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Teacher-Directed and Learner-Engaged: Exploring a Confucian Conception of Education

Charlene Tan

Abstract:

Against a backdrop of an international trend to shift from a teacher-centred to a learner-centred education, this article explores a Confucian conception of education. Focussing on an ancient Chinese text *Xueji* (Record of Learning), the essay examines its educational ideals and practices based on the principles of 'choice', 'doing' and 'power relationship'. It is argued that the educational model in the *Xueji* does not fit the description of a learner-centred education as commonly understood in the Western literature. Rather, the *Xueji* advocates a 'teacher-directed and learner-engaged' approach by giving the teacher control over the curriculum and authority over the learners. At the same time, the learners are encouraged to participate actively in the learning process so as to obtain deep understanding and moral self-cultivation. In proposing a conception that is not exactly learner-centred, the *Xueji* challenges the assumption that 'good' education must necessarily be learner-centred.

Keywords: teacher-directed; learner-centred; learner-engaged; ancient China; *Xueji*

Introduction

Many countries and international organisations are embarking on education reforms and research projects that aim to shift the teaching and learning that take place in schools from a teacher-centred to a student/learner-centred paradigm (Jones 2001; Attard et al. 2010; Rotherham and Willingham 2009; European Higher Education Area 2010; Parsons and Beauchamp 2012). Underpinning this movement is an assumption that *student-* or *learner-centred education* is desirable, or at least more desirable than *teacher-centred education*. While there is a growing corpus of research on the theory and practice of student/learner-centred education, they are predominantly premised upon or inspired by the writings of 'Western' thinkers such as Jean Piaget, Friedrich Fröbel and John Dewey, and rooted in 'Western' learning theories and presuppositions, particularly constructivist, cognitive and social constructivist views (O'Neill and McMahon 2005; Attard et al. 2010; Baeten et al. 2010).[1]

In comparison to the existing body of Western literature, little has been researched on student/learner-centred education from non-Western classical sources and perspectives. This state of affairs has led researchers such as Ninnes (1995), Tabulawa (1997), Gu (2005), David (2004) and Vavrus (2009) to question the appropriateness of student/learner-centred education

for countries such as Botswana, Solomon Islands, China and Eritrea. O'Sullivan (2004), drawing upon her study in Namibia, posits that student–centred learning is a 'Western' approach that may not lend itself well to communities that hold different learning worldviews, cultures and assumptions. Focussing on Chinese education, this article explores a Confucian conception of education by referring to an ancient text *Xueji* (Record of Learning). The article begins by discussing the concept of student/learner-centred education, followed by an exposition of the *Xueji* and its implications for student/learner-centred education. This article shall henceforth use 'learner-centred' and 'student-centred' synonymously.

Learner-Centred Education

In its simplest form, learner-centred education refers to any education that places the learner, rather than the teacher, content or system, at the heart of the teaching and learning process (Brandes and Ginnis 1986; Cannon and Newble 2000; Jones 2007; Machemer and Crawford 2007; Elen et al. 2007). Despite its ubiquitous use in the academic and popular discourse, the term 'learner-centred education' remains ambiguous without a universally agreed definition (Farrington 1991; Lea, Stephenson, and Troy 2003; O'Neill and McMahon 2005). As a result, it has been used interchangeably or in conjunction with associated terms such as personalised learning (Keefe and Jenkins 2002; Parsons and Beauchamp 2012), learner-centred education (Schweisfurth 2011, 2013a, b), student-activating teaching methods, problem-based learning, powerful learning environments, minimal guidance approach, discovery learning, open-ended learning environments, collaborative/cooperative learning, project-based learning, and case-based learning (Baeten et al. 2010). Learner-centred education is also often contrasted with practices that are typically identified with teacher-centred education such as direct instruction (Creemers 1994), conventional instructional approaches (Hannafin, Hill, and Land 1997), content oriented conception (Kember 1997), conventional learning and traditional learning (Attard et al. 2010).

In their literature review, O'Neill and McMahon (2005) report that "some view student-centred learning as: the concept of the student's **choice** in their education; others see it as the being about the student **doing** more than the lecturer (active versus passive learning); while others have a much broader definition which includes both of these concepts but, in addition, describes the shift in the **power relationship** between the student and the teacher" (p. 29, boldface in the original). Accordingly, O'Neill and McMahon introduce a 'student-centred and teacher-centred continuum' where 'teacher-centred learning' at one end of the continuum is characterised by 'low level of student choice', 'student passive', and 'power is primarily with teacher'. 'Student-centred learning' at the other end of the continuum is distinguished by 'high level of student choice', 'student active', and 'power primarily with the student'. Also stressing the value of active participation and control for learners is Schweisfurth (2013a) who views learner-centred education as "a pedagogical approach which gives learners and demands from them, a relatively high level of active control over the content and process of learning" and that what is learnt and how "are therefore shaped by learners' needs, capacities and interests" (20). Lea, Stephenson and Troy (2003) summarise the key features of learner-centred education as follows:

> Thus, student-centred learning embodies the following tenets: reliance upon active rather than passive learning, an emphasis on deep learning and understanding, increased

> responsibility, accountability and sense of autonomy in the learner, an interdependence between teacher and learner (as opposed to complete learner dependence or independence; Fay 1988), mutual respect within the learner–teacher relationship, and a reflexive approach to the learning and teaching process on the part of both teacher and learner. Implicit within this approach is the principle that students should be consulted about the learning and teaching process; that is, that it is student- rather than teacher-centred (Biggs 1999) (322).

We can identify from the quotation above the principle of *choice* (in the increased responsibility and accountability as well as increased sense of autonomy in the learner); the principle of *doing* (in active learning as well as deep learning and understanding on the part of the learner); and the principle of *power relationship* (in the interdependence and mutual respect between the teacher and learner as well as learner consultation about the teaching and learning process).

In the Western literature, these three principles are typically seen as related to each other: 'active learning' is associated with 'greater learner choice' and a shift of power from the teacher to the learner (Lea, Stephenson, and Troy 2003; O'Neill and McMahon 2005; Schweisfurth 2013a). An accompanied presupposition is that the more the learner participates, makes decisions, and shares power with the teacher, the better it is for the learner and his/her learning. Underpinning the prevailing conception of learner-centred education in the West, it may be argued, are liberal values such as autonomy, liberty, equality and individualism. Furthermore, it seems that a 'flatter' and more democratic relationship, rather than a strict hierarchical relationship between the teacher and learner, is preferred. Concomitantly, non-liberal values and practices more commonly found in non-Western societies such as collectivism, social hierarchy, teacher authority and student compliance are seen as inimical to and incompatible with learner-centred education.

It should be clarified at this juncture that the preceding does not imply that there exists a relatively coherent and consistent Western view of learner-centred education in the literature and discourse. On the contrary, there exists a growing body of literature that problematises and reconceptualises the prevailing notion of learner-centred education. For example, various authors have highlighted the problem of learner-centredness as a floating signifier, and draw our attention to variations in learner-centred philosophies and practices that reflect a wider cultural base (e.g. Alexander 2008, Barrett 2007, Guthrie 2011, Mtika and Gates 2010, Sriprakash 2009, Tabulawa 2003, Schweisfurth 2013a, b). But such writings, although important, are relatively small in number compared to the extant published works that promote a Western-centric version of learner-centred education. The fact remains that the dominant conception of learner-centred education is one that is primarily traced to European philosophies, focuses on active learning, learner choice, and a shift of power from the teacher to the learner (Lea, Stephenson, and Troy 2003; O'Neill and McMahon 2005), and is propagated by the spread of innovations especially in the U.S. and U.K. (Schweisfurth 2013a).

Is the above dominant concept of learner-centred education as presented in the Western literature the only 'correct' or 'good' model for educators and learners? Are there alternative conceptions of education from non-Western traditions, sources and scholars that also place the learner at the centre of education, but involve different and even competing views, assumptions and practices? I shall attempt to offer one such conception of education from a Confucian perspective by referring to an ancient Chinese text.

The *Xueji* (Record of Learning)

China has a long intellectual tradition in education, which can be seen in the Confucian canon known collectively as the Four Books and Five Classics (*sishu wujing*) from the Early Han dynasty (202 BCE-8 CE). One of the Five Classics is the *Book of Rites* (*Li*) that includes the *Xueji* (Record of Learning) as one of its chapters (Gao 2005). Although all the books in the Confucian canon discuss educational issues in one way or another, the *Xueji* stands out as the only treatise that systematically elucidates the elements of teaching and learning (Tan 2015a).[2] Scholars believe that the *Xueji* was written either during the Warring States period (475-221 BCE) or the Han dynasty (202 BCE-220 CE), making it one of the earliest educational texts in the world (Yang et al. 2012). Its authorship is unknown, with possible candidates being a disciple of Mencius and Han dynasty scholar Dong Zhongshu (Gao 2005). As space does not permit me to expound the text in full, I shall only discuss passages that are directly relevant to the three principles of 'choice', 'power relationship' and 'doing' as identified by O'Neill and McMahon (2005).[3]

The principle of choice: high or low level of learner choice in their education?

As discussed earlier, 'choice' refers to the learners having a say on various aspects of their education. The key decisions for the learners include: "What is to be learnt, how and when it is to be learnt, with what outcome, what criteria and standards are to be used, how the judgements are made and by whom these judgements are made" (Gibbs 1995, 1, as cited in O'Neill and McMahon 2005, 28). In the *Xueji*, the learners were given a very low level of choice on the 'what', 'how' and 'why' of their education due to the socio-political context in ancient China. The learning site mentioned in the *Xueji* was a college or Imperial Academy that was established either prior to the Qin dynasty (221 to 206 BCE) or during the Han dynasty (202 BCE-220 CE). Regardless of the exact time period referred to in the *Xueji*, what is clear is that the goal of teaching in the institution was to train government officials. This is mentioned in passage VI that states that learners need to "recite the three [songs] from the Xiao Ya [of the Book of Odes], so that [they would learn about the duties of] officials at the start [of the school term]". Given the political agenda to groom able and virtuous officials, the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment were determined by the college rather than the individual learners.[4]

The *Xueji* describes a well-structured college system with different levels of learners ('first-year learners', 'third-year learners', 'ninth year of study' etc. mentioned in passage V), a prescribed curriculum where texts, music, poetry and rituals etc. are learnt (see passage VII), recommended teaching methods (more on this later), and assessment system (see passage V). Passage V gives us a glimpse of the structured and progressive programme for the learners over a period of nine years:

> V. [Learners are] enrolled into the college every year, and [they] sit for examination in alternate years. In the first year, [the learners] are observed to see if they are able to analyse the texts and discern the meanings. In the third year, [they] are observed to see if [they] are reverentially committed to [their] study and enjoy the company of others. In the fifth year, [they] are observed to see if [they] have broadened [their] learning and maintained a close relationship with [their] teachers. In the seventh year, [they] are observed to see if [they] are able to discuss what is learnt and make friends [judiciously]; [learners who pass this level will attain] what is called 'minor achievement'. In the ninth year, [they are observed

> to see if they are able to] know the different categories [of knowledge] and gain mastery [in learning]; [whether they] are firmly established without regressing [in learning]; [learners who pass this level will attain] what is called 'major achievement'.

The principle of power relationship: power resides primarily with the learner or teacher?

Coupled with a very low level of learner choice in education is a very high respect for teachers. A hierarchical relationship is maintained in which power resides primarily with the teacher. Again, the historical milieu for the *Xueji* is informative: ancient Chinese believed that respect towards one's teachers is a prerequisite for successful learning. The following passage explains the rationale:

> XVII. In the way of learning, reverence towards [one's] teacher is highly commendable. When [one] reveres [one's] teacher, then [one] respects the Way (*dao*). When one respects the Way, then [the people] know how to respect learning.

The passage above links respect for one's teacher to respect for the Way and learning. The 'Way' (*dao*) embodies Confucian ideals that originated from an idealised culture of the past (Chan 2000). The Way is manifested and transmitted principally through written records, rituals, social institutions and the exemplary conduct of sage-kings such as Yao, Shun, and Yu of the first three dynasties of China. It is instructive that that the *Xueji* exhort learners not only to respect the way but to know it:

> II. A jade that is uncut will not become a vessel [for use]. [Likewise] people who do not learn will not know the Way.

The word 'know' (*zhi*) for ancient Chinese refers not only to intellectual understanding but also to an application of knowledge through articulating and determining; to know is "to influence the process of existence within the range of one's viable possibilities" (Hall and Ames 1987, 55). To know the Way, therefore, is not just about preserving the past but extending and changing it as well. As explained by Chan (2000), although the past contributed significantly to the formation of Confucian ideals, these ideals also "helped shape the way in which the past had come to be remembered" (246). A teacher in ancient China was upheld as someone who had succeeded in learning and knowing the Way. Hence such a person was qualified to teach others to learn, abide in and propagate the Way. Respecting one's teacher, therefore, entails respecting the source of respect, i.e., the Way, and the means to obtain the source of respect, i.e., through learning. So central is the reverence for one's teacher that even the ruler, traditionally regarded as the son of heaven, can dispense with protocol when receiving instruction from his teacher:

> XVII. When [a person] takes on the role of a teacher, [the ruler] does not treat [such a person] as a subject. According to the propriety of the college, [the teacher] does not [need to face] north even when addressing the son of heaven. That is how respect to the teacher is shown.

Given the strict hierarchical social order, the power relationship between the teacher and learner is naturally an unequal one. Rather than inter-dependence and a shift of power relationship between teacher and learner, the learner depends on and reverences the teacher who does not need to consult the learner on the curriculum and assessment (but the teacher needs to adjust one's teaching approach based on the learner's individual needs, as I shall elaborate later). It should be added that the learner's great respect towards one's teacher is not accompanied by

fear, dread or unquestioned obedience, nor should the teacher abuse one's power and authority. Rather, the learners are encouraged to maintain a warm and close relationship with their teachers (V and IX). The teachers, on their part, are expected to be role models and mentors by relating to the learners with ease (VI), harmony (section XIII), intimacy (section V) and empathy (XIX).

The principle of doing: learner active or passive?

Since there is a very low level of learner choice in education and that power primarily resides in the teacher in the *Xueji*, does it mean that the learner is passive rather than active in learning? 'Active learning' here refers to the learner "doing more than the lecturer" (O'Neill and McMahon 2005, 29) by participating in the learning process (Brandes and Ginnis 1986) so as to obtain deep learning and understanding (Lea, Stephenson, and Troy 2003). Antipodal to active learning is passive learning where the teacher, rather than the learner, does the talking, and the needs, potentials and abilities of the learners are marginalised.

Passive learning is eschewed in the *Xueji* as the text criticises teachers who are fixated with transmitting knowledge without considering its detrimental effects on the learner:

> X. The teachers nowadays [only] chant the [texts on the] bamboos, with much talking and asking of questions. [They aim to] advance rapidly but disregard [the learners' ability to] accomplish [the learning]. [The teachers] are not sincere in making others [learn], and do not give [their] utmost to [consider the learners' individual] talents when teaching them. [The teachers] carry out measures that are contrary [to what is right], and make requests that are not realistic [for their learners]. In such a case, [the learners] detest [their] study and resent [their] teachers; [they] are embittered by the difficulty [of learning], and are unaware of [its] benefits. Even if [they] were to complete their study, [they would] certainly lose [what they have learnt] quickly. These are the reasons why teaching does not produce [its desired] results!

How then should teachers teach? The *Xueji* supports active learning through the 'leading' (*yu*) approach:

> XIII. [When] a *junzi* (noble or exemplary person) knows the reasons for teaching to flourish and fail, [such a person] can then become a teacher. Therefore a *junzi* teaches by leading (*yu*): [lead] the way [of learning] but does not drag [the learners]; strengthen but does not suppress [them]; open [their minds] but does not arrive [at the conclusion on their behalf]. [To lead] the way [of learning] without dragging [the learners] will result in harmony [between the teacher and learners]; to strengthen [the learners] without suppressing [them] will result in ease [of learning for them]; and opening [the learners' minds] without arriving [at the conclusion on their behalf] will result in [reflective] thinking. [A teacher who produces] harmony, ease and [reflective] thinking may be called skillful in leading.

Here teachers are cautioned not to spoon-feed or exert undue pressure on their learners. They should instead 'lead' or 'enlighten' (Yang et al. 2012) the learners through scaffolding, encouragement and promoting reflective thinking. The word 'si', which I have translated as 'reflective thinking', can also be translated as 'thoughtfulness' (Legge 1855), 'independent

thinking' (Wong 1976), 'independent reflection' (Gao 2006) and 'thoughtful inquiry' (Yang et al. 2012). The consensus among scholars is that the teacher should foster active learning by providing the necessary knowledge, skills, resources, emotional support and conducive environment to maximise the students' learning. Active learning strategies mentioned in the *Xueji* include peer learning ('observation for mutual learning' in XI), asking questions ('ask questions' in XVIII, also see XIX)[5], participating in public discourse ('able to discuss what is learnt' in V) and demonstrating one's social skills ('make friends [judiciously]' in V). [6]

The ultimate goal of active learning in the *Xueji* is moral self-cultivation. Passage IX states that a *junzi* is one who "cultivates [oneself]"; the same passage explains, "Be reverentially committed to and constantly diligent in [learning]; only then will [successful] cultivation come". While knowledge can be easily obtained via the transmission approach from teacher, moral cultivation requires the internalisation, appropriation and application of the knowledge by the individual himself or herself. The process of moral cultivation involves much time and effort spent in self-reflection, self-correction and interactions with other human beings – a lifelong endeavour that necessitates active learning on the part of the learner. The learner is expected to cultivate oneself by practising Confucian virtues such as *li* (normative behaviours), *ren* (humanity), *zhi* (wisdom) and *yi* (appropriateness) as well as taking the sequent commitment to one's family, community and the world (Tan 2013a). That teaching was organised in a personalised or face-to-face way in the ancient academies in ancient China rather than whole-class teaching in modern schools also makes it easier for the teacher to give close attention to the learner's progress in moral cultivation.

It should be clarified that the dependence of moral cultivation on socialisation into an established moral community in ancient China does not mean there is no leeway for the correction of potentially unethical practices of that moral community. This is because there is a crucial difference, from a Confucian perspective, between the moral community and the *moral standard*. Moral cultivation requires, among other factors, socialisation into an established moral community *as long as* the moral community conforms to the moral standard of the Way. As mentioned earlier, the Way embodies Confucian ideals that originated from an idealised culture of the past. Moral self-cultivation is not about blind adherence to social norms and unquestioning obedience to authoritative figures, but about knowing the Way. In fact, moral self-cultivation includes reviewing, critiquing and modifying, if necessary, the cultural norms and socio-political logic of the day in accordance with the Way. Doing so is to "to influence the process of existence within the range of one's viable possibilities" (Hall and Ames 1987, 55). Even the Way itself is not immune to reflection and change; as noted earlier, learners are tasked to extend the Way by shaping the manner in which the past has come to be remembered (Chan 2000). The crucial distinction between the moral community and moral standard allows and empowers individuals to correct potentially unethical practices of one's moral community. A good example of such an individual was Confucius who chastised the political rulers of his time for their moral shortcomings and called for a return to the normative tradition of the past (for a detailed discussion of Confucius' teachings, see Tan 2013a).

Conclusion

The preceding shows that the *Xueji* advocates a conception of education that may be termed 'teacher-directed and learner-engaged'. It is 'teacher-directed' in the sense that the teacher maintains control over the curriculum and authority over the learners. However, it is also

'learner-engaged' as the learners are encouraged to participate actively in the learning process so as to obtain deep understanding and moral self-cultivation. Applying O'Neill and McMahon (2005)'s definition of learner-centred learning, we see that the 'teacher-directed and student-engaged' approach in the *Xueji* satisfies only one out of three criteria: while the learners are encouraged to learn actively, they have little choice over the type of education received and power primarily resides in the teacher. It can be concluded that the educational model recommended in the *Xueji* does not qualify as 'learner-centred' as commonly understood in the Western literature. By proposing a conception of education that is not exactly learner-centred, the *Xueji* challenges the assumption that good education must necessarily be learner-centred. In contrast to Western-style learner-centred education that typically positions individual autonomy as an ethical ideal, the *Xueji* values individual moral cultivation and being part of a community of Way-knowers.

It is worthy of note that the 'teacher-directed and student-engaged' approach presented in the *Xueji* is still being applied today across Chinese societies. To be sure, there have been socio-cultural changes in Chinese communities since the *Xueji* was written, and hence it cannot be assumed that virtues that were valued highly at the time of the *Xueji* play exactly the same role for the Chinese educators and learners today. However, there have been empirical studies that show that the Chinese continue to subscribe, to varying degrees and in different forms, to the principles and ideals delineated in the *Xueji*, such as the high respect for teachers, the expected role of teachers as moral exemplars and guide, and moral self-cultivation (e.g. see Tan 2013b, 2015b; Gao and Watkins 2001; Jin and Cortazzi 1998, 2006; Cortazzi and Jin 2001; Huang and Leung 2004; Li 2004; Wang and Murphy, 2004; Wong 2004; Li 2012).

A major implication from our exploration of a Confucian conception of education is a need for researchers and educators to rethink the notion, assumptions, value, relevance and application of learner-centred education and its link to 'good' education. Our study of the *Xueji* reveals that what one cultural community regards as 'good' education, as well as related terms such as a 'good teacher', 'good student' and 'good school', is invariably underpinned by its historical, intellectual and socio-political contexts. The local formulations of what is 'good' education in turns shape the nature of and relationship between the principles of 'choice', 'doing' and 'power relationship' for the teacher and learners.

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Notes

[1] I have placed the word 'Western' in inverted commas to signify its vague and contentious nature. It is beyond the scope of this article to define, analyse and interrogate this term as well as associated terms such as 'non-Western' and 'Eastern'. For our purposes, the term 'Western' (including 'West) serves as a useful starting point to explore the cultural origins of and influences on educational concepts and practices. I should also add that the claim that the extant literature on learner-centred education is premised upon or inspired by the writings of thinkers such as Jean Piaget, Friedrich Fröbel and John Dewey does not imply that these scholars share a common understanding of 'learner-centred education', or that there are no substantial differences among them. With particular reference to John Dewey, I am aware that he did not advocate a form of learner- or child-centred education that is antithetical to teacher- and curriculum-centred

education. Rather, he encourages educators to direct the curriculum and learning environment in ways that support and enrich the child's lived experiences. For further readings on Dewey's views on education, see Dewey (1902), Simpson (2001) and Tan (2015b).

[2] Although the literal translation of 'xueji' is 'record of learning', it should be noted that the ancient Chinese character for learning (*xue*) referred to both 'learning' (*xue*) and 'teaching' (*jiao*) (Yang 2010). Other scholars have translated the *Xueji* as 'Record on the Subject of Education' (Legge 1885), 'Record of Learning' (Wong 1976), 'The Subject of Education' (Yuan 2007), and 'On Teaching and Learning' (Yang et al. 2012). Despite the variations, the consensus is that the text focuses on both learning and teaching.

[3] All the passages of the *Xueji* cited in this paper are translated into English by me, unless otherwise stated. In my translation, I have tried to preserve the original meaning and word pattern as much as possible. Any additions to the translation for the purpose of clarification are marked by square brackets.

[4] Some readers may wonder whether it is appropriate to apply modern educational terms such as 'learner-centred learning', 'curriculum' and 'assessment' to ancient China. On the one hand, it is correct to note that there was no modern schooling system, as we understand the term today, in the *Xueji*. On the other hand, however, a number of scholars have found it appropriate to use modern specialised educational terms to expound the *Xueji* as they see sufficient parallels between the modern terms and ancient thought/practices. For example, Yang et al. (2012), in their introduction to the *Xueji*, refer to "the schooling system, the principles of pedagogy, and the methods of instruction" (1). Likewise, Legge (1885) refers to 'system of teaching' and 'subject' for passage VII, and Wong (1976) refers to 'method of instruction' and 'courses' in the same passage.

[5] While the *Xueji* encourages learners to learn actively by asking questions, it also teaches that they should ask questions at the right time. Passage VI states that "The young ones listen and do not ask questions, so that [they] would not transgress the [proper] grade [they were at] in [their] learning." The idea here is that the novice learners should concentrate first on forming their learning aspirations and grounding themselves in the foundational knowledge. Only when they have attained the foundational knowledge are they encouraged to question what they have studied.

[6] It is helpful to note that the *Xueji* was written before the introduction of the civil service exam during the Sui dynasty (581-618 CE) in China. One should therefore guard against reading into the *Xueji* principles and practices that were associated with the civil service exam, such as book-learning, rote memorisation of the Confucian texts and exam essays, and didactic teaching by Confucian masters. For a good discussion of the learning approaches to prepare candidates for the civil service exam, see Elman (2013).