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Reshaping a tradition for moral education: Confucianism in a school curriculum in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Purpose – School curricula are vital carriers of traditions, which in turn are sources of moral and civic education. Drawing on the ideas of Raymond Williams, this article analyses the Chinese virtues and values chosen and represented in a Confucian school curriculum in Hong Kong.

Design/methodology/approach – This study was mainly a documentary one combined with an in-depth interview with a key informant of the curriculum.

Findings – The curriculum still relies on Confucian classics and selected historical stories, albeit with some adjustments to accommodate the situation of modern society and considerations of pedagogical effectiveness and compatibility with official education reforms. The concepts of rite, filial piety and loyalty have been reinterpreted to coincide with modern life. Classics education and modelling are supplanted by new ways of learning.

Research limitations/implications – This is an empirical analysis of the adoption and adaptation of Confucian thoughts in modern school curricula, making new contributions to the sociology of morality and moral education.

Practical implications – This article demonstrates how Confucianism can be utilised in pedagogical practices, including Confucian understanding of some virtues and its learning methods, such as etymological exercises, ways of thinking and introspection.

Originality/value – Utilising Williams's framework to understand the cultural production of morality and its education along the dimensions of selection, interpretation and social analysis, this article adds new knowledge concerning the invention of tradition. We can better understand how actors compose and change traditions through various forms of borrowing and mutual interaction out of cross-cultural encounters.

Keywords Classics education, Confucianism, Curriculum, Hong Kong, Tradition

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction: the missing piece of puzzle in sociology of moral education

Moral education is a collective cultural phenomenon, and sociology can enhance our understanding of its social nature and the context that influences its operation and outcomes (Dill, 2007; Swartz, 2010). However, because culture is often seen as given or legitimised, existing work focuses primarily on cultural transmission or reproduction, including the ways in which schooling maintains social order or perpetuates inequalities and dominations, and the cultural politics about curriculum, with insufficient attention to the production of culture itself (Kay, 1975; Dill & Hunter, 2010). The great sociologist Emile Durkheim (1956) is right to attribute moral sources and authority to the society. Since morality comes from some specific sources that are not static, we must reveal these specific sources and their driving force. Among them, tradition, as a compound of elements and segments, is a major source of values, beliefs, norms and worldviews.

Moral education and civic education are distinct yet intertwined both conceptually and practically (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006). Moral education is primarily about fostering proper values, ethical conduct and character development, while civic education focuses on

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cultivating citizenship, which includes legal status, rights, responsibilities and civic virtues. Civic education is more politically-oriented, addressing the individual-state relationship within the public sphere. It also entails a set of dispositions and competencies required for effective political engagement. Moral education and civic education may overlap in some domains or elements. Since morality and citizenship are essentially ideal and normative notions, there are different orientations across various schools of thoughts and social contexts.

Culture can be broadly understood as a comprehensive way of life encompassing a community's or group's shared knowledge, beliefs, values, identity, actions and activities. Culture and tradition are closely related, as traditions are vital in transmitting cultural content across generations. Traditions often have a normative or ideal dimension and provide standards for evaluation and imitation, i.e. moral codes. The continuity of traditions consists in the influence of past thoughts and practices on present ones. Traditions reproduce themselves as they change and are therefore also dynamic and evolutionary social phenomena. Cultural transmission is not simply about repetition but also about variations and new creations. For traditions to survive or persist in the face of social change, they must adapt to change and prove their relevance and effectiveness in terms of people's needs and social conditions. Traditions are also learned by actively appropriating other elements. Therefore, preservation and creation coexist over time.

The view of a "tradition versus modernity" opposition and the eradication of tradition with the advance of modernisation was quite popular in past scholarship. The previous literature emphasised the backwardness, fixity, stability and continuity of tradition but neglected its beneficial roles, dynamics and complicated meanings (So, 1990). Since the 1970s, academia has moved away from an essentialist and static view of tradition and the theory of linear evolution. Modernity is no longer contrasted to tradition in a historical periodisation that distinguishes societies into different stages of development (Otto, 2016). Also, the thesis of de-traditionalisation was replaced by the coexistence thesis – the persistence of traditional values and practices in modern societies and the renewal of a tradition with new elements (Tu, 1996, 2000). There has been a paradigm shift towards constructionism, seeing tradition as a (re-) making practice in which "the past" is continuously processed over time in the course of its transmission. Accordingly, more attention has been paid to the variation, contestation and change of traditions (Handler & Linnekin, 1984; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983).

Learning is essential to transmission, and traditions are commonly sustained in institutions such as the family, schools and religions. Sociology of moral education must answer why, how and how much traditions may change or continue; and find out the ways cultural agents work on the traditions in changing circumstances. The preservation of tradition relies on specialised institutions such as the school system, which is a vital site of cultural reproduction and acquisition of traditions by members of the community. As the basis of teaching and learning, school curricula are carriers of legitimate knowledge, beliefs and values that shape students' characters.

The distinctive content and format of moral (and civic) education in schools, along with their evolution over time, warrant careful investigation. Confucianism, an ancient indigenous Chinese religion and philosophy, is one of the key traditions that has exerted a lasting influence for years, alongside Taoism and Buddhism (Wu & Lee, 2021; more discussion in Section 5). In light of the above discussions on moral (and civic) education and tradition, this paper aims to trace back the dynamics of cultural production and answer the research question "How did a Confucian body in Hong Kong represent and reshape the tradition of Confucianism with a school curriculum?" This case study illustrates the malleability and variety of traditions, as well as the construction of traditions for moral and civic education, hence adding new insights to recent scholarship (Tan, 2020; Wu & Lee, 2021; Yao, 1999).

The following sections discuss in turn the theoretical framework pioneered by Raymond Williams, the methodology, the current development of the school curriculum related to religions in Hong Kong, the background of Confucianism in Hong Kong, the origins of the new curriculum, and its characteristics in terms of selection and interpretation. The paper

finally discusses the implications and limitations of developing and utilising Confucian resources as a tradition for moral education.

2. Theoretical framework: Tradition as a source of morality, but what tradition and whose selection?

"Tradition" generally refers to anything handed down from the past to the present. Its content can be beliefs, customs, knowledge, values or ways of conduct that have persisted across generations (Shils, 1981). Tradition still plays a crucial role in social life nowadays by offering people an outlook of the world, providing normative guidance, constructing collective memory and identity, and legitimising the authority.

The conceptual tools and analytical methods developed by Raymond Williams over his lifetime offer valuable resources for cultural studies and other fields, enhancing our understanding of different cultural forms and their formations (McGuigan & Moran, 2014; Menter, 2022). Williams's legacy also has a much wider applicability in educational studies. Williams underscores the significance of educational provision itself as a system of cultural production, illustrating how competing forces have shaped the curriculum in England in his seminal work, *The Long Revolution*. His approach highlights the importance of understanding who makes curricular selections and how and why they make those choices. It is essential to explore the history of cultural forms and relevant institutions, as well as the means and conditions of their production, through Williams's framework. His balanced approach, which bridges textual and institutional analysis, and his emphasis on historicity and agency are highly relevant to the present study.

In particular, Williams has outlined a theory about the cultural production of traditions (Jones, 2004). Firstly, Williams (1965, pp. 64–88) coins the term "selective tradition" to refer specifically to how the canon of culture is built up over time, and school curricula in particular contain a selection of cultures past and present, with exceptions also made. The general process of transmission entails respect and duty, as only some of the traditions or parts of them have been selected (Williams, 1983, pp. 318–320). When culture makers construct traditions, they establish intrinsic and extrinsic values for their followers and keep the tradition alive according to contemporary interests. In this sense, tradition formation is an active process of constant choice regarding betrayal and abandonment. It involves evaluating the relevance of the past, connecting the lived culture and absorbing it into a selective tradition.

Secondly, the cultural tradition is not only a selection but also an interpretation. People see the past through their own experiences and relate their interpretations to certain contemporary values. To keep the tradition alive, the agent would redraw existing lines or build new lines with the past.

Third, the selective tradition itself is related to the social organisation of cultural work, and the features and changes in the field of cultural institutions are necessary components of the cultural production process under study (Williams, 1981). Therefore, a documentary analysis will naturally extend to social analysis by tracing who creates and controls the tradition. Forging a tradition is not only cultural but also attributable to the external social and political conditions. Tradition-making is a process in which elites select and organise certain cultural elements and imbue them with special value and significance for ideological, political and economic use. Rival groups also compete and struggle to establish and reproduce their own forms and meaning (Tonkinson, 1993). Researchers therefore must address the actors and agency involved, and the cultural dynamics of specific local innovations and reactions to external change in the modern age.

3. Research design

This study was mainly a documentary one combined with an in-depth interview with a key informant of the curriculum. The curriculum materials for this paper were a whole set of 10

textbooks from primary 1 to secondary 3 published in 2004 and 2006, respectively, and public documents such as publicity materials and reports on funding schemes related to a project collected from the Confucian Academy. These textbooks were particularly designed for the purpose of moral and civic education in primary and secondary schools. I read all textbooks for the analysis. A reference to the previous version of the textbooks (Lo, 1968) was also used to illustrate the distinctiveness of the new version. The data obtained were analyzed with reference to the theoretical discussion mentioned above. A frequency count was also conducted to show the main sources of the classics and the pattern of topic distribution (for more, see Section 7.1 and Table 2). I approached the Confucian Academy, and an informant of the curriculum development project agreed to talk about the background and the curriculum compilation process in July 2021. With reference to a previous study (Lau, 2017), the interview questions included the informant's biographical information and his working experience with the projects, as well as the internal and external factors related to curricular materials development. The semi-structured interview lasted over two hours, and it was tape-recorded and transcribed. All the collected data were coded and categorised according to Williams's framework.

4. Current development of school religious education curriculum

Since the British colonial era, Hong Kong has featured a vibrant religious sector and a diverse public school system, with many religious bodies actively popularising their teachings to students (Kwong, 2002). To promote school sponsorship, the Hong Kong government allows religious bodies to run faith schools. Approximately 60% of kindergartens and schools in Hong Kong are managed by religious bodies, where religious education is commonly offered. Most faith kindergartens and schools receive public funding and handle religious education in their own ways, reflecting their core identities and preserving specific traditions (Tse & Ng, 2022).

The prominent religious influence in Hong Kong's public education system stems from the significant autonomy and involvement of various religious bodies. With limited government intervention, school-based religious education is widespread, often offered under various names, along with a proliferation of related curricular materials and programmes. Although there is no compulsory religious education curriculum mandated by the government, a mono-faith model is common in faith schools, despite the diversity of students and teachers. This strong religious presence fosters close and complementary relationships among religious, moral and civic education within schools (Leung, 2010).

Before 1978, when basic education was highly selective, moral education in schools was not formally recognised by the Government. The implementation of a nine-year compulsory education programme in 1978 led to an influx of students, resulting in increased behavioural problems and juvenile delinquency. In response, the Education Department initiated guidelines for moral education in 1981 and established a religious/ethical education section under the Advisory Inspectorate in 1982 to support school heads and teachers (Chong, 1998). Although various moral education reference materials have been provided since then, a centralised and mandatory curriculum for moral education was not developed until 2012. Consequently, for many years most schools have devised their own moral education, often reflecting different religious or sectarian features. The process of democratisation and the transfer of sovereignty prompted the Hong Kong government to promote civic education, as evident in the *Guidelines on Civic Education in Schools* in 1985 and a revised version in 1996. "Moral and civic education" has also become a common notion in Hong Kong schools.

Since 1997, faith schools have faced challenges, requiring adjustments to meet social demands, including adapting to official education reform and reinforcing the younger generation's national identity after Hong Kong's handover. Major religious school sponsoring bodies have also updated their own religious education programmes to incorporate new content and pedagogical strategies (Tse & Ng, 2022).

5. The setting of tradition formation: Confucianism and Confucian bodies in Hong Kong

Confucianism has a long history in China, having originated in the 7th century BCE (a timeline of Chinese dynasties can be found in appendix). It was a subject in the central government school (*guanxue*官學) for two thousand years, from the Western Han dynasty to the Qing dynasty. It enjoyed lofty academic and political status and was treated as an important part of Chinese culture and the nexus of imperial hegemony. And for many years the Four Books and Five Classics of Confucianism were the main content of Chinese education [1]. But Confucianism has been buffeted by political turmoil and changes of regime since the end of the Qing dynasty (Levenson, 1968). In the time of radical social change, the Confucian tradition was equated to the old social order and an ossified ideology and considered as an obstacle to progress. Many people were eager to repudiate and overthrow the tradition as a whole (Zheng, 2012). In the 20th century, there were two large-scale anti-Confucian movements in mainland China: the New Culture Movement (1917–1919) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).

Confucianism experienced decline in mainland China but was able to survive in Hong Kong. After the collapse of the Qing's monarchy, a group of former Qing scholars moved to Hong Kong and tried to revive Confucianism through the Confucian Academy (1930) and Confucius Hall (1935) (Chen, 1999; Ngai, 2016). Considering themselves as cultural and moral custodians, these Confucian bodies played the roles of advocating Confucianism and of consolidating and uniting the Chinese people in Hong Kong. Confucianism is a residual cultural tradition, that is, formerly dominant forms that have survived to play a reduced but active role at present (Jones, 2004).

Over the years, the Confucian Academy has striven to achieve its objectives of manifesting Confucian values and promoting education to foster a community with moral betterment (Confucian Academy, 2010). The Academy has established three primary schools and two secondary schools in Hong Kong. For decades, the Academy has continued to promote the teaching of Chinese classics through the essence of Confucianism (Lo, 1968; Ngai, 2016).

6. Social analysis of tradition: origins of the curriculum

The mode of control and selection concerning cultural production is related to the state-civil society relation. Although Confucian groups could gain a foothold in Hong Kong Chinese society, the development of Confucianism was stagnant for many years. The British Hong Kong government closely cooperated with Christian bodies in social welfare and education. There were so few schools affiliated with Confucian groups that they could hardly have a significant influence on Hong Kong society.

In 1997, Hong Kong became one of the special administrative regions (SAR) of the People's Republic of China. In the face of changes in sovereignty and national identity, fostering young people's positive values and sense of belonging became important tasks for the government (Morris & Morris, 2000). In this political context of decolonisation and retrocession, the acclamation of Chinese tradition appeared to be an essential part of the creation of national identity in the eyes of the leaders of local and central governments.

After 1997, with the establishment of the SAR government and the accompanying education reforms, the Confucian Academy seized the opportunity to elevate its status to that of other religions (Chen, 1999). In 1999, the Education Commission initiated a comprehensive education reform with several purposes: providing students with a wide variety of life experiences and developing good conduct, positive values and outlook on life, and a sense of citizenship and commitment to the country and society. In tandem with the reform was the enhancement of moral and civic education, which opened a policy window for many bodies. To echo the reform, the Confucian Academy developed a curriculum with traditional Chinese culture at its core.

In 1999, the Academy established a preparatory committee with members including the directors of the Academy, teachers of classics education in the Confucian schools, experts in Chinese culture and some primary and secondary school principals. The Academy

subsequently recruited 14 primary and 12 secondary partner schools and set up a teacher training and curriculum centre with a total funding of HK$3,700,000 from the Quality Education Fund (established by the Hong Kong government in 1998) between 2001 and 2004. The Academy set up a website, compiled the school curriculum, published teaching materials and developed multimedia software (Confucian Academy, 2004a, 2004b, 2006, 2007).

This curriculum is in line with the post-1997 official education reforms and with the "one country, two systems" political arrangement. The curriculum tries to meet the needs of modern life and to carry forward traditional Confucian culture (Tong, 2005). The full set of teaching materials serves the purposes of moral education, learning of Confucianism or Chinese culture, and language education. The curriculum uses the "Eight Virtues" of Confucianism as the theme at the primary school level and expands on the framework at the secondary school level by foregrounding national education and identification with Chinese culture [2]. Table 1 shows the teaching units or chapters at each grade.

7. Cultural production of Confucianism for moral and civic education

7.1 Selection of materials

First, the understanding of constructing a tradition can be analyzed in terms of the cultural resources that are collected and appropriated as materials and discourses. Selectivity implies preservation, addition and elimination. Preservation is particularly evident in the canonisation of certain texts as classics.

According to President Tong (2012) of the Academy and also the chairman of the Editorial Committee, it is necessary to fully restore the teaching of the classics, especially the Four Books and Five Classics, in school education and to modernise Confucian classics to make them more relevant to daily life (life-oriented) and more popular. The former classics reading book merely includes a biography of Confucius, some background information on the Chinese classics and some ethical prescriptions (Lo, 1968). The new curriculum retains reading the classics as a major way of learning the virtues. However, considering the level of the students, only simple and easy verses are selected, and they are explicated and interpreted in modern Chinese for easier comprehension. Therefore, translation, explanation and word-matching exercises are provided to aid students' understanding of the texts written in classical Chinese.

The Confucian Academy's curriculum favours a strong Confucian culture based on the belief that Confucianism is the mainstream of traditional Chinese culture and values. To this end, the teaching materials refer to many Confucian classics and a range of ancient literature. The texts used across the nine grades are mainly selected from the *Analects of Confucius* (quoted 336 times), *Mencius* (36), the *Three Character Classic* (24), the *Book of Rites* (*Liji*, 9), *Classic of Filial Piety* (*Xiaojing*, 5), *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong*, 5), *Praise to Master Kong* (4) and the *Classic of Poetry* (*Shijing*, 4). Among them, the *Three Character Classic for Kids* was a popular textbook for children's education written in 1931 by Lo Sheung-fu (1868–1970, President of the Confucian Academy from 1942 to 1970) (Au & Li, 2016).

The texts are made easy to memorise by including excerpts that are short and simple to read. The selected 10 articles include *Datong* (大同The Great Harmony) [3], and works by Dong Zhongshu, Han Yu, Fan Zhongyan, Zhou Dunyi, Luo Guanzhong, Wang Shouren and Gu Yanwu [4]. The ancient literature cited includes the *Classic of Poetry*, works by Wang Wei, Du Fu, Bai Juyi, Du Mu, Yue Fei, Lu You, Lu Meipo and the aphoristic poem *The Start of a Day* [5]. These texts are selected to illustrate the stories about the virtues or their meanings taught to the students.

Given that Chinese characters are mainly monosyllabic ideograms derived from pictures, with the external features expressing objects, the textbooks require students to understand the composition of the words of eight virtues (P1A, pp. 7, 25, 62; P1B, pp. 6, 28, 45, 64; S2, p. 21) and their basic meanings. For example, the Chinese character *xin* (信honesty or integrity) can be explained by its parts combined as *ren* (人human) and *yan* (言word) (S1, p. 98). There are also word-formation exercises and introductions to related idioms/proverbs or aphorisms (e.g.

Table 1. Table of curricular contents

Year	Unit/chapter name (number of lessons prescribed)
P1	1.1 Filial piety (4)
	1.2 Brotherly love (4)
	1.3 Loyalty (5)
	1.4 Truthfulness (5)
	1.5 Propriety (5)
	1.6 Righteousness (5)
	1.7 Integrity (5)
	1.8 Shamefulness (5)
P2	2.1 Diligence (6)
	2.2 Maintaining harmonious relations with relatives and neighbours (7)
	2.3 Trustworthiness (7)
	2.4 Benevolence and compassion (6)
P3	3.1 Perseverance (4)
	3.2 Loyalty and bravery (5)
	3.3 Determination (5)
	3.4 Thrift and sense of honour and shame (8)
P4	4.1 Stories of Confucius (4)
	4.2 Filial piety (4)
	4.3 Making friends (4)
	4.4 Speaking cautiously (1)
	4.5 Encouraging learning (6)
	4.6 Illustrious virtue (4)
	4.7 Finding pleasure in following one's convictions (2)
P5	5.1 Being well-mannered (6)
	5.2 *Junzi* and people with low social status (6)
	5.3 On benevolence (6)
	5.4 Governance (6)
P6	6.1 Confucian orthodoxy (8)
	6.2 Confucian classics (8)
	Selected primary texts
S1	7.1 Confucius (3)
	7.2 Mencius (3)
	7.3 Great Harmony (2)
	7.4 Filial piety (4)
	7.5 Brotherly love (2)
	7.6 Loyalty (4)
	7.7 Truthfulness (4)
S2	8.1 Propriety (4)
	8.2 Righteousness (4)
	8.3 Integrity (3)
	8.4 Shamefulness (3)
	8.5 Benevolence (4)
	8.6 *Junzi* (4)
S3	9.1 Confucianism in the Qin dynasty (3)
	9.2 Confucianism in the Han and Tang dynasties (3)
	9.3 Confucianism in the Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties (3)
	9.4 Modern Confucianism (2)
	9.5 Determination (2)
	9.6 Learning (2)
	9.7 Making amends (2)
	9.8 Making friends (2)
	9.9 Patriotism (2)
Total	51 units (216 lessons)

Table 2. Distribution of topics

Units	Lessons
Filial piety	18
Propriety and being well-mannered	18
Truthfulness/Trustworthiness	17
Benevolence	16
Shamefulness and making amends	15
Integrity and thrift	13
Loyalty	12
Junzi	10
Learning	9
Righteousness	9
Brotherly love	7
Determination	7
Diligence	6
Making friends	6
Perseverance	4
Finding pleasure in following one's convictions	2
Patriotism	2
Maintaining harmonious relations with neighbours	1
Making judgement	1
Self-understanding and self-reflection	1
Speaking cautiously	1

"brothers are like hands and feet") (P1A, p. 27; P3, p. 11; P5, pp. 37, 86; S3, p. 76, 112). These examples show that language learning still plays an important role in cultural education and character education.

The role model method is ancient and common in character education, as it allows students to understand codes of conduct better and shape their own characters by observing the words and deeds of the characters in the stories. The curriculum makes extensive use of Confucius (or Master Kong, 551–479 BCE) as a moral exemplar to teach the moral virtues (P5, p. 72) and asks students to remember and listen to his teachings (P3, p. 41; P5, pp. 42, 72; S1, p. 6). Besides Confucius, more than 90 ancient figures appear in the textbooks, including Zilu, Zengzi [6], Mencius, Mencius' mother and others from different dynasties. There are only 15 modern characters, such as the teachers who sacrificed themselves in the Pat Sin Leng Country Park hill fire in 1996 (S2, pp. 80–82), a hungry mother who was rescued (P2, pp. 107–108), Gandhi (S3, p. 33), the Olympic athlete Liu Xiang and little astronauts (S3, p. 73).

Both pedagogical preservation and renewal are found in the curriculum to echo the official education reform. Hence, the classic texts are explained in conjunction with stories (usually with selected stories from the *Twenty-four Filial Exemplars* written by Guo Jujing (1260–1368) during the Yuan dynasty but also with some fictional stories about family and friends) and current events. To arouse students' learning interests, some stories are also presented in the form of comic strips (for example, P1A, pp. 14, 31, 49; S1, p. 101; S3, p. 34). In addition to the text extracts, there are eight nursery rhymes, exercises for filling out the texts for review, tests of reading comprehension and activities on the *Analects*. The curriculum also contains news clippings, songs, videos and pictures from multimedia or newspaper websites to facilitate the teaching of Chinese classics.

Modern pedagogic ideas are also found in the curriculum. According to the informant of the project, when preparing the proposal, the committee actually referred to some Quality Education Fund proposals from other schools. Those in charge of the project also understood the expectations of the Education Department from other sources and tried to tie the proposal

with the principles behind the calls for education reform: whole person development, lifelong learning, moral and civic education, critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

The above ideas are reflected in the curriculum design. The design of each unit at the primary school level usually includes questions and discussions concerning the contents and reflection. At the junior secondary level, there are pre-class discussions, classroom activities and post-class extension activities. The design of these activities aims to ensure that they are relatable to everyday life and funny, inspirational and interactive enough to capture students' attention, arouse their interest in learning, enhance learning effectiveness and develop their generic skills. Students are asked to look for examples in newspapers and on the Internet to help them understand the related concepts. They are also asked to use information technology for data collection on topics such as news about good people and good deeds (S2, pp. 19, 30, 84) and cases of corruption (S2, p. 48).

The curriculum also includes references to children's life experiences, with discussions and life examples to allow students to reflect on the meanings of moral virtues and to cultivate students' ability to think, analyse, judge, solve problems and improve their resilience, as evident in the following three examples:

(1) Korean national hero scientist Professor Hwang Woo-suk in November 2005 purchased human eggs for research instead of receiving them by donation. He then resigned when his integrity was questioned. Students are asked which of his behaviours the Korean people should imitate and which they should be vigilant about. (S1, p. 95)

(2) Should Qu Yuan [a poet and minister in the State of Chu during the Warring States period] die for the country? (S3, p. 11)

(3) Whether Bi Gan was more blindly loyal than Bo Yi and Shu Qi [figures in the Shang Dynasty]? (S3, p. 124)

There are also many scenarios for discussion as classroom activities. Students are asked to distinguish the nature of particular behaviours (P1B, pp. 17–19, 38–39, 57, 76; S1, pp. 101–102, 107; S2, pp. 19, 64, 75, 106, 112, 117) and indicate their responses to or feelings about the situations under discussion (S2, pp. 16, 29, 35, 81, 93, 124).

7.2 Selection of topics

The Confucian classics themselves are a vast repository, and even the ideas and values are subject to further selection, indicating the importance of transmission. According to Tong (2012), Confucian culture contains rich ethics and moral thinking and continues to shape the moral outlook of the Chinese nation as the main body of its culture. Tong regarded the restoration of traditional Chinese virtues through the teaching of Confucian classics as the only way to cultivate the moral quality of young people. Benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and faith are the five basic ethical and moral categories of Confucianism. It is said in the curriculum that both the Chinese tradition and Confucianism are based on morality – the principles of behaviours for social living (P4, pp. 103–104; P5, pp. 9, 49, 67).

Character formation is a pillar of the nine-year curriculum, throughout which 21 virtues related to one's relationships with oneself, family, communities, the nation, the country and the world are taught (see Table 2 for the distribution of topics in ranking), with special emphasis on "filial piety (18 lessons), propriety and being well-mannered (18), truthfulness/trustworthiness (17), benevolence (16), shamefulness and making amends (15), integrity and thrift (13), loyalty (12), *Junzi* (10), learning (9) and righteousness (9)".

The chapters on the determined pursuit of aspirations (*lizhi* 立志), studying and making friends are specially compiled for students' needs. The related chapters concentrate on the development of personal moral knowledge and good human relationships, which are also aligned with the current Hong Kong education reform policy of promoting lifelong learning

and whole-person development. The textbooks emphasise basic methods of learning, including spontaneous learning, diligence in study, thinking more and asking questions. Confucius' ways of teaching according to students' aptitude and heuristic teaching methods are also mentioned (P4, pp. 70, 85; P5, p. 48; S3, pp. 76–84). Furthermore, critical thinking is explicated in terms of the Confucian doctrines of the "six becloudings about thinking" (六蔽) (P4, pp. 83–84; S3, p. 78) and the "*junzi*'s thoughtful consideration concerning nine subjects" (九思) (P5, pp. 46–48).

Concerning human well-being, the textbooks foreground spiritual joy and a mindset of ease rather than sensory satisfaction or material rewards (P4, pp. 95, 98, 103–104; P5, p. 71). The noble goal of humans is to contribute to society instead of pursuing self-interest or material enjoyment. Cultivating a person with both talents and virtues, namely a *junzi* (君子person of noble character), is the goal and value of life, and makes life happier and more meaningful (P5, pp. 2, 25, 64; P6, p. 50).

The curriculum regards *ren* (仁benevolence) as the most important doctrine in Confucianism, and benevolence is based on the spirit of filial piety, with the core value of loving people starting from love within families and then extending to every person (to form a universal love for people) and every being (P4, p. 48; P5, pp. 49, 59; P6, p. 105). And virtue cultivation should start with filial piety. Confucianism places family ethics as the foundation of social ethics, with the full development of filial piety lying in the maxim to "Treat our elders as they ought to be treated, as well as the elders of others" (P6, p. 105). As families develop into a clan and the union of clans becomes a nation, the nation is a big extended family. Everyone acts as a family member and cares for and helps each other, hence "great harmony of the world" (P2, p. 110; P4, p. 48; P5, p. 67; P6, p. 10). The curriculum also introduces the notions of "improving upon yourself first, then managing your family, then governing your state; and finally bringing justice and virtue to the world" from the *Great Learning*, and the concept of "cultivat [ing] oneself to appease others" (修己安人 *xiuji anren*) as the requirement to be a *junzi* (P5, pp. 25, 45).

In imperial China, traditional morals were characterised by an emphasis on the Five Cardinal Relationships, especially the dyads of ruler and subject and of father and son. However, the curriculum disregards Dong Zhongshu's three cardinal guides in the Han dynasty (that the ruler guides the subject, the father guides the son and the husband guides the wife). And according to the informant, due to the rising status of women and awareness of freedom, democracy and equality in modern society, specific prescriptions for women's morality are omitted.

7.3 Interpretation and emphasis: representing Confucius and Confucianism with a modern outlook

Tradition is aptly seen as a signifying practice of certain cultural agents that aims to give meaning to the past (Shoham, 2011). Thus, tradition formation is also a symbolic activity in which some actors assign meaning to certain areas of life. Although tradition stems from the past, what matters most are those aspects of the past that are still relevant and alive today and the ways in which the corresponding meanings are assigned to meet the needs of the present. Cultural agents use tradition, a cultural resource, to deal with the contemporary challenges. A living tradition is the one adaptive to change. Tradition is associated with continuity and identity that extend over a long period of time. Narrating a tradition often involves the telling of stories about the national character or spirit.

Consolidating the mainstream status of Confucianism in traditional Chinese culture, the Confucian Academy emphasises that Confucian values, such as filial piety, benevolence, proper rites, honesty and righteousness, resilience, a positive outlook and the spirit of a *junzi* (P5, pp. 1, 5, 27, 100; P6, pp. 105, 107) are the core of Chinese culture. It also emphasises the superiority of traditional Chinese culture and thoughts (P6, p. 84) because filial piety (P6, p. 105), the political philosophy or the ideal societal model for the whole commonwealth (the

Great Harmony) (P6, pp. 25, 84) and the like are so advanced and great that they are still applicable to and serve as important guide in today's world (P6, p. 43).

As mentioned earlier, Confucius is the most frequently cited moral exemplar in the curriculum. The textbooks regard Confucius as a symbol of the national culture of the Chinese people and his thoughts as the essence of traditional Chinese culture (P5, p. 72). In addition to the sanctification of Confucius by words, the covers and texts of the primary school materials contain many pretty cartoons of Confucius designed by specialists (see link to the Academy at https://www.confucianacademy.com/load.php?link_id=38000). To create a friendly and kind image of Confucius as an old man, the images show Confucius with children (P1A, p. 3) with pleasant smiles. Comics are also used to illustrate the texts (S1, p. 34) to capture young children's interest and convey an approachable and lovely image of Confucius.

To remove the conservative stereotype of Confucianism, the textbook foregrounds the spirit of reform and improvement for perfection in Confucianism. An institution adapts to changes in time and place, and every national culture or institution entails inheritance and innovation (P6, pp. 16, 28). Morality and virtues must be constantly developed and revised to keep abreast with the time and the needs of society. The *Great Learning* shows that the purpose and meaning of education lies in people's continuous renewal (P6, p. 97).

In response to changes in modern society, some doctrines in Confucianism must be reinterpreted, particularly with reference to the notions of *li*, *xiao* and *zhong*.

The textbook states that the rites include ethics, law, religion, human relations, social order and codes of conduct (P5, p. 1). Rules and rites should be based on the moral requirements of benevolence and righteousness, and sincerity is the most important attitude. Authenticity counts most, as ceremonies and rules are merely external forms (P5, pp. 12–13, 85). While secular etiquette often comes with the problems of being lavish and ostentatious, Confucius resorted to keeping things simple when following the rites to avoid unnecessary waste. The rites for Confucianism are not static (S2, p. 9), as Confucius himself claimed that "choosing and following what is right" (擇善而從 *zeshanercong*) was necessary for the rites. In terms of today's language, Confucius was really a "rationalist" or "reformist" (P6, p. 16). A modern interpretation of the character "li" (禮propriety) includes the one offered by the contemporary scholar Li Zehou (P5, pp. 17–18) [7].

The curriculum deliberately rectifies the misunderstanding of filial piety and loyalty in Confucianism as a kind of blind obedience. While keeping praising filial piety as the most basic and precious sentiment of human beings (P4, p. 36), the textbooks explain filial piety in four aspects: i. caring, respecting and understanding the parents' minds; ii. maintenance of parents; iii. self-love, self-respect and conducting oneself with dignity; and iv. being prudent in performing funerary rites of parents and remembering the remote ancestors (P1A, pp. 1–20; P4, pp. 36–47; S1, pp. 34–60). When the textbook interprets the meaning of the passage "those whose parents are still alive should not travel to far-off places or they should have a certain destination", it states that although modern transportation and communication are very convenient, when children go to a place far away, they must tell their parents where it is to lessen their worries. Parents' consent is also required when going out during the years of schooling (P4, p. 42). "Obeying" parents mainly refers to valuing their experience and knowledge and not hurting their feelings. Confucius did not agree with blind obedience to parents, but when making a suggestion to one's parents, one must be peaceful and reasonable and should not treat parents in an impolite manner (P4, p. 45).

Respecting one's parents and the ruler is not absolute obedience (P6, p. 105). Filial piety and loyalty must also refer to "righteousness" as the standard (P6, p. 110). The object of loyalty is duty and truth, not superiors and authority (S1, p. 84). Concerning the meaning of loyalty to a duty, although the basic principles or spirits are unchanged, institutions and people must deal flexibly with changes (P3, p. 27). Loyalty is a prescription that everyone commits to their duties and responsibilities, which is also the principles for dealing with people and work (P5, p. 85). The relationship between rulers and subjects can be broadly regarded today as the relationship of reciprocity between leaders and subordinates, with the rite of leaders being to

respect, understand and sympathise with their subordinates and the rite of subordinates being loyal to their leaders (P1A, p. 63; P3, p. 27). The criterion for evaluating an official's loyalty is the benefits brought to the people and the resulting healthy development of society (S1, p. 92). A genuinely loyal official is one who sticks to the right path and dares to tell the ruler what is wrong.

In terms of patriotism, modern society promotes equality for all people and a balance of rights and obligations. Therefore, the object of loyalty is no longer an individual, but a people, a country, a nation and a duty (S1, p. 91). The relationship between the state and people is understood as people being cared for and protected by the state and living with freedom and equality, so they have the responsibility and obligation to be loyal to the state (P1A, p. 39). The highest loyalty is to sacrifice one's life when making a commitment to one's duties (P3, pp. 29, 35), with the examples presented of the Southern Song dynasty general Yue Fei's spirit of serving the country with the utmost loyalty (P1A, p. 49) and the heroic martyrdom of naval commander Deng Shichang in the Sino–Japanese naval warfare of the late Qing dynasty (P3, p. 35).

In ancient China, there was no concept of citizenship equivalent to that of the West. Confucian political philosophy values governance through moral socialisation and expects a ruler with *junzi* characteristics (Wang, 2018). The Confucian idea of the *junzi* is an ideal moral personality for the rulers to govern the people with benevolence, and even ordinary civilians can achieve it through education and self-cultivation (P5, pp. 76, 80). There is little formal discussion of citizenship in the textbooks, except that good citizens are those obeying the law, paying high regard to justice and gregariousness, having a sense of commitment and mission to society and being seriously concerned about the country and the people (P1B, pp. 1, 3; P5, p. 27; S3, p. 122).

Civic education is about civility and the public sphere. *Yi* (義righteousness) means the most appropriate and reasonable behaviour, and *kungyi* (公義justice) refers to the common requirements in a community (P5, pp. 9, 34). The latter concept follows standards of fairness and rightness to act with courage and safeguard the public interest (S2, pp. 31–32). The curriculum also includes some Western examples to illuminate traditional moral values. For instance, there is a class discussion about the similarity of the non-violent anti-discrimination movements led by Gandhi and the Confucian spirit of "outcry for injustice", "daring to speak out" and "not being afraid to challenge the authority" articulated by Han Yu (S3, p. 33).

However, the curriculum does not discuss any forms of political participation (such as voting). In the Patriotism chapter, there is a task for students to write a letter to China's President Hu Jintao or Premier Wen Jiabao to express their expectations for the country and to promise to contribute to the country (S1, p. 96). This shows a leaning more towards the so-called "dutiful citizen" than the "engaged citizen" with regard to the practice of citizenship (Dalton, 2021). Against the typology of citizenship developed by Westheimer and Kahne (2004), the curriculum tends to emphasise "the personally responsible citizen" rather than "the participatory citizen" or "the justice-oriented citizen" (Leung & Yuen, 2012). Concepts of rights and equality – two essential components of a nuanced understanding of a citizen – are also under-explored in the curriculum, potentially leading to a limited grasp of citizenship (Ip, 1996).

8. Conclusion and discussion

Details are given above of the efforts of the Confucian Academy in Hong Kong to preserve or revitalise Confucianism with a school curriculum for moral and civic education. In short, ancient Chinese classics and examples are still dominant in the teaching materials. The main themes are the Eight Virtues, benevolence, the determined pursuit of aspirations and an eagerness for learning. Learning to develop and practise virtue is the value of living, and the *junzi*-like citizen is the ideal person to be cultivated. In addition, the curriculum reserves reading the classics and using the role models for character cultivation.

Adaptations of the Confucian tradition in tandem with pedagogical changes can be seen in the selection of materials and topics, as well as interpretation. The curriculum is still inclined towards ancient times in terms of material selection, focusing on classics, poems and historical stories. The teaching content is reformed by extracting a small number of easy-to-read texts, and adding modern translations to facilitate learning. A novel way of presenting the material is the use of comics. The teaching materials are brought closer to real life by being matched with stories, news items and websites to show the applicability of Confucianism to modern life, and with some modern interpretations. In addition, under the influence of official education reform, pedagogic innovations are made in terms of expanded learning experiences, enriched multimedia teaching resources and a variety of pedagogic activities to arouse students' interest, promote participation and strengthen students' thinking, judgment and expression skills.

The curriculum simultaneously abandons some elements of Confucianism and promotes others. What is carried forward is the renewal and developmental potential of the tradition, which can be integrated with modernity to enhance its connections to and prescriptive significance for modern life. The meanings of filial piety and loyalty are hence reinterpreted. What is abandoned are Dong Zhongshu's Three Guides for strengthening monarchy and patriarchy due to the change in modern society.

The curriculum offers only limited coverage of rights with regard to citizenship, giving only relatively simple and scattered descriptions. The curriculum takes existing legal norms and civil rights protections for granted but does not provide much discussion of social inequality and injustice or reflection on social problems. It hence falls short in developing students' political awareness, social engagement and civic skills, hence reinforcing individuals' unconditional obligations to the country and the ruling authorities (Morris & Morris, 2000). The above limitations can be attributed to the composition of the compilers. According to the informant, the entire writing and editorial team are mostly Chinese language teachers or from a Chinese studies academic background, and their understanding of the West may lack sufficient depth.

Theoretically speaking, this paper can make two contributions to a renewed discussion on the sociology of morality and moral education. First, unlike the de-traditionalization thesis about the erosion of tradition in religion and society in the postmodern era due to secularisation (Heelas, Lash, & Morris, 1995), this study pinpoints the tenacity of Confucian tradition as a source of cultural and moral education in late modernity. The Confucian Academy's pragmatic approach to the Confucian tradition is selective and flexible in its interpretation, with conservation and transmission of the past to allow for progress in line with the spirit of reform and continuous self-improvement.

Second, this study shows the validity of utilising Williams's framework to understand the cultural production of morality and its education along the dimensions of selection, interpretation and social analysis. The example of Hong Kong shows how a Confucian body has repositioned and revitalised Confucianism by instilling personal and moral values that are connected to modern daily life. This case study also illustrates the incorporation of other modern or Western elements besides Confucianism into the curriculum, influenced by the broader social and educational context. This paper allows us to better understand how actors compose and change traditions through various forms of borrowing and mutual interaction out of cross-cultural encounters.

Since the early 1980s, mainland China has been experiencing a Confucian revival and a burgeoning "traditional learning craze" (*guoxuere* 國學熱), including reading the classics (Billioud & Thoraval, 2015; Chen, 2012). Some scholars have also highlighted the ongoing Confucian value for contemporary moral education (Wang, 2004; Tan, 2021, 2024). But most prevailing discussions on Confucian education are largely philosophical and prescriptive, lacking empirical analysis of the adoption and adaptation of Confucian thoughts in modern school curricula. With a rich and solid account above, this paper expands the existing literature and demonstrates how Confucianism can be utilised in pedagogical practices. For instance,

some Confucian elements, such as its understanding of some virtues and its learning methods (etymological exercises, ways of thinking and introspection), can be refreshed and used as intellectual resources to help students to cope with modern life or deal with some daily life problems.

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Appendix
Timeline of Chinese Dynasties since Confucius (551–479 BCE)

770–475 BCE Spring and Autumn Period

475–221 BCE Warring States Period

221–206 BCE Qin Dynasty

206 BCE-220 CE Han Dynasty

220–265 Three Kingdoms

265–420 Jin Dynasty

386–589 Period of the Northern and Southern Dynasties

581–618 Sui Dynasty

618–906 Tang Dynasty

907–960 Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms Period

960–1279 Song Dynasty

1279–1368 Yuan Dynasty

1368–1644 Ming Dynasty

1644–1912 Qing Dynasty

1912–1949 Republican Era

1949-present People's Republic of China

Notes

1. "The Four Books and Five Classics" are Confucian classic texts. Four Books include *Analects*, *Mencius*, *Great Learning* and *Doctrine of the Mean* (selected by Zhu Xi (1130–1200) in the Southern Song dynasty), whereas Five Classics refers to the *Classic of Poetry*, *Book of Documents*, *Book of Rites*, *I Ching* (*Book of Changes*), as well as *Spring and Autumn Annals.*
2. The "Eight Virtues" are Confucian foundational principles of morality, including *xiao* (filial piety), *di* (brotherly love), *zhong* (loyalty), *xin* (honesty), *li* (propriety), *yi* (righteousness), *lian* (integrity) and *chi* (shame) stipulated in the Song dynasty.
3. *Datong* appeared in the *Liyun* (禮運) chapter of the *Book of Rites*, one of the Confucian Five Classics.
4. Dong Zhongshu (198–106 BCE) was a scholar of the Han dynasty associated with the promotion of Confucianism as the imperial official ideology; Han Yu (768–824) was a leading essayist, Confucian scholar and senior official of the Tang dynasty; Fan Zhongyan (989–1052) was a statesman, writer and scholar of the Northern Song dynasty; Zhou Dunyi (1017–1073) was a Confucian philosopher and writer during the Northern Song dynasty, a key proponent of what later came to be known as Neo-Confucianism. Luo Guanzhong (1320–1400) was a Ming dynasty-novelist best known for his work "*Romance of the Three Kingdoms*". Wang Shouren (1472–1528) was a key thinker of Neo-

Confucianism in Ming dynasty and Gu Yanwu (1613–1682) was a famous scholar who lived during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. Please refer to Yao (2003) and Littlejohn (2023) for their biographical details.

5. Wang Wei (692–761), Du Fu (712–770), Bai Juyi (772–846) and Du Mu (803–852) were famous poets in the Tang dynasty. Yue Fei (1103–1142) was a military general of the Southern Song dynasty and considered as a patriotic hero. Lu You (1125–1210) and Lu Meipo (1127–1279) were poets of the Southern Song dynasty.
6. Zilu or Zhong You (542–480 BC) and Zengzi or Zeng Shen (505–435 BC) were the best-known disciples of Confucius. Their biographies can be found in Yao (2003) and Littlejohn (2023).
7. Li Zehou (1930–2021) was a contemporary Chinese scholar of philosophy and intellectual history.

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