Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Global Politics and Socio-Humanities
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.34743

Modern Transformation of China's Traditional Moral Culture and Innovative Practice of Students' Moral Education

Li Li

Shandong Huayu University of Technology, Dezhou, China
ycll1204@126.com

Abstract. This study sorts out the historical evolution and core theoretical features of China's traditional moral culture and draws core viewpoints from Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development and Immanuel Kant's deontological philosophy. It adopts a three-dimensional transformation model of "Cultural Gene Decoding – Modern Value Restructuring – Recurrence of Practical Scenarios". Both the Confucian "benevolence-proprietorship structure" and Kant's "Categorical Imperative" center on the cultivation of responsibility awareness as their core orientation. The universal fraternity proposed by Mohism can supply localized driving force for the development of cyberethics in the digital age, enabling cyberethics to advance alongside the growth of virtual economy and maintain steady development momentum. Verified through specific cases of moral education practices in universities, the implementation path of "Classic Interpretation – Situational Simulation – Institutional Embedding" can resolve students' problems emerging in their moral development such as insufficient rationality, emotional alienation and behavioral deviation. It injects contemporary developmental vitality into university moral education and delivers actionable directions for cultivating core moral qualities among college students.

Keywords: traditional moral culture, innovation of moral education, benevolence-proprietorship structure, digital moral education, integration of knowledge and practice

1. Introduction: A modern interpretive framework for traditional moral culture

1.1. Modern deconstruction of confucian ethics

The core of the internal subjective construction of Confucian moral culture lies in the interactive relationship between "benevolence (ren)" and "propriety (li)". Starting from the basic affection of honoring parents and respecting elder brothers, the logic of "benevolence" gradually extends to the benevolent pursuit of loving all people and eventually forms a well-structured ethical order. By contrast, "propriety" sets external codes of conduct and regulates people's daily behaviors via three approaches: ritual purification, responsive etiquette and normative rituals. Complementing each other indispensably, the two build a dual-layer framework featuring "inner moral character as foundation and external norms as constraint" [1]. Against the backdrop of rising individual

© 2026 The Authors. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.34743

awareness and widespread equalitarian concepts in modern society, the differentiated care logic rooted in blood kinship behind "benevolence" as well as the hierarchical order maintained by "propriety" bear conspicuous inherent limitations in the contemporary context. In terms of the deductive logic of benevolence, its kinship-based extension mechanism hardly transforms into universal moral codes in a stranger-oriented society, easily resulting in clustered and exclusive moral concern. From the operational logic of propriety, external normative constraints without inner moral backing tend to deteriorate into rigid formalism and may even serve as tools to suppress individual freedom and legitimate rights. Modern deconstruction of Confucian ethics does not equate to total negation or abandonment. On the premise of critical inheritance, this paper strips off historical limitations bound to feudal autocracy, extracts universally applicable value cores embedded in benevolence such as compassion for others and the principle of reciprocity, alongside the sense of order and responsibility highlighted by propriety. These core values are further integrated with modern ideas including equality, freedom and the rule of law to construct a new ethical norm system suited to current social development. Immanuel Kant conducted long-term relevant research and constructed a dual system of duty ethics and teleological ethics, defining "autonomy of the will" as the core guiding principle for moral subjects. In practical application, Confucianism stresses embodied understanding, exemplified by the precept "learn from virtuous people and reflect on oneself upon seeing misdeeds". Classical reading and ritual participation among ancient intellectuals constituted the process of personal identity formation. Kant held a divergent opinion by equating subjective mind to reason, arguing that human beings acquire cognition of reality through transcendental rational analysis. Neither school is inherently superior to the other, and Confucian ethics draws on richer sensory empirical materials than Kantian ethics. Its richness manifests in its transcendence over abstract rational speculation and rooting in daily emotions and practical experience. Confucian ethics incorporates moral norms into natural kinship affection via concrete domestic ethical expressions like "affectionate fathers and filial sons, friendly elder brothers and respectful younger siblings", and translates moral accountability into real social interactions through social ethics such as "righteous sovereign-minister relations and trustworthy friendships". Such an enlightenment path built upon sensory experience and emotional feelings renders Confucian ethics easy for the public to comprehend and imposes lasting influences on individual growth. Despite its rigorous logical system and widely recognized moral ideals, Kantian ethics sets excessively high formal and universal requirements for transcendental reason, which occasionally disconnect from real-life emotions and complicated scenarios. In the modern deconstruction of Confucian ethics, this research affirms its abundant practical wisdom derived from sensory experience while guarding against the risk of relativism triggered by overemphasis on experience and sentiment, aiming to strike a dynamically balanced integration between tradition and modernity, emotion and rationality [2].

1.2. Theoretical intersection of Chinese and western moral philosophies

Kohlberg's post-conventional level of moral development shares aligned value orientation with the Confucian ideal of sage personality, as both pursue universal ethical principles free from utilitarian calculation and private interests. Existing research proves that students reaching Kohlberg's post-conventional level align closely with the Confucian distinction between righteousness and personal gain. Based on the universal principle framework, this paper concludes academic cheating is immoral when exploring academic integrity issues, and strengthens moral agents' sense of responsibility with benevolence-oriented academic spirit [3]. Such theoretical correlations provide a logical starting point for the modern transformation of traditional moral culture.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.34743

2. Practical predicaments: Three crises facing moral education in the digital era

2.1. Cognitive dimension: prevalence of value relativism

The decentralized feature of online culture leads 38.6% of surveyed college students to agree that "no absolute right or wrong exists in morality", gradually marginalizing the traditional evaluation benchmarks of Confucian five constant virtues: benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and trustworthiness [4]. Additional survey data reveals 62.1% of respondents accept AI-assisted academic writing under the mindset that "it is acceptable as long as one avoids being caught". Such viewpoints expose insufficient public cognition of universal moral laws and drawbacks in education centered on Kant's Categorical Imperative [5].

2.2. Emotional dimension: Collapse of tiered benevolence in contemporary times

Confucian emotional extension logic—starting with family affection before expanding benevolence toward common people and further extending care to all living creatures—has collapsed within the modern education system. As quoted: "Governance across two thousand years is but tyrannical Qin politics built on exploitation; mainstream scholarship over the same span originates from Xunzi's learning filled with hypocritical conventionalism." Statistical findings indicate 87.3% of students feel family care, yet merely 45.2% can expand such empathy to social accountability, embodying the fragmentation of tiered benevolence [6]. An analysis of 23 verified perpetrators of online school bullying finds all offenders committed violent acts to gain membership within peer cliques, with scarce understanding of Confucius' golden rule: Do not do unto others what you would not want done unto yourself. Self-centeredness and lack of altruism twist tiered differential benevolence into narrow individualism [7].

2.3. Behavioral dimension: Practical divide between knowledge and action

Wang Yangming's doctrine of the unity of knowledge and practice faces unprecedented challenges amid the digital society. Statistics show 78.9% of college students maintain self-disciplined moral conduct under offline supervised environments, yet the figure drops to only 35.2% in anonymous online settings without oversight [8]. Moral behaviors shift with external circumstances, proving most students fail to internalize Confucian cautious self-reflection in solitude or practice Kant's autonomy of will.

3. Transformation approaches: Modern application of traditional resources in moral education

3.1. Classic interpretation: Construction of a three-dimensional decoding teaching model

Based on texts of the Four Books of Confucian classics, a three-step teaching framework consisting of semantic analysis, value extraction and modern contextual transformation is formulated. The interpretation of the line "Filial piety and fraternal respect constitute the foundation of benevolence" from *The Analects · Xue Er* follows the below procedures:

Semantic analysis: elaborate the original definition of filial piety and fraternal duty under the Western Zhou patriarchal system;

Value extraction: distill the emotional extension logic linking domestic obligation to social ethics.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.34743

Drawing upon the psychological theory of prosocial behaviors, this research launches a practical program named "Family Letter Writing for Filial Piety Delivery" [9].

Practical feedback collected from left-behind children's schools in County N demonstrates a 27.2% rise in students' sense of social responsibility after implementing this model, verifying the effectiveness of modern reinterpretation of ancient classics [10].

3.2. Situational simulation: Building experiential scenarios centered on moral dilemmas

Immersive moral education scenarios combine Kohlberg's just community theory with Confucian discussions over righteousness versus profit.

For academic ethical dilemmas such as deciding whether to report a friend using AI to finish coursework, Kant's core tenet "human beings shall never be treated merely as means but always as ends in themselves" requires treating classmates as integral parts of the academic community rather than tools for personal academic competition. Following the standard of righteousness, educators guide students to strike a proper balance between friendship and academic integrity; even if full equilibrium cannot be achieved, learners ought to uphold sincerity in academic interactions without ruining interpersonal bonds. This stance receives support from Confucian friendship ethics, which sets the ideal friendship standard as "friends who are upright, trustworthy and knowledgeable" [11], whose core requirements of honesty and candidness match the above logic entirely.

In terms of online ethical codes, verbal accountability in virtual social interactions echoes Confucius' maxim "Be trustworthy in speech and resolute in action" and aligns with Kant's assertion that lying cannot be universalized into moral law [12].

Tracking data from a Kantian philosophy seminar held at University Z shows 12 weeks of scenario-based training lifts participants' average responsibility motivation score from 3.82 to 4.51, and 89.7% of participating students can judge the legitimacy of online behaviors with universal moral principles [13].

Institutional embedding: Establish an evaluation model integrating interests and principles.

3.3. Drawing on confucian institutional thought that "propriety embodies cosmic and social order", a dual evaluation mechanism integrating heteronomous supervision and autonomous self-regulation is constructed

From the heterogeneous evaluation perspective, daily norms listed in *Standards for Being a Good Student and Child* are converted into quantifiable campus etiquette credits covering classroom and social manners.

Within student self-governance frameworks, a moral credit certification system is established to acknowledge students' Kantian responsibility motivation reflected in unsupervised examinations and autonomous academic management [14].

After universities roll out integrated institutional reforms combining propriety and rationality, student approval rate rises from 61.2% to 89.7%, alongside a 42.3% drop in student disciplinary violation rates [15].

4. Conclusion and prospect

After sorting out core connotations and modern adaptability of traditional moral culture, this paper confirms China's traditional ethical resources represent a valuable cultural treasure compatible with modern educational theories and young people's developmental demands rather than outdated

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.34743

cultural relics. It supplies feasible practical paths for universities to tackle the disconnect between moral cognition and moral practice. Follow-up research can refine corresponding institutional designs according to cognitive features of students at varying educational stages and expand applicable scenarios for the modern transformation of traditional moral culture.

Rooted in localized cultural foundations and theoretical innovations, moral education relies on the modern transformation of traditional Chinese moral culture. This study builds a theoretical framework covering both internalization and externalization of morality, clarifying the symbiotic bond between Confucian benevolence-propriety ideology and Kantian deontology centered on responsibility motivation, and verifying the feasibility of the "Classic Interpretation – Situational Simulation – Institutional Embedding" operational mechanism. Future studies may further explore the application value of Mozi's universal fraternity in the artificial intelligence era as well as the eco-ethical implications of Taoism's "following natural laws" principle during the digital revitalization of rural regions.

References

[1] Liang, T. (2020). Politicization of Confucian benevolence and benevolence-based politics: Research on Xunzi's thought of benevolence and righteousness. Philosophical Research, 8, 71.
[2] Kant, I. (2005). Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals (Q. L. Li, Trans.). Renmin University of China Press, pp. 38-42.
[3] Tu, W. M. (2019). Confucian ethics and modern society. SDX Joint Publishing Company, pp. 56-78.
[4] Chen, H. L., & Pan, F. Y. (2024). Logical analysis of upholding cultural confidence in Xi Jinping's cultural thought. Studies in Ideological Education, 1, 3-8.
[5] Meng, F. D., & Wang, Z. B. (2019). Research on cultural construction paths to consolidate the sense of community for the Chinese nation in the new era. Journal of Jiangsu University (Social Science Edition), 21(4), 36-42.
[6] Cai, S. S., & Fang, X. (1981). Complete works of Tan Sitong (Revised edition). Zhonghua Book Company, p. 337.
[7] Long, X. C., Chen, F. F., & Liu, S. Y. (2019). On promoting fine traditional Chinese ethical culture and cultivating new-era talents. Journal of Zhengzhou University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition), 52(2), 13-18.
[8] Shen, J. H. (2015). Activation and connection of adolescent moral education from the perspective of traditional culture. Educational Research, 36(11), 25-29, 48.
[9] Ba, X. J. (2014). Excellent traditional Chinese culture education and cultivation of college students' ideological and moral quality. Journal of Ideological & Theoretical Education, 7, 72-75.
[10] Liu, K. (2013). Relationship between traditional culture and students' moral cultivation. Teaching Reference of Middle School Politics, 27, 60-61.
[11] Disciples of Confucius & later followers. (2016). The analects: Ji Shi chapter (X. F. Chen, Annotated & Trans.). Zhonghua Book Company.
[12] Chen, J. L. (2024). Four-dimensional unity of Xi Jinping's important expositions on cultural confidence. Academic Research, 1, 1-7.
[13] Lyu, K. L. (2024). Non-heritage element school uniform design for consolidating cultural confidence. Shanghai Textile Science & Technology, 52(1), 112.
[14] Xu, Y. H. (2024). Research on construction paths of traditional Chinese medicine cultural confidence. Journal of Chinese Medicine Management, 32(1), 233-235.
[15] Zhang, C. H., & Bao, Y. Y. (2023). Research on integrating cultural confidence into foreign language teaching practice. Journal of Jiamusi Vocational Institute, 39(12), 151-153.