

Review paper

Confucian education as citizenship education in Hong Kong: A semi-systematic review

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ABSTRACT

Hong Kong's citizenship education reflects both Western liberal civic values and the Chinese Mainland's collectivist duty-oriented perspectives. Since the 2020s, national identity education in Hong Kong has increasingly aligned with the Chinese Mainland, reflecting a stronger policy emphasis on Chinese identity formation. This study examines the applicability, challenges, and potential contributions of Confucian education as citizenship education in Hong Kong, and its role in ongoing and future citizenship education reform, from a theoretical perspective in this unique socio-political context. Using a semi-systematic literature review, this study analyses 68 academic publications and policy documents from Hong Kong and Greater China. It develops a comparative theoretical framework that incorporates Western models of thin and thick citizenship, Confucian concepts of liberal and illiberal Confucianism, and Junzi and Tianxia citizenship. The findings suggest that both historical traditions and current policy developments provide a basis for strengthening Confucian-related citizenship education in Hong Kong. Nevertheless, Confucianism's emphasis on hierarchical order and limited attention to individual aspirations may limit its acceptance among some Hong Kong youth. The study proposes integrating Confucian moral values with service learning as a pedagogical strategy to cultivate good citizens with civic engagement experience, while highlighting the need for further empirical research to evaluate its effectiveness.

Keywords: China, Confucianism, Hong Kong, citizenship education, moral education

Citizenship education reflects a nation's values and aims to cultivate good citizens (Lee & Kennedy, 2024). As a Chinese city influenced by Britain during its colonial past (Kennedy et al., 2023), Hong Kong has been shaped by both Eastern Confucian parental and Western liberal civic values in its prior civic education (Cheng, 2004). Since the 2020s, with the implementation of the National Security Law and related national education policies, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region's (SAR) political and educational climate has been increasingly influenced by the Chinese Mainland (Chong et al., 2022; Yan & Morris, 2025). Chinese civic education fosters nationalism and reinforces Confucian values (Zhang, 2026), gradually affecting Hong Kong's citizenship education reforms. Confucian values vary across dynasties and thinkers, and some may exhibit obligation-orientedness and excessive collectivism (Lam, 2025; Tse, 2026), sparking debates over whether they are non-democratic (Wang, 2024). Some forms of Confucian education emphasize loyalty and patriotism (Guo, 2021), aligning with recent national identity education policies (Lin, 2025a). In addition, Confucian education in Hong Kong has long existed in both formal subjects, such as Chinese literature (Hong Kong Education Bureau [HKEDB], 2022), and informal learning activities (Tan, 2023).

Nevertheless, there has been limited research on how to reconcile traditional moral values with modern civic education in Hong Kong's rapidly changing social and political climate, leaving significant gaps. Based on a critical review of previous theoretical and empirical research across multiple disciplines, this study expands the recent Confucian education concept, "Tianxia Citizen" (Wang, 2024), in the Hong Kong context. It further explores the potential of integrating this concept with service learning (Tan, 2024) to cultivate good citizens in an international context. Accordingly, this study examines the applicability and challenges of strengthening Confucian education as a form of citizenship education in contemporary Hong Kong. This perspective aligns with recent studies suggesting that Hong Kong is becoming increasingly integrated with China while maintaining its international connections (Lin, 2025b; Tse, 2026). This article contributes to the theorization of Confucian values education in East Asia and offers implications for policymakers and curriculum designers in Hong Kong. It may also inform other Confucian societies, such as Singapore and South Korea.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Citizenship education in Hong Kong

Hong Kong's citizenship education generally focuses more on moral education than on political education and has been increasingly influenced by the Chinese Mainland, especially since 2020 (Wong et al., 2021). During the British colonial period, Hong Kong's citizenship education generally avoided political issues, although democratic elements gradually increased before the 1997 handover (Fairbrother, 2006; Yuen, 2016). Nevertheless, since the handover in 1997, civic education in Hong Kong has generally trended towards depoliticization again to meet the needs of political regime governance (Fairbrother, 2006; Yuen, 2016). Cheng (2004) argues that Eastern Confucian-parental, Western Christian religious, and Western liberal civic values are three main resources in Hong Kong's moral education from the 1970s to 2000s. From the 2010s to 2020, there were several large-scale anti-government or anti-China protests and movements, with secondary school students and university students actively participating (Koh, 2018; Batchelor et al., 2017; Reichert et al., 2023; Chan, 2026). In response, the Chinese central government introduced the Hong Kong National Security Law, and conducting national security education has become a legal obligation for schools and universities (Hong Kong Information Service Department, 2025). There were debates over whether there was a causal link between citizenship education at that time, such as the secondary school subject called "liberal studies," which covers political topics like human rights, and students' participation in anti-government social movements (Koon, 2022). However, such citizenship education linked to fighting for individual rights and freedom was regarded as risky by the government, and relevant content has been significantly reduced in the new textbooks and curriculum (Lin, 2025a, 2025b).

In contrast, the content related to China in Hong Kong's citizenship education has increased significantly in recent years. Both the new citizenship-related secondary subjects (Yan & Morris, 2025; Vickers, 2024) and the new national security-related compulsory courses in higher education institutions (Shek et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2023) place more emphasis on national security and building students' patriotism and Chinese identity by adding content on Chinese culture, history, law, and values. Official curriculum documents also show this shift. The 2026 Value Education Curriculum Framework replaced the previous expression "positive values" with "correct values" and explicitly included "Chinese Traditional Virtues" and "Chinese Socialist Core Values" as references (HKEDB, 2021b, 2026). Such an adjustment may be considered reasonable, as citizenship education supports the individual nation's values (Lee & Kennedy, 2024), and the National Security Law and other policies provide legitimacy. As Western influences may be declining in contemporary Hong Kong, strengthening Confucian education as citizenship education may hold potential and present a research gap (Tse, 2026). At the same time, it cannot be overlooked that Hong Kong's previous civic education incorporated elements of Western liberal democracy (Cheng, 2004), and this city is still expected to serve as a bridge between East and West (Ho, 2003; Lin, 2025b).

Confucian value for confucian education

In this study, Confucian education refers to value education aimed at cultivating Confucian morality and values. Confucianism is one of the key philosophical systems in China (Hue, 2007) and has profoundly impacted East and Southeast Asia, including Hong Kong. Confucian thought originated around the 7th century BCE (Tse, 2026) and has continued to develop throughout history. One influential Confucian framework, systematically developed by Dong Zhongshu during the Han dynasty (Deng, 2011; Tse, 2026), comprises the five basic ethical categories and the three cardinal guides, which are reviewed below.

The five basic ethical categories imply a comprehensive system of high moral standards for a "good person" and aim to maintain harmonious social order (Lam, 2025). To be specific, benevolence refers to the value of loving people within families and then extending that love to every person and every being (Tse, 2026; Shumer, 2019; Yim, 2011; Lam, 2025). Benevolence may be the core and highest moral goal in Confucian thought. Righteousness means acting in a reasonable, faithful, and just way when interacting with others (Tse, 2026; Shumer, 2019; Yim,

2011; Lam, 2025). Propriety concerns the observance of well-mannered and disciplined practices for communicating with others respectfully (Tse, 2026; Shumer, 2019; Lam, 2025). Wisdom means not only mastering theoretical knowledge but also engaging in reflection and taking related action to change society (Shumer, 2019; Yim, 2011; Lam, 2025). Faith encourages refraining from hurting others and keeping one's promise (Tse, 2026; Shumer, 2019). Moreover, the value of filial piety, although not listed in Dong Zhongshu's five basic ethical categories, is sometimes regarded as another key value in Confucian values, emphasizing respect, care, and loyalty to one's parents and elders (Yim, 2011; Lam, 2025). Generally speaking, these five ethical categories would be preferable for citizens to focus on their responsibilities rather than their rights, and to place greater emphasis on compliance with existing rules and obedience to those in higher classes (including parents and teachers) (Ho, 2003; Tse, 2026).

In terms of the three cardinal hierarchical guides, there may be more obvious duties and collectivist-oriented features. The three guides are the ruler, who guides the subject; the father, who guides the son; and the husband, who guides the wife (Tse, 2026). In ancient China, this generally implied unconditional obedience and absolute support from subjects to their sovereign and from children to their parents. To elaborate further, the three guides (especially the first two) convey a strong sense of loyalty and identity towards the family, the nation (China), and the emperor (Shek et al., 2015), whilst also exhibiting the limitations of excessive collectivism and a lack of democracy (Tse, 2026; Huang & Asghar, 2016; Wang, 2024).

Nevertheless, earlier Confucian works contain values with democratic features. For instance, in the *Analects* (formed in the 5th–4th century BCE), there are values regarding critical thinking and challenging teachers (Ni, 2017), as well as diversity (Zhao et al., 2023). Similarly, in the *Mencius* (4th–3rd century BCE), there is some support for people's rights to peacefully complain, appeal, or protest against a tyrannical ruler (Wang, 2024). One explanation for these debates over whether Confucian values are democratic (Wang, 2024) is that scholars (or politicians) deliberately select parts of Confucian values to support their arguments for academic (or political) goals (Wong & Chui, 2005). Such a selection could be traced back to Dong Zhongshu. According to Deng (2011), Dong Zhongshu selectively developed non-democratic elements of Confucianism to support Emperor Wu's political agenda by promoting national loyalty and strengthening centralized rule.

Confucian education in Hong Kong, the Chinese mainland, and Taiwan

This study focuses on Confucian education in Hong Kong while drawing on studies from the Chinese Mainland and Taiwan for comparison. Taiwan, another Chinese society strongly influenced by Western civic values, is also reviewed as a comparative case for understanding possible attitudes towards Confucian values in Hong Kong. Confucian education is delivered through both the “classics-reading education” (reading the Confucian classics) (Wang, 2020; Wang & Huang, 2023) in formal subjects like Chinese language and Chinese history, and informal education, such as experiential learning and interaction with peers and family members. This is because citizenship education and value education should be addressed both within and beyond the classroom and should integrate disciplines and encompass both formal and informal learning (Dewey, 2018; HKEDB, 2021b, 2026).

Hong Kong has a relatively long and stable history of Confucian education. In the 1950s, some intellectuals from the Chinese Mainland introduced Confucian education into Hong Kong's colleges by teaching Chinese language and history courses infused with Confucian values (Chou, 2011). In addition, before the 1997 handover, Confucian values were taught in Hong Kong's school education for their emphasis on obedience to higher social classes, which was described as the ‘best sedative for a restive populace’ (Lo & Auld, 2024, p. 5). In the 21st century, Confucianism continues to shape education in Hong Kong in various ways. In terms of formal education, Confucianism-related literature and historical content are included in the Hong Kong secondary curriculum's Chinese Language and Chinese History subjects (HK Examinations & Assessment Authority, 2007; HKEDB, 2022). In terms of overall learning atmosphere, Hue (2008) found that Confucianism's expectations of teachers enhance teachers' ability to transmit knowledge and support students in resolving personal difficulties. Similarly, Tan (2023) argued that Confucianism's values, such as trustworthiness, are taught to students through school activities, the school climate, and the school ethos. Beyond the campus, in parental and family education, Confucian values of diligence and the attribution of success are also widely passed on to children to help them achieve academic success (Lam et al., 2002).

On the Chinese Mainland, Confucian education has been significantly strengthened since the 2010s, following earlier setbacks. In the early years of the People's Republic of China (especially 1966–1976), Confucian values were neglected due to the prevailing political climate and even suffered a devastating blow (Fairbrother, 2006; Tse, 2026; Zhao & Yu, 2026). Since the 2000s, Confucian education has developed considerably in China (Wang, 2022). Since the 2010s, Confucian and other traditional Chinese values have become an important component of contemporary socialist China's mainstream ideology (Zhao & Yu, 2026), with the introduction of specific curriculum reform policies, such as significantly increasing the number of classic texts required to be memorized in secondary Chinese subjects (PRC Ministry of Education, 2018).

In contrast, there may be an obvious decrease in Confucian education as citizenship education in Taiwan since the 21st century. Following democratization after 1987, Taiwan experienced the rise of Taiwanese identity and a decline in the emphasis on Chinese Mainland identity and Confucian values. In 2010, the official curriculum guidelines for the Citizen and Society no longer mentioned Confucian morals (Hung, 2015). In terms of curriculum design and learning culture, some Taiwan policymakers also appear to oppose the Chinese Mainland by rejecting Confucian teaching methods and adopting Western inquiry-based and learner-centred approaches (Huang & Asghar, 2016).

In summary, Confucian education has been continually adapted to meet the ideological needs of particular regions, serving as a morality-based form of citizenship education. While Confucian education has a strong foundation in Hong Kong, there are still research gaps regarding how it can serve as citizenship education in a unique contemporary context, further influenced by the Chinese Mainland. The theoretical framework of a good citizen, which is the goal of citizenship education (Li, 2018), will be explored in the next section.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Good citizen with international citizenship values: thin and thick good citizen

As argued earlier, Western liberal civic values were among the main resources in Hong Kong's citizenship education in the past (Cheng, 2004) and may still influence Hong Kong adolescents' and youths' socialization into good citizens through social media, peers, and family. Moreover, Hong Kong is still expected to serve as a bridge between East and West (Lin, 2025b), so understanding and respecting some rights and individual-oriented Western liberal civic values may be reasonable for the next generation to communicate with global partners and serve the Motherland.

Liberal civic values are generally individual and rights-oriented (Wang & Huang, 2023). This political-philosophical thought holds that all adult citizens have legal rights and are encouraged to participate in politics and decision-making (Umeno et al., 2023). Liberal democracy focuses on the individual's rights to dissent, protest, and engage in political participation, and it fights for freedom and rights (Wang, 2022; Lam, 2025). In addition, protecting individual citizens' interests necessarily requires effective checks on public power (Liu, 1998). Therefore, individual citizens have the right to question and engage in debate with the government, expressing diverse voices in due course (Liu, 1998).

Based on liberal civic values and other democratic traditions, the features of good citizens can be divided into two types: conventional and social movement-related (Villalobos et al., 2021). Kennedy et al. (2008) noted that the conventional ones focused on relatively thin, basic responsibilities, such as obeying the law, paying taxes, voting in elections, and having a strong national identity. Such thin good citizenship may, whilst fulfilling its duties in civic affairs, have devoted little critical thinking, time, or energy, or taken few risks to make innovative contributions to society. In contrast, the social movement-related ones may be thicker and rights-oriented (Reichert, 2016), such as engaging in community volunteering, participating in protests, fighting for human rights, protecting the environment, and advocating for the interests of women and immigrants. Such good citizenship may be more ideal and harder for a common citizen to achieve, because meaningful and respected critical social and political engagement must be grounded in a solid theoretical foundation and structured action (Kennedy, 2021), covering both rights and responsibilities.

Good citizen with Confucian and international values: Liberal and illiberal Confucianism, Junzi and Tianxia Citizen

Based on a review of long-standing debates over whether Confucian values have strong non-democratic features, as well as philosophical reflection on the complex Confucian moral systems and Western liberal values, Wang (2024) innovatively systematized two sets of concepts: Liberal Confucianism and Illiberal Confucianism, Junzi citizen and Tianxia citizen. This system successfully blends Confucian and Western liberal values of citizenship; however, in the Hong Kong context, it could be refined to better balance responsibilities and rights.

Liberal Confucianism refers to Confucian citizenship values with liberal features. The moral foundation includes the spirit of benevolence and reciprocity, as discussed in the literature review and other sources. Wang (2022, 2024) argues that Liberal Confucianism cares about citizenship rights, individualism, and social equality. He points out that Confucian values include the right to education without discrimination, the expression of rights, and social equality. In addition, Wang (2024) found that Confucian doctrines recognize people's right to resist their ruler when basic survival needs are unmet, reflecting a limited focus on individual rights.

In contrast, Illiberal Confucianism refers to Confucian values with illiberal and non-democratic features that profoundly influenced ancient China. Wang (2024, p. 23) points out that one example in Confucian thought is the "kingdom of the superior," characterized by "hierarchy and meritocracy" rather than by democratic checks and balances on power. Generally speaking, in ancient Confucian society, there was greater emphasis on morality than

on the democratic legal system, and the moral system, like the three cardinal hierarchical guides reviewed in the last section, may have obvious limitations regarding full submission to authority (Wong & Chui, 2005; Deng, 2011). Therefore, excessive illiberal Confucianism may harm modern society (Wang, 2024).

By combining the advantages of Liberal Confucianism with democratic features and thick citizenship, emphasizing both rights and duties, the Junzi citizen and the Tianxia citizen set two good-citizen goals for modern society (Wang, 2022). The concept of Junzi in ancient China refers to the ultimate goal of a moral leader: exemplifying virtue and promoting social harmony, which are qualities expected of senior officials (Lam, 2025). Influenced by Illiberal Confucianism, it has the limitation of overemphasizing responsibility and ethics over law, politics, and rights (Wang, 2021). To develop a new concept that meets modern society's needs and embodies the features of liberal democracy, Wang (2021) argues that civic Junzi citizens should combine moral reflection with civic engagement, reduce self-interest, and work together to pursue the public good.

Similarly, the concept of Tianxia citizen also draws on traditional Chinese thoughts whilst embodying moral and idealistic values. In Confucian classicism, a good person should extend the ethical self to the family, the state, and, finally, the Tianxia (a broader concept with no clearly defined national boundaries). Wang (2021) points out that Tianxia citizenship should cover four interrelated gradational levels: local citizenship, national citizenship, global citizenship, and cosmopolitan citizenship. Local and national citizenship are consistent with the values of national identity and loyalty in Confucian thought. The global one is based on the spirit of Benevolence and Righteousness that loves and cares for every person and being. The cosmopolitan one can be explained by another Chinese traditional philosophical thought, “tian (heaven), di (earth), and ren (human)” (Wang, 2024, p.37), which originated in Daoism and was developed by Confucianism, disagrees with the idea that humanity is the center of the world and is destined to conquer nature. Instead, such a thought respects nature and the laws of the known and the unknown. Therefore, the Tianxia citizen may be more liberal and a thicker form of good citizen than the Junzi Citizen, as the former has a broader international perspective encompassing contemporary international social and political issues, such as environmental protection and sustainable development.

Based on these theoretical frameworks and the literature reviewed, the research question of this study will be discussed in detail after the methodology section: What are the applicability and challenges in developing Confucian education as citizenship education in contemporary Hong Kong? To be specific, there are three separate research questions. First, to what extent is it feasible to strengthen Confucianism in citizenship education in contemporary Hong Kong? Second, what are the challenges to doing so? Third, how may these challenges be mitigated?

METHODOLOGY

A semi-systematic review involves identifying and understanding numerous related studies, using meta-narratives to identify research gaps, and constructing innovative arguments with sufficient breadth and depth through thematic or content analysis (Snyder, 2019). Unlike a systematic review (e.g. Omirzakova & Tileubay, 2026), a semi-systematic review employs a transparent, purposive search strategy to identify themes closely related to the research question (Muhr, 2026). In interdisciplinary research, this review method may be more appropriate than traditional systematic reviews, as fully systematic reviews can be tricky when covering all the literature for each subject (Snyder, 2019; Tushar & Sooraksa, 2023; Portus et al., 2024). Although the semi-systematic review originated in business and medical research (Snyder, 2019; Portus et al., 2024), it has increasingly been applied in educational research (Tushar & Sooraksa, 2023; O'Toole et al., 2024; Mareye, 2025; Muhr, 2026; Schefers, 2026) in recent years. As this study is interdisciplinary, drawing on traditional philosophy, history, education, sociology, and politics, it would be difficult to comprehensively identify and synthesize all relevant literature through a fully systematic review. Therefore, a semi-systematic approach that transparently and purposively selected literature most relevant to the research question was considered appropriate for the present study.

Some of the literature reviewed by this study is grey literature, defined as “all levels of government, academics, business and industry in print and electronic formats, but which is not controlled by commercial publishers” (Paez, 2017, p. 233). Government policy documents are not peer-reviewed academic publications and therefore serve a different purpose from scholarly literature. Nevertheless, grey literature can provide valuable contextual and policy-related evidence, particularly when the research question concerns policy implementation, educational reform, or a rapidly changing social context (Paez, 2017). For example, in one semi-systematic literature review on widening participation in Scottish universities, some government reports are recognized as meaningful grey literature in the data-inclusion process to explore attitudes from different stakeholders (O'Toole et al., 2024). As this study examines how the Chinese mainland's value education influences Hong Kong's citizenship education, several Chinese-language policy documents are also included in the review corpus. These policy documents are used to understand policy intentions and curriculum requirements, while peer-reviewed literature is used to interpret and critically analyze these policies.

A transparent inclusion and exclusion process was adopted in this study. This study conducted a targeted search of research published in English and Chinese that addressed these fields from 2000 to 2026. The keywords were

selected from academic literature databases based on the research question. The following search terms were employed in the search:

“Confucian Education” OR “Confucianism values” OR “Citizenship Education” OR “Civic Education” OR “Hong Kong” OR “China” OR “Taiwan”.

The potential peer-reviewed literature was sourced from Google Scholar, JSTOR, and ProQuest, which are mainstream databases in educational research (Portus et al., 2024; Tushar & Sooraksa, 2023). Additionally, several Chinese-language government-published policies and curriculum documents were reviewed as grey literature, as explained earlier. This study’s initial database searches yielded 85 records.

For the exclusion stage, the titles and abstracts of the retrieved records were carefully screened against the search criteria. Studies that did not align sufficiently with the research question were excluded. For instance, some papers covered Confucian education across wider Asian regions, such as Singapore and South Korea, but did not focus much on China and the Hong Kong SAR and were therefore excluded. Moreover, during the analysis of the abstracts, Confucian leadership and management were identified in some papers. However, they may not be sufficiently closely related to citizenship education and thus do not fall within the scope of this review. Therefore, this semi-systematic review encompassed 68 sources. The themes were identified through iterative reading and comparison of the included literature: applicability, challenges, and potential solutions for Confucian education serving as citizenship education in Hong Kong nowadays, which will be discussed in detail below.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Applicability: Historical foundations and current policies for thin good citizen

Confucian culture and values may have long-term impacts on Hong Kong as part of China, serving as a good foundation for citizenship education, and current policies can support the implementation of relevant curriculum reforms. The integration of Confucian values into Hong Kong’s formal subjects and informal curriculum (HKEDB, 2022; Tan, 2023) can provide a solid historical foundation for further development of Confucian education. In addition, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government (HKSARG) has experience in formulating and implementing policies on Chinese traditional culture that carry political implications. The first Chief Executive of Hong Kong, Tung Chee-Hwa, encouraged locals to learn and practice Chinese traditions as lifelong values to build Chinese national identity (Fairbrother, 2006; Wong & Chui, 2005; Yim et al., 2011). Within the context of changes in sovereignty, such a voice to the public can aim to foster a sense of identity with and belonging to the motherland, which had previously been very limited (Tse, 2026). Although Tung’s views may not have led to the formulation of specific Confucian educational policies at the time, they may have had a socializing effect on the general public through public speeches and media reports (Wong & Chui, 2005), thereby laying the foundations for contemporary educational reforms.

As argued in the literature review, in the contemporary context in Hong Kong, citizenship education is more impacted by the Chinese Mainland (Wong et al., 2021). Such an argument can also be supported by comparing the content of the 2021 and 2026 Value Education Curriculum Framework published by HKEDB, which reveals a marked increase in references to general ethics and ethics related to patriotism. Education grounded in Confucian values, with their features of responsibility-oriented moralities and strong national identity, may meet political needs and be supported by further policies to cultivate thin good citizens through citizenship education.

There is an obvious increase in the frequency of some Confucian-related words in the updated version compared to the previous version: Benevolence (1 to 35); Faith (0 to 3); Responsibility (77 to 94); Unity (1 to 31). Both versions of the documents have the same number of pages (89). Benevolence and Faith are among the five basic ethical categories in Confucian values, indicating that Confucian values have been given greater emphasis in moral education. The increase in Responsibility and Unity may also be influenced by Confucian values, as duty-oriented and collectivist values are part of Confucianism (Tse, 2026; Huang & Asghar, 2016), as reviewed earlier. Nevertheless, there are no changes in frequency for Right (still 9) or in other citizenship values fields. Therefore, the update of the official document may reflect the official trend that the good-citizen goal may focus more on duty-based thin citizens than on thick ones with liberal civic values.

Similarly, there is a significant increase in the frequency of patriotism-related words: Patriotism (6 to 30); National circumstances (Guo-Qing) (3 to 20). Some expressions in the new curriculum framework may appear relatively assertive and polemical but are not balanced or objective enough. For example, in terms of the “correct value” and expectations for the learning of upper-year primary school students, it shows “Gain a basic understanding of the national circumstances of the motherland and learn about the major achievements and latest developments the country has made under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party” (HKEDB, 2026, p. 44). Such an expression may cover only the positive perspectives on achievements and development in China but neglects the negative and challenging ones. Such a type of patriotism may feature “unconditional obedience and absolute support from subjects towards their sovereign” as one of the three cardinal hierarchical guides in

Confucian values. As noted in earlier official documents (HKEDB, 2021a; HKSARG, 2023), Chinese culture has been a central part of the value of education and of patriotic education. The purposefully selected Confucian values of duty-based morality and a form of patriotism may be marked by unquestioning obedience and a lack of critical thinking (Lam, 2025) could meet the HKSAR government's political needs of "Proactively Align with the 15th Five-Year Plan Follow a Holistic Approach to Development and Security" (HKSARG, 2026), as the Beijing government (Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office of the State Council, 2026) expects. The 15th Five-Year Plan is China's national-level economic and social development plan, with strong socialist characteristics.

Moreover, as Hong Kong is increasingly influenced by the Chinese Mainland, the latter's emphasis on Confucian education may also affect the former. As reviewed earlier, since the 2010s, Confucian and other Chinese traditional values have been accepted as a significant part of contemporary socialist China's mainstream ideology (Zhao & Yu, 2026). China's citizenship education focuses more on moral education, emphasizing adherence to existing rules and regulations and downplaying individualism and political rights (Baisotti, 2019). This is because Chinese society holds non-democratic citizenship values (Li, 2018; Leong et al., 2022), and Western civic values are not always seen as the features of a good citizen. The reasons President Xi began adding Chinese characters to the mainstream around 2015 (Baisotti, 2019) may include the construction of a new discourse on political legitimacy within Chinese ideology (Zhao & Yu, 2026). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, traditional European-inspired socialist ideology may no longer possess sufficient ideological persuasiveness to serve as the dominant ideology in modern China. Therefore, the innovative Chinese socialist thought needs to continue to emphasize a collective, responsibility-oriented thought and be grounded in China's unique culture and values. Confucian values, with features such as duty-oriented, unconditional loyalty, and national identity, can contribute more to the development of rising Chinese socialist thought. Therefore, Confucian education may be further strengthened in the Chinese Mainland, and this trend could also extend to Hong Kong, thereby enhancing its relevance as a form of civic education to cultivate thin good citizens with Chinese features.

Challenges: Risk of conflict between Confucianism and modern youth's expectation of thick good citizens

As discussed in the previous sections on the history of Confucianism, Confucian education and the emperors' political governance have long been intrinsically linked. In addition, prior to modernization, many Chinese dynasties tended to prioritize agriculture over commerce, potentially discouraging commercial and consumer activities. Therefore, there is a risk of conflict between traditional Confucian thought and the values of modern Hong Kong youth, because Hong Kong is a Chinese city that was influenced by Britain's capitalist lifestyle during its colonial past (Kennedy et al., 2008; Kennedy et al., 2023), including the neoliberal values with a "small" government with limited interference to the market and citizens' life. Although some empirical research has examined these value conflicts in Hong Kong (e.g., Lin & Zhao, 2023), the evidence remains limited. Therefore, studies from Taiwan and the Chinese Mainland are also drawn upon as comparative references.

Lin and Zhao (2023) conducted qualitative research through interviews with Hong Kong school teachers on how neoliberal and Confucian values conflict in local education. They found that the neoliberal wave that has emerged in Hong Kong education since the 1980s has cast teachers' roles as "service providers and baby sisters" (Lin & Zhao, 2023, p. 160), positioning them as a type of "service industry". From the perspective of Western capitalist logic, this approach appears rational, as the salaries of staff in government-funded schools are primarily derived from citizens' tax contributions, whereas in private schools they are partially funded by parents' tuition fees. Nevertheless, Lin and Zhao (2023) argued that failing to adequately respect the teacher undermines the Confucian teacher-student relationship, which is grounded in a humanistic "respect" ethos. The student-teacher relationship is not among Zhongshu's three cardinal hierarchical guides. However, it is among the traditional Confucian values, including in Xunzi's (around 300 BCE) works: students should show their teachers the same high level of respect they would show to a father or an emperor (Zhai, 2023).

Such traditional-modern value conflicts also emerged in Taiwan, another region of Greater China influenced by modern civilization (Leong et al., 2022). Some Taiwan scholars' (Chien et al., 2024) quantitative research with data from students also discussed that the respect for teachers in the West is in an "equality-based" way, which is different from the traditional Confucian one that is in a "hierarchical or reverential" way, which may have negative impacts on students' academic engagement (Chien et al., 2024, p. 2343). Similarly, Huang and Asghar's (2016) work also highlighted traditional and modern value conflicts in Taiwan's education by analyzing qualitative data from education policymakers. They argued that some policymakers and experts educated in Western societies are actively implementing policies to replace the traditional Eastern student-passive learning approach with Western inquiry-based and learner-centered approaches. However, some parents hope their children will learn more through traditional, teacher-centered methods, and some teachers have also expressed a lack of enthusiasm for innovation in teaching (Huang & Asghar, 2016). Their attitudes could be explained by their parents'

acknowledgment of the Confucian-style education they received in the past, and by frontline teachers' reluctance to take on extra workload in curriculum innovation.

The Confucian emphasis on hierarchical order manifests not only in the relationship between teacher and pupil but also in that between citizens and those in governance, which may prove more difficult for contemporary youth to accept. Based on qualitative data from curriculum designers (scholars and experienced schoolteachers), Hung (2015) argued that the decline of Confucianism in Taiwan's character and citizenship education is due to "sovereign-subject" paternalism, which is a barrier to the development of Western Democracy. Some Taiwanese intellectuals have pointed out that, in early classical texts, benevolence was a requirement of the sovereign; however, over time, Confucianism transformed this value into an obligation for ordinary citizens (Hung, 2015). Emphasizing duties and obligations over rights and freedoms runs counter to liberal civic values (Liu, 1998), so some Illiberal Confucian values may not be accepted by Taiwanese who hold strong civic values that balance citizens' rational rights and duties.

As discussed earlier, in the Chinese Mainland, students tend to passively and compliantly receive civic-related education (Leong et al., 2022), including party-state ideology and political legitimacy education combined with Confucianism (Zhao & Yu, 2026). Nevertheless, the qualitative study found that some Chinese youth critically highlighted the limitations of textbooks and curriculum concerning Confucian thought, including "not equal in equality of class and gender", "focus on the external expectations rather than setting goals oneself", and other points (Zhao & Yu, 2026, p.9). Such attitudes of Chinese youth may reflect their criticism of the notion that collective interests unconditionally take precedence over individual interests. Realistically speaking, this reflection is reasonable, as after China's market-economy reforms, an individual's standard of living has come to depend largely on personal or family effort rather than state allocation.

Another risk for Hong Kong students who resist Confucian culture or values is exposure to criticism of Confucian values in other Confucian-influenced societies. For example, some research argued that the "orientations of authoritarian statecraft and collectivist hierarchical behavioral traits" (He, 2010, p. 22) in Confucian values were used by the South Korean political elite to maintain non-democratic rule. Similarly, some studies have criticized Confucianism for strengthening the "legitimacy and hegemony" (Chia, 2011, p. 397) of one-party dominance in Singapore.

Given Hong Kong's liberal civic tradition, some students, parents, and teachers may critically evaluate illiberal dimensions of Confucianism, particularly those that place insufficient emphasis on individual rights and freedoms. Accordingly, researchers should respect Hong Kong citizens' rational expectations for legally protected thick good citizens rather than assume that the Chinese-feature thin good citizen is the only goal of citizenship education.

Potential solutions: Innovative Confucianism-related service learning for cultivating Tianxia citizens

Service learning is a form of experiential learning originating in Western countries (Shumer, 2019) and is an effective approach to citizenship education (Birdwell et al., 2013; Leung, 2003). Its origins may lie in Dewey's educational philosophy (Leung, 2003), and it is consistent with certain Confucian values (Shumer, 2019; Tan, 2024), offering a potential solution for Hong Kong youth to combine Confucian values with modern civic engagement, thereby becoming thick Chinese citizens with global perspectives. Existing scholarship has increasingly explored conceptual links between Confucian values and service learning in Hong Kong (Ma, 2021; Goel et al., 2026). However, empirical studies examining Hong Kong students' attitudes toward Confucian values in the context of service learning remain limited.

Service learning is an experiential learning approach that educates students through real-world activities, fostering personal development in social, emotional, academic, or career areas while benefiting communities and society (Leung, 2003; Birdwell et al., 2013). For example, tutoring secondary school pupils, measuring pollution levels for the city's environmental projects, and visiting elderly people as part of voluntary work are examples of service learning (Birdwell et al., 2013). The difference between a part-time job and service learning is that the latter consistently supports socially vulnerable groups and can increase students' social and civic awareness (Leung, 2003; Birdwell et al., 2013).

As noted above, service learning is closely linked to Dewey's educational philosophy, which holds that citizenship education is closely tied to daily life and public issues to socialize adolescents (Dewey, 2018; Tan, 2024). Interacting with community members beyond campus can help students connect the knowledge they gain from textbooks to real-world practice. Civic participation, such as community volunteering and environmental protection, also meets the expectations of thick good citizens (Reichert, 2016). Current Chinese qualitative research also indicates that when practice and connection to life are insufficient, moral education may lead students to "communicate as giants but act like dwarfs" (Huo et al., 2025, p. 15). Such an educational philosophy in service learning may also align with certain values in Confucian thought. Benevolence is one of the five basic ethical categories in Confucianism, emphasizing love and empathy toward others and embodying kindness (Lam, 2025; Shumer, 2019). Service learning is always about helping others without financial remuneration, which aligns with

the spirit of Benevolence (Ma, 2021). Additionally, another key value in the five basic ethical categories, Propriety, focuses on acting respectfully (Lam, 2025; Shumer, 2019). The process of helping others in service learning also shows respect for other social members, even when the people being served are vulnerable groups rather than those from higher social strata, thereby aligning with the value of Propriety (Ma, 2021). Moreover, both the value of Wisdom in the five basic ethical categories (Shumer, 2019) and the thought “unity of knowledge and action” that appeared in later Confucian thoughts in about 1500 CE emphasize the idea of transferring theoretical knowledge into taking related real action to improve society (Tan, 2024, p. 248). Therefore, service learning may align with both Dewey’s educational philosophy and Confucian moral values. Through close collaboration among policymakers, curriculum designers, and frontline teachers, students may be expected to cultivate and put into practice both of these values during the service-learning process.

Service learning could help cultivate Tianxia citizens in Hong Kong. As reviewed in previous sections, although the Junzi citizen offers some innovations and development within the traditional Junzi value, it may still not be easily accepted by Hong Kong youth due to stereotypes about an excessive focus on responsibility. Nevertheless, the Tianxia citizen has broader perspectives, encompassing moral action at multiple levels: local (Hong Kong), national (China), global, and cosmopolitan (the natural world, including animals and plants). Some Confucian philosophical ideas may be too abstract for students to grasp in the classroom, but they may be easier to understand with educators’ guidance during real-world action-taking. There have been some experiential learning practices and related research in Hong Kong, which cover cases of such learning in local, Chinese Mainland, and other nations’ contexts (Xing, 2015; Wong, 2022a, 2022b), pointing out that it may have some foundation for combining service learning with experiential learning that includes an explanation of the Tianxia citizen values. Helping others in Hong Kong and the Chinese Mainland can increase students’ sense of belonging to their community, city, and country, while serving others in international or non-human (like animals and plants) contexts can increase students’ civic awareness of intercultural and environmental issues (Xing, 2015), which meets the trends of thick global citizenship education and does not conflict with Chinese thin good citizen values.

At the same time, three challenges may emerge. First, students may lack motivation to participate because service learning does not provide immediate material rewards. As discussed earlier, service learning cannot provide students with the visible, immediate positive feedback that a part-time job can, which can quickly earn a student an hourly wage. From the perspective of liberal Confucianism, it is inappropriate to compel students to devote their time and energy to civic duties rather than rights. Therefore, educators should provide related communication and guidance to students: Service learning is voluntary and could strengthen soft skills, experience, and networks for long-term academic or career development. Second, schools may face resource constraints in supporting extracurricular activities. Service learning requires additional financial resources to support extracurricular events (Birdwell et al., 2013), and the design and implementation of the informal curriculum also require educators’ time and effort. Nevertheless, the Hong Kong SARG may currently be facing a severe budget deficit (HKSARG, 2025), and local schoolteachers already have a high median working week of over 60 hours (Hong Kong Professional Teachers’ Union, 2016), so it can be challenging for them to take on the additional burden of service learning. Therefore, alternative sources can be considered, such as donations from charitable organizations and service-learning volunteers from higher education institutions, including undergraduate and postgraduate students.

Third, a disconnect may arise between service activities and intended learning outcomes (Birdwell et al., 2013; Xing, 2015). A Tianxia citizen, as a type of liberal-thick citizen, is expected not only to help vulnerable groups but also to understand the underlying causes of their plight (such as social injustice and educational inequality), which inspires a desire to improve society in the future. This idealized goal may be unlikely to be achieved through a few service-learning initiatives within a single educational stage; this study calls for close communication and collaboration between policymakers and curriculum designers across multiple educational stages (primary, secondary, and higher education) to foster a sense of Tianxia citizenship among Hong Kong’s next generation over the long term. Moreover, empirical data and research are needed to further develop such service learning, especially research that captures the voices of students and teachers.

CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

This study addresses an important research gap concerning how Confucian education can be strengthened as citizenship education to cultivate good citizens in contemporary Hong Kong. Based on a semi-systematic review of the literature across various disciplines, as well as policies and official documents, and drawing on the theoretical framework of good citizens with both international and Chinese features, this study addresses the related research questions. First, the enduring influence of Chinese history, coupled with recent politically driven policies that have strengthened national education, has laid the foundation for the reinforcement of Confucian education in Hong Kong. Second, the challenge that cannot be overlooked is that local adolescents and youths may disagree with certain non-democratic and non-individualistic features of current Confucian education in Greater China. Third,

integrating Confucian values and practices into service learning could help address this challenge, cultivating Tianxia good citizens with both liberal civic values and a strong Chinese identity.

This study makes a theoretical contribution to Confucian values education in Hong Kong, based on shifts in Hong Kong's political and social context. At the same time, it offers policymakers and curriculum designers insights into Hong Kong's moral and citizenship education. The limitations of this study are the relatively small number of reviewed sources and the lack of empirical validation of its arguments. Further empirical research is expected to verify or further develop its arguments from a rigorous bottom-up perspective. Moreover, future comparative research may examine differences between Hong Kong and other societies influenced by Confucian values, such as Singapore and South Korea, where debates continue over the relationship between Confucian values, citizenship education, democratic participation, and political legitimacy.

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IRB approval was not required as this paper involved only the analysis of previously published literature. No human participants were involved, nor was any additional data collected.

Competing interests

The author has no competing interests.

Author contributions

SQ. is the sole author of this study and was responsible for all aspects of the research, including conceptualization and design, literature and document collection and analysis, manuscript writing, and critical revision.

Data availability

All sources used are publicly available, and no new data were generated.

AI disclosure

During the preparation of this work, the author used Grammarly and ChatGPT for language editing, improving English phrasing, and formatting references. The author has reviewed and edited all AI-assisted outputs and takes full responsibility for the manuscript's content.

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