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Abstract

There is wide-spread concern about the ethical behavior of university business students. Research shows that ethical decision making by business students is heavily influenced by self-interest—more so than any other academic major. The moral development of business students is a global conundrum where universities from North America to Asia are searching for ways to increase ethical decision making of their students and decrease unethical behaviors of their graduates. This research elaborates a recent model of how universities influence the moral development of business undergraduates by including a Chinese university study.

This research explores the ethical system and its influencers as perceived by the Chinese business student. These findings corroborate the original model presenting six factors that provide input into the students' ethical decisions, emanating from their *moral code: institutional moral reinforcement, business moral reinforcement, service activities, moral amplifiers, experiential challenges, and moral cultural identity* (Hanson & Moore, 2014). Our findings point to the fact that Chinese students actively are developing a sense of moral cultural identity and internalizing their moral codes. Very effective influencers in the life of the Chinese business students are their teachers, volunteer student clubs, and business supervisors. The Chinese study provides new insights in how each of these factors are lived out in a collective society, notably the collective identity while at the university, the centrality of relational harmony and the importance of workplace experience.

We conclude by recommending that universities develop intentional and programmatic experiential learning bridges with the business community. These efforts would seek to apply ethical core values into the workplace.

Key Words: moral development, business student, China, ethics, qualitative research

Background

Business school research has pointed to the fact that ethics and moral development in business students can not be relegated to an isolated course or segment of a business program. AACSB Business Accreditation sees a school's primary purpose to encourage and support ethical behavior seen it it's first "guiding principle & expectations for accredited schools" which starts with Ethics & Integrity

(AACSB, 2023). Researchers found that a single ethical course is not a significant factor in morally developing students nor decreasing their narcissistic traits (Traiser & Eighmy, 2011; Davis & Welton, 1991). However, this does not mean that a student moral reasoning ability is stagnant. To the contrary we find that a student's moral code is dynamically evolving and maturing based on their university exposure (Hanson et al, 2017). In the Chinese context Yin & Quazi (2018) called for business ethics research to be contextualized using a theoretical framework, which is the focus of this research.

China

The moral development of business students is a global conundrum where universities from North America to Asia are searching for ways to increase ethical decision making of their students and seek to decrease the unethical behaviors of their graduates. This study looks at the Chinese context. Business ethics in China date back to ancient times, advocating fair trade, honesty towards customers not to be deceptive (Nie, 2003). The reforms of 1978 established policies to focus on national economic development based on ethical practices. One of the goals of ethical business education in China is to develop students' own ethical and professional identities (Zhou & Ding, 2006). Chinese researchers started to explore the relation between economic development and business ethics, and curriculum studied in professional ethics education (Nie, 2003). Chinese researchers are calling for a wholistic education system guided by values and developing people through teaching virtue (Eryong & Li, 2021). Some have observed that a key problem of professional ethics education in Chinese business colleges is that it focuses mainly on values and concepts instead of a focus on application. They recommend adopting teaching methods of case study and group discussion (Wong, Kennedy & Yan, 2021; Wu, 2005).

Ethics education in business schools is seen as a very important element of Chinese society and is a compulsory course for all business majors (Ding & Wang, 2010). However, the popularity of business ethics education is low and cheating remains high (Ma, 2013). Only 30% of the 115 sampled Chinese business colleges offer business ethics courses (Wu, 2012). Many business schools argue that the "ideological morals" course in the university already includes business ethics. Truth be told, "ideological morals" courses, pay little attention to ethical business problems (Liu, 2016).

One researcher, WU Hongmei (2010), argues that business students' ethical identity determines their locus of control and behaviors when coping with ethical problems. The research looked at an internal locus of control (idealism) versus an external locus of control (relativism). Her findings of Nanjing university students revealed that there was no correlation between a student with or without siblings and their internal or external locus of control. No differences were found in students displaying an

internal locus of control with regard to their gender, year in school and major. The differences emerged with male and senior students having an external locus of control. As seniors, they focus on avoiding harming others and their instruction reinforces their responsibility to care for others over profits. Accounting, Finance, Management majors have highest degree of student external locus of control. We believe this is due to the regulatory business environment of these disciplines. The researcher suggests that more application oriented ethical training is particularly necessary in these areas. Ecommerce, international business, marketing, agricultural economics have the highest degree of student internal locus of control. Findings point to personal ethical values motivating ethical actions as part of their internal locus of control and ethical identity. These findings support the need and importance for business ethics education in China and the use of case study learning for students with an external locus of control to facilitate the internalization of their ethical identity (Wu & Liu, 2010).

Reviewing business ethical education in China, we see that it has increased in the past decade. In 2010 there were no business ethics courses. Since then, universities have added a professional ethics elective course. Currently all Chinese students take a compulsory Core Values of Socialism course, providing a general ethical framework for the Chinese citizen.

Methodology

We use the qualitative research case study method to elaborate on the student moral development theory previously applied to the North American, Moroccan, Brazilian contexts (Hanson, Moore, Bachleda, Canterbury, Franco, Marion, & Schreiber, 2017). The primary research question which is: “How does the university influence student moral development of ethical decision making?” Supporting questions are:

- What university factors influence the moral development of student ethical decision making?
- How does the university culture and environment (national culture), connect students to ethical outcomes?

Table 1 presents the demographics of the Chinese university student participants compared to students in our previous studies. This Chinese university case study enables us to develop greater generalizability of the theory and branch out into the Asian context (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2003).

Table 1*Chinese Institution compared with previous study*

Cultural Setting	Institutional Type	University Size	Theoretic Sample	Religious Affiliation
China	Public	14,364	35	No
Brazil	Private	600	25	No
North America	Private	1,800	16	Yes
Morocco	Public	1,700	71	No

Setting and Sample

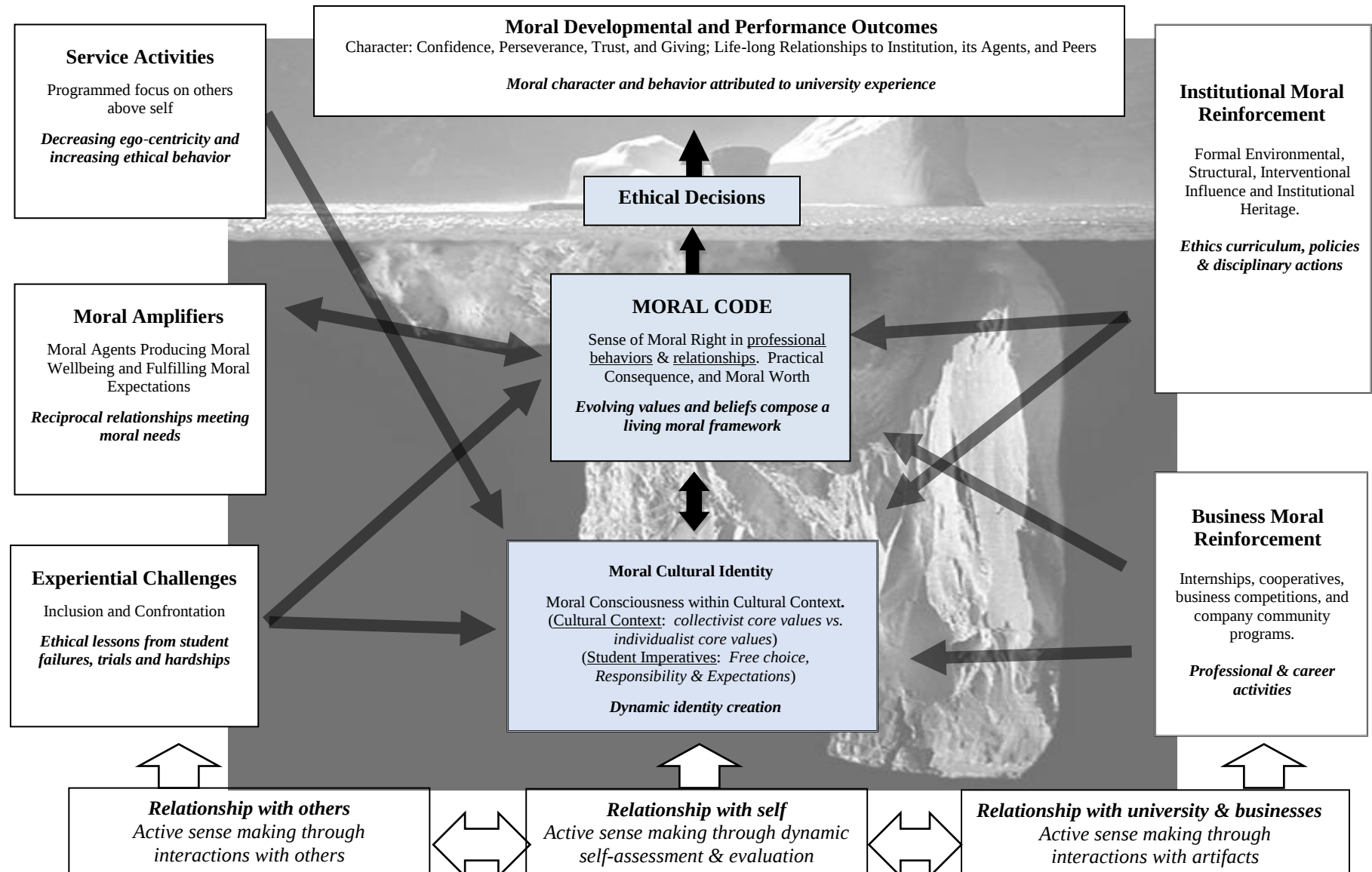
The research was completed at a university in the People's Republic of China in the southern region at a large public institution. Our interviews came from two business classes where a total of 35 students (24 female and 11 male) answered the written questionnaire; thus meeting the standard suggested by Creswell (2003) of between 20 and 30. The key in qualitative sampling is to reach data saturation, at which point meaning between respondents emerge (Charmaz, 2008; Merriam, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Our sample criteria were business students in their last two years of undergraduate studies to select those with the richest experience of university life (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The survey instrument was translated into Chinese to gather the richest possible data from students. Responses were translated into English by one of the authors. The authors worked on coding the translated responses.

Coding and Analysis

We used methods outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1990) and used thematic coding of the student responses. This coding was done in three phases. The first was to take the sentence responses and break them into units of meaning. The second was grouping the units of meaning in groups, or themes, with similar properties. Finally, the third was determining relationships between these themes. Once this was completed, we took our preliminary findings back to a group of students to conduct a member check. During this member check, students clarified or corrected the meaning found in their responses. We thus depended on research triangulation methods to show research rigor in the collection, analysis and production of findings.

Findings

Using the Theory of Moral Development of University Students (Hanson & Moore, 2019) as our theoretical framework we compare the responses of university business students in China. Our findings collaborate the theory finding all six of the factors present. The six factors that influence the students' ethical decisions, emanating from their *moral code* are: *institutional moral reinforcement*, *business moral reinforcement*, *service activities*, *moral amplifiers*, *experiential challenges*, and *moral cultural identity* (Moore & Hanson, 2019). These factors, found in figure 1, can be organized in three types of relationships in the life of the student: relationship with self (*moral cultural identity* factor), relationship with others (*Service Activities*, *Moral Amplifiers* and *Experiential Challenges* factors), and relationship with university structure (*Institutional Moral Reinforcement* & *Business Moral Reinforcement* factors). Our findings point to the fact that Chinese business students are actively developing a sense of moral cultural identity and internalizing their moral codes. We elaborate the current model by clarifying the moral cultural identity to include a specific reference to cultural context core values. Our findings show the positive influence of collective core values on developing a collective identity in Chinese business students. Our understanding of collective comes from Hofstede (2005) description of the cultural dimension of individualism vs collectivism. Collectivism according to Hofstede is someone "knows one's place" in life within a specific social context, while individualism expects individuals to make their own choices and decisions. Furthermore, Bond (2022) suggests that Chinese morality has four dimensions: communal sharing motivated by unity, authority ranking motivated by hierarchy, equality matching is motivated by equality, and market pricing is motivated by proportionality. Our findings can be understood in the collectivist and focus on unity & hierarchy frameworks that Bond & Hofstede outline.

Figure 1*Theory of Moral Development of the Identity of the Business Student*

Note. Adapted model from “Theory of Moral Development of the Identity of the Business Student.” (Moore & Hanson, 2019). Reprinted; permission not required. Photomontage by Kils and Bodo, 2006; permission granted under the terms of GNU Free Documentation License.

Ethical relationship with oneself

The Chinese business student is developing their own moral code through active sense making of the multitude of interactions with people and his/her environment. This internal dynamic in the student starts with the Moral Cultural Identity found within his/her cultural context, which is replete with core values. Students must create meaning from these core values and identify for themselves which are essential to include in their moral code essential to governing their ethical decision making. We look at the moral cultural identity and the core values of the Chinese business students.

Moral Cultural Identity factor

The university is a place where students are undergoing a high level of personal development and maturing. For many this is the first time, away from home and having to live independent. Student responses articulated a moral code as well as a moral cultural identity. Not surprisingly, included in their moral code were traditional Chinese values as well as relational values that bring about relational harmony. Their core values center around honesty, care for others, dedication and obedience. Students articulated values they have learned to avoid or stop. One should avoid selfishness, lying and cheating. One student says: “I picked up a classmate’s dining card. I didn’t listen to my classmate who asked me to use the card. I decided to give it to the academic affairs office.” From a relational perspective they learned the following values at the university: respect of others, importance of relational harmony, and the love of the collective. The relational behaviors they have learned to avoid were don’t lose face, don’t gossip and don’t discriminate. Figure 2 describes the Chinese core and relational values. The traditional Chinese values are bolded: modesty, care for others, obedience, honesty, respect, loving the collective, and safeguarding harmony. These values are positive collectivist characteristics widely honored in Asia.

Figure 2

Top ethical lessons university students have learned

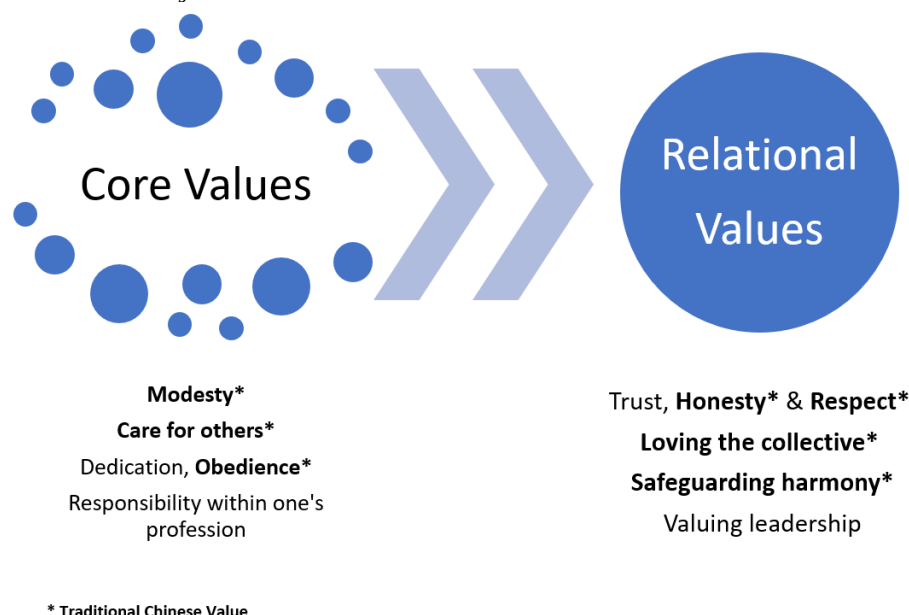


Table 2 provides representative quotes from the Chinese business students. We asked them to define their top ethical values (see Appendix for survey).

Table 2

Student Moral Cultural Identity

Relationship with oneself: Impact of Culture	Representative Quotes
Honesty	I learned honesty and respect from class, for example, it is important to fulfill one's commitment to others and respect others. Telling a lie. I didn't want to go to class so I lied to the teacher. As a result, ... I almost failed in the exam due to the absence
Modest	Learn to be modest but not overdo it, otherwise it become false.
Care for others	Friends care for each other, and classmates help each other Do not talk about people behind their backs. First of all, we have to realize that no one is perfect, and everyone has their own shortcomings, but there are always people who are always talking about it. I also hate it. I swear never to be such a person.

Dedication	Dedication, and this is a more specific question after joining the Party, and it is a pleasant feeling to help others and get happiness from it. Dedication is a way to realize self-value.
Responsibility	Be down-to-earth and law-abiding. Learn to do everything well and get results from it. I learned to be responsible from doing part-time job (family tutor)
Obedience	To comply. there have been several incidents that students were [disciplined] because they went out to have a drink at midnight without complying school rules Bow your head when you should
Relational harmony	What I learned from getting along with roommates is: Mind your [words], even with someone who [is] close to you, don't point out other person's disadvantage face to face.
Love the collective	Love the collective. Since childhood, many of our teachers would tell us that we are a group, and we should love the collective, so I take an active part in every activity in the class, and we get along well with our classmates
Respect	Respect the teachers... The teachers of the university are more concerned with what kind of person we are going to be. To respect teachers. In school, I can see that teachers get on well with students. The head teacher and we are friends, but we also pay attention to some details. After all, he is a mentor.

Chinese students reported having a **collective identity** while at the university. When they talk to others at the same university, all of them refer to the university as their “mother-school”. The collective importance of this means that Chinese students regard the university as a family. This is lived out by senior schoolmates being considered as elder-brothers and elder-sisters to influence their younger siblings. In this family students care for others even if they don't know them. For example, one student mentioned a “stranger” who let them borrow an umbrella. They state: “That day I was stranded by the rain in front of the library, a schoolmate passed by and stopped to ask me whether I needed an umbrella and then lend it to me. Although I don't know him, he influenced me with his kindness.” This example articulates the collective shared values held by the members of the university family towards each other.

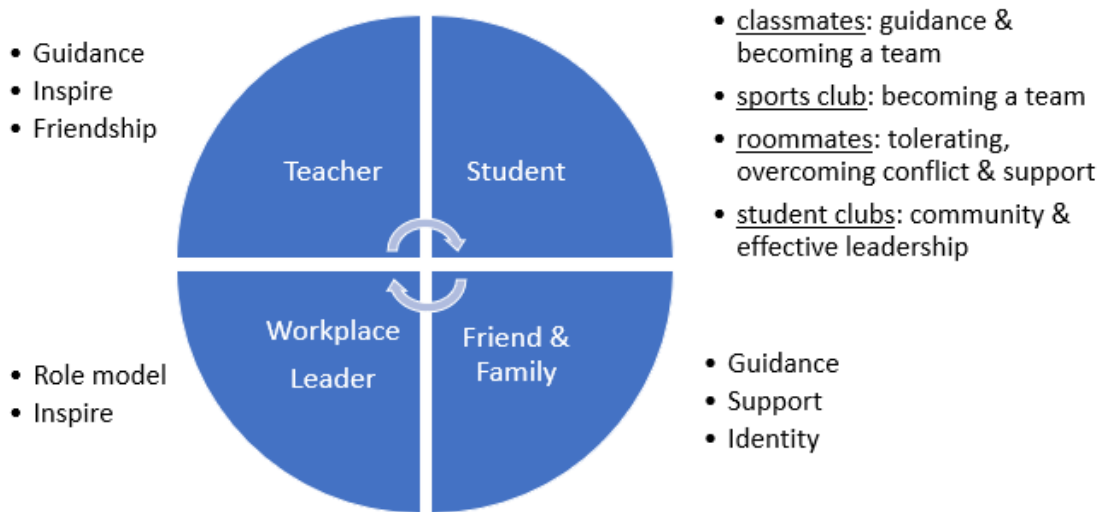
Relationship with others

Moral Amplifiers factor

Inspiration, guidance, help, support, learning, and personal development towards achieving their professional goals is the focus of their relationships. Students pointed to four groups of people while at the university who are the most important relationships they have developed at the university. They are teachers, other students, friends & family, as well as workplace leaders. An important finding is that they are impacted by their interactions with workplace supervisors. Figure 3 describes the four key relationships that impact students morally.

Figure 3

Most important university relationships



First, the relationship between teachers and students remains the primary influencer for university students. Students are very focused on their professional life and transitioning to a career and profession. One student explains: “It is very important to get along with teachers on campus. Teachers can give you guidance and help.” Relationships with teachers is extremely important in a collective society. One student said: “As the saying goes, your teacher for a day, he will be the parent forever. It's always important to learn from teachers.”

Students say that they have been changed by relationships with other students. These relationships have a moral impact even if they are positive or negative. One student says: “In college you can meet all kinds of people who will broaden your horizons. As I relate with others, this interaction has influenced me. Through these experiences I have developed core values that lead me to make right

decisions.” Other students often stand out as moral amplifiers as a student points out: “The saying that people around us will influence us to become like them. There are many people worth learning from in the university. They have many shining qualities worth learning from. If you see these qualities in others’ such as morality and excellence, one is more apt to follow them.”

Experiential Challenges factor

In the collectivist Chinese cultural context, the core values of harmony, care for others and loving the collective are part of the student’s internal moral cultural identity but is enmeshed with relationships. In individualist countries like the United States, we see a clear separation between “I” and “We” (Hofstede, 2005). Experiential challenges are seen in tension with other students “what I learned from getting along with roommates... don’t point out another’s mistakes to their face.” They face institutional conflict as one noted about learning obedience “several students were disciplined because they went out to have a drink a midnight without complying to school rules.” Their challenges also come through university sport activities “we are playing basketball, we won’t have a fight because of a collision, I learned these through mutual understanding and respect between people.” We see that so much of their moral code is developed from the relationships they develop at the university and finding their place “harmony” in the relationship.

Service Activities factor

Students also reported being changed by their personal experiences in service activities while at the university. One student said: “I joined “sanxiang” program in the summer of 2017.” This is a program under which officials, doctors, scientist, and college students go to the countryside to teach in rural areas. Table 3 describes student activities that internalized for them these core values.

Table 3*Core Values Learned through Service Activities*

Relationship with others: Impact of Service Activities	Representative Quotes
<u>Respect</u> the old and cherish the young (Chinese traditional value)	Go to the nursing home to see the elderly. Simple greetings will warm their hearts.
<u>Sympathy</u> to the poor and the weak (Chinese traditional value)	I have donated money to a classmate who was seriously ill. I went to an orphanage to visit orphans. I have participated in "targeted poverty alleviation". I volunteered as a teacher in a summer government service program in the countryside to serve the poor.
Be <u>pleased</u> to help others (Chinese traditional value)	I helped freshman to adapt the university. For example, I helped them enroll and find the dormitory and showed them how to apply for the student's card.
<u>Don't profit</u> at another's expense (Chinese traditional value)	I have helped a stranger. One day when I was downtown, I saw a lady fall from the electric bicycle and I helped her took her to the hospital. I picked up another schoolmate's cellphone and returned it to her. At school, I saw my classmates accidentally drop the money, and the students in the back actively chased him and gave money back to him.
<u>Positive</u> peer pressure (Modern value)	I am inspired by the thank you letters I see posted on the school bulletin board where students have helped each other. I decided to follow their example.

Ethical relationship with university and businesses*Institutional Moral Reinforcement factor*

Table 4 explains the different aspects of how the university structure has influenced the moral code of the business student. It is important to note that the volunteer student leadership positions and membership in sport teams have an important role to play in the life of the student.

Table 4*Institutional Moral Reinforcement Power of Heritage, Heroes and Other Artifacts*

Relationship with University	Representative Quotes
Courses	I think universities are beneficial in promoting our ethical development. We can learn a lot from books in school, which lets us understand what is morally acceptable. Teachers guide us to make moral decisions which strengthen our moral values. I took a business ethics course. Through teacher's explanation and case analysis, I understand the importance of business ethics and its specific requirements
Volunteer Student Clubs	When I completed my student union leadership position I regretted that I had not done a better job with my duties and how I related with others. Department minister of our student union. From getting to know him to getting into the department, he taught me a lot of things and encouraged me to try something good that I hadn't tried.
Sports Teams	I think the university promotes my ethics and moral development, which can help me make moral decisions. When we are playing basketball, we won't have a fight because of a collision, I learned these through mutual understanding and respect between people.
Rules and regulations	When I was in military training for two weeks I learned what it was to be tired and happy. My career outlook also changed. The university is actively hosting open lectures to communicate and teach students moral decision making.
Collective Identity	The university is our "mother-school", which means that students regard the university as a family. Thus, the senior schoolmates are considered as elder-brothers and sisters to influence the juniors (member check).

Students point to amazing experiences that internalize their core values. As we look at their responses, we discover that there does not exist a specific activity that they all share. We find however that various

activities and situations arise where the students choose to be the “hands” of caring – doing the right thing, activating their own moral identity.

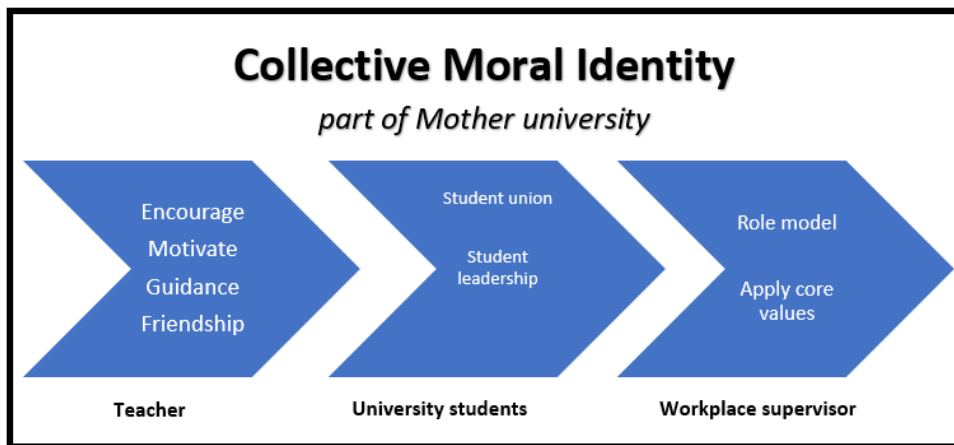
Business Moral Reinforcement factor

Chinese students mentioned they were influenced by their workplace leaders. In fact, they are highly impacted by their ethical example. Once student states: “The relationship between leaders and employees is important. People will take part in the work of society, so it is very important to deal with the leader and learn to be humble. A leader must not lack humanistic care for employees.” By seeing his workplace supervisor’s example, the student realizes how to apply the core value of caring for others in a workplace setting and care for employees. This is captured in a student response: “I learned that I must abide by the business ethics in my work.” Another student is grateful for his boss: “The boss of my part-time job. He is kind, and taught me to be self-reliant, independent, grateful, patient, hardworking, brave and kind.” For instance, one student pointed out that the boss of his part-time job used to be an ordinary college student. Not only did that student become a teacher but he also opened his own shop under his own efforts. He was inspired “What I learned from him is: don't think about who you are now, but rather think about who you want to be through your own effort.”

Our findings support an active adaptation of core values into practical student life where they internalize a moral cultural identity.

Discussion

The role of the university is key to the moral development of business students, our future business leaders. Our findings point to the fact that Chinese students actively are developing a sense of moral cultural identity and internalizing their moral codes. Very effective influencers in the life of the Chinese business students are the role of teachers, volunteer student clubs, and business supervisors. Figure 4 describes the Chinese university student collective moral identity being reinforced by the members of the university. The main actors are the teachers, other students and workplace supervisors. Teachers provide the encouragement, motivation, guidance and sometimes friendship that drives the collective moral identity. University students are the next group that reinforces the collective moral identity through student leadership, student led Communist Party membership and other aspects of daily university life. Finally, the workplace supervisors play an especially key role in contextualizing the moral code and living out the collective moral identity that is expected from the student.

Figure 4*Collective Moral Identity*

We suggest that based on these findings that the university develop intentional and programmatic experiential learning bridges with the business community. University students all over the world are transitioning into full time work. Many Chinese students describe how influential their workplace supervisors are. This intentional programming focus would focus on case study type discussions and applications of core values into the workplace.

Conclusion and Future Research

Business educators across the world ponder how they can be more effective in helping their graduates make more ethical choices. Partnering with a university in Southern China we sought to replicate recent research. Our findings point to the fact that Chinese university students are actively developing their sense of moral identity through the same six factors: *institutional moral reinforcement, business moral reinforcement, service activities, moral amplifiers, experiential challenges, and moral cultural identity*. This study further elaborates the model by discovering in the Moral Cultural Identity the importance of cultural context. This cultural context is essential as collectivist core values stand in sharp contrast to individualist core values. Chinese business students describe collective core values, adopting a collective identity while at the university and point to the centrality of relational harmony. They adopt a positive student collective identity with the “mother university”.

These findings suggest that universities can leverage this theory to increase their effectiveness in morally developing their students. This can be done in two ways. First, using the key relationships of the Chinese student, which are their teachers, student club volunteers and business supervisors. These

relationships can be evaluated to find ways to intentionally incorporate authentic collectivist core values through instruction or during experiential challenges. Second, collectivist core values can be integrated in curriculum or university activities using business ethical case studies and business internships. Using business cases is a practical way to bridge theory to practice, preparing the future graduate for the realities of making ethical decisions in the workplace. These findings resonate with Chinese young adult research in moral development (moral reasoning & moral identity) which posits that moral development increases prosocial behaviors (Ding et al., 2018).

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Appendix

Interview Protocol

1. What are the top 3 ethical lessons you have learned while attending the university (does not have to be learned at school). Describe how each of these lessons was learned either through trial or teaching. *How did you learn these lessons?*
2. Think of the top 3 relationships you have developed while attending the university. *Describe why* these relationships are very important to you and what challenges or experiences made this relationship so strong.
3. Think of 3 people at your university who influence you to be a better person, or make good, ethical choices. *Describe how they influence you.*
4. Since you have been at the university, how has your campus service with people at the university changed? Do you feel that the level of your campus service has increased, stayed the same, or decreased? *Why?*
5. Since you have been at the university, how has your community service with people *outside* the university changed? Do you feel that the level of your community service has increased, stayed the same, or decreased? *Why?*
6. Think of 3 things (other than people) at your university that enable you to make better ethical decisions? *How* did they contribute making good, ethical choices?
7. How do you feel that the university has increased your ethical or moral development, contributing to your making ethical decisions?