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Canglong Wang

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Right, righteousness, and act: why should Confucian activists be regarded as citizens in the revival of Confucian education in contemporary China?

Canglong Wang^{a,b}

^aFaculty of Arts Cultures and Education, University of Hull, Hull HU6 7RX, UK; ^bState Key Laboratory of Subtropical Building Science, South China University of Technology, Guangzhou 510641, China

ABSTRACT

This article explores three core elements of citizenship – right, responsibility, and act – and their implications for the rise of Confucian activists in the revival of Confucian education in present-day China. Adopting an empirical research approach, the author draws from two sets of resources: public speeches by a leader in contemporary Confucian classical education, and interviews with teachers and parents at a Confucian school. A critical discourse analysis of the data is conducted to examine the emerging themes. First, the study identifies the widespread circulation of the discourse of right (*quanli*) to education within the field of Confucian education. Second, focusing on the emerging discourse of righteousness (*yi*), it reveals how this particular Confucian ideology, articulated through local terminologies, generates a sense of civic responsibility and obligation. Third, it investigates the Confucian idea of “extending innate knowledge” (*zhi liangzhi*) and its contribution to the conversion of internal, individual ethical reflection to creative, civic acts. Based on the findings, this study challenges the popular characterisation of Confucianism as a contradiction to citizenship. The revival of Confucian education offers an opportunity to explore a more nuanced understanding of the effects of Confucianism on the formation of the “Confucian citizen”.

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Introduction

Ever since scholars initially translated the term ‘citizen’ into Chinese at the end of the 19th century, they have presented multiple translations, such as *gongmin* (public people), *guomin* (national people), and *shimin* (city people) (Goldman and Perry 2002). In his review of the emergence of the concept of citizen in modern China, Guo (2014) clarified two perspectives with which to translate ‘citizen’: statism introduces the citizen as an instrument with which to build a powerful nation-state by disrupting Chinese people’s servility and encouraging their civic consciousness, whereas individualism aims to establish a more liberal nation-state by cultivating Chinese people’s individualistic and utilitarian mentalities. These two views have evolved unevenly in China’s modern era. While the state has largely repressed individualism and distanced it from Chinese

CONTACT Canglong Wang  Canglong.Wang@hull.ac.uk

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citizenship, it has overwhelmingly emphasised statism since the founding of the Chinese socialist regime. While post-Mao China has experienced an emerging process of individualisation and a consequent rise in individual consciousness of citizenship rights since the implementation of reform in the late 1970s, the dynamics of individualisation still serve as a developmental strategy of the party-state to pursue modernisation (Yan 2010). Differing from the Western rights-based citizenship, Chinese citizenship seems to prioritise the dimension of civic responsibility/obligation over individual rights (Guo 2014).

Scholars have formulated two extremes in Chinese citizenship studies (S. Chen 2020): one model oversimplifies citizenship as membership in a political community but overlooks its modern normative implications; the other essentialises citizenship as a Western concept, but ignores the situational effects of non-Western conditions. How can we disrupt the normalisation of the two extremes? First, to address the oversimplification of Chinese citizenship, we should examine commonly accepted cores of citizenship, such as rights and responsibilities, and their implications for the Chinese context. Second, to challenge the essentialisation of Chinese citizenship, we should pay attention to local Chinese traditions and values, such as the principles of Confucianism, and combine them with the fundamental values of citizenship.

Adopting the above points as a framework, I aim to unpack the implications of the incorporation of core tenets of citizenship in the revival of Confucian education in China. I highlight how Confucian activists embody these cores of citizenship in their promotion of Confucian classical education and demonstrate how Confucian activism can align with nuanced understandings of citizenship in contemporary China. The research question guiding this study is as follows: How do Confucian activists make sense of core conceptions of citizenship and thus present themselves as citizens in their engagement in Confucian education? To address this question, the study draws from two sets of resources: public speeches by a leader in contemporary Confucian education, and interviews with teachers and parents at a Confucian school. Through a critical discourse analysis of these data, I identify the emerging discourses of educational right and righteousness and articulate the transformation of Confucian values from ethical reflection to civic acts.

In the following sections, I first establish a theoretical foundation by elaborating on two bodies of literature: (1) philosophical discussions of the compatibility or incompatibility of Confucianism and citizenship in Western and Chinese scholarship; and (2) empirical studies on grassroots Confucian education since the early 2000s. I then introduce the setting for the study and some methodological issues. Before moving on to the conclusion, I present three major results – claim for educational right, discourse of righteousness and responsibility, and Confucianism-inspired ethical reflection and civic acts.

The question of the compatibility of Confucianism and citizenship

The relationship between citizenship and Confucianism is a perplexing topic in existing scholarship. One popularly accepted proposition is that citizenship and Confucianism are incompatible with each other (Yu 2020; Wang 2015), but this is not always the case. Two questionable assumptions define this perspective. First, scholars assumed that liberal citizenship, which emphasises civil, political and social rights (Marshall 1962), is the predominant paradigm, and they neglected other meaningful models of

citizenship, such as civic republicanism, communitarianism, and multi-culturalism (Kymlicka 1995; Kukathas 1996). Second, scholars elevated the authoritarian aspects of Confucianism that prioritise hierarchy, obedience, and obligations but depreciated other Confucian values that may contribute to the development of human rights, individual freedom, and social equality (Angle 2002; Kim 2015). Both Confucianism and citizenship can be perceived as concepts of essential contestability (Gallie 1955), being variously describable, internally complex, and open to modification, accommodating different, or even controversial, ideas and narratives. Thus, it is reasonable to imagine multiple types of relationships beyond the predominant assumption of incompatibility.

Scholars have explored new types of relationships between Confucianism and citizenship beyond incompatibility (e.g. Nuyen 2002; Wang 2015, 2021; Yu 2020). As Nuyen (2002) argued, Confucianism has much to contribute to the criticism of the liberal conception of citizenship for its uncompromising emphasis on individuality and individual rights, and this criticism aids the construction of a thicker or deeper understanding of citizenship. According to Wang (2015), citizenship can be classified as ‘thin’ and ‘thick’, while Confucianism can be described as either liberal or illiberal, depending on practice and circumstances. Wang (2015) combined these classifications to identify three primary relationships between Confucianism and citizenship: incompatibility, compatibility, and reconstruction. In the same vein, Yu (2020) pointed out the need to better understand the potential compatibility of Confucianism with democracy and to seek the necessary conditions for their peaceful coexistence, as they are not always directly at odds. Moreover, Wang (2021) compared traditional understandings of ‘citizen’ with ‘gentle person’ (*junzi*), the ideal personality in Confucianism, and argued that both are compatible in certain ethical virtues but do not hold the same socio-political and civil status. Contemporary China would need to construct a ‘gentle citizen’, a new subject who prioritises the common cores of citizenship (e.g. civic rights and responsibilities and public participation) and supplements them with Confucian morals (e.g. benevolence, righteousness, propriety) (Ibid.).

Diverging from philosophical arguments, I adopt an empirical approach to investigate the entanglement of Confucianism and citizenship by focusing on one specific domain of the general revival of Confucianism in contemporary China: Confucian education. I discuss three core elements of citizenship – rights, responsibilities, and acts – and their implications for the rise of Confucian activists in the revival of Confucian education. Scholars commonly consider ‘rights and responsibilities’, two of the three elements of citizenship, as the primary tenets (Isin and Turner 2002, 2). Rights, as a fundamental aspect of liberal citizenship (Marshall 1962), have expanded in scope from civil, political and social rights to minority rights (Joppke 2007) and cultural rights (Boele van Hensbroek 2010). Responsibility, as another key aspect of citizenship, has played a crucial role in understanding public participation (Stevenson 2010). In addition, scholars recently have introduced the concept of ‘acts of citizenship’ as an alternative way to discuss citizenship, a way that ‘is irreducible to either status or practice’, ‘requires a focus on those acts when, regardless of status and substance, subjects constitute themselves as citizens or, better still, as those to whom the right to have rights is due’ (Isin and Nielsen 2008, 2).

While the concept of citizenship may encompass far more than these three values, I focus on rights, responsibilities, and acts because of their relevance in the ongoing revival of Confucian education in contemporary China. I do not mean to imply that these three elements represent the entirety of the values or tenets of citizenship; neither do I mean to suggest that they represent all of Confucian culture. As a complex body of thought, Confucianism encompasses many more elements and principles than those indicated here. Nonetheless, I emphasise these three elements as of special significance to Confucianism. Recently, there has been a burgeoning literature on the study of Confucian philosophy, in which Confucian scholars explore liberal elements of Confucianism, such as civic rights (Q. Chen 2021) and individual rights (Sun 2017), the corresponding responsibilities (J. Chen 2016), and appropriate acts to achieve social equality (Angle 2012). These discussions signal the significance of these three elements to the new developments in Confucian thought in contemporary China.

Empirical studies on Confucian education in the 21st century

The current revival of Confucian education, as part of the overall return of Confucianism in China, dates back to the late 1980s, when the socialist Chinese government began supporting the teaching of traditional Chinese culture at public schools (Yu 2008). It was not until the early 2000s that grassroots Confucian education initiatives experienced rapid growth and popularity across the country. Scholars (Billioud and Thoraval 2015) described this trend as part of the broad reappearance of ‘popular Confucianism’ (*minjian rujia*, literally ‘Confucianism in the space of the people’), referring to Confucian-related activities instigated by ordinary people and ‘carried on outside the party-state apparatus’ (p. 8). Some (Wang 2018) have observed a diversification of Confucian teaching and learning practices in *sishu* (old-style private schools) established by individual Confucian activists, where parents send their children for either full-time or part-time study of Confucianism. Among the various forms of Confucian education, the most influential type, and perhaps the most controversial, is *dujing* (classics reading) education, where children are required to read and memorise Confucian classics. Wang Caigui,¹ a Confucian educator and philosopher from Taiwan, is the leading promoter of *dujing* and has helped popularise this form of Confucian education since the early 2000s in mainland China. He even proposed a comprehensive pedagogical system for *dujing* education that has influenced a large number of Confucian activists, including *sishu* founders and parents, and has substantially shaped the landscape of teaching and learning classics in present-day China.

A relatively small but growing number of empirical studies on grassroots Confucian education has appeared over the past two decades. Billioud and Thoraval have contributed pioneering and impactful research on the rediscovery of Confucianism in mainland China in the field of education. They have examined how the Confucian education revival has taken form and become institutionalised (Billioud and Thoraval 2007; Billioud 2010, 2016); how this phenomenon exhibits a paradoxical feature of anti-intellectualism (Billioud and Thoraval 2007, 2015); the religious motivation for individual engagement in the learning of Confucian classics (Billioud and Thoraval 2008); and why certain Confucian educational institutions should be regarded as ‘*jiachua* (literally “to transform the self and others through teaching”) organizations’ (Billioud 2011) or

‘redemptive societies’ (Billioud 2016). Other researchers have explored how Buddhism is playing an important role in the nationwide success of the classics reading and national studies movements through its well-developed networks and organisations (Dutournier and Ji 2009; Ji 2018); the tensions and vagaries of Confucian education as a ‘holistic’ educational experience (Dutournier and Wang 2018); the practice of education through music, from an initiation into classical music for children to Confucian self-cultivation for university students (Ji 2008); and the ongoing debates about classics reading and the widening disparities in practising Confucian education (Wang 2018).

Besides these descriptive studies, some scholars have attempted to provide theoretical explanations for the empirical findings on the revival of Confucian education. For example, Wang (Forthcoming) used the theory of Chinese individualisation to understand parents’ engagement in their children’s study of Confucian classics. Billioud (Forthcoming) referred to Hartmut Rosa’s concept of resonance to explain why many people are reading Confucian classics and voluntarily reappropriating them today. Gilgan (Forthcoming) drew on the grounded utopian movement theory to assess the underlying utopianism of the capacity for change in the classics reading movement and the civil sphere theory to explain specific socio-political conditions for bringing change into society.

In summary, empirical studies on a variety of relevant aspects and dimensions of Confucian education have burgeoned over the past few years. But these studies have not dealt with Confucian education from the perspective of citizenship studies; neither do they investigate the possible relations between Confucianism and citizenship from the empirical view of Confucian education activists. The present study contributes to filling this gap. In the following sections, I first describe the research setting, data sources, and research methods, and then examine the presence of the three cores of citizenship – rights, responsibilities, and acts – in the narratives of Confucian activists.

Methodology

Focusing on *dujing* education, I explore the relationship between Confucianism and citizenship by examining two sets of resources: public speeches by Wang Caigui and interviews with teachers and parents at the Yiqian School (a pseudonym), an institution strongly influenced by Wang’s pedagogy. Placing Yiqian School in the grander field of Confucian education revival as clarified above, I choose it for this study first because it is one of China’s earliest established Confucian private schools in contemporary and has undergone changes and shifts throughout; second because of its officially recognised compulsory school status but featuring Confucian education (details below). In the data analysis sections, I merge the two types of materials. One advantage of combining the data in this way is to present more straightforwardly the consistencies and inconsistencies between purported educational ideals and everyday schooling practices.

First, I examine one of Wang’s collections of speeches, entitled *Dujing ershi nian* (*Two Decades of Reading Classics*). Published in 2014, this book includes six speeches about *dujing* education, which Wang carefully selected and believed to be most representative of his main ideas on Confucian education. The book also has an Introduction and Conversation section, where Wang summarised the achievements and inadequacies of *dujing* education over the past two decades and directly responded to challenging

questions. Finally, I collected and analysed two of Wang's speeches from 2015, in which he rarely referred to key elements of citizenship when advising Confucian education activists on how to address the strict regulations of local government.

Second, Yiqian School is in a small, mountainous town in a developed province on the southeast coast of China. The history of Yiqian School can be traced back to 2002, when the school's founder, Mr Chen, gathered a few preschool children to read *The Analects of Confucius* (a Confucian classic) at home. In 2010, Yiqian School was endowed with the official status of a private school (*minban xuexiao*, 'school run by the people') by the local government. Despite its approval as a nine-year compulsory school, Yiqian School does not routinely offer the comprehensive state-stipulated curriculum; instead, it requires students to read and memorise Confucian classics such as *The Analects* and *Mencius*, in addition to some Taoist classics, such as *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi*, throughout the school day. This paradoxical situation results in Yiqian School struggling between teaching Confucian classics and delivering the national curriculum.

I visited the Yiqian School for two months in 2012, one month in 2013, and six months in 2015, during which periods I collected data through interviews and participant observation. The student population at Yiqian School varied greatly across these three visits. The school catered for approximately 300 students in 2012 and 2013 but had only about 120 students divided into six classes in 2015. Most students were at the age of compulsory primary and middle school education (6–15 years old). In theory, students could study at the school from Year 1 to Year 9; in practice, very few students did so because of the national curriculum incompatibility mentioned above. Consequently, many students ultimately transfer to state schools or other Confucian schools. In 2015, Yiqian School had 20 staff members for teaching and administration. Most of the teaching staff had some knowledge of traditional Chinese culture, and a few had previously worked in other Confucian schools.

I incorporate interviews with the school's founder, headteacher, and 17 parents of students (6 fathers and 11 mothers) in the analysis for this article. I recruited the parental participants by snowball sampling. Most of the parents lived in urban areas, and they had educational backgrounds ranging from high school to Master's degree level. They held a variety of occupations: for example, white-collar employees at private companies, low- and mid-ranking civil servants, self-employed entrepreneurs, full-time mothers, and engineers. The parents were affluent enough to pay the high tuition fee of RMB30,000 (equivalent to £3,000) per year charged by the Confucian school in 2015. The background information indicates that the parental informants were at an advanced socio-economic status. But the small size of sampling means that it is not possible to extend the findings of this study to the entirety of Confucian education activists; neither do the interlocutors' notions of citizenship elements represent the masses.

All interviews were conducted in Mandarin. The school founder and headteacher were interviewed on multiple occasions from 2012, and phone interviews with parents were held mainly from May to August 2015. Each interview with a parent lasted one to two hours and was audio-recorded with the consent of the informants. I personally transcribed the interview recordings. All participants are anonymised in this article.

Participants may have varying levels of engagement in Confucian education, but they all demonstrate some degree of activism in that they challenge, question, or disrupt the dominant state education track and open new space for Confucian education.² In this

sense, I regard the participants as Confucian activists who actively facilitate Confucianism-related activities, such as those of Confucian education (see Billioud and Thoraval 2015, 45). Wang Caigui and those who support him do not represent the whole population of Confucian activists, particularly on account of the diversity of Confucian education in today's China, including some controversial approaches (Wang 2018), and the particular socio-economic status of the participants. However, the revelation of the rights, responsibilities, and acts of citizenship in Wang and his followers is indicative of the new varieties of Confucian/Chinese citizen (re)fashioning in flux.

I conducted a critical discourse analysis of Wang's speeches and the interviews with participants to unpack how their narratives are associated with the cores of citizenship. I did three phases of coding with the assistance of NVivo 12: 'developing categories of information (open coding), interconnecting the categories (axial coding), [and] building a "story" that connects the categories (selective coding)' (Creswell 2007, 160). Next, I move to the finding sections, where I identify the emerging discourses of educational right and righteousness and articulate the transformation of Confucian values from ethical reflection to civic acts.

'My right to do Confucian education': discourse of right (*quanli*) to education

When examining the entanglement of citizenship with Confucian education, I consider the emerging discourse on the 'right (*quanli*) to education', which circulates widely among Confucian activists. Based on my follow-up observations of Confucian education since 2012, I note that the discourse on a citizen's right to education continues to spread within Confucian education. The same discourse on the right to education can also be found in the recent appearance of home schooling. Parents with students who have unique educational needs may adopt this alternative education of home schooling as a means of expressing their discontent with the hegemonic examination-oriented state system while safeguarding the legitimacy of their child's education (Wang, Wang, and Wu 2017). We may understand the increasing awareness of citizenship rights as an outcome of the process of individualisation in China since the late 1970s, which has empowered Chinese individuals to 'link the self with a set of rights or entitlements' and to take 'various forms of rights assertion behaviour' (Yan 2010, 500). Individualisation is also part of the shifting moral landscape of China, 'from responsibilities to rights, from self-sacrifice to self-realisation, and ultimately from collectivity to individuality' (Yan 2011, 46). In this section, I analyse Wang Caigui's writing and speeches and the narratives of educators and parents at the Yiqian School to showcase the existence of a strong claim to the 'right to education'.

In Wang Caigui's myriad of articles and speeches, the term 'citizen' (*gongmin*) rarely appears. One explanation for the absence is that Wang, as a Confucian scholar, primarily relies on Confucian jargon to justify his teaching theory. This lack of reference could also signify a lack of direct connection between ancient Confucianism and the Western idea of citizenship (Wang 2015, 2021; Chen 2020). Nonetheless, Wang does reference right or entitlement in his appeals to parents to exercise their right to their children's education. In a gathering of Confucian education activists in 2015, Wang explicitly argued that receiving education is a fundamental right of a child and that endowing education to children is a natural entitlement of parents.³ Wang traced the history of *sishu* in ancient

China and asserted that the secret to the duration and sustainability of the practice lay in the human desire to actualise the right of education. Education as a right, however, has been transformed into an obligation as a result of the established state-sponsored compulsory education system in modern China. Wang affirmed the values of the compulsory education system, indicating that it is a benevolent policy of the state and has generally benefited people. However, he noted that if compulsory education becomes ‘unjust’, meaning that it may infringe upon the nature of education as a right rather than an obligation, parents should reflect on whether it diverges from the Way (*Dao*). He suggested that a true educational system should always be in accordance with the *Dao* and claimed that the mushrooming of private Confucian schools affirms its validity and effectiveness. He urged the state to allow people with educational ideals to launch their own schooling initiatives instead of asserting full control over the educational space and resources. Finally, he called for the state to return the right to education to citizens.

Over a series of interviews, Mr. Chen, a loyal follower of Wang and the founder of the Yiqian School, echoed Wang’s call to break the state monopoly over education. Arguing that state power did not extend to primary education in ancient China and that ordinary people enjoyed sufficient liberty to pursue their preferred form of education by way of *sishu*, he proposed that China’s contemporary educational reform follow the same approach by allowing parents to select the way of education for their children, essentially curbing the power of the state. He said:

The government should no longer control everything but instead allow social forces to engage in public welfare undertakings. It can purchase services from society. . . . China’s educational reform entails open competition between maintained schools and private educative institutions. This is an appropriate time to run Confucian schools, as what we are doing now.⁴

He expressed his satisfaction with the market-oriented reform of Chinese education, arguing that it created more opportunities for students and parents to actualise the right of selecting preferred methods of schooling. He even asserted that the state education system could not represent the ‘truth of education’, as it is incapable of developing ‘common humanity’ (*gongtongde renxing*) and fails to cultivate students’ morality. In this sense, he suggested that the state should allow citizens to experiment with their own ideal forms of education. Mrs. Zheng, the headteacher of Yiqian School, held the same stance as Mr. Chen. She stated that the authorities should relax state control of the education system and endow people with the freedom to run their own educational institutions outside the state apparatus. ‘As long as people are not constrained by the state system’, she said, ‘they will do their own things very well, just as they have done in the economic reforms. It is the same in the educational reforms’.⁵

Many parents of the Yiqian School, despite not using the term ‘right’ (*quanli*) directly, argued that parents should be allowed to choose alternative options beyond the standardised state system when their children require a more personalised education, and that they are doing the ‘right’ (*zhengquede*) thing to transfer their children from state schools to Confucian schools (see also Wang 2020). This notion of education is consistent with the widespread discourse of *suzhi* (quality), which is argued to justify all sorts of social and political hierarchies (Kipnis 2006). Given that many of the parent informants were from socio-economically advantaged families, their claim to the right for their children to

engage in the alternative Confucian education can be understood to reflect the overall anxiety of China's emerging middle class (Rocca 2017) about how to maintain their social status by seeking a more quality-oriented, individualised education for their children (see also Kipnis 2011). Additionally, the discourse of right could be hardly heard from pupils. This was understandable as students were often arranged by their parents to engage in the study of Confucianism. But many students shared with me their unpleasant experiences with the state education, expressing their dissatisfaction and even resentment towards it. Some older students also used terms such as 'common humanity' and 'truth of education', as mentioned above by teachers and parents, to argue for the advantages of *dujing* education. Another point I would like to make is that the regular civic education curriculum offered in state schools was missing in Yiqian School. This may be one reason why the discourse of right disappeared in the day-to-day schooling that was filled with Confucian classics, virtues, and terminologies.

In summary, the revealed 'right' to Confucian education discussed in this section overlaps the broad sense of citizenship right in that both refer to certain official, fixed entitlements secured by legal provisions. However, Confucian activists (teachers and parents) take the further step of claiming not only the right to an education in a general sense but also the right to have the right to access Confucian education as an alternative to the state system. Thus, I argue that the discourse of right by Confucian activists opens new spaces for education practice and action and demonstrates the dynamic landscape of citizenship in China.

'Right to do Confucian education': discourse of righteousness (*yi*) and civic responsibility

In this section, I explore the implications of the discourse of righteousness (*yi*) for the development of civic responsibility among Confucian activists. Confucian activists claim that they have both a 'right' to education and a right to the 'righteous' type of education, i.e. *dujing* education. As Isin and Nielsen (2008, 1) noted, 'If people invest themselves in claiming rights, they are producing not only new ways of being subjects with rights but also new ways of becoming subjects with responsibilities, since claiming rights certainly involves "responsibilizing" selves'. Examining the narratives of Confucian education, I find that the discourse of righteousness contributes to generating Confucian activists' strong sense of responsibility and obligation for engaging in Confucian education. Righteousness, one of the five constant virtues of Confucianism, refers to an attribute of both an action and an actor (Yu 2006). Righteousness is 'a characteristic of acts', and the righteousness of acts 'depends upon their being morally fitting in the circumstances' (Lau 1984, 23). It mediates 'the universal principle of humanity and the particular situations in which the principle is concretely manifested' (Tu 1989, 52). Righteousness is also an actor's intellectual ability to judge, choose, and do what is righteous. According to Cheng (1972), 'a man of *yi* must be a man of creative insights who is able to make appropriate ethical judgements in particular situation'. We find both interpretations of righteousness in the narratives of Confucian education activists.

Wang Caigui used the discourse of righteousness to encourage civic responsibility for Confucian education. In a number of open speeches over the past two decades for a variety of educational and social institutions, he emphasised that his own continual

perseverance to promote *dujing* education comes from the call of the *Dao*, which provides him with a firm will to shoulder the responsibility to pursue the righteousness of education. He encouraged Confucian education activists to cultivate independent, rational thinking, obey what is righteous, and do what aligns with the *Dao*. In a passage taken from one public speech in 2015, he emphasised the righteousness of sticking with the *daoli* or ‘truth’ (*dao* translated as ‘the Way’ and *li* translated as ‘principle/reason’):

I often state that what someone says is not necessarily right. What the expert says is not necessarily right; what is modern is not necessarily right; what is American is not necessarily right; what is Chinese is not necessarily right; what is traditional is not necessarily right; and what I say is not necessarily right. So, what is right? Only what is right is right! Therefore, one cannot use any excuse to support his opinion. Opinion is not the *daoli*. We only obey the *daoli*.⁶

Wang further argued that only a few people with the profound wisdom of what is right are capable of acting, speaking, and judging in line with the *daoli*, whereas the majority of ordinary people’s agency and rationality may be impaired by their stubborn human habits (*xixing*). ‘Only a few who have clear minds are able to step out of their habits and follow the truth’, Wang claimed, ‘but many others are merely subject to their strong habits, and their minds are obscured’. He went on to suggest that ‘the real self should be a rational self, whereas the habitual self is a false self! But an ordinary person tends to believe in falsehood as truth’. Building from the binary of the rational/true self and the habitual/false self, Wang called on Confucian activists to practice honest self-reflection to manipulate their intellectual faculty to ‘do the right thing’ in accordance with the truth. What, then, is the ‘right thing’? He claimed that as long as people are lucid and autonomous, they will inevitably identify the momentousness of *dujing* education and devote themselves to promoting it, regardless of difficulties or oppositions. As Wang (2014, 4) asserted, *dujing* education is always consistent with the common truth of human nature and ‘is bound to be accepted by all humans and will be expanding widely’.

I summarise two aspects of Wang’s articulation of human nature in his framing of the *dujing* education theory. First, he argued that classics are the crystallisation of eternal human wisdom, beyond the limits of time and space, in accordance with universal humanity, and thus can help establish a positive outlook on life, cultivate a virtuous character, and stimulate a passion for knowledge. *Dujing* education upholds these ideals by incorporating classics and related practice into daily life. Second, Wang suggested that mechanical memorisation is the ‘golden method’ for children to study Confucian classics because it best aligns with natural human development. According to Wang, children under the age of 13 are endowed with a strong faculty for memorisation but a relatively weak capability for comprehension. Therefore, Wang believed that requiring children to read and recite classics is the best way to exploit their natural strengths, awaken their humanity to the greatest extent, and nurture their disposition efficiently and effectively. Building from this logic, he encouraged people to actively participate in this righteous education by reading classics themselves, sending their children to learn classics, or establishing a private *shisu*.

Using the same discourse of righteousness in reference to humanity and truth as Wang Caigui, Mr. Chen explicitly argued that Confucian education is the perfect example of teaching and the inevitable path for returning to human nature.

According to Mr. Chen, Confucian education guides learners to pursue the knowledge of life, the rooted morality, and the ‘transcendental’ truth of mind, which he judged as more righteous than the state education system. Confucian education explicitly tends to students’ hearts and spirituality, inspires them to diligently study the profound wisdom, instructs them on how to maintain interpersonal relationships, and disciplines them in a rational way of living, doing, and thinking. Similarly, Mrs. Zheng explained that the revival of Confucian education is tantamount to the return of humanity because it embodies what education should originally be, implying that Confucian education best conforms with human nature. In contrast, she criticised the state education for distorting human nature and distancing itself from the truth of education. She felt that she had the responsibility as an educator and a human to correct the state education system, or at least to creatively implement a humane alternative for people who hold the same ideals. She even asserted that the state education should integrate with the Confucian education rather than shape Confucian education in line with the state system. She clarified that her confidence came from the fact that the socialist regime is increasingly open to supporting the revival of Confucian culture (Yu 2008; Wang 2018) and that more and more people identify with the values of Chinese classics and take part in reading classics in various forms (Billioud and Thoraval 2015).

Despite the inevitability of ‘returning to a common humanity’, as Confucian activists have claimed, individuals must take action to realise this goal. Mr. Chen used the term *kailu* (‘carving out a trail’), implying that Confucian education grows in response to the direct engagement and commitment of individual actors or participants. He called for parents to assert their responsibility for *kailu* by involving their children in classical education as much as possible. His personal story is tied closely to his understanding of *kailu*. As a member of the earliest groups involved in Confucian education since the early 2000s, Mr. Chen began teaching his four-year-old son, who did not attend a public school until late adolescence, to read Confucian classics at home by using the method recommended by Wang Caigui. Initially, Mr. Chen ran a nursery to gather young children of similar ages to read classics alongside his son. Later, as the number of children increased, he established the current Yiqian School, which reached a total of nearly 300 students. Discussing his decision to establish Confucian education specifically, he said:

If you truly understand that classical education is in line with the *Dao*, [it is] impossible not to teach your own children to read classics. If you do classical education but do not instruct your children to learn classics, this is absolutely not right.⁷

The parents of the Yiqian School students reiterated similar opinions during their interviews, echoing the discourse of righteousness. The parents disclosed that they were not afraid of people challenging their decision to send their children to read classics because they firmly believed that *dujing* was the ‘right’ way to approach education. One father of a student from the Yiqian School, Mr. Lan, who himself is devoted to the promotion of Confucian education, stated

If you are on the right path to education, the farther you go, the brighter the future seems to be, and the fewer difficulties you have. . . . There must be difficulties in everything. . . . But we only ask whether the thing is right or not. If it is right, we just do what we ought to do. . . . Keep promoting what you believe is right. Make other people know what they do not know. Examine yourself and put your heart in the right place.⁸

His words resemble those of Mrs. Zheng, who referred to one verse from the *Confucius' Analects* to articulate her determination to engage in Confucian education:

There is a saying on the *Analects*, “With regard to the world, the gentleman has no predispositions for or against any person. He merely associates with those he considers right.”⁹ What does it mean? When a gentleman wants to act and do something in the world, what should he do? I want to promote classical education, but what exactly should I do? This verse implies that there is nothing that I ought to do or ought not to do. Why? It is because I must act appropriately according to the proper time and the actual conditions. On the other hand, “He merely associates with those he considers right.” That is to say, a gentleman always stands with righteousness. If I stick with the right education, I will never waver with external circumstances. I only keep asking myself: is what I am doing right?¹⁰

However, it is worth pointing out that the teachers and parents had a variety of ideas about how to actualise the responsibility of carrying out Confucian education. For example, Mr Chen and Mrs Zheng initially agreed with Wang Caigui on the method of mechanical, extensive memorisation for Confucian study and dutifully experimented with it in the early years. Later, they realised that students seemed to dislike rote learning and often forgot the memorised classic texts after a period of time. Students’ negative reactions to Confucian education prompted them to reform the pedagogy in 2013 by mixing memorisation with the principle of individualised teaching. In so doing, they encouraged students to learn classics autonomously and flexibly. A few of the interviewed parents also expressed their concerns about the mechanical memorisation approach. For instance, Mrs Hua worried that students would be marginalised in education and society if they spent all day memorising classics in an isolated school environment and were thus disengaged from public life. In addition, students’ aversion to rote memorization was evident according to the interviews with them and observations of their daily learning process. Nonetheless, they also demonstrated an awareness of cultural responsibility. That is, they seemed to have internalised a disciplinary discourse that constantly required them to become ‘great cultural talents’ (*wenhua dacai*) through extensive memorization of the classics. Thus, in the view of many students, the arduous process of putting in tremendous effort and time to recite the classics was exactly a manifestation of undertaking one’s own responsibility for the revival of Confucian culture and education.

In this section, I demonstrated the circulation of the discourse of righteousness among Confucian activists and its contribution to generating their sense of civic responsibility and obligation for promoting the revival of Confucian education. Although the ‘righteousness’ of Confucianism is not synonymous with the ‘responsibility’ of citizenship, by claiming the ‘right’ to pursue a ‘righteous’ education, individual activists are stimulated by a sense of civic responsibility and obligation and take various forms of action to engage in Confucian education initiatives, with the belief that *dujing* education best conforms with the ideal of common humanity and reflects the truth of teaching.

'Extending innate knowledge': from ethical reflection to civic action

Having investigated the emerging discourses of right and righteousness and how they contribute to Confucian activists' rising awareness of civic entitlement to and responsibility for education, I explore the third aspect of citizenship: ethical reflection on creative acts of citizenship. Previously, I suggested that the discourse of righteousness, laden with such terms as 'humanity', 'the *Dao*', and 'rationality', all of which are underexplored in the existing scholarship of citizenship studies, ignites Confucian activists' moral call to action to disrupt the conventional, 'normal' path of state education and turn instead to alternative forms of education. Delving into the underpinnings of ethical reflection, I unpack how these ethical acts may provide valuable context for understanding civic acts (Isin 2008).

In examining how individually held ethics are converted into public civic action in the context of Confucian education, I focus on the Neo-Confucian concept of 'extending innate knowledge' (*zhi liangzhi*) that Wang Caigui frequently reappropriated to inspire Confucian activists. Wang urged people to return to their innate knowledge and extend it honestly to the external act of teaching and promoting Confucian education. The Confucian philosophical term *liangzhi*¹¹ has a variety of English translations, such as 'innate knowledge', 'intuitive knowledge', or 'pure knowing'. *Liangzhi* is described as something truly real and something necessary to be conscious of and to be affirmed immediately (Billioud 2012, 7). It describes an ability to know, to differentiate good from evil, and to investigate the meaning of things and deeds. Once an individual's innate moral knowledge is unlocked and extended, things are rectified (*zheng*) (Ibid., 149). In the context of Confucian education, this implies that through the extension of innate knowledge, education can return to an alignment with common humanity, and people can teach and learn according to human nature. A moral subject should always be vigilant of their *liangzhi* and devote themselves to the unity of knowledge and action (*zhi xing he yi*) through constant self-cultivation of introspection. Examining the philosophical sophistication of *liangzhi* goes beyond the scope of this study, but the philosophical revelation of *liangzhi* implies a personal ethical drive to realise one's actions and autonomously form an inward decision (Ibid., 172). In the following passage, Wang Caigui emphasised the immediate action upon the awakening of one's innate knowledge:

When you feel something inside your heart and know something within your mind, this is called *liangzhi*. Once *liangzhi* is present, it cannot help but ask to be realised in actual life. *Liangzhi* is always there and will always be there, so the action cannot be interrupted for a minute.¹²

Wang urged all Confucian activists to promptly and directly 'act from innate knowledge' (*cong liangzhi erxing*) following the manifestation of one's innate knowledge. A person who always 'acts from innate knowledge' in public affairs would become both a virtuous, wise human and a responsible, conscientious citizen. For this reason, Confucian activists argue that reading Confucian classics is a 'natural' choice consistent with the *Dao* and a cultural and moral obligation that a conscientious citizen must embrace. As Wang stated:

To act from innate knowledge, we are in line with the *Dao* of the sages. Close to classics, let the sages inspire us and awaken our innate knowledge. This is called "the ancients got my heart first." . . . If Chinese culture is about conscience and humanity, it is an eternal culture.

To carry forward this eternal culture is not only for the sake of our nation and ancestors but also for ourselves. Make it your own responsibility to promote Chinese culture. It should not be a burden but something that you are sincerely delighted with. If so, you will have become a virtuous, conscientious person.¹³

More importantly, the approach of associating ethical reflection from innate knowledge with the civic responsibility for Confucian revival is laden with creative and disruptive potential. Some scholars of citizenship studies (Isin 2008; Isin and Nielsen 2008) have challenged the traditional understanding of citizenship by arguing that it depends on habitual practices, which ‘engender reasonably durable, resilient and predicable ethical-political relations with others’ (White 2008, 44) but neglect the creativity of an act that breaks the routine obligatory practices through an appeal to disruptive and transformative actions. A creative act of citizenship is derived from the aspiration to ‘overcome the force of habit by provoking a genuine encounter that poses the problem of how to act’ (Ibid., 46). The citizen actor must face the unforeseeable and contingent circumstances and aspire to ‘transcend the limits imposed by habits (even if momentarily) in order to disrupt the static and sedimented dimensions of human action’ (Ibid.).

The conceptual insight of creative acts of citizenship offers a useful tool to understand Mr. Chen’s ‘disruptive’ act of insisting his son to read classics for years at home, or his act of establishing a Confucian school outside the state apparatus. This ‘creative’ approach to developing and supporting an alternative form of education confronts the hegemony of mainstream education and presents parents and students with a new method for learning. In his discussion on why to give up state education, Mr. Chen pointed out that, ‘State schools go against human nature, . . . [and] are complete failures’.¹⁴ He criticised the state system as nothing but a ‘utilitarian’ (*gongli*) education that fails to cultivate students’ virtues, further arguing that ‘its examination orientation goes against the law of children’s cognitive-psychological development and trains students to become test machines’.¹⁵ Labelling the state education system as a ‘one size fits all’ type, he also attacked it for ignoring students’ distinct interests, needs, and personalities. Parents who sent their children to read classics at Mr. Chen’s school reiterated similar critiques. By reflecting on their own experience with the state education system and the experience of their children, most of the parents condemned the state education system as a ‘moral deficit education’ (*quede jiaoyu*) (one parent’s term) that unduly focuses on students’ academic achievements and skills at the expense of character development. They expressed concern for students being overburdened with excessive schoolwork, which they claimed endangered physical and mental health. They criticised the educational system for oppressing children’s creative and critical thinking skills, for impairing their passion for study, and for damaging their autonomous exploration of knowledge. The negative evaluation of state education was also evident in the interviews with the students. Many pupils confessed that they were labelled as ‘backward students’ (*houjinsheng*) or ‘bad students’ (*chasheng*) because of their poor academic performance in state schools and were discriminated against by teachers and classmates. In summary, the dissatisfaction with state education directly drove Mr. Chen and the parents to enrol their children in Confucian classics education.

Borrowing Bergson’s (1991, 45) terminology, we can understand the revival of Confucian education as a response to an ‘encounter’, a meeting or confrontation between people and things, between the state education system and Confucian activists. Deleuze

(1986, 61–63) further noted that the encounter raised a series of questions on what it means ‘to act’, including: ‘should I act’, ‘to what extent am I capable of acting’, and ‘how should I act?’ In the encounter with state education, parents considered exercising a degree of choice over whether to act one way or another way (White 2008). They experienced a constant ‘ethical restlessness’, which functions as an ‘affective stirring of the soul’ or an ‘upheaval of the depth’ (Ibid., 52). This uneasiness influenced an aspiration towards openness, change, and rupture, provoking parents ‘to dispense with habitual modes of thinking and to embrace profoundly new insights and ideas’ (Ibid.). All of the parents reported having experienced a strong sense of moral anxiety about the corrupting influence of society on their children’s ethical performance. These feelings confirmed their belief in the ability of Confucian education to enhance students’ moral cultivation through extensive study of classics. The emotions of ethical uneasiness and anxiety surrounding education are closely related to the conscience and call on a person to extend the intuitive knowledge outward and take prompt action. Parents were thus motivated to transfer their children from the state education system to Confucian education.

Despite the disruptive actions associated with their claim for this educational right, many parent informants accepted that they would have to consider returning their children to state-subsidised schools after a couple of years of Confucian schooling because there was no institutional channel for further studies. Although parents were outspoken in their criticism of state schooling, they worried that their children would not be able to attain a university degree if they continued with their Confucian education and, therefore, would be at a disadvantage in the job market (see also Dutournier and Wang 2018). Also, parents’ concerns were related to the incompatibility of the curriculum provision at Yiqian School with the state-mandated curriculum. On the one hand, as a school known for teaching the classics, Yiqian was highly regarded by the local government and given a considerable degree of autonomy to offer major courses in the Confucian classics. On the other hand, as a state-approved private school, it was sometimes required by the local education bureau to teach the national curriculum, but these classes only played a marginal role. Due to the lack of a systematic arrangement for teaching the state-stipulated courses, students were unable to keep up with them and instead spent most of their time memorizing the classics.

In summary, the claim to the right to a Confucian education presents one case for understanding modern citizenship from the Chinese perspective. By analysing this case, I show that the Confucian term ‘extending innate knowledge’ endows the element of an ‘act of citizenship’ with novel meaning in the local context, just as the notion of an ‘act of citizenship’ expands the application of the Confucian term to Chinese citizenship practice.

Concluding remarks

In this study, I explored the relationship between the revival of Confucian education and citizenship by addressing three civic dimensions – right, responsibility, and act. First, I drew attention to the widespread circulation of the discourse on the right to education within Confucian education. Claiming the right to run a private Confucian school and the right to choose Confucian education, Confucian education activists appealed to the

socialist state to create more space for individual citizens to experiment with diversified, alternative forms of education outside the state apparatus. Second, focusing on the emerging discourse of righteousness, I revealed how this particular Confucian ideology has contributed to Confucian education activists' sense of civic responsibility. Articulated through local terminologies, such as common humanity, the *Dao*, and rationality, which scholars rarely discuss in current citizenship studies, Confucian activists rely on the discourse of righteousness to convince the state that Confucian education embodies a return to human nature, aligns with the 'natural' law of human development, and is thus able to maximise children's moral development through extensive memorisation of seminal classics. Through this discourse, activists call upon all individuals to take action to realise Confucian education as the 'righteous' type of education by requiring children to study the classics, establishing private Confucian schools, or engaging in the promotion of classical education in any form as a means of taking responsibility for the revival of Confucianism. The call to individuals to engage in the revival of Confucian education relates to the third aspect of civic acts, the Confucian idea of 'extending innate knowledge', and its contribution to translating private ethical reflection into creative acts of citizenship. I argue that one's motivation for civic action is closely associated with moral introspection. Driven by a strong sense of Confucian morality, parental activists criticised the deviation of state education from common humanity. Their 'ethical restlessness' directly drove them to creatively disrupt the conventional state education pathway and transfer their children to the less mainstream option, Confucian education. Their acts were creative in the sense that they posed a challenge to the authority of the state and created new possible forms of schooling by disrupting the status quo of education in China. In addition, this study reveals the incongruence or contradictions in the application of the purported Confucian education ideal put forward by Wang Caigui in the everyday practices of teachers, parents and students. There are many tensions and complexities among the parties involved in Confucian education.

The appearance of these three significant elements of citizenship in Confucian education and their crucial role in the revival of Confucian education advocacy challenge the stereotype that Confucianism contradicts contemporary Chinese citizenship. While the Confucian approach does emphasise relational hierarchy, social responsibility, and loyalty to authority (Yu 2020), Confucianism and citizenship share complementary ideas that are more likely to yield coexistence rather than incompatibility (Wang 2015, 2021). Moreover, this compatibility is intensified by the recent academic discussions among Confucian scholars on how Confucianism is able to contribute to the development of civic rights (Q. Chen 2021), individual entitlements (Sun 2017), a sense of responsibility (J. Chen 2016), and social equality (Angle 2012). Thus, further research is necessary to provide a more nuanced understanding of the implications of Confucianism on the formation of the modern Chinese citizen.

Through this study, I provided evidence to complement existing scholarship that challenges the oversimplified interpretation of the controversial relationship between Confucianism and citizenship. The consistency between Confucianism and citizenship, as exhibited in Confucian education activists' narratives and actions, is understandable under modern conditions, as the government of China constantly seeks to cultivate modern citizens to contribute to the building of a powerful state (Yan 2010). The current revival of Confucian education reflects the transformation of contemporary China

a rapid process of individualisation has resulted in increasing awareness of individual rights and the development of multiple channels through which to assert one's rights (Yan 2009). Nonetheless, the story of Confucian education offers a chance to investigate how Confucianism may inspire the creation of a new type of citizen – the Confucian citizen. I understand the Confucian citizen to bear a resemblance to the 'gentle citizen' (Wang 2021). The latter is proposed as a synthesised, thick subject who makes 'the civic attributes the subjective underpinning', is inspired by and supplemented with Confucian virtues, and pursues 'the integration of inner sageliness with outer kingliness' (Ibid., 295). In light of this, I argue that the formation of the Confucian citizen stems from a process where Confucian moral values extend from the individual to civic awareness of rights, responsibilities, and activism. I emphasise that the appearance of the Confucian citizen contributes new theoretical implications for citizenship studies. First, it provides an embodied example to Chen (2020), who suggested that scholars should rethink citizenship by integrating its fundamental values with local Chinese traditions and experiences. Second, I go further in indicating that the Confucian citizen, embodying the compatibility of Confucianism with modern citizen elements, serves as a perfect window to exhibit the shifting moral and civic ethics of Chinese individuals and the emerging varieties of moral life and civic subjectivity in China.

However, the findings of this study should not be extended to the whole body of Confucian education activists in contemporary China. The present study relies on a relatively small sample of Confucian education activists and does not imply that the participants' perceptions and understandings of citizenship elements necessarily represent the masses. The research findings are indicative, not representative, not only because Confucian education, in general, is now experiencing a palpable diversification in teaching and learning methods but also because of the increasingly diverse socio-economic status of Confucian activists. I acknowledge that most of the parental informants in this study came from the recently emerging middle class (Rocca 2017), and their socio-economically advantaged background entails idiosyncrasies in their perceptions of the civic elements embedded in concrete social class conditions. Another limitation of this study is that it does not sufficiently present students' voices and how these voices may influence the everyday schooling. Nonetheless, I emphasise that the demonstration of the participants' Chinese citizenship features of rights, responsibilities, and activism in this study is indicative of the (re)fashioning of Confucian/Chinese citizen. Further studies are needed to explore the implications for the Confucian activists' (particularly students') conceptions of Chinese citizenship in contemporary China through a social class lens.

Additionally, the acts by Confucian citizens are presented as disruptive and creative, as they challenge the hegemonic state system and carve out new options for education. These acts of citizenship, however, are performed privately by individuals rather than collectively. The foundation of Confucian activism relies on the individual, who acts separately rather than collectively and who reflects on the truth of education in solitude. As the rise in consciousness of individual rights is subject to the power of the state in contemporary China, individuals may only act within the boundaries defined by the regime (Yan 2009). Some scholars argue that Chinese citizens are expected to prioritise the party-state interests and submit to the absolute ideological authority (Chia 2011; Kennedy, Fairbrother, and Zhao 2014; Chen 2020). For the time being, Confucian citizens and grassroots Confucian education remain under the management of the party-

state, as reflected by the Chinese Ministry of Education's recent designation of full-time classical schools as 'illegal' and subsequent order for a full-scale investigation. In future research, scholars could explore the implications of state management of grassroots Confucian education on the formation of citizenship in the revival of Confucianism.

Notes

1. A detailed introduction to Wang Caigui (born in 1949) can be found in Billioud and Thoraval (2015, Chapter Two).
2. It is worth noting that the re-emerging Confucian education institutions do not necessarily operate in opposition to the state education system. As Billioud and Thoraval (2015, 35) indicated, some Confucian-inspired educational practices may also develop within and be complementary to existing academic institutions. Nonetheless, regardless of the extent of institutional complementarity or competition, the individual practitioners of Confucian education demonstrate to some degree a common dissatisfaction with state education.
3. Regarding Wang's 2015 speech, see <https://www.rujiarz.com/article/5494> (7 May 2015), accessed on 28 July 2021.
4. Interview in 2015.
5. Interview in 2015.
6. For the whole speech text, see https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/f__OHFcZxQHpm465mDt5sQ (8 October 2015), accessed on 28 July 2021.
7. Interview in 2012.
8. Interview in 2015.
9. The *Analects* 4.10, translation by Slingerland (2003).
10. Interview in 2015.
11. The notion of *liangzhi* was inherited from Mencius but was elaborated by Wang Yangming (1472–1529), the influential Ming Neo-Confucian scholar.
12. See Wang (2014, 66).
13. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
14. Interview in 2012.
15. Interview in 2012.

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Notes on contributor

Canglong Wang is a Lecturer in Chinese Studies at the University of Hull, UK. His research extensively explores the cultural, social, and political implications of the revival of Confucian education in contemporary China.

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