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# Confucius in The Times from 1785 to 2019: a diachronic news discourse analysis of newsworthiness

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This article diachronically analyses the variations in newsworthiness with regards to the conception of Confucius in the British newspaper The Times from its initial publication in 1785 to 2019. Adopting corpus linguistic methods and discursive news values analysis approach, this study examines news values through collocations and concordances of Confucius-centred instances. The results mainly lie in two folds. First, before 1840s, Confucius had been highly Westernized and religionized through analogy with Western philosophers, literary works, religious prophets, religious maxims, etc., which constructed *proximity* and *eliteness* to help alleviate the foreignness brought by the Chinese concept of Confucius and reduce the British audiences' sense of distance. Following the increasing and continuous identification of Confucius with the Chinese identity in reporting, these methods (Westernization and religionization) of reporting had comparatively abated, as a consequence of which the media tended to present more Chinese contexts to market more full-scaled information related with Confucius. Second, the concepts of Confucius had been frequently metonymized for the national identity of Chinese, which dominantly framed the ordinariness of the Chinese people before 1880s, and gradually transformed into the elite Chinese identities after 1880s. With historical statistics and diachronic lens, the results of this study provided valuable historical data for social studies in the British context and improved on the findings of the existing studies of Confucius in Britain.

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## Introduction

Confucius, better known in China as ‘Master Kong’, was a fifth-century BCE Chinese thinker whose influence upon Asian and the Western intellectual and social history is immeasurable (Swain, 2017). Confucius was firstly introduced into Europe by the Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci in the late sixteenth century. After that, a group of Western missionaries, such as Johann Bell (1592–1666), Antoine Gaubil (1689–1759) and James Legge (1815–1897), published a large number of research and translated productions of Confucianism, praising Confucius for discovery of universal natural laws through reason (Csikszentmihalyi, 2020). In modern times, Western scholars such as Cohen (2019) highlighted the promotive actions of Confucius on religion, science and democracy. While at times, Confucius was also criticized as an advocate of despotism and an obstructor against social democracy (e.g., Fairbank, 2008). Generally speaking, as a remote culturally symbolic figure in China, Confucius has been alternately idealized, deified, dismissed, vilified and rehabilitated over the millennia by the Western society (Fan, 2010). Thus, it is noteworthy to examine how the conception of Confucius evolved in the Western public through history. This study focuses on Confucius in Britain which was ever the centre of the Western culture.

News values are ‘filtered from the public perception through the mediated representations of journalists, editors or the selected news actors, working as delegates of the public perception’ (Zhang, 2017: p. 42); thus, by revealing how the news values of Confucius were construed by the Western media throughout history, we can infer the perception of the Western public towards Confucius and its evolution. Exposure of the hidden news values within news reports is the very concern of discursive news value approach (DNVA), which focuses on how newsworthiness is construed through multimodal resources (Caple et al., 2020). In this article, we adopt the DNVA method in diachronic news discourse analysis, to explore the news values constructed by the news discourse of the British newspaper *The Times* around Confucius from 1785 to 2019, which may inform us how the news entity ‘Confucius’ has been packaged and sold to the British domestic audiences throughout the 235 years (Caple et al., 2020). Empirically, we will answer the following research questions: (1) In what ways had Confucius been defined and described in *The Times* reporting from 1785 to 2019?; (2) what news values were constructed by these definitions and descriptions of Confucius?; and (3) how did news values dominate *The Times* newspaper in the portrayal of Confucius diachronically?

As analysed in the next section, the existing studies on Confucius in Britain mostly took Confucius educational institutes and Confucius texts (such as *The Analects of Confucius*) as the two dominant research objects. The present study explores the construction of Confucius in Britain through British news discourse analysis, which may help us get new findings from the perspective of mass media outlets. Besides, with historical lens, this DNVA analysis may improve the interpretations of newsworthiness that have been put forward by previous DNVA studies with synchronic lens.

## Studies of Confucius in Britain

Confucius was identified as China’s first philosopher and the symbol of Chinese traditional culture (Richey, 2022). Western scholars portrayed Confucius as a natural theologian to pursue the good, which they considered a marked contrast with the ‘idolatries’ of Buddhism and Taoism (Csikszentmihalyi, 2020). The perception of Confucius in Britain has long been a subject of interest in literature, sociology, communication, education, etc. Their analogical studies aimed to explore the influence of

Confucius’ texts, theories and culture upon the British society both in the past and the present, and were conducted mainly in two ways. First, the studies are based on the English versions of Confucius texts (usually during a certain period in history, mostly concentrating on 1780s–1890s). For example, St Andre (2018) examined the concept of ‘filial piety (Xiao)’ in *The Analects of Confucius* and its adaptation in English language and philosophy. Bai (2013) interpreted the ethics of Confucius and Confucian texts (*Sishu* [Four Books] and *Wujing* [Five Classics]) based on Robert Morrison’s textbook *China: A Dialogue*. Zhen (2022) analysed the English translations of Confucius books and explored the way Chinese culture took root in England. Second, the more recent studies have focused on the Confucius Institute. For example, Xiang (2021) conducted an investigation of the experiences of Chinese teachers working in British schools through the Confucius Institute, and revealed the conflict between their own objectives and the requirements of different British schools. Hua and Wei (2014) investigated the different motivations and ideologies of the different interest groups of the Confucius Institutes, to reveal how British Chinese learners in the Confucius classrooms react to the teaching of Chinese culture. Li and Xue (2022) examined the Confucius Institutes’ development both in China and in Britain. Li (2019) explored the educational ways of Language Promotion Organizations and Confucius Institutes in the UK. Ye and Edward (2018) analysed the motivation and challenges of the Confucius institute teachers in the UK.

These existing studies, which took Confucius institutes and Confucius texts as the two dominant research objects, are all based on the assumption that Confucius institutes and Confucius texts have been the two dominant ways for British society to receive and accept Confucius (Kanamori, 1997; Zhang, 2022). However, this may not always have been the case in some historical periods. For example, Murray (2015: p. 597) found by his literacy study of English versions of Confucius’ texts that ‘readers in the British Romantic Period (1800s–1840s) started to know who Confucius was, but few were familiar with his works.’ Angle and Slotte (2015) claimed, on the basis of their historical investigation, that it was not until the 1850s that the first Confucius institute was established in Britain. Therefore, the widely adopted assumption in the existing research may provide a wrong research object and produce ineffective results.

Besides, a majority of the existing research examining Confucius in Britain employs a synchronic lens, and studies investigating the historical changes remain scarce (especially across hundreds of years). For example, the aforementioned investigations of the Confucius institute have usually been grounded on contemporary surveys and experiments (e.g., Xiang, 2021; Hua and Wei, 2014; Hyun-Joo and Skinner, 2012). Similarly, the analyses of Confucius texts, though usually select works covering a period of several decades, only focused on exploiting the synchronic features during this period while ignoring historical comparison (e.g., St Andre, 2018; Murray, 2015; Bai, 2013).

News discourse is derived from society and reflects public attitudes towards social events (Dong and Gao, 2022). This study firstly explores how Confucius was perceived in British society through retrieval of ‘Confucius’ concepts in a diachronic full-data news corpus which covers all aspects of British social life over 235 years, to identify the effective research objects during different historical periods, based on which the research methodology would be further designed.

## A discursive approach to news values

News values, or newsworthiness, is a concept originated from journalism and communications research. They have been

conceptualized as the key drivers in the news content (story/event) selection process (Palmer, 2000; Conley and Lamb, 2006), which explain why this news is selected. For example, Bell (1991: p. 155) interpreted news values as 'criteria by which newsmen make their professional judgements as they process stories'. Tuchman (1973) explained news values as the framework adopted by newsmen to construct and reconstruct social reality in news reporting by establishing the context in which social phenomena are perceived and defined. Richardson (2007: p. 91) noted that news values are 'the criteria employed by journalists to select, order and prioritize the collection and production of news'. With respect to sociolinguistic approaches, a group of journalistic scholars expanded the scope of news values beyond the content-based perspective, and interpreted it as a language construction process. For example, Cotter (2010) focused on the role of the news values to control practitioners in producing news language. Bell (1991: p. 229; 1995: p. 26) highlighted the roles of news values in the construction of news discourse, while indicating the frequent use of language to enhance and maximize news values.

Different from these journalistic and sociolinguistic perspectives, Bednarek and Caple (2012b; 2013; 2014) concentrated on how this news is selected and constructed, and they propounded a discursive view on news values, which has progressed along two complementary lines. First, they see news values as being constructed through discourse, including any semiotic devices that play a part in the news process, such as verbal and visual input material, interviews, press releases, etc. (Caple and Bednarek, 2016; Bednarek and Caple, 2014: p. 137). Second, they maintain that news values portray the ideological aspects of the journalists, who are dominated by the social power, which ultimately control the construction of news discourse (Bednarek and Caple, 2014: p. 137). Hence, a discursive approach to news values (named as 'discursive news values approach (DNVA)') examines the multiple semiotic choices that underpin the construction of news discourse in relation to their roles in the establishment of news values (Caple and Bednarek, 2016). With the powerful systematic analysis of newsworthiness through multimodal resources, the DNVA framework helps researchers gain a fuller understanding of how the news is forged in the mental process of the journalists (Bednarek and Caple, 2012a).

Mental representations of language users have widely been ignored in critical analyses of news discourse, which have focused more on specifying the direct relation between the news discourse and the society (van Dijk, 2018a; 2018b). However, van Dijk (2021: p. 64) (based on a sociolinguistic perspective) claimed that 'discourse structures and social structures are of a different nature'. Accordingly, news values, which define the mental representations of language users as individuals and as social members, are the important connection to relate the two (van Dijk, 2018a). Thus, he advocated that the mental construction should be taken seriously and put forward a sociocognitive approach which is characterized by the Discourse–Cognition–Society triangle (van Dijk, 2018a). His perspective propelled a series of recent critical analyses of news discourse to focus on exploring the newsworthiness. For example, Huan (2018) analysed the newsworthiness of Chinese journalists in selecting different news actors in Chinese hard news reporting on risk events. Hou (2018) interpreted the establishment of ideological positions associated with the American Dream and the Chinese Dream by the media. Bevitori and Johnson (2022) examined whether and how the mainstream press perceive and describe migration as adaptation in the context of climate change. Nonetheless, although these critical discourse studies interpreted their results from the perspective of news values, they solely focused on limited aspects of discourse and have not taken a discursive approach to news values. For example, Huan (2018) examined language patterns of

judgement and suggested how lexicogrammatical patterns, semantic features and social orders are intimately connected. Hou (2018) analysed frequent words and keywords to explore the semantic preference and semantic prosody of the news reporting. Bevitori and Johnson (2022) explored meaning patterns of 'risk' and 'resilience' in a purpose-built diachronic corpus of quality newspapers. Overall, critical linguists have so far not been really interested in DNVA. As DNVA possesses a powerful framework for systematically revealing deep ideological newsworthiness through multimodal news resources, this study selected the DNVA framework, instead of the news values analysis framework of the previous CDA studies, in order to gain a fuller understanding of how Confucius was construed through news reporting.

DNVA has been proved useful in revealing differences in previous cross-cultural comparative analyses. For example, Caple et al. (2020) conducted a cross-linguistic comparison of news values of national day in the contemporary reporting from China and Australia. Zhang and Caple (2021) examined news values in four news outlets from China, Britain, Australia and the United States in their latest English-language news reporting about the Chinese tennis player, Li Na. However, based on our literature analysis, the existing DNVA studies have mostly focused on cross-cultural comparative analysis with synchronic lens. We can hardly find any application of DNVA framework in diachronic studies. In view of this research status, this study attempts to apply the DNVA in diachronic research. Additionally, with historical statistics, this study attempts to produce new findings which could not be obtained by the previous synchronic DNVA studies, including the way in which the changing society dynamically influenced the newsworthiness, the different news value construction ways in the history, etc.

The previous DNVA studies defined news values as constructed through a whole text of news reporting and explored the news values through news reporting centred on the specific news entity. While as the historical news data on Confucius that we can find are limited (every news datum is very valuable), not all the reporting data are presented in news texts with the specific theme of Confucius and most of them are scattered around different news texts with various topics. However, these large numbers of scattered pieces of news reporting for describing and defining Confucius, though not gathered together, have demonstrated prominent news values and special construction ways, which are worth studying. This study investigates the reporting data of Confucius, as distributed through the historical news texts published in *The Times* (one of the oldest and prestigious British newspapers) between 1785 and 2019. The DNVA framework is applied to identify and analyse the newsworthiness of Confucius, with the aim of revealing the dynamic relations of the news discourse with the mental construction of the British media and the British society.

## Data and methods

We selected *The Times* as the corpus source for two reasons. First, *The Times* is one of Britain's oldest and most influential newspapers, publishing daily news consecutively over 235 years since 1785; hence, it can be used to gain diachronic and successive insights into the British reader positioning and news market constructs towards Confucius. Second, all the news texts over 235 years have been collected as an exhaustive database in CQPweb<sup>1</sup> established by Lancaster University, which is available for our analysis. Comparatively, we cannot get such complete databases from other British newspapers such as *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph*.

The database adopted by this study is the diachronic corpus of *The Times* from 1785 (the initial publication year for *The Times*)

**Table 1** The database of The Times from 1780s to 2010s.

Period	Total number of news texts in the corpus	Total word tokens in the corpus
1780s	1486	27,464,729
1790s	3107	67,330,315
1800s	3122	77,344,308
1810s	3131	118,391,225
1820s	3129	177,747,373
1830s	3125	264,788,425
1840s	3114	383,903,711
1850s	3115	486,169,015
1860s	3103	598,710,996
1870s	3130	613,965,907
1880s	3129	650,593,231
1890s	3129	584,982,819
1900s	3130	540,638,412
1910s	3134	542,714,711
1920s	3103	756,714,316
1930s	3101	799,993,480
1940s	3100	290,448,326
1950s	3087	420,978,622
1960s	3098	519,523,147
1970s	2789	480,659,269
1980s	3090	537,031,328
1990s	3125	767,266,910
2000s	3122	822,524,677
2010s	3132	853,413,201

to 2019 (the year this study began), including 24 sub-databases, with totally 72,831 news texts and amounting to 11,383,298,453 total word tokens (see Table 1). We adopted the built-in online retrieval tool (with the same retrieval function with the corpus analysis toolkit AntConc<sup>2</sup>) in the corpus website of The Times newspapers (<https://cqpweb.lancs.ac.uk/>), to search for the concordance lines of the search terms, including 'Confucius', 'Confucian', 'Confucianism' and 'Confucianist', which indicate the identity of Confucius. The Confucius-centred news texts of each decade were retrieved and collected, and 24 corpora were finally established for a diachronic comparison.

As we found that the Confucius-centred texts are usually dispersive short phrases and clauses throughout the news reporting (instead of long paragraphs), we only analysed the collocations and concordance lines of these search terms. With manual analysis (Richardson, 2017), the instances of Confucius have been categorized into different sub-themes related with Confucius, based on their semantic fields. Each sub-theme and the instances contributing to the sub-theme have been analysed in the DNVA framework, to reveal the focus of the reporting on Confucius and the way they work together to emphasize the newsworthiness of Confucius (Wodak, 2014; Pfliger, 2020). As the analysis methods of different sub-themes vary considerably, we present the analysis procedures together with the analysis results of each sub-theme in the following part (Findings).

The 10 news value categories based on the conceptualization of DNVA (Bednarek and Caple, 2017) have been adopted as the criteria to define and interpret the news values in this study, with a specification for linguistic devices only (as written texts are the only way for news presented in the newspapers of The Times before 1840s, this study focused on written texts only), including Consonance, Eliteness, Impact, Negativity, Positivity, Personalization, Proximity, Timeliness, Unexpectedness, Superlativeness. For their definitions and further information, see the Appendix (Bednarek and Caple, 2017). Based on the discursive perspective on news values, journalists use newsworthiness as judgement to frame/package (including select, order and produce) news stories

through news discourse (Bednarek, 2015; Bell, 1995). In this study, we mainly analysed how the concepts of Confucius were framed/package to British readers as news(worthy), and how newsworthiness was created for the audience through language. The term 'frame/package' (which will be used very frequently in the next 'Findings' section) indicates the news process of selecting, ordering and producing news events (Bednarek, 2015). Simultaneously, our analysis framework has additionally adopted definitions that had portrayed news values as culture-sensitive (Montgomery, 2007: p. 6) and which were subsequently put forward by Bednarek et al. (2021). This was done in consideration of the publication's target audience and the publication time, while also taking into account the cross-cultural focus of this study - the Chinese philosopher (Confucius) reported in British news.

Moreover, the changes of the journalistic values and social ideologies concerning Confucius established in the 235 years' news reports have been discussed by examining the evolution of the Sino-UK relations.

### Findings

Based on semantic analysis, the instances of Confucius occurred in news reporting have been categorized into four news entities (referred as four sub-themes) related with Confucius through 235 years, including 'the person of Confucius', 'works/theories of Confucius', 'Confucius institutes' and 'followers of Confucius' (see Table 2).

The sub-theme 'the person of Confucius' served as the reference to the person of Confucius himself (a fifth-century BCE Chinese thinker). The sub-theme 'works/theories of Confucius' does not only indicate the *Analects of Confucianism* (also named as *Lunyu*, containing direct quotations from Confucius as recorded by his disciples) and other books of Confucius, with instances such as 'books of Confucianism', 'collection of Confucius', 'biography of Confucius'. 'Works/theories of Confucius' (the sub-theme) also refers to the concrete quotations and theories cited from these books, e.g. 'words of Confucius', 'Confucius said ...', 'Confucian proverbs', 'dictum of Confucius', 'Confucian law', 'philosophy of Confucius'. The sub-theme 'Confucius institutes' refers to those institutes or organizations broadcasting Confucius culture and theories, with occurrences such as 'school of Confucius', 'Confucius class', 'Confucian Association of China', etc. The sub-theme 'followers of Confucius' occurred in the reporting indicates the identities of Chinese followers of Confucius, e.g., 'follower of Confucius', 'disciple of Confucius', 'compatriots of Confucius', 'admirer of Confucius'. Except for the sub-theme of 'Confucius' exclusively expressed by instance of 'Confucius', other three sub-themes are expressed by a group of various instances respectively (see Table 2).

The occurrences of the references (see Table 3) indicating four sub-themes show that in the early period from 1780s to 1830s, it was 'the person of Confucius' and 'followers of Confucius' that had been firstly reported before the other two categories ('works/theories of Confucius' and 'Confucius institutes'). The concern of media provides insights into the social interest and news market constructs (Bromley and Cushion, 2002). This result may further reflect that Confucius was firstly a topic of concern for the British society not through the works/theories of Confucius or Confucius institutes, but through the person of Confucius himself and his followers. This result provides statistical evidence contradicting the assumption adopted by existing studies of Confucius in British society (e.g., St Andre, 2018; Bai, 2013), which concentrate on examinations of Confucius institutes and Confucius texts before the 1830s.



**Table 2 Sub-themes and references of Confucius in The Times reporting (only a part of the instances of each sub-theme has been illustrated for the limited space).**

Sub-themes	The person of Confucius	Works/theories of Confucius	Confucius institutes	Followers of Confucius
Instances	Confucius	Works of Confucius, words of Confucius, collection of Confucius, Analects of Confucius translation, biography of Confucius, Confucian Analects, teachings of Confucius, Confucius said: '...', according to Confucius, ..., the edition of Confucius 's Spring and Autumn Annals, the story of Confucius, Confucius he say: '...' Confucian manuscript	School of Confucius, Confucius class, Confucian school, Confucian Association of China, Confucian exhibition, Confucian intellectual community, the campus of the Confucius, Confucian Songkyunkwan University, the Confucius Foundation of China	Follower of Confucius, disciple of Confucius, compatriots of Confucius, Confucian scholars, Confucian philosophers, Confucian leaders, Confucian sage, Confucian master, Confucian man, admirer of Confucius

**Table 3 Occurrences of the sub-themes of 'Confucius' in The Times reporting from 1780s to 2010s.**

Sub-theme periods	The person of Confucius	Works/theories of Confucius	Confucius institutes	Followers of Confucius
1780s	1	0	0	0
1790s	0	0	0	0
1800s	0	0	0	1
1810s	0	0	0	1
1820s	1	0	0	0
1830s	1	0	0	2
1840s	1	5	0	0
1850s	5	8	0	3
1860s	4	11	0	5
1870s	19	17	2	0
1880s	37	49	0	2
1890s	54	43	1	8
1900s	28	60	3	4
1910s	18	55	0	6
1920s	38	29	0	4
1930s	33	41	0	6
1940s	16	48	3	1
1950s	12	46	3	3
1960s	26	90	7	2
1970s	112	133	3	14
1980s	41	96	2	7
1990s	58	203	1	9
2000s	112	191	1	7
2010s	129	203	1	7

Since 1840s, 'works/theories of Confucius' started to rise and become the most frequently reported news entity (together with the sub-theme 'the person of Confucius') for the following 180 years (from 1840 to 2019). By contrast, 'followers of Confucius' which occurred the earliest (together with 'Confucius'), and 'Confucius institutes' which has been concerned as the main broadcast channels for Confucius, constantly maintained at a very low frequency through 235 years.

The four sub-themes of Confucius identified above have been taken as the research objects of this study. The analytical procedures and results of the news values constructed in each sub-theme will be presented as follows. For better clarity the context of Confucius, we demonstrate more sentences to the left or right of the concordance line in some examples.

**'The person of Confucius' and its constructed newsworthiness.**

We examined collocation (also with the help of concordance lines) and found the references of 'the person of Confucius' had been mainly reported as a social actor in four strategies (see Table 4). First, 'the person of Confucius' has been framed as a religious prophet/leader (the strategy is named as religionization), with instances listed in parallel with prophets and leaders in Christianity, Islamism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, etc. (see Examples 1&2). As in Example 1, Confucius, Christ, Mahomet and Moses are defined as having the same principle 'to seek the knowledge of the universal mind'; As interpreted in Example 2, the 'conception' categorizes Christ, Buddha, Confucius and Mohammed into the homogeneous group. This religionized descriptive manner enables the media to elevate the social impact of Confucius to a holy, sacred or divine degree, thus construing the news value of Eliteness (Bednarek and Caple, 2017).

**Example 1**

Theist of every nation - Christian, Jew, Mahometan, or Chinese - can meet upon common ground; whatever minor predilection each may entertain for his own most eminent teacher or prophet, whether Christ, Mahomet, Moses, or Confucius, their great principle is the same - to seek the knowledge of the universal mind, and rules for the guidance of man in the great volume stretched out before all men.

(The Times, 1850-04-18)

**Example 2**

Enough to say that any such conception is alien to real Christians. It is the negation of any real value in any religion. It puts Christ, Buddha, Confucius, and Mohammed on the same plane.

(The Times, 1910-07-04)

Second, 'the person of Confucius' has been framed (selected, ordered and produced by newsmen) as a great master (Bell, 1995), with instances co-occurred with well-known Western philosophers, militarists, scientists or men of letters (the strategy is named as Westernization) (see Examples 3&4). As in Example 3, Confucius is classified with Greek philosopher, English poet/dramatist and British novelist; In Example 4, Confucius is compared with Greek philosopher, Roman emperor, Christian theologian and British writer. In this way, the high professional status of the Chinese master Confucius has been identified with reference to the Western great masters, which simultaneously establish the news value of Eliteness.

Indeed, all news values are 'situationally sensitive' (Montgomery, 2007: p. 6) and defined with consideration of the

**Table 4 Four strategies framing ‘the person of Confucius’ by The Times reporting.**

Strategies	Religionization	Westernization	Sinicization	Depreciatization
Collocates	Christ, Christian Fathers, Jesus, Mohammed, Koran, Moses, Buddha, Zoroaster, Spartans, prophet	Shakespeare, Pythagoras, Constantine, Columbus, Oliver Cromwell, Socrates, great philosopher, Plato, Lucretius, Charles Dickens, Pythagoras, Sesostris	Chinese, birthplace, cities, countries, monuments, temples, Lao-tze, family, tomb, Kwan-yi-wu, WengVzu, great Chinese sage, before Chou Dynasty, national divinity	Attack, revising, campaigns against, struggle against, stubborn reactionary, attack, Old Kung Number Two, criticism, criticize, confounded, bad, lose face, the danger of bourgeois revisionism, ‘Pi Kong’

target audiences (Bell, 1995). As these explicit references to the Western great masters transform the enthetic Chinese character ‘Confucius’ into an image culturally and geographically near the British readers who is the target community. This strategy also construes the news value of Proximity (Bednarek and Caple, 2017).

Example 3

If we make due allowance for the tone of burlesque, there is still a good deal of truth in what Matthew Arnold wrote of Mr. Sala some five and twenty years ago, in the style of an imaginary ‘Young Lion’. I do not class him with the great masters of human thought and human literature - Plato, Shakespeare, Confucius, Charles Dickens. Sala, like us, his disciples, has studied in the book of the world Ovan - than in the world of books .

(The Times, 1895-01-24)

Example 4

He (Lubbock) learned that Ruskin was referring to Aristotle, Marcus Aurelius, Confucius, Thomas A Kempis, and even Kingsley. Looking back on the history of the college, and of the movements that succeeded it, it is hard to resist the feeling that the heroic days of adult education are no more.

(The Times, 1954-11-05)

Third, ‘the person of Confucius’ was identified as a Chinese character (the strategy is named as sinicization), with collocates of Chinese places, Chinese names (names of the family or students of Confucius), Chinese dynasties, etc (see Table 4). These instances (see Examples 5&6) demonstrate Chinese attributes of Confucius which are foreign to the British readers. Thus, they create an exotic context for British audiences, with explicit references to place and nationality distant from the target community, and cultural concepts unfamiliar to the target audiences.

Example 5

The Nien-fei rebellion is spreading rapidly, the latest report being that the city of Chu-fou-Rsien, remarkable as being **the birthplace of Confucius**, has been captured and sacked. This rests on native testimony alone, but I have hitherto found.

(The Times, 1865-08-16)

Example 6

It was after an ethereal encounter with this mythical creature that a Chinese lady called En Chen Tsai magically **gave birth to Confucius**.

(The Times, 1980-09-23)

Fourth, ‘the person of Confucius’ was debased and criticized (the strategy is named as depreciatization), with instances of violent verb collocates and negative nominal collocates, e.g., ‘attacks on Confucius’, ‘campaigns against Confucius’, ‘Confucius

loses face at UN New York’, ‘Old Kung Number Two (insulting remark on Confucius in Chinese)’. Such references demonstrate negative evaluations and emotions towards Confucius and describe violent behaviours against Confucius, simultaneously establishing the news value of Negativity (Bednarek et al., 2021: p. 707). The concordance lines further show that the depreciation of Confucius is attributed to the reporting of the Campaign against Confucius during the Great Cultural Revolution in China (from 1966 to 1976) (see Examples 7&8). As portrayed in Example 7, Confucius is deprecated in the Chinese broadcast for children; in Example 8, Confucius is named as the bad lord who wanted to use music to bolster the old political order.

Example 7

Confucius deprecated in broadcast for children from David Bonavia *Peking*. ‘Uncle’, a small boy exclaims at the beginning of a new Chinese television programme, ‘what are you reading?’ ‘...a devout disciple of Old Kung Number Two,’ the child carefully spells out from his uncle’s copy.

(The Times, 1974-02-11)

Example 8

Nor does Chinese classical music, rarely performed nowadays, escape criticism. ‘Confucius, whose name is a bad lord in China today, wanted to use music to bolster the old political order,’ the critics say. The Chinese argument about the class content of music is that it always reflected the social position of the composer.

(The Times, 1974-03-14)

The concurrences of the four strategies (see Table 5) show the diachronic changes in the newsworthiness constructed by news reporting of ‘the person of Confucius’.

The identity of Confucius was dominantly Westernized or religionized from 1780s to 1840s (in the preliminary stage), which indicates the news values of Eliteness and Proximity (constructed by strategies of Westernization and religionization) exclusively dominated the reporting of Confucius in the earliest period. It was not until 1850s that the newspaper started to be concerned with the Chinese identity of Confucius, which prevailed as the main strategy to frame Confucius (Bednarek, 2015). From 1850s to 1990s, Westernization, religionization and sinicization had been the three dominant strategies to construct the identity of ‘the person of Confucius’ by The Times, in which the news values of Eliteness and Proximity (constructed by Westernization and religionization) coexisted with and counter-weighed the foreignness of China constructed by the strategy of sinicization. However, there was an exception in 1970s during which ‘the person of Confucius’ was mainly devalued in the narration of the newspaper, and the reporting was shortly dominated by

**Table 5 Occurrences of the four strategies constructing Confucius in The Times reporting.**

Strategy periods	Religionization	Westernization	Sinicization	Depreciatization
1780s	0	100%	0	0
1790s	0	0	0	0
1800s	0	0	0	0
1810s	0	0	0	0
1820s	0	100%	0	0
1830s	100%	0	0	0
1840s	0	100%	0	0
1850s	67%	8%	25%	0
1860s	24%	24%	52%	0
1870s	52%	0	48%	0
1880s	52%	0	48%	0
1890s	33%	30%	27%	0
1900s	17%	9	74%	0
1910s	55%	0	45%	0
1920s	41%	9%	50%	0
1930s	10%	23%	67%	0
1940s	37%	18%	45%	0
1950s	0	52%	48%	0
1960s	40%	33%	27%	0
1970s	1%	0	13%	86%
1980s	31%	18%	48%	3%
1990s	23%	38%	39%	0
2000s	8%	9%	83%	0
2010s	7%	7%	86%	0

Negativity. A change also occurred during the 2000s to 2010s when the reporting of ‘the person of Confucius’ was dominantly sinicized, while the religionized and Westernized descriptions declined, signifying that the foreignness of China started to outweigh Eliteness and Proximity.

Seeing through the construction of news values, we can further dissect the media’s cognitive basis for decisions about selection of news information in reporting of news entity (McQuail, 2005: p. 310). As the occurrences showed, when ‘the person of Confucius’ was first brought into the British media and society, his high status and fame (which establish Eliteness) was particularly highlighted, with a reference to religion leaders/prophets and Western academic masters, which brought conviction to the British target audiences on this alien identity (Fairclough, 1995). Furthermore, the association to these authoritative figures well-known in the Western society (which establishes Proximity) promotes the target audiences to conceptualize the eliteness of Confucius and reinforces their conviction on this foreign identity (van Dijk, 1990). Thus, it can be argued that in the initial stage, the news values of Eliteness and Proximity were constructed by the newspaper to improve the acceptability in the portrayal of Confucius. The introduction of the Chinese identity of Confucius in the British news reporting definitely brought a great many alien concepts and references which were culturally and geographically remote to British audiences, which subsequently constructed the foreignness of China and intensified the nonacceptance and rejection of the audiences (Bednarek and Caple, 2012a). The chronological co-existence of Eliteness and Proximity (from 1850s to 1990s) helps to alleviate the resistance of the audiences against the alien identity and acts as a counterweight to the foreignness. After a period during which the concept of Confucius had settled down in the British society and started to be widely accepted by the target community, Eliteness and Proximity ceased from being functional in improving the acceptability in the reporting of Confucius, as a consequence of which the media tended to present more Chinese

contexts to market more full-scaled information related with Confucius.

It is evident that the news values of Eliteness and Proximity always interrelated with each other and were selected by the newspaper to reinforce the audiences’ conviction and deduce the obstacles brought by the foreignness of Confucius. These news values, which waxed and waned on different historical stages (or broadcast stages), were selectively constructed in the reporting with the same objective to improve the acceptability of the identity of Confucius.

As the negative descriptions of ‘the person of Confucius’ during 1970s were the reporting of the Chinese social campaign, it can be inferred that the news value of Negativity was established under the impact of the Chinese social attitudes related to Confucius. News has been defined as interpreted products by media and journalists (Hutchins and Boyle, 2017). What is presented in news is journalistically assigned values, rather than values that are natural or inherent in the event (Gorin and Dubied, 2011). However, the dominant construction of Negativity during 1970s shows that natural events also exert decisive effect on the construction of news values. Especially in reporting the enthetic news entity from another culture, the news values that drive the journalistic practices are greatly affected by the natural events in the original culture.

**‘Works/theories of Confucius’ and its constructed news-worthiness.** ‘Works/ theories of Confucius’, as professional production, obviously constructs the news value of Eliteness (Bednarek and Caple, 2017). The concordance lines and collocations further show that this news value of Eliteness had been frequently reinforced in three ways (As the instances of these three strategies only amount for small proportions throughout the years, scattered throughout 235 years, and do not indicate marked regular changes, we do not illustrate the table of the frequencies of the occurrences here).

First, 'works/ theories of Confucius' were illustrated together with or compared to famous Western academic works/theories (see Examples 9–11). In Example 9, 'Precepts of Confucius' is compared to 'Poems of Homer'; in Example 10, 'The Book of Music by Confucius' matches with Greek drama, books of Spenser's and Shakespeare's; in Example 11, the dictum of Confucius is taken as the reference for Western education theory. This reporting way resembles the strategy of Westernization in identifying 'the person of Confucius', which specifies and highlights the influence of the works of Confucius by comparing with the Western classical works/theories, further strengthening the Eliteness indwelling in these works of Confucius. Therefore, as the Western classical works are well-known to the British target audiences, the news value of Proximity has been construed correspondingly.

#### Example 9

But even this reason is not sufficient; for on the same principle they might re-publish the Poems of Homer or the Precepts of Confucius, and dedicate them to the Duke with the same complimentary meaning. In our opinion, a work consecrated to the memory of the Duke of Wellington should at once strike every beholder as appropriate and characteristic.

(The Times, 1818-12-17)

#### Example 10

In his delightful tribute to vanished literature, *The Book of Lost Books*, Stuart Kelly describes 'the great books you will never read': most of Greek drama, the last six books of Spenser's *The Faerie Queen*, *The Book of Music* by Confucius, Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Won* (if it existed).

(The Times, 2005-12-17)

#### Example 11

'An interesting theory had been put forward that the children of youthful parents were gifted with physical energy, but seldom with great intellectual activity.' When the father was above forty the children would not make good soldiers, but were marked by superior intellectual ability; of a still older father the children would have marked philanthropic tendencies. This theory harmonized to a large extent with the dictum of Confucius.

(The Times, 1910-04-19)

Second, 'works/theories of Confucius' were mentioned in parallel with religious scriptures or maxims (see Examples 12&13). In Example 12, works of Confucius is illustrated as an analogy with Koran and Mormon theology; in Example 13, Confucianism is defined as a religion in parallel with Brahmanism and Buddhism. This reporting way is similar with the strategy of religionization in describing 'the person of Confucius', which demonstrates the sacredness of the works/theories of Confucius with an analogy with scriptures and maxims in Muslim, Christianity, Buddhism, etc., and reinforces the news value of Eliteness.

#### Example 12

Under any honest and fair interpretation of its Constitution, Mr. Darrow declared, the State of Tennessee had no more right to teach the Bible as a Divine book than the Koran, Confucius, or Mormon theology.

(The Times, 1925-07-15)

#### Example 13

Some religions as Brahmanism and Buddhism and Confucianism could not long resist the encroachments of modern philosophy, which exposed the laws and fictions which lay at the base of these towering system of idolatry.

(The Times, 1821-3-20)

Third, 'works/theories of Confucius (especially the sayings of Confucius)' had been frequently quoted in the reporting by Western social elites, including scholars, men of letters, artists, officials, etc (see Examples 14 &15). The high social status of the

quoters flatters the authoritativeness of the quoted words from Confucius, simultaneously reinforcing the news value of Eliteness that is constructed by the inner professionalism of concept ('works/theories of Confucius'). Besides, the British identity of the quoters is also culturally and geographically near the British audiences and establishes Proximity, easing the non-acceptance brought by the foreignness of Confucius.

#### Example 14

BBC Two, 8.45 pm, the art historian Waldemar Januszczak uses **a quote from Confucius** as the text for his sermon on the value of contemporary art.

'Everything has its beauty, but not everyone can see it.' 'Of course there is art today of great power and beauty,' says Januszczak.

(The Times, 2009-11-21)

#### Example 15

A few days later the producer in Bristol received a telegram from the controller of programme: 'Please avoid all questions involving religion, political philosophy or vague generalities about life.'

'The attacks did not stop.'

Joad (The BBC's director) had illustrated an answer with a supposed **quotation from Confucius**. 'What economy is it to go to bed in order to save candlelight if the result be twins?'

(The Times, 1980-12-06)

Generally, Eliteness is dominantly constructed in the reporting of 'works/theories of Confucius', which had been constructed not only by the inherent professionalism of this sub-theme, but also through analogy with Western classical works and religious scriptures/theories along with the quoters with high social status. Besides, in view of 'the person of Confucius' acting as the origin of 'works of Confucius', it also can be argued that the Eliteness established in reporting of 'the person of Confucius' reinforces the Eliteness in 'works of Confucius'.

#### 'Confucius institutes' and its constructed newsworthiness.

Similar to 'works/theories of Confucius', 'Confucius institutes', as specialized schools, associations, communities, exhibitions for teaching and disseminating Confucius theories and culture, conceives the connotation of professionalism. Furthermore, as these institutions had usually been set up by Chinese government (Rajaram, 2013), the references carry the official image. Therefore, the instances of this sub-theme intrinsically construe the news value of Eliteness.

The concordance lines further show that the instances of 'Confucius institutes' always show up in the contexts indicating its close relation (supported, established or sponsored by) with Chinese government, which reinforces the inherent news value of Eliteness. For instance, Example 16 indicates that the governmental identity of the Confucian Foundation of China. Example 17 demonstrates the financial support from the Chinese government to the Confucius Foundation of China.

As the instances of 'Confucius institutes' constantly occurred in low frequency throughout 235 years and had not demonstrated distinct reporting ways worth discussing, we do not further categorize the instances with tables.

#### Example 16

Mr. Deng Xiaoping and his supporters have found in Confucianism the same respect for education, intellectual achievement and authority that they want to instil in modern China. Since the late 1970s, Peking has spent more than 67,000 rebuilding Qufu's temples, pavilions and steles. Theoretical journals have reexamined Confucian thought, private Confucian societies have sprung up across the country, and a government-run Confucian Foundation of China was set up in 1984.

(The Times, 1986-11-29)



**Table 6 Two strategies framing ‘followers of Confucius’ by The Times reporting.**

Strategies	Constructed as Chinese ordinary people	Constructed as Chinese social elites
Instances	Follower of Confucius, disciple of Confucius, compatriots of Confucius, Confucian, admirer of Confucius	Confucian scholars, Confucian lawyers, Confucian philosophers, Confucian leaders, Confucian sage, Confucian master, follower of Confucius

Example 17

‘We have begun with government funds,’ said Mr Gao Jinghong, the director of the Qufu office of **the Confucius Foundation of China**. ‘but we would like to reach the point where we are sustained by contributions from over-seas Chinese.’ (The Times, 1986-11-29).

**‘Follower of Confucius’ and its constructed newsworthiness.** It was found that ‘follower of Confucius’ was identified in two strategies by the newspaper (see Table 6). In the first strategy, the instances had been constructed as Chinese ordinary people, indicating both the Chinese individual and the entirety of the Chinese masses. For example, the ‘disciple of Confucius’ in Example 18 and Example 19 function as the referents to the Chinese nationality of ‘the child’ and ‘the students’ (based on the contexts), while ‘disciple of Confucius’ and ‘follower of Confucius’ in Example 20 and Example 21 conceptualize the nationality of the Chinese masses. As this reporting strategy demonstrates the identity of ordinary Chinese people (both individual and public), the news value of Personalization has been established. It is noteworthy that though these examples illustrate identity of the ordinary people, but none of these personal identities had been further clearly identified and described. Thus, the Personalization is weak.

Example 18

The child is also born in some country, of parents belonging to some clan and who possess characters peculiar to themselves. Over these circumstances also the child can have no influence whatever... These circumstances have to be fixed. First, whether the child shall be a Jew, a **disciple of Confucius**, a worshipper of Juggernaut, a Christian, or a savage, or what country he shall belong, and in consequence, what national prejudices shall be forced upon him.

(The Times, 1818-10-27)

Example 19

‘I think that **disciple of Confucius** (the students) put a question which it was very difficult to answer. I object to the system of supporting missionaries in China, because it is unfair to the Chinese and because it is most unjust to our naval officers.’

(The Times, 1869-03-10)

Example 20

This poor country had been visited by famine and pestilence a way in which no other country had been visited before. Our tale of ruin had reached to all. The Hindoo, the Mahomedin, **the disciple of Confucius**, had shed a tear over our misery, and stretched out a hand in our relief. It was ever to be regretted that any of those men to whom the destinies of this empire had been committed should have chosen that moment to add to their misfortunes, and aggravate the burdens under which they laboured.

(The Times, 1851-08-21)

Example 21

**Table 7 Occurrences of the two strategies constructing ‘followers of Confucius’ in The Times.**

Strategy periods	Constructed as Chinese ordinary people	Constructed as Chinese social elites
1780s	100%	0
1790s	100%	0
1800s	100%	0
1810s	100%	0
1820s	100%	0
1830s	100%	0
1840s	100%	0
1850s	100%	0
1860s	100%	0
1870s	100%	0
1880s	100%	0
1890s	37%	63%
1900s	50%	50%
1910s	67%	33%
1920s	75%	25%
1930s	33%	67%
1940s	0	100%
1950s	33%	67%
1960s	0	100%
1970s	0	100%
1980s	14%	86%
1990s	0	100%
2000s	0	100%
2010s	0	100%

The **followers of Confucius** declare their intention of shortly retaking from us the whole of Kuldja.

(The Times, 1856-12-01)

In the second strategy, the instances of ‘follower of Confucius’ had been framed as Chinese social elites, including political leaders, scholars, philosophers, etc. For instance, ‘follower of Confucius’ in Example 22 and Example 23 are identified with high social status or academic professions, establishing the news value of Eliteness.

Example 22

It is obviously to England’s interest, both politically and commercially, that the integrity of the Chinese Empire should be maintained, and to this end it should be one of the first objects of British policy firmly and consistently to guide the Chinese government in the path of administrative and financial reform. The dangers which threaten the Empire’s frontiers in Mongolia and Tongking are sufficiently obvious to be perceived even by **the Confucius scholars of the Hanlin Academy**.

(The Times, 1897-10-20)

Example 23

Among them will be ... Dr. Taitaro Suzuki, a Japanese professor of Buddhist Philosophy at Kyoto; Professor S. N. Das Gupta, principal of the Government Sanskrit College at Calcutta: the Chief Rabbi; Mr. S. I. Hsiung, **a follower of Confucius and author of Lady Precious Stream**.

(The Times, 1936-07-04)

The occurrences of the two strategies (see Table 7) show that the reporting of ‘followers of Confucius’ had been dominated by the news value of Personalization during the early stage of 105 years (from 1780s to 1880s), which had been established by the instances indicating Chinese ordinary people (Bednarek et al., 2021). From 1890s to 1950s, the newspaper constructed ‘followers of Confucius’ simultaneously as Chinese social elites and Chinese ordinary people, by which the news value of Personalization coexisted with Eliteness for almost 70 years. After 1960s, social elites nearly became the exclusive identity

constructed for reporting ‘followers of Confucius’; accordingly, Eliteness had been construed as the dominant newsworthiness in the recent 50 years.

Generally, all the instances of ‘followers of Confucius’ in the news reporting do not refer to ‘the group who believe and help to spread the Confucius doctrine (defined by Rajaram, 2013)’ that is indicated by the literal meanings, but are used as a metonymy to nominate Chinese national identity of the news entities. The concordance lines further demonstrate that those instances that construct Personalization only identified the ordinariness of the described Chinese individuals or masses, but never indicated their specific personal identities, emotions, experiences, etc. For instance, Example 18 to Example 21 illustrate the assumption or indication of Chinese nationalism for the news entities (‘the child’, ‘the Chinese students’, ‘Chinese people’), yet none of these news entities had been further identified and described. In contrast, the instances that construe Eliteness usually state clearly the personal identity of the Chinese elites, such as in Example 22, which tells the work unit (the Hanlin Academy) of the ‘Confucian scholars’ and Example 23 accounting for the name (Mr. S. I. Hsiung) and the publication (*Lady Precious Stream*) of the ‘follower of Confucius’.

Therefore, it could be said that the news value of Personalization dominated the British newspaper only to identify the nationality of Chinese people, while the news value of Eliteness drives the reporting to make a concrete specification of the personalization of the Chinese elite people. Through the changes in the reporting ways of ‘followers of Confucius’, Chinese people had been gradually transformed from a general national conception to a variety of abundant and concrete elite personalities. In addition, the results in this part show that Personalization can be established by highlighting the ordinariness of the people while obscuring the individuality. This way of constructing Personalization is different from those defined in the previous studies where the ordinariness of the news entities has always been realized by the concrete depiction of individualism (e.g., Zhang and Caple, 2021; Caple et al., 2020).

The analysis above indicates that the news values constructed by these Chinese national identities evolved through history from Personalization-centred (before 1890s) gradually to Eliteness-centred. According to Palmer (2000; 1998) and Bell’s definition (1991), news values are socially and cognitively constructed, ‘reflecting the values of the society about the role of a newsworthy entity’ (Zhang and Caple, 2021: p. 71). Thus, it can be argued that the evolution was guided by the cognitive changes in the British society towards Chinese people, from commonality-centred to authorities-centred, and from blurry cognition to clear-cut and specific cognition. Moreover, the evolution resulted from the social changes in which more Chinese elites interacted with British people (as the concordance lines of the instances show that since 1890s a group of Chinese officials on behalf of the Qing Government negotiated with British envoys when aggressive troops were sent by Britain; Chinese scholars worked in the UK in the recent decades).

In general, ‘followers of Confucius’ served as a metonymy for the identity of Chinese in reporting. In other words, the Personalization and Eliteness had been combined to indicate the image of Chinese people, highlighting the Chinese context.

## Discussion

This diachronic discursive analysis of news values shows how The Times newspaper selected reporting ways and how newsworthiness in reporting Confucius varied throughout 235 years. Before 1840s, the concepts of Confucius had been highly

Westernized and religionized by the British newspaper by making analogy with Western philosophers, literature works, religions, religious prophets, religious maxims, etc. The Eliteness and Proximity constructed by this dominant reporting way helps alleviate the foreignness of the Chinese concept Confucius and reduces the British audiences’ sense of distance. After 1840s, when Confucius started to be increasingly sinicized and the foreignness of the Chinese identity of Confucius had been consequently intensified, the strategies of Westernization and religionization had been adopted constantly to counterbalance the arising foreignness. Second, the concepts of Confucius (here refers to ‘follower of Confucius’) was consistently metonymized for the national identity of Chinese people by the British media, which dominantly framed the ordinariness of the Chinese people before 1880s, and gradually transformed into Eliteness after 1880s. The systematic interactions of the textual resources exercise the overall control in the production of news discourse, and ensures its coherence in the narratives and its appropriateness for the on-going communicative process during specific period.

Media and journalists should be approached as interpretive community to news events (Hutchins and Boyle, 2017). Media packages or reconstructs social reality as news, for selling its journalistic assigned values, rather than values that are natural or inherent in the event (Tuchman, 1973; Caple and Bednarek, 2013). This study demonstrated that The Times newspaper packaged Confucius in different historical times in diverse ways for different journalistic values or purposes (Bednarek, 2015). Sometimes, the newspaper adjusted the newsworthiness and reporting ways to cater for the specific cognition of the British audiences during that period, to improve the acceptability of the news entity (Confucius). For example, Confucius had been highly Westernized and religionized throughout the history (especially before 1840s) to construct Proximity and Eliteness, in order to reduce the alienation generated by this Chinese concept. It can be argued that the newsworthiness that drives this reporting way is dominated by the communication purpose of the media which focused on ‘promoting the acceptability of the news story that the media has framed and intended to market’ (Cheng and Chen, 2019: p. 83). On the other hand, the newspaper sometimes altered its newsworthiness to accommodate itself to the specific attitudes that judged Confucius. For example, The Times newspaper frequently reported criticism and disparagement against Confucius in China during 1970s and established and highlighted the news value of Negativity, to conform itself to the social attitudes towards the Cultural Revolution in China and its negative direction of the Western public opinion. This highlights that the reconstruction of news was also greatly dominated by the media’s intention to accommodate the social reality, which is defined as ‘news authenticity’ in journalism (Conley and Lambie, 2006: p. 105). With the DNVA framework, the links between the news discourse, the media’s mental model and the society has been clearly revealed. It can be inferred from the evolutionary news values of The Times newspaper in this analysis that The Times newspaper adjusted its journalistic ‘mental representation’ (van Dijk, 2021) to target the British general public during different periods in reporting the Confucius.

Taylor (2022: p. 3) pointed out that discourse analysts are ‘inevitably part of their own object of study when they examine contemporary discourses and the readers are likely to be in the same position’. As Fowler (1991: p. 4) put it with synchronic lens, most of the existing discourse studies ‘always interpreted the same expression in different ways’. The historical corpus analyses will shift the analysts into a historical period and this distance can bring objective insights, and help reveal the ways in which these discourses have been shaped. Compared with the synchronic DNVA and critical news discourse studies, which examined the

influence exerted by the current society upon the news reporting (Bednarek et al., 2021), this diachronic discourse study has demonstrated how the changing society dynamically influenced the newsworthiness and news reporting way of the British newspaper *The Times*. For example, with the familiarity of the British public towards Confucius, the reporting of Confucius gradually became more sinicized and less Westernized/religionized (since 1840s). This result has been supported by the viewpoints of many Chinese historical Confucius studies that Britons started to take Confucius seriously when their innovations were met by unexpectedly stout resistance from China's traditional Confucian culture during the Opium War of 1840–1842 (e.g., Miao, 2021; Liang, 2020). It can be inferred that it was the Britain invasion of China during the Opium War that drove the British society and media to pay attention to Confucius. For other examples, with more Chinese elites interacting with Britain over opium trades since 1880 (Miao, 2021), the news values construed by instances of 'followers of Confucius' gradually evolved from Personalization towards Eliteness. The Eliteness of the 'Confucius institutes' had been constructed by their institutional properties affiliated with the Chinese government from 1870s to 2000s. In this way, more dynamic relations interlinking the social factors, the news values and the news discourse have been revealed.

Besides, the historical perspective adopted by this study also helps the analysts trace the emergence, development and extinction of these salient discourse features in short periods (Adibeik, 2021), and exploit more deeply the synchronic Discourse–Cognition–Society relation. For example, the study shows that the depreciation of Confucius started and peaked in 1970s, and withered away in 1980s, synchronizing with the beginning and ending of the Cultural Revolution in China. Since the 2000s, Confucius has been dominantly sinicized and less Westernized/religionized, which is reflected by the increasing familiarity of the British public with Confucius.

The newsworthiness in certain historical times shown by this diachronic discourse analysis indicates special journalistic mental presentations, which is discrepant from the newsworthiness construction demonstrated by previous synchronic DNVA studies (e.g., Bednarek and Caple, 2012a; Bednarek, 2015; Bednarek et al., 2021). For example, it has been found that the news value of Personalization constructed by the instances of 'followers of Confucius' before 1880s highlighted greatly the ordinariness of the Chinese people while obscuring their individuality, which is different from the 'Personalization' defined in the previous studies where the ordinariness of the news entities has always been realized by the concrete depiction of individualism (e.g., Zhang and Caple, 2021; Caple et al., 2020). Thus, the diachronic study may also uncover special historical discourse features and social values that have not existed in the contemporary discourse.

Last but not least, the instances of Confucius and their discourse features retrieved and obtained by this study also offer valuable historical data to record how the concept of Confucius had been disseminated by *The Times* newspaper and perceived by the British public in different historical stages. For example, the statistics of this study revealed that Confucius was firstly a topic of concern for the British society not through the works/theories of Confucius or Confucius institutes, but through the person of Confucius himself and his followers. This result provides statistical evidence contradicting the assumption adopted by existing studies of Confucius in British society, which concentrate on examinations of Confucius institutes and Confucius texts before the 1830s. These findings offer data support for studies of Confucius in Britain and in the Western society. Moreover, the social attitudes towards Confucius in Britain in the past 235 years (mirrored and revealed by *The Times* news reporting analysis)

also help explore the cultural communicative strategies between China and UK in today's society.

## Conclusion

This study shows the capability of DNVA to analyse the news values through the reporting data scattered around different historical news texts, which is different from the previous DNVA studies which explored the news values through news reporting centred on the specific news entity.

Seeing that most of the existing research examining Confucius in Britain employs synchronous surveys and Confucius literature analyses, it is the first effort examining the accommodation of Confucius in British society through corpus-based quantitative analysis. It has obtained results that are different from the previous studies of Confucius in Britain. Findings from this study reveal dynamic relations of the news discourse, news values and the British public cognition throughout the 235 years, which indicates clearly how Confucius had been packaged and sold by *The Times* newspaper and further reflects the changes of the British public's cognition towards the concept/identity of Confucius. The instances of Confucius retrieved and obtained by this study provide valuable historical data for British social studies and the results of this study present inspiring information for scholars who are interested in tracing the localization of Confucianism in Britain and also in the Western society.

Overall, this study offers a new investigation of Confucianism in Britain and provides momentum to scholars who are interested in adopting DNVA and corpus-based quantitative analysis to studies of Confucianism. Moreover, it demonstrated the application of news discourse analysis in Confucianism studies. With its focus on diachronic discourse analysis, the paper also provides a historical perspective for DNVA studies and news discourse studies.

This study is limited in that it has examined one newspaper (*The Times*) only. Our future studies should incorporate analysis of other Britain's newspapers (such as *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph*) which may construct other interpretative packages and offer different insights into the British reader's cognition towards Confucius (when we have obtained or established the database of the diachronic news reporting).

## Data availability

The datasets analysed during the current study are available in the CQPweb at Lancaster: [<https://cqpweb.lancs.ac.uk/>].

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## Notes

- 1 CQPweb: <https://cqpweb.lancs.ac.uk/usr/index.php?ui=welcome>.
- 2 AntConc is a corpus analysis toolkit for concordancing and text analysis. Please see AntConc in the website: <http://www.laurenceanthony.net/software/antconcl/>.

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### Author contributions

CC originally conceptualized the project and conducted data analyses and the primary framing of the original manuscript. RL substantially contributed to the project and refinement of the manuscript. All authors agreed and consented to the publication.

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The authors declare no competing interests.

### Ethical approval

This article does not contain any studies requiring ethical approval.

### Informed consent

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

### Additional information

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