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Abstract

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, traditional Confucian education re-emerged in China in the context of so-called study halls and academies. The goal of the parents, teachers, and headmasters associated with them is to cultivate modern virtuous persons through an approach called "classics-reading education." Even though they allude to deep historical roots, these contemporary facilities are novel (re)creations, developed in response to current needs. This article examines the classics-reading movement under the theoretical lens of infrastructures of memory to illustrate the roles of memory and the perception of the past in the current making of "traditional" education and educational sites. Memories of and references to the past inform people's visions of a better future that is to be achieved through their tradition-related educational practices. Making a connection with the past through memory aims at stability in the face of future uncertainty.

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Keywords

Classics-reading movement, heritage formation, infrastructures of memory, utopia

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Introduction: The Classics-Reading Movement and Bottom-Up Narratives in Cultural Heritage

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, traditional Confucian education re-emerged in so-called study halls (学堂, *xuetang*) and academies (书院, *shuyuan*), especially in large cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Chengdu, Xiamen, and Guangzhou. These educational facilities are described as reactivated traditional structures (Billioud and Thoraval, 2007: 15; 2015: 86) that aim to cultivate a modern "virtuous person" (君子, *junzi*; Billioud and Thoraval, 2015: 43, 86f.; the term is chosen instead of "morally upright gentleman" as gender is not considered a factor that influences a person's degree of cultivation in the context of this education). Involved educators call this approach "classics-reading education" (读经教育, *dujing jiaoyu*; Billioud and Thoraval, 2015: 17). The common agenda of reviving tradition for the good of society is a core motivation among the activists of the so-called classics-reading movement (读经运动, *dujing yundong*). Although they allude to deep historical roots, today's study halls and academies are novel (re)creations that embody responses to current needs. They are based on institutional models that emerged during times of social upheaval a century earlier.

The Confucian revival that has been taking place in academia and politics since the Reform and Opening Era has received important scholarly attention in Asian and Chinese studies (such as Billioud, 2007; Billioud and Thoraval, 2008; Bresciani, 2001; Liu, 2007, 2010; Makeham, 2003). Grassroots development in popular Confucianism increased in the first decade of the twenty-first century, and educational initiatives that make use of traditional elements have been a major strand in these but have appeared in fewer projects. The most comprehensive research on popular Confucianism has been done by the French sinologists Sébastien Billioud and Joël Thoraval (Billioud, 2018; Billioud and Thoraval, 2007, 2015). Their work includes qualitative research on four classics-reading facilities and embeds educational initiatives as insightful examples of the scope of vibrant activity in Chinese civil society. The broadest collection of data on study halls and academies (Gilgan, 2020, 2022) shows a diversity of approaches to the past and to tradition; these reflect perceptions of history that influence collective memory and practices of cultural production among the involved people. The importance and value of these practices for the landscape of cultural heritage remain to be explicated. People's involvement in heritage practices mirrors a core concern of the discursive turn in heritage studies, that is, the focus on cultural heritage as a construct of discursive practice, which assigns a central place to the actors involved in the discourse (Wu and Hou, 2015: 39). I consider heritage in this context as a process of social production that is created by the people and is both part of and constitutive of collective memory (Apaydin, 2020: 88; Smith, 2015: 140). The classics-reading movement illustrates the relevance of bottom-up narratives and discourses in the field of cultural heritage in contemporary China.

In this article, I focus on the meaning of memory in popular Confucian education, its influence on the landscape of the Confucian revival, and the role of non-state agency in heritage production. I will argue that collective memory and narratives on tradition as

well as place-making in bottom-up heritage formation processes reveal the need to connect with lost roots to bring orientation and stability into times of uncertainty. The degree of people-generated stability, however, depends on the level of state interference.

"Infrastructures of Memory" (IoM) in Complementary Function to Grounded Utopian Movement Theory

Methodology: A Constructive Grounded Theory Approach

This study builds on previous findings and the resulting classification of the classics-reading movement as a "grounded utopian movement" (GUM; Gilgan, 2020: 74–84). Data was collected in participant observation and semi-structured interviews with headmasters, teachers, and parents (as main drivers of the movement; interviewed after written consent) in twenty-one privately run study halls and academies that offer full-time classics-reading education in ten Chinese cities between October 2015 and July 2016 (facilities referred to in this article are listed in an appendix, see the supplemental material; see also Gilgan, 2020: 311–314). Stays in the facilities varied between one day, a couple of days, and two weeks, depending on the facility's capacity and willingness to host a researching visitor. All research was conducted in Chinese; an interpreter was not necessary. The interview excerpts in this article were chosen to illustrate the role that memory and history play in activists' narratives. Interviewees are cited by their role in the classics-reading facilities or individual codes for which the roles are specified in the reference section. The original names of the visited classics-reading facilities are anonymised in relation to the type of facility and location. Naturally occurring talk during field research is referred to as "conversations" to distinguish them from the more structured and recorded interviews.

The analysis is grounded theory driven, meaning that it starts from data fragments to derive theoretical statements. Coding is pivotal here; together, the codes form the elements of a nascent theory that explains the data and guides further data collection while in the field and during analysis (for the detailed step-by-step coding process behind the theoretical discussion under the GUM theory, see Gilgan, 2020: 61–71). Successive levels of abstraction lead to proximity to general theories (Charmaz, 2006: 46, 178, 180), which means that the discussion between theory and data starts from what the data themselves produce and what perspectives they generate (an ethnographic approach), rather than testing theories or hypotheses against the data. Reflecting the different levels of abstraction in the grounded theory process, interviewees in this study are in some instances cited indirectly on joint themes and concerns that derived from relating, comparing, and interpreting (parts of) the interviews.

The proximity to (established) general theories in Kathy Charmaz's constructive approach to grounded theory arises "from scrutinizing numerous particulars and after developing a substantive theory may include analyzing and conceptualizing the results of multiple studies to construct a formal theory" (Charmaz, 2006: 180). "Constructive"

means that the analysis implies an interpretative understanding of the empirical world and does not view the theory as a "closed system," which means that a constructive grounded theory process provides an "open-ended approach to studying the empirical world" (Charmaz, 2006: 23). One can go back to the data and again into (new) analysis; new data and revised coding can lead to further development of the previous theory; and there can be proximity to more than one established theory. In this study, the theoretical discussion of the classics-reading movement as GUM is complemented by the IoM theory to illustrate the roles of memory and the perception of the past in the current making of "traditional" education and educational sites, and thus the role of peoples' narratives in the landscape of cultural heritage.

Theoretical Frame: "IoM" in Further Development of GUM Theory

GUMs emerge in contexts characterised by imperial coercion (e.g. generated by direct foreign rule) that threaten an entire cultural group, people or community, which results in their desire to search for an ideal place where this oppression is not yet or no longer existent (Price et al., 2008: 134). This is where "utopia" comes into play. The historian Jay Winter (2006: 3) characterises "utopia" as a discourse between two contradictory parts. The first regards discontinuity with the past through moments or events that represent a strong rupture, and the other regards a future vision that is accompanied by the realisation that the present state is not ideal – it is not a utopia. The analysis and disentanglement of utopia show people's ways of relating to their histories, their understanding of (1) their specific present circumstances with a view to (2) their historical development, as well as (3) a possible future (Gordin et al., 2010: 2–4). The anthropologists Charles Price, Donald Nonini, and Erich Fox Tree have identified this threefold timely entanglement of utopia in social movements in the Americas that make use of cultural resources (e.g. religious beliefs) to create novel cultural formations and meanings in response to external threats to their cultural foundations (Price et al., 2008: 128). These threats can extend far back in history; their being present is constituted through people's memories and their perceptions of history. Activists' action is also propelled by their present perceptions of an oppressive past (Price et al., 2008: 145–146). Their utopia-driven quest for a better alternative for the future furthermore reverts to tradition as it used to be before external power exerted its influence. Images of this future are constructed on the basis of ideas of a time long past, which are used to fill that future with stability. Here is the join of a dual function of history in the utopian quest, as both source of challenges and treasure chest of solutions, and this reveals that its perception by individuals and groups is biased and laden with people's ideas and emotions.

Structurally, GUM theory focuses on tensions between activists' utopian thinking and their endeavours to ground it in concrete spatial practice, such as educational measures, rituals, and embodied values in classics-reading education. This grounding involves concrete physical sites, activists' meaning-making expressed in spatial activity and overarching narratives that connect sites and activities with activists' perceptions of the past and visions for the future. Under the lens of IoM, the process of this "grounding" can be

further explored, and particularly the role of memory and narratives about the past in place-making among the activists can be better understood. Anthropologist Jonah Rubin (2018) developed his IoM approach to explain the role of people's memories and perceptions of the past in memory politics. Rubin describes how remnants of the past, in the form of physical structures that relate to historical incidents, as well as in the form of archived documents that carry information on past events, continue to exert power in current political contexts. Here, "infrastructures of memory" show how the government, through the physical and institutional structures it developed to preserve the past, influences present memory-making. The classics-reading movement, however, is in the hands of the people. Activists choose which elements of the past they wish to feed into the process of cultural transmission and heritage formation; they actively establish sites and places of education, ritual, and everyday life to enact their understanding of the past and of tradition, and they do it in the vision of a past-inspired future. The lens of IoM will be adapted accordingly to the perspective of the people. After contextualising the revival of Confucian education, interviewees' narratives and practices in study halls and academies are analysed to show the way people's perception and embodiment of the past form narratives and inspire spatial activity that ultimately shapes new physical sites of heritage.

Traditional Confucian Education Today and the Role of Discontinuities in the Past

Study halls and academies today, though alluding to a long educational past, are not in continuity with tradition, but rather relate to revivals of tradition in times of upheaval. All the phases of revitalisation mentioned below have their own context; however, they have in common the moment of discontinuity or rupture. Study halls were among the institutions of elementary learning at the beginning of the twentieth century. They emerged at a time of transformation from traditional learning to modern, Western education. Western subjects were taught, as well as reading the classics (读经, *dujing*), which served to underline Chinese national identity and patriotism (Goossaert and Palmer, 2011: 172–173). After the abolition of the imperial examinations in 1905 and with the end of traditional systems of learning, culture, and ritual that coincided with the fall of the last dynasty in 1911, educational reform was guided by American-oriented educational structures and curriculum content (Bailey, 2013: 400; Goossaert and Palmer, 2011: 95). The void in the intellectual world was filled with thinking originating in so-called Western or Northern countries. The May Fourth era (between 1915 and 1923/1924/1925; Chow, 1960: 4–6; Rahav, 2015: 13) marked a serious struggle among Chinese intellectuals with their own traditions and the adoption of new ideas from foreign and former imperialist powers.

After the many years of the Chinese Civil War (1927–1949) between the Nationalists and Communists, the Chinese Communist Party founded the People's Republic of China in 1949. The educational system was remodelled again, this time according to Soviet socialist ideals. Teaching contents and material oriented towards technical subjects

such as engineering and mining were imported from the Soviet Union and translated into Chinese. School and labour were combined; students would work part-time in their school's factory or garden or only go to school only part-time to support China's workforce (Glöckner, 2013: 198). This idea of education and the practice of learning that accompanied it were quite far from the ways of the traditional scholar-literati. The destruction of culture and tradition during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) marks another caesura reflected by the people in the classics-reading movement.

The academies that flourished in the Song 宋 dynasty (960–1279) as private schools for study under neo-Confucian literati using the Four Books (四书, *sishu*) and as platforms for intellectual exchange among these scholars, continued to serve as institutions of higher learning throughout the Ming 明 (1368–1644) and Qing 清 dynasties (1644–1911; Bol, 2008: 229; Chen, 2009: 156). They experienced a revival in the 1920s and 1930s during the emergence of modern New Confucianism (现代新儒家, *xiandai xinrujia*), a school of thought that was intended to preserve Confucian thought at the beginning of the twentieth century as the basis for the modernisation of China (Liu, 2007: 74). This was at a time when Western culture and science were considered superior while the Confucian tradition was viewed with suspicion and considered the source of China's overall backwardness relative to the West. In this antitraditional atmosphere, one reason why the Confucian tradition was brought forth by New Confucian scholars was to demonstrate that China had a valuable cultural legacy that could be a foundation for its modernity (Chow, 1960: 4–6; Liu, 2007: 74; Rahav, 2015: 13).

Study halls and academies experienced another revival within the classics-reading movement at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In 1994, the Taiwanese scholar Wang Caigui 王财贵) (b. 1949) began an initiative calling for the reading of Chinese classics under the slogan "My child, read with me" (小朋友，跟我读, *xiaopengyou, gen wo du*; He, 2009: 23), which was taken up by tradition-enthusiastic parents in Taiwan. The *Analects* (论语, *lunyu*), a Confucian classic containing dialogues between Master Confucius and his disciples, were at the core of the reading and recitation. These activities expanded to mainland China in 1997, especially into big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Wuhan, Chengdu, and Xiamen. Parents were mobilised to read not only the *Analects* but a range of works from the Confucian canon with their children after class and on weekends. The seed of the classics-reading movement had been planted (Billioud and Thoraval, 2015: 85; Cao, 2012: 18; He, 2009: 23, 26f.; Li, 2008: 152). There are no official statistics on the total number of facilities and enrolled students associated with the movement. It is estimated that at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, several tens of thousands of students were enrolled in classics-reading educational facilities (Billioud and Thoraval, 2015: 48), and a few million children were involved in reading the classics generally (Billioud, 2018: 8; Billioud and Thoraval, 2015: 41). This movement, even though its beginnings were in cities, is not an urban phenomenon. Several facilities that were founded in the city moved later into rural areas (Gilgan, 2020: 55, 129, 153), and there are classics-reading facilities in the countryside as well (Dutournier and Wang, 2018: 267). Local governments in China also invest in the renovation of ancient academies, for

example, as tourist attractions to support the local economy and as symbols of cultural nationalism (Walton, 2020: 69–71). This dynamic is different from the establishment of private academies as alternative educational institutions.

Classics-reading education is the underlying pedagogical concept, and at its centre, Wang Caigui placed the Confucian classics. He attributes to them the essence of Chinese culture and ethics, as well as the general rules that a person's life should follow and thus considers them to be most suitable for childrearing and education (Wang, n.d.: 11). It encompasses joint and individual reading and reciting of the classics with the goal to learn them by heart. The intensity of self-study and the amount of target text for memorisation vary with age and are connected with the two major learning abilities that Wang Caigui ascribes to humans: (1) memory (记忆力, *jiyili*) and (2) understanding and comprehension (理解力, *lijieli*). A child slowly develops the ability to memorise until the age of three years old, accelerating between the ages of three and six, culminating in the "golden period" (黄金时代, *huangjin shidai*) of memorisation between the ages of six and thirteen, during which children should practice frequent reading (阅读, *yuedu*) as well as rhythmic and fast recitation (诵读, *songdu*) because these years are the best for this kind of learning (Wang, n.d.: 19–22). After thirteen years old, the ability to memorise decreases, while the capacity for understanding increases, and the learners are ready to understand the contents of what they had memorised over the preceding years by burying their noses in commentaries to the classics and in grammar books (Wang, n.d.: 21; 2009: 16).

In classics-reading education, we encounter a selection of elements drawn from thought and practice at different periods of Chinese history, assembled into a mosaic to serve new purposes. Wang's concept of learning and its relationship to age groups can be traced to the theories of education that were prevalent under the Yuan 元 (1279–1368), Ming, and Qing dynasties (Billioud and Thoraval, 2015: 86–89): the Ming-Qing scholar Lu Shiyi 陆世仪 (1611–1672) declares that the years before puberty are optimal for learning because children are not yet troubled by sexual desires; this time coincides with Wang's golden period. The Ming author and government official Xie Zhaozhe 谢肇淛 (1567–1624) characterises rote learning as an important element in children's overall learning, while the Qing poet Wang Yun 王筠 (1764–1854) stresses the element of comprehension; these two aspects resonate with Wang's two learning abilities. Finally, the approach to the classics found in the classics-reading movement resembles the educational concepts of Yuan neo-Confucian scholar Cheng Duanli 程端礼 (1271–1345), who advocates reading the original texts of the Four Books and Five Classics (五经, *wujing*) while ignoring the mass of commentaries on them. In today's educational facilities, reading the classics is accompanied by learning rites, such as dressing neatly and greeting adults with a bow, practices which are inspired by the Confucian scholar Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200).

In a novel situation, elements that are tied to the past can offer stability and serve a specific current purpose. This is what historian Eric Hobsbawm (1983: 2, 4–5) considers to be lying at the foundation of "invented tradition"; it is a response to needs arising from changes occurring in the present. Invented traditions are different from customs; they

arise when the "old" traditions might have proven to be unacceptable, unsuitable, or not usable for the novel present. Communities identifying with these invented traditions are held together by common practices (Hobsbawm, 1983: 12). In the case of classics-reading education, small diasporic classics-reading circles (读经圈, *dujing quan*; Anonymous 15, 2015, Anonymous 16, 2015, and Anonymous 21, 2016) live out new-old lifeways in their study halls and academies in the classics-reading world (读经界, *dujingjie*; a term frequently used among classics-reading activists), embodying their own understanding and interpretation of Confucian tradition, and creating their own narratives on and sites of tradition. Grassroots scholars and self-taught tradition enthusiasts, workers, peasants, craftsmen, businessmen, former schoolteachers, and many more enter the field of classical Chinese education today (Billioud, 2018: 3f.), indicating a transgression of ordinary citizens in the popular sphere (民间, *minjian*) into the former domain of (imperial) scholar-literati and the intellectual elite (Billioud and Thoraval, 2015: 8). Through their self-driven processes of heritage formation, they own these domains in their own ways, as the following accounts show.

Collective Memory, Narratives, and Heritage Formation in Classics-Reading Education

In the physical study halls and academies today, educators train children in the recitation and memorisation of the Confucian classics; study halls recruit children from three years old and up, and academies usually take students from the beginning of their teenage years. The educational practice and daily school life embody many elements that are re-created by reference to the past: Confucius rituals, traditional teacher-student relationships, discipline and self-cultivation, a lifestyle led by values such as modesty and frugality, and a devotion to studying the Confucian classics are core elements of learning and living in today's study halls and academies. In class, common practice is that the learners sit down and recite the classics steadily and monotonously. The teacher reads out what is written and the students repeat chorally. A good classics-reading student needs a loud voice, fast rhythmic reading, and the ability to be alert and attentive in joint recitation sessions that can last up to two hours (Anonymous 12, 2015; Anonymous 14, 2015; Anonymous 25, 2015; field observation: Suzhou Study Hall A, 13 November 2015; Xiamen Study Hall A, 13 October 2015; Xiamen Study Hall B, 26 October 2015; Shenzhen Study Hall A, 8 March 2016; Beijing Academy B, 21 January 2016). Recitation of the classics in a full-time educational approach is hard and disciplined work. This is especially the case for study halls and academies that operate according to a so-called pure classics-reading (纯读经, *chun dujing*, also 老实大量读经, *laoshi daliang dujing*) approach, that is, reading and reciting for at least eight hours per day, allowing no other activities on the curriculum. There are, however, also facilities that take a much lighter approach to read the classics, such as kindergarten facilities in particular. Playing and reading the classics are considered to be daily activities of equivalent merit. Western classics such as the Bible and Shakespeare's works are seen in many facilities as preparatory tools for an understanding of other cultures in the world (Wang, 2015).

Usually, the headmasters (堂主, *tangzhu*) set the tone for the traditional or Confucian education that is practised, and they have the power to determine which elements in a tradition should be passed on under the roof of their facility. Sometimes teachers also support them in these questions. Many headmasters and teachers were once employed in jobs related to culture or education, such as journalism, teaching (such as at a public school, a university, or a further education institution), publishing or the promotion of classics-reading education. Many, however, have no previous experience in teaching or education; enthusiasm and the will to learn are more valued than university qualifications. Nevertheless, the teacher is the central authority in class, a doctrine that is visually underlined by the images of Confucius on the walls. The classics are considered to be the second authority as they are vessels through which the words of the sages are handed down to the present generation by its present teachers. Confucius' image does not only underline the position of the teacher in class visually; it is also included in daily rituals. It is common at all study halls and academies for students to bow to the teacher and to Confucius before and after each lesson. In most cases, the students bow to Confucius first and then to the teacher. Either a teacher or a student guides this ritual of respect by saying "bow" (鞠躬, *jugong*) and "get up" (起, *qi*). The students bow jointly, and the teacher usually responds with one bow back to the students (field observation: Suzhou Study Hall A, 13 November 2015; Shenzhen Study Hall A, 13 March 2016; Beijing Academy A, 18 January 2016, Xiamen Study Hall B, 26 October 2015). For the children, the educational value of these rituals is in the foreground; they teach the students respect for authority, and they are urged to learn these rituals from early age onwards (Anonymous 4, 2016). Furthermore, Confucius is regarded as a master of all teachers and as a sage; this ritual of respect manifests his position and that of the sages as idols in the eyes of the individual (imperfect) person (Anonymous 1, 2016; Anonymous 4; Anonymous 26, 2016; Wang, 2015). His image is thus a motivator for self-cultivation among adults in the facilities.

Education to become a virtuous person takes place in environments with deliberately constructed social conditions. Many educators believe that a person's behaviour is influenced by both the physical conditions of that person's surroundings and the social constellation of the people within it:

> There is a saying in China: "those who are close to cinnabar will get red, and those who are close to black pigment [for making ink] will get black" (*jin zhu zhe chi,* 近朱者赤, *jin mo zhe hei,* 近墨者黑). Chinese people are convinced that all people are the product of their environments. (Teacher at Beijing Academy A/Anonymous 8, 2016)

A good environment is organised according to conscious patterns and structures that should influence the people who are interacting within it. In the context of classics-reading education, the learning environment is a positive basis for working out new social interactions, which are to be transformed according to standards of good and moral behaviour. Study halls and academies are thus conceived as starting points for creating a better society: elements from the past form a tradition-infused vision of a better

future, and this is embodied in concrete spatial practice to educate new role models, the modern, who will extend this vision throughout society at large (Billioud and Thoraval, 2008: 100; 2015: 44f.).

Classics-reading facilities, with their links to tradition in educational practice, are part of the social frames that shape the activists' collective memory (Assmann, 2008: 51–52, in reference to Maurice Halbwachs). Memory does not emerge on its own but is very specifically determined by the people (Assmann, 2008: 51). Social frames are structures of "shared concerns, values, experiences, narratives" (Assmann, 2008: 51–52) that can be implicit or explicit. They determine the collective memory of tradition that feeds into the creation of new traditional education in the present, and in the classics-reading movement, this takes place before the image of a desired future. That alone does not constitute the driver of the movement, as there is a second type of collective memory of the past that is jointly criticised by activists. This memory is concerned with foreign influences in the educational and political system, as well as the intellectual world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is negatively oriented and propels people's utopian searches for alternatives to the status quo that simultaneously (re-)form continuity with a better, lost past.

Interviewees' Reconnection with a Better Past Through the Classics

Classics-reading education is being used by activists to fill a void that has opened up in their own cultural identity, creating new ideals for the future that will return their tradition to the future through the present. Parents, classics-reading teachers, and headmasters shared with me their dissatisfaction and feelings of disillusionment concerning the social and moral values of society, in education and, resulting from this, in interpersonal relations. These assessments of the status quo draw on their reception of twentieth century history and personal memory. The motivations of the intellectual leader Wang Caigui to bring the Chinese classics back into today's education are rooted in his youth, when he began to feel regret that the classics had been erased from the national curriculum at the beginning of the twentieth century. He felt that Chinese tradition was cast aside and blamed for China's then unfavourable and uncompetitive development status, and was therefore substituted with Western thought, science and system (Wang, 2015). However, he claims that his classics-reading approach, which focuses on transmitting the wisdom of the sages to children, was the most useful and fruitful education available, as it allowed the learner to absorb content that cultivates the personal natural disposition, aesthetic perception, and knowledge. His approach to reviving classical education was to seek to repair the system by, in his words, "flipping" or "reversing" time:

> We need to reverse time (*fan shidai*, 反时代), we need to transform this age (*gaizao shidai*, 改造时代). […] I want to educate talented people like [the *junzi*], I want to educate a few thousand or a few ten thousand of such people, and they need to walk into the world, and this way, they could influence the whole world. (Wang, 2015)

The sense of loss referred to by Wang is shared by other classics-reading headmasters in the field: the loss of the Confucian classics and traditional education also meant the loss of a source of guidance in life and spiritual fulfilment. The active political decisions that led there are considered to have been a mistake, as the headmaster of Beijing Academy B puts it:

> People thought that the Chinese classics were useless – and not only useless but also a hindrance to the process of modernisation. […] They believed that China's culture was an obstacle for democracy and science, that people must adopt democracy and science and cast aside Chinese culture. This is how the people of the May Fourth movement thought. Such a way of thought looks kind of radical today. [I think that] you can absorb things from Western culture, but you do not need to set aside everything from Chinese culture like you pour away bathwater. (Headmaster of Beijing Academy B/Anonymous 5, 2016)

The cultural oppression addressed in GUMs as an element imposed by foreigners seems rather to have been chosen a self-imposed yoke taken up by intellectuals and leaders during the May Fourth period, in assertion or recognition of Western cultural and technological superiority. However, many activists agree that nothing coming from the West, neither science, democracy nor religion, could provide a similar basis to what the Chinese had in the Confucian tradition, nothing was that all-encompassing, nothing was sufficient and nothing had its roots in China (Anonymous 1, 2016; Anonymous 5, 2016; Anonymous 15, 2015; Anonymous 18, 2015; Anonymous 23, 2016; Wang, 2015).

For some activists, the roots of today's problems reach back beyond the period of Western imperialism to another kind of foreign domination: the Qing rule. The headmaster of Suzhou Study Hall A criticised that the Qing were responsible for the negative image that the Chinese have of their own tradition in the first place that had led them to adopt Western thinking. She states that the Manchus were an ethnic minority that came from the margins of the empire under the formerly glorious Han-Chinese Ming dynasty, and when they took power, they displaced the original Chinese culture, thus opening the way for Western thought and theory. She came to this conviction while engaging in the revival of traditional Han garments which is actually at the core of a movement that Australia-based sinologist Kevin Carrico (2017: 85–87) has called *Han clothing movement* (汉服运动, *Hanfu yundong*). This nationalist movement focused on the Han ethnicity emerged in the first decade of the twenty-first century and seeks to revitalise the Han nationality through the wearing of the traditional Han garments *Hanfu*. Activists believe that supposedly barbarian Manchu clothes such as the typical Qipao 旗袍 or the equestrian vest Magua 马褂, which came into fashion in the Qing dynasty, replaced the originally (culturally) correct Han garments of the people, relating this culture-displacement-through-clothes to conspiracies by the Manchu against the Han (Carrico, 2017: 85–87). Law and Qin (2022) take a structured look at the diverse and polyphonic academic perspectives on the movement, which is based on their own data and extends beyond Carrico's work.

Suzhou Study Hall A's headmaster's reading of history is quite emotionally charged, which some longer interview excerpts show. She develops a sense of personal

responsibility for correcting the course of history upon it, and it feeds her sense of mission in the classics-reading movement:

> No matter whether through literary inquisition (文字狱, *wenziyu*), isolation of the country (闭关锁国, *biguan suoguo*), or high pressure through all kinds of politics: all of this caused China's originally magnificent civilization to shrink and get insignificant, it turned into this feeling.
>
> I know this part of history, and I know why today our entire Chinese nation has a perception of history that is all wrong: it has slowly changed into this over the past few hundred years, and the reason why there was May Fourth also lies here. Well, everything that was criticized by the May Fourth movement – feudalism, conservatism, the backwardness – this is actually all the Qing dynasty; this is the impression that Qing dynasty gave people, and not the impression that China before the Ming dynasty made on people. Well, actually, the people of China before the Ming dynasty made an open-hearted, optimistic and open impression on others. But once the Qing dynasty was there, it changed within moments – people turned numb, and the government got corrupt and immoral.
>
> I know this part of history, and at the beginning I thought, this is very painful and sad, but, well, my second self thinks that I have the responsibility to let more people know about this, and I hope that real Chinese culture can be brought back. (Headmaster of Suzhou Study Hall A/Anonymous 15, 2015)

She also discusses the roles of the Chinese Civil War (1927–1949) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Such difficult and troubled periods had severe negative effects on education and tradition. Being born when she was, she sees herself and her generation as thereby enabled to take a different stance toward tradition and to "do the right thing":

> Before the new China was established, there were all kinds of battles, no matter whether with other countries or within our own country – anyways, everything was at war. In 1949, after the new China was established, this started again and it lasted until the political upheavals of the Cultural Revolution. The Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, and in 1979, there slowly began the process of reform and opening, and it was only after the reform and opening that Chinese society entered a state of normalcy. Before this, it was some kind of un-normalcy. Only after entering normalcy could there be people who could think normally about things they wanted to do and those who dared to do things that need to be done. […] Because I was born in 1981, and basically people born in the 1970s to the 1980s were born into a more normal time, these people could do more normal things when they grew up. (Headmaster of Suzhou Study Hall A/Anonymous 15, 2015)

These narratives are showing well how the perceptions of the past motivate to actively induce changes in the present. This involves reconnecting with a lost tradition, which meets activists' current needs in addressing social issues and educational shortcomings.

Addressing Current Social Issues by Bringing a Better Past into a Desirable Future

Many classics-reading educators and parents consider China's deficits in education and society as the result of foreign intrusion into their thinking and systems, which drive them to call for educational reform (改革, *gaige*) based on the classics (Anonymous 1, 2016; Anonymous 4, 2016; Anonymous 6, 2016; Anonymous 7, 2016; Anonymous 9, 2016; Anonymous 16, 2015; Anonymous 25, 2015; Anonymous 26, 2016; Wang, 2015). Placing education into what is considered an original Chinese tradition of education provides a promise for a better tomorrow for society. As the headmaster of Shanghai Study Hall puts it, "We think that classics-reading education can nurture people who are loved by others, trusted by their friends, embraced by the hearts of their parents, and for whom the elderly could have hope" (Anonymous 11, 2016).

This statement describes an ideal person that classics-reading educators use to criticise current society, in response to which they seek the remedy of Confucian education. Turning to a utopia means acknowledgement that the present is not ideal. A shared negative image appears of contemporary Chinese society, as a void one that is chaotic and immoral. The headmaster of Guangzhou Study Hall sees no consistent social order to which people could orient their actions (Anonymous 3, 2016). Although China is not at war, it is perceived as similarly chaotic, as a teacher at Beijing Academy A dramatically portrayed it. The general lack of a common set of rules and ethics, a common belief (信仰, *xinyang*), led society to become a dangerous place. He sees the establishment of a common ethic (价值观, *jiazhiguan*) based on a system of the Chinese classics (经典系统, *jingdian xitong*) as the only viable solution to this problem (Anonymous 8, 2016). The lack of morality in society is associated with the belief that Chinese society is being led by false standards, namely, materialism and monetarism. This impacts people and society as a whole; for example, it results in superficial and unsophisticated lifestyles that rest on entertainment and simple conviviality (Anonymous 15, 2015). It leads to an orientation towards the wrong values, such as monetary success and profit, and towards neglecting moral or ethical boundaries. This even affects safety and health:

> When we go shopping on the market today, we cannot really say that it is safe. […] For example, maybe you heard of the Gutter Oil case. […] Well, there is nothing that we can do, now, in this age, when everybody is just running after their own benefit; there is no trust to talk about, and when there is no trust, problems can emerge everywhere. (Headmaster of Beijing Study Hall/Anonymous 7, 2016)

"Gutter oil" refers to processed waste cooking oil, used frying oil or oil extracted from discarded animal parts such as skin and organs. The gutter oil scandal involved the revelation that waste oils were being collected, processed and sold as cheaper cooking oil (Liu et al., 2017: 75–78; Lu and Wu, 2014: 135). This example of tainted oil is used to show that businessmen go as far as putting others' health at risk for their own personal profit. The headmaster of Beijing Academy A also mentions cases of additives in milk powder

and other food products that are harmful to health. He believes that such measures are resorted to out of businessmen's own dissatisfaction, unhappiness, and fear of financial loss (Anonymous 4, 2016). This greed for monetary profit is also seen in connection with environmental pollution and thus the destruction of people's livelihoods, which has become globally relevant (Anonymous 2, 2016). In addition to dishonest businessmen, the high rate of corruption among Chinese officials is the subject of lively debate among tradition enthusiasts; they consider this to be a concrete result of inadequate moral education (Anonymous 4, 2016; Anonymous 6, 2016) and turn to Confucian tradition in the hope of attaining change by upholding the long-standing ideals from the past.

General dissatisfaction has also been seen among parents and educators in the field of classics-reading education with regard to the goals and overall quality of public education, which they have based on personal educational experiences and their own observations as parents. The students' only goal is to receive good grades to enrol in a good university and ultimately find a well-paid job (Anonymous 1, 2016; Anonymous 2, 2016; Anonymous 4, 2016; Anonymous 6, 2016; Anonymous 8, 2016; Anonymous 10, 2016; Anonymous 26, 2016; Wang, 2015). The learning and examination system is stressful for the students: it confronts the children with too much in too little time, resulting in very short classes with a lot of input (Anonymous 5, 2016; Anonymous 6, 2016). The basic goal of the school is the pure acquisition of knowledge to achieve certain points to obtain certain grades, which many activists consider pointless (Anonymous 6, 2016; Anonymous 7, 2016; Anonymous 9, 2016; Anonymous 13, 2015; Anonymous 16, 2015; Anonymous 17, 2015). Hardworking children could receive good grades but would remain unqualified for life in general (Anonymous 13, 2015); public education also does not provide them with any way to approach the deeper meaning of life (Anonymous 5, 2016; Anonymous 6, 2016; Anonymous 19, 2016; Anonymous 22, 2016). In sum, too much time is spent on learning that does not have the impact that parents desire for their children, leading them to view public school education as a waste of time (Anonymous 5, 2016; Anonymous 6, 2016; Anonymous 12, 2015; Anonymous 17, 2015; Anonymous 19, 2016).

Parental ignorance concerning childrearing is considered another deficit of Chinese society by many interviewees. Some relate it to the low education levels that many parents had in their time (Anonymous 8, 2016); some see this as an "inherited" deficit from times when education did not and could not play a major role in China, above all during the Cultural Revolution, the results of which are still noticeable today (conversation with a teacher, Beijing Academy A, 18 January 2016; conversation with the headmaster's wife, Chengdu, 24 April 2016; Anonymous 4, 2016; Anonymous 9, 2016; Anonymous 15, 2015; Anonymous 23, 2016; Anonymous 24, 2015; Anonymous 26, 2016). Some respondents link this with personal childhood memories; the leading teacher of a facility in Xiamen remembers having grown up with parents who knew little about raising children:

> Growing up was hard because even though my parents loved me very much, they didn't know how to guide me. That means [when I had] worries of life and [when I was]

> growing up, they did not know how to advise me. This actually left me with great disorder in my heart. (Leading teacher of Xiamen Study Hall B/Anonymous 25, 2015)

Autobiographical memories and a shared perception of history overlap at these junctures. Relatedly, classics-reading educators see the cause of children's problems in the parents' shortcomings as role models:

> Why do China's children today have so many problems? I think that in China, our educational problems are very severe. Oh, parents don't know any principles; they do not understand any principles. So first of all, the behaviour of the parents is problematic, and the parents' thought is problematic, and now imagine that the parents interact with the children on a daily basis – over the time, the problems of the children will get more and more. (Teacher of Beijing Academy A/Anonymous 8, 2016)

At the same time, classics-reading educators observe that many parents today are overwhelmed with their parental responsibilities. They blame the schools for their children's problems rather than reflecting on their own role (Anonymous 7, 2016; Anonymous 17, 2015; Anonymous 20, 2016; conversation with a leading teacher of Guangzhou Study Hall, 4 May 2016). Therefore, parents being good role models for their children is part of the ideal of study halls and academies (Anonymous 7, 2016; Anonymous 8, 2016; Anonymous 11, 2016; Anonymous 12, 2015; Anonymous 19, 2016; Anonymous 20, 2016; Anonymous 21, 2016; Anonymous 25, 2015), all the more as the family is at the core of moral education (Anonymous 8, 2016; Anonymous 12, 2015; Anonymous 14, 2015).

Memory and Heritage as Elements of Stability in the Face of Future's Uncertainty

Individual stories of the perception of the past and the present, along with the dual role that history plays as the origin of problems and source of solutions reveal a type of collective memory among activists that underpins classics-reading education. This memory drives actions and provides study halls and academies with meaning. In the meaning-making, activists use elements of the past in the present: "It is a process, or indeed a performance, in which [people] identify the values, memories and cultural and social meanings that help [them] make sense of the present, [their] identities and sense of physical and social place" (Smith, 2015: 141). At the same time, these facilities are major reference points for classics-reading activists' discourses and actions, and they underpin the social framework within which activists' memories are allocated and assessed (Assmann, 2008: 54). Through their discourses, activists store, delete, and forward information about events in the past; through their spatial practices, they make use of this information and (re-)create traditional elements.

IoM help us connect the dots here between memory, narrative, and physical space (study halls and academies). They spell out memory's involvement in both grounding

utopian thought and place-making, both of which are crucial to informing and implementing future imaginaries. The novel traditional practice in study halls and academies shows how memories and perceptions of the past are concretely implemented in places of learning. Here, IoM reveals its most tangible facet in the context of the classics-reading movement. Study halls and academies are concrete physical sites that are selected, designed, and used as anchoring points where people's past enters the present. Revitalising Confucian educational tradition reconnects people with their lost tradition (see GUM theory) and serves people's current needs to identify and make sense of the present (see Hobsbawm's idea of the "invented traditions"). Polish-British sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman (2017: 6) understands such a revivalism as an attempt to translate the future's uncertainty into the reliability and trustworthiness of the "vaguely remembered past." Concretely, this means that "visions [are] located in the lost/stolen/abandoned but undead past, instead of being tied to the not-yet-unborn and so inexistent future" (Bauman, 2017: 5). Instead of utopias, Bauman speaks of *retrotopias.* People's imaginaries of the past are brought into physical sites to allow stability and security to enter life; study halls and academies work as structures that allow dealing with the uncertainty of the future based on the certainty of the past. The IoM perspective emphasises that grounding future visions that (re)create the past serves the concrete purposes of the stability and steadfastness of the future that relate to the current uncertainty. People's current needs are not restricted to the present; they are no less concerned with making sense of the past and the future and with bringing timelines into coherence. As the British sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991: 48) puts it, "[t]ime is not empty, and a consistent 'mode of being' relates the future to the past. In addition, tradition creates a sense of the firmness of things that typically mixes cognitive and moral elements." This is part of the concept of ontological security, that is, the sense of order and continuity in individuals' experiences and perceptions. In opposition to fast-paced consumer culture and society and in critical reflection of the seemingly lost traditional Chinese values and identities, the past serves as a source of stability.

From the perspective of people's agency, IoM also show how current sites are turned into places of heritage making. People's activities instil a site with meaning and reveal how people carry their values, views, and ideas of social relations as elements from the past into the present. Sites of classics-reading education are simply normal buildings located in residential areas, such as a suburban villa or a flat in a high-rise building (see Figure 1); they are in no way remnants of the past. They gain their meaning as sites of traditional education through people's own meaning-making. Without the label that has been borrowed from the past as well as daily classes, rituals, and tradition-inspired social relations that are lived in these places, they would be ordinary buildings. Place-making in the light of current needs is an element in processes around heritage making (Nakano, 2018: 57; Svensson and Maags, 2018: 13); classics-reading education has the peculiar feature that this is done in quite ordinary places. A couple in Fuzhou has even built a new building for their study hall according to their own ideal image of a modern study hall (see Figure 2); the three-story building is in a square shape, encloses a courtyard in its centre, and is reminiscent of China's traditional courtyard houses (四合院, *siheyuan*).

Figure 1. Xiamen Study Hall A is located in a flat in this building. © Author of this article

Concluding Remarks on the Peoples' and the State's Agency in Classics-Reading Education

Engaging with the past through one's own narratives about the past and tradition can be very powerful, as it enables people to challenge official narratives or interpretations of national history and heritage, which are sources of power and legitimacy for the state (Nakano, 2018: 57; Svensson and Maags, 2018: 21–22). The Chinese government has already provided a role for the classics in education, as an important part of China's outstanding traditional culture (中华优秀传统文化, *zhonghua youxiu chuantong wenhua*) and a necessary part of the national curriculum (Billioud, 2007: 58; Liu and Wang, 2014: 1, 2, 4). In 2018, Confucius's *Analects* came to be featured on the university entrance examination (Chinese Education Online, 2018). The Chinese Communist

Figure 2. Fuzhou Study Hall. © Author of this article

Party also emphasises the role of tradition under the umbrella of one of its largest projects, the One Belt-One Road initiative, and clearly places classical education within the narrative of a larger political agenda. Language education by means of the classics is considered to be a fruitful measure of bringing together hearts and minds from beyond China to facilitate the establishment of the One Belt-One Road initiative (助力 '一带一路' 建设, *zhuli yidai yilu jianshe*). For this purpose, the government considers its task to establish classes for classics reading and a system of teaching materials (构建经典诵读课程和教材体系, *goujian jingdian songdu kecheng he jiaocai tixi*), as well as a nationwide cultural atmosphere of reading the classics (营造全社会诵读经典的文化氛围, *yingzao quan shehui songdu jingdian de wenhua fenwei*; Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2018). In the latter two tasks, the government's and classics-reading educators' responsibilities intersect, that is, in establishing classics-reading courses and materials and in creating an atmosphere for reading the classics (读经气氛, *dujing qifen*; Wang, 2010: preface).

In the initial period, classics-reading education had an unclear legal status. Teachers and headmasters treated and justified study halls and facilities as legitimate alternative private forms of education, such as people-run schools or homeschooling (Gilgan, 2020: 22–25). There were no policies that targeted the new facilities directly, which granted people a certain space for their own development. The government changed this; its first explicit

policy response to classics-reading education came in 2017, in the "Notice of the General Office of the Ministry of Education on good work on compulsory education enrolment in 2017" (General Office of the Ministry of Education, 2017). This document explicitly addresses local educational offices and public education institutions with the message to pay additional attention to children who are educated in "classics-reading classes" (读经班, *dujingban*) and "traditional-style private schools" (私塾, *sishu*) to enable them to facilitate their re-entry into the system. In March 2019, the General Office of the Ministry of Education went a step further to tighten the regulations on education in private classics-reading facilities. In the "Notice of the General Office of the Ministry of Education on good enrolment at general primary and secondary schools in 2019" (General Office of the Ministry of Education, 2019), the ministry refers to the widespread "school-picking fever" (择校热, *zexiao re*) among Chinese parents and stresses that it seeks to control school dropouts due to classics-reading education, which it refers to as "unlawful education" in view of China's compulsory education.

Study halls and academies gain their meaning through joint narratives and spatial practice. While educational practice experiences are constrained under the new policies, collective memory and joint narratives remain among the people. They might find other outlets to manifest in heritage production, as it is typical for GUMs to be flexible. GUMs can simmer under the surface for some time until they re-emerge, possibly in a slightly different guise – something to keep an eye on in the future.

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