

## Article

# Confucianism for Kids: Early Childhood Employments of Confucianism in Taipei and Tokyo

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**Abstract:** This article focuses on two examples of Confucian early childhood education in contemporary Taiwan and Japan. Based on fieldwork conducted by the author in 2015, it contrasts the use of Confucianism in a grass-roots community early childhood educational setting in suburban Taipei with attempts to create elite Confucian “kids’ seminars” in central Tokyo. The study reveals the roles of gender, elitism, religious plurality, and modern early childhood pedagogy in the contrasting ways Confucianism manifests in these urban Taiwanese and Japanese settings. In doing so, it looks to contribute to wider discussions about the roles of modernity and tradition in contemporary religious revival in East Asia.

**Keywords:** Confucianism; Buddhism; Taiwan; Japan; education; early childhood education

## 1. Introduction

Much research on Confucianism centers on texts, ideas and philosophy—in other words, doctrine. This article instead focuses on the daily practice of Confucianism, taking as its case study the use of Confucianism in one of its most traditional settings—early childhood education. Although utilizing an example which shows children interacting with Confucianism, my aim here is not only to think about how children practice Confucianism, but also to emphasize more broadly the diversity of social factors which influence the way Confucianism manifests in society. When scholars research contemporary Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, or other religious traditions, they know that despite their shared doctrinal traditions, the practice of these religions will be influenced primarily by wider social factors and context. Research on Confucianism, if interested in its social and political impact, needs to take a similar approach.<sup>1</sup>

Education, including early childhood learning, has been a major part of Confucian activity throughout the ages.<sup>2</sup> During the process of modernization, Western-style modern state education’s displacement of Confucianism in the field of childhood learning was a key factor in the overall decline of Confucianism in East Asia at the end of the nineteenth century (Elman 2005; Paramore 2016, pp. 137–43; Kurozumi 2003, p. 177). Similarly, in the current renaissance of Confucianism across East Asia, education is a key field of revival. This article focuses on two examples of Confucian early childhood education in Taiwan and Japan. Based on fieldwork conducted by the author in 2015, it contrasts the use of Confucianism in a grass-roots community early childhood educational setting in suburban Taipei with attempts to create elite Confucian “kids’ seminars” in central Tokyo. In both cases, educators introduce young children (aged 3–11) to the reading of Confucian texts as an alternative approach to early childhood education.<sup>3</sup>

This study reveals the roles of gender, elitism, religious plurality, and modern early childhood pedagogy in the contrasting ways Confucianism manifests in these urban Taiwanese and Japanese settings. In doing so, it looks to contribute to wider discussions about the roles of modernity and tradition in contemporary religious revival, the nexus between education and religion, and the legacy of elitism in contemporary approaches to Confucianism in East Asia.



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This article concentrates on the case in Taiwan, primarily using observation, supported by interviews and written sources, to analyze the interaction between people, practice, and method in the utilization of Confucianism in this setting. It then moves on to contrast this against the case of Japan, where primarily interviews, supported by written sources, are used to research a very different attempt to read Confucian texts with children.

## 2. A Pre-School in Taipei and a Kids' Seminar in Tokyo

In 2015, I had the opportunity to observe two very different employments of Confucianism in the education of young children. One was in Taipei, where I observed the utilization of the reading of Confucian classics as part of the curriculum of a city-funded, lay-Buddhist organization-run pre-school in the Neihu ward of Taipei city. The other was in Tokyo, where I interviewed participants of a “Kids’ Confucian Seminar”, a regular extra-curricular activity for children run by a children’s television station in cooperation with professors of Chinese philosophy from some of Japan’s most elite universities.

I decided to study both cases in tandem for two main reasons. Firstly, at the time I was regularly flying back and forth between Tokyo and Taipei while working on another research project. As I happened to be in both locations regularly and knew participants in both cases, it was an excellent opportunity to augment my archival-based historical research with the observation of Confucianism in contemporary practice. I was also intrigued to find out whether I would see any interaction between the historical cases of Confucian practice I had been studying in archives and libraries and these current cases in contemporary society.

Secondly, and most importantly, I was particularly intrigued by the fact that, in both cases, the organizers explained why they chose to use Confucianism in education in similar terms. Both described it in terms of a reaction against the deficiencies, as they perceived them, of their contemporary state education systems. It thereby appeared to me, initially at least, that both ventures were based on a similarly critical approach to the oft-criticized focus on rote learning and exam-centered education in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>4</sup> Both articulated a view that the exam-centered modern education system in their respective countries did not provide an ethical or moral compass for children. In the Taiwanese case, this was seen as problematic because, in their view, a socially embedded practice of ethics was the basis of the kind of Buddhism they sought to inculcate in the children and thereby in society. In the Japanese case, the organizers did not overtly articulate exactly why they saw a lack of moral teachings in the state education system as a problem. However, statements made by the leader of the children’s seminar in Tokyo, Prof. Kaji Nobuyuki, in other contexts linked a lack of moral teaching in national education to a lack of national character and prescribed Confucianism as a solution. This resonates with earlier, modern historical employments of Confucianism in Japan, particularly between the 1890s and 1945, where it was closely associated with conservative nationalist and corporatist ideologies of “national morality” (Inoue 1912; Paramore 2016, pp. 149–57).

Therefore, both cases shared a stated aim to introduce the teaching of Confucianism to children to counter what they saw as deleterious effects of the mainstream national education systems—despite these taking place in two different countries. They also shared a belief that the way to fix these problems was to introduce ethics. However, the aims of the ethics imagined in each case were different. The employment of ethics in the Taipei case was informed by a universalist Buddhist outlook, while the employment of ethics in Tokyo seemed to be informed by national particularism, the modern idea of national morality. One approach perceived education in broadly humanist terms, the other in primarily competitive nationalist terms. This was the beginning of me noticing a range of other differences which belied the seeming similarity of these projects and began to give me a much deeper understanding of the multiplicity of social factors affecting the nature of Confucian practice on the ground.

Below, I describe and analyze each of the cases in turn, before returning to discussing the similarities and differences and what they might reveal to us about Confucianism in East Asia today.

### 3. Taipei Kindergarten “Classics Reading”

#### 3.1. Aims and Context

In Taiwan, I observed what was called a “Classics Reading” (*dujing* 讀經) class in the Miaoshan Kindergarten 妙善幼兒園 in the Neihu ward of Taipei City. This kindergarten is a regular, city-certified, private kindergarten (*Taipeishi shili tuoersuo*) for children aged 3 to 6 years old. The kindergarten is run by the Bliss and Wisdom Culture and Education Foundation (*fuzhi wenjiao jijinhui* 福智文教基金會), a national lay-Buddhist organization in Taiwan which also has some members and activities in other Chinese-speaking countries, including mainland China.<sup>5</sup> Like the Neihu area where it is located, the social-economic dynamic of the school is mixed, but with a lower middle class base. The school waived fees for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, and was also unusually open to children on the autistic spectrum, with ADHD and similar conditions.

The kindergarten experience in Taipei is seen as preparation for elementary school, and is therefore perceived primarily as a place of learning rather than simply a childcare facility. The teachers are qualified kindergarten teachers licensed by the City of Taipei under the auspices of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of China (Taiwan). In other words, they are all trained and qualified child pedagogues. In fact, this particular kindergarten was a training destination for student teachers as part of their college qualification—one was present in the lower class during my fieldwork.

The general ethos and practice of the teachers, therefore, is primarily informed by mainstream, modern theories of early childhood pedagogy, including early childhood education’s role in socializing children and introducing them to the basics of numeracy and literacy. However, the teachers also subscribe to the educational philosophical outlook of the Bliss and Wisdom Foundation, which sponsors the kindergarten. Although all are trained in standard pedagogy in the state-approved system, they also clearly have an alternative outlook on children and society. This is evidenced by the way they deal with children from minority backgrounds and students with autism, ADHD, and similar conditions, all of whom they engage wholeheartedly in the school, unlike some other kindergartens which may see dealing with diversity as a distraction from preparation for competitive examination performance. It is also noteworthy that, as per the global norm in these professions, all teachers and the principal of the pre-school were women. The principal would have been aged in her 40s, and most of the teachers in their 30s.

Miaoshan pre-school provided childcare and early childhood education to local people in Neihu for over 10 years before the introduction of readings of Confucian texts. The introduction of the reading of Confucian texts was inspired by the use of Confucianism advocated by the spiritual leader (or master) of the Bliss and Wisdom Foundation, Master Richang (Shi Richang 釋日常 (lay/birth name: Huang Jingsheng 黃靜生)) (1929–2004). Although leading a Buddhist organization, Richang valued Confucian texts because he saw Confucian texts as encouraging ethical behavior contributing to the larger goals of Buddhism. In other words, he saw Confucianism and Confucian texts in instrumental terms, as a means to encourage forms of behavior and action which would in turn lead to individuals and society being more in tune with Buddhist ideals. This approach interacts with the Buddhist concept of “expedient means” (*upaya* (Sk.) *fangbian* (Ch.) *hōben* (Jp.) 方便), which has long been used in traditional East Asia to legitimate the use of Confucian and other non-Buddhist texts and practices within Buddhist institutions (Pye 2003). In this case, Confucianism is seen as providing an ethical education, with those ethics supporting a larger Buddhist worldview. This vision also has clear intersections with early childhood education’s objective of the socialization of children.

The primary activity in the use of Confucianism in this kindergarten, and the element I observed in the daily routine of this kindergarten, is called “Classics Reading” (*dujing* 讀經).

Despite the kindergarten being Buddhist, five of the six “Classics” read are Confucian books, mainly Neo-Confucian pedagogical and moral primers comprising texts collated between the Song and Qing dynasties. Although the activity is called “Classics Reading” as an activity, the actual action of reading the text is not referred to as reading (du 讀), but rather as “recitation” (bei or beisong 背誦). As we will see below, the act of “recitation”, following traditional Neo-Confucian approaches, themselves influenced by Buddhist practices, seems to be seen as key to the act of “reading”.

The stated aims of the school in introducing this “Classics Reading” activity into the curriculum are twofold. The first aim is to introduce to the children “a principle of learning” in which learning itself is seen as a regular daily activity which enriches children’s lives “at the ultimate extent by connecting them with knowledge passed down through the ages”.<sup>6</sup> This first aim envisages the activity as an important introduction to the act of book learning itself. Importantly, the principle of learning in this context does not aim at the passing of examinations (a dominating and heavily criticized element in contemporary Taiwanese children’s lives) but something broader. This links to the second stated aim of the “Classics Reading” curriculum, encouraging “good action” (shanxing 善行, also commonly translated as “virtuous conduct”, “correct action”, “kind deed”, etc.). Good action is interpreted by the teachers in context as activity by the children contributing to the social good. Regular organized exemplifications of this are activities of filial piety (for instance, the physical massage of parents and grandparents), and activities focusing on the communal good of the school community (for instance, the cleaning and repair of the physical environment and furniture of the school, as seen in Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Children learning filial piety through good actions.

### 3.2. People and Practice

The school day usually runs from 8:30 a.m. until 5 p.m. and the children are divided into three groups delineated mainly by age—a lower group (*xiaban*) for children around 3 years old, a middle group (*zhongban*) for children around 4 years old, and a higher group (*shangban*) for children around 5 years old (immediately pre-primary school). The “Classics Reading” activity takes about 1 to 2 h and is usually performed in the late morning,



although the teachers are extremely flexible and reactive to the students in terms of the length of teaching time, especially with the lower group.

The actual practice of “Classics Reading” for one to two hours per day is markedly different in each of the three groups, each of which also concentrates on different texts. The lower group read *Dizigui* 弟子規 (*Rules for Younger Sons*) and *Qianziwen* 千字文 (*The Thousand Character Classic*). The latter text, dating from at least the mid-first millennium AD, is a rhyming arrangement of a thousand characters in four character sets which is used to teach characters. The former is a Qing period short primer for young children, teaching them basic moral rules from a Neo-Confucian perspective—in this case, through listing moral rules and advice.<sup>7</sup>

The class reads 12 characters at a time. The 12 characters are set up on a white board in front of the class and the class communally reads through several times in a loud voice. Both texts have been designed to rhyme and chant well, and the school uses the intended musicality of the texts effectively to make the process fun and exciting for the children. After chanting the 12 character set several times, the teachers begin to remove certain characters from the 12, then ask the students communally and individually to pick out the right character to replace. A clear aim is to use this traditional technique to communally begin to teach Chinese character literacy. The instructors put much emphasis on making the activity enjoyable for the students, even including physical games in the process. For instance, after individually picking the correct replacement character or reciting the 12-character set, the student will get to go through a small fun obstacle course at the back of the class. In this way, the process is made very dynamic and at times physical for the 3- to 5-year-old students involved.<sup>8</sup> Chanting is the major element, and clearly the most enjoyable for the students. It is clear that nearly all students can chant most of the texts, especially if prompted now and again. However, the capacity to recognize characters shows much greater diversity between individuals.

The middle class read *Gujin beishufangfa* 古今背書方法 (*Method for Reciting Texts from the Past and Present*) and the *Xiaojing* 孝經 (*Classic of Filial Piety*). The *Gujin beishufangfa* is a Qing period compilation of short excerpts from famous Confucian scholars, giving instruction on how one should recite (*beishu* 背書—so recite, not read) texts. The excerpts are drawn from Neo-Confucian scholars from the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing periods, with an emphasis on excerpts from the Song doyen of Neo-Confucianism, Zhu Xi (1130–1200 AD), and his adherents. Zhu Xi developed Neo-Confucianism under heavy Buddhist influence, emphasizing religious methods of self-cultivation as sitting at the heart of Confucian practice. Correspondingly, the contents of this compilation emphasize approaching the recitation of the text in terms of creating a certain mood, by placing the text carefully, facing it calmly, paying close attention, etc., as can be seen in Figure 2.<sup>9</sup> It emphasizes mood and affect in the reading of the text, rather than meaning. It is clear from my observation of the recitations in Taipei, notably in contrast to the approach in Tokyo, how influential this Buddhist-inspired, traditional Neo-Confucian approach to textuality is in this example of early childhood practice. The *Xiaojing*, or *Classic of Filial Piety*, is one of the so-called 13 Classics. The text dates at least from the Han and is self-ascribed as a record of a conversation between Confucius and his disciple Zengzi, traditionally thought to have lived in the fifth century BCE. A relatively short text, it focuses on the import and meaning of filial piety, set in the context of the hierarchies of political and family relations of the time.<sup>10</sup>



**Figure 2.** Children engaged in “classics reading”.

The middle group is larger in number than the lower group, comprising 40 students with two teachers (as opposed to about 28 students with three teachers in the lower group). The core practice is also chanting, and sets of characters are shown on the board, but the visual aids are not used as much, the students instead encouraged to follow the chanting by moving their hand through their own copy of the book character by character. As with the lower group, students are asked individually to fill in the removed parts of the text. However, these are longer sections and have fewer visual aids, so the students are asked, both individually and as a group, to complete comparatively long sections of the text. Again, this is achieved through musical chanting.

In the higher class, with about 30 students and two very active teachers, the students read from their own books large sections of text. They read the *Daxue* 大學 (*The Greater Learning*) and *Fumenping* 普門品 (*The Universal Gate*). The *Daxue* is the first book of the Neo-Confucian Four Book canon. Edited by Zhu Xi in the Southern Song, this very short treatise was traditionally the first Confucian book read by young children across East Asia from around the Yuan dynasty onwards. The *Fumenping*, or *Universal Gate*, is the 25th chapter of the Buddhist Lotus Sutra relating to the Bodhisatva Guanyin 觀音 (Jp: Kannon).

By higher class stage, the students read several pages at a time, so many use the text as their main prompt (as seems to be the literacy pedagogy aim). The diversity in capacity to read at a higher level is very high. Some children appear to use the text and actually read, while others have their fingers nowhere near the right part of the text and are clearly just mumbling along. Possibly for this reason, instead of asking individuals to read, the class is broken into different teams (usually two or three) which chant at each other, chanting half a page before the next group takes up the other half. The parallels with music education are very clear. One notable example is that the teachers have to keep reminding the students not to speed up as they chant. I was reminded of choir practice or class singing at school when I was a child. It is clear that the children enjoy this activity very much. Again, the physical act of loud articulation and chanting is clearly physically stimulating for the students and allows them to release energy and enjoy themselves. The higher group class I observed lasted for nearly two hours, and at the end although some of the students seemed exhausted it was also clear that most of them felt exhilarated and had enjoyed themselves.

I had the opportunity to interview the higher-group students together with the teachers and principal immediately after the class. I asked the children simply how was their lesson and what they thought of it. The two main responses shouted from the floor by several children were either “hard” or “good”. With help from the teachers, I encouraged the children to answer individually about what they found “hard” and what they found “good”. Answers to what was “hard” included: “It’s hard when I cannot remember”; “the characters are hard”; “it’s difficult to read”; “it’s difficult to read so much”. The child who gave the last answer after thinking then added, “but it’s OK when Daddy helps”. The children who replied “good” gave as reasons: “you can read things you see outside or in the street” (to which several children nodded and loudly expressed agreement); “you learn to sing”; “learn characters”. The teachers, seemingly noticing, as I had, that all the answers related to language pedagogy rather than ethics then prompted the students to say something about the ethical or moral side of things. The response was initially a long silence. This silence was finally broken by one girl saying, in a very humorous tone, “I learnt that whatever mama says to do I should do”, after which all the children and teachers broke out laughing, which from her reaction was clearly the response to her joke the girl had been looking for. It was clear from observation, and particularly from the question session, that the children saw the “Classics Reading” sessions as a fun form of singing or literacy lesson. They are aware that they are learning characters and seem to see that as the main event.

It should be pointed out, however, that the Confucian elements of the curriculum related to “Classics Reading” are not limited to these actual reading sessions. As noted above, there are regular activities run by the school under the auspices of the Buddhist organization, notably the “Filial piety days”, where children are helped to perform activities for their parents such as massages or writing letters, which are supposed to enact the ethics articulated in the texts. Other Confucian activities include biannual school trips to the Confucian Temple in central Taipei. Intriguingly, these trips to the Confucian Temple, which include communal worship (praying) at the temple by the Buddhist school children, are not in any way coordinated with the Confucian organization running the temple. The temple is a public installation, so the school simply turns up and uses it. The way they use it also conforms to the manner of their reading activities. At the temple, as well as lining up and bowing, which obviously takes only a moment, the children are asked to sing songs and move around. The teacher remarked that the children like it because it is an open space where they can make noise and move. Again, here we can see the packaging of “Confucian” activities in ways which allow children to do child-like activities, employing modern pedagogical practice to pad out the Confucian activity in what appears to me to be a very effective manner. This is yet another example of the admirable pedagogical skills and personal flexibility of the teachers at this school.<sup>11</sup>

Teachers were very aware of the importance of repetition and musicality, and intriguingly they also discussed this in relation to the sociality of the introduction of “Classics Reading” in their curriculum. In explaining why they introduced it, the principal of the school talked about the need to offer competing cultural forms to children in a manner they could absorb. She used the example of TV commercials, a constant on Taiwanese children’s television, and including advertisements for unhealthy foodstuffs. She pointed out that these TV commercials use repetition, music, and movement because they know that repetition in particular works on children. She asked, “should we leave the children to simply absorb TV commercials of how they should consume more, or should we offer something else?” In this sense, the practice can be seen as a reaction against contemporary consumerism, not only in its attempt to counter it, but also in its adoption of practices which, despite being “traditional” pedagogical techniques, are being deployed to compete against commercial culture and materialism using similar methods on similar grounds. In other words, the influence of “traditional culture” in the pedagogy is overlaid with, or plaited into, the influence of mainstream society (capitalist modernity) and an attempt to resist its deleterious influences.

This is the same logic which explains the big question of why a Buddhist school uses Confucian classics and Confucian pedagogy instead of their own texts. The principal explained to me that “Master Richang” had suggested that, given the current state of human society, the Confucian content was more appropriate and effective—a classic “expedient means” argument. This again relates to the understanding of the teachers (also as practitioners) that the “Classics Reading” activity, as a religious and educational activity, is one which deliberately interacts with a particular moment in the development of human society.

#### 4. Tokyo Kids’ Seminar “Analects Program”

The example in Tokyo, although seemingly similarly motivated by a critical stance towards contemporary society, was located in a very different social milieu, and took an angle of criticism profoundly different to the Taipei example. “Fuji Television Kids Analects Leadership Seminar”, in 2015, was one element in “Fuji Television Kids Analects Program”, which began in 2013 and continued to 2017. The Analects Leadership Seminar was a classroom tutorial for primary-school-aged children, primarily 6–11 years old. The figurehead of the seminar and broader program, Professor Kaji Nobuyuki, is a Professor Emeritus of Chinese Philosophy of Osaka University and major columnist and media commentator in Japan’s nationalist right-wing media—notably, media associated with the Sankei newspaper group. Fuji TV Kids, a pay-to-view children’s cable station from one of the major Japanese TV networks, Fuji, supported the seminar. I interviewed people involved in the seminar in 2015. I was unable to observe the classes directly, but viewed a significant amount of textual and audio-visual material from the classes, in addition to the interviews.

##### 4.1. Aims and Context

The “Analects Leadership Seminar” was initially conceived as a classroom experience where children would be tutored in reading and understanding the content of key Confucian texts—notably, one particular text, *Confucius Analects* (Ch. Lunyu; Jp. Rongo) 論語. Therefore, although billed as part of an “ethics” education, particularly suited to those aspiring to “leadership” positions, the planning emphasized textual analysis. The articulated aim amongst the teachers, and the original idea pitched to those involved in the planning and teaching of the seminar, was to teach the children how to read the text in order to understand its underlying meaning as deeply as possible. As one of the teachers remarked to me, “the idea was simply to teach the children to analyze the meaning of the text as deeply as possible”.<sup>12</sup>

However, despite this being the apparent pedagogical aim, the seminar was promoted to parents in 2014 and 2015 primarily using the term “leadership”, suggesting that “leadership ethics” would be the primary content taught. In later years, the term “business ethics” was also employed centrally in the student recruitment publicity. The seminar, like other elements in the “program”, was also linked to examinations, with children being “offered the opportunity” to take exams on the content being studied, thereby gaining “qualifications”—in actuality, certificates issued by the private organization itself. The ethical aims of the seminar thereby also seemed to be instrumentalized in that the ethical teaching was portrayed in applied terms related to “leadership” and “business”—future roles for the participants which might be regarded as more prestigious or elite.<sup>13</sup>

The seminar was an extracurricular activity carried on outside of school hours. Participants’ parents paid fees, as they would for other kinds of extracurricular classes, and tended to come from more affluent socio-economic backgrounds. The seminar, not being based in any established school, had no permanent premises and was held in a variety of hired locations. These locations were generally in some of the most affluent parts of Tokyo (and thereby Japan). The prestige of the seminar, related to “leadership” and taught by elite university professors, appeared framed as a motivator for well-to-do parents to enroll their children.<sup>14</sup>



#### 4.2. People and Practice

The seminar was ostensibly taught by Professor Kaji (born 1936), a Professor Emeritus of the prestigious Osaka University, assisted by other full professors of similarly prestigious national universities—eminent senior scholars internationally recognized in Confucian Studies. In reality, however, much of the hands-on teaching of the children was carried out by senior research students and junior academics associated with one or other of these more senior figures. These younger figures were hired on a part-time basis to “assist” in the teaching, but in reality delivered the bulk of the seminar teaching. Prof Kaji’s involvement on the ground appears to have been restricted to giving opening lectures. It appears that he may never have taught any of the text-analysis “seminars” which were supposed to be the focus of the program—at least in the period up to April 2015, when I completed my fieldwork. We will return to the significance of this split between “lecture” and “seminar” teaching below. Notably, all teachers were male, and none had any qualifications or significant experience in teaching young children, except some of the younger academics who had tutored in cram schools as part-time student jobs.

The first noteworthy feature of the practice in the Tokyo case was that the program focused to a large extent on one particular text: *Confucius Analects*. In the context of the Confucian textual canon, *Analects* is sometimes regarded as a relatively accessible text because its written form is less prosaic; clearly interrogative; and made up of short, contained passages. The short passages comprising *Analects*, however, are particularly open to interpretation, making the interpretation of meaning comparatively complex. This is partly because, rather than only recording events, or history, like many other texts in the Confucian canon, the sayings of Confucius in *Analects* tend to be more generalist and philosophical. In addition, the interrogative, analogous style of *Analects* also leaves much of its content open to pluralist interpretation. Other Confucian classics dealing with conduct—for instance, *The Classic of Filial Piety*—employ a more directly prescriptive didactic approach, making the meaning quite straightforward and comparatively less contentious. *The Analects*, in comparison to other Confucian texts, is therefore an interesting choice for a children’s seminar focusing on ethics and understanding, exactly because it is particularly open to pluralist interpretation.

Indeed, in East Asia for most of the last 2000 years, and certainly from between the 12th to the beginning of the 20th centuries, *Analects* was most often read in a manner which emphasized this plurality. Most editions published in this period included long commentaries on each passage. Many editions from the 1400s onwards in China and Japan, as can be seen in Figure 3, included multiple competing (differing) commentarial texts analyzing each original sentence (generally a couple of pages or more of commentary for each two-line passage, including multiple, competing interpretations).

Contemporary scholarly readings of *Analects* in East Asia also tend to focus on the commentaries, generally reading the texts in combination with a range of contrasting commentaries. The graduate students who carried out much of the actual teaching in the “Fuji TV Kids Analects Leadership Seminar”, for instance, when themselves reading the *Analects* in university seminars do so through such commentary collections—an approach that is inherently open to plural interpretations of the original text. In this sense, although also employing modern academic methods such as philology and philosophy, modern university researchers in Japan still read *Analects* following this tradition of reading the text in combination with contrasting commentaries—an approach which encourages pluralist interpretation.



**Figure 3.** A page of the late imperial Four Books commentarial compilation, Shishu jizhu daquan 四書集註大全, showing a section from *Confucius Analects* with multiple commentaries.

Junior academics who agreed to teach the “Fuji TV Kids Analects Seminars” probably did so envisaging that they would be following this kind of scholarly tradition and teaching the children multiple competing interpretations of the original text. As one said in an interview, “I imagined it would be like a kids version of a university reading seminar, that was the image we were given”. Professor Kaji’s public statements on the aims of the seminar, however, did not focus on meaning, instead emphasizing the indoctrination of morals (for “leadership” and “business” purposes). They did not refer either to textual interpretation or pluralist interpretation as desired learning outcomes. However, if the aim were to teach morals, why employ a text which is relatively open and complex instead of a more morally prescriptively didactic text (for instance, *The Classic of Filial Piety*)? These kinds of anomalies in the articulation of aims and setting of texts were clearly confusing to some teachers. As one stated in interview, “I don’t think there was any methodology, or if there was, no one told me about it”. In practice, the pedagogical methodology seems to have been unclear both to teachers and students.

One key aspect of the educational delivery which was perhaps illustrative of the methodological confusion was the use of lectures in addition to seminars. The seminar format is usually key to any teaching of the act of “reading”. This applies as much to seminars focused simply on character and vocabulary literacy as it does to those focused on interpretation. This course was overtly called a “seminar”, and the teachers interviewed also had assumed all learning would occur through small reading groups. Yet, intriguingly, most (possibly all) of the teaching conducted by Professor Kaji himself was delivered in lecture format. Although this may seem a subtle difference, in the history of Japanese Confucianism, the difference between lecture and seminar has been a key issue of debate

and controversy since the seventeenth century, just as participatory learning remains an issue of debate in modern educational theory. For instance, Shibano Ritsuzan (1736–1807), the most influential Confucian scholar from the Japanese state Confucian Academy government during the last years of the 1700s and a rabid opponent of lecturing, in 1788 described his observations of the ineffectiveness of lectures in government education in the following terms:

“Whatever was said in the lecture, none of it entered their ears. They just sat in their rows day-dreaming about the floating world [popular entertainments]. The lecture served no purpose whatsoever” (Shibano [1788] 1914, p. 143).

Shibano and most of his contemporaries instead preferred various kinds of seminar-style student participatory educational formats (Paramore 2016, pp. 83–88). Therefore, this contrast between lecture and seminar style, and a preference for seminars, has a long tradition in Japanese Confucianism, a tradition which informed junior teachers’ expectations of a student-centered and interactive methodology (Maeda 2009). In the actual realization of the program, however, senior figures withdrew from this format and instead simply lectured. This is another indication of the confused nature of communication and coordination around pedagogical approach and method.

There did not appear to be agreement on pedagogical methodology, the pedagogical aims seem to have been unclear or confused to the teachers, and there appears to have been absolutely no methodological consideration given to the early childhood setting of the educational program, nor to childhood educational methodologies or theory.

## 5. Comparison and Conclusions

In comparison, although the two programs shared some superficial overlaps in their articulated aims, they ultimately appeared to be motivated by very different worldviews. A comparative analysis of their practice demonstrated this divergence more strikingly, and provided insight into the importance of a range of non-doctrinal sociological factors in contemporary Confucian revival (and, I would suggest, perhaps also in Confucian practice in general in any historical period).

The practice of the programs differed in four main ways: the texts chosen (*what* was being read), the method of instruction (*how* it was being read), and the teachers and organizational setting (*who* was leading and delivering the education).

Differences in the conduct and practice of the two programs began with differing choices of what “Confucian classics” (texts) would be read. The single text focused upon in the Tokyo example, the *Analects*, is comparatively open to subjective engagement by the reader, requiring a more interpretative approach. This would fit with a pedagogical aim of “understanding the meaning” of the tradition, as per the approach of the junior teachers, but would not necessarily be the most suitable choice for the “leadership moral” inculcation advertised in the publicity material and focused upon by Professor Kaji.

In the Taipei example, simpler, more didactic texts were chosen. Their content seeks to instruct, not to provoke. Yet, counterintuitively, the reading of these texts provoked a much more engaged, autonomous response from the children in Taipei than the reading of a comparatively interrogative text had from the children in Tokyo. This tells us something interesting about the relationship between text content, on the one hand, and text utilization and affect on the other. In this context at least, they seemed quite unrelated. In short, the way a text is used seems much more important than what is in the text.

This brings us to differences in the methodology employed—how the texts were read. In the Tokyo case, there appeared to have been confusion about the pedagogical method used. In the Taipei case, the methodology was clearly articulated, was informed by both modern childhood pedagogical and traditional Confucian pedagogical theories, and was realized in a coordinated and planned way in a professionally managed school.

Another major difference observed was the nature of the teachers and organizations—who was running the programs and teaching the children. In Taipei, a grassroots (Buddhist) religious organization introduced the reading of Confucian texts in standard, state-

regulated pre-schools, overseen by qualified child pedagogy specialists, and integrated into a larger educational model of socialization. Confucianism was introduced as an instrument, but as an instrument to encourage broad socialization, including children with learning difficulties and cognitive challenges, and delivered to a broad-based socio-economically diverse community. Education was conducted by people who were not experts in Confucianism or Classical Chinese, but who were experts in childhood education—all women with state-approved child pedagogy qualifications.

In Tokyo, a large media corporation in cooperation with elite university professors who had high public profiles in broader society introduced privately run extracurricular seminars focusing on the reading of *Confucius Analects* in the context of developing “leadership ethics”. A 100% male and predominantly older group of teachers with little to no experience working with children taught a small group of fee-paying children from elite backgrounds in central Tokyo.

In both cases examined in this article, the revival of Confucian practice was explained overtly in terms of correcting aspects in modern education. In this sense, both Confucian Reading classes were motivated by a critical stance towards contemporary society. However, whereas the Taipei activity opposed the problematic aspects of modern society (competitiveness, consumerism) with a pre-modern, non-materialist alternative, the Tokyo activity presented an alternative to the status quo which was also competitive and also based in contemporary business culture. In Tokyo, despite being backed by a massive and well-resourced media corporation and led by high-status figures associated with some of the most elite institutions in the country, the activity lacked social engagement—it was not embedded into society or structurally integrated into any other social organizations (excluding the commercial TV corporation).

In Taipei, by contrast, the attempt to reintroduce Confucian reading in education was part of a religious revival, deeply embedded in broader society. The reading of Confucian texts was linked to the revival of other Confucian practices such as filial piety, good conduct, and temple attendance, and that broader Confucian revival was also embedded within a strong, extant Buddhist religious network, which itself was part of a wider Buddhist religious revival. Crucially, this Buddhist organization was (is) structurally embedded within broader society through a whole range of institutional and social links, some of them originating from the Buddhist lay organization itself, some of them interacting with broader society and the state—the pre-school being one example of this latter form of social integration. The pre-school worked within and under the broader social- and state-regulating auspices, while the pre-school and Buddhist organization provided services to broader society, opening up to an even wider variety of participants than most standard private pre-schools in the same society. A key aspect of the Confucian revival observed in the Taipei case was that it was part of a larger (Buddhist) religious revival, which was itself deeply embedded in general society.

Deep social embeddedness also means that the organizations within which the Confucian revival occurred in the Taipei example (the kindergarten and the broader lay Buddhist organization) themselves served as nodes or fulcrums for broader alternative social networks. I would suggest it was this construction of new social networks, and the conduct of Confucian practice within such a social network that facilitated the kind of critical employments of this tradition which we observed. For instance, the kindergarten principal explained the use of movement, repetition, and affect as a replication of the methods she saw used in children’s TV commercials, but, in order to have the reverse effect of protecting children from consumerism, this was directly informed by real experience in society, facilitated by a shared, broad social network based around an alternative ideology and world-view.

This kind of approach, observed in the field work in Taipei, is itself driven by the positioning of educational and religious practice in society, opening the doors of the school and its methods of education to the broad reality of contemporary society. Tradition is then deployed as a means of correction within this socially embedded contemporary context. It



is this social embeddedness which gives the Taipei example its critical capacity to offer an alternative to the current (educational and broader social) status quo, and which therefore provides it with meaning (and utility) for those involved.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Such more sociological approaches to the study of Confucianism have recently been exemplified in (Sun 2013; Yang and Tamney 2012).
- <sup>2</sup> See for instance (Rubinger 2007) or (De Bary et al. 1989), particularly the article “Education of Children in the Sung” by Pei-yu Wu (De Bary et al. 1989, pp. 307–24).
- <sup>3</sup> Recently, there have also been attempts in educational theory to advocate for the use of Confucianism in pre-school learning (for instance, Wu and Tan 2020); however, this article will concentrate on the analysis of its practice in the examples observed.
- <sup>4</sup> Although many associate this kind of education with East Asia (and also, incorrectly, “Confucian culture”), since at least the 1990s the education systems in most major urban areas in the Pacific basin (East Asian or not) are similarly overly competitive and examination-centered. From Vancouver to Sydney, Beijing to Santiago, anti-social effects springing from an overly competitive-exam-driven education system have been criticized across the Pacific basin. Ironically, this kind of rote learning exam-centric education is also often (wrongly) associated with the legacy of Confucianism. For an interesting critique and counter to that idea from an educational theory approach, see (Li and Wegerif 2014).
- <sup>5</sup> It is one of a number of major lay-Buddhist organizations in Taiwan involved in the bottom-up provision of various social services, including childcare/early childhood education. On Buddhist organizations and civil society welfare provision see, for example, (Huang and Weller 1998; Pacey 2005).
- <sup>6</sup> In addition to my observation of the Classics Readings in this school over two weeks, the school also generously furnished me with a range of written material, including manuals for teachers, and Powerpoint presentations for use in teacher and volunteer training. Quotes like this are drawn directly from this Powerpoint material produced by the school, but also closely match statements made by the teachers and principal in my interviews.
- <sup>7</sup> Both texts are available on ctext: Dizigui at <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=en&res=887677>; Qianziwen at <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=en&chapter=113246> (accessed on 7 February 2022).
- <sup>8</sup> This integration of dynamic physical movement in early childhood literacy learning is an example of the influence of modern childhood pedagogical theory. Despite the Lower Group being made up predominantly of 3-year-olds, it also included several 4-year-olds, and one or two 5-year-olds. The older children included a couple who had lived part of their lives in non-Chinese speaking countries, and one older child with learning difficulties.
- <sup>9</sup> The first part of the compilation is drawn from Zhu Xi’s 童蒙須知 <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=en&chapter=144320>, specifically the fourth chapter 《讀書寫字第四》 (accessed on 7 February 2022).
- <sup>10</sup> *The Classic of Filial Piety*, also including Legge’s English translation, is on ctext at: <https://ctext.org/xiao-jing/zh?en=en> (accessed on 7 February 2022).
- <sup>11</sup> For example, during my interview with the principal before one day of field work, there was a boy constantly entering the staff room. Throughout each day, he came and went from all the different classrooms I was in, as well as the staffroom, the kitchen, and various bathrooms. The principal and teachers explained to me that he had ADHD, and while he had no problem learning he needs to physically move around, so they just let him move freely all around different parts of the school all day.
- <sup>12</sup> I interviewed teachers on a number of different occasions over a 6-month-period both while they were working on the project and in the months immediately thereafter.
- <sup>13</sup> These quotes appeared in publicity material from 2015, both hard copy (promotional brochures) and online, produced to explain the seminar to the public and promote it to potential customers (parents of target-age children).
- <sup>14</sup> Publicity material referred to above, in combination with information from interviews conducted with participants in 2015.

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