

Turning the Gaze Inward: A Four-Dimensional Framework for Developing University Teachers' Moral Competence in China's Ideological-Political Education Landscape

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Abstract

What does it take for university teachers to integrate values guidance with disciplinary teaching? In China's current higher education reform under the "Great Ideological-Political Education" framework, this question has taken center stage. Yet the research on teacher moral competence (defined as the capacity to enact and cultivate moral values through teaching) faces a dual difficulty: too much reliance on local policy narratives makes international dialogue hard, while simply borrowing universal frameworks misses the institutional specifics of how teacher ethics actually take shape. This paper tries to work through both problems. I bring together Tirri's (2023) model of teacher ethical competence (moral sensitivity, reasoning, motivation, and implementation) and Ozturk's (2025) four-level ethical knowledge framework (general ethics, pedagogical ethics, subject-specific ethics, and character education pedagogy). From that integration I build a four-dimensional analytical framework: political-moral sensitivity, embedded integration of ethics into disciplinary knowledge, institutional collaboration capacity, and reflexive-practical iteration. Drawing on existing studies of early-career academics in Chinese universities, I then examine three structural dilemmas that hold back their moral competence development: a mismatch between strong policy language and weak institutional change, a disconnect between deep disciplinary training and the demand for cross-cutting integration, and a fracture between pre-service preparation and in-service support. The paper offers what I call a "structurally isomorphic, contextually specific" way of thinking: China's institutionalized ideological-political education represents a distinctive approach to the broader challenge of teacher moral formation. That gives us a portable analytical tool for cross-national comparative work. I close with implications for teacher de-

velopment, evaluation reform, and professional learning communities in higher education.

Keywords

Teacher Moral Competence, Teacher Ethical Formation,
Early-Career Academics, Ideological-Political Education,
Great Ideological-Political Education

1. Introduction: Situating Teacher Moral Competence in Higher Education

1.1. The Global Salience and Local Articulation of Teacher Moral Competence

For a long time, research on higher education has paid surprisingly little attention to teacher moral competence, defined here as the capacity to enact and cultivate moral values through teaching, integrating values guidance with knowledge transmission and professional practice. With disciplines growing ever more specialized, and with teacher professional development dominated by content knowledge and pedagogical techniques, this neglect has become hard to ignore. But across different countries, scholars working on moral education and teacher ethics (a related but broader term referring to the professional standards and reflective practices concerning moral issues in teaching) have come to a shared insight: teachers are moral agents through and through. Their daily practice is unavoidably value-laden, and that demands competencies far beyond subject expertise or classroom skills (Tirri, 2023; Campbell, 2008). As universities worldwide are asked to take up civic formation and ethical development more seriously, questions about teacher moral agency have moved to the foreground in Finland, Germany, Japan, and elsewhere.

In China, this general question has taken a distinct institutional form. In 2020, the Ministry of Education issued the Guidelines for the Ideological-Political Construction of University Curricula (often called the Curriculum Ideological-Political Construction Guidelines). This policy requires universities to weave values guidance into knowledge transmission and competence development across every discipline (Ministry of Education of China, 2020). The guidelines lay out a vision of “three-all education” (all-staff, whole-process, all-round education), and they make curriculum ideological-political (Ke Cheng Si Zheng) the main institutional channel for teachers to fulfill the fundamental task of “fostering virtue and cultivating talent” (li de shu ren). Seen this way, teachers’ moral competence becomes the key lever for the whole reform. The ability to bring ideological-political elements organically into subject teaching is no longer just an ideal; it is an institutional expectation written into evaluation standards.

Around the same time, the Guidelines for Deepening the Reform of Education

Evaluation in the New Era (the [Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, & State Council, 2020](#)) called for evaluation systems to prioritize teachers' dedication to education, giving broad policy direction to the cultivation of moral competence. More recently, the Ministry of Education and five other central departments jointly issued the Guidelines on Strengthening the Development of the Young University Teacher Workforce in the New Era (Teacher [2025] No. 5). These guidelines explicitly list the enhancement of teachers' capacity for educating students morally as a key task ([Ministry of Education et al., 2025](#)). They stress strengthening ideological-political guidance, improving professional competence, supporting teachers in embedding values guidance into disciplinary instruction, and deepening evaluation reform.

1.2. The Theoretical Dilemma Facing Research on Teacher Moral Competence

But when you move from policy documents to what actually happens on the ground, a sharp tension appears. On one side, policy discourse keeps stressing the strategic importance of teacher moral competence, and central policy documents offer clear frameworks for implementation. On the other side, early-career academics find themselves inside evaluation systems where research output (especially high-impact journal papers and external grants) still rules promotion and performance pay. Much of the existing research in this field falls into three patterns. One pattern focuses on interpreting policy texts and designing institutional arrangements from a top-down bureaucratic angle. A second pattern tries to break down teacher moral competence into individual capabilities, listing things like “internal drive for moral awareness”, “political capacity for staying on track”, and “design capacity for systematic integration”. A third pattern uses case studies to showcase how particular universities have built exemplary curriculum ideological-political practices. Each of these has its use, but they share a common weakness: they lack a theoretical framework that can lift teacher moral competence out of its immediate domestic policy context while still capturing what makes that context distinctive.

That weakness shows up in two interconnected ways. First, there is a tendency to replace universal theoretical dialogue with local policy narrative. The papers cite policy documents at great length, but they engage only thinly with theory. Policy texts tell you what should be done (they prescribe) but they do not explain why or how things actually work. When you list competence dimensions as policy requirements, you get a descriptive inventory, not a generative model. That makes it hard to test, challenge, or compare those models across different settings.

The second problem runs deeper. Many researchers seem to assume that the institutional particularity of China's “Great Ideological-Political Education” makes it completely incommensurable with universal theoretical discourse. This assumption is rarely stated openly, but it leads people to treat the Chinese case as

a self-contained system that doesn't need outside theory. But that confuses institutional particularity with academic incommensurability. From a comparative moral education perspective, every national system operates under its own institutional, cultural, and political conditions. The real challenge is not to deny particularity; it is to build analytical tools that can show how universal questions of teacher moral formation get shaped by specific institutional arrangements. Consider this: the requirement that university teachers express national ideological orientations in their teaching shows up in China as the mandated curriculum ideological-political reform. But similar tensions (how to balance value orientation with professional autonomy and disciplinary integrity) are discussed, for example, in the German Beutelsbach Consensus tradition about teachers' civic obligations, and in American debates over civic education in K-12 standards. The structure of the question is isomorphic across contexts, even if the specific content of those values changes with each country's educational philosophy.

This raises a key autonomy issue: how can teachers maintain professional judgment when institutional expectations prescribe specific value orientations? The framework developed below addresses this by treating value guidance not as a top-down mandate but as a dialogical process where teachers exercise moral sensitivity, reasoning, and implementation within their disciplinary and pedagogical expertise. In other words, the framework does not erase teacher autonomy; rather, it recasts autonomy as the capacity to interpret and enact institutional values through professional judgment, a position that balances alignment with integrity.

1.3. Research Purpose and Paper Structure

This paper tries to respond to these theoretical challenges. I make three main arguments. First, we need a theoretical framework that can bridge institutional particularity and universal theoretical discourse. Second, I show how two existing theoretical lines (Tirri's, 2023, teacher ethical competence framework and Ozturk's (2025) ethical knowledge framework) can be synthesized into a four-dimensional analytical model for understanding how university teachers' moral competence develops. Third, I use that framework to examine the structural dilemmas that early-career academics in Chinese universities face, revealing how policy intensity, institutional inertia, disciplinary specialization, and fragmented support systems all interact to constrain moral competence formation.

The rest of the paper is organized like this. Section 2 lays out the theoretical resources, presenting Tirri's and Ozturk's frameworks as complementary lenses. Section 3 develops the four-dimensional framework, spelling out each dimension and its sub-dimensions. Section 4 looks at three structural dilemmas that early-career academics experience, drawing on published research. Section 5 suggests implementation pathways based on the framework. Section 6 concludes with theoretical contributions and practical implications.

2. Theoretical Resources: Integrating Teacher Ethics with Teacher Knowledge

2.1. Teacher Ethical Competence: From Moral Reasoning to Moral Implementation

Bandura (1991), working in the social-cognitive tradition, saw moral agency as a person's capacity to bring moral standards to bear on a situation, regulate their own behavior, and act morally in specific contexts. That gave us a crucial insight: moral behavior depends not just on how well someone can reason about moral questions, but on their ability to spot moral issues in concrete situations, get motivated to act, and then actually translate judgment into action.

Kirsi Tirri (2023), in her Kohlberg Memorial Lecture published in the *Journal of Moral Education*, systematically stretched this perspective into teacher education. Drawing on decades of research from Finland and internationally, she argues that besides moral reasoning (thinking through value conflicts in a principled way), teachers need three other capabilities. Moral sensitivity is the ability to recognize moral issues hiding in everyday teaching interactions, and that includes both what's universal across cultures and what's culture-specific. Moral motivation means being willing to put moral values ahead of competing claims (administrative efficiency, career advancement, peer approval) when they clash. And implementation of morality is the capacity to turn moral judgment and motivation into concrete teaching actions (Tirri, 2023). Putting this all together, Tirri says that purposefulness and professional ethics are essential assets for teachers navigating the current global transitions. This integrated framework is a real advance over older models that focused almost entirely on cognitive moral reasoning while ignoring the situational, motivational, and performance dimensions of teacher ethics.

Now, if you try to transplant this framework into the heavily institutionalized context of China's "Great Ideological-Political Education", two questions come up. First, what happens to the content of moral sensitivity when teachers work inside an organizational environment where values are explicitly stated in policy language and evaluated institutionally? Second, what extra capabilities are needed when "implementation of morality" has to happen not just through spontaneous professional judgment but also through planned curriculum design that meets institutional accountability requirements? These questions suggest that while Tirri's framework gives us the generic dimensions of teacher ethical competence, we have to translate them carefully for each specific context.

2.2. The Ethical Dimension of Teacher Knowledge: Extending Shulman's Framework

Lee Shulman (1986) gave us a foundational insight about teacher knowledge: effective teaching needs not only content knowledge (CK) and pedagogical knowledge (PK) but also pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), the special kind of knowledge that fuses subject matter with teaching strategies to make particular

content understandable to learners. This framework has shaped teacher education research around the world. But critics have noted that Shulman's framework mostly leaves out the moral dimension of teaching, the question of what ends teaching serves and what values it conveys, often without saying so.

Nesrin Ozturk (2025) offers a systematic reply to this limitation. She proposes extending Shulman's framework by adding an ethical knowledge (EK) framework. For Ozturk, teachers' ethical knowledge has four levels, each building on the previous one. General ethics knowledge means knowing the basic theories and concepts of moral philosophy. Pedagogical ethics knowledge is about ethical judgment in teaching situations: grading fairly, treating students right, managing classrooms. Subject-specific ethical considerations are the particular ethical issues that come up in different fields, such as informed consent in life sciences, algorithmic fairness in AI, safety ethics in engineering. And pedagogical knowledge of character education is knowing how to design teaching activities and interactions that actually promote character development in learners (Ozturk, 2025). The hierarchy matters: ethical knowledge is not something you either have or don't have. It grows as you articulate it more and more with practice.

Ozturk's central argument is that cultivating teachers' ethical knowledge is not just about helping them get through complex ethical situations in today's classrooms. It's about building a morally responsible profession, enabling teachers to make fair and right instructional decisions and to develop students' character. This way of putting things directly engages a core tension in teacher ethics research: the relationship between individual teacher professionalism and the institutional context where that professionalism is exercised. The framework doesn't locate moral responsibility only at the level of individual character. It embeds it in the knowledge structures that mediate between personal values and professional action.

2.3. Integrating the Two Frameworks

Putting Tirri's (2023) four-dimensional ethical competence framework side by side with Ozturk's (2025) four-level ethical knowledge framework creates a productive analytical matrix. The two frameworks address different but complementary aspects of how teachers become moral agents. Tirri focuses on capacities for moral action (sensitivity, reasoning, motivation, implementation) that work in real-time teaching situations. Ozturk focuses on knowledge structures, the cognitive resources teachers use to understand, deliberate about, and carry out moral action across more and more context-specific domains. To fully account for teachers' moral competence, you need both the capacity to act and the knowledge that informs that action. Here's how they fit together: moral sensitivity works partly through ethical knowledge—without subject-specific ethical knowledge, a teacher won't even see the moral issues hidden inside their discipline's content. And implementing morality requires pedagogical knowledge of character education; the teacher has to know not just that they should act but how to act effectively given

the constraints and opportunities of the teaching situation.

Table 1 shows this integrated matrix. It maps Ozturk's four ethical knowledge levels onto Tirri's four teacher ethical competence dimensions. Each cell spells out what a given competence dimension looks like when it operates at a given level of ethical knowledge.

Table 1. Integrated Matrix: Ethical Knowledge Levels and Teacher Moral Competence Dimensions.

Ozturk's Ethical Knowledge Level (Ozturk, 2025)	Moral Sensitivity	Embedded Integration	Institutional Collaboration	Reflexive Iteration
General ethics knowledge	Recognizing the institutionally articulated values and their pedagogical implications	Translating ethical principles into design anchors for lesson planning	Understanding professional ethics codes and their application in specific institutional settings	Engaging in principled moral deliberation drawing on philosophical foundations and refining one's professional moral framework
Pedagogical ethics knowledge	Identifying moral opportunities in classroom interactions and teacher-student relations	Embedding values guidance into moment-to-moment instructional decisions through spontaneous yet principled intervention	Participating in the negotiation of classroom-level ethical norms (fairness, respect, accountability)	Calibrating strategies through pedagogical feedback loops (student feedback, peer observation, self-assessment of outcomes)
Subject-specific ethical knowledge	Recognizing discipline-specific ethical issues (engineering safety ethics, algorithmic fairness) and articulating them as teachable moments	Translating specific disciplinary ethical considerations into curriculum cases, research ethics guidelines, and professional exemplars	Engaging in departmental-level construction of disciplinary moral curricula and sharing knowledge across courses and cohorts	Sharing teaching-learning experiences with disciplinary peers in professional ethics workshops and refining discipline-specific pedagogical tools
Pedagogical knowledge of character education	Recognizing pedagogical situations that promote or impede character development and distinguishing between surface compliance and deep moral formation	Systematically integrating character education objectives into curriculum design, assessment rubrics, and learning activities	Engaging in institutional evaluation system design (rubric development for moral competence assessment, cross-institutional articulation of moral education outcomes)	Mentoring junior faculty in moral education practice and refining articulated models of moral pedagogy through systematic inquiry and dissemination

From this matrix, we can directly trace the origin of the paper's four proposed dimensions. First, political-moral sensitivity emerges from the intersection of Tirri's moral sensitivity (the capacity to recognize moral issues) with Ozturk's general and pedagogical ethics knowledge, because recognizing institutional values and classroom moral moments requires both sensitivity and ethical knowledge. Second, embedded integration of ethics into disciplinary knowledge derives from Tirri's implementation of morality (translating judgment into action) combined with Ozturk's subject-specific ethical considerations and pedagogical knowledge of character education, since effective integration demands both the capacity to act and the knowledge of how to design disciplinary moral learning. Third, insti-

tutional collaboration capacity draws on Tirri's moral motivation and implementation (the willingness and ability to act collectively) and Ozturk's pedagogical and subject-specific ethics knowledge applied to organizational settings, because collaboration requires motivation to prioritize moral goals and knowledge of how ethical standards operate institutionally. Fourth, reflexive-practical iteration builds on Tirri's moral reasoning and implementation, together with Ozturk's pedagogical knowledge of character education, since sustained improvement in moral practice requires ongoing reflection, feedback, and knowledge refinement. Thus, the four dimensions are not arbitrary; each is a necessary confluence of a specific moral capacity from Tirri and a specific knowledge domain from Ozturk.

This integrated framework is the theoretical foundation for the four-dimensional analytical model I develop next.

3. A Four-Dimensional Analytical Framework for Teacher Moral Competence Development

Building on the theoretical integration just laid out, this section spells out a four-dimensional framework for understanding and developing teacher moral competence in higher education. Each dimension gets three sub-dimensions, and I also say how the dimensions relate to each other.

Before elaborating each dimension, it is important to clarify where Tirri's concept of moral motivation (the willingness to prioritize moral values over competing claims) appears in the new model. Unlike moral sensitivity and implementation, which are distributed across multiple dimensions, moral motivation is most centrally located in Dimension Three (institutional collaboration capacity) and also informs Dimension Four (reflexive-practical iteration). In Dimension Three, moral motivation manifests as the drive to engage in cross-functional collaboration and university-society bridging despite institutional pressures that favor research over moral education. In Dimension Four, it appears as the commitment to sustained reflective practice even when such work receives little formal recognition. The reason moral motivation does not have its own separate dimension is that, in this integrated framework, motivation is treated as a cross-cutting condition that enables the other dimensions rather than as a standalone competence. A teacher may have high moral sensitivity and strong ethical knowledge, but without moral motivation, they will not act on that sensitivity or apply that knowledge. This conceptual move follows Ozturk's (2025) emphasis that ethical knowledge must be activated through professional commitment, a point that aligns with Tirri's original formulation.

3.1. Dimension One: Political-Moral Sensitivity

Political-moral sensitivity is the ability to spot moral issues in teaching that touch on value orientation, social responsibility, and citizenship formation. This dimension translates Tirri's moral sensitivity into the institutionalized context of China's curriculum ideological-political education. It answers the question: "Where and

in what forms should teachers look for opportunities to do moral education?”

Sub-dimension 1: Structured sensitivity. Teachers have to interpret policy requirements for moral education accurately and turn them into pedagogical objectives that can actually be designed and acted on. Doing this well means moving beyond just reciting policy language to asking what specific values—patriotism, social responsibility, scientific integrity, global citizenship—mean in a given disciplinary context. Research on early-career academics shows that while most recognize the policy importance of moral competence, many struggle to turn abstract requirements into concrete operations. That suggests structured sensitivity is a real developmental need in the early career period (Liu & Liu, 2024).

Sub-dimension 2: Situational sensitivity. Teachers need to notice emergent moral opportunities in everyday teaching interactions. In the “Great Ideological-Political Education” context, situational sensitivity means recognizing when a student’s comment reveals a value orientation that needs careful pedagogical handling, when a teaching moment lets you connect disciplinary content to larger social issues, and when a classroom dynamic calls for collective reflection on norms of respectful disagreement. As Tirri (2023) notes, moral sensitivity especially requires “skills to identify culture-invariant and culture-dependent moral factors”, a formulation that directly helps analyze how teachers navigate universal pedagogical ethics inside culturally and institutionally specific settings.

Sub-dimension 3: Relational sensitivity. Moral practice for higher education teachers unfolds across several relational domains: teacher-student, teacher-teacher, teacher-administrator, and teacher-parent. Each domain brings its own moral claims, and sometimes those claims conflict. Relational sensitivity is the capacity to judge which moral priority should win when such conflicts arise. For instance, balancing the primary responsibility to student development against institutional accountability demands, or weighing the duty to maintain collegial relationships against the responsibility to step in when you see ethically questionable teaching practice. Survey research finds that teachers’ moral competence varies significantly across these relational domains, which suggests relational sensitivity may be a separate dimension needing its own developmental attention (Wang & Shi, 2024).

3.2. Dimension Two: Embedded Integration of Ethics into Disciplinary Knowledge

This dimension maps Ozturk’s (2025) subject-specific ethical considerations and pedagogical knowledge of character education onto teachers’ instructional practice. It addresses a fundamental tension that early-career academics feel: they’ve been trained intensively in their disciplinary content, but they often lack the methodological tools to say how their discipline connects to moral questions. The capacity for embedded integration is what turns that tension from a barrier into an opportunity.

Sub-dimension 1: Explicit integration. Teachers have to identify the parts of

their disciplinary knowledge that inherently carry moral significance and work those parts systematically into curriculum design. In engineering education, for example, safety ethics, environmental impact assessment, and technology accessibility are not add-ons to technical content; they're part of what it means to practice engineering responsibly. A teacher who can do explicit integration builds these considerations into learning objectives, case design, and assessment criteria from the start. Similarly, in economics, the ethical presuppositions of market theory and the normative dimensions of distribution policy can be brought to the surface as integral to learning, not as external decorations. Ozturk's notion of subject-specific ethical considerations speaks directly to this sub-dimension, emphasizing how discipline-specific knowledge enables culturally and contextually appropriate ethical reasoning.

Sub-dimension 2: Generative integration. Not every value-laden teaching moment can be planned for in advance. Generative integration is the ability to spontaneously "call forth" moral significance during live teaching. For instance, connecting a point about scientific discovery to an unplanned discussion of research integrity, or using a case analysis session to raise questions about team collaboration ethics. This sub-dimension matches what Tirri (2023) calls implementation of morality: translating moral judgment into action in real-time.

Sub-dimension 3: Reflective integration. Teachers need systematic ways to review how well their integration practices are working. Reflective integration means analyzing student feedback for signs of value-cognitive change, using peer observation to get an outside perspective on integration strategies, and tracking the causal link between specific integration choices and student learning outcomes. What comes out of reflective integration then feeds back into the next cycles of explicit and generative integration.

3.3. Dimension Three: Institutional Collaboration Capacity

This dimension gets at the collective and organizational sides of teacher moral competence, things that individualistic frameworks tend to miss. Moral formation is not just an individual achievement; it gets enabled or blocked by the institutional environments where teachers work. Campbell (2008) stressed that the professional ethics of teaching is not sustained by individual virtue alone. It also needs professional communities that support ethical deliberation and accountability. In the specific context of Chinese higher education, where moral education has been institutionally defined as a collective responsibility across all staff and all processes ("all-staff, whole-process, all-round"), institutional collaboration capacity moves from nice-to-have to essential.

Sub-dimension 1: Teacher-institution synergy. Teachers need the ability to engage with institutional policy design and to contribute to collective moral education at the department or school level. That means participating in curriculum ideological-political construction within disciplinary teams, advocating through sustained dialogue for resources that support moral education, and giving man-

agement accurate feedback about implementation challenges encountered on the front line.

Sub-dimension 2: Cross-functional collaboration. The “all-staff” principle means subject teachers have to work effectively with other institutional actors who share responsibility for moral education. That includes joint lesson planning with ideological-political education specialists to integrate disciplinary content with broader moral education aims; sharing student development information with student affairs personnel (counselors, student advisors) to keep moral formation coherent; and taking part in coordinated case discussions about students whose value orientations cause concern.

Sub-dimension 3: University-society bridging. Moral competence in higher education cannot be confined to the campus. Teachers have to mobilize external resources—industry partners, government agencies, civil society groups—to expand the space for moral formation. That could mean setting up practice bases with employers that embed professional ethics into internships; organizing service-learning projects with community partners that let students develop social responsibility by solving real problems; and bringing in alumni as moral exemplars who show how professional skill and ethical commitment can be combined over a career. Studies of university-community partnerships in moral education (such as Hebei Agricultural University’s “Smart Agriculture Consortium” model) show how such bridging enriches moral formation.

3.4. Dimension Four: Reflexive-Practical Iteration

This last dimension builds on the idea of the “purposeful teacher” (Tirri, 2023) and on Lave and Wenger’s (1991) situated learning theory. Being a teacher who exercises moral competence is not about having static knowledge and stable character traits. It is about engaging in ongoing practical inquiry where past experience informs future action and collective deliberation sharpens individual judgment. “Purposefulness” here means not just being clear about ends but continually integrating means and ends through situated practice and collective reflection (Tirri, 2023).

Sub-dimension 1: Documentation and review. Moral competence grows when teachers keep records of their moral pedagogical judgments and then subject those records to systematic review. Useful documentation tools include moral incident logs (recording value-related issues in teaching and how they were handled), student development portfolios (tracking changes in student value-cognition as seen in their written work and class participation), and peer observation records (an outsider’s perspective on integration strategies). The key move in this sub-dimension is making evidence: turning implicit moral judgment into documented material that can be revisited for learning.

Sub-dimension 2: Negotiated learning in communities of practice. Moral competence development cannot happen in isolation from peers. Situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) holds that knowledge gets co-constructed

through legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice. For teacher moral competence, that means teachers need opportunities to join communities where moral issues in teaching can be discussed safely and productively. Such communities can be formal (cross-disciplinary moral education research groups, lesson study teams) or informal (discussion groups among teachers facing similar problems). Campbell's (2008) study of teacher ethics stresses that ethical knowledge requires collective negotiation and validation to become shared professional understanding rather than isolated individual conviction. Without that collective dimension, individual moral competence stays vulnerable to institutional pressures that reward other things.

Sub-dimension 3: Boundary crossing and knowledge migration. The reflexive iteration loop should not be closed inside the teacher's immediate work environment. Teachers need to venture beyond their home institution to find new resources for competence development: take part in inter-university exchanges to learn what others do, engage with international research on teacher ethics and character education (for instance, Finnish models of teacher professional ethics or Anglo-American character education initiatives), and translate successful innovations from their own practice into clear frameworks that others can adopt or adapt. Boundary crossing stops reflexive iteration from becoming mere repetition of old patterns. It opens the loop to fresh input from the broader scholarly and professional community.

4. Structural Dilemmas Facing Early-Career Academics

Before analyzing the three structural dilemmas, it is necessary to explain how the studies cited in this section were selected and synthesized. The search was conducted between September 2024 and January 2025 across three databases: CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure), Wanfang Data, and Google Scholar. Keywords included combinations of "early-career academics", "young university teachers", "moral competence", "ideological-political education", "promotion pressure", "induction training", and "curriculum integration". The inclusion criteria were: 1) peer-reviewed articles published between 2018 and 2025; 2) studies focusing on Chinese higher education settings; 3) empirical or theoretical work addressing at least one of the three themes (promotion systems, induction design, or integration methods). A total of 47 articles were initially identified, and after screening for relevance to the structural dilemmas, 12 were retained as primary sources. These sources are supplemented by policy documents and key theoretical works. The selection prioritizes studies that directly report empirical data from surveys or interviews with early-career academics in Chinese universities, ensuring that the dilemmas discussed are grounded in evidence rather than speculation.

If you apply the four-dimensional framework to the actual situation of early-career academics in Chinese universities, you see that moral competence development is held back not mainly by individual teacher factors but by several structural dilemmas that interact and reinforce each other. This section looks at three such

dilemmas, drawing on available research from the Chinese higher education context.

4.1. Dilemma One: Mismatch between Policy Intensity and Institutional Inertia

At the central policy level, teacher moral competence has been given extremely high strategic importance. The Curriculum Ideological-Political Construction Guidelines calls “fostering virtue and cultivating talent” the fundamental task of education; the Deepening Education Evaluation Reform Plan wants evaluation systems to orient themselves toward teachers’ dedication to education. But at the level of university governance and daily academic practice, this policy intensity hasn’t produced matching structural changes in faculty evaluation and professional development systems.

Early-career academics face a practical reality where research output (publications in high-impact journals, external grants, citation counts) still dominates promotion and performance allocation. Research has shown that research output and project funding remain the dominant criteria in university faculty promotion systems, while teaching effectiveness and moral education outcomes carry much less weight (Liu et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2022). A survey across multiple Chinese universities found that young faculty members overwhelmingly identify research publications as the most important factor for career advancement, with moral education performance perceived as having limited impact on promotion decisions (Liu et al., 2023). Research shows that teachers live in a tension field among many competing demands, and moral education is only one of them. A survey study on curriculum ideological-political construction in application-oriented undergraduate institutions found that while teachers’ moral competence and awareness do positively affect instructional quality, the implementation environment still has significant structural constraints (Liu & Liu, 2024). Front-line teachers want to do moral education as the policy requires, but they find that evaluation systems, resource allocation, and promotion paths keep favoring research excellence.

The Guidelines on Strengthening the Development of the Ministry of Education et al. (2025) openly acknowledges this tension. The guidelines call for “improving the teaching evaluation system, evaluating teaching norms, teaching effectiveness, and teaching reform achievements, strengthening evaluation of educating students morally”, and they specify the need to “de-emphasize publication and award quantity indicators, reduce non-teaching research burdens” (Ministry of Education et al., 2025). That signals high-level recognition of a mismatch between policy aims and what happens on the ground. But turning that recognition into concrete operational changes at the department level means reconfiguring promotion criteria, resource distribution, and professional development priorities. That kind of institutional change touches power and resource flows that create resistance from established structures.

From the viewpoint of the four-dimensional framework, this dilemma shows up most sharply as a fracture between Dimension Three (institutional collabora-

tion capacity) and Dimension Four (reflexive-practical iteration). Teachers might have the capacity to collaborate and reflect, but if the institutional environment gives them no actionable feedback on how well they are doing moral education, then the reflexive-practical loop gets broken. No feedback means no calibration; no calibration means no confidence in one's own ability to do moral education effectively.

4.2. Dilemma Two: Disjuncture between Disciplinary Specialization and Integration Demands

The second structural dilemma sits at the intersection of knowledge production and knowledge transmission. University teacher professional socialization, from doctoral training through early-career induction, is overwhelmingly organized around the discipline. Early-career academics know their disciplinary framework: the core theories, signature methods, current debates, frontier questions. They've been socialized into a community that defines excellence by contributions to specialized knowledge. Their professional identity is built first as subject specialist and only second as teacher.

Now this same person is expected to become a "values guide" in the classroom, someone who can integrate value orientation with disciplinary content. That's a significant shift in professional identity. Yet for most early-career academics, this transition happens with almost no explicit methodological support. Studies on new faculty induction programs in Chinese universities have found that training on how to integrate ideological-political elements into disciplinary teaching is extremely limited. [Tang et al \(2020\)](#) surveyed induction programs across multiple universities and reported that most programs focus on basic teaching skills and research capacity, with very few offering systematic training on curriculum ideological-political design or moral education methods. Similarly, [Qiu \(2017\)](#) have argued that the lack of clear methodological guidance for embedding values into subject teaching remains a major obstacle for early-career academics. They're expected to pull off the integration largely without scaffolding. Their graduate training rarely includes systematic instruction in moral education methods, pedagogical ethics, or the pedagogical knowledge of character education ([Ozturk, 2025](#)). The survey research shows that while teachers generally recognize the importance of moral competence and try to put ideological-political elements into their teaching, many have trouble with "natural integration" and "innovation in moral education methods" ([Wang & Shi, 2024](#)).

We should not read this difficulty as individual teacher deficiency. It's better understood as a structural outcome of how academic careers are organized. A new faculty member gets intensive training in disciplinary content and some training in general teaching methods, but very little training in the specific knowledge and skills needed for moral education (subject-specific ethical considerations, pedagogical knowledge of character education). The professional identity built through this training simply doesn't include moral educator as a core role. And as [Ozturk](#)

(2025) stresses, subject-specific ethical knowledge—knowledge of the particular ethical issues within a discipline—doesn’t come automatically from disciplinary training. It requires deliberate attention in professional preparation.

In the four-dimensional framework, this dilemma shows up as an internal fracture inside Dimension Two. The components of embedded integration (explicit, generative, reflective) aren’t impossible. But they can’t be deployed effectively when teachers lack the knowledge bases that underpin them. The absence of subject-specific ethical knowledge and pedagogical knowledge of character education from standard graduate curricula means early-career academics enter their jobs already missing the cognitive resources that Dimension Two requires. You can not fix this gap downstream; it has to be addressed upstream in professional preparation.

4.3. Dilemma Three: Fracture between Pre-Service and in-Service Support Systems

Tirri (2023) makes an observation that’s important but often ignored in practice: moral sensitivity and moral reasoning don’t appear automatically when someone becomes a teacher. They develop through sustained reflective practice over time. In fact, Tirri identifies purposefulness and professional ethics as essential assets for navigating today’s global transitions in education, and those assets need cultivation across the whole career span.

In the Chinese higher education context, systematic cultivation of these capacities across the career span is notably underdeveloped. Research on teacher induction and professional development has consistently pointed to the fragmentation of support for early-career faculty. Tang et al (2020) found that new faculty induction programs are often short-term and skill-oriented, with little attention to the sustained development of moral competence. The Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, Teacher Workforce Division (2023) also noted that professional development opportunities specifically targeting moral education remain scarce, and there is a lack of structured, long-term programming for cultivating teachers’ ethical sensitivity and integration capacity. Furthermore, studies have shown that the transition from pre-service preparation (which rarely includes moral education training) to in-service support (which focuses on research productivity) creates a significant gap in which early-career academics must develop moral competence on their own initiative (Qiu, 2017). New faculty induction programs focus heavily on basic teaching skills (lesson planning, classroom management, using instructional technology) and on building research capacity. The systematic cultivation of moral competence (how to recognize value issues in classroom interaction, how to facilitate student deliberation on value conflicts, how to model moral behavior in teacher-student relationships) gets limited attention in induction and even less in ongoing professional development.

The gap is not just about time allocation; it’s about developmental sequence. The early career period is exactly when teachers’ professional identities are most

malleable, when they're forming habits of practice that will stick with them for years. If moral competence development is not built into early career support, it will be hard to fix later. The 2025 guidelines call for strengthening faculty development centers as institutional resources for ongoing professional growth. But that has to come with structured programming specifically aimed at moral competence, not as an add-on to existing offerings but as an integrated strand of teacher professional development (Ministry of Education et al., 2025).

In the four-dimensional framework, this dilemma shows up as a fracture between Dimension One (political-moral sensitivity) and Dimension Four (reflexive-practical iteration). Moral sensitivity can't develop without experiential learning opportunities paired with structured feedback. But if teachers enter their first jobs having had no structured moral education in their professional preparation, and if ongoing support gives them no scaffolding for developing this capacity, then moral sensitivity development ends up being a matter of individual initiative. Some teachers will cultivate it on their own; many won't. The systemic strategy is not to rely on individual variation but to embed moral competence development in the routine professional development of all early-career academics.

Table 2 sums up the three dilemmas and how they connect to the four-dimensional framework.

Table 2. Three structural dilemmas of early-career academic moral competence.

Dilemma	Empirical Manifestation	Fracture within Framework
Policy-institution mismatch	Early-career academics face overwhelming research assessment pressure; moral education effectiveness lacks institutionalized feedback mechanisms	Dimension Three (institutional collaboration) ↔ Dimension Four (reflexive iteration)
Discipline-integration dislocation	Professional training organized around disciplinary content; "how to integrate moral education" lacks methodological support	Internal rupture within Dimension Two (embedded integration)
Pre-service-in-service fracture	New faculty induction focuses on teaching skills and research capacity; moral competence development largely absent from both pre-service and in-service stages	Dimension One (political-moral sensitivity) ↔ Dimension Four (reflexive iteration)

5. From Framework to Practice: Implementation Pathways for Moral Competence Development

The four-dimensional framework does more than just help analyze structural dilemmas. It also gives us a basis for designing interventions to address them. This section proposes three implementation pathways, each grounded in the framework and each responsive to the dilemmas just identified.

5.1. Pathway One: Situation-Embedded Moral Competence Development Based on Experiential Learning

Drawing on experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984), moral competence development for early-career academics needs a "situated-action-reflection" model rather than passive absorption of abstract principles. The model has three phases.

Phase One: Situation design. Faculty development centers should build case libraries from authentic teaching situations collected from peers: teaching logs that have clear moral dimensions, classroom video clips that capture value-laden interactions, student feedback that reveals value-cognitive tensions, examples of ethical issues that come up in research supervision. These materials should be organized not by abstract categories but by the kinds of situations teachers actually run into at work. The 2025 guidelines call for strengthening teacher development centers and their capacity to provide training support; such centers are the natural home for developing and keeping these case libraries (Ministry of Education et al., 2025).

Phase Two: Action embedding. Moral competence development has to be woven into the routine workflow of academic practice, not treated as an add-on. That can be done through structural changes to existing processes: add a “moral education objectives statement” to course syllabus review (not as a pro forma exercise but accompanied by constructive feedback that links stated objectives to teaching design choices); include a “moral education reflection” section in teaching portfolios (showing how practice changes over time); and require a “moral education practice and outcomes” narrative as part of the teaching statement in promotion dossiers.

Phase Three: Reflection facilitation. Ozturk’s (2025) emphasis on the pedagogical knowledge of character education (knowing how to design activities that build character) means that reflection on moral competence needs the support of peer dialogue in a psychologically safe professional atmosphere. Faculty development programs should set up regular moral education case discussion forums (monthly or bi-weekly) where faculty share real moral dilemmas from their teaching and get structured feedback from cross-disciplinary colleagues. The goal is not evaluation but collaborative inquiry. That feedback is exactly what closes the experiential learning loop.

5.2. Pathway Two: Peer-Supported Moral Education Networks Based on Communities of Practice

Situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) suggests that professional competence grows best not as individual acquisition but as a collective journey inside a community of practice. For moral competence, this matters especially because moral knowledge needs validation through collective deliberation. Campbell (2008) stresses that ethical knowledge is neither an individual possession nor something that can be unilaterally declared; it gets established through ongoing conversation among practitioners who share a commitment to deliberating well.

Building from that theoretical base, here are structures that can help develop faculty moral competence through community-based participation. First, at the department level, set up structured moral education peer support groups that mix experienced faculty with early-career academics. Have them meet at a fixed interval for structured case discussion following a shared protocol, each person brings

a current moral education challenge and gets guided feedback. This structure directly addresses the pre-service to in-service fracture by providing ongoing support.

Second, widen the scope beyond single departments by creating university-wide or multi-university moral education networks. The “Great Ideological-Political Education” framework calls for breaking down disciplinary silos. A university-level “moral education incubator” could pick promising practices from individual departments and support cross-disciplinary teams to develop integrated moral education cases that bring in perspectives from several fields (engineering, humanities, social sciences). When moral education cases are built through cross-disciplinary collaboration, they model the kind of integration the framework asks for.

Third, bring external practitioners into moral education networks as co-participants. Industry mentors, community organizers, and professionals from various sectors bring moral perspectives shaped by practical experience, perspectives that differ from those of academic faculty. Their presence introduces diversity in moral frameworks and problem-solving heuristics, expanding the resources available to the network.

5.3. Pathway Three: Developmental Evaluation as Moral Competence Formation

Moral competence development needs a responsive evaluation and feedback loop. Current moral education evaluation systems in higher education are mostly binary pass/fail, which tends to push people toward procedural compliance. An alternative is developmental evaluation, oriented toward formative improvement rather than summative judgment.

A developmental evaluation system would have three design features. First, evaluation standards should be organized as a progressive sequence that matches Ozturk’s four-level ethical knowledge framework: basic ethics knowledge for Level 1 (general ethics knowledge), competence in pedagogical ethics for Level 2, subject-specific ethical knowledge for Level 3, and pedagogical knowledge of character education for Level 4 (Ozturk, 2025). A progressive structure lets teachers see where they currently stand and what they need to learn next.

Second, evaluation should be based on multiple evidence sources, not a single student satisfaction survey or administrator observation. The evaluation model should combine student development portfolios (longitudinal evidence of student value-cognitive change), peer classroom observation protocols (an outside perspective on teachers’ moral sensitivity in action), and teacher self-reflection reports (evidence of reflexive-practical iteration).

Third, evaluation findings should be tied to professional development resources. Linking evaluation to resources (priority access to teaching workshops, funding for moral education curriculum development projects, recognition in promotion review for documented moral education excellence) creates incentives

for sustained engagement with moral competence development.

6. Conclusion and Implications

6.1. Theoretical Contributions

This paper has tackled the problem of how to theorize teacher moral competence in higher education in a way that respects institutional particularity while still talking to universal theoretical discourse. By integrating Tirri's (2023) teacher ethical competence framework with Ozturk's (2025) ethical knowledge framework, I've built a four-dimensional analytical model that catches both the capacity dimensions of moral action and the knowledge structures that inform those actions. The model's four dimensions—political-moral sensitivity, embedded integration of ethics into disciplinary knowledge, institutional collaboration capacity, and reflexive-practical iteration—give us a generative heuristic for analyzing teacher moral competence development across different contexts.

Let me highlight three main theoretical arguments. First, by identifying three structural dilemmas (policy-institution mismatch, discipline-integration dislocation, pre-service-in-service fracture), the analysis moves the discussion beyond individual teacher deficiency toward institutional diagnosis. Moral competence is not just about individual disposition or skill. It gets enabled or blocked by the institutional structures where teachers work. Second, the paper demonstrates a method of “structurally isomorphic, contextually specific” analysis. I've re-articulated the “Great Ideological-Political Education” framework as one particular instance of generic questions in teacher moral formation: what ends should teaching serve? How should value commitments be balanced with disciplinary integrity? How should professional autonomy be reconciled with institutional accountability? Third, the paper bridges Chinese educational research and international teacher ethics scholarship. The analytical model uses concepts defined at a level abstract enough for cross-cultural comparative application, yet it can also take in contextual specificity at the content level.

6.2. Practical Implications

For higher education policy leaders and institutional administrators, the four-dimensional framework offers an architecture for designing integrated teacher development and evaluation systems. At the institution level, strategic planning should treat moral competence development as a cross-cutting priority across all stages of the academic career pathway, done in a sustained rather than episodic way, with systematic faculty development programming that connects pre-service and in-service stages. Evaluation system reform should move beyond binary compliance checking toward multi-source, growth-oriented evaluation that gives actionable feedback and links evaluation findings to professional development resources. And community-building initiatives (department-level peer support groups, cross-disciplinary moral education incubators, university-community partnerships) should be supported as complements to individual development

and evaluation.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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