

CHINESE FAMILIES' PURSUIT OF CONFUCIAN LEARNING BELIEFS THROUGH OVERSEAS EDUCATION: RETHINKING LEARNING CULTURES IN CROSS-CULTURAL RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Aim. The aim of the article is to understand how Chinese parents draw on their learning beliefs and experiences within the Chinese educational context to make decisions about their children's overseas education, as well as analysing how their learning beliefs are similar or different from East Asian or Western learning beliefs.

Methods. The study is based on more than 100 in-depth separate interviews with 22 Chinese families conducted over several years between 2016 and 2019. Based on interpretative phenomenological analysis and discourse analysis, the results are coded according to the theory of values proposed by Clyde Kluckhohn (1951). These learning values are further coded according to whether they are reflective of the American learning model (EALM), Confucian learning model (CLM), and Confucian learning philosophies.

Results. The analysis shows that Chinese parents have displayed similar learning beliefs in socialising their children in the family domain, in their disapproval of the Chinese education system, and in their pursuit of a Western overseas education. The Chinese families' pursuit of a Western education for their children are driven by their cultural leaning beliefs, which are rooted in Confucian heritage culture, and which also echo European American heritage cultures.

Conclusion. Many researchers tend to emphasise cultural differences in learning, particularly between Confucian heritage and European American heritage cultures. This paper shows the possibilities of cultural learning values shaping educational choices, expands upon the understanding of Confucian heritage culture, and suggests the similarities between the learning cultures of East Asia and the West.

Keywords: learning beliefs, cultivation, socialisation, Confucian heritage cultures, values



INTRODUCTION

Culture has a fundamental influence on learning (Li, 2012; Li & Fung, 2021; Loh & Teo, 2017). A society's sociocultural context, especially its respective value and belief systems, is responsible for shaping educational philosophy (Li, 2012). Many researchers emphasise cultural differences in learning beliefs, cultural philosophical origins, learning processes, learning purposes, the principles of pedagogy, and the methods of instruction, particularly between Western and East Asian countries including China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam (Cheng, 1998; Hess & Azuma, 1991; Hofstede, 2011; Li, 2010, 2003, 2016; Li & Fung, 2021; Li & Yamamoto, 2020; Loh & Teo, 2017; Wursten & Jacobs, 2013).

In recent years, the number of Chinese students from middle- and high-income regions of urban China opting to study abroad has proliferated greatly. Indeed, approximately 662,100 students studied overseas in 2018 (National Bureau of Statistics of China). Scant attention has been given to how Chinese families pursuing overseas education perceive the learning beliefs, and how might learning beliefs differ in China from that of Western overseas education have impacted their decisions about their children's overseas education.

This paper explores how Chinese parents, whose children pursue overseas education in the UK, draw on their learning beliefs and experiences to make decisions about their children's overseas education. While motivations abound, such as having better job opportunities, upward class mobility, and migration to a more affluent country (Martin, 2021), this study focuses on the learning beliefs or teaching and learning philosophy that Chinese families adopt for their children through the following questions:

What do Chinese families perceive regarding their learning beliefs in socialising their children within the family domain, in Chinese school settings, and their pursuit of a Western overseas education respectively?

Where do those learning beliefs in different domains originate from, and in what ways are these learning beliefs similar or different to East Asian or Western learning beliefs? In this article, I offer an analysis of these questions, and on this basis contribute to the understanding of Confucian heritage culture as well as learning cultures in cross cultural research.

CHINESE CONFUCIAN LEARNING AND TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

This section reviews the Confucian teaching and learning philosophy or learning beliefs from historical classical texts. Chinese education has stressed Confucianism since ancient China, which was not only the content of examination for selecting officials, but that it cultivates moral values and

also continues to serve as society's exemplary norms (Bakken, 2000; Kipnis, 2011). For the majority, morality was about adopting the custom and tradition under the influence of Confucianism (He, 2015).

Both *The Analects* (*lún yǔ* 论语) and *On Teaching and Learning* or *Xueji* (*xué jì* 学记), are the essence of Confucian values in Chinese classical works, including teaching and learning philosophy, which are well known to the public. *Xueji* is one of the *Five Classics* that constituted the core of traditional Confucian teaching and learning philosophy. The content of *Xueji* presents a summative synthesis of the ancient systems in its account of the schooling system, the principles of pedagogy, and the methods of instruction (Xu, 2016). Here, I draw upon Xu Di's (2016) translation of principles of instruction in four approaches in *Xueji*, which is widely cited in the existing literature:

The first precept of the academy is precaution (*yù* 豫): Guard against bad habits before they become ingrained. The second is readiness and timing (*shí* 时): Choose the most efficacious time for teaching. The third is felicity and flexibility (*xùn* 逊): Adjust the structure and sequence of your teaching to suit subject and student. The fourth is observation and discussion (*mó* 摩): Let students improve each other through interaction. These four precepts are the way to ensure effective instruction. (p. 10)

In this piece of literature, *Xueji* raises several points of the Confucian teaching and learning philosophy, such as:

- the importance of developing right habits;
- catering to students' interests, motivations, and learning abilities when teaching;
- altering the mode of delivery to match the students' aptitude and capacity for learning, teachers possessing a wide array of knowledge, enlightening and leading students forward through reasoning and inspiration, offering them encouragement, opening their minds and provoking critical thinking (Xu, 2016);
- observing and encouraging students to reflect and engage in lively discussions and debate.

These approaches to teaching are also shown in *The Analects* and other classical works, such as the works of Zengzi (*zēng zǐ* 曾子), Mencius (*mèng zǐ* 孟子), and Han Yu (*hán yù* 韩愈), which bear great influence. For example, in *The Analects Book VI*, it wrote "The Master said, 'to prefer it is better than only to know it. To delight in it is better than merely to prefer it'" (Muller, 2021, p. 1). Here, Confucius highlights the importance of cultivating an interest in learning. For another example, *The Analects Book II* also recorded that "He who learns but does not think is lost; he who thinks but does not learn is in danger" (Muller, 2021, p.1). Here, Confucius attaches much importance to learning and thinking independently. Many examples from *The Analects Book XI* emphasise the thought of "teaching students according to their aptitude" (Muller, 2021, p. 1).

In short, these Chinese classic works respect individual characteristics of students, cultivate students' interests, the exchange of ideas, independent thinking, and active learning and engagement. However, scholars have also pointed out that the Confucian teaching and learning philosophy has not been fully implemented in the Chinese educational system (Xu, 2016). The next section provides an overview of the Chinese education system to facilitate a deeper understanding of the learning practices in China's school settings.

THE LEARNING CULTURE IN CHINA'S SCHOOL SETTINGS

The Chinese education system and learning styles in school settings are closely intertwined with the legacies of imperial governing complex and the re-instatement of examinations in many dynasties in China (Kipnis, 2011). Since the 7th century CE, competitive civil service examinations were a means for the Chinese state to select officials (Bakken, 2000; Kipnis, 2011), with the examinations' contents mainly focused on four Confucian books and five Confucian classics. As selecting talents into the government is the main purpose and the prescribed texts had the status of irrefutable dogmas, rote memorisation became the main teaching method, with teachers being at the centre of the learning process (Thogerson, 1990) and focusing on examinations (Thogerson, 2000).

The contemporary Chinese education system has inherited the extremely exam-oriented system and has gathered widespread criticism aimed at rote learning and spoon-feeding since the 1990s. As a response to the broader context of society and mounting criticisms about the exam-oriented education from parents and educators in the 1990s, government policies have since then focused on the promotion of *suzhi jiaoyu* (*sù zhì jiào yù* 素质教育) reform (frequently translated as quality education reform) to address these shortcomings (Dello-Iacovo, 2009; Murphy, 2004).

The term *suzhi jiaoyu* first appeared in professional education journals and discussions of education reform in the 1980s and was claimed to be informed by Confucian traditions of cultivation (Kipnis, 2006; Murphy, 2004). *Suzhi jiaoyu* refers to a curriculum and method of instruction that emphasises creativity, critical thinking, civic responsibility, life skills such as teamwork and effective communication and overall personal development (Dello-Iacovo, 2009; Hansen, 2018; Hao, 1998; Murphy, 2004). The official document shows that, the education reform is

cultivating students' curiosity and desire for knowledge; making students active participants in the learning process; developing students' sense of inquiry and investigative strategies; encouraging communication and co-operation; giving students opportunities for hands-on experience and relating the curriculum to students' everyday lives (Dello-Iacovo, 2009, p. 243).

Although the education reform is supposed to permeate all levels of education in schools and despite calls for a reorientation in educational style, content, and methods, many scholars showed that *suzhi jiaoyu* reform was unsuccessful due to assessments still revolving around examination contents (Dello-Iacovo, 2009; Lin, 2011). Thus, the failure of *suzhi jiaoyu* reform represents the entrenchment of examination-oriented education, with the teaching and learning philosophy practiced in Chinese institutions being overly skewed towards examinations, passivity, and teacher centrism. The next section reviews the studies on cultural differences in learning beliefs between Western and East Asian countries.

RESEARCH ON WESTERN AND EAST ASIAN CULTURAL LEARNING MODELS

Researchers use cultural models to study how families draw on a given sociocultural learning model to socialise the young (Li, 2016; Li & Yamamoto, 2019). A cultural model is regarded as a cultural resource which all members share and may draw upon to suit their needs, while learning beliefs are developed individually under the influence of such a cultural model (Li, 2016). Contemporary research on the learning differences between the European American learning model (EALM) and Confucian learning model (CLM) has demonstrated the ways in which learning beliefs, cultural philosophical origins, learning processes, learning purposes, the principles of pedagogy, and the methods of instruction differ from each other. In making distinctions, research shows Western learning culture or EALM as mind-orientation while Confucius heritage culture or CLM as virtue-orientation (Li, 2003, 2016; Li & Fung, 2021). Specifically, as Li Jin and Fung Heidi (2021) elaborate, EALM

tilts heavily to mental functions, ability, competence, and understanding the world as learning purposes. Regarding the learning process, students ideally seek active engagement, critical thinking, inquiry, and self-expression. The gauge for successful learning includes understanding the essentials of a subject, achieving personal insights and creativity, and being one's best. For effective learning, students demonstrate curiosity/interest and intrinsic motivation, and challenge existing knowledge and authorities. (p. 30)

By contrast, CLM

prioritises learning virtues to foster in children. Such learning aims at achieving breadth and depth of knowledge, application to real-life practice, contribution to society, and the unity of knowledge and morality. This model emphasises learning affects such as commitment, passion, and respect for teachers.... (Li & Fung, 2021, p. 30)

Other empirical research also illustrates learning patterns of East Asian countries with Confucian heritage cultures, which points to the differences

regarding Chinese and Western approaches to education in school settings. Scholars often depict that the learning styles of western education emphasise self-expression, creativity, individuality, egalitarianism and developing the whole person (Hulbert, 2007; Li, 2016). By contrast, many researchers typically show Chinese teaching and learning patterns as rote, hierarchical, rigid, lacking creativity and imagination, teacher centered, passive, dependent, primitive, oppressive, and lacking critical thinking (Greenspan, 2006; Li, 2016; Ryan, 2010; Ryan & Louie, 2007; Xu, 2016).

While these writings show different learning beliefs and practices between Confucius heritage cultures and Western learning cultures, critics show that Chinese teaching and learning philosophy or CHC cultures are not widely understood and are misinterpreted by Western academics (Ryan, 2010; Ryan & Louie, 2007; Xu, 2016). Examining how Chinese families approach Western overseas education with respect to their learning beliefs can offer significant insights into the learning values that underpin their decisions, as well as shedding light on how they perceive the differences between learning cultures in East Asia and the West.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For the purposes of this article, I draw on Kluckhohn's (1951) theory of "value" as a "conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable, which influences the selection from available modes, means, and ends of action" (p. 395). As Kluckhohn (1951) explains, "The desirable is what it is felt or thought proper to want. It is what an actor or group of actors desire – and believe they "ought" or "should" desire – for the individual or a plurality of individuals" (p. 396). Motivation and value are interrelated, with value being influenced by both the unique life history of the individual and their culture. As an anthropologist, Kluckhohn theorises on the cultural and historical context of values, providing operational indices for locating and interpreting them. Kluckhohn posits that values are not only abstract philosophies of life, but also ideas that directly impact people's behaviour, with actions revealing value orientations. Following Kluckhohn, I use the terms philosophy, value, and belief interchangeably. Philosophy refers to individuals' ideas or approaches to doing things. Values can be likened to belief systems that enable individuals to exhibit certain traits and distinguish between legitimate or worthwhile desires from those that are not (Kluckhohn, 1951). This study also draws on the literature on European American learning model (EALM) and Confucian learning model (CLM) as well as Confucian teaching and learning philosophy (as discussed above) to understand the Chinese families' learning beliefs and actions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Data for this article comes directly from a research project that investigates the motivation of the mainland Chinese middle-class in sending their children to an elite university in UK. The research is based on more than 100 in-depth separate interviews with 22 students (17 females and five males), 32 parents (15 fathers and 17 mothers), and 18 grandparents (10 grandfathers and eight grandmothers) conducted over several years between 2016 and 2022.

The cohort comprises students whose birth years fall within the interval of 1989 to 1993, originating from diverse urban centers across China. Meanwhile, the parents, born within the time frame of 1962 to 1971, possess educational backgrounds from Chinese colleges or universities, holding professions such as doctors, teachers, professors, and entrepreneurs. The rest of the parents are engaged in roles within the state sector, including state officials and employees. In contrast, the grandparents belong to the birth cohort spanning 1928 to 1948, and among them, five grandparents have not undergone any formal education. The grandparents and parents experienced constraints of physical mobility and financial lack in Maoist China and the early Reform era, and they consequently had no international mobility. Only six parents claimed that they had travelled abroad for holidays since 2015 when their children had grown up and they could afford to fund those trips.

This author conducted multiple open-ended interviews—informed by the life and oral histories approach—with each participant on a one-to-one basis. With oral history interviewing method, I inquired about topics related to parenting, the various educational pathways and educational experiences in China. Informed by the life history interviewing method, I asked about indirect questions such as biographical information, family structure, childhood experiences, typical and the most memorable and poor learning experiences and activities across different stages in life.

All interviews were transcribed, and informants were all thoroughly anonymised to make interviewees unrecognizable. This study employs interpretative phenomenological analysis, which involves descriptive coding, searching for connections across emergent themes, conceptual coding, and hermeneutics. Based on discourse analysis, the results are coded according to the theory of values proposed by Kluckhohn (1951). These learning values are further coded according to whether they are reflective of the American learning model (EALM), Confucian learning model (CLM), and Confucian learning philosophies.

CULTIVATION OF CHILDREN IN EARLY LIFE

This section covers the Chinese families' perception regarding their learning beliefs in socialising their children within the family domain, the origins of those learning beliefs, and the ways in which those learning beliefs are simi-

lar or different to East Asian and Western learning beliefs. In this study, the Chinese families' teaching and learning beliefs in socialising their children at home during their formative years are classified under various beliefs: cultivating students' interests, aptitude, and learning abilities, curiosity and passion for learning, enlightening and grooming children with the ability to think independently, developing creativity and exchanging ideas, and teachers possessing a wide array of knowledge. These are shown to be in accordance with the Confucian teaching and learning philosophy and which also echo European American heritage cultures (Li, 2016; Li & Fung, 2021; Li & Yamamoto, 2019).

First, cultivating students' interests and following aptitude-based teaching emerged as a theme in many of our conversations. When asked how their parents taught them, many students shared their experiences of growing up and described the teaching strategies that catered to their abilities and interests. For example, Diana revealed,

I learned drawing and dancing since I was a child. My parents were also very casual and did not force me to do things which I disliked. For instance, I didn't like math, and my parents didn't force me to have tutoring lessons. They respected my choices and let me learn whatever I liked, as I have always been very willing to share my thoughts with them. Therefore, studying and furthering my education not only becomes a way to enhance myself, but is also worth it and makes me happy.

Similarly, Natalie's mother emphasised the importance of cultivating interests in her child:

Natalie was sent to mathematical Olympiad classes since primary school. After a few lessons, she came back and told me that she couldn't understand what was being taught. I told her to stop attending if that was the case, as I felt that being interested is far more important than what she's learning. Since she doesn't already understand, letting her continue would just be giving her a hard time.

In my research, a majority of the students shared similar stories showing their parents promoting effective teaching and learning in terms of prioritising interest cultivation, valuing the communication process between them, stressing cultivation being optimally situated – physically and mentally and ensuring their children enjoy learning. Similarly, synonymous with cultivating the students' interests for learning, a significant number of students whom I interviewed also mentioned the curiosity that their parents desired to cultivate in them since childhood. For example, Isabel shared stories of how she grew up and her learning experience at home:

I remember how my parents trained my curiosity as a child. They were very patient when attending to my curiosity and would always answer my questions in great detail; even if they did not have the answers, they would look for them online before teaching me. For example, my parents studied Engineering in

university, and they would explain to me what a remote control is, how electrical appliances such as televisions, refrigerators, and traffic lights work. Once my mother designed a circuit board at home and when I became curious and asked her, she patiently explained to me what might happen when two different circuits are connected.

Isabel's comments illustrate how her parents attended to her questions, cultivated her curiosity and conducted their own independent learning in order to have both breadth and depth of knowledge to handle questions from her. When interviewed separately, Isabel's parents also narrated many examples of efforts to cultivate Isabel's curiosity and support her exploration of knowledge that interests her. Isabel's case is not exceptional, as many parents and grandparents narrate learning activities that reveal cultivating interest, curiosity and the desire for knowledge, making students active participants in the learning process, developing students' sense of inquiry and investigative strategies, with parents invoking the Confucian classic saying of "knowing the hows but not the whys."

The narratives of Confucian classic sayings and desirable approach to teaching their children are not only in accordance with the Confucian teaching and learning beliefs of cultivating a person's interests, curiosity, willingness and active learning, but also about the importance of readiness and timing of teaching—the content, pace, and mode of delivery must be altered to match the students' aptitude and capacity for learning (Xu, 2016). This also resonates with the learning beliefs in European American learning model (EALM) in that "for effective learning, students demonstrate curiosity/interest and intrinsic motivation" (Li & Fung, 2021, p. 30).

Moreover, the interviews frequently mentioned enlightening and grooming children with the ability to think independently, developing creativity, and exchanging ideas, traits that are again linked to the Confucian teaching and learning philosophy. According to Ethan, he and his parents greatly respect their relationship, and they even encouraged him to voice his individual opinions. Even if there were occasions when he disagreed with his parents at home, they would communicate harmoniously with him and listen to his views:

My parents and I are very equal. They never forced their ideas upon me and have always encouraged me to think independently and guided me through constructively. It's akin to not giving your child a blank sheet of paper and instructing him to copy a drawing. Instead, you teach him how to draw and let his creativity flow. It's important to teach children to think on their feet, discuss their ideas with others, and form conclusions of their own.

Moreover, for Hanna,

My parents treated me as equals in the family. Whenever they have something in mind, they would always discuss with me. Similarly, when I have confusions in life, I would also consult them. But I always make my own decisions, as they are more like my advisors.

Parents and grandparents similarly provided many examples of encouraging active thinking and communication in learning activities. In the interviews, the parents often quote Confucius classic sayings, such as “Learning without thought is dangerous” while grandparents frequently recall creating opportunities and asking for their children’s opinions. Their quotes highlight creativity, thinking independently, forming and communicating their own ideas, as well as forming conclusions in early life. These dovetail with the definition of critical thinking: “reasonable reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe and do” (Ennis, 1991, p. 7). Further, we can also observe that the parents and students emphasise equality and mutual respect, which are congruous with studies which show families with educated parents—they no longer subscribe to a domineering relationship with their children nor assume a commanding tone in educating them (Fung et al., 2017). These ways of teaching their children reflect this equality as part of Confucian values (Li, 2010, 2012) as well as the philosophy recorded in *Xueji* and *The Analects*, such as enlightening and leading students forward through reasoning and inspiration, offering them encouragement, opening their minds and provoking critical thinking (Xu, 2016), and encouraging students to reflect and engage in lively discussions. This also resonates with the Western education and learning styles emphasis on self-expression, creativity, and egalitarianism (Hulbert, 2007; Li, 2016) and the internal learner characteristics in the EALM of “thinking, communicating, and active engagement on the other” (Li, 2003, pp. 264-265) as well as “open-mindedness” and “active learning” (Li, 2016, p. 40).

Additionally, the development of self-reflection is a recurring theme in the interviews. Sammy’s father shared lots of examples in the interviews that he tried to cultivate in his child independent thoughts, learning abilities and help her to understand the world in a delightful way. According to Sammy’s father,

My mother was a teacher. She would always instruct me and students from rural places in the Confucian values of hard work, resolve, and diligence and told us that learning [from others] and reflecting are the best ways to receive knowledge and experiences. Similarly, I often cultivate in my daughter those values and share with her stories of how to learn, say, how others have failed, hoping that my daughter can learn from the mistakes of others and reflect upon them. If we need to learn everything through the school of hard knocks, it’ll be too slow and too high a price to pay. It’s important to learn and be reflective. Thus, learning philosophy is very important, which is why I will help my child to find a way such that she can rejoice in her studies, learn, and receive knowledge.

The quote above shows how Sammy’s grandparents and father perform the role of the exemplary teacher by transmitting Confucian learning virtues and learning philosophy to the child, such as self-reflection. Like Sammy’s father, many of my interviewees credited members of their own families with

providing an exemplary role model to follow. Their narratives reveal that grandparents and parents transmit and embody Confucian learning values in their everyday life (Li, 2003; 2016), impressing upon the interviewees the importance of these learning values. This learning style resonates the philosophy of active engagement in reflecting and thinking in *Xueji*, which embodies the definition of critical thinking as stated previously. It also reflects the learning characteristics of “achieving personal insights”, “active learning” and enjoy the learning activities intrinsically in the EALM (Li, 2016, p. 40).

THE CHINESE EDUCATION SYSTEM’S CONFLICT WITH PERSONAL BELIEFS

This section illustrates how Chinese parents and students are vocal about their disapproval of the Chinese education system’s teaching styles, which reveals their personal beliefs of learning beliefs as well as how these compare to East Asian or Western learning beliefs. In studying values, Kluckhohn (1951) shows that acts regarded as disapproval provide clues to values or conduct valued by individuals. The narrated disapproval of the Chinese education system can be linked to a deviation from the Chinese learning values of catering to the students’ interests, motivations, independent thinking and learning abilities. First, almost all parents and students pointed out in unison that the basic education system lacks opportunities for cultivating students’ interests and independent thinking. Parents lamented the “failure” of *suzhi jiaoyu*, such as the oppressive, stressful learning life, the exam-oriented system, the large amounts of homework, and the lack of time for children to explore their interests. They are largely concerned that students have been “treated like machines,” with teachers being ill-equipped to teach *suzhi jiaoyu* (education reform) and are thus unable to “fully develop their potential and creativity.”

These learning characteristics similarly extend to the higher education landscape. First, students and parents lamented frequently that, even at the university level, students are required to complete compulsory courses that come in a limited range of options, thus preventing students from tailoring these courses according to their interests. Students typically elaborated how they lost the enthusiasm and willingness to learn during their undergraduate studies, owing to the contrived courses, uninspiring teaching that impedes their learning ability, and coupled with the lack of nurturing of students’ curiosity and creativity on the university’s part.

Further, many students and parents also expressed their disapproval for not having appropriate courses that could enlighten and nurture their passions and thirst for learning. Kathy’s father revealed that,

More people are choosing majors and courses that dovetail with their interests, but the lack of importance and attention attached to majors like philosophy threatens this positive development in China.

The parents' and students' preference for liberal arts and knowledge again point to the failure of Chinese education to fulfill students' preferences, as well as to cultivate passion and commitment for learning, a stark contrast to their Confucius learning beliefs.

In addition, critiques of China's higher education landscape are also tightly intertwined with the disapproval of rote learning and the teachers' inability to cultivate students' independent thinking. Students who did their undergraduate studies in China before pursuing master's degrees overseas compared and bemoaned that lecturers in Chinese institutions only read from lecture notes and deprived them of opportunities to be engaged in discussions or debates in class. Further, students say, prior to the final exams, lecturers will even give out sample or model questions and answers to 'condition' the minds of the candidates. Such a pedagogy does not teach students how to think and, as a result, students are perceived by society as "machines" that participate in examinations by preparing and answering exam questions in a certain manner without the cognitive space to actively process what they have learned.

It is not unusual to hear of students and parents venting their frustrations with the Chinese university education system's practicing and teaching philosophy that validates rote learning and memorisation in place of interest exploration and feeding one's passion for knowledge through enlightenment and the cultivation of individual's learning ability to engage in discussions and the exchange of ideas. The following examples further illustrate parents' personal beliefs about pedagogy and suggest a perversion of the Chinese traditional Confucian teaching and learning philosophy and *suzhi jiaoyu*, which has led to a breeding discontent of the contemporary education system in China. Diana's father commented,

I think education is a process of receiving knowledge. Han Yu, a famous Chinese philosopher and educator once stated, 'Teachers, are the ones who could propagate the way, impart professional knowledge, and resolve doubts.' China's education, no matter if it's in the high school or tertiary level, focuses too much on imparting knowledge (*shòu yè* 授业), and overlooks the most important part i.e., to propagate the way (*chuán dào* 传道). This refers to teaching on how to think philosophically about the meaning of and the valuable things in life." On this note, Diana's father continued: "Even though Chinese universities strongly advocate that students must have a problem-solving mindset, this policy has not been matched by the appropriate structural adjustments. For example, regardless of whether one is in the undergraduate or doctoral level, it is important to have the ability to find, analyse, and solve questions when writing a thesis or conducting research in the future. However, some undergraduate courses do not require students to submit a thesis in order to graduate.

The quote of Han Yu in Diana's father's narrative is well-known to the public, which points to the role of teachers in cultivating students' active thinking, questioning, and analytical skills, traits that are part of critical

thinking and which involves judgment, reasoning, meta-cognition, and reflective thinking. The parents' disapprovals of the teaching and learning philosophy in Chinese institutions point to what Xu (2016) termed "the erroneous and ineffective practices of teachers" (p. 53) and resonate with the perceptions of Chinese learning styles as one of rote learning for exams, being hierarchical, rigid, teacher centered, passive, primitive, and oppressive (Greenspan, 2006). Further, such disapprovals reveal parents' desirable learning beliefs – deductive and inductive reasoning – which are historically rooted and similar to the learning beliefs in EACM of emphasising various kinds of thinking, analyses, inquiries, and scientific discoveries (Li, 2010, 2012).

OVERSEAS EDUCATION REFLECTING CHINESE LEARNING BELIEFS

This section elaborates on the Chinese families' perception of overseas education in relation to the learning beliefs, and the degree of similarity or differences these beliefs have to their East Asian and Western counterparts. According to Kluckhohn (1951), "an individual or a group showing a consistent directionality in its selections reveals values, provided that this directionality is involved in the approval-disapproval continuum" (p. 405). The Chinese families describe overseas education to be better than their Chinese counterparts' as the former is deemed to be similar to their learning beliefs and have satisfied their personal beliefs of what a good education should be providing.

Overseas higher education is recognised by many parents and students to be capable of piquing students' interests and increasing their enthusiasm for learning. The parents mentioned how important it was for their children to approach learning by following their passions, while describing how overseas institutions offer a greater variety of programmes and courses for students to pursue their favourite subjects. The following excerpts are just four of the many examples.

Isabel's father shared,

These days, people are no longer pursuing an education for the sole purpose of making a living, but instead do it to satisfy their interests. This goes back to our Confucian tradition of cultivating a person. I want my child to major in something she likes, so that she can have a lot more choices and bring her competitive edge fully into play.

Grace shared,

When I applied for a Ph.D., my parents told me to consider whether I was passionate and whether I could contribute to my chosen field. This is because they were more concerned if it was something I really wanted to do, just like how they let me pursue my hobby as a child.

According to Ethan's father,

Western universities encourage students to freely choose subjects that they are interested in. With this freedom, students will not be constrained by rigid policies [in China] which require them to take compulsory modules that pertain to Party ideologies. This is why I sent my son abroad as I want him to receive a better education, to follow his heart and to pursue the meaning of life. In this regard, overseas education performs better than China's.

Kathy's father commented on the diversity of courses in overseas education:

Western countries widely embrace non-mainstream majors like philosophy and art; however, these courses are neglected in China solely because these majors do not contribute to economic development. Historically, Confucianism emphasises such philosophy. Perhaps, these majors—like philosophy which trains the mind to think critically—may prove to be more relevant and widely accepted when the economy has matured to a certain extent. Our country lacks experiences in developing and advancing this field as foreign countries have been ahead of us in this for a long time. Thus, overseas education is a good choice to keep up with this advancement.

The parents' narratives reveal the inability of the domestic education system in providing ample choices to fulfil their children's learning and passion due to the social and educational realities in China. These include rigid ideological policies (Ethan's father), subject majors that are underdeveloped due to their irrelevance to economic development (Kathy's father), and that the chief purpose of education in the past was about making a living rather than following one's interests (Isabel's father). Moreover, the parents also narrate the advantages of overseas education and its ability to promote critical thinking and the following of one's interests, which are driven by their inherent cultural learning beliefs embedded in Confucianism.

Further, Chinese students and parents feel that overseas education lives up to their learning beliefs of independent thinking, developing heightened creativity and innovative skills together with the facilitation of the exchange of ideas. Almost all students and parents mentioned that overseas higher education is synonymous with academic rigour, intellectual property protection, and the honing of students' research capabilities. Further, students are pushed to be independent learners, creators of innovative ideas, and to communicate with classmates and professors in and out of class. For example, Penny studied abroad after getting undergraduate degree in Chinese universities:

The merits of overseas education are also closely related to the way professors teach and assess students. Real learning only begins after the classes when students begin to do in-depth studies. Students are assessed by writing papers and this is when we are required to research on the relevant information and materials of a particular subject and come up with questions and ideas inde-

pendently, which we further exchange and discuss with teachers and course mates in order to better finalise the papers.

Penny is one of the students who cited experiences at their Chinese and overseas institutions to exemplify the “failure” of Chinese university’s education, as reflected in the students’ inability to conduct independent research, draft research papers, whereas the ‘successes’ of overseas education include various assessments, teachers equipping students to perform research, honing their independent thinking, exchanging ideas, and writing up a paper logically. The students’ narratives again echo the parents’ dissatisfaction regarding China’s inability to provide a holistic education and reveal their desired Confucian teaching and learning beliefs as discussed above.

Further, parents often emphasised independent thinking, expertise and creativity as key values and cited examples to highlight their importance, such as China’s four great inventions – papermaking, compass, gunpowder, and printing – which are products of ancient Chinese wisdom. They also mentioned the number of patents from foreign/Western countries or famous entrepreneurs, such as Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg. The parents’ desire for the system of education that they perceive as standing in opposition to the “stifled” education in China. An overseas education is seen as liberating and capable of “provoking” students to think unconventionally and evoke inspirations from within, which resemble their desired learning beliefs being rooted historically, especially in reference to expertise, creativity, exchanging ideas and acquiring knowledge.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article examines how Chinese parents, whose children pursue overseas education in the UK, draw on their learning beliefs and experiences with Chinese school settings to make decisions about their children’s overseas education. The findings reveal that the Chinese parents have displayed similar learning beliefs in socialising their children in the family, in their disapproval of the Chinese education system, and in their pursuit of a Western overseas education. These cultural learning beliefs resonate Confucian learning beliefs and European American learning cultures. The Chinese families’ pursuit of a Western education for their children are not only driven by their cultural leaning beliefs but also mediated by Chinese educational realities. Drawing on the cultural-historical perspective, Chinese families utilised cultural and historical knowledge to enhance learning experiences for their children and shape educational choices.

This paper first reveals that Chinese families are influenced by cultural and social messages rooted in the Confucian teaching and learning philosophy. These communicate to them the importance of having appropriate learning beliefs by which children can become better learners. In cultivat-

ing their children in everyday life since the children's formative years in the family domain, the Chinese families have adopted the cultural shaping of Confucian teaching and learning philosophy, including engaging students' interests, creativity, active thinking, requiring teachers to possess a wealth of knowledge and students' active learning process from observation, discussion, and interaction. These beliefs are narrated as being transmitted from the parents and the Chinese classic works such as *The Analects* and *Xueji*. This resonates with the understanding of parents being the primary transmitters of cultural values and norms and understanding of Chinese society in which traditional values are transmitted, reproduced, and emphasised through exemplary norms and role models (Bakken, 2000; Li, 2012; Wang et al., 2021).

Having internalised these learning beliefs, parents and students became critical of the education landscape in China (both basic and higher education), resonating with widespread criticisms since the 1990s. They asserted that the Chinese higher education system cannot provide a conducive environment for cultivating students' intellectual abilities and interests due to social and educational realities in China. First, rote-learning methods and the lack of cultivation of problem solving and independent thinking skills can be linked to the re-instatement of the examination-oriented education of the regular system (Thogerson, 2000) and the erroneous and ineffective practices of teachers (Xu, 2016). Second, the limited choice of courses are due to the state's ethos of promoting required ideological courses and the Chinese education system revolving around certain majors, which thus fail to cater to students' varied interests (Fong, 2011). Third, the social reality of making a living constrains choices. While the reasons of the school system's failure are not the aim of this article, these narratives highlight the Chinese families' desired learning beliefs, which guide them to look beyond China to educate their children.

In the pursuit of overseas education, the Chinese families crafted a narrative about a Western education which they perceive as having a similar teaching and learning philosophy as those rooted in Confucianism to suit their needs and fulfill their values, such as fostering interests, independent thinking, creativity, and innovative skills along with the free exchange of ideas. Further, these desires are consistent with how parents inculcate in their offspring learning beliefs and values during their formative years at home. This then begs the question of why these parents did not send their children abroad earlier. Their reason was that they wanted to cultivate their children's traditional cultural values and Chinese identity, as well as being worried that they would be unable to take care of themselves at such a young age. This is consistent with Wang Zhongyan and Gao Xue-song's (2021) finding that the parents who send their children to international schools in China want their children to "maintain cultural identity" (p. 511). The parents in Wang and Gao's (2021) study devote themselves to supporting their children's academic development and "perform the tra-

ditional duty" (p. 512), which were driven by their own cultural beliefs regarding what defines good parenting (Huang & Gove, 2015). Similarly, the Chinese middle-class families' pursuit of a Western education for their children represents their effort to embody their cultural learning beliefs regarding what defines good cultivation.

This article has several contributions. First, it contributes to an empirically grounded understanding of actual practices of embodying the Confucian teaching and learning philosophy and expands upon the understanding of Confucian heritage culture. The existing literature tends to view the educational philosophy as hierarchical, rigid, lacking creativity and imagination, and teacher centric (Greenspan, 2006; Stephan, 2020). Nevertheless, this study goes further to show that the teaching and learning philosophy permeating the Chinese education system is different from the learning beliefs practiced and socialised in the family domain, which are in line with the culturally dominant form of the Confucian teaching and learning philosophy rooted in classical works such as *The Analects* and *Xueji*.

Second, while my analysis is specific to the Chinese context, it demonstrates possibilities of how individuals' cultural learning values shape their practices, perceptions, preferences and formulate action commitments of choosing alternative learning activities from a different culture, which they perceive as having similar values, suiting their needs, and fulfilling their values. With such a small sample of informants, this study did not attempt to generalise its results to all Chinese families. Nevertheless, regardless of individual variations, the Chinese families affirm the cultural learning beliefs and the desired traits of an overseas education – resonate with their Confucian teaching and learning philosophy and realise traditional ways of believing, valuing, knowing, and learning.

Third, this study contributes to the comparisons of Western and East Asian learning beliefs (Li, 2003, 2010, 2016; Li & Fung, 2021; Li & Yamamoto, 2020; Loh & Teo, 2017; Wursten & Jacobs, 2013) and suggests shared learning cultures. Studies often show that Western and East Asian core learning beliefs and practices are diametrically opposed (Li, 2003, 2016, 2021; Li & Yamamoto, 2019). As Li Jin (2016) notes, "The actual meanings of the two learning models hardly overlap, with a distinct set of key concepts for each, indicating different cultural emphases" (p. 40). This empirical study shows that though the learning and teaching philosophical origins are different – with Chinese learning philosophy being embedded in Confucianism while European American culture's "philosophical foundation dates back to Greek antiquity" (Li & Fung, 2021, p. 29) – the Chinese families perceive Western education, its learning characteristics, beliefs, and practices, to parallel Confucian learning beliefs. Both emphasise cultivating students' interests, communication, active learning and engagement, independent thinking, equality, as well as creativity and curiosity. This research thus presents a new perspective on learning cultures in cross-cultural research and facilitates discourse on the differences and understanding of Confucian and Western learning cultures.

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