

## Pre-service teachers' perceptions of teacher morality in China

Ye, W., & Law, W.-W. (2019). Pre-service Teachers' Perception of Teacher Morality in China. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 86*, 1-13.

### Abstract

This study examines pre-service teachers' perceptions of teacher morality in China. Data were drawn from questionnaires completed by 203 pre-service teachers, descriptive reports by 81 pre-service teachers, and semi-structured interviews with 13 pre-service teachers in East China Normal University in Shanghai. Analyses of the findings revealed that pre-service teachers generally agreed with teacher morality and political-civic requirements, and that their perceptions of teacher morality correlated with political-civic competences; however, they expressed diverse opinions about existing teacher morality codes. This study suggests using a "regulated-autonomy" framework for understanding pre-service teachers' perceptions of teacher morality in China.

### Keywords

Pre-service teacher; teacher morality; China

### Introduction

There are two understandings of teacher morality. The paternalism tradition views moral education as a main aim of education, and teachers as authoritative custodians of higher wisdom, virtues, and appropriate values; this understanding is characteristic of more traditional or culturally homogenous societies or communities (Carr, 1993). Liberalism, however, claims values are a matter of personal choice. Teachers may hold whatever views they wish, provided they do not violate professional ethics in their teaching. Thus, inculcating moral values is primarily a familial responsibility, and teachers' primary concern is ensuring students' learning achievements. In recent decades, despite liberal-progressive educators' misgivings about teachers acting as moral custodians (Carr, 2003), there has been increased interest in the moral nature of teaching and the profession's ethical role (Schjetne, Afdal, Anker, Johannesen, & Afdal, 2016; Campbell, 2008). Studies have highlighted the following important teacher morality values: principles, rights, and duties (Strike, 1999); care and caring (Noddings, 2002); and fairness, justice, integrity, honesty, compassion, patience, responsibility, practical wisdom, and variations on the principles of non-maleficence and beneficence associated with societal expectations of professionals (Coombs, 1998; Reitz, 1998; Thompson, 1997).

However, teacher morality is not easily achieved. First, the state sets and ensures moral standards and bears responsibility for ensuring the moral quality of teaching practices; however, studies suggest the state has a limited role in defining teacher morality, as morality is only minimally enshrined in law in Western liberal democracies (Lapsley & Woodbury, 2016; Campbell, 2008). Most studies agree formal teacher professional ethics are severely limiting, and only narrowly related to legal or

contractual obligations. Teachers' actual moral and ethical responsibilities and teaching realities far exceed any code (Campbell, 2008).

Second, the teaching process is rife with moral dilemmas. The interpersonal essence of teaching provides ample fuel for moral conflicts between and among teachers, principals, students, and/or parents; and within individual teachers struggling to determine (and do) what is right in complex situations (Campbell, 2008; Levinson & Fay, 2016). Studies have shown constant conflicts between teachers' different ethical considerations, and that teachers' actions often conflict with their conscience (Colnerud, 2006). Per Terhart (1994) teachers must serve both students and society, whose interests sometimes conflict. This double mandate becomes evident in the present study, in which teachers themselves describe the ethical problems in their day-to-day professional lives. The current school reform "hype" (David & Cuban, 2010), characterised by managerialism, marketisation, and privatisation (Cribb, 2009), increases the double mandate pressure on teachers. Oser, in studying teachers' professional ethos (Oser, 1991, p. 202), argued that moral conflicts in educational settings arise when three types of moral claims (justice, care, and truthfulness) cannot be met simultaneously. These claims are critical to teachers' professional decision-making, and professional morality emerges through strategies for co-ordinating moral dimensions in search of solutions to problems.

Third, as reported internationally (Pantić & Wubbels, 2012), teacher education programmes lack a substantive focus on moral values and teachers' roles in inculcating them. Willemse, Lunenberg, and Korthagen (2005) found almost no evidence of teacher education institute's curriculum designers conducting systematic, critical analyses of the relationships between programme goals, objectives, content, and methods, and their moral aspects. Cross-country studies from south-eastern Europe (Pantić & Wubbels, 2008) show that neither values nor dealing with ethical issues are commonly explicitly addressed in teacher preparation programmes.

However, most studies on teacher morality have been conducted in the West (Carr & Landon, 1999; Husu, 2004; Colnerud, 1997); more research is needed to understand teacher morality in other different contexts, such as China. First, unlike Western societies, China has traditionally reflected a paternalistic understanding of teacher morality (Paine, 1995); the People's Republic of China's (PRC) very high teacher morality standards reflect this traditional emphasis (Ding, 2016). Second, as one-party state, the PRC not only defines teacher professional ethics, it also integrates teachers' morality and political-civic qualities (Zhu, 2014; Huang, 2010). The *Teachers' Law of People's Republic of China* stipulates that "teachers are professionals fulfilling education and teaching responsibilities, conduct missions to teach, to carry out moral education, to prepare socialist career constructors and successors, to improve nation's quality" (National People's Congress (NPC), 1993), while *The Compulsory Education Law* (NPC, 2006) expects teachers to be loyal to communist China and devoted to their education career. Third, teacher morality in China has faced many challenges recently, due to rapid social transitions, teacher education reform, the lack of teacher morality education (e.g., Tan et al., 2010), and the failure to present pre-service teachers with sample moral dilemmas from which to learn how to solve challenging situations in a

changing society (Huang, 2010). This makes China an interesting case for exploring teacher morality.

The goals of this study are to sketch Chinese pre-service teachers' morality based on their perceptions, contribute to the literature on how pre-service teachers from different cultures perceive teacher morality, and make relevant suggestions for teacher education programmes. This article first reviews the literature on teacher morality in China, and then describes the study's design and implementation. The major findings patterns are presented next, followed by some possible explanations for these patterns. This article concludes with a framework for understanding pre-service teachers' perceptions of teacher morality in China.

### **Teacher morality in China**

This section introduces three salient features of teacher morality development that make Chinese teacher morality a very broad term (including requirements/expectations on teachers' personal morality, civic-political competences, and professional ethics), and related studies on teacher morality in China.

#### ***The paternalistic teacher morality tradition in ancient China***

China has a long, paternalistic tradition of emphasising teacher morality and regarding teachers as “moral guardians” (Paine, 1995). Ancient China established very high expectations of teachers' character and conduct. Its paternalistic morality insisted one's values are inherent in one's character and conduct, and appropriate values can be transmitted effectively only by those who possess and exemplify them; teachers thus faced high expectations regarding their personal conduct, forms of expression, attitudes, and even appearance. Famous Chinese scholars/educators such as Confucius (B.C. 551-479), Mencius (B.C. 372-289), and Han Yu (B.C. 768-824) developed China's “*shi dao chuan tong*” (tradition of being a teacher)—i.e., the traditional way of teaching and being a teacher. This tradition placed high requirements on such aspects of teacher morality as the teacher-student, teacher-self, and teacher-society relationships.

In the traditional teacher-student relationship, teachers should “love students like their own children” (*ai sheng ru zi*, Confucius) and students should return filial respect; “even if you were a student under a teacher's supervision for only one day, you should treat the teacher as your father for the rest of your life” (*yi ri wei shi, zhong shen wei fu*). The traditional teacher-self relationship placed high moral demands on teachers; e.g., master knowledge to shape their good characters and become student role models, research and study with passion (*xue er bu yan*, Confucius), be lifelong learners, and love the teaching profession (Huang, 2003).

The traditional teacher-society relationship reflected another aspect of China's paternalistic teacher morality—i.e., that teachers were viewed as authoritative custodians of higher wisdom, virtues, and appropriate values (Carr, 1993). The relationship, per China's “*shi dao chuan tong*” tradition, highlighted teachers' important role in society and emphasised society must respect teachers and value education. As Confucian philosopher Xun Zi suggested. “if a country is to prosper, it must respect and value teachers” (*guo jiang xing, bi gui shi er zhong fu*) (Zhu, 2014).

### ***The integration of political-civic requirements and teacher morality in the early PRC***

The 1949 founding of the PRC ushered in an era of communist moral education. Confucian ideals were replaced by Marxist theory, based on Marxist philosophy, political economy, and scientific socialism. Political-civic requirements, belief in Marxism, and loyalty to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and PRC were deemed central to teacher morality. After 1949, most school teachers who had taught or been taught under the *Kuo Ming Tang* could remain in the profession, provided they studied, adopted and expressed belief in Marxism (Sui, 2012). A series of ideological education movements, including the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), re-educated teachers, often through political, physical and psychological attacks (Zhou, 2016), to make them accept and obey CCP-mandated political-civic requirements. Teachers were expected to display selfless dedication and loyalty to the CCP and PRC. Many teachers in the early PRC treated their job as a glorious task assigned by the CCP and PRC, and were influenced by collectivism to put work before family (Ding, 2016).

### ***Tightening control on teacher morality in the post-Mao era***

Since the 1978 policy of reform and opening to the world, education and teachers have played increasingly important economic development roles. To facilitate quality education reform and cultivate competitive citizens in the global age (Law, 2014), China shifted from its previous closed normal education system to a more open one, but also increased its control over and expectations of teacher morality, reflecting China's traditional paternalistic teacher morality and highlighting teachers' political-civic requirements.

Recently, China has issued policies and laws on teacher morality, including 2005's *Advice on Further Enhancement and Improvement of Teacher's Morality Construction*; 2008's revised *Primary and Middle School Teachers' Ethic Code*; 2010's *Nation's Mid- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development Guideline (2010-2020)* (which highlighted enhancing teachers' morality construction, education in professional ideals and morality, and responsibility for and commitment to teaching, and deemed morality the first criterion for teacher evaluation, recruitment and promotion); and 2014's *Method of Disposition for Handling Primary and Middle School Teachers Who Violate Professional Ethics*.

The *Primary and Middle School Teachers' Ethic Code* (Ministry of Education (MOE), 2008) made six major basic requirements reflecting China's traditional paternalistic expectations of teacher morality—i.e., asking teachers to love the teaching profession, love and care for students, teach students with patience, become role models, be lifelong learners, and commit to being “ladders for students, willing to dedicate themselves”—and the political-civic requirement of being loyal to the CCP and PRC. The *Method of Disposition for Handling Primary and Middle School Teachers Who Violate Professional Ethics* (MOE, 2014) and the *Ten Norms for Middle and Primary School Teachers in the New Era* (MOE, 2018) set a bottom line for teachers by highlighting forbidden behaviours, including speech or actions violating CCP and state policies, negatively influencing students through unfair treatment, etc.

The decentralisation and marketisation of China's education system has changed the traditional "teacher-society" relationship, in which teacher had full authority, including over the teacher-student-parent relationship; for example, teachers could administer corporal punishment and parents, by both cultural practice and law, could not intervene (Wang, 2014). However, in contemporary China, teachers now share authority over the teacher-student-parent relationship with parents. Due to China's recent industrialisation, Westernisation, marketisation, implementation of the one-child policy, and ban on corporal punishment, parents have claimed power in education (He, 2018).

Additionally, China's profound post-reform economic changes have challenged teachers' ability to live their morality. Chinese schools became the first observable impact point for social changes (problems) among children and adolescents; economic reforms spurred massive urbanisation, leading to increased internal migration, which in turn overturned traditional family dynamics and increased stress levels among youths in schools, thus complicating teachers' ability to behave morally (e.g., Ye, 2016).

### ***China Studies of Chinese teacher morality***

Studies of Chinese teacher morality have increased in the Chinese literature since the 1990s. However, most focus on theoretical discussions of teacher morality's definition, traditions, and problems. For instance, Chen (2001) defined teacher morality using the professional and ethical requirements placed on teachers through laws, regulations, etc. Empirical studies examining Chinese teachers' views on teacher morality have become increasingly common in recent decades. Tan et al. (2010) surveyed teachers in eastern, central, and western China and reported teachers disagreed that teacher morality required a teacher and his/her family to be "fully devoted to [one's teaching] work," and decried the lack of teacher morality education in teacher education programmes.

Several recent studies have applied theories from Western teacher morality studies to Chinese teachers. Zhou (2016) and Wang and Lu (2011) examined Chinese teachers' morality from a moral dilemma perspective, using theories like Oser's teachers' professional ethos model (1991). Chen, Wei, and Jiang (2017) found the ethical dimension of teachers' practical knowledge was embedded in a complex web of meanings, compromises with national policies, negotiations with school governance, and concern for students with diverse backgrounds.

Although most Chinese studies on Chinese teacher morality are theoretical discussions or examinations of teachers' perceptions of teachers' ethical codes, and Western-influenced or -conducted studies mainly examine Chinese teachers' ethical dilemmas, both provide some understandings of teacher morality in China. More efforts are needed to bridge Chinese and Western perspectives on teacher morality. This study explores Chinese teachers' perceptions of teacher morality (based on both Chinese and Western literature), professional ethical codes, political-civic competences, and ethical dilemmas.

### **This Study**

This study has four research questions:

- (1) What are pre-service teachers' perceptions of teacher morality and ethics codes

in China?

(2) What are pre-service teachers' perceptions of their political-civic competences?

(3) How do Chinese pre-service teachers respond to moral dilemmas?

(4) What is the relationship between pre-service teachers' perceptions of teacher morality and their political-civic competencies?

The study adopted a mixed methodology to collect data, including a questionnaire survey, descriptive reports, and semi-structured interviews.

A questionnaire survey is a relatively inexpensive means of exploring the views of many informants (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). The questionnaire used was based on existing studies on teacher morality and citizen political-civic competence in China. Its first section included statements reflecting both paternalistic and liberal understandings of teacher morality and teacher professional ethics codes in China, including such seemingly conflicting items as "teachers should be moral role models for students," and "morality is only a matter of teachers' personal choice."

The second section included statements reflecting each of the four types political-civic competence requirements to be mastered by Chinese citizens, per the most recent (but not yet clarified in teacher education standard/policies) High School Moral-Political Education Curriculum Guideline (MOE, 2017): political identity (PI), including knowledge of, a positive attitude about, and support for socialism with Chinese characteristics, the CCP's leadership, and socialist core values; scientific spirit (SS), comprising mastering Marxist ideals and shaping cultural confidence; rule-of-law awareness (LA) (see Appendix A), e.g., developing acceptable opinions on constitutional supremacy, legal authority, equality, legal responsibilities, etc.; and public participation (PP), consisting of knowing rules and methods, gaining experience, and improving one's abilities for public participation. Modelled on the MOE's four citizenship competence definitions and four levels of evaluation criteria, the section identified major indicators of pre-service teachers' perceptions of the four citizenship competences, and their perceived (rather than actual) citizenship competences.

Some questions in the second section were adapted from the ICCS (International Civic and Citizenship Education Study) (2009–2011) and from empirical studies of citizenship education in Yangzhong, Shanghai, Beijing, and Hong Kong by Ye (2018), Law and Ng (2009), and Pan (2011). The political-civic competence section included 25 items (seven PI items, five SS, five LA, eight PP). Based on China's teacher ethic codes, the first section included two items on teachers' political-civic competence ("support state policies," "Obey laws and regulations") essential for their profession. The second section deeply explored teachers' political-civic competence in cognitive, affective, and behavioural domains. Both sections used five-point Likert scales (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree) to ascertain respondents' degree of agreement with the statements.

To ensure reliability and encourage honesty, the questionnaire was anonymous (Cohen et al., 2007), questionnaire data was kept by the researchers only, and political-civic items relied on less-direct questioning. The internal consistency of quantitative items in the political-civic section was estimated using Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ).

In the questionnaire's third section, all surveyed pre-service teachers were required

to make (and explain) responses to five hypothetical dilemmas: 1) a student misbehaves in the classroom, seriously bothering other students listening to the lecture (hereafter, classroom misbehaviour); 2) a colleague teacher's behaviour hurts one of your students' feelings (hereafter, hurtful colleague); 3) a perennially failing student scores 59 on an exam (60 is the pass point)—will you pass him/her (hereafter, pass/fail); 4) a student behaves poorly, but his/her parents will beat him/her if told (hereafter, violent parents); and, 5) a parent criticises your teaching (hereafter, parental criticism).

In the questionnaire's fourth section, all respondents reflected on the statement, "Many people use this poem as a metaphor for teachers' sacrifice: 'A silkworm exhausts its silk until death. A candle burns itself out to give light'. What are the implications of this metaphor for being a teacher, and why?" This metaphor has long been used to describe societal expectations of teachers' selfless dedication in China (Ding, 2001). The use of metaphors to spur reflection in research on teacher studies can make teachers' intuitive knowledge about themselves, their classrooms, and their practice more explicit (Erickson & Pinnegar, 2017; Saban, 2006). Many studies have used metaphors across diverse educational contexts in Western nations (Erickson & Pinnegar, 2017; Martínez, Sauleda, & Huber, 2001) and China (e.g., Zhao, Coombs, & Zhou, 2010). This study used this metaphor to examine teachers' perceptions of "selfless dedication" requirements in Chinese teacher morality codes.

The study selected the Master of Education (M.Ed.) programme of the East China Normal University (ECNU) in Shanghai for investigation. The questionnaire was piloted with two M.Ed. graduates to ensure that questionnaire items could be clearly understood by respondents and finished within around 20 min. One hundred and fifty six Year One M.Ed. students received questionnaires from one of the authors directly; 136 questionnaires were sent to Year Two M.Ed. students via email. The return rate was 70 per cent; 203 questionnaires (122 from Year One and 81 from Year Two, respectively) were completed and returned from 13 majors<sup>1</sup> in the two-year M.Ed. programme (see Table 1).

[Table 1 about here]

Quantitative questionnaire data were analysed using SPSS software. The Cronbach alpha ( $\alpha$ ) for the 20 teacher morality and professional ethics items was .835 ( $\alpha = .890$  for 17 paternalist items and  $\alpha = .706$  for three liberal items), and .894 for the 25 teacher political-civic competencies items ( $\alpha = .861$  in PI,  $\alpha = .873$  in SS,  $\alpha = .702$  in LA, and  $\alpha = .848$  in PP), showing a high degree of internal consistency. Quantitative data were analysed as follows: (a) frequency distribution, means and crosstabs (nominal by interval) were calculated to answer Research Questions 1 and 2; and, (b) multiple regression analysis was used to answer Research Question 4.

The second data collection method involved asking post-practicum Year Two students to describe a teaching practice situation involving a pupil, parent, or colleague he or she found difficult to handle, from a moral or ethical perspective, to examine what

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<sup>1</sup> Chinese, math, English, Moral-politics, history, geography, physics, chemistry, biology, science, special education and art education.

sorts of ethical situations impressed/challenged pre-service teachers in their teaching practice. Eighty-one writings were collected—all from respondents who had participated in and returned the questionnaire.

For the third data collection method, two research assistants conducted two follow-up, semi-structured focus group interviews to collect more detailed information on teachers' perceptions of teacher morality in China. Focus group interviews “capitalize on the interactions within a group to elicit rich experiential data” (Ashbury, 1995, p. 414) and allow different/differing views to be presented and challenged (Kitzinger, 1994). The assistants were coeval to and established friendly relations with the interviewees. A life history question (“Why did you choose this teacher education programme?”) was posed to elicit potentially personal sensitive issues (e.g., Kvale, 1996). Thirteen students, randomly selected from different major backgrounds, participated in the survey, and were divided into one six- and one seven-person group; each group had one Year Two student, while the rest were Year One students. Each interview lasted around 110 minutes (see Appendix B for interview guidelines). Interviews were audio-recorded and notes taken; the recordings were transcribed for analysis.

The above qualitative data collection tools (i.e., the third and fourth questionnaire sections, and second and third data collection tools) were designed to reflect the importance of exploring one's disturbances and articulations to understand one's ethics. Qualitative data gathered via open-ended questionnaire questions (coded Q01, Q02, etc.), interviews (coded I01, I02, etc.), and pre-service teachers' practice-based descriptive reports on teacher morality (coded S01, S02, etc.), were read and subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The authors first read the interview transcripts, descriptive reports, moral dilemma responses, and metaphor reflections, then identified key themes related to China's teacher morality codes, citizen political-civic competence, and teacher moral dilemma, based on Oser's (1991) model. Secondly, the authors reviewed, evaluated and coded the data to answer Research Questions 1 and 4, and to supplement and clarify the quantitative findings. They coded pre-service teachers' descriptive reports and responses to moral dilemmas, using five categories emerged from the data – care, truthfulness, justice, authority, and harmony – the first three of which overlapped Oser's (1991). They coded pre-service teachers' responses to the sacrifice metaphor using two categories: agree and disagree. They coded interviews using three categories (teacher-student relationship, teacher-society relationship, teacher-self relationship) to identify their perceptions of teachers' morality and political-civic competences. Thirdly, in addition to explaining how the qualitative data were coded, the authors enhanced data transparency by citing data verbatim from students' descriptive reports and interviews with personal identifiers, and analytical transparency by using and weighing alternative data sources.

The data were collected between October 2017 and January 2018. All participants gave their informed consent to participate in the study, which had university ethics approval, prior to its administration; their identities were held in the strictest confidence. Due to the limited sample, this study is not generalisable.



## Findings

This section reports pre-service teachers' perceptions of teacher morality, per the questionnaire survey, and reports on ethical situations in teaching practice. Interview findings are discussed later.

### *Pre-service teachers' perception of teacher morality codes and teacher sacrifice*

Generally, pre-service teachers in this study showed positive attitudes towards the state's regulated teacher morality codes. Per the questionnaire data, they highly agreed teachers should be moral role models for students (Mean,  $M=4.65$ , with 4 and 5, respectively, representing "agree" and "strongly agree"); should be careful about their behaviours, both in and out of school ( $M=4.50$ ); should use decent language in teaching ( $M=4.58$ ); and should conduct moral education regardless of their subject background ( $M=4.61$ ). They also generally supported state policies (4.44) and related laws (4.69). They agreed teachers should be fair to all students (4.63), care about students (4.59), be serious and devoted to their work (4.47), always improve their teaching (4.71), and not seek private profit from their positions (4.49).

A major theme (respondents' conflicting opinions) emerged from the questionnaire's open question on the teacher sacrifice (silkworm) metaphor. Only 29.1% of pre-service teachers agreed the metaphor presented a fair standard for teacher sacrifice. Of these, most stressed that dedication is key to the teaching profession, and that those wishing to teach should make sacrifices. They referenced famous educators' sayings to support their views, including Tao Xingzhi's (1891-1946) saying, "I come with my full heart [to do education], without asking for a half piece of grass" (Q05).

In contrast, 57.1% of pre-service teachers disagreed with the metaphor. First, they noted the importance of setting boundaries on teacher sacrifice to ensure teachers' freedom. Typical sentiments included, "a teacher has his/her own life as well, and can't sacrifice his/her health/family/entertainment etc. to work" (Q12) and "a teacher is a person, not a god. Sacrifice teachers' themselves will lead to them unhappy. If one was not happy how can he/she teach excellent" (Q11).

Second, they raised concerns about the need to balance teachers' responsibilities and rights to highlight teacher autonomy. One stated, "I think this metaphor is out of step now; dedication is important to the teaching profession, but teachers' inputs need be repaid" (Q13). Another explained, "the nation keeps developing; providing better education to students cannot only depend on teachers' sacrifice. We should input more resources to education, to improve education equality" (Q14). Some highlighted teachers' autonomy and freedom, reflecting that "this metaphor, at first glance, seems like it praises teachers, but in fact is a *dao de bang jia* (moral kidnapping—i.e., occupying the moral high ground to dictate others' actions) of teachers, depriving teachers of their basic rights. Very cruel" (Q15). One even pointed out the unbalanced right/sacrifice expectations that teachers will "get the lowest wage [in society] but make the largest sacrifice; teacher morality is mainly based on teachers' conscious" (Q16).

Finally, the pre-service teachers raised their understandings of teacher and sacrifice, saying the "metaphor is out of date today... teachers should be wise rather than only sacrifice themselves... We cannot always give output but without input... I would like

to use the ‘electric bulb’ [as a] metaphor for teachers [rather] than the candle. The electronic bulb receives endless power and gives light to us. This is more sustainable” (Q17), and that “a rich leisure life can benefit teachers’ work as well” (Q19).

### ***Pre-service teachers’ perception of political-civic requirements***

Pre-service teachers perceived themselves as having high political-civic competences. The mean of 25 items on pre-service teachers’ perceptions of their political-civic competences was 4.15. They agreed they knew socialist core values (4.13), identified with socialist core values (4.37), knew socialism with Chinese characteristics (4.06), agreed that only socialism can develop China (4.16), and knew Marxist world views (4.01). They showed positive attitudes toward political participation—i.e., trusted the government (4.23), voted for National People’s Congress (NPC) Members (3.80), were aware of the CCP’s recent 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress (3.95), and volunteered (4.35). Pre-service teachers’ political affiliation correlated with their perceptions of items related to knowing socialism with Chinese characteristics ( $\eta = .204$ ,  $p = .018$ ,  $\eta^2 = .042$ )<sup>2</sup>; following certain legal reports personally ( $\eta = .242$ ,  $p = .029$ ,  $\eta^2 = .059$ ); voting for NPC members ( $\eta = .253$ ,  $p = .004$ ,  $\eta^2 = .064$ ); and awareness of the CCP’s recent 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress ( $\eta = .278$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $\eta^2 = .072$ ). Pre-service teachers who were also CCP members showed at least a 10% higher degree of agreement on these items (means).

### ***Factors affecting pre-service teachers’ perceptions of teacher morality and political-civic competences***

Multiple regression analysis was employed to explore the predictors of respondents’ perceptions of teacher morality and political-civic competences. First, the predictors of these two categories (controlling for background variables) explained 58.6% ( $R^2 = 0.586$ ,  $F(9,184) = 28.905$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and 50.6% ( $R^2 = 0.506$ ,  $F(6,187) = 31.894$ ,  $p < .001$ ) of the variance, respectively (Tables 2 and 3). Second, pre-service teachers’ perceptions of their political identity (PI;  $\beta = 0.337$ ,  $p < .001$ ), scientific spirit (SS;  $\beta = .249$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and rule-of-law awareness (LA;  $\beta = .289$ ,  $p < .01$ ) significantly predicted the tendencies of their perceptions of teacher morality (Table 2); however, their perception of public participation (PP;  $\beta = -0.0061$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ) did not, nor did their gender, teacher certificate, graduation from normal school, or urban/rural birthplace. Third, the tendencies of pre-service teachers’ perceptions of political-civic competences were significantly predicted by their perceptions of teacher morality ( $\beta = 0.695$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and their CCP membership ( $\beta = -0.106$ ,  $p < .05$ ) (Table 3).

[Tables 2 and 3 about here]

### ***Pre-service teachers’ response to moral dilemmas and reports of teacher ethical situations in teaching practice***

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<sup>2</sup> Only for scale correlations.

This study adopted Oser's (1991) model of teachers' three types of moral claims (justice, care, and truthfulness) to solve moral conflicts and analyse pre-service teachers' responses to moral dilemmas on the questionnaire, and found the following major themes in pre-service teachers' responses to the five purported dilemmas.

In general, most teachers suggested they could handle all five dilemmas (See Table 4), as it was their responsibility to do so.

[Table 4 about here]

Like Oser (1991), this study found pre-service teachers stressed moral claims (care, justice, truthfulness) in their reflective responses to moral dilemmas. Unlike Oser, this study revealed pre-service teachers' struggles to exert their authority while maintaining harmonious relationships with students and parents. In responding to the first four dilemmas, over half of the pre-service teachers highlighted their caring for students. In handling the parental criticism dilemma, they mainly considered authority and harmony; around 40% emphasised teacher authority ("I am the professional teacher" (Q02), "I have a teacher certificate" (Q03)) and suggested they would only consider useful parental criticisms. Another 49.8% were inclined to collaborate with parents to improve teaching, and to promote school-parent harmony (3%, 0.5%, and 1.5% were concerned with caring, justice, and truthfulness, respectively).

Analysis of 81 Year Two pre-service teachers' descriptive writings on teacher ethical situations in teaching practice produced two recurring themes. First, pre-service teachers specified two values in the state-mandated teacher morality codes as important. The first was caring, echoing their high degree of agreement with the survey statement, "teachers should care about students" (M=4.59). Most reported interactions with students that highlighted the importance of the value, "care about students," to teacher morality, and that showed that school teachers love their students:

A very fat boy in my class joined his classmates to do gym on the playground. However, he was too fat to find a suitable uniform. The teacher suggested his parents to buy a white T-shirt for the boy, but they declined. The teacher bought a white T-shirt for the boy that looked perfect, similar to other students'. The boy was happy and loved the shirt (S01).

Several pre-service teachers reported similar events between them and their students. Most suggested that caring for students was important for teacher morality. One commented that

a boy wasn't attentive in my class for several days. Rather than criticise him directly, I shared a lot of my own high school stories. Suddenly, I realised I had two chocolate bars in my bag. I gave one to him and kept one for myself. Then I continued my talk. The boy suddenly started to talk, saying "I didn't have my dinner yesterday, nor the breakfast this morning, I'm going to starve." He had conflicts with his mother recently. We had a very good talk that day and I think it

was helpful for the boy (S04).

The second important value was respect. In their reports on ethical situations in their teaching practice, pre-service teachers raised concerns about what teachers should respect, as the 2008 Teacher Professional Ethic Codes only directs them “to respect colleagues and parents” and “respect students’ dignity,” without further explanation.

Pre-service teachers reported teachers’ violations of the need for respect. One reported a ‘scary’ situation involving her mentor teacher and a new teacher:

C was my mentor teacher. D was a new school teacher under C’s supervision. D was preparing for a public class<sup>3</sup>, and thus always visited C for advice. D was humble and hardworking, while C always criticised her lesson design. What scared me was that, after D left, C would complain about D to other people in the office; not only criticise her work but also her personal life, like WeChat moments... Therefore, I believe respecting other people is a basic principle for a teacher, no matter how much experience she/he has (S02).

### **Possible explanation and discussion**

This section offers possible explanations for Chinese pre-service teachers’ perceptions of teacher morality, referencing interview data and the wider Chinese context.

#### ***Pre-service teachers’ strong motivation to work as a teacher and state/CCP control mechanisms***

The participating pre-service teachers’ high degree of agreement with China’s teacher morality standards and political-civic requirements, and the relationship between their perceptions thereof, can largely be explained by pre-service teachers’ strong motivation to become teachers and the state’s/CCP’s teacher morality control mechanisms.

Their motivation to work as teachers was evident in the questionnaire data; 85.2% of respondents had already earned a teacher certification<sup>4</sup>, although only 56.7% had graduated from a normal education track. It is also shown by the programme in which they enrolled. ECNU’s two-year M.Ed. programme focuses on teacher preparation, and the students accepted fall mainly into two categories: students from a normal education track, and students from non-normal education tracks. Their initial reasons for wanting to work as a teacher were mixed and sometimes conditional, including most of the factors listed by Richardson and Watt (2006), such as self-perception of teaching abilities (e.g., “In my B.Ed. years, I gradually found my talents in teaching” (I05)), and intrinsic motivations, such as liking teaching (“I like to work as a teacher. Though my previous university was leading in foreign language studies, I still need a more professional degree [from a leading normal university to work as a teacher]” (I02)). Some mentioned personal utility motivations, such as getting an M.Ed. from a prestigious normal university to facilitate their job hunting. One suggested,

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<sup>3</sup> Class open for other teachers to observe.

<sup>4</sup> China’s teacher certification tests allowed students from both normal education and non-normal education track to participate. Teachers’ certification is necessary for one to be recruited as a school teacher.

when I was a just B.Ed., one of the best schools in Chengdu [her hometown] gave me an offer, but I declined. I wish to work in better schools [after I get M.Ed. from ECNU]. I believe working in better schools will provide me better professional development opportunities (I01).

Pre-service teachers' strong perceptions of teacher morality, political-civic requirements, and the relationship between them can also be explained by the Chinese state's control mechanisms for teacher morality and political-civic competence, which affect teachers and those wanting to be teachers.

The Chinese state sets fulfilment of political-civic requirements and professional moral standards as pre-requisites for teacher certification. As many scholars have noted, the Chinese state has relied on mechanisms such as the teacher certification system, the professional ranking system, and in-school accountability systems (Paine & Fang, 2006) to control teachers in the post-Mao era. In this study, pre-service teachers accepted MOE-mandated teacher morality codes and political requirements as necessary first steps in obtaining teacher certification (MOE, 2008), which pre-service teachers must have to enter the teaching profession. When asking interviewees for examples of teacher morality violations, no interviewees reported other teachers' violations of political standards; most gave examples of teachers' misbehaviours in their student and/or parent relationships, and daily work failures (e.g., not preparing their lessons). Pre-service teachers explained they believed adhering to political requirements was a bottom-line requirement for working as a teacher. Additionally, the two survey participants majoring in politics were prepared for and taught compulsory ideology education curricula—morality and the rule of law (Grades 1-9), and moral-political education (Grades 10-12), which also briefly introduced politics and economics in other countries. The remaining respondents majored in such subjects as language, mathematics, science, history, etc., and focused their classroom teaching on academic knowledge teaching and exercises to support students' examination aspirations (e.g., Davey, Lian, & Higgins, 2007); their lack of opportunity to address politics in the classroom explains their not thinking about doing so in their future classrooms.

Moreover, state codes and regulations enforce the integration of teacher morality with teachers' adherence to political-civic requirements. China's laws, policies, and regulations have consistently made political competence a component of teacher morality. China's 2008 teacher morality codes, for example, included six major requirements, the first being to love the nation and obey its laws (MOE, 2008). China's teacher morality codes set the expectation that teachers will show greater political competence than regular citizens. Chinese citizens are expected to support socialism with Chinese characteristics, the CCP leadership, and socialist core values (MOE, 2017); teachers, however, are additionally warned that any speech or behaviour violating CPC or state policy will be deemed a desecration of teacher morality, resulting in punishments ranging from reprimands to dismissal (MOE, 2014).

Finally, the Chinese state influences the perceptions of teacher morality held by pre-service teachers who are also CCP members through special on-campus activities

during their teacher training. CCP members must attend both CCP member meetings and education and training sessions (*san hui yi ke*). The former include activities like exchanging opinions, self-criticising, etc., while the latter (around 30 hours annually) involve lessons on basic CCP knowledge, recent national and international political news, etc. (Cao, 2016). This may explain the correlation between students' CCP affiliation and their perceptions of political identity survey items, as presented earlier. In this study, 44.3% of survey respondents were CCP members. Members were required to attend the *san hui yi ke* and reported that “nearly every Wednesday afternoon we have to attend [CCP] activities” (I01) and “learned a lot from the related lectures, polices and documents reading activities [for CCP members]” (I04).

### ***Pre-service teachers' reflections on the transition of traditional teacher authority in contemporary society***

In this study, in response to moral dilemmas in the survey arising from parental criticism, around 40% of the pre-service teachers emphasised teacher authority, while another 49.8% were inclined to promote harmony between school and parents; in their teaching practice, they highlighted the value, respect. As presented earlier, this reveals the two values—teacher authority and harmony—pre-service teachers viewed as important for teacher morality in China, and reflects the transition away from traditional teacher authority in contemporary society.

In the paternalistic tradition of teacher morality, teacher authority is an important part of teacher morality. Studies (e.g., Lai, Gu & Hu, 2015) have shown Chinese school teachers are regarded as experts in their subject areas, role models, and moral agents, and are expected to be respected by students and parents as authority figures, both inside and outside the classroom. As noted by many studies, there has been a change in the PRC from the traditional perception of teacher authority (in which the teacher wields sole authority in the teacher-student-parent relationship) to one in which teachers and parents share that authority. Scholars have reported that, against China's emerging market economy background, parents have started to view teachers as service providers, rather than unchallengeable authorities (Chang, Schwartz, Dodge, & McBride-Chang, 2003).

However, despite the transition, teacher authority is still obvious and is ensured by several mechanisms in the PRC's education systems. First, the state's laws emphasise respecting teachers; the *Education Law of the People's Republic of China*, for example, stipulates that “education is the basis of socialist modernisation construction. The nation would guarantee the preferential development of education. The society should care and support education development. The society should respect teachers” (NPC, 2015). Second, teacher authority is perpetuated by the education system, which gives teachers the power to praise, criticise, reward, or punish students, influence class council members and “three good students”<sup>5</sup> selection, and control seating arrangements<sup>6</sup>, all of which give them control over students' school life (Shen, 2012).

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<sup>5</sup> An honor title for students perform well in three aspects: academic, athletic, and moral-political.

<sup>6</sup> Students' seats in Chinese classrooms are always arranged by teachers, based on the concern of students' height, academic performance, vision ability, gender, etc.

In addition, as Shen (2012) and Yang (2010) suggested, teacher authority is an important part of teacher morality, and a vital basis for teaching. In classroom teaching, intellectual disagreement and student-initiated free expression and thinking are regarded as disruptive behaviours (Haley & Ferro, 2011). When reflecting on parental criticism dilemmas, around 40% of pre-service teachers in this study emphasised teacher authority and highlighted teacher professionalism and systematic education resources. On the other hand, based on their experience as students and student-teachers, pre-service teachers also noted the limitation of highlighting teacher authority alone in the social transition in contemporary China. In the interviews, one interviewee reported that his teachers had used their teacher authority/power to gain monetary benefits:

In my junior middle school years, students from rich families gave teachers gifts, money to “buy” all kinds of good opportunities in school. For instance, good seats...I remind myself that in the future, I will not be a teacher like them (I06).

In their reports on teaching practices, student-teachers showed dislike for and criticised other teachers’ authoritarian attitudes and behaviours toward students, noting “[teachers] should respect students, should not treat them as [their] subordinates, or always order students [around]” (I07).

When asked how they dealt with moral dilemmas involving parents and family education, many pre-service teachers in this study reported delegating their authority to parents to maintain harmony. Harmony is emphasised in traditional Chinese culture, with Confucius having stressed the importance of cooperation and harmony among people. Leung, Brew, Zhang, and Zhang (2011) pointed out that many people from countries influenced by Confucianism—such as Korea and Japan, as well as China—deal with disagreements by maintaining interpersonal harmony, rather than through confrontation (e.g., Gabrenya & Hwang, 1996), and do so without reference to a carefully analysed conflict framework (e.g., Deutsch & Coleman, 2000), as might be found in the West. In the interviews, pre-service teachers expressed that “reality is very complex... teachers need to learn how to resolve [conflicting] issues related to parents; if not, they may face problems or even punishment” (I04). When responding to the ‘parental criticism’ moral dilemma, some pre-service teachers highlighted harmony, stating

teachers should patiently explain their teaching to parents, to help them to understand teachers’ consideration in teaching design. It’s a normal phenomenon that parents can’t understand teachers’ teaching. Teachers should be patient (S04).

### ***Post-1990s pre-service teachers’ autonomy in interpreting teacher sacrifice***

Although China’s teaching profession’s morality codes were made in a top-down manner and are tightly controlled by the state and the CCP, they are nonetheless very abstract (e.g., Zhu, 2014) and provide teachers room to interpret teacher morality in practice. In this study, pre-service teachers’ responses to the teacher sacrifice metaphor reveal their autonomy in understanding teacher morality in China.

The PRC, in its early years, promoted the collectivist expectation that teachers would make selfless sacrifices to show their loyalty to the CCP and the state. This expectation continues to this day, with the state having made teacher sacrifice a requirement in recent policies. In the *Primary and Middle School Teacher Professional Morality Codes* (MOE, 2008), teachers were asked to be willing to dedicate and sacrifice themselves, while the *Nation's Mid- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development Guideline (2010-2020)* added that teachers should be indifferent to fame and wealth.

However, despite these requirements, there has been no official guidance on how to be a selfless teacher in practice, nor has any punishment been specified for teachers who do not meet this expectation. Thus, teachers have a degree of autonomy when interpreting this requirement. Most pre-service teachers in this study disagreed with the teacher sacrifice metaphor, revealing their autonomy in understanding teacher sacrifice; here, this article adopts Ballou's (1998, p. 105) definition of autonomy as "the quality or state of being self-governing."

Several pre-service teachers in this study clarified their thoughts about teacher sacrifice by stressing the need to set boundaries, and to balance teachers' responsibilities with their rights. Their understanding of teacher sacrifice might be explained by one feature of their generation. The surveyed pre-service teachers, most of whom were only-children born after 1990, were part of a generation that has been described as more individualistic, in studies on China's "me culture" generation (Deng, 2016; Sima & Pugsley, 2010). They expressed individualistic values ("a teacher is a person, not a god," "a teacher has his/her own life as well, and can't sacrifice his/her health/family/entertainment etc. to work") and emphasised the validity of personal attainment, such as expectations of improving wages (disagree with "teachers get the lowest wage [in society], and make the largest sacrifice"). They were brought up as China opened its economy and society to Western democracies, and have difficulty accepting China's traditionally less democratic, more authoritarian interpersonal relationships (Author et al., 2018).

Pre-service teachers' understanding of teacher sacrifice could be influenced by their context and may change over time. It should be noted that teachers are still highly respected and viewed as knowledgeable authorities in China today. Teachers are generally ranked above corporate managers and mid-level military officers (Ding & Sun, 2007), hold an important role in society, and often shoulder heavy responsibilities for the nation's educational mobilisation. Underlying this phenomenon is the paternalistic tradition of high expectations for teacher morality and the fact that most teachers meet those expectations (e.g., Ren & Zheng, 2011). Pre-service teachers in this study were in their beginning years of professional development, and had not yet entered the teaching profession; as such, their professional morality, including their views on teacher sacrifice, may change and develop over time. Moreover, though teacher sacrifice is only one among numerous requirements in China's teacher morality codes, it is related to teachers' conforming to many other moral requirements, such as a commitment to and love of the teaching profession.

**Conclusion: a "regulated-autonomy" framework for understanding pre-service**



### **teachers' perception of teacher morality in China**

Extant studies (e.g., Lapsley & Woodbury, 2016; Campbell, 2008) have reported the influence of liberalism and the state's limited role in defining teacher morality, and have viewed teacher morality as difficult to achieve due to the moral dilemmas in the profession and the lack of teacher morality education. With specific reference to pre-service teachers in ECNU in China, which has long had a paternalistic tradition of teacher morality, this article has revealed that some of the moral dilemmas confronting sampled pre-service teachers in China were not covered in Oser's model (1991), such as teacher authority and harmony. Moreover, this study found that pre-service teachers generally agreed with the state's and the CCP's strict requirements on teachers' political-civic competence as a feature of teacher morality, and that their perception of teacher morality correlated with their political-civic competence. However, they questioned aspects of the existing teacher morality code; for instance, in their reports on teacher morality in their teaching practice, most disagreed with the silkworm metaphor, stating the need for limits on teacher sacrifice and a balance between teachers' rights and responsibilities, and instead emphasised caring and respect. This can be attributed to their strong motivation to become teachers, the state's/CCP's tight control over teacher morality, their reflections on the transition of China's traditional teacher authority in contemporary society, and post-1990s pre-service teachers' autonomy in interpreting teacher morality.

This study supplements the extant literature on teacher morality by proposing a "regulated-autonomy" framework for understanding pre-service teachers' perception of teacher morality and the aims of education in China. Rather than merely analysing the state's influence on teacher morality codes, teachers' perceptions of moral dilemmas, or teacher morality education, this framework focuses on how the power struggles and interactions among different actors—the CCP-led state, society, and pre-service teachers—impact pre-service teachers' perceptions of teacher morality and the aims of education in China in the Chinese context. Pre-service teachers are learning to become regulated, reflective professionals who have expertise, knowledge, and skills, exhibit altruism by observing codes of professional conduct and ethics promoted in the culture and society, and exercise autonomy in making professional judgements in response to the changing contexts of teaching and society at large.

First, the CCP-led state influences pre-service teacher morality in several regulatory ways, including: setting disciplines in a top-down manner, defining the meaning of teacher morality, and issuing a series of teacher morality codes (see, for example, Lapsley & Woodbury, 2016); integrating political-civic competence requirements into teacher morality; creating control mechanisms such as the teacher certification system (Paine & Fang, 2006) to ensure pre-service teachers obey teacher morality codes and political identify requirements; and organizing CCP activities to increase CCP member pre-service teachers' identification with the CCP's political ideology. These regulations reflected a mix of a paternalistic tradition and communist understanding of the aims of education and teacher morality. Such a mix could help the CCP legitimise the cultivation of loyal citizens as a major aim of education and set high expectations for teacher morality and teachers' loyalty to the communist state. In this regulatory context,

pre-service teachers in this study generally agreed with the links between regulated teacher morality and political-civic requirements. In addition, pre-service teachers' individual characteristics (e.g., strong motivation to work as a teacher, political affiliation with CCP, etc.) may influence their perception of state/CCP requirement related to teacher morality and teacher civic-political competence.

Second, pre-service teachers are not fully autonomous, because their perceptions and understandings of teaching can be affected by their context and experiences. In this study, pre-service teachers' perceptions of teacher morality were influenced by China's social traditions and transitions, as shown by their highlighting the importance of caring and respect in ethical situations in their teaching practice, and of authority and harmony when dealing with moral dilemmas involving parents. On the one hand, the pre-service teachers adopted such socially-promoted ethical values as caring and authority. On the other, they observed that China's teacher ethics code should better explain the need to respect students and younger colleagues (based on their experience, as students, of teachers' using their authority to receive monetary benefits).

Third, pre-service teachers could exercise some autonomy in some limited realms by taking advantage of grey areas in official policies, regulations, or codes to adjust understandings in ways that do not strictly follow what the authorities might expect. For instance, although the Chinese state has regulated teacher sacrifice in teacher ethical codes, it has neither provided related teacher sacrifice guidelines nor stipulated punishments for violations, thus giving preservice teachers a grey area in which to exercise their autonomy in interpreting the meaning and limits of teacher sacrifice. Additionally, the pre-service teachers' generational attributes and early professional development stage impacted their understanding of teacher sacrifice and, perhaps, their commitment to teaching and education thereof.

China's teacher morality context is quite different from that in Western countries. However, while the "regulated-autonomy" framework proposed by this study generally supports extant teacher morality research—which has found that the state has made and imposed teacher morality laws and codes in a top-down manner (Lapsley & Woodbury, 2016)—it also highlights society's and teachers' roles in shaping teacher morality, echoing neo-Kohlbergian researchers' findings that the shaping of morality is a dynamic process, occurring between people in specific contexts (e.g., VanSandt, Shepard, & Zappe, 2006).

If the current results can be confirmed using a broader sample, then this case has three important implications for understanding the complexity of developing pre-service teachers' teacher morality in China's context. First, as pre-service teachers' understanding of teacher morality is a dynamic process, teacher education programmes should not only provide students opportunities to learn state-given teacher morality regulations, laws, etc., but also to consider moral dilemmas in their teaching practice. During teaching practice, moral dilemmas discussion could be a useful pedagogical strategy (Salvador, 2019) to help pre-service teachers reflect on given rules of teacher morality, develop moral reasoning, examine conflicts between their real-life situations in school and the moral expectations imposed on them, and explore possible action choices. Such discussions could also help prepare pre-service teachers to cope with

challenging ethical problems and decisions that will confront them on a regular basis in their future teaching careers (Levinson & Fay, 2016), and in teaching students how to face moral dilemmas that arise in their daily lives, both in school and in society.

Second, it highlights how important teachers' motivation to teach is, and how it informs their commitment to the state's teacher morality codes. Due to their strong motivation to work as teachers, pre-service teachers must accept tight state/CCP control of and links between teacher morality and teacher political-civic competence; as such, their perception of teacher morality and teacher political-civic competence are significantly correlated. Studies in non-Chinese contexts have suggested pre-service teachers' stronger teaching motivation is correlated with their professional competence, including teacher morality (Sylvia, Tang, Wong, & Cheng, 2015).

Third, more attention should be paid to the role of social contexts and individual features in shaping pre-service teachers' understanding of teacher morality. In this study, the tradition and transition of Chinese society may have caused changes to long-standing teacher authority constructs, and were important factors shaping pre-service teachers' perceptions of teacher morality. The post-1990s generation's individualism has caused them to question traditional concepts of teacher sacrifice, and to re-define teacher sacrifice by setting boundaries and seeking to balance teacher responsibilities with teacher rights.

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