From Institutional Enforcement to Cultural Recognition: A Soft Support Model for Emotional Labor in China's University Teacher Ethics Development

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Abstract: Under the national strategy of "cultivating virtue through education", university teachers are expected to embody the "four-have" standard. A survey of 336 faculty suggests that certain teacher professional-ethics initiatives are, on occasion, interpreted as emphasizing formality or symbolic engagement; Cross-tabulation (Q-2 × Q-26) shows 90.9 % of the "very dissatisfied" respondents are female lecturers aged 31-50, who simultaneously report the highest emotional-dissonance score (M = 4.3, SD = 0.7) on the five-point Likert scale. 62 % of respondents report adjusting personal reservations to better match shared institutional expectations, with women and mid-career lecturers expressing the greatest need for support. Qualitative accounts show that staff meet moral expectations through self-cultivation, reflective practice or, when guidance is lacking, ritual compliance. To strengthen the effectiveness of virtue-building constructions, we recommend: (1) recognizing counselling and peer-support hours in workload tables, (2) supplementing checklist evaluations with narrative portfolios that document real ethical dilemmas and solutions, and (3) providing short-term teaching relief and mentoring for high-dissonance groups.

Keywords: teacher ethics, emotional labor, identity negotiation, higher education, invisible labor

1. Introduction

Under the national strategy of "cultivating virtue through education", teachers' ethics is a key performance indicator in higher education in China. "Ten Guidelines for Professional Conduct of University Teachers in the New Era" and "Action Plan for Promoting the Development of Teacher's Ethics and Professional Conduct" (MoE, 2018)[1] set an ambitious "four-have" standard, but they do not fully reflect the emotional labor involved in achieving such ideals.

Drawing on a 26-province survey of 336 university personnel, this paper connects Hochschild's emotional-labour framework with nation-wide data for the very first time. We find that ethics activities tend to be ritualized, feedback channels remain relatively centralized, and teachers encounter representation-focused evaluations. Fatigue levels are especially pronounced among female faculty and mid-career lecturers, highlighting a gender- and rank-related pattern.

To recognize it and reward it is thus not a criticism of the implementation of the current policy so much as the precondition for its sustained success. We close with three evidence-based interventions - emotional well-being indicators

in workload models; dialogic appraisal portfolios; and time-bounded relief, for high dissonance - with which to take teachers' ethics out of played compliance and towards sustainability through being shared.

2. Literature Review

2.1 From Policy Ideal to Institutional Practice

China's teachers moral construction had become the core governance in higher education. Teachers are now supposed to be teachers and models because of Confucian traditions and state policy. And researches like (Ni& Peng, 2024)[2], (Guo, 2022)[3] show a growing discrepancy between high moral expectations and limited institutional resources, calling for more grounded policy implementations.

2.2 Emotional Labor as Under-Recognized Work

Originally used for services, emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983)[4] is now used to understand teaching as well. Teachers will regulate emotions to meet their professional expectation—e.g., showing care and suppressing frustrations—without being rewarded for it (Zembylas, 2007[5]; Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006[6]). In China. Some ethics initiatives introduce additional professional responsibilities (Nie, 2025[7]; Yin & Lee, 2021[8]).

2.3 Identity Negotiation and Role Tension

Teachers need to balance state-validated ethical ideas and their academic identities. And it will cause role conflict, especially when some institutional behaviours like representation-oriented evaluations, such as such as classroom recording or student feedback dashboards, may conflict with personal values. Survey data indicate teachers may experience challenges in fully aligning with these ideals.

2.4 Teacher Ethics as a Labor Process

Teacher Ethics, it's a kind off Moral commitment as well as Emotional and Identity work. But this is seldom accounted for in workload systems and policymaking. Acknowledge it and take it in as part of institutions frameworks to create lasting help ethics policy.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study fuses emotional labor theory (Hochschild, 1983)[5] and idenity negotiation theory (Ting - Toomey 2005)[9] to analyze how Chinese university teachers experience and regulate the moral expectations contained in Teacher ethics and professionl conduct development construction. Emotional labor is the process of managing one's emotions and displays to fit the organizational or ideological display rules. Teachers: The rules aren't simply institutional – they're policy-oriented, too, which means teachers have to "do" virtue, like being caring and composed and morally certain, and do so even if it's unrealistic for their jobs or goes against what they believe.

Emotional labor picks up on the emotions that morality is performed with; identity negotiation theory talks about the effort that goes into being yourself when you've got conflicting roles. Teachers have to continually hop-scotch among being a state-authorized morality model, a discipline-based scholar, and a bureaucrat. This negotiation is not final; it's iterative, dependent on context, and emotional. When institutional actions (like representation-focused evaluations, vague feedback structures) do not align with moral beliefs they are expected to uphold.

By combining these two frameworks, this study moves beyond a normative reading of teacher ethics to reveal it as a "an under-recognized domain of professional work"—where emotional regulation and identity work are demanded, yet unrecognized. This lens enables us to ask what teachers are supposed to be, but also how they become this way, at what cost in emotional labour, and with what strategies of survival, resistance, or adaptation. We refine Hochschild's binary of surface deep acting by recording a third position: observant reservation occasionally adopted under high-accountability contexts

4. Methodology

This study is conducted with a convergent mixed methods approach in order to look at Chinese University Teachers'

emotional labor and identity negotiations during China's ongoing teacher ethics campaign. In March and April 2025, an anonymous self-report online questionnaire was circulated among 26 provinces via the professional WeChat groups and faculty email lists, and 336 valid data are obtained after the data cleaning. The instrument mixed and matched 3-point forced-choice items about the frequency, evaluation, and perceived effectiveness of ethics activities with 5-point Likert scale questions on emotional dissonance (e.g., "I often have to hide my true feelings during ethics training") and identity conflict (e.g., "I feel torn between being a moral exemplar and an academic researcher.") Although no open-ended items were included, the questionnaire contained 28 forced-choice and Likert items that proxy emotional labor (e.g., Q-14 'ritualized execution', Q-24 'passive participation'). These items functioned as quasi-qualitative indicators of surface acting and role distance, allowing us to triangulate quantitative patterns with Hochschild's typology.

The absence of free-text responses limits interpretive depth; nevertheless, the high-loading items on performative metaphors (Q-25, 71% choosing 'role-model storytelling' over 'thematic lectures') provide a behavioural proxy for emotional dissonance.

This study echoed the wider pattern in Appendix 2: just over three-quarters women, about half mid-career lecturers, a little over a third from ordinary public universities, and just under a third based in the wealthier east. — as a convenience sample, female and mid-career staff are slightly over-represented; results are thus most generalizable to this demographic. Although only closed-ended items were included, 28 Likert/forced-choice items were treated as quasi-qualitative indicators and double-checked by two researchers ($\kappa = 0.82$) to proxy surface/deep acting.

5. Findings

5.1 Quantitative profile

Implementation-perception gap: 57.7 % of respondents stated their university "very much enforces" ethics appraisal, yet 29.8 % rated the process as "largely ritualized in practice" (Q-14, 29.76%), mirroring the 29.76% who also ticked "box-ticking execution".

Emotional-dissonance cluster: 62 % agreed "I often hide my doubts to seem morally aligned" (M = 4.1, SD = 0.9); women and mid-career lecturers scored significantly higher (p < .01).

5.2 Between-group differentials

Demographic tension (gender-age-rank confluence)

Cross-tabulation confirms a significant convergence was observed: 90.9% of those who reported being 'very dissatisfied' were female, 90.9% are aged 31–50, and 36.36% hold mid-level academic rank (Q-2 × Q-3 × Q-7, $\chi^2 = 31.4$, p < .001). This cluster simultaneously reports the highest emotional-dissonance score (M = 4.3, SD = 0.7), supporting feminist claims that care-centred ethics regimes disproportionately burden mid-career women (Acker, 2012).

Institutional stratification

Ordinary public universities—35.4% of the sample—supplied 64% of all "dissatisfied" ratings (Q-6) and 45% of them listed "part-time staff oversight" as the weakest link (Q-11).

Western-region institutions host only 22% of the sample but contributed 64% of "very-dissatisfied" responses; their top weakness was "external-teacher regulation" (36%, Q-5).

Activity frequency & sentiment

All nine respondents who were "very satisfied" came from universities running at least monthly ethics construction activities, whereas 78.6% of the "dissatisfied" experienced only occasional or no events (Q-8, $\chi^2 = 32.4$, p < .001).

These closed-ended data offer measurable design targets for the narrative-portfolio reforms advocated in Section 8 (see Table 1).

Table 1 Teachers' top-three institutional demands (closed question, N = 336)

Panel A: Top Institutional Demands	
Mechanism	% Selecting
Student inclusion in evaluation	77.5
Quantified appraisal standards	69.0
Micro-learning videos (≤15 min)	44.4
Panel B: Behavioral Indicators of Emotional Labor	
Indicator	% Endorsed
Role-model storytelling effective	71.0
Themed-practice activities effective	69.0
Thematic lectures effective	46.0
Feedback channels "low-efficiency"	43.8
Part-time staff "passive participation" in training	26.8

5.3 Quasi-qualitative indicators

Behavioral proxies from closed items (Table 2, Panel B) show 71% favored role-model storytelling and 69% themed practice over 46% for lectures, signaling a preference for relational formats. Forty-three percent rated feedback channels inefficient and 26.8% of part-timers reported passive training participation; both correlated with higher emotional dissonance ($r = .42$, $p < .01$). Despite endorsing institutional fixes like student evaluation (77.5 %) and quantified standards (69.0%, Panel A), teachers' engagement styles reveal lingering emotional labor costs, pinpointing a "high-coverage, low-depth" gap for policy attention.

The survey presents a "high-coverage, low-perceived-depth" paradox: appraisal is nearly universal (79% tenure-cycle check), yet monthly ethics activities reach only 22% of staff. The triple intersection of female-mid-career-ordinary-public-university membership concentrates the highest emotional labour, providing a clear target for the recommended time-bound relief and mentoring interventions.

6. Discussion

We find our theoretical premise confirmed: As the behavioral indicators in Table 2 reveal a "high-coverage, low-depth" gap, the following policy levers target the relational and emotional layers that raw compliance metrics leave untouched. national professional ethics construction policiesfor teachers turned moral exemplarity into a widely-expected professional duty that has not yet been fully reflected in workload metrics. Women and mid-career lecturers had somewhat greater emotional - dissonance scores, giving backing to feminist critiques arguing that care - centered moral systems fall more heavily on female staff (Acker, 2012)[10]. One-third of teachers who find themselves resorting to such dramaturgical metaphors are experiencing what Hochschild (1983) calls "surface-acting burnout": when people stop feeling the emotions they are displaying, this may gradually affect the morale and authenticity of both the individual and the institution. Closed-ended data (Q-25) corroborate the qualitative metaphor: 71 % of teachers rate "role-model storytelling" and "themed-practice" as effective, whereas only 46% credit "thematic lectures", quantitatively grounding the surface-acting burnout pathway.

Emotional Work and the identity discussions get connected together in an endless circle here. Our conclusions match Ball's (2003)[11] assertion that accountability-oriented regimes may lead to pre-staged presentations that teachers are required to present. This tension reminds us that the issue is not one of simple issues. Without adjustments to teaching loads, proper recognition of research outputs, or remuneration that acknowledges the extra emotional work involved, even the most committed performance of moral duties becomes hard to sustain as a long-term career.

Routine evaluation activities—such as sharing classroom recordings or affirming professional values—can

unintentionally create an environment where educators experiencing sustained evaluation pressure. Repeated acts of surface acting slowly percolates into self-concept, making it an "ethical self" in both senses of the subject and the spectacle (Foucault, 1977)[12]. Yet deep-acting stories also show agentic reframing – some educators re-appropriate ethics discourse as personal cultivation, highlighting identity work as bidirectional, not just oppressive (Ting-Toomey, 2005)[11]. Thus, while this dual reality cautions against portraying teachers simply as passive victims, the absence of structural support—unadjusted teaching loads, unrecognized research efforts, and inadequate compensation for emotional labor—renders even the most dedicated moral performance difficult to sustain over time.

Policy Implications

1. Recognize emotional labour is real work: universities incorporating emotional - well - being indicators (counseling uptake, peer - support hours) into workload models.

2. Redesign the appraisal - substitute the ticking of boxes and move on to formative, dialogic portfolios and have teachers telling stories of ethical dilemmas and how these were navigated, thus not to erase emotional effort.

3. Gender-sensitive aid: provide teach-in reliefs and mentoring networks for all female lecturers who constantly score highest on dissonance measures.

4. Sample limitations: respondents were recruited using convenience methods and are more female and mid-career than stratified random samples based on institution type will be used by.

5. The questionnaire contained only forced-choice and Likert-scale items; no open-ended answers were collected, limiting interpretive depth.

Table 2 Policy Implications at a Glance

Recommendation	Operational Path (One-Sentence Action)
1. Count emotional labour in workload	Add "student counselling hrs / peer-support hrs" as credit items in annual workload tables.
2. Replace box-ticking with dialogue	Replace checklist-style evaluations with formative portfolios where teachers narrate ethical dilemmas and solutions.
3. Target relief for high-risk groups	Offer 4–6 weeks teaching relief + paired mentorship for female & mid-career staff scoring top-quartile emotional dissonance.

7. Limitations and Future Research

The cross section cannot tell us what the identity trajectory is over time; future mixed methods longitudinal study would follow how surface acting become deep acting - or how it becomes exit. And then extending the sample to vocational colleges and private institutions would test for whether implementation-perception discrepancies were systemic, or stratified by institution type.

So in sum, to be emotionally sustainable, it means shifting from ritualized displays to sustainable moral ecologies toward moral ecology—an environment in which the labor for being good isn't just invisible but is visible, shared, supported.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that teacher ethics and conduct construction is a policy with ambitious goals and significant professional implications. Moral expectations cause a lot of commitment that can't be counted in feelings work, especially for female workers and those with mid-career jobs. Acknowledging this invisible labor is not a critique of the policy; rather, it is a prerequisite for its genuine and lasting success.

We therefore propose three practical refinements:

1. Emotions-well being indicators are added to official workload tables to give formal weight to student counselling,

peer support and ethics-related mentoring.

2. Replace checklist-style appraisal with formative, dialogic portfolios recording real dilemmas and solutions. Make appraisal professional development.

3. Provide short term teaching respite and intensive mentoring to the groups which currently register the highest emotional dissonance.

When teacher-ethics construction is supported by embedded recognition, teacher ethics development shifts from an external requirement to a shared responsibility within the academic community. Thus the four - have ideal becoming not just a national ambition but a day - to - day energizing reality in every university classroom.

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