 6 Child & Parent Consent Procedures

### STEP ONE: PARENTAL CONSENT



## STEP TWO: CHILDREN'S CONSENT



## ***Appendix 7 Interview Guide Outlines***

### **To teachers**

#### **1. Personal experience**

- (1) How did you know classical education? How did you get involved?
- (2) Does your child read classics? What do your family members think of requiring child to read classics?
- (3) Are there children of your friends or relatives reading classics? Could you say something about it?
- (4) What did you do before came to the school? Why did you give that job up?

#### **2. Relationship with classical school**

- (1) How did you know this classical school? Why did you decide to work here?
- (2) How do you feel about working in this school? What do you think of the relationship with other teachers?
- (3) Do you have any plan for future? If yes, what is it?

#### **3. Evaluations of classical education**

- (1) What do you think of classical education? How do you evaluate the ideas and style of this school?
- (2) How do you see current maintained education? What do you think of the relationship between classical education and maintained education?
- (3) What changes do you think reading classics bring for children? What do you think of these changes?
- (4) How do you see students' future within the classical school?
- (5) Is there anything else we haven't talked about you'd like to tell me about?

### **To students**

#### **1. About maintained school**

- (1) Did you once study in maintained school? How did you feel? What do you think of your performance there?
- (2) How was the relationship with teachers? What do you think of their education styles?
- (3) How was the relationship with classmates? What did you usually talk about?
- (4) How was the relationship with parents? What do you think of their feeling

about your performance in school?

## **2. About classical school**

- (1) How long have you been reading classics? How do you feel?
- (2) What do you think of teachers and students here? How is your relationship?
- (3) How do you feel about the education style of classical school?
- (4) What changes do you think have been made since reading classics?
- (5) How do you see yourself now? What is your plan for future?
- (6) Is there anything else we haven't talked about you'd like to tell me about?

### **To parents**

- (1) How did you know classical education? What do you think of it?
- (2) How did you know this classical school? What do you think of its educational ideas and style? Why did you decide to send your child here? What are other family members' attitudes towards the decision? Whether cost plays a role in your decision?
- (3) What changes do you think reading classics bring for your child? What do you think of these changes?
- (4) How is your relationship with the classical school? How do you keep in touch with it? What do you often talk about?
- (5) How do you see current maintained education? What do you think of the relationship between classical education and maintained education?
- (6) What do you think of your child's future? How do you plan for it?
- (7) Is there anything else we haven't talked about you'd like to tell me about?

### **To local officials**

- (1) Could you introduce the history of how local government approved the classical school? What factors did local government concern to allow the classical school to set up here?
- (2) How do you see the relationship between classical education and maintained education?
- (3) What do you think of the classical school (educational ideas and style)? How do you see its role in local education? What is the relationship with other local schools?



(4) How often do you inspect the classical school? How to inspect it (standards, staff, materials, etc.)? What are the inspection results?

(5) Is there anything else we haven't talked about you'd like to tell me about?

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