

British Journal of Religious Education

ISSN: 0141-6200 (Print) 1740-7931 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cbre20

Navigating the intersection: philosophy and religious education in China's elementary public schools

Mohamad Zreik

To cite this article: Mohamad Zreik (2026) Navigating the intersection: philosophy and religious education in China's elementary public schools, British Journal of Religious Education, 48:3, 469-480, DOI: 10.1080/01416200.2026.2633330

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2026.2633330

Published online: 16 Feb 2026.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 77

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=cbre20

BRITISH JOURNAL OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION
2026, VOL. 48, NO. 3, 469–480
https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2026.2633330

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

Navigating the intersection: philosophy and religious education in China's elementary public schools

Mohamad Zreik

School of International Studies, Institute of International and Regional Studies, Sun Yat-Sen University, Zhuhai, Guangdong Province, China

ABSTRACT

This article examines the intersection of philosophy and religious education in the public schools of China, with an emphasis on how the Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist philosophies have been covertly integrated into the officially secular school system. It examines how these traditions are instilled in the moral and civic education programmes that develop students' ethical character and social values. Drawing on pertinent literature, curriculum documents, and policy guidelines, the article illustrates the impact of philosophical teachings on students' moral conduct, social coexistence, and self-development, without necessarily promoting religion. Drawing on comparative insights into France and India, the article emphasises differences in how traditional philosophies may be accommodated within secular education systems, with a broader discussion of the role of philosophy and religion in schooling around the world. These findings indicate that the Chinese education system offers rich insights into the incorporation of the philosophical concept into the secular environment and can serve as a model for preserving cultural heritage without conflicting with modern educational goals.

KEYWORDS

China; public schools; religious education; philosophy

1. Introduction

Secular education systems face a sophisticated and multidimensional challenge in integrating philosophy and religious teachings, particularly in those countries with strong cultural and philosophical traditions (Stambach et al. 2011; Edwards and Hobson 2019; Kim 2015). The introduction of traditional philosophical and religious doctrines into the state school system is an interesting case study in China, where the formal school system promotes secularism. The country's education system is still closely tied to its historical philosophical culture, mainly Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, which have influenced its moral and ethical values over the centuries (Wu and Lee 2021). However, the nation remains committed to secularism. This paradox poses important questions about how China negotiates the role of secularism and these traditions, which continue to play a vital role in the Chinese public education system. Particularly, the research problem will focus on how the Chinese educational system incorporates these teachings into its curriculum, specifically in moral and civic education, without contravening its principles of secularism.

The article will discuss how Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist philosophies are quietly integrated into China's secular education system. The article explores how these philosophies shape moral and civic education in Chinese public schools, despite the nation's secular educational policies. The main aim of the article is to examine how these philosophical

CONTACT Mohamad Zreik zreik@sysu.edu.cn School of International Studies, Institute of International and Regional Studies, Sun Yat-Sen University, No. 2 Daxue Road, Xiangzhou District, Zhuhai, Guangdong Province 519082, China

© 2026 Christian Education

teachings continue to influence students' values and moral formation, even within a modern, secular education system. The article will provide information on how philosophical traditions are incorporated into the curriculum and, in doing so, offer an understanding of how traditional values are transmitted and how they contribute to shaping students' moral and civic duties.

To fulfil its goals, this article responds to the following research questions: (1) How do Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist philosophical doctrines find their way into the Chinese public-school curriculum, especially in moral and civic education? This question aims to establish exactly how these conventional philosophies are incorporated into educational materials, with emphasis on how they have contributed to students' moral and ethical development through the teaching of subjects such as civic responsibility, social harmony, and personal conduct. (2) How does the incorporation of these teachings influence the values and ethical growth of the students? The question will focus on how these philosophical teachings have influenced the students' moral character, attitudes towards social peace, respect for authority, empathy, and other moral virtues preached in Chinese moral education. (3) What does this integration tell us concerning the tensions between secularism and cultural heritage in the educational system of China? This query examines the broader impact of the amalgamation of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism within a formally secular system, asking how China is balancing the fine line between maintaining cultural practices and upholding secular educational principles.

This article addresses the three research questions through a focused analysis of policy and curriculum texts and selected school textbooks. Research Question 1 is examined by analysing how national moral education policies and curriculum guidance position Philosophy and Religious Education and how these orientations are reflected in textbook content. Research Question 2 is explored by identifying the ethical concepts and virtues promoted within these texts and discussing how these framings may shape intended moral learning outcomes. Research Question 3 is considered through analysis of policy discourse on secularism and cultural tradition, complemented by brief comparative references (e.g. France and India) to clarify points of convergence and tension in the Chinese context.

The article examines the moral and civic education curriculum in Chinese elementary schools, including curriculum documents and policy guidelines, with a view to exploring the integration of Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist teachings. The comparative analysis will also be limited to the extent to which the research examines education practices in other countries, such as France and India. This analogy will aid in putting into context the Chinese culture of incorporating philosophy and religion into the education system, more especially in secular settings. This research will provide significant data on how traditional philosophical doctrines are being introduced into the public-school education system in China, without necessarily being explicitly taught as religious instruction.

2. Literature review

2.1. Secularism and education

Secularism in education can be understood as the disengagement of religious doctrines and the educational curriculum of public schools (Watson 2016). This distinction is frequently defined in a way that guarantees classroom neutrality, ensures that education is no longer biased by religious beliefs, and is grounded in scientific and empirical evidence. Secularism in education has been a contentious issue worldwide, particularly in nations with strong philosophical or religious backgrounds. Secularism is a well-established policy in most Western countries, such as the United States and France, and there are stringent laws that regulate the separation of religion and state, even in the education sector (Roy 2007; Blackford 2012). Nevertheless, the adoption of philosophical doctrines is an important part of education in such secular systems, especially in courses such as ethics, morality, and civic responsibility.

Secularism in education became a major policy shift in China after the imperial regime collapsed in the early 20th century. Secularism was enshrined in the education system under the Republic of China and subsequently in the People's Republic of China as part of broader modernisation and nation-building. The May Fourth Movement of 1919 was instrumental in advancing a secular worldview and in advocating abandoning traditional religious and Confucian philosophies in favour of Western-style rationalism, science, and democracy (Lin 1972). Following the People's Republic of China's establishment in 1949, education was unquestionably aligned with the state's secular aims, with emphasis on scientific, technological, and ideological education and minimal focus on religious and philosophical education, which might be incompatible with the state's objectives (Wei-Ming 1990). Traditional Chinese philosophies, despite their secular orientation – such as Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism – have nonetheless lingered in moral and civic education, raising the question of how these teachings could be incorporated into a purported system of secularism.

2.2. Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist philosophies in education

In Chinese education, Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism have played a significant role over the last 2000 years, shaping the moral, ethical, and social structures of Chinese society (You, Rud, and Hu 2018). The influence of Confucianism, in particular, has been immense on Chinese education (particularly in the areas of moral upbringing, filial piety, social harmony, and respect for authority). In the past, Confucianism was the cornerstone of the imperial civil examination system, which stressed knowledge of Confucian texts and virtues to select officials (Elman 2000). The Confucian teachings remain central to moral education in contemporary China, as schools teach values such as respect for authority, family loyalty, and social harmony (Feng and Newton 2012).

Taoism, a teaching that emphasises harmony, simplicity, and non-interference, has also influenced higher education settings in China, though not as extensively as Confucianism. The Taoist concepts of harmony and harmony with nature have been applied to the educational systems that encourage self-development, stability, and flexibility (Chu 2023). Indicatively, Taoist doctrines are used to help students balance their lifestyles and embrace challenges in a spontaneous, non-contentious way (Ruhal et al. 2024).

Chinese education has also been strongly influenced by Buddhism, which arrived in China from India in the first century CE (Sen 2012). Buddhist principles, especially on compassion, mindfulness, and the impermanence of life, have been incorporated into moral education to foster empathy, altruism, and ethical behaviour. Buddhist teachings are often conveyed through stories, parables, and teachings that emphasise the value of kindness and ethics (Guang 2013). Even though Buddhism is not considered fully incorporated into the education system as Confucianism is, it still influences Chinese moral and civic education, especially by fostering compassionate, socially concerned people.

In this article, philosophy refers to ethical reasoning and virtue-based traditions (e.g. Confucian moral cultivation) used as normative frameworks for civic and personal conduct. Religion is used more narrowly to denote institutionalised belief and practice oriented towards the sacred or transcendent (e.g. doctrine, worship, ritual authority), which public schools in secular systems typically avoid endorsing. Moral ideology refers to state- or curriculum-defined value frameworks (e.g. civic virtues, Core Socialist Values) that prescribe desirable conduct and social norms. Analytically, distinguishing these categories matters because similar concepts (e.g. harmony, compassion, self-cultivation) can function either as philosophical ethics or as religious instruction depending on how they are framed, authorised, and taught; the article therefore examines not only the presence of traditional ideas but also the curricular framing through which they are presented as cultural-ethical resources rather than confessional religious education.

2.3. Philosophical integration in secular systems

The combination of philosophical doctrines with the world education system is a widespread concern in any country, especially in a secular government that is also rich in culture or religion. Secularism in France, for example, is enshrined in the principle of *laïcité*, which mandates the strict separation of religion and public life, including education (Lizotte 2020). Nevertheless, the French education system still gives much priority to philosophical education, especially in high school, where students are made to study great philosophical masterpieces, including the ethical teachings of different religions around the world (Gaudin 2017). Although religious courses are forbidden, philosophical lessons covering the moral teachings of religions and the role of religion in society are key to the curriculum.

However, India is more pluralistic in its approach to education, with a moderate secularism that acknowledges the country's religious and cultural diversity. Indian education incorporates religious studies alongside philosophy and ethics due to the country's multi-religious nature. Although religious education is not compulsory, topics on spiritual and philosophical traditions are integrated into the general curriculum, especially in subjects such as history, social studies, and moral education (Barnes 2014). The Indian model can be described as more inclusive in its approach to religious diversity in the educational setting, providing an environment in which the different world religions can be studied. Still, it is not based on a secular framework.

The Chinese practice of incorporating ancient philosophical traditions such as Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism into its secular education is analytically useful to examine. Those models are contrasted with France, where philosophical education is a system tightly integrated with secularism, and with India, where religious studies have been formally introduced into the curriculum. The oblique implementation of these philosophies characterises the Chinese model. The principles derived from Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist dogmas are indirectly embedded in the system of moral and civic education, shaping students' ethical perspectives and social actions, without a clear statement of their religious character. This is an indirect form of integration that enables China to maintain a secular education system while also retaining and transmitting its cultural and philosophical heritage.

2.4. Gaps in existing research

Although there has been an emerging literature on the impact of secularism on Chinese education and on the influence of traditional philosophical teachings, much remains to be understood about the nuances of how Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism have been ingrained in modern secular education. Much of the literature focuses on the obvious role of Confucianism in the government of China and national policymaking. It pays little attention to subtler ways of imbuing these teachings in the practical form of education. The available literature tends to view the fusion of philosophy and religion as a governmental programme or a widespread cultural phenomenon, but does not explore the pedagogical processes that help achieve such a fusion in the classroom (Wu and Wenning 2016; De Bary and Chaffee 2022).

Moreover, comparative studies examine how traditional philosophies can be incorporated into secular education systems, especially in China. Although scholars have studied secularism and the importance of religious education in nations such as the United States, France, and India, little is known about the Chinese model of the indirect introduction of Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist doctrines. More detailed research is needed that focuses on the process of integrating these philosophies into specific subjects, e.g. moral and civic education, and on how this process affects students' moral growth and civic behaviour. Sealing these gaps, this work aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how secular education systems can maintain and transmit traditional philosophical values without losing their own secular values.

3. Conceptual framework

3.1. Secularism and cultural heritage

Secularism in education is a long-standing idea that proposes separating religious teachings from educational programmes to establish a disinterested space free of ideological influence (Davies 2014). Secularism has been observed in most nations as a means of ensuring inclusivity and equity in multicultural societies (Modood 2022). But in countries such as China, where cultural and philosophical traditions are abundant, the strict observance of secularism may pose a challenge to conserving and passing on the culture. This is especially true in the case of moral and civic education, where traditional values rooted in Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism continue to shape societal norms.

Secularism is not stipulated in the Chinese educational system through an absolute rejection of traditional values; rather, it is a compromise between secular values and cultural survival (Yang 2011). The problem is to incorporate the teaching of philosophy that is not necessarily religious but rather lies at the heart of Chinese culture. It is integrative in nature, and as such, it is possible to retain cultural heritage, including Confucian virtues, Taoist harmony, and Buddhist compassion, without losing a secular structure that encourages scientific and rational thinking. Through this strategy, the education system in China serves as a model of how secularism can coexist with cultural heritage, providing a platform for learners to acquire not only rationalised knowledge but also a time-tested ethic.

3.2. Cultural transmission

Cultural transmission theory describes how societies transmit their values, beliefs, and knowledge to subsequent generations (Trommsdorff 2009). This theory is especially applicable to the context of education, where a school is not only a place where an individual learns academic disciplines but also acquires social norms, moral values, and cultural beliefs. Traditional philosophical teachings such as Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism have significantly contributed to the transmission of culture in China (Wu and Lee 2021). These ideologies provide the basis for moral and civic education and strengthen their principles, such as respect for authority, family devotion, social cohesion, and sympathy.

Learning institutions serve as channels through which such cultural values are transmitted to learners. Moral education is incorporated into the Chinese curriculum so that children learn to assume their responsibilities in society, fulfil their social duties, and practice ethical behaviour. Although China has a secular approach, these teachings are subtly incorporated into the educational system; subjects such as ethics, civics, and character education are among them (Liang 2016). In so doing, it will help ensure that the philosophical traditions continue to influence students' moral growth, sustain the culture, and meet the state's educational goals. Here, the transmission of culture is not entirely based on direct religious instruction but also includes values that address the moral and ethical aspects of society.

3.3. Soft Power and education

Joseph Nye's conceptualisation of soft power is the capacity of a nation to influence others through cultural appeal rather than war and coercion (Nye 1990). Education plays a significant role in soft power because it is one of the main ways to transmit cultural values and shape national identity (Atkinson 2010). The role of Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist philosophies in fostering responsible citizens in China is not only to cultivate accountable citizens but also to propagate cultural values that can help raise China's global image.

Philosophy in the curriculum helps shape a national identity grounded in Chinese traditions, including filial piety, social harmony, and respect for authority. These are presented as the main features of responsible and ethical citizenship, as well as bolstering a sense of pride in

China's historical and cultural success. Further, as China's global role grows, these traditional values are spreading through education, serving as soft power that projects Chinese cultural heritage to other countries (Nye 2023). This approach is reflected in initiatives such as Confucius Institutes, which aim to popularise the Chinese language and culture worldwide through an educational process that serves as a cultural tool (Hubbert 2019). Therefore, philosophical doctrines in the Chinese educational framework do not remain solely critical to internal moral growth, but also provide means to intensify China's soft power in the international arena.

3.4. Integration theory

Integration theory concerns how societies can adopt new ideas and practices without losing important components of their traditional culture (Schimmelfennig 2010). This theory is useful in educational systems for explaining how traditional philosophical teachings can be incorporated into modern education systems without disruption. The integration theory applies specifically to China, where Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist philosophies are seamlessly integrated into the secular education framework.

The way China incorporates these philosophies into the curriculum shows that traditional values can be redefined to align with current educational objectives, which aim to promote societal stability, moral accountability, and shared interests. Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism are integrated into many subjects, such as moral education, civic responsibility, and ethics, which serves as an example of how traditional philosophies can be combined with contemporary educational goals. These philosophical concepts are presented not as religious beliefs but as moral codes that influence students' ethical development (Wu and Lee 2021). The integration theory indicates that such subtle incorporation would enable China to maintain its cultural heritage while accommodating the needs and desires of a modern secular society.

With this inculcation, the Chinese educational system has established a paradigm that bridges its rich philosophical roots with the needs of a young, westernised education, providing an example of how ancient teachings can be translated into the realities of contemporary society without ideological clash.

4. Methodology

This article used a qualitative, comparative document analysis to investigate the roles of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism in the Chinese system of public education. Using a comparative design, it is possible to examine the subtle integration of old philosophical teachings into a secular context and to emphasise the concepts of moral and civic education. Using a qualitative approach, the article sought not only to comprehend the presence of such philosophies in the curriculum but also to understand how these philosophies are represented in curricula and textbooks and what moral and civic aims they are intended to support. The research design combined curriculum analysis with a review of policy and guidance documents, supplemented by an analysis of selected moral/civic education textbooks.

The research used in this article is sourced from various sources to provide a well-rounded understanding of the integration of Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist philosophies into the curriculum. The analysis drew on curriculum materials, policy regulations, and official guidance documents. These documents offer us an idea of how the government and academic institutions developed moral and civic education, how philosophical teachings were incorporated into it, and how the curriculum was documented. Documents and textbooks were selected because they represent formal curriculum aims and commonly referenced instructional materials in moral and civic education. This multi-text corpus will help provide in-depth knowledge of how traditional philosophies shape the educational system.

Materials for analysis were drawn from several educational materials, including those on moral education, civic education, teaching practices, and classroom resources. Primary, secondary, and tertiary textbooks are reviewed to identify explicit and implicit references to Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist doctrines. These sources are systematically evaluated, which helps demonstrate how concepts such as filial piety, social harmony, generosity, and self-improvement are promoted within instructional materials. Also, the policy documents, such as those on the Core Socialist Values and moral education, are examined to obtain a clear picture of the official position on incorporating traditional philosophies into the curriculum.

Thematic and content analysis methods are used to analyse the collected data. Thematic analysis is also used to identify recurring themes and patterns in curriculum documents, textbooks, and policy guidelines. This approach helps reveal the presence of Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist philosophies across various curriculum spheres, particularly in moral and civic education. The systematic study of the definite language and concepts used in these materials was conducted through content analysis, using keywords and phrases related to the main values of these philosophical traditions, including filial piety, social harmony, and compassion. These values were organised into thematic clusters through coding and categorisation, enabling easy determination of how philosophical teachings are imparted in the curriculum. Coding attended to framing indicators (e.g. civic/ethical learning objectives versus doctrinal or devotional aims) to distinguish philosophical ethics from religious instruction and curriculum moral ideology. The process demonstrated the existence of these teachings and showed how they align with the overall educational objectives, such as developing social responsibility and good morals. Brief comparative references to France and India are provided in Philosophical integration in Secular systems to contextualise different models of secularism and curriculum treatment of religion/philosophy.

Analytically, the document and textbook review was structured around the three research questions. RQ1 guided the identification of where and how Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist ideas were positioned within curriculum aims and policy language. RQ2 guided the coding of moral concepts and virtues promoted in the analysed materials, while RQ3 informed the interpretation of how these representations were framed within a secular public education discourse and associated policy priorities.

5. Findings

This section reports findings that address RQ1 and RQ2. First, it shows how policy and curriculum texts integrate philosophical traditions within moral/civic education (RQ1). Second, it synthesises the key values and ethical themes emphasised across the analysed textbooks and policy documents (RQ2).

5.1. Confucianism in education

Confucianism was a major force in Chinese religious and ethical education, and it remains influential in modern curricula (Wu and Wenning 2016). The Confucian ideals of filial piety, reverence for authority, and social harmony are part of the moral education that students in China receive in public schools. One of the most outstanding Confucian virtues is filial piety, which is consistently emphasised in educational literature. Students learn to be respectful and honourable towards their elders, and the emphasis is placed on the value of family relationships and their role in society. This virtue is inculcated in early primary school and emphasised through textbooks, moral anecdotes, and classroom discussion. For example, students of one textbook on moral education read about the necessity of taking care of their ageing parents to ensure their well-being and that of their relatives' families, which, according to the ideals of Confucianism, holds that the family is the basis of society.

Another fundamental value of Confucianism that influences Chinese educational practices is respect for authority. The students have been shown the need to obey rules, respect teachers, and

recognise the wisdom of elders throughout the curriculum. This ideology has been associated with the broader idea of social harmony, in which the deeds of every person are considered within the framework of a united and well-structured society. Writings in primary and secondary schools focus on the contributions people make to social stability and encourage students in these institutions to align their personal behaviour with the overall good. The principles of Confucianism, regarding social harmony and moral conduct, are further extended into the sphere of citizenship education, where students learn about the need to contribute to the good of society. These values are not transferred as religious principles but as societal virtues that society requires for health.

5.2. Taoism and Buddhism in education

Although Confucianism remains the formative philosophy of the Chinese education system, Taoism and Buddhism also exert subtle influence on students' moral development, particularly in personal development, harmony, empathy, and social responsiveness. Taoist beliefs, grounded in the principles of balance and harmony, are embedded in the learning resources, which emphasise living in harmony with nature and finding inner peace (Miller 2022). Taoist principles, such as *wu wei* (non-action or effortless action), are incorporated into the teachings on conflict resolution, self-discipline, and flexibility (Zhang 2024). To illustrate, a secondary school textbook on Living Harmoniously will contain Taoist ideas of balance, as applied to one's emotional response to stress, encouraging students to adopt a positive, calm attitude towards personal problems. Such a combination of Taoist thinking will help students face life's challenges with strength and composure, benefiting themselves and society.

The Buddhist influences have been felt specifically through its principles of compassion, mindfulness, and the impermanence of life. Moral education includes ideas intended to make students more empathetic and altruistic (Wu and Lee 2021). For example, when learning about Empathy and Kindness, secondary school students study the teachings of Buddhism, which emphasise the obligation to understand and experience others' emotions. Stories of Buddhist monks or parables about the significance of assisting people in need and acting altruistically are a typical part of textbooks. This way, the Buddhist teachings of kindness and care for others are naturally woven into the general curriculum, adding to students' moral and ethical education. These lessons can foster a sense of social responsibility, encouraging students to think not only about themselves but also about the well-being of their communities.

6. Discussion

6.1. Philosophical integration and civic values

The Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist philosophies ingrained in the Chinese system of public education are highly influential in students' moral and ethical development, especially in their social relations, sympathy, and civic duties. The Confucian teachings, which emphasise filial piety and the value of authority, help instil a sense of responsibility towards family and society (Du and Li 2024). These values not only mediate personal relationships but also help ensure social order. The focus on social harmony, one of the major Confucian principles, encourages students to prioritise the welfare of the group rather than their own individual needs, making them feel responsible for others and for society as a whole.

The teachings of Taoism, grounded in the principles of harmony and balance, foster a deeper understanding of self-development and conflict resolution (Chai et al. 2024). By incorporating Taoist concepts of *wu wei* (non-action) and leading in accordance with the rhythms of nature, the students will be asked to address life's difficulties with patience and endurance. The philosophical practice helps cultivate emotional intelligence, enabling students to resolve conflicts amicably and fostering a well-integrated society. Similarly, Buddhist doctrines of compassion and mindfulness inspire

students to be empathetic, become emotionally resilient, and benefit society. These virtues are becoming more relevant to raising a society of good-natured people who are cherished by one another and willing to give.

All these philosophical teachings help foster an ethically responsible citizen who is conscious of their responsibilities to society and to others. They equip students with guidelines for personal relationships, social interactions, and civic duties, emphasising cooperation, respect, and compassion. These traditional philosophies, combined with moral and civic education, ensure that students are not only academically qualified but also grounded in values that promote social cohesion and responsible citizenship (Tianlong 2013; Hämäläinen and Wang 2024).

6.2. Tensions between secularism and cultural heritage

However, despite its efforts to incorporate traditional Chinese philosophies into secular education, tensions are bound to arise between secularism and cultural history. The possibility of shaping the curriculum in a specific way through education is a major issue. Even though Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism are interwoven as moral advice rather than religious indoctrination, one still runs the risk that the philosophical teachings may be used to support specific major issue discourses. The advancement of these philosophies in education can, at times, blur the distinction between secular morals and state-operated cultural interests.

Besides, the indirect incorporation of traditional philosophies may also restrict pluralism by advancing a given set of values at the expense of other philosophical or religious views. In a culturally diverse society, it may not be easy to ensure that students from diverse backgrounds feel represented or included. These tensions raise important questions about the limits of secularism and the extent to which cultural heritage should be permitted to influence public education. Education systems need to find a balance between cultural traditions and making education inclusive and neutral, especially in matters related to students' ethical and moral growth (Feng and Newton 2012).

Taken together, the discussion answers the three research questions in sequence: it clarifies the forms of integration of philosophical traditions into moral/civic education (RQ1), identifies the dominant ethical themes advanced through policy and textbooks (RQ2), and interprets how these forms and themes are justified within a secular public education framework (RQ3).

6.3. Implications for policy and practice

The findings of this research may have important implications for teacher education, curriculum development, and the moral education policy. To begin with, teacher education programmes could place greater emphasis on the interaction between secularism and conventional teachings in philosophical terms. Teachers could be supported with resources and training to manage the complex relationship between delivering secular knowledge and helping students understand traditional cultural values. Professional development sessions could help teachers consider how to incorporate moral lessons in their classrooms without disregarding both secular educational values and cultural heritage.

Secularism and cultural values have a delicate relationship that could also be considered in curriculum design. Moral education could be approached inclusively and culturally sensitively by clearly acknowledging the presence of both secular and traditional philosophies in the curriculum. This may include offering a wider range of philosophical views so that students may study traditional and contemporary ethical theories. Curricula of moral education may be intended to encourage a set of universal values, including social responsibility, empathy, and respect for diversity, and to take into account the historical and cultural backgrounds of these values.

Finally, the policies of moral education could be reconsidered to advance critical thinking and ethical development. The policy could promote students' study of a diverse set of moral traditions

and their ability to explore in a pluralistic society. By fostering an inclusive and open educational environment, China could further develop a system that honours its culture and the ideals of secularism, ensuring that students are well prepared to be responsible and ethical citizens in a globalised society.

7. Conclusion

This article examines the influence of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism on the Chinese system of public education, with particular reference to how these philosophical schools continue to shape moral and civic education despite the nation's secularism. The article shows that although the education system in China is officially secular, analysis of curriculum documents, policy guidelines, and case studies demonstrates that traditional philosophies are closely incorporated into moral education. They are taught in forms that foster social cohesion, understanding, civic accountability, and self-growth, which align with the broader educational objective of raising ethically responsible citizens.

The findings indicate that the Chinese way of integrating Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist values provides a special example of indirect integration. The approach China has taken to introduce its cultural and philosophical context into the curriculum, in a way that embraces national unity and social cohesion while maintaining the secularism of the education system, unlike in France, which has been strictly secular, or in India, which has been pluralistic. This incorporation indirectly enables China to maintain its cultural heritage, especially those that emphasise collective interests and moral standards, without projecting these lessons as religious dogmas.

Nevertheless, the article also mentions possible tensions between secularism and cultural heritage. Although such a combination of philosophic foundations helps strengthen traditional values, it can also raise questions about a curriculum shaped and limited by views. The way to resolve these tensions is to keep the educational system in China open, open to different opinions and faithful to its secular values, while remaining true to its cultural and philosophical traditions.

The policy and practice implications are that teacher education, curriculum design, and the moral education policy ought to be more conscious of the coexistence of secular and traditional philosophical principles. Teachers must navigate this turbulent landscape while still enabling students to become critical thinkers and responsible members of society. China can continue developing an education system that does not ignore its cultural roots and trains students to face the challenges of the modern world reflectively and inclusively, by encouraging a more inclusive and reflective attitude towards moral education.

This article provides a consolidated response to the three research questions. Regarding RQ1, it shows that Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist ideas are principally integrated through moral and civic education aims and associated curriculum framing rather than through confessional Religious Education. Regarding RQ2, the document and textbook analysis highlights a recurring emphasis on virtues such as social harmony, filial responsibility, self-cultivation and compassion as central moral themes. Regarding RQ3, the findings indicate that these traditions are positioned as cultural – ethical resources compatible with a secular policy discourse, while also revealing areas of tension concerning pluralism, interpretation and the boundary between cultural heritage and secular civic formation.

The article is useful to the wider international discussion of the functions of philosophy and religion in secular education. It provides useful information on how traditional philosophical teachings can be harmonised with current educational goals, which other countries can apply in their efforts to reconcile secularism with cultural heritage.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Mohamad Zreik is a Top 2% Scientist (2025, Stanford/Elsevier), with a PhD in International Relations from Central China Normal University, China. He is currently a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Sun Yat-sen University, Zhuhai, China. Zreik has held key research positions at institutions such as the University of Cambridge, focusing on macroeconomic issues like migration. With extensive experience in international relations, political analysis, and Chinese studies, Zreik contributes actively to academic networks and has published widely in top-tier journals. He is fluent in multiple languages and utilizes advanced research methodologies in both qualitative and quantitative domains.

ORCID

Mohamad Zreik http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6812-6529

References

Atkinson, C. 2010. "Does Soft Power Matter? A Comparative Analysis of Student Exchange Programs 1980–2006." *Foreign Policy Analysis* 6 (1): 1–22. doi:10.1111/j.1743-8594.2009.00099.x.

Barnes, L. P. 2014. *Education, Religion and Diversity: Developing a New Model of Religious Education*. London: Routledge.

Blackford, R. 2012. *Freedom of Religion and the Secular State*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.

Chai, F., Y. Wang, J. Ma, and T. Han. 2024. "Dialectics of Wellness: Philosophical Practice in Chinese Contexts." *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 11 (1): 1–10. doi:10.1057/s41599-024-02626-0.

Chu, I. 2023. "Confucianism and Sustainability." In *Faith Traditions and Sustainability: New Views and Practices for Environmental Protection*, edited by N. Singh, M. C. Vu, I. Chu, and N. Burton, 81–98. Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Davies, L. 2014. "One Size Does Not Fit All: Complexity, Religion, Secularism and Education." *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* 34 (2): 184–199. doi:10.1080/02188791.2013.875647.

De Bary, W. T., and J. W. Chaffee, eds. 2022. *Neo-Confucian Education: The Formative Stage*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Du, X., and S. Li. 2024. "The Role of Confucian Virtues in Shaping Educational Philosophy and Practices in Modern Chinese Secondary Schools." *Journal of Research in Social Science and Humanities* 3 (8): 74–79. doi:10.56397/JRSSH.2024.08.10.

Edwards, J., and P. R. Hobson. 2019. *Religious Education in a Pluralist Society: The Key Philosophical Issues*. London: Routledge.

Elman, B. A. 2000. *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Feng, L., and D. Newton. 2012. "Some Implications for Moral Education of the Confucian Principle of Harmony: Learning from Sustainability Education Practice in China." *Journal of Moral Education* 41 (3): 341–351. doi:10.1080/03057240.2012.691633.

Gaudin, P. 2017. "Neutrality and Impartiality in Public Education: The French Investment in Philosophy, Teaching About Religions, and Moral and Civic Education." *British Journal of Religious Education* 39 (1): 93–106. doi:10.1080/01416200.2016.1218221.

Guang, X. 2013. "Buddhist Impact on Chinese Culture." *Asian Philosophy* 23 (4): 305–322. doi:10.1080/09552367.2013.831606.

Hämäläinen, J., and S. Wang. 2024. "Family, Community, and School as Arenas for Citizenship Education in China." *Pedagogy, Culture & Society* 32 (3): 637–656. doi:10.1080/14681366.2022.2065692.

Hubbert, J. 2019. *China in the World: An Anthropology of Confucius Institutes, Soft Power, and Globalization*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Kim, H. S. 2015. "Seeking Critical Hope in a Global Age: Religious Education in a Global Perspective." *Religious Education* 110 (3): 311–328. doi:10.1080/00344087.2015.1039389.

Liang, J. 2016. "A Revisit of 'Moral and Character Education' Subject in Junior-High School in China." *China Journal of Social Work* 9 (2): 103–111. doi:10.1080/17525098.2016.1231254.

Lin, Y. S. 1972. "Radical Iconoclasm in the May Fourth Period and the Future of Chinese Liberalism." In *Reflections on the May Fourth Movement*, edited by B. I. Schwartz, 23–58. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center.

Lizotte, C. 2020. "Laïcité as Assimilation, Laïcité as Negotiation: Political Geographies of Secularism in the French Public School." *Political Geography* 77: 102121. doi:10.1016/j.polgeo.2019.102121.

Miller, J. P. 2022. *Taoism, Teaching, and Learning: A Nature-Based Approach to Education*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Modood, T. 2022. "Multiculturalizing Secularism." In *Religious Diversity, State, and Law*, edited by J. M. Marko, M. Lakitsch, F. Winter, W. Weirer, and K. Wonisch, 110–134. Leiden: Brill Nijhoff.

Nye, J. S. 1990. "Soft Power." *Foreign Policy* 80 (80): 153–171. doi:10.2307/1148580.

Nye, J. S. 2023. *Soft Power and Great-Power Competition: Shifting Sands in the Balance of Power Between the United States and China*. Cham: Springer Nature.
Roy, O. 2007. *Secularism Confronts Islam*. New York: Columbia University Press.
Ruhal, M., Q. Linxin, A. B. Khan, T. Ahmad, and L. Fang. 2024. "The Role of Chinese Philosophy in the Education System of China." *Canadian Journal of Educational and Social Studies* 4 (4): 93–104.
Schimmelfennig, F. 2010. "Integration Theory." In *Research Agendas in EU Studies: Stalking the Elephant*, edited by M. Egan, N. Nugent, and W. E. Paterson, 37–59. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.
Sen, T. 2012. "The Spread of Buddhism to China: A Re-Examination of the Buddhist Interactions Between Ancient India and China." *China Report* 48 (1–2): 11–27. doi:10.1177/000944551104800202.
Stambach, A., K. Marshall, M. J. Nelson, L. Andreescu, A. C. Kwayu, P. Wexler, Y. Hotam, S. Fischer, and H. El Bilawi. 2011. "Religion, Education, and Secularism in International Agencies." *Comparative Education Review* 55 (1): 111–142. doi:10.1086/657650.
Tianlong, Y. 2013. "Educating for World Citizens in Chinese Schools: Moral Education in the Cosmopolitan Age." In *Citizenship Education in China*, edited by K. J. Kennedy, G. Fairbrother, and Z. Zhao, 85–99. Abingdon: Routledge.
Trommsdorff, G. 2009. *Intergenerational Relations and Cultural Transmission*. Konstanz: Bibliothek der Universität Konstanz.
Watson, B. 2016. "Secularism, Schools, and Religious Education." In *Inspiring Faith in Schools*, edited by M. Felderhof and P. Thompson, 3–16. Abingdon: Routledge.
Wei-Ming, T. 1990. "The Confucian Tradition in Chinese History." In *Heritage of China: Contemporary Perspectives on Chinese Civilization*, edited by P. Ropp, 112–137. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Wu, J., and M. Wenning. 2016. "The Postsecular Turn in Education: Lessons from the Mindfulness Movement and the Revival of Confucian Academies." *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 35 (6): 551–571. doi:10.1007/s11217-016-9513-8.
Wu, S. W., and J. C. K. Lee. 2021. "Influence of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism on Chinese Life and Moral Education." In *Life and Moral Education in Greater China*, edited by J. C. K. Lee, S. Y. Yip, and R. H. M. Kong, 218–234. Abingdon: Routledge.
Yang, F. 2011. *Religion in China: Survival and Revival Under Communist Rule*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
You, Z., A. G. Rud, and Y. Hu. 2018. *The Philosophy of Chinese Moral Education*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
Zhang, C. 2024. "Infusing Taoist Principles into Early Literacy Professional Learning." *Journal of Literacy Research* 56 (4): 465–491. doi:10.1177/1086296X241300349.