

Article

Individual Self, Sage Discourse, and Parental Authority: Why Do Confucian Students Reject Further Confucian Studies as Their Educational Future?

Canglong Wang ^{1,2} 

¹ Department of Modern Languages, Faculty of Arts Cultures and Education, University of Hull, Hull HU6 7RX, UK; canglong.wang@hull.ac.uk

² State Key Laboratory of Subtropical Building Science, South China University of Technology, Guangzhou 510641, China

Abstract: Throughout the twenty-first century, Confucian education has rapidly expanded among the grassroots in China. This study focuses on the most influential style of Confucian education, *dujing* (classics reading) education, and on a very understudied group, the students, in the Confucian education system. Using data collected at a Confucian school, this study aims to elucidate *dujing* students' genuine thoughts and feelings toward their plans for future education. The findings suggest that *dujing* students exhibit an individualistic outlook, which is characterized by their personal aspirations, self-determination, independence, and self-pursuit, as well as a reluctance to pursue further Confucian studies. Their self-identity is further strengthened by resistance to the authoritarian discourse circulating in the domain of *dujing* education and by a shifting relationship with imposed parental expectations. This study argues that the development of Confucian individualism in students' *dujing* experience must be understood within the broader social contexts shaping Chinese individualisms and subjectivities.



Citation: Wang, Canglong. 2022. Individual Self, Sage Discourse, and Parental Authority: Why Do Confucian Students Reject Further Confucian Studies as Their Educational Future?. *Religions* 13: 154. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13020154>

Academic Editor: Anna Sun

Received: 30 November 2021

Accepted: 7 February 2022

Published: 10 February 2022

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2022 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Keywords: individualism; authoritarianism; Confucian revival; Chinese education; Chinese parenting

1. Introduction

At the beginning of the 20th century, many Chinese intellectuals criticized Confucianism, characterizing it as a backward, outdated ideology with little relevance to modern life (Ren 2018). When the communist regime rose to power in 1949, the Confucian tradition was discarded entirely by the Chinese government. However, over the past few decades since the 1980s, particularly since entering the 21st century, China has witnessed a growing revival of Confucianism in its schools, social life, spirituality, and governing ideology (A. Sun 2013, 2018; Billioud and Thoraval 2007, 2008, 2009). Of particular interest to the present study is the bottom-up movement of Confucian rejuvenation, which has been largely spearheaded by ordinary people (i.e., grassroots) with no affiliations to the state apparatus, through popular uptake and social campaigns. These bottom-up grassroots movements have facilitated the rise of “popular Confucianism” (*minjian rujia*, literally “Confucianism in the space of the people”) across various strata of Chinese society (Billioud and Thoraval 2015, p. 8).¹

This study focuses on the educational dimension of the grassroots Confucian revival. The current rejuvenation of Confucian education can be traced back to the late 1980s, when the Chinese socialist regime began allowing public schools to teach traditional culture (Yu 2008). Since the early 2000s, grassroots Confucian education initiatives have achieved rapid and substantial development across China (Billioud and Thoraval 2007). Teaching and learning practices have been diversified in the various types of *sishu* (old-style private schools) that have emerged in the past two decades. Here, many children and adults

have taken advantage of opportunities to engage in the full-time or part-time study of Confucianism (Wang 2018). Although official statistics are lacking, estimates by some intellectuals (e.g., Billioud 2021; Wang, forthcoming) indicate that over 3000 *sishu* have been established in China, and thousands of students (from 6 to 15 years old, the age range corresponding to compulsory education) have been enrolled in Confucian studies.

Dujing (classics reading) education is perhaps the most influential and controversial form of Confucian education. *Dujing* students are required to spend their entire day reading and reciting Confucian classics. The rapid expansion of *dujing* education has been closely associated with Wang Caigui, a reputable Confucian educator and philosopher who is recognized by Confucian education activists as the initiator and leader of the “children reading classics” educational movement.² Wang (2014) proposed a theory of *dujing* education, emphasizing three points (pp. 41–66). First, teaching content must include the great classics that have been published throughout human history, viz., the canonical literature, including both Chinese and Western classics³, because these “most valuable books” are deemed as “the crystallization of the profound wisdom of mankind” (Wang 2009, pp. 5–6). Second, the learning method should primarily involve the extensive and mechanical memorization of content, without the need to understand the literal meanings of the texts or the hidden principles. This is in relation to the third point—children who are below the age of 13 years are considered to have a strong memory but weak comprehension. Following this perception of human development, *dujing* education requires children to read and memorize classics early, extensively, and simply to lay the foundations for their character and morality (Wang 2014, pp. 6–15). Under Wang Caigui’s continuous and widespread influence, many Chinese parents have begun learning Confucianism by themselves and arranged for their children to study Confucian classics, and some have even established their own Confucian schools (Billioud and Thoraval 2015, pp. 51–62; see also Dutournier and Wang 2018).

This research focuses on students, a group that the recently emerging scholarship on the rejuvenation of Confucian education has overlooked. Several studies have described the teaching and learning practices in Confucian classical schools and actors’ (teachers and parents) motivations to engage in *dujing* education (e.g., Billioud and Thoraval 2015; Dutournier and Wang 2018; Gilgan, forthcoming). This study, drawing on students’ voices about their plans for further Confucian studies and personal aspirations, aims to uncover their favor of individualistic values under pressure from teachers and parents. I propose that student perspectives are key to understanding the actualities of *dujing* education in classrooms and the “learner’s inner world”. Additionally, it is important to understand *dujing* students’ genuine perspectives on their educational prospects, as these may reflect the future of the *dujing* education movement. As Billioud and Thoraval (2015) suggested, Confucian education revival derives meaning from the possibility that “it might produce new generations of Confucian activists” (p. 48). As such, the overarching research questions in the present study are: How do *dujing* students understand the plans for further Confucian studies? Are their actual feelings and perspectives toward their educational future the same as, or different from the expectations of teachers and parents? How should the consistency or incongruence among students, teachers, and parents be interpreted? In this study, I explore these questions arising from a specific event during my field research. I argue that *dujing* students demonstrate an individualistic outlook on their future education in forming an aversion toward further Confucian studies; and the students’ individual aspirations, which are generated by the interweaving neoliberal values and Confucian virtues, contradict the expectations of teachers and parents. The complexities of the shaping of *dujing* students’ individual self would reveal an emerging Confucian individualism in contemporary China.

To explore the above questions, I draw from two sets of data that were collected during fieldwork at a Confucian school: participant observations of and interviews with older students (i.e., older than 13 years), teachers, and parents. This study focuses on the older students because this specific age group is often perplexed by the issue of further education,

particularly whether to continue Confucian studies. An analysis of the data identifies three crucial factors that jointly influence Confucian students' plans for the next stage of their education: their sense of individual self, the imposed authoritarian sage discourse, and parental authority. First, the "individual self" refers to a social and psychological disposition to pursue one's personal interests and development, follow one's own will and aspirations, and guide oneself by self-determination and self-reliance. As the individual self includes values of individualism, it should be noted that "individualism" in the present study is not used as a derogatory term carrying the meaning of "egoism or the doctrine that an individual is an isolated, atomic being that owes society nothing but contempt" (X. Chen 2014, p. 73). Instead, "individualism" refers to values such as individuality, self-consciousness, and self-realization (X. Chen 2014). Secondly, the "sage discourse" is defined as a Confucian style of authoritarian rhetoric by which individuals achieve moral cultivation, arrange their life goals according to the model of Confucian sages and saints, and dedicate themselves to being part of collective grand causes. Finally, the "parental authority" is contextualized in this research as a parenting power to give children orders, make decisions on their behalf, or enforce their obedience. In the *dujing* landscape, parents may form an authoritarian style of parenting due to their Confucian-inspired values, such as filial piety (*xiaoshun*). In short, this study associates these three elements derived from the fieldwork data to present the contradiction between individualism and authoritarianism in the shifting discourse and practice of Confucian education.

In the following sections, I first lay the theoretical foundation of the study by examining two areas in the literature: (1) Chinese individualism and its implications for the young generation; (2) empirical studies on the grassroots Confucian education revival since the early 2000s. I will subsequently detail the study context and the research methods. In the finding sections, I will explicate three elements that derive from the coding of the data I collected from fieldwork—students' individual aspirations in conflict with the pursuit of further Confucian studies, their resistance to the imposed sage discourse, and their adjustments to parental authority.

2. Chinese Individualism and Its Relevance for the *Dujing* Youth

An increasing number of studies have examined the emerging varieties of individualism within the context of China's modernization, marketization, individualization, and globalization (see Hansen 2015; Liu 2011; Yan 2009, 2010, 2021). As noted by Yan (2011), the profound dynamics of individualization have led post-Mao China (1976 to present) to experience an extensive shift in popular discourse and moral practice "from an authoritarian, collective ethics of responsibilities and self-sacrifice towards a new, optional, and individualistic ethics of rights and self-development" (p. 37). Concomitantly, China has witnessed the rise of an individualistic ethos in both the private and public domains. This is succinctly reflected in the fact that people speak and act as the first person ("I") rather than as a representative of a collective—whether the family or clan in ancient China or the nation-state in the socialist regime (Yan 2009, p. 280). Individualistic values, such as the striving spirit, personal autonomy and independence, and the pursuit of individual interest and wealth are increasingly recognized as common ethics among Chinese people (Hansen and Pang 2008; Yan 2012). Several scholars (e.g., Cheung and Pan 2006; Liu 2011) have argued that this increasing desire to act individually and autonomously has weakened the previous dominant communist values of altruism, selflessness, and collectivism. While acknowledging the proliferation of individualism in a reform-era China, it should be noted that individualistic values formed a significant but marginal ideology in ancient China (De Bary 1970) and during China's Maoist era (1949–1976) (Yan 2010), when kin-focused and state-focused collectivism, respectively, dominated the value system (Kim et al. 2017).

Researchers have explored young people's relationships to different forms of Chinese individualism in post-Mao China. In their study on middle-class students' childrearing aspirations for the next generation, Kim et al. (2017) discovered a hybrid form of "soft" and "hard" individualism, wherein soft individualism is characterized by values such as

freedom, autonomy, the pursuit of individual interests, and the desire for self-development. This contrasts hard individualism, which emphasizes strict rules, disciplined study habits, and a clear authoritarian hierarchy between adults and children. Furthermore, Liu (2011) argued that the concept of individualism among urban youth in China “has a double emphasis on individual freedom and material achievement,” incorporating “both an eager pursuit of individualistic self-expression and an entrepreneurial spirit with a heavy dose of materialism” (p. 67). Liu also clarified that both expressive individualism and economic/utilitarian individualism “are simultaneously and equally forcefully displayed by the cultural identity being forged by the younger generation” in China (Liu 2011, p. 68). Additionally, the salience of various types of individualism has generated negative and positive influences. On the one hand, Yan (2003, p. 226) stressed that the utilitarian individualism penetrating Chinese society has generated the “uncivil individual,” that is, a person who is lacking in civility or a sense of responsibility for public goods or the well-being of their elders. On the other hand, in his investigation of China’s millennial youths, Moore (2005) emphasized the positive implications of individualism, which is represented by the “ku (cool)-generation,” who rebels against old cultural values and demonstrates “an openly and enthusiastically individualistic approach to life that values the bold and the innovative” (p. 374).

The emergence of various forms of individualism functions to shape new Chinese subjectivities. Researchers have indicated that the cultivation of Chinese subjects in present-day China involves two contradictory ideologies: the individualistic/neoliberal and the authoritarian/collective (Kipnis 2011). As stated by Liu (2011, p. 29), on one hand, the neoliberal rhetoric is characterized by discourse on autonomy, the freedom to choose, self-development, and self-enterprise aimed at producing a responsible and self-reliant neoliberal subject. On the other hand, the authoritarian values imposed by the socialist regime of China on the people call for one to subsume or even sacrifice one’s lesser self (*xiaowo*) to the greater self (*dawo*) of the nation-state. Accordingly, Cheung and Pan (2006) coined the term “regulated individualism” to reflect the contradictory nature of Chinese subjectivities; this term also refers to how the socialist regime addresses “the tension between the newly acquired personal autonomy and the bottom line of the socialist collectivism” (p. 37).

Education offers a meaningful lens through which one can understand the complexities of Chinese individualism. For instance, in her fieldwork in a Chinese rural high school, Hansen (2013) discovered contradictions “between the teaching of an idealized view of the self-cultivating and self-reliant individual”, as well as a demand for individual students to submit to their disciplines (p. 63). Students are therefore educated to become neo-socialist individuals who are “submissive to Party rule and accept dominant behavioural norms” and “capable of innovating and creating economic value through self-assertive behaviour” (Hansen 2013, p. 75). In addition, contemporary Chinese pedagogical paradigms for children are characterized by an ambivalent combination of neoliberal ideology, authoritarian discourse, global or Western models, neo-socialist goals, nationalistic ethos, and Confucian rhetoric (Naftali 2016, p. 17). Of particular relevance to the present research is that Confucian ethics may be regarded as one source of the authoritarian rhetoric that represses the growth of Chinese individualism (Billioud and Thoraval 2015). A number of Confucian philosophical studies have portrayed Confucianism as an authoritarian value system that prioritizes one’s imposed collective responsibilities and obligations but downplays individual entitlements and rights (see, e.g., Nuyen 2002; Wang 2021). On the other hand, several scholars (De Bary 1983; X. Chen 2014; X. Sun 2017; Q. Chen 2021) have indicated that the individual orientation of Confucianism has been largely overlooked in the literature. For instance, De Bary (1983, pp. 45–46) described “Neo-Confucian individualism” as being constituted of interlinked notions such as *ziren* (“taking it upon oneself” or “bearing the responsibility oneself”) and *zide* (“getting it by or for oneself” or “learning to one’s satisfaction”). According to X. Chen (2014), Confucian ethics relating to the concept of the self focus on “how to realise a self as fully self-conscious being-for-itself of definite character, substance, and personality” (p. 67). Notably, despite accumulated philosophical

explications, there is a striking dearth of relevant research from an evidence-based perspective. Given this, the present study adopts an empirical approach to exploring Confucian students' demonstrations of individualistic values in their aversion to classics reading, arguing that their individual identity is formed and consolidated through reacting to the authoritarian style of the Confucian sage discourse and the imposition of parental authority.

3. The Revival of Grassroots Confucian Education in the 2000s

Few studies have empirically examined the revival of grassroots Confucian education in the 2000s in China, despite the recent increasing research interest in this area. Of these, research by Billioud and Thoraval, who used extensive fieldwork to investigate how Confucianism is being rediscovered in the educational domain of China, is deemed the most cutting edge and influential. This body of research encompasses a variety of topics, including the multiple approaches to institutionalizing Confucian-inspired educational initiatives (Billioud and Thoraval 2007; Billioud 2010, 2016); the controversial topic of anti-intellectualism in the rhetoric and practice of Confucian education (Billioud and Thoraval 2007, 2015), and the religious dimension of individual involvement in the study of Confucian classics (Billioud and Thoraval 2008). The ambiguous and complex identities of newly established Confucian educational institutions were also explored (Billioud 2011, 2016). Apart from the research of Billioud and Thoraval, other authors have discussed the role of Buddhism in promoting the extensive spread of Confucian education in the past two decades (Dutournier and Ji 2009; Ji 2018); the contradictions and vagaries of some Confucian education practitioners in their efforts to present Confucian teaching and learning as a "holistic" form of education (Dutournier and Wang 2018), and the indoctrination of children and adults through classical music (Ji 2008).

In addition to the descriptive studies mentioned above, several studies have attempted to offer theoretical explanations for the observed revival of Confucian education in China. In several forthcoming studies, (Wang, forthcoming) applies the theory of Chinese individualization to interpret parents' motivations in sending their children to read and memorize Confucian classics. Drawing on Hartmut Rosa's concepts of alienation and resonance, (Billioud, forthcoming) aims to capture the reinvention and reappropriation of Confucianism among the general populace in China. Another study (Gilgan, forthcoming) draws from the grounded utopian movement theory to explore the dilemmatic utopianism of the educational movement of classics reading.

In summary, multiple original and innovative empirical studies investigating various topics of interest in Confucian education have emerged in the past few years. Nonetheless, there remains a lack of evidence-based research addressing the genuine feelings and experiences of students of Confucian education. Empirical studies on how Confucian students navigate their educational prospects after several years of reading classics are also lacking. The current research therefore aims to fill these important knowledge gaps.

In the following sections, I clarify the research context and methods and use data obtained from fieldwork to examine the extent to which three elements—the individual self, sage discourse, and parental authority—shape *dujing* students' outlook on their future education.

4. Research Setting and Methods

This study is based on ethnographic fieldwork at a Confucian school in China, which is henceforth referred to by the pseudonym "Yiqian School". Despite being located in a small, mountainous town in a southeastern province of China, Yiqian School attracts many non-local students and teachers from across and outside the province. The diverse geographical origins of the student population play a decisive role in making Yiqian School a full-time boarding school and a disciplined study ambience (e.g., students are disallowed access to the Internet or cell phones). Yiqian School is a nine-year compulsory school that has been approved by the local government but follows a classics-focused curriculum, primarily Confucian classics such as *The Analects of Confucius* and *Mencius* and Taoist classics such

as *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi*. This is due to the strong influence of Wang Caigui's *dujing* education theory. State-mandated courses are at a marginal, supplementary status, being not part of the school's daily teaching, only provided to students who are preparing the junior middle school entrance examination. Furthermore, most students fall within the age range corresponding to compulsory primary and middle school (i.e., 6–15 years old). Yiqian School is institutionally designed such that students can complete their full compulsory education; in reality, however, few students do so and most choose to transfer to state schools or other *sishu* after several years of classics study.

Yiqian School is among the earliest Confucian schools to have emerged in twenty-first century China. As early as 2002, the founder of Yiqian School began gathering several preschool children at his home to read Confucian classics. In 2010, the school was approved as a legal private school (*minban xuexiao*, "school run by people"). Since then, it has experienced a rapid expansion of its population of students and teachers, reaching a peak of nearly 250 students and 50 teaching staff in 2013. When I visited the school in 2015, it had six permanent classes, each assigned with a homeroom teacher (*banzhuren*, a position that is usually assumed by experienced senior teachers) and one or two teaching assistants (positions that are assumed by younger, newer teachers). Most of the teachers had knowledge of traditional Chinese culture, and some had experience in other Confucian schools. Yiqian School charged each student RMB 30,000 (approximately GBP 3000) for tuition fees and an additional RMB 2000 (approximately GBP 200) for living expenses per year in 2015. This relatively high tuition fee (compared with China's free public schools) indicates that most students at this Confucian school were from affluent families.

I visited Yiqian School in 2012, 2013, and 2015, staying for two months, one month, and six months, respectively. During each visit, I collected data through interviews with and participant observations of students and teachers in the school. I participated in the daily lives on campus, including various activities that took place in classrooms, dorm rooms, the cafeteria, and the playground. Moreover, I conducted multiple group discussions with older students in two classes in 2015, respectively given the pseudonyms of Qibo 启博 Class and Qili 启礼 Class. I informed all participants of the details of the study and obtained their consent. In addition, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 17 parents, including 6 fathers and 11 mothers. Most of the parents interviewed live in urban areas ($n = 16$) and work in a variety of occupations: self-employed entrepreneurs ($n = 6$), white-collars in private companies ($n = 3$), low- to mid-level civil servants ($n = 3$), teachers ($n = 3$), an engineer ($n = 1$), and a full-time mother ($n = 1$). Each interview with the parents lasted one to two hours and was recorded with an audio recording device after the interviewee's permission was obtained (all interviewees agreed to be recorded). Combining the interview data with parents with the school fieldwork data with students ($n = 36$) and teachers ($n = 19$) (i.e., observations, group discussions, and interviews), the current study aims to investigate students' rising individual awareness in reaction to their parents and teachers' expectations. It should be noted that the participants of the study may not be fully representative of all actors involved in Confucian education. However, the findings of Confucian students' individualism-driven resistance to authoritarianism over the subject of their future education are indicative of the complexities and contradictions that will likely arise while cultivating a new generation of Confucian activists in the contemporary era. For ethical concerns, the details of all participants of the study are anonymized.

The spoken language in the field was Mandarin, and as a native speaker, I conducted and transcribed all interviews myself. The software package NVivo was used to manage and analyze the collected materials through a three-step coding approach: "developing categories of information (open coding), interconnecting the categories (axial coding), [and] building a 'story' that connects the categories (selective coding)" (Creswell 2007, p. 160). I also repeatedly reviewed the field notes and interview transcripts and thus identified three emerging themes to further clarify. These themes constitute the findings that are presented in the next three sections: (1) students' conflict between pursuing individual aspirations and seeking further Confucian studies at a specific Confucian educational

institution; (2) students' individual resistance to the authoritarian sage discourse; (3) the shifting relationship between students' individual self and their parents' expectations.

5. Developing Soft Individualism in Confucian Studies: To Pursue Individual Aspirations or Boyue Academy?

In this section, I demonstrate *dujing* students' development of soft individualism (Kim et al. 2017) regarding personal aspirations in their study of Confucian classics. I argue that the students at Yiqian School form soft individualism as Chinese youth in general (Liu 2008), but they have developed this in criticism of one Confucian academy. Moreover, the shaping of students' soft individualism is related to an authoritarian sage discourse (to be addressed in the next section), which focuses on perfection through memorization, puts pressure on the students, and intensifies their individualistic values.

The salience of students' individualistic outlook on aspirations is relevant to an incident that happened during the fieldwork. One day in the first half of 2015, Yiqian School organized a group of students ($n = 24$) to visit Boyue Academy (a pseudonym; the Chinese term for "academy" is "*shuyuan*"). Founded in the early 2010s, Boyue Academy has been deemed by many practitioners of Confucian education, including parents, teachers, and students, as an ideal place to seek further Confucian studies after one completes the initial years of memorizing the classics in other *sishu*. This one-day visit had a distinct purpose, which, as the headteacher Mrs. Zheng explained, was to motivate students to set this Confucian academy as their goal for the next stage of their education. She also expected this visit to enhance the students' motivation to recite Confucian classics because one essential admission criterion to Boyue Academy is to memorize a minimum of 300,000 characters of classics. Notably, no official agreement about a student exchange program existed between Boyue Academy and Yiqian School. However, Yiqian School explicitly encouraged its students to pursue further Confucian studies at Boyue Academy as soon as they could successfully recite 300,000 characters of classics. All students had heard of Boyue Academy before, but most of them never visited it. The school selected the best students for this visit, most of whom were over 13 years old and had studied the classics for a minimum of three years. I was permitted by Yiqian School to accompany the students and teaching staff on this short visit.

The visit comprised two parts: first, Wang Caigui, who stayed in Boyue Academy then delivered a brief lecture to all of the visiting students and answered their prepared questions; second, all visitors had a chance to meet students who were attending the Academy and to carry out discussions with them freely. The Academy's students, many of whom were of similar age to the visiting students from Yiqian School, were widely recognized by Confucian education practitioners as excellent role models to demonstrate the achievements of the *dujing* education developed by Wang Caigui. Several mature students were from the earliest cohorts, which had begun Confucian education since childhood and changed a few *dujing* schools until coming to the Academy for full-time study.

In the week following the visit, Yiqian School invited three student representatives to share their thoughts and feelings about their visit to Boyue Academy with all students and teaching staff during the regular morning assembly on Monday. In the speeches by the three students, Boyue Academy was described as the "cultural shrine" (*wenhua shengdi*) they had dreamed of for furthering their Confucian studies. They also expressed their admiration and gratitude for Wang Caigui's persistent efforts to promote *dujing* education for decades. They claimed that as students they should make every effort to memorize every sentence of the classic books so as to be well prepared to shoulder the great mission of revitalizing Chinese traditional culture in the future. Thus far, the students' impressions of Boyue Academy seemed promising, delightful, and encouraging.

After the morning assembly, however, my multiple conversations with students who had visited Boyue Academy revealed a different story. Lanxin, a 14-year-old girl, was one of the visiting students and one of the three who had made a speech that morning. In a private conversation with myself, Lanxin told me in a weak but firm tone that what she said

in the speech was not her real impression of her visit. "I was telling a lie," she indicated, "the homeroom teacher asked me to say those words. I feel ashamed of myself!" Given the teachers' high praise of her academic performance and the impression I gained of her as a diligent student, her revelation caught me by surprise. Lanxin had begun studying the Confucian classics when she was seven years old. She was educated in several Confucian schools and never spent a day at a state school. Her mother was a firm believer in Wang Caigui's *dujing* theory and thus yearned for Lanxin to persist in studying Confucian classics, ultimately pursuing advanced studies at Boyue Academy. My presumption of Lanxin as a well-behaved girl who would obediently follow her mother's educational plan was not baseless because such an educational background meant that, from the perspective of some teachers and parents at Yiqian School, she was not influenced heavily by the state school and general society and thus, as "her heart and mind are still simple and pure" (her homeroom teacher's words), she could be disciplined and shaped more easily by the pedagogy of Confucian education.

Despite her "simple and pure" education experience, Lanxin confessed that the visit to Boyue Academy did not stimulate her aspiration to study there. Even worse, it left her feeling disappointed about this advanced Confucian institution. That disappointment stemmed partly from her direct impression of students at the Academy, some of whom she had known for years. As Lanxin explained,

"Well, I am just feeling that the dream is full, but the reality is empty. They [students of the Academy] have already stayed in the Academy for one year or two, but I cannot see any progress they've made. (. . .) Take Qinqin (a friend of Lanxin, who once studied classics at Yiqian School) for example. She has studied at Boyue Academy for two years. But I did not see any improvement in her during the visit. Thus, I have become a bit skeptical of my reasons to study at the Academy."⁴

Many other students who I interviewed shared similar sentiments; for instance, those in Lanxin's Qili Class. This class was made up of 17 girls over the age of 13, half of whom were selected to visit Boyue Academy. In multiple interviews and group discussions, all but two students (n = 15) expressed their disinterest in furthering their education at the Academy. For instance, some expressed the following: "I had no plans to go to the Academy before, and now I dislike it even more"; "I would rather die than go to the Academy"; "It is useless to me to study in the Academy"; "I was rather disappointed after attending Professor Wang's lecture on that day"⁵, and "I just feel as if the dream has been disillusioned." Nevertheless, it is necessary to point out that most of the interviewed students had no aversion to Confucian classics per se, but rather recognized the value of Confucian studies for moral cultivation; they were disgruntled with the learning requirements and teaching organization at the Academy.

From the interviews with the students (n = 36), I identified two specific reasons that explained their concerns about the Academy. First, almost all the students had felt frustrated by the rigid admission criterion of Boyue Academy; that is, to memorize 300,000 characters of classics. They felt that this was a nearly impossible task to complete. "My hair would have turned grey when I finished reciting all of the books!" One student exclaimed in a group discussion, "I would rather die than memorize 300,000 characters of classics!" A few other students (n = 4) criticized this admission standard as being too one-sided and unsuitable for talented students with multiple aptitudes. One student argued with a rhetorical question, "Should not those who are excellent in various capabilities be admitted to the Academy?"

The second and more meaningful reason was that the students believed that Boyue Academy did not align with their individual aspirations in terms of the academic environment and curriculum. Liyan, a student of Qili Class, confessed that she had no intention to continue with *dujing* education in the future and thus was not interested in studying at the Academy. She stated,

“I think attending university is a more pragmatic choice than going to the Academy for future education. It would be best if I could study abroad. Admittedly, many people waste their time at university, but many others work hard to obtain knowledge. I feel that studying at the Academy is not consistent with my own aspirations. Well, different people have different aspirations. Anyway, I am not interested in pursuing Confucian research in the future, so the Academy is not my cup of tea.”⁶

In the same vein, Jingjing, who claimed no interest in the Academy’s curriculum, said, “I look forward to acquiring different kinds of knowledge. When I met the students at the Academy, they informed me that they would learn five languages, two musical instruments, and other skills in the future. This sounds intriguing to me. However, the only courses that are currently provided are classics memorization and interpretation, plus a bit of Chinese philosophy and German language. They start learning the Chinese zither (*guqin*) very late and have no calligraphy class. I am very much disappointed, and feel that I may not be suited to study at the Academy.”⁷

Many other students at Qili Class (n = 8) held the same views as Liyan and Jingjing. They argued that universities could provide students with a wide range of courses, and that university students were able to select their favorite modules according to their personal interests. They had also envisioned that university students could make friends from all over the country and seek advice from respected professors. They therefore yearned for the free academic atmosphere of a university. They understood that Boyue Academy lacked all of these benefits.

The male students interviewed (n = 19) at Yiqian School expressed similar sentiments to their female counterparts. These sentiments reflected the conflicts that the students faced between pursuing their personal aspirations and attending Boyue Academy. Chenchen, a 14-year-old boy, explicitly stated that Boyue Academy did not fit his life plan. During the fieldwork, I often heard him complain, “I don’t understand the value of memorizing classics all day long!” He clarified that when he had initially transferred to Yiqian School two years ago, he was full of longing for the Academy and regarded it as the “dream place” to pursue an advanced Confucian education. However, over the past two years, Chenchen said he was always suffering from the boredom of learning classics by rote. In many instances, I saw him sitting at his desk, staring blankly and occasionally reading classics but obviously not memorizing them. In a daily conversation with me, he said, “Reading classics is not at all suitable for my life aspirations. I feel no value in doing it.” He explained that his life goal was to become a musician or a writer. He hoped to attend university to study his major of interest, make preparations to pursue his career ambitions, and participate in activities that he genuinely enjoyed.

Many other boys (n = 16) shared Chenchen’s view that attending Boyue Academy did not align with their personal life aspirations. The opinions of Ge Ren were perhaps the most unexpected among these. For context, this 13-year-old boy studied extremely hard and achieved excellent performance in memorizing the classics. He was the only student in the school who had succeeded in reciting three entire classics books in one semester. Yiqian School even identified Ge Ren as a role model for other pupils. However, on the day following the visit to Boyue Academy, Ge Ren informed me that he had no interest in studying at the Academy. Interestingly, he criticized four well-known sentences of Zhang Zai, a Confucian philosopher who lived in the Northern Song Dynasty (1020–1077): “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.”⁸ Ge Ren expressed his confusion about the four sentences, confessing that he did not want to dedicate his life to these lofty pursuits. Rather, he aspired to do what he personally liked, seek his own ambitions, and create his own life journey. He shared that he would partake in the cause of promoting Confucian education and strive to raise people’s awareness of reading Confucian classics

someday but was not ready to make this his lifelong career. Thus, he rejected Boyue Academy as an option for his next stage of education.

To sum up, the findings in this section demonstrate that older students at Yiqian School, both girls and boys, had concerns about furthering their studies in Confucianism at Boyue Academy.⁹ The interviewed students rejected the Academy primarily because this particular Confucian institution did not align with their personal interests or life aspirations. I argue that the students exhibited a soft version of individualistic outlook, characterized by personal aspirations, self-determination, and self-pursuit (Kim et al. 2017). Their salient “individual self” also reflects the arguments by Liu (2008) that young Chinese people in contemporary society have adopted an individualized approach to planning their lives and “a form of the self that is consistent with the autonomous, self-authoring and individualistic neoliberal subject” (p. 193). Moreover, the *dujing* students’ focus on the individual self in their personal aspirations implies a connection with Confucianism, as Confucian teaching attaches great importance to the role of a firm aspiration to shape one’s authentic self (X. Chen 2014, 2015). I will further clarify the concept of the students’ individual self in the following two sections.

6. “I Don’t Want to Become a Great Cultural Talent.” Students’ Individual Self against the Sage Discourse

The students’ concept of the “individual self” is further cemented by two distinct elements in their experience of learning Confucianism: the authoritarian fashion of sage discourse, and the parental authority. The two elements demand students to develop hard individualism featuring disciplined study conduct and a strict parent–child hierarchy (Kim et al. 2017). However, students’ resistance to them in turn reinforces their pursuit of soft individualistic values of autonomy and self-development. I will discuss the first element in this section and leave the second for the next section.

Resistance to the authoritarian sage discourse generated by the Confucian school intensified the shaping of students’ identity of individual self. One typical example of such sage discourse is the four sentences of Zhang Zai quoted in the preceding section. As I previously revealed from the discussion with Ge Ren, this student did not exclude the possibility of pursuing Confucian education in the future but emphasized that he would only do it at a time when he genuinely desired to do so; he was eager to create his own life and to seek what he loved to do. When sharing these thoughts during a class meeting, Ge Ren was interrupted by the teacher who was present. I resort to the following notes from my observations to illustrate what happened.

[When Ge Ren was speaking,] the homeroom teacher Miss Cai wrote a sentence on the blackboard: “The high covers the low.” [When Ge Ren finished speaking], Miss Cai explained to all students that Professor Wang Caigui had proposed the ambition “to set the mind for heaven and earth,” which is a grand goal, but he did not ask everyone to realize it. However, targeting such a grand goal as one’s life aspiration allowed one to achieve other smaller goals. In this way, even if a person failed to reach the grand goal, he or she could still achieve a relatively higher one than that of merely pursuing a small goal. Miss Cai spoke slightly emotionally, confessing that it had taken her a long time to grasp this point, and that she hoped Ge Ren could understand it someday. When Ge Ren raised his hand to remind the teacher that he had wanted to provide more comments, Miss Cai made a “stop” gesture and said, “We had better not spend any more time discussing this issue. Let’s talk about it in private instead.”¹⁰

I assume that my presence could have been one reason why Miss Cai prevented Ge Ren from continuing to express his opinion. However, Miss Cai’s statements plunged Ge Ren into even deeper confusion about his plans for his future education and life. In private conversations with me, Ge Ren acknowledged that such a grand aspiration as “to set the mind for heaven and earth” was too abstract, high, and distant. He said, “Only the saints can achieve it. But I am merely an ordinary person, and I just want to live a mediocre life.”

Similarly, Yangyang felt frustrated with the implications of such a sage discourse. In a daily conversation with me, this 12-year-old boy, who had begun studying the Confucian classics in nursery, commented critically on a point that Wang Caigui had made during the students' visit to Boyue Academy. In the meeting with all of the visiting students, Wang had urged them not to become a "stingy and narrow-minded" (*xiaoli xiaoqi*) person but rather to strive to become a sage-like person and a qualified successor of Confucianism, who was capable to shoulder the responsibility for rejuvenating Chinese traditional culture. In response to this point, Yangyang stated,

"Frankly, I do not possess such a high goal for my life; neither do I possess a lofty aspiration such as 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 the revival of Confucian culture merely with a few of us pupils? A cultural renaissance takes a long time and requires the efforts of several generations. But I don't want to be one of them. I am a petty person who is always concerned about trivial matters—for example, finishing the demanded memorization tasks, receiving a letter from home, or enjoying a delicious dinner. I don't think I have the qualities to become a sage or a gentleman (*shengren junzi*). A cultural revival is an extremely honorable and selfless enterprise. But I am merely a stingy and narrow-minded person, just as Professor Wang [Caigui] said. I always live for today, even if I have desperately finished reciting the entire *Book of Changes* this month."¹¹

Notably, the members of the teaching staff (n = 19) at Yiqian School who identified with Wang Caigui's principles of *dujing* education—especially the proposed method of extensive memorization—were driven by a sense that they were on a cultural mission to cultivate "great cultural talents" (*wenhua dacao*). The Confucian school defines a "great cultural talent" as a person who is profoundly learned and capable (*manfu jinglun*) through the extensive study of Confucian classics. As the headteacher, Mrs. Zheng, explained in multiple interviews, the interruption of Confucian culture in China throughout the 20th century had led modern Chinese people to become alienated from the Confucian classics; thus, it was only by nurturing the "great cultural talents" who had profound moral cultivation and cultural capacity in Confucian studies that it would be possible to make up for these past disruptions to China's cultural development.

The authoritarian sage discourse is embedded in the ethos of an emerging cultural nationalism held by the Confucian education practitioners. In his speech to the students of Yiqian School, Wang Caigui shared that he expected them to follow the exemplary models of ancient Confucian sages: to take the memorization of Confucian classics as an essential approach to achieving moral improvement; to cultivate a Confucian "*junzi*-hood" (the selfhood of becoming a superior person), and to make preparations to contribute to the great mission of Confucian revival. I understand the sage discourse from the logic of exemplarity, which according to Bakken (2000) states that a human cultivates virtuous ethics and proper conduct through recitation, repetition, and imitation of the wisdom of the sage, as embodied by the classical texts (p. 169). However, here it presents a different picture in terms of the subjectivity of the *dujing* students, who—as exemplified by Ge Ren and Yangyang—did not support this authoritarian form of sage discourse but instead challenged its legitimacy. In other words, the students' resistance to the sage discourse that requires hard individualism consolidated their soft individualistic values of self-pursuit, self-reliance, personal interest, and individual aspirations (Kim et al. 2017). This applied to both boys and girls. For example, Yingying, a 13-year-old female student, disagreed that reading the classics was a "great cause" (as was often stated by practitioners of Confucian education) but merely interpreted it from a utilitarian perspective. She indicated,

"It is said that reading the classics is equivalent to inheriting the sage's knowledge and initiating peace and security for all ages. Well, if I believe this point, I am just deceiving myself because I am a nobody and I don't want to be a great or superior

person either. I am actually not sure how long it will take to revive Confucianism through reading the classics. Social development would not cease just for a small number of people like us. (. . .) I don't think reading the classics is something great or special; nor is it an education that promises a bright future."¹²

The above passage demonstrates Confucian students' feelings of self-deprecation due to their perceived failure to measure up to the high standards imposed by the Confucian school. Interestingly, this practice of retreating inwards enhanced the students' sense of utilitarian individualism (Liu 2011), as it offered them a practical but individualistic means to deal with what they perceived to be the impossibility of the task set before them as part of a collective national project.

To sum up, this section reveals the incongruence of students' individual selves with the authoritarian sage discourse circulating in the field of *dujing* education. The sage discourse stresses an ideal Confucian personality that was regarded by the students to be too abstract to achieve realistically. Furthermore, the students' resistance to the sage discourse served to reinforce their values of soft individualism.

7. "I Don't Want to Let My Parents Down." Students' Individual Self and Parental Authority

The preceding section explores how students' objections to the authoritarian sage discourse stimulated their individual awareness. This section focuses on a second element—parental authority—and discusses how the approaches the students used to address their parents' educational desires for further Confucian studies intensified their individual self.

There was evident tension between the students' individual aspirations and their parents' expectations for their engagement in advanced Confucian study. I have explained the students' various personal aspirations for their lives and education. In contrast, parents who I interviewed (n = 17) acknowledged the advantages of enrolling in further Confucian studies at Boyue Academy; some (n = 10) strongly yearned for their children to go there someday. This conflict is reflected in the case of Mrs. Fan and her 14-year-old daughter, Keke. Mrs. Fan had been determined to send Keke to Boyue Academy ever since Keke had left the state school to engage in Confucian education. However, Keke did not fully agree with the educational blueprint that had been laid out by her mother. Mrs. Fan attempted to change Keke's mind but encountered numerous arguments with her. "I often talked with my daughter about Boyue Academy," Mrs. Fan recalled, "but every time I tried to speak of it, she would become slightly angry, saying, 'I don't want to go there at all!'" Nevertheless, Mrs. Fan refused to give up and believed that if she held a firm faith in *dujing* education, she would surely and ultimately convince Keke to attend the Academy. Mrs. Fan told Keke that she would not make any concessions in insisting on her daughter's learning of the Confucian classics. Faced with her mother's unyielding position, Keke had no choice but to follow what was demanded of her. However, this led Keke into a difficult situation—although she was not willing to go to the Academy, she had to obediently remain in the Confucian school to memorize the classics every day "in order to avoid disappointing my mom." In a group discussion, Keke confessed that she had no plans for herself except to complete the recitation of 300,000-character classics as soon as possible and to subsequently enroll in Boyue Academy. This was because her mother had promised her that as long as she was admitted to the Academy and studied there for two years, she would be rewarded with the freedom to choose her own future career and do whatever she wanted.

Many older students experienced a similar conflicting situation. This is from the group discussions with the students in Qili Class (n = 17). Here, Lanxin, Keke's classmate, indicated that while she had no desire to attend Boyue Academy, she confined herself to reading the classics in the Confucian school simply to meet her mother's expectations. "I do not want to disappoint my mother," said Lanxin, using almost the same words as Keke. This personal conflict was not an experience that was limited to the girls. In a daily conversation, Jie Wu, a sixteen-year-old male student, recounted that his father had not

compelled him to attend the Academy, but required him to prioritize the completion of memorizing the classics before doing what he personally aspired to do. Like many other students, Jie Wu felt bored about learning the classics but had to force himself to continue to do it so as not to let his father down.

“I don’t want to let my parents down” was a common account shared by *dujing* students in attempting to rationalize the difficult situation that they faced; that is, to keep reading classics at Yiqian School while maintaining no interest in attending Boyue Academy. I emphasize here that the students’ obedience to the parental authority reflects their internalization of hard individualism (Kim et al. 2017), which, however, conflicts with their individual aspirations. On the one hand, in struggling to live up to their parents’ expectations, the students displayed a connection of hard individualism with the Confucian virtue of filial piety. Being filial in the Chinese context refers to children’s obligation to follow their parents’ orders and maintain their parents’ honor or “face” (*mianzi*) (Kipnis 2009, p. 215; Zhang 2016). However, for students at Yiqian School, prioritizing their parents’ expectations conflicted with the students’ self-pursuits. Consequently, the students shared that they often quarreled with their parents in attempts to resist such parental authority.

The students’ resistance to parental authority was often in vain, as was demonstrated in case of Keke. In contrast, some students (n = 14) reported that their efforts at resistance appeared to make some space for negotiations about their personal choices regarding future education. This situation of *dujing* families is not different from other families because they are all the reflections of the general shifting parent–child relationship in contemporary China (Naftali 2016, p. 120). Additionally, students’ persistent negotiations with their parents demonstrate the development of expressive individualism (Liu 2011). In discussions with the girls in Qili Class, several students (n = 6) admitted that the uncompromising attitudes of their parents eventually diminished because of their repeated objections to attending Boyue Academy. “When I was at home, my mom persuaded me by saying, ‘You must go to the Academy or you’ll be letting me down,’” a girl recounted, “I then cried, shouting, ‘I don’t want to go there! I don’t want to go there!’ We then had a big quarrel. After several occurrences like this, my mom finally said, ‘Do whatever you want, as you wish.’” Another girl shared a similar story:

“My mother expects me to attend Boyue Academy. (. . .) On one occasion, I told her that I did not want to go there but looked forward to studying in Japan. She then began to spell out the disadvantages of studying in Japan. (. . .) We fought many times about this, until one day she said, “Do whatever you want, as you wish.” Well, nowadays she still yearns for me to study at the Academy but does not impose her views on me as strongly as before.”¹³

Resistance from their children also caused the parents to acknowledge the necessity of respecting their children’s expressive values of individualism. One parent, Mrs. Song, expressed her strong expectations for her 14-year-old son Jianjian to continue his Confucian studies at Boyue Academy. She had had countless quarrels with Jianjian about her plans for him to study at the Academy until she later realized that her overhasty persuasion had placed too much pressure on her son. Ultimately, Mrs. Song changed her approach and attitude toward her son. She said,

“I no longer compel him to do anything because he has grown up. I hope to give him some space to think independently about his own future. Perhaps it is not yet the appropriate time for him to think about this issue [of going to the Academy]. (. . .) I am happy to allow him to decide on his own whether or not to study in the Academy in the future. But for now, he must recite the classics.”¹⁴

Through self-reflection, several parents (n = 7) had become more tolerant of their children’s self-choices and pursuit of their personal interests. In a conversation about the future education of her 10-year-old son, Mrs. Wu argued that a boy at this age was “still

vague in thinking about his life plans.” Like Mrs. Song, Mrs. Wu had learned to stop coercing her son to attend Boyue Academy. She indicated,

“[I inform my son that] it is well enough that he does whatever he wants as long as he makes full efforts. (. . .) If I forced him to attend Boyue Academy, he would be very stressed. Well, studying at the Academy should not be something that happens by coercion. Nowadays I avoid exerting too much pressure on him. This is my true personal experience, that is, to respect the child.”¹⁵

Many parents who I interviewed (n = 8) emphasized their children’s independence in making personal decisions. When discussing the next stage in her nine-year-old son’s education, Mrs. Zhu shared, “I will just follow his decision and respect his choice. Whatever he wishes to do, I am happy to support it.” This reflected the sentiments of Mrs. Lan, who said,

“If my son is willing to go to the Academy, I will absolutely support him. If not, I will still respect his choice. Well, he is now 13 years old and is becoming increasingly mature and sensible. He knows many things, including what he really wants.”¹⁶

From a general perspective, the complexity of the shifting parent–child relationship as revealed in *dujing* families is no exception to other Chinese families. It corresponds to the argument by Naftali (2016) 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 their children” (p. 120). On one hand, children’s formation of their individual self and parents’ orientation to respect their children’s autonomy reflect the broad social process of “the growing empowerment and individualization of Chinese children within the family and society” (ibid., p. 118). On the other hand, Chinese children are still obliged to obey the authority of their parents, owing to the implicit influence of Confucian ethics such as filial piety (Kipnis 2009, p. 214).

Furthermore, the paradoxical relationship between the individuality of the child and the authority of the parent reflects a general change in the Chinese parenting style. The traditional parenting style in China is controlling, restrictive, and authoritarian (Chao 1994). In describing the nature of Chinese parenting, some scholars (Li et al. 2017) have suggested the term *guan* (training), which refers to a form that integrates care with discipline and love with governing. This is evidenced in the above stories of *dujing* families where parents put pressure on their children and forced them to go to the Academy out of consideration for their future education and life. However, the profound process of individualization in Chinese society (Yan 2009, 2010) has caused Chinese parenting to increasingly embrace a child-centered approach and to value open communications with the child. Contemporary Chinese parents allow their children to make their own decisions, improve their children’s independence and autonomy, and decrease the power differential between them and their children (Li et al. 2017). This new trend is in accordance with the findings in this section.

8. Concluding Remarks

Based on a field study at a Confucian school in China, the current research has identified three factors that jointly shape Confucian students’ mentality regarding their educational prospects: the students’ rising awareness of individualism, the authoritarian sage discourse, and parental authority. First, students at Yiqian School encountered an either–or dilemma when planning their future education—either to pursue advanced Confucian studies, ideally at Boyue Academy, or to pursue their individual aspirations elsewhere. Most of the interviewed students demonstrated an explicit individual-oriented attitude toward their education, hoping to pursue personal interests, attend university, study abroad, or follow their own aspirations. However, the students’ individual selves were challenged by two types of authoritarian rhetoric—the sage discourse generated by the Confucian school, and the parental expectations imposed upon them. The students’ resistance to both sources of authoritarian rhetoric served to consolidate their individualism.

Given these findings, I demonstrate here a complicated landscape in the ongoing revival of Confucian education that features individualism among students, which counteracts the authoritarianism of teachers and parents. Nonetheless, I wish to clarify that not all students at Yiqian School fully rejected the thought of attending Boyue Academy. For example, 2 out of 17 students in Qili Class and 1 out of 17 students in Qibo Class disclosed their yearning to attend the Academy. In addition, some teachers and parents expressed that they respected the children's wishes for their future education. Thus, despite the conflict between the students' individualism and the teachers' and parents' authoritarianism, I acknowledge that there may be space for both sides to mutually influence, negotiate and coordinate.

I argue that Confucian students' preferences for the individualistic values of autonomy, freedom, self-reliance, and personal interest are in line with the concept of soft individualism (Kim et al. 2017). However, this does not mean that the ethics of hard individualism did not also apply to the students at Yiqian School. Rather, almost all students recognized to some extent the essentiality of hard individualistic learning virtues, such as discipline, pressure, and endurance of hardship in their long-term learning of Confucian classics (see also J. Li 2012, chp. 4). Accordingly, the disciplined schooling environment also emphasized cultivation of students' hard individual virtues and skills. Additionally, students' resistance to the authoritarian ideologies did not necessarily exclude their internalization of these "hard" virtues of individual learning. Furthermore, the students exhibited both a desire for individual self-expression and a utilitarian concern in planning their future education. This provides new evidence for the argument put forth by Liu (2011, p. 68) that the younger generation in China displays both expressive and utilitarian individualism simultaneously against the dramatic social transformation that is taking place in present-day China. Similarly, scholars (Carabelli and Lyon 2016) have indicated that the propensity of young people to imagine a rationally calculated future instead of an adventurous future is a global trend that is unfolding beyond China.

More importantly, this study has revealed the complicated nature of the emerging Confucian individualism among *dujing* students. On the one hand, the students have embraced the virtue of individual aspiration, which is a feature of Confucian individualism (X. Chen 2015). They have developed personal aspirations with innovative implications by highlighting the soft individualistic values of self-determination, self-pursuit, and self-reliance. On the other hand, Confucian individualism does not negate the hard individualistic values such as respect for the seniors, abidance by parental authority, and disciplined study habits. Therefore, the nascent Confucian individualism arising from the contemporary revival of Confucianism and Confucian education can be understood as an ideology accommodating both soft and hard individualistic values. Additionally, Confucian individualism should also share common values with expressive and utilitarian individualisms but articulate them more with the fundamental virtues in Confucian doctrines.

Contextualizing the Confucian individualism in *dujing* students' experience of Confucian study, I argue that the rise of Confucian individualism is due to a mixture of elements, including neoliberal values, Confucian virtues, (aversion to) the sage discourse and Confucian idealism, and (rebellion against) the parental authority. In view of this, I clarify two points. First, the students' eagerness to pursue self-defined aspirations indeed weakens the hegemony of the authoritarian ideologies. Second, one should avoid interpreting the students' reluctance to follow the authoritarian sage discourse and parental authority as a completely neoliberal phenomenon because the students still adhere to certain Confucian virtues, such as filial piety. Thus, I argue that the development of students' Confucian individualism must be understood within a broader context beyond the scope of Confucianism. Only through this general, hybrid perspective can we understand why *dujing* students as Confucian individuals would reject further Confucian studies. Moreover, Confucian individualism is most likely linked to the complex shaping of Chinese subjectivities, which involves a mixture of neoliberal versus authoritarian values and individualistic versus collective values (Kipnis 2011; Liu 2011, p. 29). This study calls for follow-up research on the nature of Confucian individualism.

The students' individual selves, as shown through their genuine thoughts and feelings about studying Confucianism, are important for reflecting on the movement of *dujing* education. Many academics and the general public in China are currently engaged in widespread debate over the pros and cons of *dujing*; this debate has covered a variety of topics, such as the mechanical memorization method, learning materials, legitimate status of the *sishu*, and uncertainties surrounding the acquisition of an academic diploma (see Wang 2018). In particular, several influential *dujing* campaigners, including Wang Caigui himself, have emphasized the authoritarian side of Confucianism but downplayed its individualistic nature (see Ke 2017). This is reflected well in the recent emergence of new learning methods such as *baoben* (reciting a whole book of classics in one go) and "double tens" (reading classics for 10 h per day, for 10 years) (Wang 2016a, 2016b). However, the students' voices are largely missing in the ongoing disputes. Given the students' salient identity of the individual self as presented in this study, I argue that *dujing* education should take into account students' desires for individual values during its pedagogical reforms and thus attempt to achieve a balance between respecting students' autonomy and independence and encouraging them to participate in the national revival of Confucianism.

This study has a few limitations. First, it is based on a small number of participants at one specific Confucian school, and the findings by no means imply that the interviewees' experiences and opinions about their educational prospects necessarily represent those of the general population, especially given the diversities and contradictions of the Confucian education rhetoric and practice in today's China (Wang 2018). Follow-up studies are demanded to focus on various groups of actors at multiple sites of Confucian education. Second, this study does not examine in detail the role of the state power in constructing the students' identities of their individual self nor the implications for the shaping of Confucian individualism through a social class lens, as many of the students came from socio-economically advantaged backgrounds. Future studies would do well to explore these two aspects further.

Funding: The research is part of the Open Project for International Cooperation Research, funded by the State Key Laboratory of Subtropical Building Science (*Yaredai jianzhu kexue guojia zhongdian shiyanshi*) at South China University of Technology (Funding Number: 2020ZA01).

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ In addition to the bottom-up movement, the top-down approach is the other feature of China's Confucian revival in the 21st century. According to Billioud and Thoraval (2015, p. 284; also see Billioud 2016), the top-down approach is driven by state power and cultural or political elites through government mandates and cultural dissemination. It is noted that the top-down and bottom-up approaches are not clear-cut parallels; rather, there are complex and dynamic interactions between them.
- ² Billioud and Thoraval (2015, pp. 41–51) offered a detailed description of this particular "classics reading movement" and the leading activist Wang Caigui.
- ³ According to Wang Caigui's recommended list of great books, Chinese classics include mainly those of Confucianism such as *The Analects of Confucius*, *The Great Learning*, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, and *Mencius*, as well as some of Taoism such as *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi*; Western classics include the works of ancient Greek philosophers such as *The Death of Socrates*, and Shakespeare's plays such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.
- ⁴ Interview in June 2015.
- ⁵ Many Confucian education practitioners, including the older students at Yiqian School, refer to Wang Caigui as "Professor Wang" because he is a professor emeritus from a university in Taiwan.
- ⁶ Interview in May 2015.
- ⁷ Interview in June 2015.

- 8 Confucian intellectuals have long used these four sentences to articulate their cultural and political undertakings and regarded them as the perfect interpretations for the pursuit of the sage realm. By devoting oneself to achieving the four indicated aspects, Confucians argue to endow their lives with greatness, sacredness, and values. Teachers at Yiqian School sometimes quoted the four sentences to stimulate students' motivation for learning Confucianism.
- 9 It is worth noting that Boyue Academy was not the only place mentioned by students or their teachers and parents. In my fieldwork, some participants mentioned alternative Confucian schools or academies as potential destinations of future study. Even so, they did not negate the authoritative status of Boyue Academy in the domain of *dujing* education. Some parents disclosed their final expectation that their children would study at Boyue Academy after a couple of years of classics reading in other institutions.
- 10 Fieldnotes in May 2015.
- 11 Interview in June 2015.
- 12 Interview in July 2015.
- 13 Group discussion in May 2015.
- 14 Interview in July 2015.
- 15 Interview in July 2015.
- 16 Interview in June 2015.

References

- Bakken, Børge. 2000. *The Exemplary Society: Human Improvement, Social Control, and the Dangers of Modernity in China*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Billioud, Sébastien, and Joël Thoraval. 2007. Jiaohua: The Confucian Revival in China as an Educative Project. *China Perspectives* 4: 4–20. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Billioud, Sébastien, and Joël Thoraval. 2008. Anshen Liming or the Religious Dimension of Confucianism. *China Perspectives* 3: 88–106. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Billioud, Sébastien, and Joël Thoraval. 2009. Lijiao: The Return of Ceremonies Honouring Confucius in Mainland China. *China Perspectives* 2009: 82–100. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Billioud, Sébastien, and Joël Thoraval. 2015. *The Sage and The People*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Billioud, Sébastien. 2010. Carrying the Confucian Torch to the Masses: The Challenge of Structuring the Confucian Revival in the People's Republic of China. *Oriens Extremus* 49: 201–24.
- Billioud, Sébastien. 2011. Confucian Revival and the Emergence of 'Jiaohua Organizations': A Case Study of the Yidan Xuetang. *Modern China* 37: 286–314. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Billioud, Sébastien. 2016. The Hidden Tradition: Confucianism and Its Metamorphoses in Modern and Contemporary China. In *Modern Chinese Religion II, 1850–2015*. Edited by Vincent Goossaert, Jan Kiely and John Lagerwey. Leiden: Brill, vol. 2, pp. 767–805.
- Billioud, Sébastien. 2021. Confucianism in Chinese Society in the First Two Decades of the 21st Century. In *The Cambridge History of Confucianism*. Edited by Kiri Paramore. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1–16.
- Billioud, Sébastien. Forthcoming. Historicity and Relevance of the Confucian Revival in Contemporary China.
- Carabelli, Giulia, and Dawn Lyon. 2016. Young People's Orientations to the Future: Navigating the Present and Imagining the Future. *Journal of Youth Studies* 19: 1110–27. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Chao, Ruth K. 1994. Beyond Parental Control and Authoritarian Parenting Style: Understanding Chinese Parenting through the Cultural Notion of Training. *Child Development* 65: 1111–19. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Chen, Qiaojian. 2021. From Righteousness to Rights (Cong Yi Dao Quanli). *Philosophical Studies* 2: 57–68.
- Chen, Xunwu. 2014. The Ethics of Self: Another Version of Confucian Ethics. *Asian Philosophy* 24: 67–81. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Chen, Xunwu. 2015. The Value of Authenticity: Another Dimension of Confucian Ethics. *Asian Philosophy* 25: 172–87. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Cheung, Kwok Wah, and Suyan Pan. 2006. Transition of Moral Education in China: Towards Regulated Individualism. *Citizenship Teaching and Learning* 2: 37–50.
- Creswell, John W. 2007. *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 2nd ed. London: Sage Publications.
- De Bary, William Theodore. 1970. Individualism and Humanitarianism in Late Ming Thought. In *Self and Society in Ming Thought*. Edited by William Theodore De Bary and The Conference on Ming Thought. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 145–247.
- De Bary, William. 1983. *The Liberal Tradition in China*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press.
- Dutournier, Guillaume, and Yuchen Wang. 2018. An Adventure Called 'Sishu': The Tensions and Vagries of a 'Holistic' Educational Experience (Zhengti Jiaoyu) in Today's Rural China. In *The Varieties of Confucian Experience: Documenting a Grassroots Revival of Tradition*. Edited by Sébastien Billioud. Leiden: Brill, pp. 262–301.
- Dutournier, Guillaume, and Zhe Ji. 2009. Social Experimentation and 'Popular Confucianism': The Case of the Lujiang Cultural Education Centre. *China Perspectives* 2009: 67–81. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Gilgan, Sandra. Forthcoming. Confucian Education and Utopianism: The Classics Reading Movement and Its Potential for Social Change.
- Hansen, Mette Halskov, and Cuiming Pang. 2008. Me and My Family: Perceptions of Individual and Collective among Young Rural Chinese. *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 7: 75–99. [[CrossRef](#)]

- Hansen, Mette Halskov. 2013. Learning Individualism: Hesse, Confucius, and Pep-Rallies in a Chinese Rural High. *The China Quarterly* 213: 60–77. [CrossRef]
- Hansen, Mette Halskov. 2015. *Educating the Chinese Individual: Life in a Rural Boarding School*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Ji, Zhe. 2008. Educating Through Music. *China Perspectives* 2008: 107–17. [CrossRef]
- Ji, Zhe. 2018. Making a Virtue of Piety: Dizigui and the Discursive Practice of Jingkong's Network. In *The Varieties of Confucian Experience: Documenting a Grassroots Revival of Tradition*. Edited by Sébastien Billioud. Leiden: Brill, pp. 61–89.
- Ke, Xiaogang. 2017. *Shengming de Mohua (Transformation of Life)*. Shanghai: Tongji University Press.
- Kim, Sung won, Kari Elle Brown, and Vanessa L. Fong. 2017. Chinese Individualisms: Childrearing Aspirations for the Next Generation of Middle-Class Chinese Citizens. *Ethos* 45: 342–66. [CrossRef]
- Kipnis, Andrew. 2009. Education and the Governing of Child-Centered Relatedness. In *Chinese Kinship: Contemporary Anthropological Perspectives*. Edited by Susanne Brandtstädter and Gonçalo D. Santos. New York and Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 204–22.
- Kipnis, Andrew. 2011. Subjectification and Education for Quality in China. *Economy and Society* 40: 289–306. [CrossRef]
- Li, Chen-bouck, Changming Duan, and Meagan M. Patterson. 2017. A Qualitative Study of Urban, Chinese Middle-Class Mothers' Parenting for Adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Research* 32: 479–508.
- Li, Jin. 2012. *Cultural Foundations of Learning: East and West*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Liu, Fengshu. 2008. Constructing the Autonomous Middle-Class Self in Today's China: The Case of Young-Adult Only-Children University Students. *Journal of Youth Studies* 11: 193–212. [CrossRef]
- Liu, Fengshu. 2011. *Urban Youth in China: Modernity, the Internet and the Self*. New York: Routledge.
- Moore, Robert L. 2005. Generation Ku: Individualism and China's Millennial Youth. *Ethnology* 44: 357–76. [CrossRef]
- Naftali, Orna. 2016. *Children in China*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Nuyen, Anh T. 2002. Confucianism and the Idea of Citizenship. *Asian Philosophy: An International Journal of the Philosophical Traditions of the East* 12: 127–39. [CrossRef]
- Ren, Jiantao. 2018. *Dang Jing Chengwei Jingdian: Xiandai Ruxue de Xingbian (When Scriptures Become Classics: Transformation of Modern Confucianism)*. Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press.
- Sun, Anna. 2013. *Confucianism as a World Religion: Contested Histories and Contemporary Realities*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Sun, Anna. 2018. Contemporary Confucius Temples Life in Mainland China: Report from the Field. In *The Varieties of Confucian Experience*. Edited by Sébastien Billioud. Leiden: Brill, pp. 205–34.
- Sun, Xiangchen. 2017. Xiandai Geti Quanli Yu Rujia Chuantong Zhong de Geti (Individual Rights in Modern Time and 'Individual' in Confucian Tradition). *Wenshizhe (Journal of Literature, History and Philosophy)* 3: 90–106. (In Chinese).
- Wang, Caigui. 2009. *Jiaoyu de Zhihuixue (Wisdom of Education)*. Nanjing: Nanjing University Press. (In Chinese)
- Wang, Caigui. 2014. *Dujing Ershi Nian (Two Decades of Reading Classics Education)*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company. (In Chinese)
- Wang, Caigui. 2016a. Ertong Dujing Zhengyi Dawen (Question and Answer on Children Reading Classics). *Rujia Wang (Confucian Website)*. Available online: <http://www.rujiazg.com/article/id/9316/> (accessed on 26 January 2018).
- Wang, Caigui. 2016b. Zhuanfang Wang Caigui: Dujing Shi Duoyuan de Jiaoyu (Exclusive Interview with Wang Caigui: Classics Reading Is a Multi-Dimensional Education). *Rujia Wang (Confucian Website)*. Available online: <http://www.rujiazg.com/article/id/8967/> (accessed on 26 January 2018).
- Wang, Canglong. 2018. Debatable 'Chineseness': Diversification of Confucian Classical Education in Contemporary China. *China Perspectives* 4: 53–64. [CrossRef]
- Wang, Canglong. 2021. Confucianism and Citizenship Revisited. In *Routledge Handbook of Chinese Citizenship*. Edited by Zhonghua Guo. London: Routledge, pp. 287–300.
- Wang, Canglong. Forthcoming. Parents as Critical Individuals: Revival of Confucian Education from the Perspective of Chinese Individualisation.
- Yan, Yunxiang. 2003. *Private Life Under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village 1949–1999*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Yan, Yunxiang. 2009. *The Individualization of Chinese Society*. Oxford: Berg.
- Yan, Yunxiang. 2010. The Chinese Path to Individualization. *The British Journal of Sociology* 61: 489–512. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Yan, Yunxiang. 2011. Chapter One: The Changing Moral Landscape. In *Deep China: The Moral Life of the Person*. Edited by Arthur Kleinman, Yunxiang Yan, Jun Jing, Sing Lee, Everett Zhang, Tianshu Pan, Fei Wu and Jinhua Guo. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 36–77.
- Yan, Yunxiang. 2012. Of the Individual and Individualization: The Striving Individual in China and the Theoretical Implications. In *Futures of Modernity: Challenges for Cosmopolitical Thought and Practice*. Edited by Michael Heinlein, Cordula Kropp, Judith Neumer, Angelika Poferi and Regina Römhild. Bielefeld: Transcript, pp. 177–95.
- Yan, Yunxiang. 2021. The Politics of Moral Crisis in Contemporary China. *The China Journal* 85: 96–120. [CrossRef]
- Yu, Tianlong. 2008. The Revival of Confucianism in Chinese Schools: A Historical-Political Review. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* 28: 113–29. [CrossRef]
- Zhang, Yi. 2016. Practising and Displaying Xiao—Young Mothers' Negotiations of Obligations to Elders. *The Journal of Chinese Sociology* 3: 27–46. [CrossRef]