

Educating the Autonomous Learner in a Confucian School: Subjectivity, Memorisation, and Dilemma

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ABSTRACT: The current literature on Chinese governmentality and subjectivity lacks rigorous discussion of the involvement of Confucian education. This article applies Foucauldian conceptual tools to explore this scholarship gap empirically. Based on ethnographic fieldwork at a Confucian school, we explore how Confucian pedagogical techniques are used to create a type of subject. This article first presents pedagogical reform in a Confucian school. The resultant pedagogy of individualised memorisation combines two paradoxical knowledge sources: the individualised teaching principle and the method of repetitive memorisation. We then demonstrate how the Confucian teaching techniques used in the classroom result in contradictory processes of subject-making. Students are governed by the technologies of power in the disciplined classroom but are also encouraged to be the “master” of their own study according to the technologies of the self, so as to become autonomous learners. The revived Confucian education is encountering a profound cultural dilemma between autonomy/individuality and coercion/authority in the making of subjects.

KEYWORDS: Confucian education, governmentality, subjectification, power, Foucault.

Introduction

Since the mid-1990s, China has experienced a revival of Confucianism, which has rapidly expanded across the realms of politics, religion, and education (Billioud and Thoraval 2015). Confucian education is an essential part of this revival, and broadly refers to educative projects and activities that have direct associations with elements of Confucian heritage, sometimes with a great deal of reinvention and imagination. The movement of “children reading classics” (*ertong dujing* 兒童讀經) is one of the most influential features of the resurgence of Confucian education.¹

Confucian education has developed into various forms and types over the past two decades. Estimates suggest that by 2014, more than 3,000 Confucian schools had been established across China, educating tens of thousands of students of compulsory education age (Wang 2014).² Most Confucian schools are private home schools, either full-time or part-time, with varying curricula.

Many prefer a broad range of traditional Chinese cultural content, but some feature a combination of Chinese classics and Western knowledge. Despite their differences, all Confucian schools believe in the doctrinal effect of reading and memorising Confucian classics to cultivate students’ personalities.

Furthermore, from a macro-contextual point of view, the Confucian attempt to square the circle of improving pupils’ moral integrity by linking rote learning to self-development is part of a larger experiment of moral education that has been practised in socialist China for a long time already (Li 2011; Yu 2020; Wang and Billioud 2022). According to Li (2011), China’s moral education dominated by ideological-political orientations is experiencing a decline of collective ideology as well as a combination of socialist

1. Billioud and Thoraval (2015: Part One) provide detailed, comprehensive descriptions of this particular movement.

2. These figures should be treated with caution as they are difficult to crosscheck.

and individualist values due to the extensive economic reforms and the consequent rise of individuality and privacy (see also Yan 2010). Particularly, the Confucian idea of self-cultivation (*xiuyang* 修養) has always been an aspect of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) ideology (Wu and Devine 2018), as attested by the prevalence of Liu Shaoqi's 劉少奇 famous book *How to Be a Good Communist* in the early communist regime. The official communist ideals of personhood are infused with ideals of self-restraint, self-cultivation, self-assertion, and relational responsibility, all these self-oriented values sharing ideological affinities with Confucianism (Cheng 2009).³ Although this topic is not the focus of this article, it offers a broader perspective to see the Confucian revival in association with the CCP's overall strategy of moral or ideological education.

The diversification of Confucian education has aroused much debate among the Chinese public, but there is a dearth of ethnographies on this topic, particularly on the pedagogical practices of Confucian schooling. To this end, I⁴ conducted ethnographic fieldwork in a Confucian school to explore Confucian pedagogical techniques. This article considers the following questions: What does the pedagogy of a Confucian school look like? How is Confucian pedagogy implemented in mundane classroom practices? What kind of subject does a Confucian school aim to educate? As part of a larger research project examining the revival of Confucian education in contemporary China, the present study mainly focuses on the official discourse and pedagogical doctrine of one Confucian school. It reveals its specific teaching and learning skills, as well as its practices. Other articles would put forward the perspectives of different actors (teachers, students, and parents) on the pedagogy of this school. The findings of the present case study offer a window into the internal contradictions in shaping Confucian learners' autonomy by the individualised memorisation approach in the contemporary Confucian education revival.

Conceptual framing: Governmentality, subjectification, and Confucian education in China

We use Foucault's conceptual tools to establish the theoretical framework and analyse the data on classroom practices. We pay special attention to two concepts: governmentality and subjectification.⁵ Foucault refers to governmentality as "the conduct of conduct," involving "all endeavors to shape, guide, direct the conduct of others" and "to govern ourselves" (Rose 1999: 3). Governmentality implies "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). As Lemke (2001: 191) elaborates, governmentality has two interlinking aspects. One is a form of representation: "government defines a discursive field in which exercising power is 'rationalized'"; the other is a form 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." 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).

Governmentality is concerned with how individuals are constituted as subjects in the enmeshment of power relations through technologies of power and the self (Dean 1999: 17). Based on a Foucauldian conceptualisation, Paul Rabinow (1984) draw the idea of subjectification to refer to "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" (Kipnis 2011b: 289). Two technologies are intertwined in the process of subjectification. The technologies of power "determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, and objectivizing of the subject" (Foucault 2003: 146). The technologies of the self allow "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 immorality" (ibid.). Dianna Taylor (2011: 173) reframes this understanding, arguing that subjectification involves a codependent, two-way process. On the one hand, people constitute themselves as subjects through "practices of the self"; on the other hand, these practices are shaped by institutions, norms, and values.

When applying Foucault's conceptual toolkit to a non-Western society such as China, it is sensible to consider the contextual particularity of governmentality and subjectification. There are two contesting stances in the literature that can shed light on the Confucian education revival in general, and the complexities of educating Confucian learners through classics memorisation in particular.

The first stance holds that post-Mao China is undergoing a "neoliberal turn" in its mode of governmentality, very similar to its Western counterparts, resulting in the appearance of neoliberal subjects (Ong and Zhang 2008; Jacka 2009; Hoffman 2010). Intellectuals in this camp believe that China is creating a new neoliberal political agenda and attempting to cultivate Chinese individuals through "the educated and informed choices of active citizens, families, and communities" (Rose 1996: 20). The discourse of quality (*suzhi* 素質) is regarded as playing an essential role in shaping Chinese neoliberal governmentality and subjectification. It does not only rationalise the exploitation of "low-quality" workers but also masks general social inequalities (Anagnost 2004; Kipnis 2006).

Other researchers have taken the stance that the Chinese mode of governmentality and subjectification is characterised by a mixture of socialist and neoliberal rhetoric (Yan 2010; Kipnis 2011a,

3. Historically, these norms that have entered the genes of Chinese political culture since the self-strengthening movement of the 1860s were repeated by Nationalists such as Chiang Kai-shek 蔣介石, explicitly promoted by communist leader Liu Shaoqi, and today have found expressions in the Party culture of Xi Jinping 習近平.

4. Only Wang Canglong conducted the fieldwork. Hence, «I» instead of «we» is used throughout the article when referring to the fieldwork.

5. Of the three vectors of Foucault's framework – truth, power, and subject – this article does not highlight truth as much as the other two. The present research focuses on the technology of power in the making of subjects, and truth is always enmeshed with the technology of power and the formation of self in Confucian teaching. The article discusses a pedagogical reform at a case school involving a mixture of two types of educational ideas that embody the dimension of truth/knowledge.

2011b; Rocca 2017; Sun 2019). Sigley (2006: 504) argues that the practices of governmentality in post-Mao China “involve a creative blending of neoliberal rationalities and revitalized forms of socialist rationalities.” The neo-socialist rhetoric of Chinese governmentality and subjectification (Pieke 2009; Halskov Hansen 2015) differs from the neoliberal approach in its emphasis on the role of China’s authoritarian state power. As Halskov Hansen (2015: 94) notes, the mode of governmentality and subjectification in reform-era China aims to create the new neo-socialist individual who 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,” while also respecting “the fact that the party-government provides the true interpretation of it” and remaining “loyal to political authorities” (ibid.: 172). Neoliberal values, such as individual freedom, self-determination, and self-reliance, have been circulating transnationally (Soysal 2015). However, nationalistic, authoritarian values continue to be prominent in current Chinese society (Zhao 2020). The contemporary Chinese individual displays a late-socialism-cum-neoliberalism hybrid subjectivity (Sigley 2004) epitomised by self-enterprise, nationalism, and patriotism (Hoffman 2010; Yan 2010).

Foucault’s conceptual tools of governmentality and subjectification have been used to study the neoliberal schooling practices of Western societies, the common theme of which has been a desire to create entrepreneurial, independent, productive, active, and responsible subjects (Davies and Bansel 2007; Ball 2012, 2016; Ball and Olmedo 2013). However, scholars have not applied these concepts to the ancient classical style of Confucian education that is regaining popularity in China today. This intellectual gap should be filled given the remarkable expansion of Confucian education over the past two decades and the public interest in it. Governmentality and subjectification may be more complicated in the context of Chinese education. As Kipnis (2011b: 289) points out, it is “far from an easy task” to discern “the types of subjects that are being produced in China’s classrooms” as the “subjectifying rhetoric and practices in China’s classrooms” are always “a contradictory mix.” The present research explores *what* practices create *which* types of subjects in a Confucian school.

Based on extensive fieldwork at a Confucian school, this article reveals that students of Confucian education are governed by the technologies of power in the disciplined classroom but are also encouraged to be the “master” of their own study according to the technologies of the self, so as to become autonomous learners. The main argument is that the revived Confucian education is encountering a profound cultural dilemma between autonomy/individuality and coercion/authority in the making of subjects.

The scene and research methods

The present research is based on ethnographic fieldwork at a Confucian school, for which we use the pseudonym Yiqian School. This school is located in a small, remote town in the countryside of a southeastern province of China. Despite its location, this Confucian school attracts teachers and students from across and outside the province. The nine-year compulsory schooling has been approved by the local government, but the school follows specific

Confucian classic education principles. In theory, students can study at the school from year one of primary education to year nine of junior high school; that is, from age six to 15. However, in practice, very few students do so due to pedagogical changes (discussed in the next section).

As one of the earliest Confucian schools in present-day China, the history of Yiqian School can be traced back to 2002, when the founder gathered preschool children to read Confucian classics informally at home. It gained official accreditation as a school in 2010. After its formal establishment, Yiqian School was able to rapidly expand its student population and teaching staff, peaking in 2013 at nearly 50 teachers and 250 students. When I visited the school in 2015, the number of students had dropped to 119, the number of teachers to 19 and the number of administrators and accommodators to 12. Most of the teachers had knowledge of traditional Chinese culture, and some had experience in other classical schools. There were six regular classes at Yiqian School, each of which was overseen by one homeroom teacher (usually an experienced senior teacher) and one or two teaching assistants (usually younger new teachers). The turnover rate of the teaching staff was high at Yiqian. In 2015, the teachers’ average tenure was less than two years (23 months). All but three of the longest-serving teachers had been replaced by new staff members since my first visit in 2012.

As a full-time private school, Yiqian charges RMB 30,000 for tuition and RMB 2,000 for living expenses per year. It offers no regular scholarships for students but may grant a few students a discount if they have studied at the school for years. Compared with free-of-charge public schools in China, the tuition fee indicates that Yiqian students’ families are financially affluent. The sources of the student population are diverse, as the majority come from other regions, playing a critical factor in Yiqian’s being a full-time boarding school.⁶ I witnessed many pupils suffering from homesickness, and at times they could not focus on the study of classics. The isolation also provides perfect conditions for the school to exert disciplinary power over the students.

Despite its status as a state-approved school, Yiqian does not provide a comprehensive state-stipulated curriculum. Instead, it uses a Confucian curriculum that features canonical literature, which students are required to memorise. The readings come from Confucianism, Taoism, and Western classics. The pedagogy at Yiqian is deeply influenced by Dr Wang Caigui 王財貴, a Taiwanese scholar born in 1949. As a prestigious Confucian intellectual and educator, he has played a significant role in campaigning for children to read classics. Wang (2014: 41-66) proposed a three-point, embracive theory for classics study. First, the teaching content must come from canonical literature, both from Chinese and Western cultures, because it comprises “the most valuable books throughout human history” (Wang 2009: 5-6). Second, rote memorisation should be the fundamental method for classics study. Learners should read the texts repeatedly and do not need to grasp their literal meanings or implicit principles. Third, children younger than the age of 13 are endowed with the most powerful capacity for memory but have a weak faculty for understanding. This educational

6. Boarding schools are common in the current Chinese state school system as well, even at the primary education level (Halskov Hansen 2015).

theory proposes that children should read and memorise classics early, extensively, simply, sincerely, and joyfully (Wang 2014: 6-15). Wang argues that as long as learners follow the recommended pedagogy, they will absorb the wisdom inscribed in the classics and perfect their personalities. Despite its significant influence, Wang's theory is not the only source of Yiqian's pedagogy; it is accompanied by alterations and combinations, which are discussed in the next section.

Participant observations were conducted at Yiqian throughout the semester from March to July 2015. The spoken language in the field was Mandarin Chinese, and as a native speaker, I conducted and transcribed all interviews myself. The school provided me with a single room on campus. I was able to engage in daily interactions with school managers, teachers, and students, observe the teaching activities and practices, and establish rapport and trustworthiness with the participants. I took part in activities that occurred in classrooms, dorm rooms, the cafeteria, and the playground. I attended a variety of classes to observe the practices of learning and teaching and the students' interactions with peers and their teachers. I personally informed the participants about the details of my research and obtained their consent. I also engaged in daily chats and gathered documents such as school brochures and teaching syllabuses. For the sake of ethical concerns, this article uses pseudonyms for all of the participants.

Pedagogical reform: Towards a Confucian style of individualised memorisation

This section presents the pedagogical reform of Yiqian School to lay the foundation for the interpretations of the classroom techniques observed in fieldwork. Generally, Wang Caigui's influence on Yiqian was reflected in the school's inheritance of the method of memorisation for Confucian study. However, Yiqian mixed memorisation with the principle of individualised teaching in practice and proposed the theoretical schema of an "autonomous learner" in relation to Confucian study. The mixture of the two educational ideas was manifested in the multiple, paradoxical knowledge sources that reformulated Yiqian's pedagogy.

Anyone who entered Yiqian School would see a large poster on the wall of the teaching building giving the school's mission, authority, teaching principle, and spirit, the regulations of study, and briefings for teaching staff. Alongside it were photographs exhibiting visits from local education bureau officials, all six classes, and smiling students dressed in traditional Han Chinese clothing. We were immediately caught by the following sentence on the poster: "The school devotes itself to educating students in accordance with their natural ability and applies the individualised approach to teaching practices."

The above quotation is a literal translation of the Chinese phrase "因材施教" *yin cai shi jiao* (YCSJ), which implies that a teaching style should reflect the ability of each pupil. We translate this theory simply as "individualised education." YCSJ, which was initially proposed by Confucius, has been a fundamental principle of Confucian education throughout Chinese history. However, we found it unusual, because intellectuals as well as political campaigns to condemn Confucianism over the past century have ingrained a stereotype that Confucianism is an authoritarian

ideology that represses individuality and that Confucian education negates the autonomy of learners (Yan 2010, 2011). Yiqian claims to rejuvenate the YCSJ teaching principle, which apparently evokes an individual-oriented side in Confucianism. The notion of YCSJ was also inscribed in multiple documents from the school. One class described it in its "rules of study": "We hope that all students (...) can develop the capability of self-discipline, independent study, self-improvement to a greater extent, and the achievement of self-perfection gradually." On the school website, in the brochures handed out to visitors, and throughout the annual reports to the local education bureau, the idea of YCSJ was articulated as Yiqian's foremost teaching principle.

In 2013, Yiqian School began emphasising individualised teaching as a result of its pedagogical reform. Before March 2013, the educational ideology of Wang Caigui played a dominant role in establishing an authoritarian, collective approach to teaching and learning at Yiqian, as students were forced to engage in mechanical memorisation. They were also expected to follow a common mode of educational promotion, as outlined by Wang. In the first phase, they were to memorise a large volume of classics at a classical school, preferably up to 300,000 characters. Then, they were to seek further Confucian studies at the Wenli Academy, a Confucian-style academy established by Wang where students are trained to interpret the memorised classics. Responding to this particular program, Yiqian School invented a system of collective memorisation entitled "seven sections five rounds" (*qijie wulun* 七節五輪) to encourage students to recite classics. "Seven sections" refers to the practice of dividing a classic evenly into seven sections with the same number of pages and splitting one day into seven classes so that one class covers one section. "Five rounds" refers to the division of the entire process of classics memorisation into five rounds. In the first round, the teacher leads the whole class in reading a part of the classic book. In the second, students read the classic aloud by themselves. In the third, they recite the memorised part. In the fourth, they combine all of the parts into one larger section. During the fifth and final round, they are able to recite the whole book. As a collective memorisation method, it sought to create a uniformly encouraging atmosphere in which all of the students in one class could read a classic together and recite it at the same pace. The school believes that this practice would effectively increase students' classics memorisation.

However, according to Mr Chen – one of the two founders of Yiqian, who was a leader in reforming the school's pedagogy – the collective style of classics memorisation inhibited students' learning agency and impaired their enthusiasm for classical study. He indicated that the systematic model held a hierarchical, authoritarian view of students as passive objects rather than active subjects in the process of learning. In multiple interviews, he suggested that the "seven sections five rounds" approach did not fully consider individual differences in students' memory faculties and failed to cultivate their learning autonomy. Consequently, students were only pushed by their teachers to move forward in classics memorisation.

In March 2013, Yiqian School launched a pedagogical reform under the umbrella of individualised teaching, embracing an alternative pedagogy that gave prominence to the individuality

and autonomy of learners. The school leaders argued that the old pedagogy was essentially teacher centred, and the truth of Confucian education rested on a learner-centred pedagogy that encouraged students to study independently. Thus, the school began to apply the Confucian educational principle of YCSJ and invented the new individual-oriented teaching method of “one teacher for one student” (*yi dui yi* 一對一).⁷ The renewed pedagogy required that teachers neither coerce students nor compel them to study against their will. Despite its retention of the memorisation method, Yiqian revoked the mechanical manner and began emphasising individual, self-directed study of Confucian classics. Students were encouraged to understand the connotations of classic literature rather than learning it by rote memorisation. Some uniform standards were dropped, such as all students having the same number of characters to memorise, and the importance of Wenli Academy was downplayed as the next stage of education.

Yiqian School redrew its educational blueprint by confirming its goal to be the cultivation of autonomous learners who could memorise as well as understand classics. The teachers articulated that autonomous learners are students who acquire the consciousness of self-discipline and self-management in classics study, have an enhanced capability for self-regulation and self-control in moral cultivation, and are aware of studying for oneself rather than for others. In the broader context, although the cultivation of autonomy in personality and morality has been a central target of Western liberal education (Levinson 1999; Bonnett and Cuypers 2003; Hand 2006), it has not been so in modern Chinese education. Since the post-1978 reform era, the rise of *suzhi* educational reform has focused on learner autonomy more than personal autonomy. Learner autonomy means encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning (Littlewood 1999: 71). Personal autonomy 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). Some researchers have argued that even learner autonomy is unrealistic in Chinese classrooms because of the residual impact of examination-oriented education (*yingshi jiaoyu* 應試教育) (Kipnis 2011a).

This point is reflected in the interviews with Ms Zheng and Mr Chen, the founders of the Confucian school. They criticised state compulsory education for failing to develop students’ independent thinking and autonomous learning. They sought to use the Confucian idea of individualised education to reform mechanical memorisation, which the two founders argued was no different from the mainstream examination-oriented education. They disliked that it treated students as passive, submissive conformists rather than active, autonomous learners. Mr Chen said:

I judge that [our previous pedagogy] shared exactly the same teaching principle and methods as the mainstream examination-oriented education, except that the learning content had been changed from the state-stipulated textbooks to Confucian classics. We taught students this way in the past: The teacher would say, “Attention all! Read after me!” Who was the subject of the study? The teacher! And the students were merely followers. Is it any different from the examination-oriented education of state schools? In

mainstream schooling, the most popular teaching method is “Attention all! Listen to me!” The students are passive learners whilst the teacher plays the central role! To conclude, I am sure that what we did before was nothing but assume that students were submissive learners, controlled by the teacher in the learning process and consequently not enjoying the study of classics at all. (Interview, May 2015)

Ms Zheng, who held the post of school head, agreed with individualised teaching but defended Wang’s idea of “reading classics extensively” (*daliang dujing* 大量讀經). She explained that their Confucian school continued to ask students to memorise a large number of classics; however, it was not done collectively but in an individualised style. Therefore, Yiqian School had created the new, combined pedagogy that we call “individualised memorisation,” whose basic idea is to vary students’ workload and content in classics learning according to their capacity to memorise. The purpose of the individualised pedagogy was, as Ms Zheng clarified, to reduce the level of enforcement on students and intensify their self-directed learning awareness:

In ancient China, teachers taught students according to their natural ability. What does this mean? If a child is able to recognise ten characters, the teacher teaches him only eight; if he can do 100, the teacher allows him to learn 80. Let’s say that two kids study in the same classroom – even if they start with the same content, their learning progress will vary sharply after ten days. Therefore, theoretically and practically, the teacher cannot organise students to learn classics in a single collective way; instead, he must educate students according to their merits. Actually, this teaching practice lasted thousands of years in ancient China. (Interview, June 2015)

Ms Zheng’s explanation implies that there is an affinity between classics memorisation and learning autonomy. Confucian education embraces the tradition of transforming someone by education (*jiaohua* 教化) which can be interpreted in this context as classics memorisation serving to improve students’ autonomy in learning and character development. According to Bakken (2000: 143), memorisation enables educated individuals to enhance their “constancy of mind and self-control” and develop “a constant attitude towards the norms, thus ensuring proper conduct even in the absence of direct surveillance” (ibid.: 169). This idea is echoed in the following passages from the school’s promotional leaflet I collected in 2015, which stress the integration of learning/memorising classics with moral enhancement:

Seeking knowledge should go hand-in-hand with learning how to become a decent human.

Students are encouraged to combine classics study with ordinary life practice and regard inner cultivation and academic performance as the same cause.

7. Despite the literal translation of “one teacher for one student,” the conceptualisation of *yi dui yi* does not entail assigning one teacher to each student. Instead, teachers are supposed to differentiate and customise their educational content and methods according to each student’s natural ability. The Confucian school viewed this method as a pedagogical invention in concert with the principle of YCSJ.

However, it is noted that the individualised memorisation paradoxically looks like a neoliberal audit tool (Kipnis 2011a), mainly based on quantitative parameters, for example, numbers of characters. The Confucian school management consciously intensified the quantification in individualised memorisation and made it a tool of control, measurement, and coercion. This stands in sharp contrast with the previous method based on collective repetition (every pupil at the same space), which meant both a kind of levelling and egalitarianism as nobody would stand out from the crowd. The next section demonstrates specific techniques of individualised memorisation applied by Yiqian School to cultivate students to become autonomous learners.

Techniques to educate the Confucian subject as an autonomous learner

The pedagogical reform of Yiqian School has resulted in individualised memorisation, which combines two knowledge sources of Confucian education – the individualised teaching principle of YCSJ and the method of repetitive memorisation. The two knowledge sources represent and reveal parts of Confucian education, but they are not always congruent with each other. They are entangled to forge the technologies of power (in relation to governmentality) and of the self (in relation to subjectification) in classroom practices. This section explores how the pedagogy of individualised memorisation operated in the quotidian practices of teaching and learning at Yiqian. To examine the school's techniques to help their students become autonomous learners, we use the Foucauldian concepts reviewed above and data from my observations and interviews. In the following sections, we describe the three techniques involved in classics memorisation through which the school strives to cultivate autonomous learners: minimum memorisation, a study schedule, and examination. These practices manifest the making of the subject by the government of disciplinary power, which, as Foucault (1979: 170) indicates, "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." Disciplinary power yields effects by targeting the body, exerting control over bodily activities and making it "more obedient as it becomes more useful" (ibid.: 138). The exercise of discipline also demands a coercion mechanism by means of observation, normalisation, and examination (ibid.: 184). Individuals are trained in repetitive practices according to norms to learn how to control and regulate their own behaviours and attitudes through external surveillance (ibid.: 176-7).

Minimum memorisation

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...

It was the third time that Wenbo, an eight-year-old boy, had lost his pace on the same day as he attempted to recite in front of the teacher the required section of the *Analects*, a seminal book of Confucianism. His face turned red, his eyes were closed tightly and his brows knitted in a frown as if to exert all mental strength to retrieve

the text. He put two index fingers over his ears when reciting to shield himself from outside noise so that he could concentrate on remembering the passages written in classical Chinese. Struggling for 20 seconds, he opened his eyes, relaxed his brows, pulled his hands from his ears, and looked at the teacher anxiously.

The third failure frustrated him. It was the third class of the day, but he had recited fewer than 100 characters. He had a minimum character number requirement for memorisation every day, which was 220 characters. Other students also had to complete the memorisation of a minimum number of characters, which varied according to their ability to memorise. The teacher, Ms Xu, was sitting in front of a desk and facing the students, with a portrait of Confucius hanging on the wall just behind her. She did not blame Wenbo, but said gently:

Wenbo, do you know why you fail to recite? Because you have not read the texts enough times. Don't force yourself to memorise. Do not cram. Slow down and be more patient. Just do the best you can. Read it at least 20 times, and you will be able to recite naturally.

Wenbo nodded slightly, and his look of anxiety lessened. He picked up the book, bowed to the teacher, saying, "Thank you, teacher," and returned to his seat to continue reading the given passages aloud over and over again.

This scene was typical of the teaching practices in Qishun class (one of the six classes at Yiqian School). The pressure that Wenbo felt came from the difficulty of meeting the minimum requirement for memorisation. Qishun class divided the daily tasks of classics recitation into two parts. One concerned the minimum characters, which was the compulsory task that constituted the primary content of daily study. The other concerned extra characters, which were added to students' workload once they completed the minimum. The homeroom teacher of Qishun class, Mr Sun, viewed the division of the minimum and extra tasks as signalling how the individualised principle operated in educating practices. On the one hand, the minimum task reflected the baseline established by the careful evaluation of students' memories. The baseline tasks that varied from student to student aimed to, in the words of Mr Sun, achieve a state in which students "eat something" but not enough to maintain their desire to "eat," or memorise, more. On the other hand, the extra memorisation was set to maximise students' inner motivation to recite as many classics as possible.

How did the teachers recognise and confirm the minimum characters for every single student? First, the teachers would request that students report the numbers that they believed most likely reflected their self-assessed memorisation capability. Then, the teachers would review the numbers and make corrections where necessary according to their judgments of the students' past performance in classics study. The minimum number of memorisation characters was not static but subject to change each month. Students were also allowed to modify the original self-proposed minimum number of characters after discussion with the teacher. The variation in the minimum number of characters was meant to epitomise how committed the school was to implementing the individualised teaching principle. In April 2015, the lowest

number of characters was 100, whereas the highest was 1,600. The student with the lowest was the youngest, at six years old. His teacher thought he was too young to study independently, and it was not feasible to assign him extra work beyond his aptitude. The pupil who set 1,600 as the minimum memorisation had recommended 700 but accepted the teacher's suggestion to increase it. The boy acknowledged that it was not difficult to complete the minimum task because the number included both the characters for memorising new classics and those he was reviewing from previous rounds of memorisation.

The technique of minimum memorisation engendered two outcomes in classroom practices. First, most students in Qishun class reported no difficulty in accomplishing the minimum, and quite a few requested extra work, sometimes as many as double the minimum number of characters. Second, the minimum memorisation continued to put pressure on several students, such as Wenbo. The teachers encouraged the slow students to do their best to catch up or reduced the minimum character amount where necessary to make the students comfortable and avoid dampening their passion for classics study.

The minimum memorisation technique differentiated the study requirements for each student, but it also divided students into two categories: those who memorised quickly and those moving at a slower speed. The disparity in students' memories was respected, as evinced by the wide variety of recitation character numbers. However, coercion continued to be a factor for the slow students, and all students were required to follow the pattern of completing the minimum tasks first and then completing the extra. Disciplinary power was exerted through division and coercion. The practice of minimum memorisation also shaped two aspects of the students' attitudes towards learning. First, the compulsory minimum tasks required that students be honest with themselves about their performance and learning ability. Second, the extra tasks stimulated students to do their best in classics study and recite more if they could.

Study schedule and examination

The students of Qishun class generally started their workday by making a personalised study schedule according to their self-assessed capability. They were expected to use the schedule to guide themselves to arrange and complete their memorisation tasks. The study schedule had a standard structure, despite the diversity of the students' required reading. It looked like a diary and included three parts for the morning, the afternoon, and the evening. It included the date, day of the week, and weather at the top of the page. There were usually two significant tasks to be scheduled: the memorisation of classics and annotations. First, the scheduled range of classics was marked from one sentence to another and the number of characters was specified. Memorisation was divided into two consecutive steps, to read and to recite. Students had to read one passage at least 20 times before they could begin reciting. The first step of reading was considered a precondition for the natural achievement of the second step, i.e., reciting. Students were discouraged from moving onto reciting too quickly. This structure is very similar to the memorisation practices of ancient China. According to Bakken (2000: 142-3), Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200), a representative of neo-Confucianism who

lived during the Song dynasty, admired the method of repetition and recitation and recommended that students read a book "from front to back over and over again, to the point of 'intimate familiarity.'" Zhu Xi viewed the repetitive practice of reading and memorising classics as serving "to clear one's mind, and to make the social rules a part of oneself and one's own body" (ibid.: 143). The second task in the daily schedule was to recite the annotations. This activity was not included until 2015; it was meant to address the problems caused by mechanical memorisation. However, the teachers of Qishun class informed me that memorising annotations did not facilitate the students' understanding of the original classics because they merely learned the annotated texts mechanically as well. Ancient Chinese intellectuals developed a methodological system for interpreting Confucian doctrines, whereby learners could generate new ideas by expounding on seminal books loyally and critically (Wu 2011). This achievement was rarely seen in the teaching outcomes at Yiqian School.

The purpose of the study schedule technique was the same as that of the minimum memorisation. Both sought to train students to become autonomous learners, but the study schedule also oversaw and controlled students by transforming the learning process into a calculable, standardised trajectory, countable by the number of characters, pages, and reading and reciting times. It divided the entire project of study into a couple of steps. In each step, students were expected, or required, to manage and regulate their own pace. The plan makers were the students themselves, who had to include all of the tasks in a list, mark every single assignment with explicit character and page numbers, and complete them one by one. This process was always concomitant with an examination by the teachers.

There were two types of examinations at Yiqian School. The first was the everyday examination. The teachers played the role of examiner, checking every item on the self-study plan. When students were ready for the check, they walked up to their teachers to request an examination. Then, they handed over their schedules to their teachers in a respectful manner and started reciting classics from memory. The school specified that students could only be prompted twice at most. When a student passed the examination, the teacher would sign the study plan notebook to indicate that the task was finished. When students failed, they had to continue reading the passage and preparing for the next round of examination. Once all of their tasks were completed, students would be graded at the end of their study plan notebooks with a stamp that read "Excellent," "Work harder," "Recitation done," "Great," "First rate," "Read over," or "100 points." Sometimes the teachers would make comments on the students' performance to encourage them to do better next time.

The school used a second type of examination called "cover a whole book" (*baoben* 包本) to test students' memorisation of an entire book. This practice required students to recite a classic book from the first sentence to the last in one go. When students succeeded in reciting every part of a book, they were asked to review the whole book and combine all of the sections. The school valued this practice as a barometer of educational achievement and recorded the students' recitation performance onto VCDs and delivered them to parents at the end of the semester.

The self-study plan acted as a government technique, enabling the teachers to oversee every single student's performance of classics memorisation and regulate the entire class's progress. The technique of examination, which Foucault (1979: 184) regards as a practice of facilitating the exertion of disciplinary power, incorporated hierarchical observation and judgment into a "normalizing gaze." Foucault indicates that disciplinary power manifests its potency by arranging objects, and "the examination is, as it were, the ceremony of this objectification" (ibid.: 187). The practice of examination objectified the students so that they could be controlled, overseen, and managed. The teachers monitored and judged the students' classics study. They were also examiners and reminders to continue learning, especially when the students slacked off.

Discussion and conclusion

Yiqian School invented many other techniques in addition to minimum memorisation such as the study schedule and examination to execute the pedagogy of individualised memorisation, encourage competition among the students and within themselves, and classify the classroom into hierarchical groups for the students' mutual surveillance. While this Confucian school sought to cultivate autonomous learners through individualised memorisation, its pedagogical process was subject to the governmentality of disciplinary power in practice. The school's subjectification of students demonstrated contradictory manifestations of autonomy and coercion.

The present study has shown that the individualised memorisation bears resemblance to the neoliberal governmentality in terms of controlling, measuring, and regulating students' learning motivations and processes through the simplified method of numbers of characters. However, we argue that the subjectivity fashioned through Confucian education cannot be reduced oversimply to neoliberalism (Jacka 2009; Hoffman 2010); rather, it should be understood as a form of Confucianism, which, nonetheless, exhibits hybridity and contradictions. The two intellectual truths of Confucian education – the individualised principle of teaching and the method of memorisation – were intertwined and sometimes discordant with each other at the school, leading to ambiguities in governmentality and subjectivity. On the one hand, Yiqian School applied the practice of classics study under the umbrella of the individualised principle and sought to respect differences in the students' ability to memorise. The diverse minimum memorisation characters for students and their dual roles as makers and implementers of their own study plans reflected these aims. The purpose of the self-techniques was to improve individuals' motivation for classics study, encourage students to participate in the planning and execution of mundane memorisation, and enable them to control their study rather than passively follow their teachers. On the other hand, the school, as exemplified by Qishun class, attached great importance to oversight, examination, and coercion in leading students to recite as many characters as they could. The teachers always acted as the monitors and examiners of their students' learning process and could control the character number of every single student. They regulated the individual learners by adjusting their minimum character thresholds and ensured that all students continued to make

an effort to memorise classics. The teachers were also responsible for checking each student's scheduled items daily. They required the students to combine the memorised classic segments into a whole and recite the entire book after a scheduled period. Through this constant, precise monitoring and the enforcement of students' self-techniques, Yiqian sought to integrate individual learners into the overall grid of classical education, and every memorised passage in everyday classroom practice into a systematic, ambitious Confucian education strategy.

The pedagogical knowledge of individualised memorisation is a contradictory hybrid. It emphasises the Confucian individualised teaching principle of YCSJ, but learning autonomy continues to be used as a tool merely to urge students to memorise a large number of classics. The result is that the authoritarian, coercive aspects of the previous teaching model remain. Following Yiqian's pedagogical reform, individualised memorisation has been the primary mode through which students memorise classics, autonomously rather than by enforcement, despite teachers' continued disciplinary power. The reformulated pedagogy has increased the efficiency of classics memorisation for some students, who have admitted that they can recite far more than they previously did after making and following their own study schedules. However, the same students have complained that their teachers sometimes intervene in their study plans and may even coerce them to memorise more characters than they want. The teachers have explained that they do so because they believe that some students can memorise more than they report. The headteacher, Ms Zheng, offered the argument that the more classics people recite, the more moral qualities they achieve and the more likely it is that they will become a "great cultural talent." This idea comes from Wang Caigui (2014), who proposes a benchmark of 300,000 characters of classics as the core feature of a great cultural talent and the essential foundation for individuals to assume the responsibility of revitalising Confucian culture. Ms Zheng clarified that Chinese people have become alienated from Confucian classics due to their centurial suppression in modern history. Only by nurturing great cultural talents with profound moral cultivation and a high level of cultural capacity can China remedy its historical and cultural calamities.

Parental yearning for their children to become great cultural talents also confirms the authoritarian side of the pedagogy. To satisfy parents' educational desires, Ms Zheng validated the abundant memorisation of classics as a straightforward goal of schooling. A number of parents interviewed agreed with this idea because they felt it worked "as a simple and effective criterion to measure the achievement of Confucian schooling" (quoted from a mother interviewed in 2015). However, the students reacted differently, as the authoritarian practice caused them to resist. Some students sought loopholes and dawdled, expressing dissatisfaction with the memorisation-based pedagogy. These actions did not overturn the pedagogy, but they did momentarily challenge or avoid it. Their resistance did not lead to direct confrontations with the school's pedagogical authority; instead, the students only opposed the practice in subtle ways to avoid getting into trouble (Halskov Hansen 2015: 61).

The contradictions involved in the teaching practices manifested at Yiqian School reflect the profound cultural and pedagogical

dilemmas of Confucian education in revival. Under the sweeping influence of Wang Caigui, many Confucian schools have insisted that the memorisation of a large number of classics is foundational to fomenting great cultural talents. They see students as potential “seeds” for the great cause of Confucian revival, and their bodies, minds, attitudes, and behaviours have become sites of governmentality and subjectification. The general imagination of the Confucian revival is the subjugation of individuals, whose study performances are simplified into and represented by summaries of how many characters of classics they have memorised. However, present-day China has undergone a process of individualisation and a consequent rise of individuals (Yan 2010), producing and intensifying Chinese people’s craving for individual-oriented values, which are now evident in moral education (Li 2011). Concomitantly, Chinese children are experiencing growing empowerment and individualisation within their society (Naftali 2016). These cultural shifts conflict with the authoritarian aspect of Confucian pedagogy that values cultivating great cultural talent amongst children by having them memorise classics extensively.

Furthermore, we may understand the Confucian attempt to promote students’ moral cultivation by associating mechanical memorisation with the individualised learning principle in the overall perspective of the socialist regime’s moral education in general. There is a remarkable surge in the field of moral education in China today that tries to bind people to prescribed values by using “individualised” methods and approaches. For example, the so-called “over-learning” (*guodu xuexi* 過度學習), which is not

confined to the study of Confucianism but is always heavily based on memorisation, has been a frequently used technique of the self during the Maoist era prior to the Cultural Revolution. Thus, the contradiction in creating autonomous learners through Confucian education cannot be seen in isolation but should be understood as one example of how the socialist state struggles with the right mixture of control and relative autonomy in the categories of governmentality and subjectification.

To conclude, the targeted subject of the autonomous learner in Confucian education is reformulated by disciplinary power. The pedagogy of individualised memorisation is performed via the hybrid, paradoxical practices of individualisation and totalisation. The conflicting practices of classics memorisation exposed in this research indicate that the revival of Confucian education has encountered a pedagogical dilemma between teaching autonomy/individuality and educators’ need to use coercion/authority in shaping autonomous learners. Being part of a larger project, the present study has one limitation in that it does not give full attention to how the paradoxes and contradictions manifest in practice and daily life at the Confucian school from the point of view of the actors, for example, the regular teachers, students, and parents. Follow-up studies are necessary to focus on these various groups of actors in order to further the understanding of governmentality and subjectivity through Confucian education in contemporary China.

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