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ABSTRACT

The literature focusing on Christian home schooling has been entirely ignored in the educational context of China, because practising home schooling is illegal and such families have strong religious beliefs. In particular, in China, studies grounded in empirical research and dealing with the development of Christian home schooling are negligible. The findings of this study were generated by an analysis of qualitative data: they provided in-depth information about the motivation of those who practice Christian home schooling, types of existing Christian home schooling, teaching content, and teaching methods and outcomes. It was found that Christian beliefs and values philosophically support Chinese Christian families in the process of their practice of home schooling.

KEYWORDS

Christian home schooling;
Christianity; China

Introduction

In the history of China, religion, for example, Christianity, has contributed to the development of modern Chinese education. Since 1840, a growing number of church schools were established by missionaries (Wang 2008; Dong 2006; Hong 2006). In 1899, the number of church schools totalled about 1,766 (Hong 2006; Zhao 2008). A large number of secondary schools and the church universities were established. The church schools were founded by missionaries and churches, and covered all levels of education: elementary school, secondary school and university. A number of famous universities in China were built on the basis of the original church schools. After experiencing two movements with regard to universities in 1951 and 1952, the church universities in China entirely disappeared. From the 1950s to the 1990s, the influence of religions, such as Christianity, was negligible. Since the beginning of the 2000s, a kind of home schooling providing children with Christian education has emerged in the big cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou.

Because it is a new educational phenomenon, there is little literature that has systematically examined parental decisions to provide children with Christian home schooling or the ways in which home-schooling parents are involved in Christian education in China. Chinese scholars have failed to examine the development of this form of home schooling in China; thus, there is little substantive information regarding how Christian home schooling is currently practised in the contemporary Chinese society. This study seeks to provide in-depth information about the motivations of parents to participate in Christian home schooling, the types of Christian home schooling that exist, teaching content, and teaching style and outcomes. In what follows, firstly, I briefly introduce Christian home schooling in the Western context, which is followed by a short introduction to Christian education in China. Then, a description regarding the extent of Christian home schooling in China is provided. Finally, I use the qualitative data collected from semi-structured interviews with parents to illustrate how they practise Christian home schooling.

Research methodology

This study adopted a sociological perspective on the exploration of the development of Christian home schooling in China. As I state in the introduction, this study reports the findings of a data-based research study of Christian home-schooling families in China in order to provide an in-depth understanding of the demographic characteristics of Christian home-schooling parents, the motivations for Christian home schooling, the process of practising it and its outcomes. In order to fulfil the research purposes of this empirical research, the attitudes and motivations of parents engaged in Christian home schooling were particularly explored. It has been recognised by sociologists and educationalists that using a qualitative research approach contributes to a better understanding of individual motivations (Bell 2005). Bell (2005, 157) asserts that qualitative research methods, such as interviews, can help researchers follow up ideas, probe responses and investigate motives, attitudes and feelings in order to provide in-depth information, which a written response might fail to reveal. In this empirical research, I take the view of Ritchie and Lewis (2003) who suggest that the key factor that determines whether a qualitative approach should be the principal research method depends on the objective of the research. Accordingly, I decided that it would be more effective to conduct semi-structured interviews with parents. The use of interviews sought to develop an extensive and comprehensive understanding of the practices and experiences of the research subjects with a focus on parents' motivations for Christian home schooling.

Secondary research and qualitative research methods were adopted to collect the data in this study. Snowballing techniques (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981) were adopted to select the qualitative sample. The sampling process started with the selection of a few participants. At the end of the interview, the respondents were encouraged to recommend suitable additional participants. The process was repeated until there was no additional new information available from the sample parents. In all, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 30 mothers who have been involved in Christian home schooling in the city of Beijing. The interviews covered a diversity of topics pertaining to parents' educational background, children's primary experiences before home schooling, the motivation to practise home schooling, the process of practising Christian home schooling, religious beliefs and their influence on home schooling, teaching methods, and teaching content and outcomes. Interviews lasted on average from 1 to 1.5 h. The interviews with parents were recorded and transcribed for the following coding and analysis purposes.

Ethics of this research

In this study, I became aware of certain sensitive and ethical issues. Wallen and Fraenkel (2001, 22) suggest that there exist three important ethical issues, which should be addressed in qualitative research, 'the protection of participants from harm, the ensuring of confidentiality of research data, and avoiding the knowing deception of research subjects.' In addition to ensure the feasibility, clarity and significance, complex ethical issues were addressed to make sure that this research was both practicable and ethical (Wallen and Fraenkel 2001, 22). Here, I will describe how certain sensitive and ethical issues were recognised in this empirical research.

Currently, the act of practising home schooling in China is illegal because it contravenes the provisions of the China Compulsory Education Law. First, given the underground nature of the activities in which the Christian home educators are engaged, I preserved anonymity and confidentiality of respondents whilst collecting qualitative data by removing certain sensitive information from the transcripts; for example, where they lived and their place of work. The data concerning research subjects collected in this research are reported in an anonymous way.

Second, during the whole process of this research, I worked with the informed consent of the participants in order to guarantee the anonymity and confidentiality of the respondents (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2011). These authors (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2011, 77–8) claim that informed consent can be understood as 'a certain procedure in which individuals choose whether to participate in an investigation after being informed of facts that would be likely to influence

their decision.’ In the whole process of my fieldwork, I was aware of the importance of guaranteeing the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants.

Christian home schooling in the Western context

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, home schooling was very common in religiously pluralistic colonial America (Spring 2005). In that period, the parents, in particular the father, generally bore the primary responsibility for teaching their children Christian doctrines and reading (Hill 2000). The early curriculum in the USA comprised religion, reading and writing (Algera and Sink 2002). In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, home schooling disappeared because of the establishment and expansion of institutionalised school systems (Hill 2000). In the 1960s and 1970s, a number of conservative Christian parents withdrew their children from public schools because religious education had been removed from the curriculum (Stevens 2001; Wilhelm and Firmin 2009). In the 1980s, a growing body of parents who were dissatisfied with the quality of education offered by the public schools initiated and reinforced the home-school movement (Stevens 2001). The earlier period of the movement attracted conservative Christians who were enthusiastic about teaching Christian values and doctrines to their children (Basham, Merrifield, and Hepburn 2007; Planty et al. 2009). Studies have observed that the conservative Christians comprise the largest subset of home educators in the USA (Basham, Merrifield, and Hepburn 2007; Planty et al. 2009; Kunzman 2009). As shown by the data collected by the National Center for Educational Statistics, the majority of home-schooling families decided to home school because of their specific interest in religious instruction (Princiotta, Bielick, and Chapman 2006). Since the 1960s, a growing number of studies have placed attention on the close relationship between religion and the growth of the home-schooling movement.

A strong body of literature has examined the role of religion in the current movement towards home schooling (Stevens 2001; Princiotta, Bielick, and Chapman 2006; Edwards 2007; Lois 2013). In this study, the findings reported in the existing relevant literature may be summarised as follows: the role of religious belief plays a large part in parents’ motivation to home school (Stevens 2001; Brabant, Bourdon, and Jutras 2003; Dahlquist 2005; Princiotta, Bielick, and Chapman 2006; Edwards 2007; Fields-Smith and Williams 2009; Planty et al. 2009; Kunzman 2009); the effects of religion on the role of home-schooling parents as educators are clear (Mayberry et al. 1995; Stevens 2001; Kapitulik 2011) and religion, for example, Christianity, influences the gender roles of the husband and wife in the practice of home schooling (Yuracko 2008; Fields-Smith and Williams 2009; Kapitulik 2011; Lois 2013).

A number of studies conducted in the UK, Europe, Canada and Australia have identified the important role of religion on the rapid development of the home schooling (Rothermel 1999, 2010, 2011; Arai 2000; Van Pelt 2003; Jackson 2009; Roache 2009). In the UK, scholars have recognised the close relationship between religion and the development of home education (Rothermel 1999, 2010, 2011; Hopwood et al. 2007; Jennens 2011). In Canada, a number of scholars have examined the vital role of religion in parents’ decision-making process (Luffman 1997; Arai 2000; Van Pelt 2003; Davies and Aurini 2003; Brabant, Bourdon, and Jutras 2003). In the context of Australia, several scholars have identified the fact that religious preferences play a vital role in parents’ decision to home school (Barratt-Peacock 1997, 2003; Chapman and O’Donoghue 2000; Jackson 2009).

Christian education in the Chinese context

Church schools have contributed to the development of modern Chinese education (Gu 2004; Zhao 2008). As one of the results of the implementation of ‘The Eastward Dissemination of Western Learning’ in the late Qing Dynasty, a growing number of missionaries entered China and established church schools. American missionary Bridgman established the first church school, the Bridgman School, in Guangzhou in 1830. His wife Eliza J. Bridgman built the first girls’ school in Shanghai in 1850. In the 1860s, the number of schools was relatively small; however, by 1875, there were about 350 church schools, serving 6000 students. The church schools primarily provided

elementary education, although there were also a few secondary-level church schools (Dong 2006). The teacher at the church school was generally the pastor, and missionaries who established such schools in China were primarily from the USA, followed by those from the UK. In the initial period, the teaching content provided by a church school involved reading selections from the Bible. Later, from the 1860s, some church schools provided the type of curriculum, which taught English language, as well as science subjects. The establishment of science subjects and English made significant contributions to the modernisation of China (Gu 2004).

From 1875, the number of the enterprises and factories established by Westerners experienced rapid growth. The modernisation of China resulted in a great need for employees who were educated. From 1877 to the beginning of the twentieth century, the schools built by the churches and missionaries achieved dramatic growth (Wang 2008). The emergence of the church school presented challenges to the existing traditional educational system of the late Qing Dynasty and Chinese feudal culture. In the late Qing Dynasty and the period of the Republic of China, there were dozens of universities established by the church, such as Yenching University, St John's University, Hunan Xiangya Medical University and so on (Hong 2006).

Since 1949, the government has gradually reformed and replaced these church schools and by the middle of the 1950s, these church universities had become part of the system of higher education after 1949. Since the beginning of the new century, a small group of parents, who are mainly Christian, have been enthusiastically practising Christian home schooling for their children in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. In this context, the rapid growth of home schooling has inspired me to exhibit specific academic interest in studies of this phenomenon (Sheng 2013, 2014, 2017). In 2013, I have conducted a case study of Confucian home schooling in order to provide in-depth information regarding the demographic characteristics of Confucian home-schooling parents, the motivations and the process of practising it and its outcomes. In my work (2014) entitled 'Learning with Mothers: A Study of Home Schooling in China,' I have taken a sociocultural perspective and utilised Bourdieu's theoretical framework to conduct an empirical research study of both Christian and Confucian home-schooling families in China in order to provide an in-depth understanding of the demographic characteristics of home-schooling parents, the motivation to adopt home schooling in China, the process of practising it and its outcomes. In this work, I develop a research framework to examine home schooling in the context of China, which provides an insight into the ways in which social class and gender differences influence parental involvement in children's home schooling. In 2017, I analysed in depth the relationship between home education and law in China, which contributed to the literature regarding the legal status of home education in China. It is noticeable that the practice of home schooling is illegal in China because it contravenes the provisions of the 'China Compulsory Education Law' with regard to Items 2, 4 and 35. Items 2 and 4 require that parents should be responsible for sending their school-aged children to receive compulsory education at a school. According to Item 35, educating children at home contravenes the specific principles regarding the school curriculum, teaching content and curriculum setting. In China, under The Compulsory Education Law, home education is illegal. If their activities are brought to the attention of the authorities, the mothers who choose home schooling will not be prosecuted or sent to jail. Their act of practising home schooling would be prohibited. Meanwhile, in Taiwan Tung (2010) has conducted an investigation of four Taiwanese Christian families and provides an in-depth understanding of religiously infused learning experience. Tung's (2010) study has examined how Christian home schooling works in Taiwan by investigating the intentions, implementation, challenges and implications of home schooling practice. In Tung's (2010) study, several important themes have emerged, including learning through home schooling, family involvement, uncertainties about the future, and the combination of family, religion and education in home schooling.

The size of Christian home schooling in China

Because at the time of this writing, home schooling in China is illegal, it is difficult to estimate accurately the number of Christian home schoolers in China as parents who practise Christian

home schooling are disinclined to register with the educational authorities. In recent decades, journalists have reported a few isolated groups of families who are engaged in Christian home schooling in certain regions in China. In my empirical study, I concluded that there probably existed similar groups of Christian home schoolers in other regions of the country. Drawing on the research-based data collected in my surveys of Christian home-educated children in China, I estimate that there are around 5000 Christian home-educated children nationwide.

The process of Christian home schooling in China

The motivation to practise Christian home schooling

In this section, the study seeks to use a body of qualitative data to unpack the reasons that home-schooling parents decide to provide Christian home schooling for their children, as illustrated below:

...I spent about 10 years pursuing my postgraduate degree in the USA...Then I worked in an international company in the USA...my son was born abroad...when I was at the beginning of my thirties, I converted to Christianity...after I became a follower of Christianity, I started to lead a really meaningful life with the direction of God...without the guidance of God, my previous life was nothing but painful...Many of my church friends provided their child with Christian education at home...In the USA, I witnessed how powerful Christian beliefs work on the education and development of a child...when I returned to China, I felt very disappointed about the education provided by school...The only assessment of whether a child is good or not is the academic results at school...no teachers care about the development of a child's personality...I took my son out of a key-point school (selective school) and decided to educate him at home...(Elle, a middle-class mother)

As shown by the previous example, Elle reported a close correlation between her decision to home school and her religious faith. Elle had experienced studying and working for a long period abroad. It is noticeable that her decision to practise home schooling was strongly motivated by her religious belief. Moreover, Elle was also motivated by her concern about the quality of education and teaching approaches provided by conventional schools. Like Elle, the majority of Christian home-schooling educators were motivated by a mixture of reasons, both 'ideological' (Van Galen 1988) and 'pedagogical' (Mayberry and Knowles 1989).

...before I converted to Christianity, when I studied in the USA, I felt under great pressure in each period of my life...I never felt happy from the bottom of my heart...from my childhood, I studied hard and dealt with the various examination competitions...when I was at school, every day I struggled to achieve first place in the various examinations...from when I started work, I have been struggling to make more money, buy a bigger house and car...under the guidance of God, my life is happy...My son was born and educated till 9 years old...at the age of 8, he had already completed the curriculum courses for Year Five...As his teacher said, he is talented...when we returned to China, I did not send him to study at a key-point school but decided to home school him...in my view, the Bible has clearly shown and guided parents how to educate their own children...Because God has given my son talents, I must follow the guidance of God and educate him in an appropriate way, thereby offering an opportunity to maximize his talents...I never felt fearful...(Diane, a middle-class mother)

Diane was similarly motivated by her strong religious beliefs. She presented her decision to practise home schooling as a matter of divine will. Like Diane, the majority of home-schooling parents chose to practise home schooling in order to transmit particular religious beliefs and values to their children. As Diane stated, under the guidance of God, she led quite a different life from the one that she had previously experienced. Having converted to Christianity, she decided to give up her previous struggle to attain a higher social status and much more money, preferring to adhere to religious and ethical values.

...many friends said that I am crazy to make such a decision...I believe in the powerful influence of Christian beliefs...people seem to have forgotten that so many famous schools and universities in China are the ones that were established and developed by the church, Peking University, St. John University...many famous scientists in China were educated at a church school...I feel that Christian education is not a risky teaching practice, as it is regarded by my friends and relatives...according to my own experiences, I do not want my

daughter to be taught only to be good at preparing for examinations, without having any Christian beliefs...I want to provide the best for my child... (Amanda, a middle-class mother)

Amanda's motivation was primarily to provide religious and moral instruction to her daughter. Unlike other participants, Amanda believed in the powerful influence of Christian culture and beliefs on education. In her views, Christian culture has made significant contributions to the development of Chinese education, in particular higher education in China. From this perspective, Amanda was strongly motivated to practise home schooling by the positive influences of Christianity on a child's education. Five of the 30 home-schooling parents in the sample reported a similar pattern. As mentioned previously, the education provided by church schools has made contributions to the development of modern education in China (Gu 2004; Zhao 2008).

...I very much appreciated the guidance of God...before I converted to Christianity, every day I was under great pressure...now it is quite different. I felt peaceful and happy...I want to transfer the good values and beliefs that I cherished so much to my daughter...when I decided to teach her Christian education at home, I knew she would be excluded from getting access to the key-point examination system...I do not regret that I made such a decision...cultivating appropriate Christian beliefs is very important for my daughter's development...I do not want her to experience the similar conflicts and pain that I did...I felt that home schooling seemed to provide me with a private territory in which to teach the religious values and norms to my daughter...I believe that under the direction of God, my daughter will be able to grow up healthily and achieve academic success...(Erica, a middle-class mother)

The previous example shows that Erica is very religious. She was enthusiastic about transmitting the teachings of the Bible and its values and doctrines to her daughter. This finding is consistent with the outcomes of similar studies in the Western context (Carper 2000; McDannell 1995; Essenberg 2004; Liao 2006; Planty et al. 2009; Kunzman 2009). Accordingly, Erica was determined to withdraw her daughter from the key-point school; she felt that home schooling seemed to offer her a private place in which she was able to freely cultivate her daughter's Christian doctrines and values.

...I got to know about home schooling from my church friends...I noticed that the child of my friend who was home educated achieved relatively good results when he was admitted to a selective university in the USA. And this would be impossible for a child who was not educated at a top international school in Beijing...based on our income it is not possible for us to afford such expensive tuition at an international school...I felt that practising Christian home schooling might be a short cut for my son to be admitted to a selective American university...Although the cost of home-schooling books introduced from the USA is very expensive, I believe that it is worth it...my son very much cherishes this study opportunity, every day he studies very hard himself...sometimes he learns faster than I have time to prepare material to teach, and I have to catch up with him...(Pamela, a middle-class mother)

Apart from being motivated by her strong religious belief, Pamela regarded home schooling as a useful approach by means of which she was able to facilitate her son's success in the competition for a place at a selective overseas university. Since 2010, a growing number of middle-class parents in Beijing have been eager to send their children to study at an international school, which may ensure admission to a top university in the USA or the UK. Limited by inferior economic and social resources, just like Pamela, some parents in the sample were hardly able to afford such expensive tuition at a selective international school in Beijing. Influenced by her church friends, Pamela acknowledged that Christian home schooling may be a useful approach to help her son achieve academic success in a Western country. Moreover, the English-language pre-packaged Christian home-schooling textbooks from the USA provided her son with a short cut to admission to a top university abroad. Middle-class parents, such as Pamela, seem to be strongly motivated by pedagogic factors, rather than religious beliefs alone.

The types of Christian home schooling

On the basis of the qualitative data collected in this study, I have documented and summarised five primary types of Christian home-schooling settings currently found in China. Type I: in this case,

there are many middle-class home-schooling parents who have been educated and have worked in the USA or the UK for a long period. These parents converted to Christianity in their thirties. Now, they are keen to transfer their Christian beliefs to their offspring. Because they were highly educated in an English-speaking context, they are capable of educating their child using packaged Christian home-schooling textbooks from the USA. Such textbooks are used to teach a systematic curriculum which was developed by home-schooling parents and advocates of this type of education in the USA; Type II: this type involves home-schooling parents who converted to Christianity in a Chinese context. These parents are enthusiastic about cultivating their child's Christian doctrines and beliefs. In the course of teaching Christian home schooling, these parents generally only teach their child selections from the Bible; Type III: some home-schooling parents seem to regard Christian home schooling as a useful approach whereby they can maximise their children's talents. Their motivation for practising Christian home schooling seems to involve a mixture of reasons, which include those pertaining to pedagogy (Mayberry and Knowles 1989) and those concerned with ideological beliefs (Van Galen 1988). Although they are Christians, these parents also expect to facilitate their child's achievement of academic success rather than just transferring their Christian beliefs and doctrines to their offspring; Type IV: some home-schooling parents have relatively low volumes of economic and social resources when compared with those who are the owners of enterprises or IT companies. These parents' decisions to educate their children at home seem to be primarily because they are eager to facilitate their child's social mobility; Type V: some home-schooling parents regard practising home schooling and taking part in the co-operative activities organised by the church as a kind of short cut to academic scholarships awarded by the church.

Teaching content

As shown in Table 1, it is noticeable that the teaching content seemed to be strongly associated with various types of Christian home schooling. Those home-schooling parents who were educated and had worked in the USA for a long period preferred to choose the packaged English-language Christian home-schooling textbooks and related reading material, which were directly introduced from the USA. Whilst practising home schooling, these parents generally taught their children using textbooks in English. Those parents who wished to transfer specific religious beliefs to their children were likely to teach using selections from the Bible, with Chinese as the medium of instruction. Science subjects were also taught. Some home-schooling parents regarded Christian home schooling as a ladder that would facilitate their children's admission to a selective overseas university, and these parents were eager to use packaged English-language Christian home-schooling textbooks. They also arranged for the study of the Bible. Some Christian home-schooling parents who planned for their children to return to conventional secondary schools preferred to teach the content of the Bible, as well as adhering to the school curriculum and using textbooks employed in conventional schools at both elementary and secondary levels.

Table 1. Teaching content of Christian home schooling in China.

	Type I	Type II	Type III	Type IV	Type V
Teaching content	English-language Christian home-schooling textbooks and related reading materials which were introduced from the USA -Sunlight home schooling textbooks -Preston home schooling textbooks-	English-language Christian home-schooling textbooks and related reading materials which were used in the USA and the UK and HK; Bible study	Bible study Chinese classical literature Science subject study	Bible study; Primarily the school curriculum teaching content and textbooks that were being taught in the current conventional schools at both elementary and secondary level	Bible study; Reading and reciting Bible Self-chosen textbooks;

Teaching style

A strong body of work has paid specific attention to an exploration of the teaching styles used in home schooling in the USA (Klein 2006; McKeon 2007; Anthony 2009). However, research-based study focusing on teaching styles used in Christian home schooling has been entirely lacking in the educational context of China. On the basis of the qualitative data, this section unpacks the teaching approaches that the parents used in their practice of Christian home schooling. The data indicate that the parents adopted a diversity of approaches in the process of practising home schooling.

...at the beginning, I am very worried about whether I can provide proper teaching for my son...before the learning time, I spent several hours specifically in preparing for the following teaching...I instructed and my son listened to me...however, I found that my son is fond of such a teaching pattern...I found that he is very interested in mathematics...What he learns is faster than the content that I have prepared to teach...I adjust my teaching approaches and teaching content...my son and I will work together to decide the teaching content and teaching pace...I usually adapt to my son's situation and then adjust my teaching content and teaching pace...this flexible approach makes it possible to provide him with the chance to learn something he is really interested in...The result is quite good...He is learning the content of mathematics at a higher grade... (Mary, a middle-class mother)

The transcripts of Mary's interviews illustrate that whilst teaching her son at home, she changed from using a structured teaching approach to a more relaxed and flexible teaching style. In her initial practice, Mary adopted a structured style, which comprised a strict teaching schedule and planned content for each class. However, after some time, she recognised that her son was unhappy with such a traditional teacher-centred approach. As a result, she changed to a flexible teaching style which was entirely pupil-centred. The other parents in the sample described a similar pattern. As one Christian home educator stated:

...the reason that I withdrew my daughter from the conventional school is that she could not adapt to the teacher-centred teaching style provided by the schools...from the first day, I purposely used a flexible and pupil-centred teaching approach...the teaching content and teaching pace is primarily dependent on her learning pace...for my daughter, learning seems to be a process in which she must be self-motivated by her own study interests and learning needs...In the studying her favourite subjects, such as mathematics and English, she is motivated by her interests and learn faster than the instructions of each unit...In this I will follow her learning pace...As to the subjects that she is not fond of, I will take the role of an instructor...we will work together and follow the requirements of each unit in the textbooks...after one day's learning, I usually offer her an instant and positive evaluation of what she has learned...In this way, she will be motivated by the progress that she has achieved... (Belle, a middle-class mother)

As shown by the previous quote, the reason that Belle made such a choice was because she was eager to use a pupil-centred teaching approach, which could not be provided by the conventional school. By using such an approach, Belle was able to help her daughter to become self-motivated by her individual study interests. Practising home schooling allowed Belle to help her daughter to study in depth the subjects in which she was interested. Without a fixed schedule or teaching plans, Belle initially found it difficult to adapt to her daughter's learning needs and individual interests in her daily practice of home schooling.

...in the initial period, I felt very worried about whether I am capable of providing appropriate teaching... before the class I prepared for the lecture very carefully and designed a fixed schedule and content...in the class I taught the entire content in order to ensure my son's grasp of all the content...one day my husband told me that I have been teaching my son in the way in which he was taught in the classes at school...he asked, if I was doing the same, why did we withdraw our son from the school?...to some extent in my teaching I automatically imitated the teaching approach with which I had been educated at school... however, I felt very puzzled about how to change it...I read the Bible and God gave me guidance...I understand that as a mother I am the one who knows her child best...now I adopt a flexible teaching style which is primarily led by my son...sometimes when my son is interested in certain content, I will not break up the teaching but will encourage him to learn in depth...through this he is motivated by his interests, then his progress encourages him to explore further the subject he is interested in... (Sandy, a middle-class mother)

As shown by the previous quote, the values and attitudes that the parents had automatically acquired in the course of their own school education had negative effects on their initial selection of teaching strategies in their practice of home schooling. Nearly all the sample parents reported that they had experienced a transition from a way of teaching, which was used at school to a flexible pedagogy with the central role focused on the child. Like Sandy, many parents had experienced a difficult time during the conversion from a structured teaching pedagogy to a flexible approach.

As shown in Table 2, the data show that there was a close correlation between the types of Christian home schooling and teaching styles, which parents used on day-to-day basis. The parents who chose a pre-packaged, textbook-based curriculum were likely to adopt a flexible teaching style, which was entirely pupil-centred, aimed to match the specific learning needs and study interests of the child. For the Christian home educators, the flexible pedagogy led to superior academic results in terms of both subject study and other areas in which the home-schooled child was interested. Moreover, many home-schooling parents applied a mixture of teaching styles comprising both flexible and structured teaching approaches.

Table 2. The main teaching styles used in Christian home schooling.

	Type I	Type II	Type III	Type IV	Type V
Teaching methods	Flexible pedagogy Children-centred; Self-designed teaching style;	Mixed methods including teacher-centred and children-centred teaching style	Structured pedagogy Teacher-centred; Self-designed teaching style;	Self-designed teaching context and teaching style; Unschooling	Mixed methods including teacher-centred and children-centred teaching style

Outcomes

In the past decade, the rapid growth of home schooling in China has inspired increased interest in the academic performance of home-schooled students. In this section, the academic and social outcomes of Christian home schooling are illustrated as follows:

...after practising home schooling for a while, positive outcomes turned up for my son...Many church friends introduced me to a set of Christian home-schooling textbooks in English which were bought from the USA... my son likes them very much because the content is suitable for his learning needs and study interests...I found the content is designed to inspire the child to think and question...My son and I are able to easily follow the instructions in the book...The sections on literature and history provided in the textbook can help my son to acquire appropriate Christian beliefs and values...this is not available in the curriculum provided by the conventional schools...when my son studied at a key-point school, he felt very unhappy, and thus he was disinclined to go to school...because of the great pressure from various examinations, he sometimes woke up and cried in the night...Now it is quite different...he easily follows the teaching content of the textbooks...he is fond of thinking and questioning...also his talent for mathematics has been inspired...(Paula, a middle-class mother)

As Paula states, her son's academic results improved. The specific teaching content of the pre-packaged Christian textbooks was able not only to cultivate her son's particular Christian values and beliefs, but also to satisfy her pedagogic concerns. Home schooling permitted her son to set the pace and decide the direction of the learning process. As a result of using flexible pedagogic approaches, her son's study was motivated by his interest, thereby resulting in relatively good academic achievement.

...The daughter of one of my friends, who was educated at home was admitted to a selective university in the USA... this friend introduced me to a set of Christian home-schooling textbooks which were from the USA...The book is quite suitable for my son's character and study interests...The Christian home-schooling textbooks were English-language, which were used by the home schoolers in the USA...I chose Christian home schooling because I plan to send my son

to pursue his bachelor's degree abroad...it is easier for parents and the child to follow...The book offers clear instructions regarding how a question should be put forward...the outcomes are quite good...He is studying some upper-grade curricular content without any pressure...(Merle, a middle-class mother)

The transcripts provided by Merle indicate that many middle-class parents were motivated by their concerns about the connection between the curricular content of Christian home-schooling textbooks and their children's admission to a university in the USA. The content of the textbooks was designed for American students. For the parents who planned to send their children to pursue their higher education abroad, the choice of Christian home schooling provided them with a platform to bridge the gap between the curriculum teaching in China and that of the USA.

...the Christian textbook strongly inspired my son's study interests...before practising home schooling, he was not fond of reading...Following the content or literature of the textbook, he became interested...I found that he always reads faster than me...in the process of home schooling, I can flexibly select some additional subject which he becomes interested in...in this way, I developed his talents in the subjects of geography and astronomy...This is beyond our expectations...(Linda, a middle-class mother)

The above example illustrates the positive influence of home schooling in terms of academic progress. Linda explained that the teaching content of Christian home-schooling textbooks permitted her son to become self-motivated to follow his own interests or needs. Apart from the exploration of academic performance of Christian home-schooled children, this study has also examined the development of the character of such children. The positive results in terms of character development of a home-educated child are clearly described in the following quote:

...my daughter was spoiled and would not like to listen to parents and older people...she was not willing to share food or good things with others...In the home-schooling course, I purposely arranged for her to read God's commandments...I also passed on selections from the Bible, which illustrated good values...after one year of study, some positive changes emerged in terms of her character...When participating in the activities organised by the church, my daughter self-criticised her previous improper behaviours...Every change is attributable to the direction of God...The sayings of God in the Bible have made her more obedient and polite...(Sandy, a middle-class mother)

Sandy reported that after 2 years of home schooling her daughter had achieved obvious progress in terms of the development of her character. Her daughter had certain character deficiencies, such as being unwilling to share with others and being disobedient. In the process of practising home schooling, Sandy specifically taught her daughter Christian doctrines and values in order to facilitate the development of her daughter's personality. The powerful influence of religion on the formation of the child's character was evident. Similarly, Kathy stated:

...in the process of practising Christian home schooling, the most important result is the positive changes in my son's body and mind...With the guidance of God, he seems to acknowledge a lot of principles...when he wanted to give up studying something, he would say that this is not right according to the sayings of God...He is polite to older people and his peers...Whenever his peers need him to give a hand, he is willing to try his best to help...He has become persistent and diligent in his daily study...(Kathy, a middle-class mother)

After participating in Christian home schooling for some time, Kathy recognised positive changes in the body and mind of her son. The previous quote provides evidence of the positive influences of religious beliefs and values on the development of the home-schooled children's personality and appropriate behaviours. In the course of educating their children at home, many parents in the sample purposely taught particular content pertaining to the character development. This social development of their children became one of the motivations for parents to decide to home school.

Discussion and conclusions

My work in 2014 has recognised the relationship between religion and home schooling. However, limited by time and funds, this research topic was not conducted and regarded as the future research. This research presented in this article conducted semi-structured interviews amongst 30

mothers who were involved in Christian home schooling in order to examine the influences of religion on the development of Christian home schooling in China. A brief summary of findings is presented as follows:

The growth of Christian home schooling in China

Generally speaking, Christian home schooling in China has experienced three periods in its development. In the initial period, the primary participants were those Christian parents who had been educated and then worked abroad over several decades. Their children were born and educated abroad. After returning to China, these children could not adapt to the examination-oriented education system at the conventional schools. These Christian families were forced to practise Christian home schooling for their children. Since 2000, Christian home schooling was acknowledged and encouraged amongst church friends. It has been through the participation of home-schooling co-operative activities organised by the church that a number of Christian families have been willing to provide Christian home education for their children in order to cultivate in them specific religious beliefs and doctrines. From 2010 to date, Christian home schooling has entered a period of steady growth. As a result of dramatic economic development and social stratification, Chinese parents' choices regarding their children's education have become varied and diversified. A growing number of middle-class parents have striven for the best education for their children. These middle-class parents are not satisfied with the teaching quality provided by the key-point schools. They would like to send their children to receive higher education in a selective overseas university. In this context, more and more Christian families are eager to practise Christian home schooling for their children using English-language Christian home-schooling textbooks introduced from the USA.

The characteristics of Christian home schooling

Christian home-schooling families are quite distinctive in terms of family characteristics. Because practising home schooling is illegal in China, it is difficult to obtain comprehensive demographic data concerning Christian home schoolers. On the basis of the empirical data, this study seeks to present a reliable picture of their characteristics. First, there are the parents who have converted to Christianity and practised Christian home schooling. They are the Christians having strong religious beliefs. Like Amanda, five of the 30 home-schooling parents reported that their motivations for Christian home schooling were primarily framed by the positive influences of Christian schooling in China. Second, the vast majority of parents come from a privileged educational background. Some middle-class mothers have acquired their higher education degree, which makes it possible for them to use the packaged Christian home-schooling textbooks in English. Third, in the process of practising home schooling, it is generally the mothers who fulfil the role of teacher or educator. Fourth, the parents have relatively high aspirations regarding their children's education. In this context, these parents seem to be strongly dissatisfied with the examination-oriented education provided by conventional schools. They are also not satisfied with the teaching quality provided by private schools, such as international schools and international classes in the national/city key-point schools. Fifth, religion has a powerful influence on day-to-day home schooling. Sixth, the participants in Christian home schooling in China are middle-class with a good educational background and relatively high economic resources. Finally, in this study the main Christian home-schooled children were aged between 5 and 13 years. They were primarily concentrated in the elementary levels, with only a small number of home schoolers in the secondary school grades.

Religious beliefs and home schooling

This study has paid specific attention to the exploration of how religious beliefs work in the current practice of Christian home schooling in Chinese society. First, all the sample parents reported a

close correlation between their practices of home schooling and their religious faith. As shown by the empirical data, their religious beliefs and guidance from God had a powerful influence on their decision-making process. As one of the samples stated, 'I felt very uncertain about whether I can control my son's future. One day when I read the Bible, I felt at ease that as a mother my duty is to provide my son with best education. Following the guidance of the God, I did it.' Similarly, the other participants presented home schooling in terms of divine will. As mentioned by a sample parent, 'In the process of practising home schooling, what I did has always been guided by God.' The previous quotations illustrate that religion has played an important role in the initial decision to home school. Second, the parents reported that the church and church friends had provided strong support in the course of choosing home-schooling curricula and textbooks. This is evident in the transcripts provided by a sample parent: according to her, 'Without the help and support of my church friends who have been involved in home schooling, it would have been impossible for me to discover this set of American home-schooling textbooks.' Third, as reported by the sample parents, the training programmes, for example, co-operative activities, organised by the church were of powerful assistance to them in the whole process of practising Christian home schooling. Finally, the data show that parents' religious beliefs have had a strong influence on their day-to-day home schooling. As a sample educator commented, 'In the initial period my son and I always quarrelled with each other. Whenever I am having a difficult time, I will pray with my son. The direction of God supports us to go ahead.'

This study grounded in empirical research reveals that there exist significant gender differences in parental involvement in the process of practising home schooling in China. This study is dominated by interviews of mothers rather than fathers. It is noticeable that all 30 parents involved in Christian home schooling were the mothers. The data show that it was the mother who was always the parent that actually practised home schooling, whilst fathers generally took a distant and general role in terms of their involvement in their children's home schooling on a day-to-day basis. This is consistent with the findings of my work in 2014. I observed that all the Christian home-educated children in the study came from two-parent families in which the mother was the parent who stayed at home and practised home schooling. This gender imbalance is reflected in other research literature, which focuses on the role of mothers in conservative religious home schooling in the Western context (Mayberry et al. 1995; McDowell 2000; Stevens 2001; Yuracko 2008; Fields-Smith and Williams 2009). Stevens (2001, 100) states that it is the mothers who are primarily directly involved in the home schooling, whilst fathers usually play a supportive role. Green and Hoover-Dempsey (2007) observe that home-schooling parents, in particular mothers, report that they should take the primary responsibility for parenting and educating their children.

Limitations and future research

There are several limitations to my study, which I would like to present here. First, at the time of writing this article, Christian home schooling was illegal because it contravened the provisions of the China Compulsory Education Law. Moreover, in the Chinese context, Communist Party members are not allowed to believe in Christianity or participate in religious activities, which are clearly defined. Accordingly, a number of Christian home-schoolers were hidden in the relevant surveys and statistical investigations. In these specific circumstances, there might have been a number of parents practising Christian home schooling on an anonymous basis who were overlooked in this study. Second, in this study, I have attempted to develop a typology of the motivations for undertaking Christian home schooling and the characteristics of Christian home schoolers. However, as only a limited number of sample home-schooling parents were involved, the typology may be regarded as tentative and indicative, requiring future research to test out its broader applicability. Finally, the complexities of Christian home schooling in current Chinese society need to be captured through a large-scale quantitative research study.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Xiaoming Sheng, PhD, works in the area of sociology of education and has experience in sociology, sociology of education, women's studies and home schooling. She is interested in developing theorizations of social class, culture and the ways in which it is mediated by gender. Her research mainly focuses higher education choice, parental involvement, social stratification, gender and educational inequality.

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