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DEVELOPMENT, CONTROVERSIES, AND REFLECTIONS: THE REVIVAL OF GRASSROOTS CONFUCIAN EDUCATION IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

Summary

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I. Introduction

The rise of popular Confucianism (minjian rujia, literally "Confucianism among the people") in China over the past two decades represents a significant socio-cultural phenomenon. It refers to Confucian-related activities initiated by ordinary individuals operating outside the formal state apparatus (Billioud and Thoraval 2015). These activities span a wide range of fields, including society, politics, culture, education, religion, and commerce (Billioud 2021; Jiang Fu 2022). As part of popular Confucianism, the contemporary revival of grassroots Confucian education has been driven by contributions from grassroots groups and individuals while also benefiting from the support of political and academic elites (Wang and Billioud 2022). The grassroots Confucian education discussed in this chapter constitutes a form of private education functioning beyond the state-sponsored system. However, the revival of popular Confucianism (including Confucian education) must be understood as the result of continuous interactions between grassroots and official forces. In the Chinese context, the relationship between guan (official, political authority) and min (ordinary people) is not strictly dichotomous; rather, it is characterized by mutual interaction and influence (Palmer 2019). This argument is reinforced by existing studies, which identify two interwoven pathways driving the revival of grassroots Confucian education (Gilgan 2022; Wang 2022; Wang and Wang 2023). The first is a bottom-up pathway, spearheaded by grassroots forces or civil society, which may progressively shape and influence the official system. The second is a top-down pathway, directed by the government or cultural elites, which has the potential to exert a significant impact on grassroots society.

This chapter focuses on grassroots Confucian education. It examines how grassroots forces engage with official authorities and cultural elites to collectively propel the continued development of Confucian education within grassroots society. To begin, it is essential to clarify several concepts that may cause confusion when discussing the contemporary revival of Confucian education.

First, "Confucian education" (rujia jiaoyu) is the primary concept used in this chapter. It refers to an educational form centered on the study of Confucian classics and is therefore also known as "classical education" (jingdian jiaoyu or gudian jiaoyu). In contemporary China, the term "classical education" is often used interchangeably with "classics-reading education" (dujing jiaoyu) by its practitioners. The latter specifically refers to an educational practice that focuses on children's recitation of Confucian classics. This practice has developed into what scholars describe as the "children's classics-reading education movement" (ertong dujing jiaoyu yundong), which has had a profound and far-reaching influence in contemporary China (Billioud and Thoraval 2015; Wang 2018; Zeng 2022). This topic will be further elaborated upon in subsequent sections. However, due to the historical interpenetration and mutual influence of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism within Chinese culture, the so-called "Confucian education", "classical education", or "classics-reading education" often incorporates elements from both Daoist and Buddhist traditions. Interestingly, some Confucian education practitioners refer to their educational initiatives as "national studies education" (guoxue jiaoyu), a term that extends beyond "Confucian education" to encompass a broader range of content related to Chinese national studies.[1]

Second, in some parts of this chapter, I use the term "old-style private school (sishu) education" as a substitute for "Confucian education". While a detailed distinction between these two concepts lies beyond the scope of this discussion, it is worth briefly clarifying their relationship. In the context of the contemporary revival of Confucian education, "old-style private school education" –or simply "sishu education"– is widely recognized by Confucian practitioners as one of the primary approaches to implementing Confucian educational ideals. Put differently, the old-style private school or sishu

1 The term "national studies" (*guoxue*) emerged in the early 20th century as a counterpart to "Western studies" (*xixue*). In the 1990s, a phenomenon known as the "national studies fever" arose in China, and the concept gradually entered the everyday language of the general public (Dirlik 2011). Since then, its meaning has continually expanded to encompass all aspects and historical periods of traditional Chinese culture and scholarship.

(sometimes also referred to as xuetang or study hall) serves as a tangible space where students engage in the study of Confucian classics and the practice of Confucian rituals. This, to some extent, aligns with historical accounts of sishu education in ancient China, which describe how children traditionally studied elementary texts, memorized Confucian classics, practiced daily etiquette, and received moral cultivation in various types of private schools (Wang 2017).[2] Furthermore, many contemporary Confucian practitioners embrace "sishu education" as the framework for their educational activities (Wang 2018). While some classical education institutions in contemporary China are classified as "academies" (shuyuan), academy education typically represents a more advanced stage of Confucian learning compared to the foundational instruction provided by sishu.[3] Nevertheless, whether categorized as schools or academies, these old-style institutions are predominantly privately established, distinguishing them from state-maintained educational systems.

In the following sections, I begin by tracing the evolution of the contemporary revival of grassroots Confucian education over the past three decades, examining the key controversies and challenges that have emerged, as well as the reforms undertaken to address them. I then draw on recently collected data to analyze the latest developments in grassroots Confucian schools over the past five years. Finally, I conclude by identifying and discussing several emerging trends in grassroots Confucian education that remain underexplored in the existing literature.

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2 For example, Qing dynasty scholars Tang Biao (1640-1713) and Wang Yun (1784-1854) both served as teachers in old-style private schools, or *sishu*, and authored works detailing methods for conducting elementary education in these foundational institutions. Additionally, various types of *sishu* existed in ancient times (Jiang, 2011). First, family schools (*jiashu*) were established by wealthy families who hired private tutors to educate their children at home. Second, community-based schools (*sanguan*) were organized by private teachers who enrolled children from neighboring families, conducting lessons either in their own homes or in rented spaces such as ancestral halls or temples. Finally, charitable schools (*yishu*) were funded by officials, merchants, or rural gentry within clans to provide free educational opportunities to children of appropriate age within their communities.

3 For this reason, education in Confucian academies (*shuyuan*) can be understood as equivalent to college or university education in the modern system and is therefore sometimes translated into English as "college". In contrast, *sishu* corresponds to primary and secondary education and is thus rendered as "old-style private school".

II. A Review of the Development of Grassroots Confucian Education in Contemporary China

In this section, I provide a comprehensive review of the development of grassroots Confucian education in China since the 1990s. It is important to emphasize that the contemporary revival of grassroots Confucian education remains an ongoing endeavor, and it is far too early to draw definitive conclusions. I divide its evolution into three successive phases. First, the emergence phase spans from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, during which Confucian education gradually expanded from Taiwan and Hong Kong to mainland China through grassroots initiatives. Second, the rapid development phase occurred from the early 2000s to the mid-2010s, marked by extensive debates among scholars and the public regarding the practice of classics reading (dujing) and the legal status of classics-reading private schools (dujing sishu). Third, since the mid-2010s, the reflection and adjustment phase has unfolded, characterized by critical reassessments and adaptive changes within the movement.

(i) Emergence: Mid-1990s to Early 2000s

During this initial phase, grassroots Confucian education was primarily referred to as "classics-reading education", or more formally, "children's classics-reading education" (Wang 2014). This approach focuses on children, particularly those under the age of 13, and prioritizes the memorization –rather than comprehension– of classical texts, mainly Confucian works. Professor Wang Caigui, a Confucian intellectual and educator from Taiwan, is widely recognized as a leading pioneer and advocate of classics-reading education. In 1994, he initiated children's classics-reading classes at Huashan Lecture Hall and began offering free courses on the Confucian Four Books and Five Classics to the public. This initiative is often regarded as the starting point for the revival of grassroots Confucian education in the contemporary era. In 1997, at the invitation of the renowned Confucian scholar Nan Huaijin, Professor Wang delivered a lecture on classics-reading education in Hong Kong. This event marked the beginning of his large-scale promotional efforts, which gained substantial support from the International Cultural and Educational Foundation in Hong Kong. The foundation played a pivotal role during this period, not only by donating resources to advance classical education but also by introducing Confucian educational ideals to various institutions on the Chinese mainland. That same year, the first public-interest institution dedicated to promoting Confucian classical education, the Chinese Cultural Study Center (Zhonghua

wenhua yanxi zhongxin), was established in Xiamen. In 1999, the center was restructured as the Shaonan Culture and Classics-Reading Education Promotion Center (Shaonan wenhua, dujing jiaoyu tuiguang zhongxin). Under the guidance and support of this institution, numerous classics-reading classes began to emerge across various regions of China.

In 2000, the Beijing Sihai Children's Classics Reading Education Center (Beijing sihai ertong jingdian daodu jiaoyu zhongxin) was founded. In early 2001, this center collaborated with national institutions such as the National Library and the China Charity Federation to launch the "Classics Recitation Project". This initiative significantly expanded the national reach and influence of Confucian classical education. In September 2000, the Little Giants Classical School (Xiaojuren jingdian xuexiao) was established in Pingyuan County, Shandong Province, marking the first private Confucian school in mainland China dedicated to classics-reading education. In December of the same year, Yidan Academy was founded by a group of undergraduate and postgraduate students from prestigious universities, including Peking University and Tsinghua University. These students volunteered their spare time to teach Confucian classics to primary and secondary school children.

In summary, during this initial emergence phase, classics-reading education began expanding from Taiwan and Hong Kong to mainland China. This growth was facilitated through collaborative efforts by grassroots forces across Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China, including charitable organizations, NGOs, public-interest institutions, and committed individuals.

(2) Rapid Development: Early 2000s to Mid-2010s

I designate the period from the early 2000s to the mid-2010s –spanning nearly 15 years– as the phase of rapid development for grassroots Confucian education. This stage was marked by the significant rise of the children's classics-reading movement, which gained widespread momentum and exerted considerable influence across China. The defining features of this phase can be summarized into three key points. First, a proliferation of Confucian private schools, classics-reading classes (dujing ban), study halls, and academies emerged nationwide. While these institutions displayed variations in teaching philosophies and methods, many were deeply shaped by Wang Caigui's principle of "honest and intensive reading of the classics" (laoshi daliang dujing). Second, the early 2000s witnessed the first national debate over the practice of Confucian classical education, with scholars and mass media serving as the primary participants. Third, public concerns regarding the legal status of classics-reading private schools began to surface. Nevertheless, these

concerns did not impede the expansion and growing popularity of grassroots Confucian education during this period.

In July 2001, Wang Caigui delivered a now-legendary lecture at Beijing Normal University, later known as "One Lecture, A Century's Shock". The lecture was recorded and disseminated widely in the form of video discs, achieving unprecedented influence across China and abroad.[4] Countless Confucian educators were inspired by Wang's educational philosophy and teaching methods, prompting them to establish classics-reading schools and experiment with Confucian teaching and learning in real-world classrooms. Wang Caigui's ideas on Confucian education were further popularized through the Global Classics-Reading Education Exchange Network (Quanqiu dujing jiaoyu jiaoliuwang), an online forum established in 2004. Over the next decade, this forum became the primary platform for advocates of classics-reading education to exchange ideas, practices, and strategies. Additionally, a widely circulated compilation titled "Collected Online Responses to Questions on Classics-Reading Education by Professor Wang Caigui", voluntarily edited by a Confucian private school leader, became essential reading material for teachers, parents, and students engaged in classical education. In 2009, the Wang Caigui Classics-Reading Education Promotion Center was founded in Beijing, where it hosted its first teacher training program, solidifying its role as a pivotal institution in promoting Confucian education on the Chinese mainland. Notably, this center initiated multiple sessions of the "Hundred Days with the Analects" public classics-reading program, which significantly expanded participation among children, adolescents, university students, educators, and the general public in Confucian classics learning.

In 2011, the National Classics-Reading Summer Camp Alliance was established, eventually incorporating over 100 Confucian classical schools at its peak. The alliance played a critical role in facilitating and coordinating summer and winter camps across the country. That same year, the Guangdong Old-style Private School Alliance was founded, attracting participation from over 100 Confucian schools, academies, and other educational organizations through its annual conferences and forums. In 2013, Wang Caigui established the Wenli Academy in Beijing, later relocating it in 2015 to Taishun County in Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province. For a time, this advanced Confucian academy was regarded as the epitome of Confucian education –a dream institution for many classics-reading students and their families. Inspired by Wang's

4 The transcript of this lecture was later included in the book *Twenty Years of Classics-Reading Education* (*Dujing ershi nian*), authored by Wang Caigui (2014: 39-78).

systematic and comprehensive approach to classical education, many parents began carefully mapping out their children's Confucian studies in accordance with his methods.[5]

It is noteworthy that grassroots Confucian educational "experiments" exhibited remarkable diversity in teaching philosophies and methods as early as the 2000s. Some Confucian educators, initially influenced by Wang Caigui's ideas, began to adapt and adjust their curricula and pedagogies to suit practical schooling conditions, resources, and challenges (Wang 2018). However, such adaptations remained relatively limited. A majority of schools and study halls adhered unwaveringly to Wang's ideals, viewing his approach as the epitome of educational excellence. They firmly believed that by earnestly implementing his Confucian classical pedagogy, they could cultivate a generation of culturally knowledgeable, morally virtuous individuals (Wang, Wang, and Gao 2023). This highlights a strong undercurrent of utopianism within contemporary Confucian education, which motivates educators to relentlessly pursue an idealized form of education (Gilgan 2022a, 2022b). Moreover, this utopianism is intertwined with cultural nationalism, compelling educators to actively contribute to the grassroots revival of Confucian education, with the aspiration of rejuvenating Chinese culture and strengthening national identity (Wang 2023).

Overseas classics-reading education also experienced significant growth during this period. As early as 1998, with the support of Nan Huaijin, Wang Caigui delivered a series of lectures on classical education across more than a dozen cities in the United States, sowing the seeds for Confucian educational initiatives abroad. Against the backdrop of China's entry into the WTO and increasing cultural and economic globalization, grassroots Confucian

5 In 2009, Wang Caigui (2014: 79-120) delivered a lecture titled *A Comprehensive Plan for Classics-Reading Education (Dujing jiaoyu de quancheng guihua*), in which he outlined a holistic educational process designed to cultivate exceptional cultural talents (*wenhua dacai*). This process ideally begins with prenatal education and progresses to advanced scholarly training, structured into two successive ten-year phases. The first phase emphasizes extensive memorization of classical texts, typically carried out in old-style private schools, serving as a foundational and preparatory stage. The subsequent ten years shift to academy-based education, where students focus on interpreting classical texts, surveying specialized fields of knowledge, and exploring both Chinese and Western scholarship. This stage culminates in the intensive study of the complete works of modern Neo-Confucian philosopher Mou Zongsan, enabling students to synthesize ancient and modern learning while bridging Chinese and Western intellectual traditions. The ultimate goal is to cultivate individuals of profound cultural achievement who can seamlessly connect historical knowledge with contemporary insights.

education began to expand internationally in the 21st century. In 2004, the International Cultural Association for Classics was established in Hong Kong, partnering with the Hunan Chinese Culture Academy to host the first Global Chinese Cultural Classics Recitation Conference. This event attracted over 2,000 children worldwide, fostering global exchanges and advancing classical education on an international scale. In 2006, Yang Mei, a Chinese expatriate in Germany, established a children's classics-reading class in Hamburg, later formalizing it as Zhiqian Academy in 2009. The academy is widely recognized as the first modern private Confucian school in Europe. Wang Caigui further expanded these efforts through lecture tours in Southeast Asia and Germany in 2008 and 2009, respectively, stimulating the development of overseas Confucian education. In September 2009, the Overseas Classics-Reading Education Promotion Center was founded. Wang's subsequent lecture tours in Europe and the United States in 2014 and 2015 accelerated the emergence of additional classics-reading classes, schools, and Confucian education organizations abroad. In 2016, the Wenli International School officially opened, offering full-time Confucian classical education to overseas students spanning diverse age groups.

The rapid growth of grassroots classics-reading education can be attributed to the interplay of three key forces. First, the establishment of various grassroots institutions and organizations played a pivotal role in its development. In addition to the previously mentioned educational initiatives centered around Wang Caigui and his theories on Confucian classical education, several notable groups –including the Wuhan Dafang Cultural and Educational Foundation, the Xiamen Shaonan Culture and Classics-Reading Education Promotion Center, and the Beijing Sihai Children's Classics Reading Center– vigorously championed the dissemination of classical education throughout the 2000s, making invaluable contributions to its widespread adoption.

Second, cultural and political elites were instrumental in advancing grassroots Confucian education. For instance, the "Return to Confucius and Shakespeare-Children's Classical Education Week" was launched by grassroots Confucian initiatives in 2004, which garnered widespread support and participation from institutions such as Peking University, Beijing Foreign Studies University, the British Shakespeare Association, the British Embassy, the International Confucian Association, the Chinese Confucius Society, and various cultural and educational groups across China. That same year, the Confucius Research Institute at Renmin University of China collaborated with the Beijing Sihai Children's Classics Reading Center to advocate for the preservation and dissemination of China's excellent traditional culture.

Additionally, the "Hundred Days with the Analects" public summer camp activity, mentioned earlier, received official endorsement from government bodies, including the Caring for the Next Generation Working Committee and the Ministry of Education's Department of Language Application. Notably, Jiang Qing, a prominent figure representing the so-called Mainland New Confucianism or Political Confucianism, edited a 12-volume collection titled "Anthology of Chinese Cultural Classics for Foundational Education". His political Confucian thought has also exerted considerable influence on some classical education practitioners, shaping their approaches to teaching and learning.

Third, the relaxation of policies surrounding private education provided crucial institutional support for grassroots Confucian initiatives. The emergence of classics-reading schools should be viewed as part of a broader trend involving the rise of independent educational forces within Chinese civil society. In 2002 and 2004, the Chinese government enacted the Private Education Promotion Law and its Implementation Regulations, formally creating a legal framework to legitimize private educational endeavors. During this period, Chinese civil society experienced notable growth, characterized by increased citizen awareness of individual rights, greater autonomy in personal decision-making, and higher levels of social participation (Yan 2010). Against this backdrop, the rapid and widespread development of grassroots Confucian education during this phase appears unsurprising.

However, the swift expansion of classics-reading education also provoked heated debates, both within Confucian educational circles and across broader society. As early as 2004, discussions concerning classics-reading education had already begun to surface, culminating in a cultural dispute titled "Classics Reading: Enlightenment or Obscurantism?" This controversy marked the first major public clash over the relevance and implications of classics-reading education in contemporary China.[6] At the time, the discourse was largely dominated by prominent intellectuals, while the voices of grassroots Confucian educators, though present, remained relatively subdued. Mainland Confucian scholars began to publicly champion the necessity and urgency of learning Confucian classics through mainstream media platforms. Their arguments, however, sparked sharp criticism from liberal intellectuals, igniting a prolonged and contentious debate over the value of classics-reading

6 It is worth noting that as early as the 1930s, classics-reading (*dujing*) had already become a national point of contention, eliciting extensive debate among Republican-era scholars and government officials. For a detailed examination of this historical discourse, see Wang (2018).

education and the contemporary significance of Confucian cultural ideals (Hu 2005; Wang 2018).[7]

Entering the 2010s, debates over classics-reading education shifted inward to the Confucian classical education community, with grassroots Confucian educators –including private school leaders, parents, and students– emerging as the primary participants. During this period, Wang Caigui's educational theory of honest and intensive reading of the classics began encountering widespread criticism from a growing number of Confucian practitioners. These educators undertook a critical reassessment of their teaching methods, developed over the preceding years as they experimented with Wang's approach, and sought to address concerns regarding curricular content, instructional strategies, teacher-student relationships, and broader ethical considerations. Consequently, the Confucian classical education movement experienced significant fragmentation and diversification, as pedagogical methods became notably more varied (Kongshan 2017; Wang 2016, 2018). Simultaneously, some Confucian scholars voiced sharp critiques of classics-reading education, particularly targeting the "honest and intensive reading" model. These critiques further deepened internal divisions within the Confucian education community and drew increased public scrutiny and concern (He 2016; Ke 2016, 2017). A more detailed examination of these debates will follow in the next section.

The legal status of classics-reading private schools also began to attract considerable attention and public discussion. A turning point occurred in 2006 with the highly publicized Mengmutang Incident in Shanghai (D. Zhang 2009). During this event, Mengmutang, a private Confucian school, was revealed by the media to have enrolled children of compulsory school age for full-time classical education. Local education authorities swiftly intervened, classifying the institution as an "illegal educational provider" due to its lack of formal approval from the relevant administrative departments. Officials contended that the school's exclusive focus on a classical curriculum contradicted the multi-disciplinary and holistic developmental requirements stipulated by the Compulsory Education Law, thereby violating several of its provisions. Additionally, parents who failed to enroll their children in state-approved schools for compulsory education were deemed to have breached legal obligations.

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7 The 2004 debate was subsequently compiled into the volume *Classics Reading: Enlightenment or Obscurantism* (*Dujing: qimeng haishi mengmei*) (Hu 2005). For a more in-depth exploration of the specific arguments and intellectual dynamics of this controversy, Wang (2018) provides a comprehensive analysis.

However, the Mengmutang Incident ignited a vigorous debate across academia, public media, and society at large. Discussions centered on the legal status of homeschooling and the broader educational rights and autonomy of parents and children (Sheng 2015). A shared consensus gradually emerged: the state should allow greater flexibility in educational content, curriculum design, and instructional methods during the compulsory education phase, while recognizing and respecting the rights of parents to choose education that aligns with their children's individual needs and preferences. Ultimately, rather than being permanently shut down, Mengmutang was permitted to resume its educational activities after implementing the requisite reforms.

This consensus holds profound significance for the subsequent development of grassroots Confucian education. It reflects the relatively lenient and experimental climate of the 2000s, which encouraged private educational initiatives and the exploration of diverse, personalized teaching and learning models. The Mengmutang Incident stands as a milestone event with symbolic importance: it demonstrated that alternative educational approaches, including grassroots Confucian schools, while legally contentious, were not categorically invalidated by state authorities. Their educational merit, exploratory value, and potential legitimacy were acknowledged rather than suppressed. This recognition played a pivotal role in facilitating the expansion and broader dissemination of grassroots Confucian education throughout the 2000s and 2010s. From this point until 2019, grassroots Confucian schools operated in a legal "grey area"—neither formally sanctioned by local authorities nor actively dismantled. I will revisit this issue in greater depth in the subsequent section.

(3) DIVERSIFICATION AND NEW CHALLENGES: MID-2010S ONWARD

By the mid-2010s, Wang Caigui's theory of honest and intensive classics-reading had evolved into a more systematic and institutionalized educational model. However, it increasingly encountered escalating criticism from Confucian educators and scholars. This period marks the second stage of nationwide debate on contemporary grassroots Confucian education. Within this discourse, grassroots Confucian education exhibited a growing capacity for self-reflection and critical examination of its teaching methodologies. This introspection stimulated and accelerated the diversification of Confucian educational practices. Moreover, emerging external challenges have disrupted its progress since 2019, compelling educators to reevaluate and recalibrate the trajectory of Confucian education to better align with shifting societal and institutional realities.

First, the continued diversification of Confucian pedagogical methods has revealed two distinct yet interconnected trends. The first trend involves educators who remain steadfast in their commitment to Wang Caigui's educational philosophy, advancing an enhanced iteration of his pedagogy known as "pure classics-reading" (chun dujing). This approach has given rise to various innovative adaptations of classics-reading education. The pure classics-reading model refines and expands Wang's original honest and intensive classics-reading approach, emphasizing the rigorous and exclusive focus on recitation of classical texts in a deliberately mechanical and straightforward manner. Meanwhile, other subjects, such as mathematics, English, science, and extracurricular activities, are temporarily set aside (Zeng 2022). This learning model is also referred to as the "Double-Ten Classics-Reading Method" (Shuangshi dujing fa), which advocates for ten hours of daily recitation of the classics over ten consecutive years (Wu 2017).

The driving motivation behind these pedagogical changes is the aspiration to cultivate "great cultural talents" (wenhua dacai) –individuals capable of mastering both Chinese and Western classical and modern cultural traditions, seamlessly bridging ancient knowledge with contemporary understanding (Wang 2023a; Wang, Wang, and Gao 2023). Wang Caigui provides a concrete criterion for identifying such talents, asserting that only individuals proficient in reciting 300,000 words of classical texts-comprising 200,000 words of Chinese classics and 100,000 words of English texts– can fully realize their potential to achieve this status (Wang 2014). He further underscores that children should first dedicate themselves to mastering these 300,000 words of classics within private Confucian schools (sishu) before progressing to Confucian academies (shuyuan) for advanced studies (Wang 2014). Wang's Wenli Academy, which he personally established, has been revered as the preeminent institution for higher-level Confucian education. This vision has inspired numerous classical schools to explicitly position themselves as preparatory platforms for Wenli Academy, prioritizing the cultivation of students capable of meeting Wang's ambitious benchmarks. Consequently, a coherent and systematic model connecting grassroots private schools to Wenli Academy has gradually taken shape within the classics-reading education community, attracting substantial participation from parents and students committed to this idealized educational pathway.

The second trend, by contrast, arises from a critical reassessment and opposition to Wang Caigui's teaching philosophy. Educators pursuing alternative approaches to Confucian education have introduced innovative methods and theories to replace Wang's framework. Around the mid-2010s, a segment of Confucian education practitioners –including private school leaders, teach-

ers, and parents– who had once adhered to Wang's honest and intensive classics-reading method began to seriously reflect on challenges encountered during its years of implementation. This period of introspection resulted in a notable fragmentation and diversification within the classics-reading education community. Through platforms such as public lectures and online forums, these Confucian reformers articulated their critiques of the dominant model, arguing that rote memorization undermines both the essence of Confucian education and the core principles of modern pedagogy (Wang 2018; Wu 2017). In response, they championed a more inclusive, personalized, and diversified approach to Confucian classical education. This model incorporates a broader range of subjects alongside classics recitation and places strong emphasis on individualized instruction, often expressed through the principle of "teaching according to individual aptitude" (yincai shijiao). It prioritizes adapting education to students' abilities and explicitly rejects one-size-fits-all standards, such as the requirement to recite 300,000 words of classical texts. Notably, some Confucian schools have promoted the idea of reviving ancient private school education. This proposal presents a romanticized imagination and interpretation of traditional old-style private schools, portraying them as an idealized educational model that valued individual differences, accommodated diverse needs, and offered tailored instruction to each student (Wang 2023a; Xu 2012).

I argue that this debate within grassroots Confucian education (the second stage) constitutes a profound extension of the earlier academic discourse initiated in 2004 (the first stage). Firstly, the second-stage debate underscores that classics-reading is no longer confined to theoretical discussions among scholars but has transformed into a practical concern within grassroots educational settings and broader society.[8] Secondly, the

8 It is important to clarify that scholars, particularly those specializing in Confucian studies, continued to play a notable role in the second-stage debate. However, unlike the first stage, where Confucian scholars predominantly championed classical education, this phase saw scholars adopt a decisively critical stance toward classics-reading methods, particularly those influenced by Wang Caigui's pedagogical approach. For instance, some scholars launched stringent critiques of the pure classics-reading model, highlighting numerous issues that had emerged during its implementation, such as student disengagement, instances of corporal punishment, and the substantial forgetting of memorized texts over time (Ke 2016, 2017). Social and news media further amplified the discourse by illuminating the genuine struggles and systemic challenges faced by students involved in classics-reading education (e.g., Cai 2016; Jia 2016; Zhang 2016). Nevertheless, the primary role of scholars and media during this phase remained largely focused on bringing long-standing concerns within grassroots Confucian education to public attention, thereby fostering broader societal reflection and debate.

intrinsic value of classical texts has gained widespread recognition during this phase of controversy, reflecting a shared consensus among academics and grassroots educators. Thirdly, the focus of the second-stage debate has shifted away from the epistemological question of whether to read the classics –the central concern of the first stage– to the methodological inquiry of how to read the classics. In other words, the division between proponents of Wang Caigui's honest and intensive classics-reading method and advocates of alternative educational approaches does not stem from differing evaluations of the classics' worth but rather from their specific methods of engaging with these texts. In this context, the underlying tension, manifested through competing interpretations of Confucian pedagogy, centers on the authenticity and legitimacy of Confucian education. If we regard the revival of Confucian education as a process of reinventing tradition (Billioud 2007; Guo et al. 2022; Wang and Wang 2024), then these debates fundamentally reflect the diversity, intricacies, and contradictions inherent in the reimagined and reinterpreted Confucian educational heritage.

Academic scholars have also played a significant role in diversifying Confucian teaching methods. A prominent example is the widespread adoption of chanting (yinsong) in private Confucian schools across China during this period a development largely attributed to Professor Xu Jianshun of Capital Normal University. As a renowned authority on Chinese chanting traditions, Professor Xu asserts that chanting is not merely an authentic traditional method for reciting classical texts but also a comprehensive pedagogical approach for learning, teaching, self-cultivation, and cultural transmission (Xu 2012). In 2012, Xu published an influential essay titled "My Understanding of Ancient Chinese Education" (Wo suo lijie de zhongguo gudai jiaoyu). In this work, he challenges the prevalent reliance on rote memorization in classical education, advocating instead for chanting as a more dynamic and interactive means of engaging with classical texts. Xu emphasizes that chanting enriches students' individual learning experiences while fostering a vibrant and joyful educational environment. Within such a setting, students are encouraged to develop moral character, cultural literacy, and practical skills in a natural, personalized, and immersive manner. By the mid-2010s, several prominent Confucian schools embraced Xu's interpretation of ancient private school education and implemented reforms that marked a significant departure from the previously dominant approach championed by Wang Caigui. These schools actively disseminated their reformed pedagogical models through public lectures, collaborations with local education authorities

and mainstream schools, and the establishment of new local and national organizations dedicated to advancing and institutionalizing their educational ideals (Wang 2023a).

Beyond the internal transformations within the Confucian education community, external forces began to exert substantial influence, introducing stricter institutional constraints on the development of grassroots Confucian private schools and academies. In 2019, Huaxia Academy, a privately run, non-degree-granting educational institution established in 1998 in Xuzhou, Jiangsu Province, became embroiled in public controversy. Media reports revealed that its curriculum included teachings on female virtues (nvde) and female handiwork (nvhong), igniting intense societal debate (Guo and Zhang 2019). Furthermore, despite offering full-time primary and high school courses, the academy lacked authorization to confer state-recognized graduation certificates, thereby disqualifying its graduates from participating in the national college entrance examination. This incident marked the second major controversy over the accreditation and legitimacy of grassroots private Confucian schools, following the earlier Mengmutang Incident in Shanghai in 2006. Local education authorities responded promptly, launching investigations that ultimately led to the forced closure of Huaxia Academy. What caused even greater alarm among Confucian educational practitioners was the Ministry of Education's subsequent public pronouncement. For the first time, the Ministry explicitly declared that enrolling compulsory school-age students in non-accredited private schools constituted a violation of national law.[9] Such a decisive stance had not been taken even during the Mengmutang controversy.

This official declaration delivered a severe blow to grassroots Confucian education. Previously, many private Confucian academies had admitted compulsory school-age children to receive full-time classical education, operating within a legal grey area –unacknowledged by local authorities but largely tolerated. The Huaxia Academy case and the Ministry's statement

9 For example, the Ministry of Education issued the "Notice on Ensuring Proper Enrollment Procedures for Ordinary Primary and Secondary Schools" in March 2019, explicitly banning extracurricular training institutions from using programs such as traditional Chinese culture classes, classics-reading courses, or private academies as substitutes for compulsory education. Later that same year, the Ministry reaffirmed its stance through the reissued "Notice on Prohibiting Activities that Obstruct the Implementation of Compulsory Education," underscoring that enrolling school-age children in full-time private programs as replacements for state-mandated compulsory education is illegal. See the policy: http://www.jyb.cn/rmtzgjyb/201903/t20190327_219977.html, accessed on December 20, 2024.

triggered profound unease among parents and students who valued classical education yet questioned the schools' legal standing. The resulting mass exodus of students caused many grassroots Confucian schools to experience a sharp decline, with numerous institutions forced to close due to plummeting enrollment.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in late 2019 inflicted yet another devastating setback on grassroots Confucian educational institutions. Yet, this issue has received insufficient attention from both the academic community and the broader public. Empirical data quantifying the pandemic's impact on the evolution of Confucian education remains unavailable, further complicating any definitive assessment. Nevertheless, my observations highlight several significant ways in which the pandemic has profoundly affected grassroots Confucian education. First, pandemic-induced home isolation forced teachers and students to transition to remote online learning, eroding the core advantages of in-person instruction. Confucian education places great emphasis on learning by example within daily life, where teachers' verbal and non-verbal guidance play a crucial role in shaping students' moral character and cultural refinement (Bakken 2000). The abrupt shift to virtual platforms severely disrupted this foundational principle, presenting a major challenge to Confucian pedagogical philosophy.

Second, the unpredictable enforcement of lockdowns under the dynamic zero-COVID policy created enormous uncertainty for the operation of Confucian schools. This volatility generated immense psychological stress and mental health challenges for both students and educators, further destabilizing the educational environment. Third, the pandemic's economic repercussions placed grassroots Confucian schools under extreme financial strain. As predominantly self-funded private institutions, these schools rely heavily on tuition fees as their primary source of operational revenue. During the pandemic, many private schools and academies faced acute funding shortages and a subsequent loss of teaching staff. The severity of these challenges varied by institutional size: smaller schools often faced outright closure, while larger ones were compelled to reduce student intake to maintain basic operations.

Finally, the implementation of the Double Reduction (shuangjian) policy in 2021, combined with the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, had a cumulative and far-reaching negative impact on the operation and sustainability of grassroots Confucian private schools. In July 2021, the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the General Office of the State Council issued the "Opinions on Further Reducing the Burden of Homework and Off-Campus Tutoring for Students in Compulsory

Education".[10] This policy delivered a significant blow to private educational institutions, including grassroots Confucian schools and academies and other non-mainstream schooling formats. As local authorities enforced the Double Reduction policy, alternative education models, particularly Confucian classics-reading programs and traditional studies courses, came under intensified scrutiny. For instance, in October 2021, Guangdong Province launched a targeted initiative to regulate off-campus educational activities, explicitly mandating the "rigorous investigation and closure of institutions substituting full-time compulsory education with traditional culture study halls or private schools".[11] Similarly, in April 2022, the Binzhou municipal government in Shandong Province issued the "Notice on Admission Work for Compulsory Education Schools in 2022," stipulating the "strict investigation and harsh penalties for institutions offering 'traditional culture classes,' 'classics-reading programs,' or private academies as alternatives to compulsory education". The Notice further stated that parents or guardians who fail to enroll their school-age children in state-approved educational institutions without valid justification may face legal repercussions.[12] A similar directive was issued by the Pukou District government in Nanjing. In its "2024 Implementation Plan for Enrollment in Compulsory Education Schools," the government reaffirmed the enforcement of the Double Reduction policy, instructing local authorities to "comprehensively identify and rigorously address illegal educational activities that substitute compulsory education with 'traditional culture programs,' 'classics-reading classes,' or private academies, ensuring that all school-age children receive education as mandated by law".[13]

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10 On one hand, the policy mandates a comprehensive reduction in both the total volume and duration of homework for students in compulsory education, aiming to alleviate their excessive academic burden. It also emphasizes enhancing after-school services provided by state-maintained schools to address students' diverse educational needs. On the other hand, the policy imposes stringent oversight, requiring the thorough regulation of extracurricular tutoring activities and reinforcing the supervision and governance of off-campus training institutions. See the policy: http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xxgk/moe_1777/moe_1778/202107/t20210724_546576.html, accessed on December 20, 2024.

11 See the policy: https://www.sohu.com/a/493378406_402100, accessed on December 20, 2024.

12 See the policy: http://jy.binzhou.gov.cn/art/2022/4/24/art_235578_9667716.html, accessed on December 20, 2024.

13 See the policy: http://www.pukou.gov.cn/pkqrmzf/202405/t20240520_4669876.html, accessed on December 20, 2024.

While some commentators have speculated that the Chinese government may ease restrictions on private tutoring institutions in 2024 to mitigate unemployment pressures (Xiaoshan 2024), there is currently no compelling evidence to suggest any relaxation of the Double Reduction policy's detrimental effects on grassroots Confucian education. Based on my recent observations, these adverse external conditions are likely to persist for the foreseeable future in the post-pandemic era. Local governments are expected to uphold stringent oversight and enforcement measures targeting private Confucian academies under the guise of Double Reduction. Nonetheless, this does not imply that grassroots Confucian schools will remain passive in confronting these obstacles. Many institutions have already begun to reorient their strategies and adapt to the shifting regulatory landscape. In the following section, I will analyze the latest data to examine how grassroots Confucian schools and academies are reassessing their pedagogical methods and implementing adjustments to navigate these evolving challenges.

III. Reflection and Adjustments in Confucian Pedagogies: New Evidence from a Quantitative Analysis of Recruitment Advertisements by Grassroots Confucian Schools

In previous sections, I discussed the remarkable diversification of pedagogical methods within grassroots Confucian education since the mid-2010s, highlighting ongoing trends that have faced mounting challenges since 2019. These obstacles include public debates surrounding the legal status of private Confucian schools, disruptions triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, and heightened regulatory pressures resulting from the Double Reduction policy. In this section, I will present newly gathered empirical evidence to illustrate recent developments in the reflection, adjustment, and diversification of teaching methods within Confucian education.

The data analyzed in this section were recently sourced from recruitment advertisements circulated on social media platforms, particularly WeChat, by various grassroots Confucian institutions across mainland China. These advertisements can be categorized into two types: the first pertains to long-term programs, where students are enrolled to study Confucian classics for a minimum duration of one year; a total of 27 such advertisements were

collected. The second category comprises short-term classics-reading camps, including summer and winter sessions, which typically run for one week to one month; 32 advertisements were gathered for this group. This study focuses exclusively on the first category –advertisements for long-term programs– due to two primary considerations. First, long-term programs offer a more comprehensive depiction of a school's pedagogical approach and teaching practices, providing greater relevance and reliability for this analysis. Second, many schools offering long-term enrollment also organize short-term classics-reading initiatives, often integrating the two program types. Thus, examining the long-term advertisements yields valuable insights into the structure and content of short-term offerings as well.

The advertisements were systematically collected during September and October 2024. Following data collection, I constructed a dataset using SPSS, comprising 35 variables and 27 cases, with each case representing a private Confucian school offering long-term programs. The subsequent analysis provides a thorough examination of these grassroots Confucian schools, focusing on three core dimensions: institutional characteristics, recruitment strategies, and teaching practices.

(I) INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Among the 27 recruitment advertisements for long-term programs at grassroots Confucian schools, the publication dates range from August 3, 2019, to August 27, 2024. Based on their founding years, seven schools (25.9%) were established in or before 2010, 11 (40.7%) between 2011 and 2020, and one (3.7%) in 2023. Geographically distributed, five schools are located in Beijing, while another five are situated in Qufu, Shandong Province, a city widely recognized as Confucius's hometown. Four schools are based in Qujing, Yunnan, with the remaining institutions dispersed across cities including Shenzhen, Shantou, Nanjing, Ganzhou, Shijiazhuang, Emei Mountain, Harbin, Guigang, Zhaoqing, Nanyang, and Jinan. This distribution reflects the broad reach of grassroots Confucian schools across China, aligning with observations from existing studies (e.g., Billioud and Thoraval 2015; Gilgan 2022b; Wang 2023a).

Moreover, 11 schools (40.7%) are located in urban areas, while 14 (51.9%) are situated in towns or rural regions. Although most schools (n=17) did not specify tuition fees, three schools reported annual fees ranging from 10,000 to 30,000 RMB (11.1%), five schools charged between 30,000 and 50,000 RMB per year (18.5%), and one school indicated fees exceeding 50,000 RMB annually (3.7%). Given that the majority of Confucian schools operate as private institutions, collecting relatively high tuition is imperative for their

financial sustainability. Only three schools explicitly mentioned providing scholarships or tuition waivers for a portion of their students, while the remainder offered no such details in their advertisements.

In terms of institutional type, 22 of the 27 Confucian schools (81.5%) operate as full-time institutions, while one school runs part-time programs, and three schools adopt a hybrid model combining both full-time and part-time options. Nine schools (33.3%) additionally advertised short-term programs, such as summer or winter classics-reading camps. Regarding accommodation, 12 schools (44.4%) offer boarding facilities, four operate as day schools, and four combine both boarding and day options. The prevalence of boarding schools is unsurprising, particularly given the substantial proportion of institutions located in rural or small-town settings, where boarding often becomes a pragmatic solution. Nevertheless, boarding arrangements can pose challenges, especially for younger children, as prolonged separation from parents may result in psychological strain. Furthermore, managing boarding facilities adds administrative complexities for school staff (Wang 2023a).

I also examined the impact of online teaching in the post-pandemic period. Of the 27 Confucian schools surveyed, five (18.5%) continue to rely exclusively on in-person instruction, while two schools have employed a blended approach that integrates both in-person and online learning. These two institutions primarily use online platforms for short-term activities, such as classics-reading programs or book discussion sessions. The remaining 20 schools did not explicitly clarify whether online teaching had been incorporated into their regular practices. This ambiguity raises important questions for further investigation, particularly regarding how online teaching affects the operations of classical schools, the implementation of Confucian pedagogies, and the overall educational experiences of students engaged in classics-based learning.

(2) Recruitment Strategies

The vast majority of private Confucian schools (n=26) adopt mixed-gender enrollment, admitting both male and female students, while only one school exclusively recruits female students. Regarding enrollment size, two schools accommodate fewer than 10 students, two schools enroll 11-20 students, one school admits 21-30 students, and six schools report an enrollment exceeding 50 students. In terms of student age ranges, seven schools accept children under the age of seven, one school targets students aged seven to nine, seven schools recruit students between 10 and 18 years old, and four schools admit individuals over the age of 18. Additionally, 11 schools practice mixed-age enrollment, spanning primary, secondary, and even adult education levels. I

further examined whether these schools offer nine-year compulsory education programs and found that only five schools (18.5%) meet this criterion. Relatedly, I analyzed the maximum duration of study within the programs offered. The findings indicate that 11 schools allow students to study for one to three years, five schools provide programs lasting four to six years, and one school offers programs exceeding 10 years. Furthermore, eight schools operate under flexible enrollment systems, enabling students to determine their study duration based on individual needs and circumstances.

Drawing on my fieldwork conducted in Confucian schools throughout the 2010s, I can supplement these findings with additional insights. Among the schools I visited during that period, only one had secured official recognition from local authorities as a legal nine-year compulsory Confucian school, an exceptionally rare occurrence nationwide. Regardless of legal status, students enrolled in these schools consistently spanned multiple age groups, encompassing primary, junior secondary (compulsory education), senior high school stages, and even adult learners. Although Confucian schools offering nine-year compulsory education theoretically allow students to complete both primary and junior secondary education in a single institution, this rarely occurs in practice. Instead, students often leave after a few years, either to return to mainstream state-maintained schools or transfer to other Confucian institutions (Wang 2022, 2023a).

In daily teaching, these Confucian schools frequently employ mixed-age teaching methods, where students of varying ages are placed in the same classroom to study classical texts together. This approach reflects both practical considerations for student management and inspiration drawn from historical models of old-style private Confucian education. Such traditional teaching systems are often idealized as environments where students of diverse ages coexisted within a classroom, studying different classical texts while fostering mutual learning and intellectual engagement (Wang 2018; Xu 2012). This practice is corroborated by the descriptive statistics in the current study, which reveal that 24 Confucian schools implement mixed-age teaching methods, accounting for an impressive 88.9% of the sample.

Additionally, 16 schools claim that students will receive a certificate (zhengshu) upon completing their studies; however, it remains unclear whether these "certificates" refer to officially recognized academic qualifications. In contrast, four schools explicitly state that they cannot provide such credentials, while seven schools adopt an ambiguous stance on the matter. This finding is particularly noteworthy. Existing research (Wang 2023a, 2023c) highlights that the lack of formal academic certification

continues to pose a significant institutional barrier for parents and students considering Confucian classical education. Many families hope to transition back into mainstream state-led education after a period of study at private Confucian schools. However, the inability of many institutions –due to their uncertain legal status and unrecognized accreditation– to issue official qualifications diminishes their appeal and amplifies the risks associated with pursuing further educational opportunities (Wang 2022, 2023a). In light of this, among the 27 schools surveyed, over half (n=16) explicitly advertise the issuance of certificates, indicating that these institutions are increasingly aware of the importance of such credentials for students' academic advancement and future career prospects.

Relatedly, 13 schools (48.1%) explicitly mention providing career support for their students, while 14 schools (51.9%) do not include such information. This shift reflects another significant development in recent years as grassroots Confucian education undergoes introspection and pedagogical adaptation, as noted in earlier sections of this chapter. For many years, educators, scholars, and the general public have engaged in heated debates over the question: "What future opportunities exist for students of Confucian classics?" (Wang 2022). Historically, grassroots Confucian education has deprioritized or even overlooked career preparation, particularly for teenage and adult learners. This neglect has left many students and their families uncertain about the practical outcomes and career prospects associated with classical education.

In recent years, however, this issue has begun to receive greater attention. Practitioners of Confucian education have increasingly sought to address the challenge of how students can secure meaningful employment after studying classical texts. For example, one private school mentions that students are offered opportunities to intern at partner enterprises following two years of study. Another Confucian institution encourages students to pursue traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) as a career pathway. These schools integrate TCM knowledge and hands-on training into their curricula, equipping students with practical skills alongside their study of the classics, while supporting them in obtaining professional certification in TCM.

(3) TEACHING PRACTICES

Existing ethnographic research highlights the increasing diversification of content, methods, and philosophies within grassroots Confucian education (Gilgan 2022a; Wang 2023a; Wang and Billioud 2022; Zeng 2022). Rather than conforming to a singular, standardized pedagogical model, individual private schools and academies exhibit considerable variation in their instructional practices. This

variation often arises from pragmatic adjustments made by school operators, tailored to their unique resources and educational visions (Gilgan 2022b). The findings from our statistical analysis further corroborate this observation.

First, I examined the curriculum structures of Confucian schools and identified three distinct patterns. Nine schools (33.3%) focus exclusively on teaching classical Chinese texts, which serve as the primary instructional content. Seven schools (25.9%) combine classical Chinese texts with modern subjects from the national compulsory education curriculum, such as mathematics and science. Notably, 11 schools (40.7%) have adopted what can be described as a "new combined curriculum," which represents an innovative blend of traditional Chinese culture and compulsory education subjects. On the one hand, this curriculum extends beyond classical text recitation to include diverse cultural elements, such as calligraphy, landscape painting, and traditional Chinese medicine. On the other hand, it integrates core academic disciplines, including Chinese language and literature, mathematics, and English.

This finding is particularly significant, as it underscores that curricular diversification has become a defining feature of grassroots Confucian education. Such diversification occurs on two levels. First, classical education has evolved to include a variety of traditional cultural elements and practices alongside the recitation of canonical texts. Second, compulsory education subjects have been intentionally incorporated into the curriculum, reflecting a deliberate effort to balance classical learning with modern educational requirements. The second point is especially noteworthy, as it directly addresses longstanding debates about the compatibility of Confucian education with the state schooling system and the ability of Confucian school students to successfully transition into mainstream education (Billioud and Thoraval 2015; Wang 2023a, 2023c).

A deeper analysis of the classical texts being taught reveals that 13 schools (48.1%) focus predominantly on Confucian classics, while 10 schools (37%) adopt a blended curriculum that encompasses Confucian texts such as The Great Learning, The Doctrine of the Mean, The Analects of Confucius, and Mencius; Daoist texts like Laozi and Zhuangzi; selected Buddhist scriptures; and enlightenment primers (mengxue) such as The Three Character Classic (Sanzi jing), The Thousand Character Essay (Qianzi wen), and Standards for Being a Good Student and Child (Dizigui). Additionally, 18 schools (66.7%) emphasize the importance of students interpreting the texts they memorize to some degree, marking a significant departure from earlier Confucian pedagogical approaches that prioritized rote memorization, especially for young learners (Wang 2014).

The inclusion of English instruction remains a contentious issue within Confucian education. Among the 27 schools surveyed, six (22.2%) include the recitation of English classics, while nine (33.3%) incorporate standard English courses similar to those taught in state schools. By contrast, 10 schools (37%) do not offer English instruction at all. Providing English education requires specialized instructors, yet many private Confucian schools struggle with financial and accreditation challenges that hinder their ability to hire qualified teachers. Nevertheless, the fact that 15 schools (55.5%) now include English in their curriculum represents a notable shift in pedagogical priorities, signaling a move away from earlier practices that excluded English entirely.

Another significant development is the increasing integration of mathematics into Confucian school curricula. Twelve schools (44.4%) now offer mathematics courses, whereas 15 schools do not explicitly mention its inclusion in their recruitment materials. In the early stages of the Confucian education revival, mathematics was largely excluded due to the prevailing philosophy emphasizing intensive recitation of Confucian texts while marginalizing other disciplines (Wang 2018). However, the current data reveal that many classical schools have come to recognize mathematics as both a critical academic skill and a practical tool for facilitating students' eventual reintegration into mainstream educational systems.

In addition to classical texts, enlightenment primers and talent-based courses (caiyi) have regained prominence in Confucian schools. Twelve schools (44.4%) offer courses based on enlightenment primers, while 14 schools do not reference them in their materials. More significantly, 22 schools (81.5%) provide a variety of talent and skill-based courses, with only five schools omitting such offerings. These schools typically offer a diverse range of skills training, including calligraphy (n=19, 70.4%), traditional Chinese medicine (n=13, 48.1%), and classical chanting (n=11, 40.7%). Furthermore, nearly all Confucian schools (n=24, 88.9%) incorporate physical education into their programs, with a strong emphasis on specific forms of Chinese martial arts such as Eight Brocade Exercises (Baduanjin), Form-Intension Boxing (Xingyiquan), and Tai Chi. Additionally, 17 schools (63%) highlight rituals and propriety (liyi) training, integrating it into their curriculum as a core component of classroom decorum and broader life education. It is worth noting that this figure may underestimate the actual prevalence of propriety training, as many Confucian schools embed it into daily activities but do not always emphasize it explicitly in their promotional materials.

IV. CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF GRASSROOTS CONFUCIAN EDUCATION

While scholars have made substantial progress in researching grassroots Confucian education throughout the 2000s and 2010s, there remains a discernible gap in understanding its developments in the 2020s. The contemporary landscape presents grassroots Confucian education with both pressing challenges and emerging opportunities, necessitating a reassessment of prevailing trends. Drawing on my observations, contemporary private Confucian schools exhibit several noteworthy developments that merit further exploration.

First, there is an increasing effort among grassroots Confucian schools to align with the state-regulated education system. This alignment is evident in their growing emphasis on resolving issues related to students' academic registration and the issuance of recognized certificates upon graduation. Moreover, many schools are incorporating compulsory education subjects into their curricula. These strategies reflect a calculated response to the intensified scrutiny and legal uncertainties surrounding the status of private Confucian institutions. Scholars have previously noted that grassroots Confucian education during the 2000s and 2010s maintained a relationship with the state education system characterized by complementarity, competition, and independence (Billioud and Thoraval 2015). However, in the 2020s, I observe a distinct shift toward closer integration with state education policies. This alignment implies that private Confucian schools must increasingly operate within the boundaries of the state-led educational framework. Consequently, their autonomy is likely to diminish, with their activities subject to stricter oversight and regulation by state authorities.

Second, grassroots Confucian schools are prioritizing curricular inclusivity and pedagogical diversity. The earlier predominant focus on rote memorization of Confucian classics is gradually being replaced by a more comprehensive and inclusive approach. An emerging "Classics+" model integrates traditional recitation with courses that encompass various facets of Chinese cultural heritage. Schools are tailoring their curricula to include subjects such as calligraphy, traditional Chinese medicine, and martial arts while simultaneously addressing modern academic disciplines like mathematics and sciences. This curricular transformation reflects each school's unique educational philosophy and practical considerations, highlighting the dynamic and adaptive nature of grassroots Confucian education.

This diversification underscores the broader process of reimagining and reinterpreting traditional Confucian education. Rather than replicating histor-

ical practices, grassroots Confucian educators selectively reappropriate and innovate elements of the past to meet contemporary needs. As a result, the future of grassroots Confucian education is likely to be defined by increasing complexity, adaptability, and variability. Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognize that this pluralistic development unfolds within a narrative framework shaped by state policies aimed at the inheritance and revitalization of Chinese excellent traditional culture (zhonghua youxiu chuantong wenhua). Within this context, grassroots Confucian schools must continuously adapt their practices to align with the state's cultural-political agenda, ensuring their legitimacy while mitigating potential conflicts (Wang 2023c).

Third, grassroots Confucian educators continue to critically reflect on the challenges that have emerged from years of practical teaching, making intentional adjustments to their instructional methods to address these issues. Reform-minded private school leaders are increasingly recognizing and tackling long-overlooked concerns, particularly those related to the career prospects and future pathways for students immersed in Confucian classics. Historically neglected, these issues have now become central to reform efforts.[14] Furthermore, teachers and parents involved in Confucian education are no longer confined to the previous "first private school, then academy" model. Instead, they are embracing more diverse and flexible pathways for students' individual development. For instance, some private schools now encourage older students to combine the study of Confucian classics with preparations for state-accredited self-study examinations (zixue kaoshi), enabling them to obtain recognized university degrees and enhance their employability. Other schools have partnered with local businesses to facilitate internships for students, offering them valuable work experience alongside their classical studies.

Finally, online teaching, as an enduring legacy of the pandemic, has become an integral part of some private Confucian schools' long-term strategies, complementing traditional in-person instruction. Schools now leverage online platforms to offer short-term classics-reading programs, such as summer and winter camps, public lectures on traditional culture, and interactive sessions with parents. For schools facing tighter regulatory oversight from local authorities, online teaching provides a significant advantage by circumventing physical location constraints, enabling them to sustain operations and expand

14 A recent example is my observation of a series of online forums organized by private Confucian school leaders in 2023 and 2024. The topic of employment opportunities and career pathways for students immersed in Confucian classics emerged as a central focus, garnering substantial attention and sparking active discussions among educators, parents, and students engaged in Confucian education.

their reach. Additionally, the proliferation of free and paid online Confucian courses, alongside virtual seminars on classical Chinese culture, has significantly increased public access to Confucian learning. Nonetheless, the role of digital technology and social media demands further scholarly inquiry to fully understand its impact on and implications for the revival of grassroots Confucian education in contemporary China.

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