

# The Moral Foundation of Craftsmanship: A Historical and Comparative Inquiry into College Teachers' Professional Ethos in China

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**Abstracts:** Rooted in the “morality-first” tradition, the Chinese craftsmanship spirit integrates ethics with expertise, positioning moral cultivation as the foundation of professional excellence. Within higher education, this spirit underpins teachers’ professional identity and their capacity to shape students’ moral and academic character. Through a comparative analysis of China’s Confucian “reverence for morality” and Western traditions of virtue ethics, this study reveals that the erosion of morality-centered professionalism among college teachers compromises instructional quality and disrupts the intergenerational transmission of professional ethics. To address this decline, three pathways are proposed: internalizing ethical consciousness through reflective practice; constructing evaluation systems aligning value recognition with performance incentives; and embedding student-centered cultural transmission in pedagogy. Collectively, these strategies aim to restore the moral foundation of teacher professionalism, renew the cultural legacy of morality-centered craftsmanship, and cultivate virtuous educators and students who embody the ethical essence of China’s pedagogical tradition while engaging with global educational discourses.

**Keywords:** Craftsman spirit; Moral education; Teacher professionalism; Chinese cultural

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## 1. Introduction

The “craftsman spirit” was key to ancient Chinese handicrafts and remains vital for modern manufacturing. Yet, the growing pursuit of “fame and fortune” has eroded this spirit, especially amid short-term gains <sup>[1]</sup>. Thus, cultivating this spirit—particularly in education—has become urgent. Globally, the craftsman spirit is seen as crucial for competitiveness and long-term growth <sup>[2]</sup>. Originating in manufacturing, it now spans industries, denoting dedication, excellence, patience, and creativity <sup>[3-5]</sup>. Teachers embodying this spirit not only improve their own practice but also transmit professional ethos to students. Within Chinese culture, teachers’ craftsman spirit emphasizes moral integrity as its root. Research confirms that workplace moral climate positively influences this

spirit<sup>[6-7]</sup>. Despite its importance, research on college teachers' morally-centered craftsman spirit remains lacking, risking neglect in cultivation efforts. Therefore, exploring its moral connotations, development dilemmas, and breakthrough paths within traditional Chinese moral culture is essential.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Craftsman spirit in Chinese moral culture

The craftsman spirit, while present in both Eastern and Western traditions, assumes a distinct moral character within Chinese culture. In the West, it originated in ancient Rome as a skill-centered ethos; in China, it emerged during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, characterized by creativity, work ethic, and a philosophical orientation toward life<sup>[8]</sup>. Over time, this spirit has extended beyond artisanal domains to inform professional values across sectors, as seen in Germany's manufacturing excellence<sup>[9]</sup>.

What fundamentally distinguishes the Chinese conception is the unity of "high morality" and "exquisite skill"<sup>[10]</sup>. Grounded in Confucian self-cultivation, the craftsman spirit historically served as the material embodiment of moral philosophy. This primacy of virtue is captured in the pre-Qin text *Zuo Zhuan*, which ranks "moral rectitude" foremost among the guiding principles for craftsmen<sup>[10-11]</sup>. This "reverence for morality" remains a defining cultural ethos in contemporary China, expressed in the principle that "morality precedes technical skill" and rooted in Confucian ideals of learning "to be a human being"<sup>[12-13]</sup>.

Accordingly, this study defines the craftsman spirit as a professional ethos animated by morality as its core, with technical mastery as integral yet secondary. For teachers, this moral foundation shapes their own development and the transmission of the spirit to students. Through a comparative lens with Western understandings, this study further clarifies the moral connotations of the teacher's craftsman spirit within China's enduring tradition of "reverence for morality" and Confucian self-cultivation.

### 2.2. What is teacher morality: the evolution of the meaning of morality

The Chinese character for "morality" originated in the Yin-Shang dynasty, denoting the act of "walking forward with force" under direct gaze, implying path selection and vigilance<sup>[14]</sup>. During the Western Zhou dynasty, its meaning shifted from external conduct to internalized moral orientation, encompassing integrity and mindful attentiveness<sup>[15]</sup>. By the Spring and Autumn period, Confucianism constructed a systematic ethics centered on morality, prioritizing ritual propriety over self-interest. The compound term *daode* (morality) first appeared in *Xunzi's Encouraging Learning*, where it signifies both the foundational baseline of conduct and its highest aspiration. In this classical tradition, morality is fundamentally the spirit of "learning to be human"<sup>[16]</sup>.

In contrast, Western philosophy—originating in ancient Greece—developed a moral framework centered on rational knowledge and transcendental ideals. Socrates established that "virtue is knowledge", enabling discernment of the "good" and thereby the acquisition of virtue. Aristotle advanced this in *Nicomachean Ethics*, asserting that "morality is the excellence of human qualities and skills", and introduced a teleological framework wherein every practice aims at its own "goodness"<sup>[17]</sup>. A distinctive Aristotelian feature lies in role-based virtue: the ruler's virtue is statesmanship, the warrior's courage, the producer's temperance—all unified by the dominance of the rational part of the soul<sup>[18]</sup>.

Despite surface convergence, a fundamental divergence emerges. Chinese "goodness" embodies a moral humanism organized around relational ethics, as articulated in the five cardinal relationships—affection, loyalty, distinction, order, and trust. Virtue resides not in abstract principles but in concrete reciprocal

bonds. Moreover, “humanity” embodies “the unity of heaven and humanity”, requiring human action to align with cosmic will. In this integrated worldview, craftsmanship is a moral practice, where the highest works presuppose “goodness and perfection”<sup>[19]</sup>. For Chinese teachers, who sculpt the “student” as their highest entrusted work, teacher morality entails a dual responsibility: one’s own moral cultivation and the moral formation of students. Upon this primacy of moral integrity, the teacher’s “craftsman spirit” finds its authentic expression.

### **2.3. Moral-centered teacher craftsmanship spirit**

In ancient China, teachers were not counted among the hundred craftsmen, yet their professional ethos embodied a spirit closely akin to craftsmanship<sup>[20]</sup>. If the craftsman’s work is the making of tools, the teacher’s work is the shaping of persons—different in form and product, yet convergent in their spiritual pursuits. As early as the Warring States period, the Rites—Learning reflected this affinity: the craftsman’s meticulous skill embodied “virtue and artistry”, a principle equally manifest in teaching<sup>[21]</sup>.

This ancient affinity found concrete expression throughout Chinese educational history. From the era of private schools onward, a craftsmanship spirit centered on teacher ethics permeated learning and daily life. Teachers drew upon their own life experiences and values to guide students through difficulties, ensuring moral care in both study and life. The adage “Once a teacher, always a father” captures this ethos of self-rectification and deep care—a spirit subtly transmitted to students, bequeathing a lasting cultural legacy. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, this tradition continued under the principle of “honoring morality”, grounding pedagogy in the cultivation of benevolence, with foundational commitments to the way, ritual propriety, and human nature. This emphasis on “virtue” shaped the “pursuit of skill”: ancient craftsmen honored their teachers, adhered rigorously to norms, and approached their work with meticulous care, thereby attaining mastery.

Japan, deeply influenced by traditional Chinese culture, similarly emphasizes the ethical dimensions of the teacher’s craftsmanship spirit. As contemporary Japanese educator Zuo observes, the teacher’s work possesses a dual quality: that of a reflective professional seeking mastery and a craftsman accumulating experiential wisdom<sup>[22]</sup>. Historical evidence corroborates this interpretation. A comprehensive examination of the Chinese Education Series—Educational Eminent Persons of All Ages reveals that Chinese teachers from the early Ming to the mid-Qing dynasties shared a consensus that moral cultivation and self-cultivation constitute the foundation of instruction<sup>[20]</sup>. Across regions and centuries, these teachers converged on a grand educational ideal: virtue and the discernment of principle as the fundamental means of enhancing one’s craft. Thus, “virtue” stands as the soul of the teacher’s craftsmanship spirit. Only when a teacher first becomes a virtuous person can he or she truly nurture others. Grasping teacher morality from the original meaning of virtue itself is essential for teachers to authentically become interpreters and transmitters of the craftsmanship spirit.

## **3. Focusing on the moral dilemma and breakthrough of the Chinese college teachers’ craftsmanship spirit**

According to Bacon, morality is the “regulation or cultivation of the mind”, requiring an in-depth study of human nature<sup>[23]</sup>. Complete morality integrates spirituality and practice—encompassing both external moral conduct and internalized moral beliefs. This aligns with the ancient Chinese conception of the dual dimensions “within oneself” and “externally extended to others”, reflecting the unity of knowledge and

action <sup>[24]</sup>. For teachers, a virtuous practitioner achieves the integration of internal cultivation and external enactment. Only from this foundation can virtue be seamlessly integrated with “skill”, attaining the highest state of the craftsmanship spirit: the unity of the Way and technical mastery.

Yet in contemporary Chinese higher education, this spirit is conspicuously lacking. Under the dual pressures of teacher evaluation mechanisms and profit-driven incentives, teacher morality has been diminished or reduced to superficial formality. Consequently, the realization of the craftsmanship spirit has become ensnared in a predicament demanding critical scrutiny and a more penetrating theoretical reckoning.

## **4. Craftsman spirit in Chinese moral culture**

### **4.1. Stimulating conscious moral awareness**

Current research on college teachers’ morality predominantly focuses on externalized moral conduct while neglecting internalization, resulting in a persistent cognition-behavior disconnect. Institutional constraints on teachers’ ethical behavior have played a positive role, yet under the subjectivization of teacher values driven by evaluation mechanisms, overly uniform moral norms fail to accommodate individualized professional ideals, thereby limiting the substantive impact of moral education. Superficial sermons and institutional mandates are difficult to transform into conscious moral awareness. To take root, teacher moral education must engage the conscious awareness of life, prompting teachers to recognize the unity of moral behavior and consciousness—the enduring foundation of the teacher’s craftsman spirit <sup>[25]</sup>.

As Dewey argued, “All purposes and values that are educationally fit for need are themselves moral” <sup>[26]</sup>. Higher education teacher morality aims to cultivate a deep awareness of morality’s educational purpose and value, enabling self-education. This self-awareness embodies the moral essence of the teacher’s craftsman spirit: to contribute naturally to good things without internal suppression, forging the soul of “goodness.” Following Guo Xiang, moral norms should be treated as part of human nature, developing and enforcing naturally rather than as deliberate social codes—lest morality become nominal and social ethos be destroyed <sup>[27]</sup>.

### **4.2. Constructing an ethical evaluation mechanism that combines the recognition of values and interests**

The evaluation mechanism for college teachers has long prioritized explicit teaching and research outcomes, favoring instrumental values while lacking effective incentives for teacher morality <sup>[28]</sup>. Instrumental values should not obliterate human values—without high moral beliefs, knowledge and technology fail to generate genuine productivity and creativity, deviating from the moral-technical unity sought by the craftsman spirit <sup>[29]</sup>. Under external assessment pressures, some teachers pursue research outputs as their primary task, relegating moral development to irrelevance. Others adopt a passive, fault-avoidant mentality or divert energy to “second careers”, creating conflicting social roles that fragment moral coherence and undermine the unity of word and deed. With the exposure of academic corruption, noble scholarly beliefs have been increasingly squeezed. Under such conditions, the craftsman spirit remains elusive.

As a Chinese thinker noted, “A good system prevents bad people from running amok; a bad system prevents good people from doing sufficient good” <sup>[30]</sup>. Teacher moral misconduct stems largely from inadequate and inequitable incentive and evaluation mechanisms. Thus, institutional construction is fundamental to moral education <sup>[31]</sup>. Current Chinese college teacher ethics systems suffer from incompleteness and the absence of long-term mechanisms integrating incentives and evaluation. Procedural evaluations dominate, with subjective

dimensions neglected. Practices such as “rotating annual excellence ratings”, performative peer evaluations, and inflated student ratings have become commonplace, revealing systemic arbitrariness and lax management. Honorary awards like “Teacher Moral Model” carry significantly less weight than research incentives and are rarely linked to substantive career outcomes—title promotion, advancement, or development opportunities—thereby undermining their motivational function. This formalistic practice deprives teacher morality of the institutional conditions necessary for authentic cultivation.

As Marx observed, “Everything for which people struggle has to do with their interests”<sup>[31]</sup>. Within a legitimate institutional framework, the market economy can effectively regulate teacher ethics through interest-based leverage, accommodating teachers’ pursuit of value identification. Two complementary principles should guide teacher ethics construction: first, ensuring fair material rewards that satisfy basic needs and provide just compensation; second, fostering spiritual identification with professional ethical norms, transforming the externalized stance of “I am required to do” into the internalized orientation of “I want to do.” Through an institutional framework integrating value recognition with interest-based incentives, morally informed behavior characteristic of the craftsman spirit can be elevated into conscious, self-sustaining moral awareness—wherein the craftsman spirit becomes not merely observable behavior but a deeply internalized professional ethos.

### **4.3. The legacy of the craftsmanship spirit centered on the teacher moral**

In *On Teachers*, Han Yu articulates that the teacher’s duty is to “transmit wisdom, impart knowledge, and resolve doubts.” The primacy of “transmitting wisdom” underscores that the cultivation of virtue constitutes the fundamental mission of education, orienting the other two functions within an ethically informed framework. The craftsman spirit embodied by college teachers thus resides not only in self-cultivation but also in the transmission of quality through meaningful teacher-student interaction.

The college teacher-student relationship differs fundamentally from that in elementary and secondary schools, marked by considerably limited face-to-face interaction. Examining current Chinese colleges, a notable proportion of teachers have neglected their responsibility for students’ moral and spiritual development, confining communication to content delivery and skill acquisition while marginalizing holistic development. This constricted interaction has eroded teachers’ moral authority and inspirational potential.

Teacher morality fundamentally represents the moral model embodied by teachers in students’ minds. Teachers focused exclusively on academic performance—showing little concern for personality development or ideological dynamics—fail to establish authentic moral authority. As Sanger contends, “The most basic goal of education is to develop virtuous people”<sup>[32]</sup>. Drawing on Rogers’ “student-centered” approach, teachers should resonate with students on the basis of respect and trust, enacting personal virtue through empathetic engagement<sup>[33]</sup>. This constitutes the moral core value of “extending from oneself to others”—deeply embedded in the teacher’s craftsman spirit.

The classic “short board” metaphor holds that a barrel’s capacity is determined by its shortest stave. Current insufficiency in college teachers’ moral construction constitutes precisely the shortest board constraining the craftsman spirit. *The Great Learning* articulates: “The Way of the great learning lies in illuminating virtuous character, renewing the people, and abiding in the highest good.” Teachers must first establish moral authority in their own person before credibly guiding others. As Confucius asks: “How can a person be upright if he cannot rectify himself?” Only when teachers possess genuine virtue and demonstrate

it in practice can they inspire and morally influence students, elevating their moral standards. Only then can teachers be truly said to possess teacher morality.

## **5. To conclude: From virtue as foundation to virtue as transmission**

The quality of the craftsman fundamentally determines the quality of the product <sup>[34]</sup>. By extension, teachers, as the craftsmen who nurture human potential, derive the value foundation of their craftsmanship spirit from teacher morality. As Sheng Xuanhuai observed, “Only when the teacher’s way is upright can there be many kind-hearted people in society”, suggesting that the presence or absence of teacher morality has profound implications for the entire social climate, lying at the very core of human society’s moral fabric. Mozi, in contrast, regarded “those who possess the Way and persuade others to teach it” as the ultimate good for teachers, while considering “to conceal good ways without teaching them” as a great evil. Across these classical perspectives, the goal of morality consistently points toward enabling both teachers and students to achieve “ultimate goodness”—a noble pursuit that transcends historical and cultural boundaries. The craftsman spirit of college teachers remains centered on this tradition of “virtue.” However, in contemporary China, shifts in the mechanisms of social trust have transformed both the manner and the intensity with which this virtue is traditionally practiced: whereas trust in teachers within traditional Chinese culture was grounded in trust in their personal character, in modern society it has become increasingly system-dependent. Yet, as Gao argues, only within a fundamentally fair and just social system can a clear and vibrant moral ethos take root <sup>[35]</sup>. This insight directs our attention to the evaluation system for college teachers in contemporary China: with institutional guarantees in place, teachers can more effectively pursue the conscious enhancement of moral awareness and practice, achieve the unity of morality and self-interest, and strive for the maximization of productive educational outcomes. Within this framework, people may understand teacher morality either as a prescribed code of conduct for teachers or as behavior that results from the requirements of such a code <sup>[36]</sup>.

The morality-centered craftsman spirit of college teachers should continue to carry forward China’s cultural tradition of “reverence for morality” and recognize the leading role of “virtue” in realizing teachers’ professional aspirations and even their personal development. Only by internalizing this value as intrinsic to the self can the craftsman spirit be more effectively embodied and authentically transmitted to students. At the same time, educators must continue to learn from excellent Western educational ideas. Under the advocacy of “student-centered” education, educators can create a shared discourse between teachers and students, enabling students to perceive the “goodness” inherent in teachers’ craftsman spirit, thereby inspiring them to simultaneously refine their professional skills while carrying forward this moral spirit.

In summary, this research seeks to draw upon a humanistic moral perspective to identify breakthrough solutions to the realistic dilemmas confronting the craftsman spirit among college teachers in China. The three pathways proposed in this study—internalization of morality, institutional safeguards, and student-centered moral transmission—represent precisely the directions in which future efforts might be most fruitfully invested. Such endeavors would not only contribute to the professional development of Chinese college teachers and to broader social progress but would also, through the transmission of the craftsman spirit from college teachers to their students, embed this spirit deeply into the future workplaces and professional lives of the next generation.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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