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# Confucian home education in China

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## ABSTRACT

Home education, in particular Confucian home education, has been increasing steadily in China over the past decades. However, research relating to home-schooling families has largely been ignored. In particular, the literature grounded in empirical study and focusing on the development of Confucian home education is negligible in the educational context of China. This study places a focus on the influence of Confucian culture and beliefs on the development of home education in China, which is now attracting scholarly interest and public attention. It provides in-depth information regarding the status of Confucian home education, the motivation to undertake Confucian home education, teaching content, teaching methods and its outcomes. It is found that Confucian values and beliefs fit well with the model of home education in China in terms of the relationship between family, education, moral development and society.

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## Introduction

Home education in China has been growing rapidly growth since 2000. At the time of this writing, home education in China is illegal because it contravenes the provisions of the “China Compulsory Education Law”. It is difficult to estimate accurately the number of home-schooled children in China, as parents who conduct home education are not required to register with the authorities. On the basis of the results of my surveys, I estimate that there are currently around 25,000 children who are being home-schooled nationwide. Confucian home education, in particular, which emphasises the transmission of Confucian studies and Chinese traditional culture, has experienced a dramatic growth.

Because home-schooling families have generally been dissatisfied with mainstream schooling, there have been relatively few academic studies on the specific topic of the development of Confucian home education in China. In particular, there is very little literature based on empirical research, which specifically addresses the development of Confucian home education. This study therefore seeks to provide in-depth information about the following: the reasons that Confucian home education has achieved such a dramatic increase; parental motivation to educate their children in this way; what parents anticipate will be the result of providing this type of education for their children and the actual process of practising Confucian home education. This study intends to facilitate further discussion and

provide a timely well-argued analysis of the influences of classical Confucian social philosophy on home education for both English-speaking and Chinese readers.

In what follows, there is a description of the research contexts of this study. The impacts of Confucian philosophy on education in China are then introduced. In this section, Confucian philosophical ideology and Confucian educational theory will be briefly discussed. This is followed by a short analysis of the status of Confucian home education. Next, the article addresses the process of practising Confucian home education and several primary aspects of this process are covered: the motivation of parents, teaching content, the choice of textbooks, teaching methods and outcomes of Confucian home education. Finally, this article provides a brief summary of findings with a focus on the influences of Confucianism on the growth of Confucian home education.

### Relevant research context

With the revival of Confucianism in Chinese society since the 2000s, a growing number of scholars have paid attention to the re-establishment of Confucian values in modern times and the influences of Confucianism on educational development in China (Cai 1982; Chen 2005; Meng et al. 2017; Murray 2012; Pearce and Lin 2007; Song and Jiao 2017; Sun 2008; Tan 2014; Wang 2007). Pearce and Lin (2007) observe that for Chinese and White cultures, the ways in which they promote education are similar but different, and the authors explore the link between social structural positions and cultural components in unpacking the apparent academic success of Chinese Americans when compared with that of White Americans. Wang (2007) examines Chinese ideas of moral education by analysing its philosophical foundations, content, principles, methods and evaluation, and suggests that Confucian thinking on moral education has ongoing value for research and practice in contemporary moral education. From historical and philosophical perspectives, Sun (2008) examines how the Confucian concept of *jun zi* influences the philosophy of lifelong learning and indicates that it is through the concept of *jun zi* that Confucius provides an ideal model of humanity, which uses lifelong learning as a method and process. Murray (2012) explores early Chinese moral education in its classical Confucian expression and analyses early Confucian discussions regarding moral psychology, the Confucian moral curriculum consisting of model emulation, cultural practices and canonical instruction, and the methods and purposes of Confucian statecraft. Tan (2014) examines the Confucian concept of *si* and suggests that it mainly involves an active inquiry into issues that concern an individual's daily life, promotes inferential thinking and facilitates self-examination. Meng et al. (2017) take a cultural perspective and find that Chinese teachers do not advocate discussing content associated with Confucian beliefs about learning, while the US teachers perceive this to be important, since they were educated in the Western culture. Song and Jiao (2017) examine the conceptions of self in Confucian philosophy and suggest that Confucius was committed to reconstructing moral agency and civil society in a way that would be characteristically Confucian.

### Impacts of Confucian philosophy on education in China

When we look back over more than 5,000 years of Chinese history, Confucian studies and works have had a permanent influence on the contemporary sociocultural situation of China. In particular, as the creator of Confucian studies and the most famous educator and theorist

in Chinese history, Confucius has had a strong effect on education in China. The primary influence of traditional Confucian philosophy on education can be summarised as follows.

### ***Family, education and society***

In *The Great Learning*, Confucius presents a well-argued discussion on the relationship of family, education and society. Confucius proposes an important philosophical idea, namely, strict cultivation of a person's morality, good regulation of the family, correct running of the state and making the world peaceful. This is a creed pursued by Confucianists, which is the supreme ideal of countless intellectuals over thousands of years. It is anticipated that the world can become peaceful through self-cultivation, management of the family and the governance of the country.

In the eyes of Confucius, home is the smallest unit of the country, in which an individual can lead a life. In the case of a person, without a home he will lead a wandering life; in the case of a country, if there is no home, the country will be unstable. From this perspective, it is considered that a harmonious family can lead to prosperity in all their affairs. Accordingly, in *The Great Learning*, Confucius states that if people want to run their own country properly, they must first successfully manage their own families. A person is an individual as well as a social person. He wants to participate in a social group, and this group is first a family, and then a country. In this process, the implementation of responsibility is transferred from "managing a family" to "governing a country". There is a famous saying in China that in the rise and fall of the world, every person has a responsibility. This illustrates the view that the relationship between country and individual is closely linked. This can be seen as one of fundamental philosophical ideas of Confucius. From this perspective, people must make themselves examples and strive to improve their morality and increase their knowledge. After acquiring knowledge, the ideas will be genuine; if the ideas are genuine, the mind can be corrected; if the mind has been corrected, personal morality will be cultivated; if morality has been cultivated, the family will be managed well; if all of this has been done, the country will be governed correctly, and then the world will become peaceful.

Moreover, Confucius provides further information regarding how to cultivate a person's morality. He states that if a person wants to promote his/her personal morality, he/she should correct his/her own ideological attitudes. If an individual wants to do so, he/she must be sincere; and if one wants sincerity, he/she must first enrich his/her own knowledge. In order to increase knowledge, one has to clarify the inherent principles of things. In brief, in the view of Confucius, the cultivation of a person's morality is the root of the regulation of the family and the country. An individual should cultivate his/her knowledge through education and then cultivate his/her morality; the result will be that the family will be well regulated, and the world will be ruled wisely. It is clear from Confucius's argument that a person acquiring knowledge and cultivating his/her morality are two of the most important aspects of Confucian education.

### ***Putting "moral development" as the highest priority***

In the view of Confucius, for a young man, moral development is fundamental to his life, and only after learning how to be a good person can he acquire knowledge. This is evident in his work, *Xue Er*. In *Xue Er*, Confucius points out that a young man must serve his parents

well at home and be respectful to the elders outside his home. He should be earnest and truthful, loving all and being associated with those who are *jun zi*. Only after doing this can he study the classics. It is clear that Confucius prioritises the moral education above other forms. Confucius considers individual moral development to be of paramount importance, and only when that has been achieved should study and learning commence.

According to Confucius, proper virtues are vital for an individual and are seen as the essential basis for individual development. In his view, moral development is of primary importance to an individual's growth and socialisation. As the philosopher You says, there are few people who have been cultivated filially who enjoy offending their superiors. Those people who dislike offending their superiors will not become troublemakers. In this way, the noble man is concerned with the fundamentals of behaviours. Once such fundamentals have been established, the proper way of behaving naturally follows. Confucius regards the moral education as the fundamental basis of education. If a young person was cultivated morally, he will become a good man with knowledge.

Developing a young person's virtues is seen as the main purpose of Confucian education. In *Xue Er*, Confucius discusses what virtues contribute to the life of a young person. He says that those people who have no virtue cannot remain in poverty and hardship for a long time or cannot live in wealth and happiness for a long time. Benevolent people are comfortable with virtue, and the wise people take advantage of benevolence. As benevolent people, they will be comfortable with doing good things. The wise only do good things when they know it works for their own benefit. Moreover, in the view of Confucius, the cultivation of morality is closely associated with the maintenance of social order and the reconstruction of human rules. It is not an individual thing but political issues. In his work, he is worried about the lack of cultivation of morality, about studying but failing to engage in deep discussion of what has been learned, hearing what is right but not acting upon it, and being unable to correct what is not good.

### **Advocating the importance of education**

Confucianists regard education as the centre of their ideological system. Confucianism considers education to be the foundation for the country and that it is closely related to the maintenance of state politics, aiming to make people obey the customs and rules. This view sees education as the basis of governing a country. Confucianists wrote *Xue Ji*, which is the first educational monograph in China. In this work, Confucianists comprehensively and systematically expound a series of important issues that relate to education and reflect the Confucian educational philosophy and teaching principles. This has had a significant influence on later generations in China. According to *Xue Ji*, it is recognised that when building a country and managing public affairs, education should be seen as a top priority. That means that if we want to build a powerful country, we must give priority to education and establish a strong country with strong human resources. In *Xue Li*, Confucius states that inspiring law-based thinking and seeking out virtuous people may help a ruler achieve a considerable reputation, but it will not be enough to touch the public. If a ruler can be close to both virtuous people and those who are distant, he may touch the public, but it will not be enough to enlighten the people. If a ruler wants to educate the people and establish good customs, he must start with education.

Confucius created a kind of civil education for all the people. Before Confucius, only noble children had the right to be educated. Therefore, only elite children were qualified to become officials. However, from the time of Confucius, political, economic and cultural education in society started to become available to the public. This provided an opportunity for the development of private schools. In this context, Confucius started his professional career by establishing private schools with the hope of cultivating virtues, particularly with regard to officials through education in order to realise his political thinking.

### ***Confucius's educational theory***

As a great educator, Confucius established a relatively complete theoretical educational system. In the course of practising education over a long period, Confucius had accumulated relatively rich teaching experience, created effective teaching methods and advocated a series of valuable educational ideas and principles. Several of his major educational principles can be summarised as follows: teaching and learning without class; teaching students in accordance with their aptitudes; in the process of teaching and learning, placing emphasis on enlightenment and guidance; teaching with skills and patience; and teaching tirelessly. These educational experiences and principles are the valuable legacy of Chinese traditional educational thought, which still gives effective guidance to contemporary educational practices in China.

First, with regard to the objectives of teaching, Confucius explicitly puts forward the idea of “providing education for all people without discrimination”. “Teaching and learning without class” means that everyone is equal when it comes to education; everyone has the right to education. In teaching, there is no distinction between the nobility and civilians, wealthy and poor, wise and stupid, superior and inferior. As long as there is the desire to learn, they can be admitted to school. Civilian education reflects the spiritual essence of Confucius with respect to teaching and learning without class.

The theoretical foundation of Confucius’s “teaching and learning without class” theory is his philosophical view that human innate nature is similar to each other, and the habits acquired through learning are quite different from one another. “Similarity in the innate nature of human beings” shows the possibility for everyone to become virtuous. “Habits acquired through learning differ widely” show the importance of implementing education. On the basis of the understanding that everyone can become virtuous through education, Confucius proposes his famous educational idea concerned with teaching and learning without class. The implementation of Confucius’s idea of equal education has actually expanded the social foundation of education and the sources of qualified personnel, and has undoubtedly played a positive role in promoting improvement in the quality of all members of Chinese society. Accordingly, the idea of “teaching and learning without class” has had epoch-making significance in the history of education.

Second, Confucius advocates teaching students according to their aptitudes. In the process of teaching, based on the individual characteristics of students, a teacher should arrange different teaching content and implement different teaching methods. In *Xue Ji*, Confucius states that a teacher should promote students’ strengths and correct their shortcomings and weaknesses. It means that in the course of general training and teaching, a teacher must learn to take account of the different characteristics of each student, especially their strengths

and weaknesses. Different educational content and methods of teaching should be adopted so that students can learn from each other and improve together.

Third, for Confucius, the key learning method is to combine learning with thinking in the learning process. In *Xue Er*, the Master says that learning without thinking, in the end, equals labour without results, while thinking without learning becomes harmful. According to this method of learning, Confucius considers that only by combining learning with thinking can a student learn useful truths. Blind learning without thinking might lead the people to be blinded by the appearance of knowledge. However, thinking blindly without acquiring some knowledge will be more dangerous because it produces more doubts.

Fourth, in the process of learning and teaching, Confucius emphasises enlightenment and systematic guidance. In *Xue Ji*, Confucius provides a comprehensive discussion regarding how to enlighten and inspire students. He suggests that when a student does not think deeply, he should not be enlightened. If he is not struggling with the truth, do not inspire him. If the teacher tells him an instance, and he cannot draw inferences about other cases from one instance, do not repeat to teach him. Here, Confucius uses his experience of education. He does not advocate that the teacher easily tells students the answer: the key of teaching is how to inspire students to learn through thinking. This teaching principle embodies the following three points: guiding students to solve problems through independent thinking rather than instilling knowledge in students; motivating students to take the initiative to study rather than inhibiting this initiative; and encouraging students to engage in positive thinking activities instead of giving them the answers. In brief, the teacher should encourage students to actively learn on their own so that teaching can actually achieve its purpose. For Confucius, this may be regarded as a *jun zi*'s education.

Fifth, Confucius emphasises the importance of teaching and learning, and advocates that they should promote each other. In *Xue Ji*, he provides an in-depth description of it. Confucius claims that even if you have delicious cooked food, you do not know its taste without eating; even if there is a good principle, you do not know the benefit of it if you do not learn it. After learning, you will understand that your own knowledge is not enough to teach others. After teaching others, you will know how much you do not understand. Know your deficiencies, and then know how to reflect on yourself; know how much you do not understand, and then study hard. Teaching and learning promote each other, and teaching others can also increase a person's own knowledge. Hence, it is said that teaching others allows the teacher to receive half the effect of learning.

Sixth, with regard to the methodological aspects of learning and teaching, Confucius advocates "learning without tiredness, teaching tirelessly". This educational principle has had a great impact on the formation and development of Chinese educational thought so that today we are still implementing and developing this educational theory. In *Shu Er*, Confucius summarises teaching and learning methods with respect to three concerns: remembering what has been learned silently in the heart; learning does not result in feeling satisfied; and teaching students tirelessly. These three things that Confucius proposes here were practised by him daily, and we should all encourage ourselves to learn from Confucius. These things seem simple, but are not easily achieved in practice. Learning is an arduous and boring process. If you want to become a talented person who is knowledgeable, intelligent and capable, you must study hard without tiring of it. Having a wealth of knowledge and being able to apply what we have learned in practice will make us feel satisfied and happy, and will fill us with the desire to acquire more knowledge.



Finally, with regard to learning attitude, Confucius emphasises sensitivity and studiousness, and a lack of shame about asking. In *Xue Er*, Confucius indicates that if there is anything that they do not understand, people who are very diligent, intelligent and studious are not shamed to learn from those people who are inferior to themselves and have less knowledge than they do. It means that when encountering something that one does not understand, not only should one ask elders, leaders and teachers for advice, but also one may learn from people who are younger, and have lower educational levels and social status. It is not necessary to be ashamed of doing so. For Confucius, this modest and studious attitude towards learning is very valuable and should be encouraged. The spirit of being “sensitive and studious, not ashamed to ask” advocated by Confucius has in fact educated and inspired countless people to achieve success in the course of Chinese history.

Confucius advocates that people treat knowledge problems honestly. With respect to the attitude towards study, there is a well-known Confucius saying: “to know is to know, not to know is not to know, so that is the real wisdom”. Confucius teaches us to treat things with the correct attitude. This academic attitude has had powerful and permanent impacts on the later generations. The Chinese people have used it to remind young people to treat knowledge and learning honestly, to develop a pragmatic and serious attitude to learning, and to seek truth from facts. From a philosophical perspective, Confucius emphasises the consistency between learning and practices. In *Xue Er*, he states that after acquiring knowledge, practise it and make it a habit. In his view, only when what one has learned is applied in practice is the real value of learning embodied. The process from learning to practice implies a process from theory to practice and from thought to behaviour. Confucius suggests that using study to serve a practical purpose is the root and starting point of learning. This is the essence of Confucian learning.

### Status of Confucian home education

As reported by the media, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of children being home-schooled in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong, Liaoning, Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Hubei and Yunnan, etc. The majority of such families are located in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangdong, which is a surprising phenomenon in a society that places such strong emphasis on formal qualifications. In Shenyang, in the past decade, Confucian home education has experienced a dramatic growth. To date, there exist over 30 Confucian *shi shu* (so-called home schools with a private tutor) in Shenyang (Liaoning Daily 2015). These *shi shu* were established by parents to teach their own children, and the “schools” then expanded when the children of friends and relatives joined. Since home education is illegal in China, *shi shu* are forbidden. These *shi shu* therefore registered as *Xue Tang* (so-called old-style home school) or “Confucian Consultancy” instead (Liaoning Daily 2015). As stated above, accurate figures for the number of home-schooled children are not readily available. Table 1 illustrates the number of Confucian home-schoolers reported by the media. It shows that journalists have reported a few isolated groups of families who are practising home education in certain regions in China. In my empirical study, I identified the fact that it is likely that similar groups of Confucian home-schoolers exist in other parts of the country. On the basis of the results of my surveys of Confucian home-schooled children in China, at the time of writing this article, I estimate that there are currently around 12,000 children receiving Confucian home



**Table 1.** Estimated number of Confucian home-schoolers reported by the media.

Place name	Home education	Home-schoolers	Sources
Shanghai	Meng Mu Tang	60	Shanghai Youth Paper
Nanjing, Jiang Shu	Nanjing Home Education League	15	Yang Zhi Evening Paper <a href="#">2011</a>
Beijing	Ri Ri Xin Confucian Home Education	148	163.net educational channel <a href="#">2013</a>
Nanchang, Jiangxi	Confucian Home Education	8	Jiangxi Daily <a href="#">2013</a>
Shenyang Liaoning	Confucian Xue Tang	260	Liaoning Daily <a href="#">2015</a>
Haikou Hainan	Confucian Home Education	22	163.net educational channel <a href="#">2011</a>
Shenzhen	Confucian Home Education	2,000	Guangzhou Daily <a href="#">2012</a>
Hunan Zhang Gu Cun	Classic Confucian education	160	Hunan.voc.com.cn <a href="#">2009</a>
Si Hai Confucian Shu Yuan, Beijing	Confucian Home Education	90	Sohu.com
De Qian Xue Tang, Beijing	Confucian Home Education	30	Sohu.com

education nationwide. The children who are involved in Confucian home education are mainly of primary school age, that is, usually between 5 and 12 years old.

## Confucian home education in China

As stated previously, Chinese academic researchers have failed to examine the development of Confucian home education in the context of China, and there is little substantive information about how Confucian home education is currently conducted across the country. This section will provide in-depth information about what parents expect from Confucian home education, the different forms of this type of home education, teaching content, teaching methods and educational outcomes. I recognise that in line with Klein's (2006) argument, the complexities of Confucian home education in present-day China may not be captured by categorising them according to simplistic typologies.

### *What parents expect from Confucian home education*

This section provides in-depth information about the motivation for undertaking Confucian home education in China.

... My son is unable to sit down and concentrate on something for a long time ... his school teacher found it difficult to teach him ... My son's feelings were hurt because none of his peers liked to play with him ... My son is clever but he needs much more time when he's learning something new ... I tried to talk to his teacher. I asked whether she could set less demanding study goals for my son and develop his interests on the basis of his particular character, but the teacher refused ... She is too busy to have the energy or time to pay specific attention to my son's individual needs ... He has been abandoned by the school, where academic results are the only criteria for evaluating a student. The teacher has too many students to teach my son according to his needs ... there is no individual guidance or teaching available ... everything depends on academic results at school ... I will never trust the school or the teacher again. I am angry that my son is clever, but was abandoned ... (a middle-class mother)

This quote clearly illustrates that the current examination-oriented education provided by schools cannot teach a child in accordance with his or her abilities. As shown by this case, although the child was clever, he was not well trained in how to concentrate on learning, and thus he needed much more time than his peers did when learning something new.

However, since the school and teacher had too many students in the class, they were less able to establish more appropriate study goals for this child and help him achieve academic progress on the basis of his own individual needs. It is clear from the qualitative data presented in this article that the reason Confucian home-schooling parents remove their children from school is that they have problems with inherent parts of the public education model, such as age segregation of children with different abilities into large cohorts, which may result in some children's individual study interests and needs being neglected.

... I took my son out of the school and sent him to be educated through Confucian home education ... I visited this Confucian home school several times. My husband and I believe that the teaching approaches and principles that Confucius advocates will definitely greatly help my son's current situation ... this is something that the school cannot provide ... We are both too busy to teach our son ourselves ... My son is very clever, if you give him enough time and opportunity, he will grasp something very well. The teacher teaches my son in accordance with his own needs ... The teacher inspires and guides my son when he experiences difficulties in studying ... now my son takes a strong interest in his studies ... He always tells me that he was praised by the teacher ... and he has started to make friends with his peers. I made the right decision ... (a middle-class mother)

The quote presented above clearly indicates the reason that the parents were determined to choose Confucian home education. These parents believed that the teaching that follows Confucian educational theory and principles is able to facilitate their children's achievement of academic success. "Teaching and learning without class" and "teaching students in accordance with their aptitudes" are two of the theoretical foundations of Confucian education. In the view of Confucius, each child can become an intellectually superior person through education. For a teacher in the process of teaching, there is no distinction between clever and stupid, superior and inferior. These educational principles fulfil the requirements of parents regarding their children. Eventually, the middle-class mother took her son out of the conventional school and arranged for him to receive Confucian home education. This child particularly suffered socially at his conventional school because he had no peers who wanted to play games with him. After receiving Confucian home education for a while, the boy seemed to recover well in terms of social development. This finding is in accordance with what has been found in the Western context of home education (Honeybone 2000; Jackson 2009). Another middle-class mother offered a similar comment:

... I like the Confucian studies very much ... Confucian educational principles were founded on the basis of Confucius's own teaching practices. Confucius believes that in teaching there should be no distinction ... no matter whether you are rich or poor, wise or not, each child should be educated equally ... in Confucian education, the children will not be classified merely according to their academic results ... At school this is the only standard to evaluate a child's progress ... and if you have bad academic results, you might have no peers who want to play games with you. Confucius advocates moral development and puts the cultivation of morality above all else, learning with thoughts and inspiration and guidance, drawing inferences about other cases from one instance ... education in the values of traditional culture, which I believe is the most important part of education for a child, has been removed from education at school. (a middle-class mother)

As illustrated by the case above, the parents who choose Confucian home education for their child seem to be very critical of conventional education because they feel the current teaching that schools provide is less able to serve a child's individual interests and study needs. The educational ideas of this mother are in accordance with those of Confucius. Such home-schooling parents believe that a child's moral development should be prioritised and

there should be no distinction between teaching and learning: each child should be educated equally. Under the current examination-oriented system, mainstream schools and teachers, to some extent, focus on improving children's academic results, while other concerns take second place. In this context, the parents feel extremely dissatisfied that the only criteria used to evaluate whether a child is good or not depend on the child's academic results. If their academic results are not good, children may be unhappy or even suffer at school, and they may also be excluded from normal academic and social activities at school. In these circumstances, such parents anticipate that their children would benefit from the educational principles advocated by Confucius, for example in terms of the teaching process that emphasises enlightenment and systematic guidance; teaching with skill and patience; and teaching tirelessly. As a result of the strong influences of Confucian educational thought, the parents in the sample preferred to place moral development as the highest priority in their children's education. The rest of the Confucian home-schooling parents in the study reported that they felt very frustrated with the education at school. For example, one parent provided the following evidence:

My son is 13 years old. He was unhappy at school so I decided to find a place in which he can feel happy while studying ... I chose Confucian education for him because I believe this kind of education can help to meet his study needs and pace of learning ... I do agree with the teaching principle that Confucius advocates ... teaching students in accordance with their abilities is suitable for a child like my son. (a middle-class mother)

The quote provided by this middle-class mother indicates that she has chosen Confucian home education because she expects that the educational principles advocated by Confucius could reinvigorate her son's interest in education and would lead to him feeling happy while studying. According to her, Confucius's principle of teaching students in accordance with their aptitudes is very suitable for her son's daily learning practice.

This is something that this parent may not be able to obtain for her child from the education provided at school.

### **Teaching content**

Drawing on the secondary resources, the teaching content of Confucian home education in China that was described is shown in Table 2. Some types of Confucian home education, such as *Qi Lian Xue Tang*, only teach classic Confucian works, including *The Analects of Confucius* and *Mencius*. Some of them choose not only Confucian works but also the other subjects. For example, the children who study at *Meng Mu Tang*, *Hong Yi* and *Wu Tong Xue Tang* learn not only about Confucian works, but also about famous English literary works, such as the Shakespearian sonnets and so on. Apart from Confucian works, the children of *Zhi Yong Xue Tong* also study science subjects. Some of *Xue Tang* provide comprehensive courses relating to Confucian education. For example, the teaching content of *Jiu Wen* and *Si Hai Xue Tang* comprises several aspects, including reading classical studies, such as *Xiao Jing*, *Dao De Jing* and *The Analects of Confucius*; learning varieties of polite behaviour; studying the arts, including music, drawing, Chinese drawing and so on; practical activities, such as growing vegetables or other training courses, such as *jing ding* training (learning to concentrate by sitting quietly for long periods).

**Table 2.** Teaching content of Confucian home education reported by the media.

Name	Teaching content	Resources
Meng Mu Tang	"Meng Zhi" and "The Analects of Confucius"; classical English literary works, such as the Shakespearean sonnets and A Midsummer Night's Dream; other training, etc.	Sihai shuyuan.com 2015
Jiu Wen Xue Tang	Reading classical Confucian studies, such as Xiao Jing, Dao De Jing, The Analects of Confucius, etc.; learning varieties of polite behaviours; studying arts, including music, calligraphy, Chinese drawing, weiqi and so on; the activities of practices, such as planting vegetables in fields; other training courses, such as Jing Ding training (learning to concentrate by sitting quietly for long periods)	Liaoning Daily 2015
Zhi Yong Xue Culture Xue Tang	Reading and studying classical Confucian works; arts and science, Wu Shu, chess	News.163.com 2014
Qi Lian Xue Tang	Reading classical Confucian works, sports and music	Liaoning Daily 2015
Hong Yi Xue Tang	Reading Classic Confucian works; English; Wu Shu, calligraphy and music	Liaoning Daily 2015
Si Hai Confucian Shu Yuan	Reading classical Confucian works; moral education; growing plants; classic music; drawing; arts appreciation, etc.	Sihai shuyuan.com 2015
Wu Tong Shu Yuan	Reading classical Confucian works and English works of literature; reading medicine works (e.g. Yellow Emperor); Wu Shu	Guangzhou Daily 2012

### Choice of textbooks

Confucian home-schooling families primarily choose *The Analects of Confucius* and *Mencius*, which are designed to transmit Confucian beliefs and values, as their teaching textbooks. Many home educators and advocates of home-schooling have produced and published specific textbooks on traditional Chinese literature (e.g. Confucian works) for home-schooled children. Several home-schooling parents have established an online home-education website, The Home Education League, which aims to build a support network for families who are practising home education. To some extent, this can be seen as a kind of original home-schooling industry. The parents and organisers involved are able to generate a large amount of money from this new educational industry by selling textbooks and online courses.

Surveys have found that Confucian home education, which emphasises the transmission of Confucian studies and Chinese traditional culture, has been developed using the business methods. For example, these parents have established a home-schooling website and published a series of textbooks to provide the basis for their children's day-to-day learning. Unlike the development of home education in the USA, Canada and Australia, home education in China is still at an immature stage, and its curricular development is still insufficient.

### Teaching methods

The study presented in this article explored the types of teaching used by home-schooled families. Some Confucian home-schooling families are unlikely to be directly involved in home education themselves because they are too busy. These parents usually send their children to learn from an expert in order that their child may be educated in Confucian works and the specific values they espouse.

... After participating in *Meng Mu Tang* for some time, my son feels less stressed when he is engaged in his daily learning activities. When he cannot recite the works very well, the teacher will change the teaching method, for example, by asking him to do some reading instead ... my son's small amount of progress was praised by his teacher. My son seems much happier with this way of learning ... now he has started to be interested in his studies again. (a middle-class mother)

As presented previously, Confucius advocates teaching students in accordance with their aptitudes. Unlike the education at school, a home-schooled child has more opportunity to receive individual attention from his teacher. The teaching in Confucian education permits the teacher to customise the teaching content according to a child's personal study requirements and pace of learning. The implementation of these teaching principles leads children to learn and think, and take an active role in the process, which helps them achieve better academic progress.

Some of the home-schooling parents choose to teach their child Confucian studies and the relevant works themselves at home. Usually, some of the children of their relatives and friends are involved, and they form a small group consisting of six or eight children.

... I taught my daughter Confucian works myself at home ... Following the principles that Confucius proposes, in my teaching practice, I usually enlighten her about thinking first and then learning with me together ... in this way she takes a strong interest in what she is going to study ... If she cannot keep up with the pace of learning, we will stop and discuss together the difficulties that she is facing ... I also encourage her to question the learning content ... through

the method of questioning and answering she is encouraged to learn something different from what she has already learned ... I feel that the Confucian works are much more suitable for education at home ... after a while, I recognised that my daughter started to be interested in studying again ... (a middle-class mother)

As illustrated by the case above, this mother taught her daughter herself, following Confucian educational principles. In the process of the teaching and learning, the mother applied several major Confucian teaching principles, including teaching students in accordance with their aptitudes, emphasising enlightenment and systematic guidance, teaching with skill and patience. By these means, this parent successfully inspired her daughter's interest in studying, which resulted in the child's significant academic progress. It is noticeable that Confucian educational principles and thoughts are well suited to the home education model in the sociocultural context of China.

Other Confucian home-schooling families use a mixture of traditional and progressive methods to teach their children. They run a Confucian reading course, which includes the use of videos and courses taught by experts in a certain subject. In all of the above kinds of Confucian home-schooling, the primary instructional method for the teaching of Confucian studies was reading and recitation. Table 3 outlines the main characteristics of Confucian home education in China.

### ***Outcomes of Confucian home education***

As an alternative educational form, policy-makers and education officials have received little substantive information about Confucian home education. Drawing on a rich body of qualitative data, this study seeks to provide in-depth information on the relevant academic outcomes of Confucian home education.

... My son's academic results were not good, and his teacher did not seem to like him. Although he was only a student at Grade Two, every day after school he was doing his homework until 10 or 11 o'clock at night. I believe Confucian education will greatly help my son ... it has been proved in the past 2,000 years that Confucian educational theory works well in practice ... Finally, following an introduction from my friend, I sent him to study here ... he started to take an interest in his studies again ... he told me that the teacher always teaches him according to his situation ... the teacher did not push him, but used different approaches to help him grasp the teaching content ... he feels no pressure ... (a middle-class mother)

It is clear that the teaching in Confucian home education described above was in accordance with the child's abilities, study needs and learning pace and it reinvigorated his interest in studying. By responding to his specific study needs in this way, there was improvement in the child's academic achievement. The quote below presents a similar case:

... My son is 5 years old, he is always moving around and cannot concentrate on anything. I believe in Confucian educational principles, in particular Confucius's emphasis on a child's moral development. My husband and I sent him to study here ... every day he is reading and reciting the Confucian works ... Now he can learn something quietly and he is polite to the elderly and to his peers ... (a middle-class mother)

This demonstrates that after receiving Confucian home education for a while, a range of positive social outcomes was observed. For example, this child behaved politely towards older people and his friends. And these positive results illustrate that Confucian home education can have a strong influence on a child's moral development. Similar positive results in terms of moral development are evident in the case presented below:

**Table 3.** Main characteristics of Confucian home education in China.

	Meng Mu Tang	Guo Xue home edu- cation	Ri Ri Xin Xue Tang	Du Jing Xue Tang	Confucian home education	Others
Teaching patterns	Employing professional teachers in the area of Confucian theory	Employing professional teachers	Self-designed teaching context and style, unschooled, child-centred learning	Employing teachers who are experts in the area of Confucian studies	A kind of modern Shi shu Self-designed teaching context and style	Mixed methods including child-centred and teacher-centred teaching style
Organisational patterns	Purchasing a villa as the study environment, with 12 students living and studying together		Teaching at a house		At home individually	At home individually or learning together in a small group
Parents' belief	Confucian theory and its works		Various and multiple		Confucian theory and its works	Various and multiple
Educational idea	Emphasis on the learning of Chinese traditional culture		Providing a superior education to maximise their children's talents		Providing their children high-quality English-language teaching to improve their chances of being admitted by an overseas institution	Providing a kind of education which individually matches their children's learning needs and study interest



... Three months ago I sent my son to live and study at Confucian *Xue Tang*. Now I am happy to find that he has developed certain good manners ... he is very polite to the elderly ... whenever he gets into the car, he usually lets parents or the elderly in first ... When I asked him why he did this, he answered me, "The elderly are first, the younger are second" ... (a middle-class father)

It is clear that Confucian home education seems to have provided this child with training and development in relation to moral or character development. The other respondents in the study reported a similar positive influence of Confucian home education on their child's social development.

## Discussion and conclusions

In the history of China, the use of home education, *shi shu*, has been a very common educational occurrence. *Shi shu*, an old-style home school with a private tutor, initially emerged in the spring and autumn periods (770–476 BC), more than 2,000 years ago, and continued to exist apart from a temporary abatement during the Qin Dynasty. It took different forms, for example, that established by tutors, or that sponsored and developed by wealthy families. The system of *shi shu* was gradually abandoned at the end of Qing Dynasty. Since 1949, the government has gradually reformed and replaced it. As an educational practice, *shi shu* disappeared because of the establishment and expansion of the institutionalised school system in the 1950s. While *shi shu* was abandoned, *shi shu* as an educational style appeared in the form of private classes (*bu xi ban*) and private tutors in contemporary Chinese society. Since the end of the 1990s, Confucian home education, which emphasises the learning of Confucian studies, such as *Meng Mu Tang*, *Ri Ri Xin Xue Tang*, has increasingly begun to emerge in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. Until now, Confucian studies have been the dominant and primary content of home education in China. Confucian home education has experienced a change from being less recognised and accepted by the public and media to being a widely acknowledged alternative form of education.

The renaissance of Confucian home education in China has given rise to a nationwide discussion as to why Confucian home education has achieved such dramatic growth over the past decades and why it has emerged in Shanghai, Shenzhen, Guangzhou and Beijing in particular. Cities such as Shanghai and Shenzhen are regarded as large international urban areas in which new theories and ideas originated in Western contexts have developed and where foreign languages are very popular. In this respect, it is interesting that in such international cities, Confucian home education has become very popular among certain middle-class parents.

First, in the view of Confucius, there originally existed differentiation between people, for example, some were wise, some were stupid; some were honest, some were unscrupulous. However, according to Confucius, it is through education that these differences can be eliminated. He asserts that a person can achieve the purpose of self-cultivation and form a perfect personality in four ways, that is: by studying the phenomena of nature in order to acquire knowledge; by studying the inherent principles of things; by being sincere; and by being honest (e.g. establishing the correct ethics and moral values and prohibiting selfish thoughts). This is the important role of education in personal development. On this basis, everyone actively makes every effort to promote the harmony and happiness of their families and then contribute to the prosperity and stability of the country. This is the vital role of education in social development. In this way, Confucius advocates the importance of education. Since

the Han Dynasty, a Confucian slogan for education has been, “If you achieve excellent academic performance, you can become an official”, and this has become a socially dominant ideological view of education. The Confucian idea of education has been embodied in each Chinese parent’s attitudes towards their children’s education. As a result of the powerful influences of Confucianism, Chinese parents are eager to invest heavily in their children’s education. As the data indicate, all of the Confucian home-schooling parents in this study have high aspirations for their child’s education and are enthusiastic about being involved in their child’s education.

Second, to some extent, Confucian beliefs and values can be seen as one of the important foundations of Chinese traditional culture. When we look back over more than 5,000 years of Chinese history, the form of home education known as *shi shu* has existed for over 2,000 years. China’s current sociocultural situation has arisen as a result of Chinese traditional culture, norms and values (e.g. Confucian studies and works). As shown by the data presented in this article, I suggest that Confucian values and beliefs fit well with the model of home education in China in terms of the relationship between family, education, moral development and society. As the representative culture, in which Confucian beliefs have been influential over the course of history, Confucian education is the most easily accepted in terms of the content of home education in China. In this context, home education which emphasises Confucian works is experiencing an increase in its development.

The renaissance of Confucian home education illustrates the fact that a growing number of middle-class, well-educated parents are not satisfied with the current educational system in which Chinese traditional culture, values, moral beliefs and norms are not valued. Historically speaking, education focusing on Confucian works and Chinese traditional culture emphasising humanist values has to some extent been undermined by the contemporary Chinese education system. Conventional school education primarily emphasises the teaching of science subjects, which promotes conformity, standardisation and failure to acknowledge individuals’ differences. In this context, more and more Chinese parents are eager to transmit Chinese traditional culture, values and norms to their children, as well as helping their children to pursue academic excellence.

Third, when considering the reasons for the renaissance of Confucian reading courses and modern *shi shu*, it should be acknowledged that it is likely that all educational phenomena arise from the particular sociocultural context of China. I argue that the rapid growth of the economy since 1978 and the emergence of a new middle class in China since the mid-1990s have given rise to socially polarising effects in terms of parental choice concerning their children’s education. In general, the rebirth of Confucian education, and particularly Confucian home education, is due to the multiple educational choices available to parents that can benefit their children. When looking back at the development of home education in China, it is clear that the rapid economic development over the past few decades has encouraged the emergence of home education in China. Without strong economic support, the middle-class parents who are practising Confucian home education might have found it impossible to make such a choice.

Fourth, it is noticeable from the qualitative data that home-schooling parents feel dissatisfied with the current standardised approach used by conventional schools. However, it may be too simple to conclude that home-schooling students are unhappy at school because they have had problems with the existing examination-oriented educational system. I suggest that the middle-class parents who choose home education are very unhappy with

inherent parts of the public education at school, such as children being divided by age into large cohorts. Too many students studying in a class has also resulted in the teacher being less able to pay specific attention to a child's personal study needs or interests. It may be a dream for a child to be taught in accordance with his or her own abilities.

Some middle-class parents prefer their children to be educated according to their individual learning needs, but the present conventional school system cannot adequately respond to such needs. Confucius established an educational theory that advocates “teaching and learning without class”, “teaching students tirelessly”, “teaching students in accordance with their aptitudes” and “teaching with skill and patience”. These educational ideas proposed by Confucius actually fulfil the needs and requirements of the middle-class parents. These parents have therefore chosen to control what their children should learn in order to transfer Confucian beliefs, which have been ignored entirely in the curricula provided by conventional education. As a result, a growing number of middle-class highly educated parents have withdrawn their children from schools and have chosen Confucian home education for their children. They anticipate that Confucian home education will be able to provide their children with a kind of child-centred, one-to-one instructional approach, using modern *shi shu*, a traditional and mature form of education. By practising home education, they are able to transmit their preferred culture and values, for example, by teaching Confucian works to their children. Home-schooling families wish to establish an appropriate and happy learning environment with the aim of ensuring their children's achievement of academic excellence.

Finally, in contemporary Chinese transitional society, different social groups are struggling to distinguish themselves from each other. In the competition to provide a better education for their children, the different volumes of economic, social and cultural resources that parents possess have resulted in their differing abilities to mobilise their children's educational success, which in turn is embodied in the varying social statuses of parents located within different fractions of the middle classes in contemporary China. In this respect, it is noticeable that many middle-class parents who are providing their children with Confucian home-schooling (e.g. *Meng Mu Tang*, *Ri Ri Xin Xue Tang*) have prioritised their desire to distinguish themselves in terms of social class. This is evident in the comments provided by a middle-class parent: “... the education of *Meng Mu Tang* is different from the education at school. It belongs to someone who really understands education and Chinese traditional culture ... However, the school teachers do not know this ...”.

In this paper, I have attempted to develop a typology of how Confucian home education is carried out in China. However, as there are only a limited number of quotes from a small group of parents, the typology needs to be seen as tentative and indicative, requiring further quantitative research to test its wider applicability.

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