

## Book Review

# CULTIVATING THE CONFUCIAN INDIVIDUAL

Ziteng Wang<sup>♦</sup>

Canglong Wang. *Cultivating the Confucian Individual: The Confucian Education Revival in China*. Springer International Publishing, Imprint: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, 257 pp. ISBN: 978-3-031-27669-9

**Abstract:** A selfish and individualistic attitude has emerged as a significant global force, drawing considerable attention. This focus on self-interest has sparked serious concerns in familial, social, and global contexts. Such self-centered behavior not only harms personal relationships but also undermines the universal principle of treating others as they wish to be treated, severely impacting social cohesion. In contrast, Confucian teachings present a different form of individualism that is distinct from selfishness. Emphasizing the cultivation of personal virtue to contribute positively to society, Confucian principles, especially prominent in Chinese culture, promote cultural excellence and social prosperity. This form of individualism prioritizes the well-being of the community over mere self-interest.

**Keywords:** Confucian Individual, Chinese culture, Confucian Education, selfishness, Personal Virtue.

*Cultivating the Confucian Individual* by Canglong Wang explores the resurgence of Confucian learning in China amidst the rise of self-centred individuality. Across eight chapters, Wang highlights the importance of a memorization-based pedagogy rooted in

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Confucian classics as a means to shape students into moral individuals (p. 237). The book highlights the interplay between authoritarianism and individualism, suggesting that memorizing classics within an authoritarian framework cultivates morally distinguished cultural talents. This approach seeks to develop autonomous, learned individuals who uphold Confucian values. A distinctive feature of this model is the significant role parents and teachers play in cultivating children's learning capacities. Using a school ethnography approach, Wang's study focuses on cultivating children's learning capacities to become exemplars for social reform and the world. An important aspect of Wang's construction is the dual role of educators and students; while teachers and parents play a crucial part in imparting Confucian principles, the students' dedication to reading and memorizing these classics is equally vital.

In the First Chapter, Wang discusses the significant influence of Western culture on Chinese society, leading many parents to view traditional systems as outdated and irrelevant to contemporary issues in politics, society, and the economy. Since the establishment of communist rule in 1949, Wang notes that the government has moved away from promoting traditional virtues (pp. 1-2). Despite these challenges, there is a revival of Confucian education in modern China, driven both top-down by the government and bottom-up by grassroots movements. Wang emphasizes the grassroots revival, which focuses on self-cultivation and the study of Confucian classics as an alternative to exam-focused education. Parents are establishing *sishu* (traditional private schools) to engage children in this educational approach, prioritizing moral development over personal gain (pp. 2-3, 4, 6, 8). Wang also explores the pedagogical benefits of these practices and highlights Yiqian School's role in cultivating moral excellence. This Confucian school encourages children aged 6-15 to read and memorize classical texts, following Wang's theoretical framework (pp. 11-12).

In the Second Chapter, the author constructs a theoretical framework that contrasts the individualization thesis with selfish individuation, asserting that Confucian education remedies such

moral failings (p. 36). By exploring the individualization thesis through Confucian principles, Wang reveals the dual desire of parents: to engage their children in moral education and the memorization of Confucian classics. Additionally, Wang employs Foucault's concepts of governmentality and subjectification to understand power relations (p. 39). Rather than focusing on inequalities, Wang contextualizes Foucault's notion of disciplinary power by having students practice Confucian classics through text memorization (p. 40).

In the Third Chapter, Wang investigates why parents choose to engage their children in learning and memorizing Confucian classical texts. The empirical study of Wang shows that parents value Confucian education for its focus on cultivating morality through the memorization of Chinese texts, prioritizing this over mere knowledge acquisition (p. 63). Wang's dis-embedding methodology highlights how parents and children become participants in a transformative process, distancing themselves from state school policies (pp. 65, 83). Despite their preference for Confucian education, parents also acknowledge the necessity of the state school system (p. 87).

The fourth and fifth chapters of the book focus on the practitioners at Yiqian School, highlighting the differences between authoritarian and individualization concepts. The individualized memorization approach at Yiqian School fosters autonomous, learned capabilities in students. Chapter six elaborates on the transition from Confucian education at Yiqian School back to the state school system. Wang highlights the significance of this transition by presenting case studies of parents who, instead of continuing with state schools, prefer to enroll their children in further Confucian studies at Boyue Academy (p. 173). However, data from interviews reveal that many students opt for state school education for better career prospects. Consequently, even parents who were initially interested in Confucian schools become concerned about their children's future (p. 175). Therefore, parents show interest in full-time enrollment at Yiqian School only if it offers state courses like Mathematics

and English alongside Confucian education. Chapter Seven provides insightful thoughts on re-embedding Confucian education at Boyue Academy. The empirical research reveals that students are more inclined towards personal interests rather than adhering to sage discourses (p. 217). The final chapter summarizes the book's findings, including limitations and implications for future research. Wang's work contextualizes the revival of Confucian education in China, presenting parents, teachers, and children as cultural actors shaping Chinese individualization (p. 246). This book serves as a vital resource for balancing students' moral and knowledge-based education, offering substantial insights into Wang's model of Confucian revival.

Wang's empirical approach provides deep insights from parents' and teachers' perspectives, highlighting the involvement of both older and younger students in expressing their interests. However, the book does not address the post-pandemic context, which has significantly impacted the global education system. The historical approach to Confucian education is also underexplored, which could offer a more authentic understanding of this educational model's future prospects. Despite these shortcomings, the book remains an essential resource for students, teachers, parents, practitioners, and anyone interested in Confucian education. It offers valuable perspectives on balancing moral and academic education, providing a comprehensive understanding of Confucian educational practices in modern China.