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ARTICLE



## Special rank teachers' morality development in China

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to portray Special Rank Teachers' morality development in China. Interview data were collected from 14 Special Rank Teachers from 13 provinces in China in 2018. Analyses of the findings revealed that Special Rank Teachers' morality, like their other professional competences, follows a development progress. This study suggests a 'three-stage' framework for understanding Special Rank Teachers' development of teacher morality in China.

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### KEYWORDS

Special rank teacher; teacher morality; development; China

### Introduction

In recent decades there has been increased interest in the moral nature of teaching and the teaching profession's ethical role (Campbell 2008). Studies have highlighted the following values as important to teacher morality: 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). Studies have also noted the importance of developing teachers' professional morality, as daily teaching practice is guided by moral considerations, attitudes, motives, reasons, emotions etc., requiring reflection on or explication of the moral dimension (Campbell 2008).

However, the literature has suggested that moral development is a long, complex, nuanced, somewhat unpredictable, and multiply determined process, with few guarantees save that there will be a maddening number of variables. Some studies have examined moral development in teacher education. Oser (1991) argued that moral conflicts in educational settings arise when three types of moral claims (justice, care, and truthfulness) cannot be met at the same time. These claims are critical issues in teachers' professional decision-making, and professional morality emerges through strategies for co-ordinating moral dimensions when searching for solutions to problems. Studies on Values and Knowledge Education (VaKE) have promoted the discussion of moral dilemmas (e.g., Schlaefli *et al.* 1985) and the acquisition of factual knowledge (e.g., Tobias and Duffy 2009) through inquiry-based learning to develop teachers' morality. However, most studies of the moral dilemmas teachers face use case studies to highlight conflicts/dilemmas and provoke consideration and analysis of ethical dilemmas in teaching; few studies have examined teachers' longitudinal development.

Longitudinal studies on teacher career development have identified several stages teachers characteristically experience during their careers (Day *et al.* 2007). For instance, Huberman's (1989) widely-accepted career stage model provides in-depth description of teachers' start-to-finish career development, identifying five consecutive stages: the beginning (survival and

**Table 1.** Interviewees list.

Code	Gender	Province	Subject	Affiliation	Teaching age
SXD	Male	Sichuan	Maths	Middle school	27 years
WMY	Male	Jiangxi	Maths	Middle school	28 years
HJH	Male	Shandong	Chinese	Middle school	22 years
CLJ	Female	Hunan	Chinese	Middle school	29 years
WAJ	Female	Hainan	English	Middle school	21 years
YJM	Male	Xinjiang	English	Middle school	22 years
LCG	Male	Qinghai	Physics	Middle school	30 years
ZSL	Female	Guangdong	Physics	Education bureau	27 years
CTH	Male	Jiangsu	Biology	Middle school	25 years
CY	Male	Shanghai	Chemistry	Middle school	22 years
ZYH	Male	Ningxia	Chemistry	Middle school	31 years
XM	Female	Sichuan	Chinese	Special education	22 years
JLY	Female	Guangxi	P. E.	Primary school	26 years
GJ	Female	Hubei	P. E.	Middle school	27 years

discovery; the first three years), stabilisation (four to six years), the middle (experimentation/activism and stocktaking; seven to 18 years), serenity and conservatism (19–30 years), and the end (disengagement (30 years or more)). However, most studies on teacher career stages emphasise knowledge, skill, and goals, paying less attention to how teachers learn and develop morality.

Recent studies have pointed out that teachers' professional development refers not only to their continued growth in the knowledge and skills enabling them to operate effectively in the classroom, but also, and of more importance fundamentally, their growth in teaching morality – i.e., their sense of agency (willingness to take action to fulfil core beliefs) and moral commitment to work conscientiously with students, fellow teachers, and parents (Brunetti and Marston 2018). Teachers' professional development is characterised by increasing clarity and coherence of teacher identity (Beck and Kosnik 2014) and is often a concomitant manifestation of teacher agency (Beauchamp and Thomas 2009).

In China, the state's highest award for all-round teaching excellence is the title of Special Rank Teacher (SRT). The lifetime SRT award was established by the Chinese state in 1978, following the Cultural Revolution, to rehabilitate the teaching profession and honour outstanding teachers. By 2005, around 30,000 SRTs had been honoured, mostly front-line primary and secondary school teachers. This study uses SRTs, all of whom have taught for 20 or more years and thus fall into Huberman's fourth and fifth stages, to explore the moral development process of excellent teachers who, per recent literature, may have developed a deeper understanding of teacher morality (e.g., Brunetti and Marston 2018).

The overriding goal of this study is to depict Chinese SRTs' development of teacher morality. The following sections first review the literature on teacher morality and SRTs in China, and then present the analytical framework and describe the design and implementation of the study. The major patterns of its findings are presented next, after which some possible explanations for these patterns are proposed. This article concludes by presenting a framework for understanding the development of teacher morality, as it applies to Chinese SRTs.

## Teacher morality in China

There are two main perspectives on teacher morality – paternalism and liberalism. Paternalism views moral education as a main aim of education and teachers as authoritative custodians of higher wisdom, virtues, and appropriate values (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 (Carr 2003). China has a long paternalistic tradition of

emphasising teacher morality, and teachers have long been regarded as ‘moral guardians’ in Chinese culture (Paine 1995).

Famous Chinese scholars/educators such as Confucius (B.C. 551–479) developed China’s *shi dao chuan tong* – i.e., the traditional way of conducting education and of being a teacher. This tradition established three criteria for teacher morality: high expectations for teachers’ personal character and conduct; teachers’ professional competencies (teachers should be knowledgeable and committed to lifelong learning); and teachers’ role in moral education. As Carr (1993) argued, this paternalistic understanding of teacher morality stems from the belief that one’s values are inherent in one’s character and conduct, and that appropriate values can be transmitted effectively only by those who possess and exemplify them; as such, teachers face high expectations for not only their professional calibre, but also their personal conduct, forms of expression and attitudes, and even appearance.

The founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 replaced Confucian ideals with Marxist theory, but retained China’s paternalistic teacher morality tradition, with high expectations for teachers’ personal morality, professional competency, and role in moral education, to which was added the expectation that teachers would have high work motivation.

Since the 1990s, China has reformed its teacher education system from a closed to a more open model, in hopes of attracting more talented people into the teaching profession. At the same time, China tightened its control over and imposed very high expectations for teacher morality, through a series of policies on teacher professional ethics, teacher certification, professional ranking (including SRT), and school accountability (Paine and Fang 2006), reflecting its traditional paternalistic understanding of teacher morality and high expectations for teachers’ work motivation. Among these policies, the *Primary and Middle School Teachers’ Ethic Codes* (Ministry of Education 2008), issued in 1984 and revised in 1991, 1997, and 2008, clarified requirements regarding teachers’ motivation – i.e., Lifelong learning, Love the teaching profession,<sup>1</sup> and commitment to teaching (in the 2008 *Codes*).

China’s emphasis on teachers’ work motivation in teacher morality should be understood in the context of several policies designed to attract people to and retain them in teaching profession. Two examples of such policies are the tradition of financially supporting teacher education programme students in exchange for their remaining in the teaching profession for a set number of years, and that of assigning (until the late 1990s) programme graduates to ‘iron rice bowl’ teaching jobs (in-system sector jobs<sup>2</sup> with high social status, career security, good welfare provision etc.) (Liu and Ma 2018).

In the last two decades, several studies have employed Watt and Richardson’s FIT-Choice scale (2007) to investigate the influence of China’s rapid social transition and reduced financial supports on pre-service teachers. The FIT-Choice scale investigates the factors influencing pre-service teachers’ decision to teach. Social influences are presented in the first part of the model, followed by an examination of the context in which teachers choose their career, combining such constructs as perceived task demands versus returns, teacher’s self-perceived abilities and values, and fall-back career options (Watt and Richardson 2007). These studies report that extrinsic reasons, such as financial supports and social status, influence Chinese pre-service teachers’ entry motivation (e.g., Lin *et al.* 2012).

### Special rank teacher and teacher morality in China

The SRT award is a mechanism rooted in the post-Mao era, originally intended to improve teachers’ political and social status, enhance their pride and responsibility in the profession, and ensure their remaining in the teaching profession for their working life. In 1978, at the National Education Work Conference, Deng Xiaoping pointed out that the state ‘should take necessary solutions to encourage people to dedicate to teaching profession lifelong ... those especially excellent teachers, can be identified as special rank teacher.’ In the same year, the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the State Planning Commission issued the *Temporary Regulations on Special Rank Teacher Selection*,

beginning the SRT system in China. The SRT award is the most prestigious honorary title for teachers in China; to receive it is every teacher's goal.

SRT selection is based on combined excellence in teacher morality and teaching competence. The 1993 *Regulations on Special Rank Teacher Selection* notes that the 'SRTs should be role model of teacher morality, moral educator model and teaching expert' (State Education Commission 1993). Correspondingly, three basic requirements for being named an SRT are that the teacher must: 1) meet teacher morality requirements, including the political requirements of 'advocating CCP policies, loving the socialist state, being loyal to the People's education plan; seriously implementing educational policy; fulfilling their teacher responsibilities well, teaching and cultivating students, and being role models to students all the time,' all of which are included in China's *Primary and Middle School Teachers' Ethic Codes*; 2) have senior professional titles, a systematic knowledge of theory and rich teaching experience in the subject they teach, extremely good teaching effects, expertise in being and great achievements working as a homeroom teacher,<sup>3</sup> or make a significant contribution to pedagogy innovation or textbook studies; and, 3) make a deep contribution to improving other teachers' values and ideology, subject knowledge, and teaching ability (State Education Commission 1993).

In the selection process, individual teachers are nominated by their schools to the county education bureau, which inspects the candidates through lesson observations, interviews with candidates' colleagues and students, and a review of candidate-authored documents, such as lesson plans and published articles. The reports are then submitted to the provincial education bureau, which makes the final selection. Though there is only a limited number of SRTs, they are nonetheless expected to deeply influence other teachers' teaching competence, teacher morality development, teacher-education-related publications, in-service teachers' professional learning, etc.

## Analysis framework

Extant studies on teachers' professional development (e.g., Huberman 1989, Beck and Kosnik 2014) are helpful for analysing SRTs' morality development in different career stages. Teachers' professional development follows certain patterns with identifiable stages and is characterised by teachers' increasing clarity and coherence about teacher identity and teacher agency.

Based on traditional and contemporary understandings of teacher morality in China, this study views teacher morality as a broad concept, including not only the ethical behaviour required by professional ethic codes, but also their personal morality, their role in students' moral education, and their work motivation.

These aspects of teacher morality in China are intertwined with and important for teachers' professional development. Teachers' moral education competencies are viewed as core professional competencies in China. An important basis for teachers' carrying out moral education is their own personal moral characters and conducts. On the one hand, work motivation pushes teachers to fulfil society's high expectations regarding teachers' professional competencies and improve their mastery of specialised knowledge and skills. On the other, it also raises the requirements that teachers commit to, love, and remain in the profession.

## This study

This study's primary aim was to explore longitudinal development of teacher morality by investigating SRTs' morality development stages and features in China; this was done by interviews with 14 SRTs from 13 provinces/municipal cities in China. Only one SRT came from a primary school, reflecting the relative smaller portion of primary school SRTs in China (Xu 2019). These SRTs were selected by the MOE from all over China, based on their excellence in teacher morality and teaching competence, then underwent part-time training at leading universities in China. Between July-

August 2018, 14 MOE-selected SRTs attended summer training at X University in Shanghai, all of whom agreed to be interviewed by researchers for this study.

The SRTs interviewed comprised six females and eight males, most of whom were awarded SRT status after 2010. The participants described their development of teacher morality in semi-structured individual interviews, each lasting from one to two hours (see Appendix for interview guidelines). The interviews took place at X University and were recorded by voice recorder, with the permission of the interviewees. The interview guidelines: 1) generally guided SRTs' recall of their career stages and encouraged them to recount their stories; 2) asked directly about such elements of Chinese teacher morality as entry and retention motivations in their early experiences; and, 3) tracked the development of their teacher morality by eliciting their perceptions of important goals/success/conflicts in their work and important competencies in their career stages. The SRTs bore high teacher morality expectations, and we assumed asking life history questions inviting them to recall their experiences would yield more reliable results than would asking specific questions on teacher morality (Ericsson and Simon 1993).

Both researchers in this study were involved in the analysis, reading each interview transcription several times and identifying recurring patterns (Straus and Corbin 1990). We investigated teachers' awareness of changes and steps taken towards developing new understandings of teacher morality in their work. This study examined interview data for evidence of individuals' morality development within each stage, as well as any progressions or regressions along their development path. We shared the patterns we individually uncovered, discussed them at length, then returned to the transcripts to follow up on each other's findings. Through a deliberate, iterative process of discussion, reflection, and reviewing transcripts, we reached consensus about the significant themes that characterised these teachers' development. In our search for themes, we were likely influenced by our interest in teacher morality, which guided our analytic framework, including teachers' personal morality, professional morality, moral education, and work motivation. All participants gave informed consent to participate in the study, which received university ethics approval prior to its being administered. The privacy of the informants was protected by the strict use of pseudonyms. The data were collected between July 2018 and August 2018. Due to its limited sample size, this study makes no attempt to generalise its findings.

## Major findings

### *View teacher morality as important competence in all teacher professional development stages*

All interviewed teachers were asked to divide their professional development into stages and identify the core competences needed in these stages. Most teachers divided their career development into three stages: Stage 1 always included their first five/six years of teaching in schools, during which they entered the profession, faced frustrations, and struggled to survive. Stage 2 generally spanned their sixth to tenth years, a period of maturing and becoming more outstanding in their teaching and class management; Stage 3 always started after at least 10 years' teaching, the point at which they became a teaching expert and had more opportunities to influence their teaching peers. These stages echo the initial four stages of Huberman's model – the beginning of the career (first three years), stabilisation (four to six years), the middle of the career (seven to 18 years) and serenity and conservatism (19--30 years). However, no interviewees felt they were in Huberman's fifth stage – the end of career stage (disengagement (30 years or more)).

The interviewed SRTs all viewed teacher morality as an important competence at all stages of teacher professional development. In addition, they highlighted various core teacher morality competencies for each stage, such as work motivations (love for the profession, dedication to teaching, perseverance, lifelong learning); personal morality (diligence, humility,

kindness, collaboration); and teachers' moral education roles (caring for students' development beyond classroom subject teaching, etc.). The interviewed teachers included these values in reports about their professional development at different stages, as will be introduced in the following sections.

### ***Intrinsic factors, altruistic motives, and role models' influence: SRTs' motivations to enter and stay in the teaching profession***

Themes related to intrinsic factors, altruism, and role models' influence repeatedly appeared when interviewees listed their motivations for entering and remaining in the teaching profession in the early stage of their career.

Intrinsic motives, such as liking teaching as an activity and the profession in general, were mentioned by many interviewees. Their explanations ranged from loving a certain subject to loving the teaching profession as a whole. One maths SRT commented, 'I liked maths, physics, chemistry and biology in middle school . . . After I entered the normal university, I could only choose one as my major, so I studied the other subjects' textbooks for fun by myself' (SXD). Yet another interviewee (LCG) suggested that his experience of working as a part-time teacher in a middle school before college encouraged him to become a teacher.

Altruistic motives – i.e., seeing teaching as a socially worthwhile and important job through which to help learners and contribute to society – also appeared in the interviews, often expressed as helping students change their fate, improving students' social economic status, or cultivating the next generation's values. One interviewee suggested,

I was the child of an animal-breeding family . . . I changed my fate by succeeding in examinations . . . [After I entered teaching profession] I wanted to change my students' fates; 90% of them have family backgrounds similar to mine. I wish to help them to succeed in examinations to find better jobs and have higher social status, which accounts for my motivation [to stay in teaching profession] (YJM).

Teacher morality role models' influence was also mentioned by six interviewees as one of the main reasons they stayed in the teaching profession. They recounted their contacts with role models in their schools, in local teaching and research activities, and in local research teams. One interviewee suggested that he had modelled his teaching after that of a role model:

[A biology teacher in my school] is very responsible and dedicated to teaching . . . He is my role model. Therefore, I model my teaching, my body language in the classroom, ways of talking, ways of writing on the blackboard, ways of communicating with students after him (ZYH).

Another interviewee reported that he had received encouragement from a role model, stating his 'stay in the profession can be partly attributed to the encouragement from a local teaching and research officer . . . His appreciation and encouragement influenced me' (HJH).

### ***Exploring the moral meaning of education and moral role of educators in Stage 1***

All but three of the interviewed SRTs suggested they had experienced major challenges during their teaching career, all of which happened in their Stage 1. Most challenges were related to the SRTs' relationships with students or colleagues.

First, their relationships with students brought the teachers both pains and gains. Most interviewed teachers agreed that mastery of subject teaching skills and caring for one's students are two basic requirements for being a good teacher in Stage 1. However, several teachers suggested that one of the biggest challenges in Stage 1 of their professional life was learning how to balance subject teaching [for exams] with caring for students. They repeatedly reported experiencing dilemmas and struggling to decide 'what was good education for students and what teachers should do.' Some experienced conflicts caused by their high expectations of students' subject academic learning, which



they initially viewed as ‘good education for students.’ After the conflicts, they felt pain, and started to reflect on their experience to improve their understandings of education and teacher’ ethical roles.

CLJ reported that one of the biggest challenges he faced was his efforts to improve students’ academic scores; in the end, he changed his emphasis on scores and realised that a teacher’s role should not be restricted to academic teaching alone. XM, an SRT from a special education school, recalled a painful experience of dealing with a special education student in a strictly academic manner but losing him; the incident highlighted the important role education – rather than academic learning – played in special students’ lives, being perhaps the only way the students could change their fate. After this experience, XM indicated, she realised ‘education is related to life, not only to academic achievement, [so] teachers should be very cautious in teaching. When facing special students, sometimes teachers can do little to change them [academically] but teachers can find ways to support students’ development in life.’

On the other hand, most SRTs deemed their greatest professional success to be their influence on students’ morality learning. Many suggested, like ZYH, that ‘sooner or later, students will leave the school, they will forget the specific knowledge you taught, but if they remember the morality you taught, this is the biggest success for a teacher. The teaching profession teaches the next generation how to be good people, to contribute to society.’

Second, the interviewed teachers mentioned that their relationships with colleagues raised major challenges that pushed them to consider teachers’ and education’s moral roles in contexts with which they were not familiar. SDX described a challenge he faced early in his career: ‘One of my colleagues wanted my class because it was very good. As a young teacher, I lost my good class. My next class was one of the worst classes in the school.’ Through this, however, he learnt teachers had a responsibility to help problematic students as well, and that ‘a good teacher is one who can change problematic students into good students.’ JLY faced difficulties caused by mentor teachers who led her to reflect on what it meant to be a good teacher, eventually discovering that a good teacher should also care about and help colleagues.

### ***Lifelong learning: Teacher morality facilitated professional growth in Stage 2***

In Stage 2, the interviewed teachers reported the importance of lifelong learning (an important aspect of China’s teacher morality) for their professional development and how it pushed them to include various forms of professional learning in this stage, such as enrolling in post-graduate programmes, learning from peers, learning from books, developing skills by serving students, etc. In particular, enrolling in post-graduate school programmes afforded them more opportunities to learn knowledge and skills from experienced university experts. The interviewees commented on both the difficulties they faced in post-graduate programmes and the benefits they gained from upgrading their qualifications:

At that time, there were 35 students in my MEd class, most of them were university teachers. Only two were middle school teachers, including me. It was difficult to catch up to my classmates . . . after I finished my MEd studies, I went back to my middle school and got a position on the student psychological research team; [the research training I received in my MEd programme] helped a lot (WAJ).

Lifelong learning also pushed teachers to extend their learning from their teaching peers, as HJH recalled from an experience from Stage 2 of his career:

I remember one teacher; he was so devoted to his work that, to improve his teaching language . . . he bought a MP3 and every class he recorded his teaching. On the way back home, he listened to his recordings to improve teaching language . . . I learned both teacher morality and teaching skill improvement methods from him.

Persisting in lifelong learning also pushed teachers to make innovations when serving students. CLJ gave an example of encouraging students to take care of their health in boarding schools:



High school students' schedules are very tight, so they do not have much time for sports. I worried [about their health]. Later I started an activity called "don't let your mothers worry, let's do sports." Every day students were required to find time to run 800–1600 meters in the playground; if they did so every day, at the end of the school term, during the parents' meeting in the class, their mothers would be awarded a red scarf. This was a very innovative activity and helped a lot.

### **Increased importance of teacher morality in Stage 3**

By Stage 3, having increased their teaching experience, teachers found teacher morality to be more important for three aspects of their professional performance: being moral educators; team leadership; and motivating mature teachers to learn. First, teachers became more aware of their moral educator's role and students' morality development. Teachers suggested that, compared to beginning teachers, mature teachers have more time and opportunities to carry out their moral educator role.

As a matter of fact, beginning teachers pay more attention to subject knowledge teaching. I myself, for example, in the first five years, had to survive, to make students believe I was qualified for my job. In the next five years, I wanted to be excellent, to show people my class's good academic results, etc. But after that, I had more and more opportunities to reflect on my role, to highlight moral education. (CTH)

Several interviewed teachers echoed this view and further pointed out that mature teachers who had attained excellence in preparing students for higher academic achievement started to seek new goals in moral education. YJM suggested that 'previously ... I emphasised students' academic performance [to help them enter universities] ... but now, 80% of my students can enter elite universities ... I start to think more about students' whole-person development.'

Second, the interviewed teachers reported teacher morality, especially personal morality, played a more important role in their working life as they transitioned to Stage 3, because most transitions involved their changing from a mainly teaching position to one combining teaching, researching, re-education, and leadership work. At the time of their interviews, all interviewed teachers held management positions in their organisations, requiring them to handle more complex relationships than those of a subject teaching teacher alone. Performing with high teacher personal morality helped them to handle relationships with fellow teachers. JLY suggested that, 'to handle my personal and fellow teachers' relationship ... having high [personal] morality [was] very important for me to lead teamwork, to win fellow teachers' support and devotion to teamwork.'

Third, the teacher morality, lifelong learning, motivated mature teachers to work and learn. As ZSL noted, 'nowadays, I asked myself, [since] we SRTs never have to worry about our food and clothes and we live comfortably [at this status], why do we still work so hard? Because we want to contribute to society, we hope that in the future when we look back, we will not feel regret.'

### **Possible explanation and discussion**

#### **China's financial support/job assignment system narrows, beginning SRTs' teaching motivations**

The interviewed SRTs' reported that intrinsic factors and altruistic motivations were primary reasons for career entry, for teaching, and for staying in the teaching profession, echoing extant studies (e.g., Watt and Richardson 2007); however, recent studies report Chinese pre-service teachers view extrinsic motivations as important (Su *et al.* 2001, Lin *et al.* 2012). That China provided financial support for and assigned jobs to teacher education students until the late 1990s partly explains this difference, as most of the SRTs interviewed in this study were educated and entered the profession during that period.

Seven interviewees suggested that the financial support they received during their teacher education helped them to finish their higher education. On the other hand, being assigned jobs

narrowed their career choices and influenced their motivation to teach. All the teachers interviewed in this study knew, when beginning their normal university/college education (i.e., teacher education), they would be assigned a teaching job directly after graduation. Therefore, as reflected by this study, SRTs' main motivations to teach were such aspects as whether they fit/liked the profession (teacher's self-perception, intrinsic value) and what roles they wanted to play therein (social utility values/altruistic values). Most interviewed teachers explained their teaching motivations in terms of their teaching talents, the happiness they gained from teaching, and the contributions they wished to make to society. Other factors, such as comparing teacher task demands and returns or considering a fall-back career were not applicable to or practical for these teachers at the beginning stage of their career. One interviewee mentioned having 'a very clear thought to join teaching profession at that time ... I seldom [thought about joining] other careers' (CLJ).

### **Early years cause tensions for teachers to reflect on their understandings of teacher morality**

Most interviewees suggested they faced their greatest challenges in the first stage phase of their career because new teachers always face a lot of challenges that cause tensions and push them to reflect on their understandings of teacher morality. Extant studies point out that beginning teachers face many difficulties – e.g., enforcing classroom discipline, motivating students, dealing with differences, communicating with parents, coping with colleagues, organising classwork, etc. All these activities involve dealing with interpersonal relationships, including interpersonal conflicts with and among different people or groups with different, often incompatible, values.

In this study, the first big challenge SRTs reported facing in Stage 1 of their career involved interpersonal conflicts with students over how to balance subject teaching (for exams) and caring for students. SRTs' original emphasis on subject teaching reflected their concerns about what constituted a good education for students in China's examination-driven context. Examinations play an important role in Chinese society, as a university education markedly increases one's future life opportunities. To help students make higher scores in each subject's examinations is thus an important teacher responsibility. However, SRTs reported their examination-related conflicts with students caused them pain and forced them to reflect upon and improve their understandings of education and teachers' ethical roles. In this study, these conflicts led teachers like XM and CLJ to change their understanding of teachers' role from one of stressing students' academic achievement to one of exploring and focusing on students' needs.

Additionally, SRTs' conflicts with colleagues in Stage 1 pushed them to think about teachers'/ education's moral roles in contexts with which they were not familiar. For instance, the challenge SDX experienced when a colleague took his good class and left him with only problem students allowed him to appreciate that teachers have a responsibility to change problematic students into good students.

In sum, their reflections in Stage 1 created opportunities for SRTs to learn that many of their underlying assumptions about teaching, such as the need to stress academic achievement, might constrain their ability to facilitate students' development and to consider aspects of teacher morality that are new to them.

### **Teacher morality culture imposes professional learning expectations on teachers**

The interviewed teachers' view that teacher morality-work motivation, such as lifelong learning, was an important competence in teachers' professional development can be explained by the fact that China's teacher morality imposes professional learning expectations on teachers.

China's teacher morality tradition and policies (such as *Primary and Middle Teachers' Morality Codes*) include high standards for teachers' professional competencies, including lifelong learning (i.e., to 'keep broadening their knowledge horizons, [updating] their knowledge structures ... [and improving] their professional skills' (MOE, 2008)), deeming them important aspects of teacher

professional learning. Interviewed SRTs suggested that, in Stage 2 of their professional development, the learning-oriented teacher morality, work motivation, pushed them to overcome the study difficulties they faced in post-graduate programmes, to learn from peer teachers, to develop their skills for serving students. This echoed studies that found a relationship between teacher motivation and professional development. Heystek (2011) pointed out that development is demanding because it requires physical, emotional, and cognitive change in the individuals concerned. Teachers' motivation to dedicate themselves to teaching and lifelong learning helps them to move out of their comfort zones and adopt new practices.

### **Role models in the teamwork: Influences and Expectations**

It has been increasingly promoted in international literature that teachers should no longer work in isolation (e.g., Margolis 2012); China, however, has long had a tradition of teamwork in schools that allows new teachers more opportunities to learn from role models. In the Chinese education system, each subject has a *jiao yan zu* (teaching and research group) in which teachers teaching the same subject plan and discuss their teaching design and carry out related research together. Additionally, each district/city has one or more *jiao yan yuan* (teaching and research officers) overseeing specific subject teachers' teaching and research.

In this context, Chinese teachers in the beginning stage of their career receive supervision from not only their mentor teacher(s), but also other teachers on the school's teaching and research team and the local teaching and research officer, which is intended to increase their motivation to remain in the profession. This is reflected in this study in that having a role model accounted for some SRTs' motivation to stay in the profession. These role models served as guides for and supporters of new teachers; ZYH modelled his teaching (including teacher morality) after a role model, while HJH was encouraged by his role model.

Most SRTs, after becoming successful and famous in Stage 3, also became leaders of professional learning teams and saw teacher morality as increasingly important. For instance, ZSL, after 13 years of working in a middle school, was named a local teaching and research officer, while the rest of the SRTs took charge of master teachers' studios in their cities and played multiple roles (including classroom teaching and management) in their schools. All noted the importance of teacher morality to them in this stage.

This reflects a combination of SRTs' realisation of professional responsiveness and the state's policy expectation that SRTs would be role models 'of teacher morality, [the] moral educator model, and [a] teaching expert' (State Education Commission 1993).

In Stage 3, even after having been recognised for their professional competencies, the SRTs still valued lifelong learning as a way to not only improve their professional knowledge and skills, but also to contribute to society. They noted SRTs' potential to contribute to society, in that they attained greater familiarity with subject teaching content, became outstanding in their ability to prepare students for higher academic achievement, and had more time and opportunities to focus on students' moral development.

SRTs, as teacher leaders and role models, have tried to engage their teacher peers by being responsible and living up to state policies' expectations, improving their understanding/practice of teacher morality, and handling various interpersonal relationships. As reflected in this study, SRTs in Stage 3 found performing well in teacher personal morality helped them to handle complex leadership relationships.

### **Conclusion**

With specific reference to SRTs in China, this article has reported that most viewed teacher morality as an important competence for teachers' professional development. In Stage 1, their motivations to teach and to remain in the profession were related to intrinsic values, altruistic values, and role

models and they explored the moral meaning of education and the moral role of educators. In Stage 2, they found the importance of lifelong learning for professional growth, while, in Stage 3, they discovered teacher morality to be of increased importance. All of this can be attributed to the influence of China's financial support and job assignment system on pre-service teachers' motivating values, the tensions involved in clarifying beginning stage teachers' understandings of teacher morality, teacher morality setting expectations for teachers' professional learning, and a combination of professional responsiveness and top-down expectations that they would be role models in teachers' learning teams.

This study has confirmed that teacher morality plays an important role in teachers' professional development; that teacher morality and teaching are inherently compatible and unavoidably intertwined; and that teachers' professional development is characterised by increased concomitant manifestations of teacher agency (Beauchamp and Thomas 2009). Moreover, it has echoed extant studies on teacher morality development that have distinguished the development of different moral capacities at different times over the lifespan. We identified that, while the SRTs placed a premium on teacher morality in all stages of their career, their moral development differed in different stages due to differing developmental needs. For instance, in Stage 1, their teacher morality emphasised their love of and dedication to the teaching profession (which motivated them to survive and stay in the profession); in Stage 2, when most teachers were fighting to show excellent teaching and class management performance, it highlighted their ability to continuously improve; and, in Stage 3, teachers placed more emphasis on students' development beyond classroom subject teaching, due to their perceiving the increased importance of teacher morality.

This study supplements the extant literature on teacher morality by identifying a three-stage framework to understand teacher's morality learning in the Chinese context. The framework includes three different teacher morality learning stages – Stage 1 (the first five to six years of a teacher's career), Stage 2 (years six to 10), and Stage 3 (10+ years) – each of which is affected by China's socio-cultural context and interacts with other factors to construct teachers' understanding of teacher morality. Stages cannot be skipped, as each provides a new and necessary perspective on teacher morality development.

In Stage 1, the teachers in this study thought about the values motivating their professional commitment and dedication. In this study, due to the wider social context of Chinese pre-service teachers being financially supported by and receiving job assignments from the government, the teachers interviewed were (in Stage 1) motivated to teach and to remain in the profession by intrinsic and social utility values.

Additionally, after starting to work in real school contexts, the teachers re-examined and reflected on their understandings of teacher morality, which opened opportunities for their professional learning. For instance, in the broader contexts of China's examination-driven culture, their schools, and their classroom teaching, the teachers tested their beliefs and ideas and experienced conflicts with students and colleagues. This caused them to reflect on their previous understanding of teacher morality and explore their moral role as educators, which they may not have had opportunity to think about in their pre-service teacher years (e.g., educating problematic students). Correspondingly, they made adjustment to their teaching strategies, education philosophies, etc.

In Stage 2, the teachers became more mature and outstanding in their teaching and class management; therefore, their concept of teacher morality emphasised work motivation – lifelong learning to develop their professional knowledge and skills, through various means – e.g., enrolling in post-graduate programmes, learning from peers, learning from books, developing their skills for serving students by themselves, etc.

In Stage 3, the teachers became teaching experts and had more opportunities to influence their teaching peers. Three major changes brought them new experiences with teacher morality development. First, due to their increased familiarity with teaching content, they could pay more attention to their students' moral development. Second, due to their enlarged working networks and body of experience, they had more opportunities to influence peers and consider how better to

handle their interpersonal relationships, highlighting the importance of teachers' personal morality in these activities. Third, due to their increased maturity, they especially highlighted such teacher moralities as contributing to society, etc.

Although the SRTs in this study were largely promoted in an era of training and development in China, this framework also has implications for the practice of teacher morality today. First, more attention should be paid to the role of social contexts and younger generation teachers' work motivation. China's pre-service teacher population has changed in recent years, in large part due to changes in the financial support and job assignment system for pre-service teachers in normal schools in China. Unlike the SRTs studied herein, pre-service teachers since 2000 have been charged tuition fees. Additionally, the adoption of the contractual employment system has increased pre-service teachers' freedom to make career choices. All of this has made China's future teachers' motivations for teaching more complex, and the cultivation and selection of teachers with intrinsic social utility values more important.

Second, the framework highlights the need to prepare teachers (both pre-service, in-service, and teacher certification test takers) to handle the moral dilemmas and conflicts they will face in Stage 1 of their career. Different from the SRTs in this study, whose main reported challenges were caused by students and colleagues, the younger generation of Chinese teachers now increasingly faces challenges caused by students' families. China's emerging market economy has led parents to increasingly view teachers as service providers, while the country's one-child policy has introduced a Western-style, child-centred approach into contemporary mainland Chinese child-rearing, both of which have created new challenges for teachers. Presenting pre- and in-service teachers with moral dilemmas as opportunities to learn how to solve challenging situations in a changing society will enable them to become reflective professionals capable of responding to changing teaching and societal contexts.

Third, this study suggests the benefits of highlighting teacher morality learning in China's existing teacher learning teams to allow younger teachers to learn teacher morality and more experienced teachers to guide that learning. China has developed a series of teacher team learning communities, such as school-level subject teaching and research groups, local-/city-level subject teaching and research offices, and, since the turn of the century, famous teacher studios, in all of which SRTs have played influential roles. However, many similar programmes in other countries – such as the United Kingdom's and Australia's Advanced Skills Teachers (ASTs) – reward teachers [through salary and recognition] for demonstrable improvements in the quality of their practice and to provide additional opportunities for them to take up leadership roles in relation to curriculum and staff development (Fuller *et al.* 2013). As shown in this study, participation in teamwork benefits both early-stage and experienced teachers' teacher morality learning.

## Notes

1. This term is traditionally found in China's teacher ethic codes and is widely used by teachers to refer to their commitment to their teaching position and the teaching profession.
2. Governments, public institutions (including public schools), and state-own enterprises.
3. Chinese schools assign new students to a homeroom class, which remains relatively stable until graduation. The Chinese state indicates that homeroom teachers should care about the academic learning and moral and personal development of every student in the class.

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## APPENDIX

### INTERVIEW GUIDELINE

1. Why did you choose to be a teacher?
2. Why did you choose to stay in teaching profession?
3. What big challenges and successes did you experience in your professional life? What influence have these had on your understanding of the teaching profession?
4. Can you divide your professional life into stages and highlight the key competences and/or challenges in these stages?
5. What aspects do you view as being of most importance to students?
6. How do you get along with your students?
7. How do you understand the teaching profession?
8. What is your major education philosophy?