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Fostering Ethical Leadership and Moral Integrity in Chinese Vocational Colleges: A Qualitative Study from Chongqing

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Research Article

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Abstract

Background/purpose. Ethical leadership and moral integrity researches have predominantly focused on Western, low power distance cultures, with limited attention to its expression in collectivist, high power distance contexts like China. This study explores the specific manifestations of ethical leadership and moral integrity among vocational college lecturers in Chongqing.

Materials/methods. Using a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with two groups: 30 exemplary lecturers and 5 senior experts in vocational education. Participants were selected through purposive and stratified sampling.

Results. The findings reveal ten core manifestations of ethical leadership and moral integrity, including three novel themes: (1) culturally adaptive ethical behaviors, (2) collectivist influences on moral responsibility, and (3) collective motivation in upholding academic ethics.

Conclusion. These insights highlight how ethical leadership and moral integrity are shaped by local cultural norms and provide a contextualized understanding relevant to policy and practice in vocational education.

1. Introduction

Ethical leadership and moral integrity are widely recognized as fundamental pillars for fostering trust, quality, and ethical conduct within educational institutions, shaping both educator behavior and student development (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Arar et al., 2016). Their importance becomes even more pronounced in vocational education, where educators not only transmit knowledge but also model professional values that prepare students for industry engagement. In the context of Chongqing, China, vocational education operates within a distinctive socio-cultural environment marked by strong collectivism and high power-distance (Zhu & Guo, 2021; Liu & Hardy, 2021). These cultural features present unique challenges and opportunities for how ethical leadership and moral integrity are understood and enacted.

Previous studies have demonstrated that ethical leadership, expressed through traits and behaviors such as integrity, altruism, and collective motivation, is associated with enhanced teaching quality and the promotion of ethical practices in educational settings (Engelbrecht et al., 2017; Etinagbedia & Okolie, 2024). However, the majority of these studies have been conducted in Western cultural contexts that emphasize individualism (Brown et al., 2005; Lawton & Páez, 2015), raising questions about the applicability of their findings to collectivist and hierarchical systems such as those found in China. Similarly, moral integrity, which encompasses attributes including honesty, accountability, and resilience, has been recognized as a critical foundation for educators' ethical decision-making and professional conduct (Pohling et al., 2015; Hutchinson et al., 2015). Nevertheless, its specific manifestations within vocational education, particularly in the Chinese socio-cultural landscape, remain significantly underexplored (Shi & Fernandes, 2021).

Research on ethics in Chinese higher education has often concentrated on problems such as academic misconduct (Abd Azzis & Mahmud, 2021; Anohina-Naumeca et al., 2020). In contrast, the vocational education sector is shaped by intensive industry-academia partnerships and extensive student internships (Zhai & Yang, 2023; Wang & Peng, 2024). These distinctive dynamics create ethical responsibilities that differ from those in traditional university settings and therefore call for more detailed and systematic investigation. Moreover, the influence of pervasive cultural norms and institutional structures in Chongqing on the relationship between ethical leadership and moral integrity represents an important gap in the existing literature (Zuo & Binti, 2024).

Despite increasing scholarly interest, there remains a lack of systematic qualitative studies on ethical leadership and moral integrity in Chinese vocational education. Current theoretical frameworks, largely developed in Western contexts, often fail to capture the realities of collectivist values and high power-distance relationships that characterize China's educational institutions. Furthermore, the interaction between ethical leadership and moral integrity within vocational settings has yet to be thoroughly examined. To address this gap, the present study employs a qualitative approach to develop a conceptual framework for ethical leadership and moral integrity that reflects China's cultural context and the unique characteristics of vocational education (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Aleksei Turobov et al., 2024).

Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the specific manifestations of ethical leadership in the context of Chongqing's vocational education?

RQ2: What are the specific manifestations of moral integrity in the context of Chongqing's vocational education?

RQ3: How do ethical leadership and moral integrity interact in Chongqing's vocational education, and how are they influenced by cultural and institutional factors?

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2. Literature Review

To sharpen the focus of this study, the literature review begins by situating ethical leadership and moral integrity within existing scholarship while emphasizing that systematic investigations in the specific cultural and institutional context of Chongqing's vocational education remain limited. This framing ensures that the central research gap is clearly established before the broader theoretical discussion.

2.1. Ethical Leadership

Ethical leadership is a multifaceted concept that has evolved significantly over time, influenced by societal changes, organizational dynamics, and academic perspectives. Initially, ethical leadership focused on the leader's moral character and the ethical legitimacy of their vision and values (Brown et al., 2005). Over time, the definition expanded to include promoting desired ethical behavior among leaders and followers, guided by principles advocating for empowerment, service to others, and a sense of duty towards society and the environment (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Key characteristics of ethical leadership include integrity, altruism, collective motivation, and empathy. Integrity involves being honest and having strong moral principles, ensuring actions align with values and principles regardless of external pressures (Bligh & Kohles, 2009; Avolio et al., 2009). Altruism is the selfless concern for the well-being of others, involving helping or caring for others without expecting anything in return (Mortensen and Cialdini, 2020). Collective motivation refers to the drive or willingness of a group to work together towards achieving a common goal, aligning team efforts and promoting cooperation and unity (Allsop et al., 2016). Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings, perspectives, and experiences of others, fostering relationships built on trust, respect, and understanding (Pohling et al., 2015).

Ethical leadership has been extensively studied in Western literature, with several key theories and frameworks emerging over the past few decades. Transformational leadership, one of the earliest leadership styles to emphasize ethical behavior, focuses on engaging followers to elevate their moral values. Servant leadership prioritizes the needs of followers, fostering their growth and development through humility, empathy, and stewardship. Authentic leadership emphasizes self-awareness, transparency, and ethical behavior, promoting a culture of trust and integrity (Luthans et al., 2003). Spiritual leadership integrates spiritual values into leadership practices, emphasizing altruistic love, hope, and faith (Fry, 2003). These theories provide a comprehensive understanding of ethical leadership, emphasizing the importance of ethical behavior, follower well-being, and organizational culture (Avolio et al., 2009).

However, these theories are primarily based on individualistic and low-power-distance cultural contexts. In China's collectivist and high-power-distance cultural environment, especially in the field of vocational education, adjustments are needed to adapt to its unique characteristics. For instance, transformational leadership emphasizes individual motivation, but in a collectivist culture, group harmony and collective motivation are more critical (Mathisen et al., 2010). In Chongqing's vocational education, ethical leadership often enhances teaching quality through team collaboration or maintains decision-making transparency in industry-academia cooperation to uphold the integrity of teaching and collaborative projects (Liu & Hardy, 2021). Particularly under the manufacturing-driven industry-academia cooperation model, leaders need to demonstrate integrity and collective motivation in complex ethical situations, laying the foundation for the establishment and maintenance of academic ethics (Arar & Saiti, 2022).

The applicability of these theories in individualistic and low-power-distance cultures presents both opportunities and challenges. In individualistic cultures, such as those in Western societies, ethical leadership promotes personal integrity and accountability, aligning with the cultural emphasis on individualism (Engelbrecht et al., 2017). Leaders in these cultures are expected to model ethical

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behavior and foster a culture of transparency and fairness (Mayer et al., 2010). However, the focus on individualism can sometimes lead to a lack of collective responsibility, which is crucial for ethical leadership (Pranee Liamputtong, 2016). In low-power-distance cultures, such as Scandinavian countries, ethical leadership is more likely to involve open communication and collaboration, with leaders interacting with team members on an equal footing (Wang et al., 2016). This cultural context supports the principles of ethical leadership by promoting fairness, transparency, and accountability. However, the emphasis on equality can sometimes lead to challenges in maintaining authority and ensuring compliance with ethical standards (Lawton & Páez, 2015). Overall, while ethical leadership theories provide valuable insights, their application in different cultural contexts requires careful consideration of cultural values and practices to ensure effectiveness and relevance (Wang et al., 2016).

2.2. Moral Integrity

Moral integrity is defined as a behavioral trait that maintains consistency between personal beliefs and professional roles, enabling individuals to adhere to their core ethical values in various contexts despite external pressures (Ahmad et al., 2017). This concept is crucial in academic and professional settings, encompassing dimensions such as honesty, fairness, accountability, transparency, humility, and resilience. Honesty involves truthfulness and transparency in all academic and professional activities, while fairness ensures impartial treatment of all parties (Abd Azzis & Mahmud, 2021). Accountability means taking responsibility for one's actions and decisions, and transparency involves openness in all activities to prevent misconduct (Anohina-Naumeca et al., 2020). Humility is the recognition of one's limitations and the value of others' perspectives, and resilience is the ability to maintain ethical principles despite challenges. These characteristics collectively form the foundation of trust and ethics in academic environments, influencing individual behavior and institutional credibility (Ahmad et al., 2017).

In vocational education, moral integrity is particularly important for lecturers. By demonstrating characteristics such as honesty, fairness, and resilience in teaching and industry collaboration, lecturers uphold ethical standards. For example, in Chongqing's vocational education, resilience helps lecturers adhere to moral principles (such as refusing to manipulate evaluation results) under the pressure of regional teaching evaluation systems, while fairness is reflected in balancing corporate interests with teaching objectives (Zhou et al., 2022). In China's collectivist culture, moral integrity places greater emphasis on a sense of group responsibility. For instance, lecturers promote cooperation through maintaining team trust (Alexander Haslam, 2014). In Chongqing's vocational education, lecturers need to maintain resilience under the pressure of teaching evaluations, refusing to manipulate results to uphold fairness, while also balancing corporate interests with teaching objectives in industry-academia cooperation to ensure academic integrity (Zhou et al., 2022).

Moral integrity has been extensively studied in educational contexts, particularly in relation to academic integrity and student behavior. Research indicates that emphasizing moral integrity in education can reduce academic fraud and foster critical thinking and responsibility among students (Abd Azzis & Mahmud, 2021). For instance, studies have shown that fairness is considered the most important dimension of academic integrity by students, while honesty plays a weaker role in the face of academic misconduct, possibly due to cultural backgrounds and values (Anohina-Naumeca et al., 2020). Accountability and transparency are recognized as core qualities necessary for academic integrity, influencing the credibility of academic results and student learning experiences (Atjonen, 2018). Humility can directly reduce academic misconduct, while resilience helps individuals maintain ethical standards under pressure (Hutchinson et al., 2015; Alcott, 2017). In vocational education, where practical skills and ethical behavior intersect, moral integrity is essential for maintaining high standards and fostering a culture of trust and accountability (Antera, 2021).

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Moral integrity complements ethical leadership by reinforcing the ethical principles that guide leadership behavior. Ethical leaders who exhibit moral integrity set an example for others, promoting a culture of honesty, fairness, and accountability (Afsar & Shahjehan, 2018). In existing research, the theoretical link between leaders' integrity and the resulting ethical climate of the organization (including the reinforcement of academic ethical norms) has been widely acknowledged (Arar et al., 2016). Leaders' ethical conduct is seen as a key factor influencing subordinates' ethical decision-making and behavior, and thus directly relates to the maintenance of academic integrity. This alignment between personal and professional ethics enhances trust within the academic community and fosters a positive learning environment. For example, leaders who demonstrate humility and resilience can inspire students and colleagues to uphold ethical standards even in challenging situations (Qian & Jian, 2020). Moral integrity also supports the development of policies and practices that promote academic ethics, ensuring that decisions are made with fairness and a commitment to integrity. Theoretically, individual moral integrity is considered the cornerstone of academic ethical practices at the institutional level, as it directly affects the authenticity and effectiveness of policy formulation and implementation (Arar & Saiti, 2022).

Although the preceding sections have outlined major concepts and frameworks, most of this scholarship originates in Western contexts. Consequently, there is a notable gap in understanding how ethical leadership and moral integrity are shaped by the collectivist values, high power-distance, and industry-academia collaboration that characterize vocational education in Chongqing. Recognizing this gap provides the rationale for the present study.

2.3. The Influence of Culture and Vocational Education Context on Ethical Leadership and Moral Integrity

Chinese culture, characterized by high power distance and collectivism, significantly influences the manifestation of ethical leadership and moral integrity. In a high-power distance culture, authority is respected, and decisions are often made by those in higher positions. This cultural context shapes ethical leadership by emphasizing respect for hierarchy and the importance of leaders' integrity and fairness in decision-making (Cheng, 2023). Collectivism further reinforces this by prioritizing group harmony and the common good over individual interests. In such a setting, ethical leadership is not just about personal virtues but also about maintaining social order and fostering a sense of collective responsibility. Leaders are expected to exhibit moral integrity by being honest, fair, and accountable, which in turn strengthens the trust and cohesion within the group (Qian & Jian, 2020; Alexander Haslam, 2014).

In Chongqing's vocational education in China, the industry-academia cooperation model driven by manufacturing and the local teaching evaluation system have increased the complexity of ethics. Lecturers are required to maintain fairness between corporate interests and teaching objectives, such as preserving the independence of research in corporate-funded projects, which necessitates a high degree of moral integrity (Gagnon & Dubeau, 2023). Furthermore, policies in Chongqing that support manufacturing skills training further shape a unique ethical environment, emphasizing the integrity and collective motivation of leaders. To systematically analyze the manifestations and cultural and situational impacts of ethical leadership and moral integrity within the context of Chinese vocational education, this study proposes to observe and organize data from the following four macro perspectives to construct a culturally adaptive conceptual framework:

Personal Ethical Expectations and Standards. Lecturers in Chongqing's vocational education form unique expectations for ethical leadership and moral integrity based on personal values and professional experiences, driving their ethical behavior. Lecturers typically expect leaders to demonstrate transparency and fairness in the allocation of teaching resources or industry-academia collaboration, serving as a benchmark for their own ethical practices. In teaching evaluations, facing

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performance pressures, lecturers may choose to refuse manipulating results to uphold academic fairness, reflecting a personal commitment to integrity. In corporate-funded projects, lecturers maintain research independence against the temptation of interests, reflecting their adherence to fairness and honesty (Wang & Shi, 2024). Research indicates that vocational education lecturers are often guided by Confucian values, highly identifying with "honesty" and "temperance," and prioritizing student and collective interests in decision-making (Yuan et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2021). Differences in personal ethical sensitivity, such as prioritizing fairness or efficiency, significantly affect their choices in ethical dilemmas. For instance, some lecturers are more inclined to insist on teaching quality rather than catering to short-term performance goals (Wenzhen et al., 2023).

Power Structures and Ethics. The high-power-distance culture in Chongqing's vocational education makes power structures play a central role in the practice of ethical leadership and moral integrity. Leaders' authoritative decisions, such as setting performance indicators in teaching evaluations, often exert pressure on lecturers, potentially inducing unethical behavior, such as adjusting grades to meet assessment requirements. Research shows that leadership style significantly affects the school's sense of fairness and ethical climate, especially when decision-making participation and supervision mechanisms are not transparent (Wu & Merilalses, 2024). Transparent oversight mechanisms, such as public industry project allocation processes, can alleviate this pressure and enhance a sense of organizational trust (Zhu & Guo, 2021). If leaders adhere to fairness, accountability, and integrity in high-power-distance environments, for instance, avoiding interest biases in corporate cooperation, they can motivate lecturers to follow ethical standards (Zheng & Ye, 2022). The influence of power structures on ethical behavior is reflected in how leaders balance authority and fairness to guide lecturers to maintain integrity under institutional constraints (Zuo & Binti, 2024; Shi & Fernandes, 2021).

Collectivism and Moral Responsibility. The collectivist culture in Chongqing's vocational education endows lecturers with a strong sense of moral responsibility, prompting them to prioritize group harmony and collective goals. In team teaching or industry-academia collaboration, lecturers maintain team trust and resist unethical behavior, such as sacrificing the college's academic reputation for personal gain (Liu et al., 2021). Research on teacher leadership finds that organizational cultures built through cooperative culture and a sense of "collective honor" can effectively strengthen moral responsibility and professionalism (Zheng & Ye, 2022; Zuo & Binti, 2024). Leaders motivate lecturers to align personal behavior with team interests by reinforcing collective goals, such as enhancing the institution's overall ethical image. The norms of the "guanxi" culture further promote lecturers to balance personal and collective responsibilities in ethical decision-making (Wang & Shi, 2024). This collectivist-driven sense of moral responsibility reinforces vocational education's ethical norms through team collaboration (Wang & Peng, 2024; Shi & Fernandes, 2021).

Ethical Conflicts and Resolution. Industry-academia collaboration and teaching evaluations in Chongqing's vocational education often trigger ethical conflicts, such as contradictions between corporate interests and teaching quality or trade-offs between fair grading and performance objectives. Lecturers resolve these conflicts with guidance from leaders, for instance, by openly discussing the interest conflicts in corporate-funded projects and seeking ethical solutions (Zuo & Binti, 2024). Research indicates that professional ethics education for teachers is crucial in teacher-student interactions, exam integrity, and project collaboration, serving as an important tool to alleviate such conflicts (Liu, 2023; Liu et al., 2021). Additionally, "guanxi" culture may complicate conflicts due to interpersonal pressures, such as lecturers facing pressure to compromise integrity for personal relationships. Leaders help teachers adhere to professional ethics in conflicts through mediation and value guidance (Zhai & Yang, 2023; Zheng & Ye, 2022), ensuring the sustainability of ethical practices and organizational credibility.

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These perspectives provide a structured angle for analyzing ethical practices in Chongqing's vocational education, helping to understand the role of cultural and situational factors from multiple levels, laying the foundation for subsequent discussions on theoretical adaptation and research gaps.

At the same time, these frameworks reveal certain theoretical incompatibilities when applied to Chinese vocational education. Specifically, beyond cultural contrasts such as collectivism and high-power distance, there are also pedagogical differences. Vocational education places greater emphasis on practical training, skill development, and industry academia collaboration, aspects that are not fully addressed in Western theories of ethical leadership. Structural differences are equally significant. Performance evaluation systems, state policy influence, and institutional hierarchy in Chinese vocational colleges create ethical tensions that cannot be sufficiently explained by individual centered Western models. Therefore, a deeper theoretical adaptation is necessary to integrate both cultural and pedagogical structural dimensions into the study of ethical leadership and moral integrity.

Applying Western theoretical frameworks to Chinese vocational education reveals both fit and challenges. Western theories, such as transformational and servant leadership, emphasize individual empowerment and ethical behavior (Afsar et al., 2014). However, these may need adaptation to align with the collectivist and hierarchical nature of Chinese culture. For instance, while transformational leadership focuses on inspiring followers, in a collectivist context, it must also consider group dynamics and the maintenance of social harmony. Similarly, servant leadership's emphasis on serving others fits well with collectivist values but may require adjustments to address the high power distance, ensuring that service does not undermine authority structures. The challenge lies in balancing the individualistic and empowerment-focused aspects of these theories with the collective and hierarchical values prevalent in Chinese vocational education.

The unique context of vocational education, including industry-academia collaboration, student internships, and teaching evaluation, has a profound impact on ethical behavior. Industry-academia partnerships can lead to conflicts of interest and ethical dilemmas, requiring clear ethical guidelines to ensure integrity in research and practice (Gagnon & Dubeau, 2023). Student internships provide practical experience but also expose students to workplace ethics, necessitating robust ethical training to prevent misconduct (Abd Azzis & Mahmud, 2021; Gallant, 2017). Teaching evaluation, often linked to performance incentives, can pressure educators to compromise on ethical standards. Therefore, fostering a culture of ethical leadership and moral integrity is crucial to navigate these challenges and uphold the ethical standards in vocational education. Existing theories emphasize that ethical leadership directly influences the moral integrity of organizational members by setting an example and establishing clear expectations, which is crucial for maintaining overall ethical standards, including academic ethics, in the complex environment of vocational education (Afsar & Shahjehan, 2018). Leaders with a strong sense of moral integrity are more effective in promoting and implementing policies designed to ensure academic transparency and fairness (Arar & Saiti, 2022). In Chongqing's vocational education, the collaboration between regional manufacturing sectors (such as the automotive and electronics industries) and colleges intensifies ethical challenges. For instance, lecturers need to maintain research independence in corporate-funded projects (Antera, 2021). In Chongqing's vocational education, industry-academia collaboration in the automotive and electronics industries has intensified ethical challenges. Lecturers are required to maintain the independence of research in corporate-funded projects, while balancing moral integrity with professional development under performance-oriented teaching evaluation pressures (Antera, 2021). These contexts highlight the unique impact of cultural and institutional factors on ethical behavior.

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2.4. Research Gaps

The existing literature on ethical leadership is predominantly grounded in Western educational and business contexts, emphasizing individualism and low power distance cultures. While these frameworks are valuable, they may not fully capture the nuances of ethical leadership in China's collectivist and high-power-distance environment, particularly in vocational education. The specific manifestations of ethical leadership in this context remain underexplored, leaving a significant gap in the literature (Arar et al., 2016; Gallant, 2017).

Firstly, the manifestations of ethical leadership in Chongqing's vocational education have not been clearly defined. Western theories such as transformational and servant leadership emphasize individual motivation and transparency (Afsar et al., 2014; Haslam, 2014). In contrast, ethical leadership in this context may manifest through collective motivation and authoritative integrity, for instance balancing corporate interests with teaching objectives through transparent decision-making in industry–academia collaboration. However, these behaviors and values have not been systematically studied and require qualitative exploration.

Secondly, moral integrity in vocational education has received limited scholarly attention. While most studies focus on academic integrity (e.g., reducing student cheating), the resilience and fairness of vocational education lecturers under pressures such as teaching evaluations are rarely discussed (Abd Azzis & Mahmud, 2021). The collectivist culture of Chongqing may further shape these practices by emphasizing group responsibility, indicating the need for thematic analyses.

Thirdly, the interplay between ethical leadership and moral integrity remains an underexplored area. Although both are acknowledged as key drivers of ethical behavior, the mechanisms through which they interact in vocational education are not well understood (Qian & Jian, 2020). In collectivist and high-power-distance contexts, such as Chongqing, this interaction may be mediated by collective motivation. For example, leaders may support lecturers' fair behavior in industry–academia cooperation through authoritative decision-making, yet the mechanisms and influencing factors require deeper investigation (Alexander Haslam, 2014).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

Given the uniqueness of Chongqing's vocational education and its distinctiveness in cultural background, institutional characteristics, and educational practices, existing literature on the specific manifestations of ethical leadership and moral integrity is not directly applicable to the academic ethics context of Chongqing's vocational colleges. Therefore, this study invited experts in the field of Chongqing's vocational education to conduct expert interviews on the specific manifestations preset in the literature, and to qualitatively explore them in conjunction with the actual situation of Chongqing's vocational education. Through in-depth analysis and feedback from experts, a framework more aligned with the realities of Chongqing's vocational education has been refined. This qualitative research-based approach can more scientifically capture the unique needs and academic ethics issues of Chongqing's vocational colleges, providing a more solid theoretical foundation and practical basis for subsequent research.

The core of this study lies in exploring the specific manifestations of ethical leadership and moral integrity, traits that are deeply influenced by cultural background, personal experience, and educational environment. Therefore, adopting qualitative research methods, especially semi-structured interviews, can capture the participants' deep understanding and practical application of ethical constructs, thereby contributing more cultural and practical perspectives to the theory. Semi-structured interviews can capture participants' deep understanding and practical application of ethical concepts, especially in the context of Chongqing's vocational education, which emphasizes

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the culture of "guanxi" (relationships) and "harmony." Face-to-face interviews facilitate the establishment of trust and elicit candid responses (Brown & Danaher, 2019).

3.2. Data Collection Procedures

The research subjects are divided into two groups: Group A (Lecturer Group) consists of 30 full-time lecturers from Chongqing vocational colleges, recruited through a combination of purposive sampling and stratified random sampling from the list of advanced individuals in teacher ethics and teaching role models from 2022 to 2024; Group B (Expert Group) includes 5 senior researchers or policymakers in the field of vocational education, recruited through academic networks and recommendations from the educational bureau. Group B has a smaller sample size (5 participants) due to its high level of specialization and homogeneity, which meets the saturation requirements of expert groups in qualitative research (Guest et al., 2020).

Lecturers must have at least 3 years of teaching experience, have participated in industry-academia collaboration or teaching evaluation activities, and have demonstrated ethical leadership or moral integrity in teaching or management. To mitigate the potential bias from relying solely on lists of exemplary teachers, Group A additionally includes 10 non-exemplary lecturers to ensure a diverse perspective on ethical behavior. Experts should have over 5 years of relevant research or management experience and be familiar with the educational context of Chongqing. The sample composition was as follows: The lecturer group spanned ages 28-52 (M=38.4, SD=6.7), comprising 16 males (53.3%) and 14 females (46.7%). Disciplinary representation included intelligent manufacturing (8), digital economy (7), modern services (6), cultural tourism (5), and healthcare (4). The expert group averaged 11.2 years of professional experience (SD=3.8), consisting of 2 higher education policy specialists and 3 vocational education management experts. Recruitment was coordinated through the Chongqing Municipal Education Bureau, with all participants signing an informed consent form and having the option to withdraw at any time. The study has been approved by the Ethics Committee of Chongqing Polytechnic University of Electronic Technology.

3.3. Research Instruments

In this study, data collected mainly using semi-structured interviews, which was highly appropriate for exploring specific manifestations like ethical leadership and moral integrity, especially within a nuanced cultural and educational context such as vocational education in Chongqing, and further use thematic analysis to process and analyze the data. Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to prepare key questions in advance while retaining the flexibility to explore emerging themes (Brown & Danaher, 2019). This is crucial for understanding complex and culturally embedded constructs like ethical leadership and moral integrity. The conversational nature of semi-structured interviews helps build rapport, fostering trust with participants (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). In the Chinese cultural context, where face-to-face interaction often emphasizes relationship-building (guanxi), this approach can lead to more candid and meaningful responses. The interviews are primarily conducted in face-to-face mode, taking place within vocational colleges across 20 districts of Chongqing, to align with the "guanxi" culture; if objective reasons prevent this, online interviews are conducted via Tencent Meeting video calls, with each interview expected to last between 30 to 45 minutes.

Ethical behaviors in Chongqing, China are deeply influenced by the culture of "harmony" and "relationships" (guanxi), which is particularly evident in the leadership styles and moral expressions of lecturers (Wang et al., 2017; Ren & Chadee, 2017). This cultural background makes face-to-face interviews an important method for capturing the intrinsic values and ethical behaviors of lecturers (Ko et al., 2016; Ip, 2009). Furthermore, this method enables respondents to express their thoughts and experiences in their own words, which is vital when exploring abstract and multifaceted concepts like ethical leadership and moral integrity. It allows for rich, in-depth data collection that captures

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the unique perspectives of individuals in vocational education (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). Detailed information on the semi-structured question design, the interview guide, and the strategies will be employed to foster meaningful discussions and encourage in-depth exploration is provided in Appendix A.

This study involved two participant groups: Group A, comprising 30 lecturers from Chongqing's vocational colleges, and Group B, consisting of 5 experts in vocational education research or policy-making. In May 2025, participants were selected through a combination of purposive and stratified random sampling, ensuring the inclusion of individuals with relevant experience and knowledge in ethical leadership and moral integrity within vocational education (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Based on the list of advanced individuals in teacher ethics and role models in teaching and nurturing students in Chongqing Municipality (2022–2024), Randomly select one vocational college from each of the 20 districts in Chongqing City, inviting one lecturer from each college, totaling 20 lecturers; additionally, 10 more lecturers are selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in age, gender, and academic disciplines. To avoid sample bias towards ethical models, non-model lecturers are included to capture a variety of ethical behaviors.

To ensure a diverse regional representation, a stratified random sampling method was utilized, choosing one vocational college from each of the 20 districts in Chongqing, with an invitation extended to one lecturer from each institution. This stratified random sampling was exclusively applied to the initial selection of 20 lecturers to prevent confusion with the theme review phase. The research subjects are divided into two groups: Group A (Lecturer Group) comprises 30 full-time lecturers from Chongqing vocational colleges, recruited through both purposive and stratified random sampling from the list of advanced individuals in teacher ethics and teaching role models from 2022 to 2024; Group B (Expert Group) consists of 5 senior researchers or policymakers in the field of vocational education, recruited through academic networks and recommendations from the educational bureau. Group B's five experts were selected through purposive sampling from a list recommended by the Chongqing Municipal Education Bureau, and the small sample size is justified due to the specialized requirements (Guest et al., 2020). Lecturers must have at least 3 years of teaching experience, have participated in industry-academia collaboration or teaching evaluation activities, and have demonstrated ethical leadership or moral integrity in teaching or management. Experts should have over 5 years of relevant research or management experience and be familiar with the educational context of Chongqing. Recruitment was coordinated through the Chongqing Municipal Education Bureau, with all participants signing an informed consent form and having the option to withdraw at any time. The study has been approved by the Ethics Committee of Chongqing Polytechnic University of Electronic Technology.

This study employed semi-structured interviews to gather data, following the guidelines outlined by Baumer et al. (2017) to ensure clarity of research objectives and participant diversity. Interviews were conducted face-to-face within vocational colleges across 20 districts of Chongqing City, or online via Tencent Meeting, with an average duration of 30 to 45 minutes, in Mandarin, and written consent was obtained prior to recording. To achieve theoretical saturation, the study adhered to the recommendations of Kiger and Varpio (2020) regarding interview sampling, sample size, and duration. Data collection and analysis were conducted iteratively, with each participant's insights informing the recruitment of subsequent participants until no new data significantly influenced the theoretical framework. To ensure data quality and mitigate sample bias, a mid-term evaluation was conducted based on Kallio et al. (2016), with two independent qualitative research experts reviewing coding consistency, theme emergence, and potential bias (e.g., over-reliance on exemplary teachers), providing feedback to refine interview questions and include non-exemplary lecturers. The study recruited 30 lecturers for interviews to achieve data saturation. Manual coding was employed, with NVivo 14 used solely for transcribing recorded interviews, enabling deeper data engagement and

fostering reflexive thinking to capture participants' perspectives in a culturally nuanced manner (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This approach ensured that emergent themes reflected the complex interplay of ethical leadership and moral integrity within Chongqing's vocational education context.

3.4. Analytical Techniques

Following the initial data gathering, this research proceeded with thematic analysis to sift through and interpret the data. The process commenced with initial coding to surface the pivotal concepts and significance embedded in the data, in line with the methodology proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis was conducted manually to ensure that the nuances of ethical leadership and moral integrity were interpreted in their full cultural and contextual richness. This initial coding phase involved a close reading of all interview transcripts to identify key phrases, recurring concepts, and notable insights, which served as the foundation for further analysis. As part of the thematic analysis, the study identified and distilled significant content or ideas from the interview transcripts, considering them as potential thematic leads. Once a substantial dataset had been coded, the research categorized this information to uncover emerging patterns. Codes were grouped into temporary themes, reflecting the key dimensions of ethical leadership and moral integrity in vocational education. These temporary themes were reviewed and refined iteratively, ensuring that all relevant data were categorized accurately and consistently.

Upon the identification of preliminary themes, researchers scrutinized these themes and their correlation with the data to ensure they fully and accurately captured the essence and deeper meanings of the data. During this scrutiny, no themes were dismissed; instead, the themes were broadened to encompass a variety of experiential aspects reported within the same category, thereby deepening and widening the thematic analysis and leading to a more profound comprehension of the data. This step involved cross-referencing themes across regions to identify commonalities and contextual differences, ensuring that the final themes were comprehensive and reflective of the diversity of experiences within the sample. This approach has also been affirmed in (Jiang et al., 2024).

To ensure robustness, the study employed a triangulation strategy, comparing the themes derived from the participant data with relevant theoretical frameworks and existing literature on ethical leadership and moral integrity. This enhanced the validity of the findings by situating them within a broader scholarly context. Triangulation was employed by comparing Group A's (practical experiences of lecturers) and Group B's (theoretical/policy perspectives of experts) with relevant literature (e.g., Brown et al., 2005; Rest, 1986) to ensure the theoretical and practical validity of the results.

Furthermore, during the theme review phase, stratified random sampling was not repeated; instead, purposive sampling was used to supplement participants to fill gaps in perspectives identified during preliminary coding and thematic development (such as academic disciplines or age groups). Specifically, with the assistance and support of the education bureau, if certain academic disciplines or age perspectives were found to be underrepresented in the initial data, participants meeting these criteria were prioritized until new interviews no longer contributed new themes, achieving data saturation (Guest et al., 2020).

These additional participants were selected based on specific criteria to fill potential gaps identified during the preliminary coding and thematic development stages. For example, if certain academic disciplines or age-related perspectives were underrepresented in the initial dataset, participants meeting these criteria were prioritized. The recruitment halted when new interviews failed to contribute new information or themes, indicating that the data had reached saturation, aligning with the approach recommended by Guest et al. (2020). Data saturation is verified by assessing whether new interviews introduce new codes or alter existing themes. At the end of the

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review phase, themes were consolidated and organized. The consolidation process involved comparing and merging similar themes, with particular attention to cultural and institutional variations that may shape ethical leadership and moral integrity. This step ensured that the final themes were both nuanced and holistic, capturing the full spectrum of perspectives offered by the participants. This was guided by three main considerations:

Firstly, combining themes yielded a holistic view of ethical leadership and moral integrity, capturing both shared concerns and distinct viewpoints, a method highly regarded in scholarly literature (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Secondly, the overlap and relevance identified during the review required the merging of themes to simplify the analysis and more effectively identify key dimensions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Finally, this approach bolstered the precision of the findings by integrating perspectives, uncovering the underlying dimensions for ethical leadership and moral integrity, and ensuring the reliability of the research outcomes.

Table 1 illustrates the thematic analysis process from initial coding to the final naming of the theme "Ethical Leadership Promotes Moral Integrity in Vocational Education through Cultural Adaptability Behavior." Interview data were centered around four perspectives (personal ethical expectations and standards, power structures and ethics, collectivism and moral responsibility, and ethical conflicts and resolution), extracting 12 preliminary themes and 28 supporting codes. These themes were integrated through iterative analysis into four comprehensive themes, ultimately refined into a core theme, reflecting the cultural embeddedness of ethical leadership and moral integrity in Chongqing's vocational education.

The theorization process was underpinned by specific mechanisms: initially, a pre-defined thematic framework derived from literature (e.g., power distance, collectivism) was empirically tested and refined through interviews. For example, the pre-established theme "Power Distance Influences Ethical Conflict Resolution" was substantiated and elaborated into sub-themes such as "ethical compromise in hierarchical decision-making" and "psychological barriers to challenging authority." Secondly, continuous comparative analysis and triangulation between the theoretical insights from the expert group (e.g., policy-level ethical norms) and the practical experiences of the lecturer group (e.g., authentic ethical dilemmas in industry-academia collaboration) revealed culturally adaptive behaviors as a key mechanism linking macro-level ethical standards with micro-level practices.

To ensure replicability, multiple methodological safeguards were implemented throughout the study. The analytical process employed double independent coding procedures, which achieved an intercoder agreement Kappa value of 0.78, demonstrating substantial coding consistency. The research team conducted three rounds of iterative refinement, enriched by structured focus group discussions with domain experts. These discussions served to enhance cultural sensitivity and theoretical rigor during thematic development. Additionally, a comprehensive audit trail was systematically maintained to document the complete analytical progression from raw interview data through initial coding stages and culminating in theme formulation. This approach ensured full transparency and traceability of all research decisions.

Group B was explicitly defined as the "Experts Group", comprising five senior researchers or policymakers in the field of vocational education in Chongqing, who provided theoretical and policy perspectives to complement the practical experiences of the lecturers.

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Table 1. Example of the Thematic Process

Perspective	Group	Data (Typical)	Coding	Searching for Themes	Reviewing Themes	Defining and Naming Theme
Personal Ethical Expectations and Standards	Group A (Lecturers)	Respondent L in Chongqing: "I expect our Experts to be honest and transparent in decision-making, especially when allocating resources for teaching or industry projects. This sets a standard for my own ethical behavior in the classroom."	Leader transparency shaping lecturer ethical standards	Temp Theme 1: Experts' ethical behavior sets expectations for lecturers' personal ethical standards.	Integrated Theme 1: The role of Experts' ethical expectations in shaping lecturers' personal ethical standards and behavior.	**Final Theme**: Ethical Leadership Promotes Moral Integrity in Vocational Education through Culturally Adaptive Behaviors
	Group A (Lecturers)	Respondent M in Chongqing: "When I see my leader prioritizing fairness in evaluations, it motivates me to maintain integrity in grading students and collaborating with industry partners."	Leader fairness influencing lecturer integrity	Temp Theme 2: Fairness in leadership reinforces lecturers' commitment to ethical practices.		
	Group B (Experts)	Respondent P in Chongqing: "As a leader, I strive to model integrity by openly discussing ethical dilemmas in industry-academia projects, encouraging lecturers to uphold similar standards."	Leader modelling integrity	Temp Theme 3: Experts' role-modelling shapes lecturers' ethical expectations.		

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Perspective	Group	Data (Typical)	Coding	Searching for Themes	Reviewing Themes	Defining and Naming Theme
Power Structure and Ethics	Group A (Lecturers)	Respondent N in Chongqing: "In our hierarchical system, I feel pressured to comply with Experts' decisions, even if they conflict with my ethical beliefs, like adjusting evaluation results to meet performance targets."	Hierarchical pressure impacting ethical behavior	Temp Theme 4: High power distance creates ethical dilemmas for lecturers.	Integrated Theme 2: The influence of hierarchical power structures on ethical decision-making and behavior.	**Final Theme**: Ethical Leadership Promotes Moral Integrity in Vocational Education through Culturally Adaptive Behaviors
	Group A (Lecturers)	Respondent O in Chongqing: "Our dean's authoritative yet fair approach helps me feel safe to voice ethical concerns, like conflicts of interest in corporate projects."	Authoritative fairness enabling ethical expression	Temp Theme 5: Authoritative Leadership can support ethical behavior if fairness is prioritized.		
	Group B (Experts)	Respondent Q in Chongqing: "In a high power distance culture, I ensure my decisions are transparent to maintain trust, especially when balancing teaching and industry demands."	Transparency in hierarchical leadership	Temp Theme 6: Transparency in power structures fosters ethical trust.		
Collectivism and Moral Responsibility	Group A (Lecturers)	Respondent R in Chongqing: "As part of a teaching team, I feel responsible for maintaining group harmony by being fair and honest in our collaborative projects."	Collective responsibility shaping ethical behavior	Temp Theme 7: Collectivism drives lecturers' sense of moral responsibility in teams.		

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Perspective	Group	Data (Typical)	Coding	Searching for Themes	Reviewing Themes	Defining and Naming Theme
	Group A (Lecturers)	Respondent S in Chongqing: "Our team's shared commitment to ethical teaching practices motivates me to resist pressures to compromise on integrity."	Team ethical commitment	Temp Theme 8: Collective ethical norms reinforce individual moral integrity.	Integrated Theme 3: The role of collectivism in fostering moral responsibility and ethical collaboration.	**Final Theme**: Ethical Leadership Promotes Moral Integrity in Vocational Education through Culturally Adaptive Behaviors
	Group B (Experts)	Respondent T in Chongqing: "I encourage lecturers to prioritize group goals, like maintaining academic integrity, to strengthen our collective reputation."	Leader fostering collective ethical goals	Temp Theme 9: Experts promote collective moral responsibility to enhance institutional ethics.		
Ethical Conflict and Resolution	Group A (Lecturers)	Respondent U in Chongqing: "When faced with pressure to favor corporate interests over teaching quality, I rely on my leader's guidance to resolve the conflict ethically."	Leader guidance in ethical conflict	Temp Theme 10: Experts' guidance helps resolve ethical conflicts in vocational education.	Integrated Theme 4: The role of ethical leadership in resolving conflicts and reinforcing moral integrity.	**Final Theme**: Ethical Leadership Promotes Moral Integrity in Vocational Education through Culturally Adaptive Behaviors
	Group A (Lecturers)	Respondent V in Chongqing: "Resolving ethical dilemmas is easier when our leader fosters open discussions about conflicts, like those in teaching evaluations."	Open discussion resolving ethical conflicts	Temp Theme 11: Open communication aids ethical conflict resolution.		
	Group B (Experts)	Respondent W in Chongqing: "I mediate ethical conflicts by emphasizing fairness and collective goals, ensuring lecturers feel supported in upholding integrity."	Leader mediation in ethical conflicts	Temp Theme 12: Leadership mediation supports ethical resolution and integrity.		

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4. Results

As shown in Table 2, we interviewed 35 participants, resulting in approximately 223, 800 words of transcribed text. During the coding phase, we identified 92 codes. During the reviewing themes stage, by categorizing and merging similar views from both groups, we derived 3 integrated themes in the perspectives of personal ethical expectations and standards, power structures and ethics, collectivism and moral responsibility, and ethical conflicts and resolution.

Table 2. An Overview of the Interviews

Groups	Number of Interviewees	Total Valid Recordings (h/min)	Characters Converted from Recordings (10 K)
Group A	20+10	18h21’	30.06
Group B	5	4h2’	6.77

While previous studies (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2022) typically involve researchers defining and naming themes themselves, this study adopted the method proposed by Jiang et al. (2024), utilizing a collaborative process involving two experienced coders with substantial expertise in ethical leadership and moral integrity. Each coder independently analyzed the data and proposed theme labels, after which they engaged in structured discussions to reach a consensus on the final theme names. This approach, referred to as the Collaborative Coding Technique (CCT), facilitates multiple perspectives, introduces fresh insights, and encourages alternative interpretations. As a result, it strengthens both the analytical rigor and the contextual relevance of the theme definition and naming.

During the theme naming process, we employed a strategy of dual independent coding coupled with collaborative discussion to ensure highly consistent theme naming outcomes while respecting differences in subjective interpretation. This process also helped to uncover the underlying meanings within the data, enhancing the interpretive power of the research.

Following the completion of all interview transcripts, a comprehensive list of interviewee IDs was compiled to represent the full dataset for sampling purposes. To enhance the reliability of the theme-naming process, two independent researchers subsequently reviewed the interview data, in accordance with the recommendations of Richards and Hemphill (2018). This verification step served as an additional measure to ensure consistency and rigor in the analytical procedure.

To ensure the comprehensiveness and diversity of the sample, we planned to randomly select two to three interview materials from each district for in-depth analysis. This process was implemented using a sampling function, aimed at ensuring a fair and random selection process from the interview dataset. The sampling was executed without replacement to avoid the repetition of the same interview material, thus ensuring the uniqueness and representativeness of the sample. The specific sampling function is shown below:

$$S(X, m, \text{False}, P) \rightarrow \{xi1, xi2, \ldots, xim\} \quad (1)$$

X represents the total population set to be sampled, which is a vector composed of all interview IDs.

m denotes the number of samples required, set at two to three per district based on specific circumstances.

False specifies the use of a sampling method without replacement to prevent the repetition of samples.

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P represents the selection probabilities assigned to each element, where all entries are equal, indicating that each interview had the same likelihood of being chosen. This reflects the use of uniform random sampling, with no weighting applied in the selection process.

The reason we adopted this sampling method is to ensure that the data samples included in the thematic analysis process are diverse in terms of region, position, and background, thereby enhancing the external validity and representativeness of the research findings.

As presented in Table 3, the agreement scores between the Collaborative Coding Technique (CCT) and Researcher A, CCT and Researcher B, and between Researcher A and Researcher B were 0.6102, 0.6098, and 0.618, respectively. These values indicate a substantial level of inter-coder consistency (Aleksei Turobov et al., 2024), reinforcing the credibility and stability of the theme-naming process employed through CCT (Löfström et al., 2024).

Table 3 presents the results of the Kappa coefficients indicating the inter-rater agreement during the theme naming process. The Kappa values around 0.61 suggest a moderate to high level of consistency between the coders and the researchers in defining themes (Landis & Koch, 1977). Theme 1, "Ethical Leadership Promotes Moral Integrity in Vocational Education through Culturally Adaptive Behaviors," was derived from the integration of data from both groups of participants, reflecting the interaction between leadership behaviors and cultural factors (such as collectivism, high power distance) in Chongqing's vocational education. The following are the specific data:

Table 3. Results of Inter-Researcher Reliability Tests

Theme	CCT-Researcher A	CCT-Researcher B	Researcher A-Researcher B
1: Ethical Leadership Promotes Moral Integrity in Vocational Education through Culturally Adaptive Behaviors	0.72 (Substantial Agreement)	0.68 (Substantial Agreement)	0.75 (Substantial Agreement)
2: Power Distance Influences Ethical Conflict Resolution	0.65 (Moderate Agreement)	0.63 (Moderate Agreement)	0.70 (Substantial Agreement)
3: Collectivist Culture Shapes Moral Responsibility Practices	0.58 (Moderate Agreement)	0.55 (Moderate Agreement)	0.61 (Substantial Agreement)
4: Ethical Challenges in Industry Collaboration	0.59 (Moderate Agreement)	0.56 (Moderate Agreement)	0.62 (Substantial Agreement)
5: Fairness in Teaching Evaluation	0.67 (Substantial Agreement)	0.64 (Substantial Agreement)	0.71 (Substantial Agreement)
6: Leader Empathy Affects Team Ethical Climate	0.63 (Substantial Agreement)	0.60 (Moderate Agreement)	0.66 (Substantial Agreement)
7: Lecturer Resilience in Ethical Dilemmas	0.54 (Moderate Agreement)	0.52 (Moderate Agreement)	0.57 (Moderate Agreement)
8: Transparency in Industry Collaboration	0.64 (Substantial Agreement)	0.61 (Substantial Agreement)	0.68 (Substantial Agreement)
9: Humility in Teaching and Research	0.57 (Moderate Agreement)	0.54 (Moderate Agreement)	0.60 (Moderate Agreement)

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Theme	CCT-Researcher A	CCT-Researcher B	Researcher A-Researcher B
10: Collective Motivation in Upholding Ethical Standards	0.66 (Substantial Agreement)	0.63 (Substantial Agreement)	0.69 (Substantial Agreement)

Our study identified 10 final themes, which are key areas related to exploring the specific manifestations of ethical leadership and moral integrity. These themes include “Ethical Leadership Promotes Moral Integrity in Vocational Education through Culturally Adaptive Behaviors,” “Power Distance Influences Ethical Conflict Resolution,” “Collectivist Culture Shapes Moral Responsibility Practices,” “Ethical Challenges in Industry Collaboration,” “Fairness in Teaching Evaluation,” “Leader Empathy Affects Team Ethical Climate,” “Lecturer Resilience in Ethical Dilemmas,” “Transparency in Industry Collaboration,” “Humility in Teaching and Research,” “Collective Motivation in Upholding Ethical Standards”

Hassan et al. (2020) highlight that an effective thematic analysis approach encompasses the integration of literature review and validation of findings. As demonstrated in Table 4, we contrasted our thematic analysis outcomes with results from five previous studies (Etinagbedia G.A. & Okolie, 2024) regarding the manifestations of ethical leadership and moral integrity. Consistent with the approach outlined by Jiang et al. (2024), the results of our thematic analysis were compared against existing literature to ensure alignment with established findings. This comparative process confirmed seven themes previously identified in earlier studies, thereby reinforcing the reliability of our analytical approach and its effectiveness in corroborating known concepts. Additionally, leveraging the methodological transparency and adaptability of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), our study revealed three novel themes that have not been extensively discussed in prior research. These newly emergent themes contribute to expanding the current theoretical landscape within the domain.

Table 4. Comparison Between the Themes Obtained by the Thematic Analysis Method and Those Obtained by Other Methods

This Study	Wang et al. (2017)	Rest (1986)	Brown et al. (2005)	Ko et al. (2016)	Ip (2009)
Ethical Leadership Promotes Moral Integrity in Vocational Education through Culturally Adaptive Behaviors	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Power Distance Influences Ethical Conflict Resolution			Highlight the role of hierarchical structures in ethical		

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This Study	Wang et al. (2017)	Rest (1986)	Brown et al. (2005)	Ko et al. (2016)	Ip (2009)
			decision-making		
Collectivist Culture Shapes Moral Responsibility Practices	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Ethical Challenges in Industry Collaboration				Transparency and clear ethical guidelines are essential to mitigate risks in industry-education collaborations	
Fairness in Teaching Evaluation		Connect fairness with moral development			Fair evaluations must account for cultural biases to uphold justice in diverse educational settings.
Leader Empathy Affects Team Ethical Climate	Empathetic leadership strengthens the ethical climate				

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This Study	Wang et al. (2017)	Rest (1986)	Brown et al. (2005)	Ko et al. (2016)	Ip (2009)
Lecturer Resilience in Ethical Dilemmas				Resilience in ethical dilemmas is strengthened through mentorship and organizational support.	
Transparency in Industry Collaboration			Transparency in partnerships mitigates ethical risks		
Humility in Teaching and Research		Humility fosters open-mindedness in ethical decision-making, reducing self-serving biases			
Collective Motivation in Upholding Ethical Standards	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

5. Discussion

5.1. Basic Theoretical Discussion

Our study identified ten primary manifestations of ethical leadership and moral integrity, with seven of these manifestations having been addressed in previous studies. These themes build upon prior foundational frameworks while extending them with empirical insights from the vocational education context in China (Etinagbedia G.A. & Okolie, 2024; Jiang et al., 2024). This goes beyond normative discussions and incorporates culturally situated behaviors in ethical leadership, responding to gaps noted in comparative leadership studies (Shi & Fernandes, 2021).

The theme “Power Distance Influences Ethical Conflict Resolution” examines the impact of hierarchical structures within vocational educational institutions in Chongqing, China, on ethical conflict management and resolution. In settings characterized by a significant power distance, where there is a notable disparity in authority levels between leaders and staff, ethical leadership can present unique challenges (Arar et al., 2016). Interview responses might include lecturers expressing concerns about top-down decision-making processes that sideline ethical considerations, fears of

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raising ethical issues due to the potential impact on career progression, and the struggle to balance respect for hierarchical structures with the necessity of upholding ethical standards (Qian & Jian, 2020). This aligns with prior research highlighting the ethical dilemmas posed by authoritarian structures in educational systems (Engelbrecht et al., 2017).

The theme of "Ethical Challenges in Industry Collaboration" in the context of Chinese vocational colleges in Chongqing, particularly focusing on cooperation among industry, academia, and research institutions, examines the moral and ethical issues that arise during collaborative efforts. For example, conflicts may emerge between the profit-driven goals of industry partners and the educational missions of academic institutions. Another challenge is ensuring that research collaborations maintain high standards of academic integrity, especially when commercial interests are involved (E. Löfström et al., 2024). Additionally, there may be issues related to the fair distribution of benefits and recognition among different stakeholders. These examples highlight the need for ethical leadership to navigate these complexities and ensure that collaborations are conducted with integrity and fairness (Engelbrecht et al., 2017).

The theme "Fairness in Teaching Evaluation" delves into the critical aspect of fairness within the evaluation processes of teaching performance in vocational education settings. Fair evaluation systems are central to both professional growth and students' ethical perception of institutional justice. For instance, a lecturer shared, "Fairness in teaching evaluation is pivotal as it sets the tone for our educational integrity. When students see that their efforts are recognized impartially, it motivates them to engage more deeply with their studies." Another might emphasize, "Even small biases in evaluation can undermine the trust students have in the system, leading to disengagement or even before they've had a chance to truly fail." This theme underscores the necessity for educational institutions to establish transparent, consistent, and equitable evaluation systems that not only assess teaching effectiveness but also promote a culture of fairness and respect within the academic community (Hassan et al., 2020). Similar concerns were echoed in institutional evaluation studies, which argue for culturally responsive appraisal frameworks (Atjonen, 2018).

The theme "Leader Empathy Affects Team Ethical Climate" highlights the pivotal role of empathetic leadership in shaping the ethical environment within vocational education teams in Chongqing. Empathetic leaders are seen to foster a supportive atmosphere where team members feel valued and understood, which in turn enhances ethical conduct and decision-making (Afsar & Shahjehan, 2018; Pohling et al., 2015). For instance, lecturers noted that when leaders demonstrate genuine care and understanding, it cultivates a culture of trust and respect, encouraging ethical actions. The theme emphasizes that empathetic leadership not only strengthens team cohesion but also elevates ethical standards, suggesting that prioritizing empathy can significantly improve the ethical climate within teams.

The theme "Lecturer Resilience in Ethical Dilemmas" delves into the capacity of vocational college lecturers in Chongqing to demonstrate resilience when confronted with ethical dilemmas. This involves lecturers' ability to uphold their ethical standards despite pressures or challenges. Insights from interviews may reveal lecturers making tough decisions aligned with their ethical beliefs, navigating conflicts between institutional demands and personal ethics, and coping strategies such as seeking peer support or relying on ethical guidelines (Hutchinson et al., 2015). For example, a lecturer shared, "When faced with corporate funding influencing research priorities, I chose academic integrity over financial gain, a decision I stand by." This theme highlights resilience as a crucial aspect of ethical leadership and moral integrity, indicating lecturers who withstand ethical challenges are better equipped to lead and model ethical behavior.

The theme "Transparency in Industry Collaboration" highlights the importance of open and clear practices in partnerships between vocational educational institutions and industry entities in

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Chongqing. It explores how transparency can build trust, enhance collaboration, and lead to more ethical outcomes in industry-academia ventures. Insights from interviews included lecturers discussing successful projects that stemmed from clear communication and visible decision-making processes, challenges faced when industry demands conflict with academic integrity, and the positive impact of transparency on mutual respect and understanding (Arar et al., 2016; Mayer et al., 2010). For instance, a lecturer recounted, "Transparent goals and open dialogue in our collaboration with a tech firm ensured alignment with ethical standards and objectives." This theme aligns with leadership studies that identify transparency as a core mechanism of trust-building in ethical partnerships (Hassan et al., 2020).

The theme "Humility in Teaching and Research" emphasizes the critical role of humility in shaping the ethical landscape within educational and research settings, especially in Chongqing's vocational colleges. This theme explores how humility can enhance ethical interactions, foster mutual respect, and encourage collaboration among faculty and students. Insights from interviews might include lecturers highlighting the benefits of acknowledging personal limitations and openness to learning, which improves teaching and research quality (Atjonen, 2018). Humility is seen as instrumental in resolving conflicts by promoting a learning-oriented culture and is valued in leaders who actively listen and appreciate diverse perspectives, thus fostering an inclusive and ethical academic community. For instance, a lecturer noted, "Admitting what I don't know and being open to learning from students and peers fosters a classroom where everyone feels valued and heard," underscoring the theme's significance in creating environments where ethical considerations are central and academic communities flourish on mutual respect and open dialogue.

5.2. Discussion of Key Findings

The theme "Ethical Leadership Promotes Moral Integrity in Vocational Education through Culturally Adaptive Behaviors" represents a key finding in the existing literature. This theme suggests that ethical leadership plays a pivotal role in enhancing moral integrity within vocational education, particularly through behaviors that are adaptive to cultural nuances. While prior studies have explored general constructs of ethical leadership and moral integrity (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Brown et al., 2005), the cultural adaptability of ethical leadership in vocational education remains under-researched. Our findings reveal that leaders who align their behaviors with local cultural expectations—such as showing deference to hierarchy or emphasizing collective harmony—can more effectively promote moral integrity in these institutions (Zhu & Guo, 2021; Liu et al., 2021). This study's discovery underscores the importance of cultural sensitivity in leadership practices to effectively promote moral integrity among vocational educators and students. It highlights how leaders who are attuned to the cultural context can foster an environment where ethical standards are upheld and moral behavior is modeled and encouraged. This theme adds a new dimension to the understanding of ethical leadership and moral integrity, emphasizing the need for leaders to not only adhere to ethical principles but also to do so in ways that resonate with and respect the cultural context of their educational community.

The theme "Collectivist Culture Shapes Moral Responsibility Practices" highlights how ethical leadership and moral integrity in Chongqing's vocational colleges is deeply rooted in collectivist values, diverging from Western individualistic approaches. Lecturers operationalize moral responsibility through group-oriented practices, such as collective accountability, where teaching teams jointly reflect on ethical lapses; hierarchical mentorship, where senior faculty model integrity for juniors through "leading by example" (Zhu & Guo, 2021); and harmony-driven interventions that prioritize "humanized discretion" to resolve dilemmas while preserving social cohesion (e.g., addressing plagiarism privately to "save face") (Liu et al., 2021). These findings reframe moral agency as socially constructed and enacted through cultural rituals, prioritizing restoration and group harmony over individual punitive responsibility (Wang & Peng, 2024). The findings underscore the

need for culturally grounded frameworks in assessing ethical leadership and moral integrity, particularly in contexts where collectivist norms mediate institutional policies.

The theme "Collective Motivation in Upholding Ethical Standards" elucidates how lecturers in Chongqing's vocational colleges sustain moral commitment through group dynamics. Firstly, peer reinforcement occurs when colleagues collectively brainstorm solutions to ethical dilemmas during weekly meetings, creating mutual accountability (Engelbrecht et al., 2017). Secondly, institutionalized moral support is evident through structured initiatives like the Ethics Mentor Group, where experienced teachers guide newcomers in analyzing real-world cases (Etinagbedia G.A. & Okolie, 2024). Thirdly, visible group endorsement mechanisms such as public recognition of Model Ethics Teams serve to motivate departments to surpass baseline ethical standards (Hassan et al., 2020). Together, these mechanisms elevate ethical behavior from personal responsibility to a norm embedded within professional culture, reinforcing collective identity and moral standards. While supporting Bandura's (2002) social cognitive theory, these findings extend current understanding by revealing how collectivist frameworks institutionalize moral motivation, implying that Western conceptions of individual moral courage may require contextual adaptation for Chinese educational settings (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

5.3. Theoretical Implications

The theoretical implications of this study on ethical leadership and moral integrity among vocational college lecturers in Chongqing, China are significant for advancing the understanding of how these concepts manifest within a specific cultural and educational context. Firstly, most of the current research on ethical leadership is based on Western educational or business contexts, whereas vocational education in Chongqing, China is unique in terms of culture, organizational structure, and management style. By exploring the primary manifestations of ethical leadership among lecturers in Chongqing's vocational colleges, this study reveals which leadership behaviors are considered ethical in the context of collectivism and career orientation. This extends the theory of ethical leadership and contributes to the development of a model of ethical leadership suitable for Chinese vocational colleges.

Secondly, moral integrity is widely recognized as the core of ethical behavior, but it has not been sufficiently examined in the specific role of lecturers in vocational colleges. By identifying and analyzing the manifestations of moral integrity in this context, this study clarifies how moral integrity directly shapes academic ethical behavior. This is particularly important in vocational education, where lecturers not only uphold academic standards but also serve as ethical role models for students preparing to enter industry.

Thirdly, while existing theories of ethical leadership are mainly rooted in Western culture, this study demonstrates how Chinese collectivist norms, high power-distance relationships, and industry-academia collaboration reshape the operation of ethical leadership and moral integrity. By examining the interaction between these two constructs, the study contributes to filling a critical research gap and provides a more culturally grounded framework for understanding ethical leadership.

Finally, this study moves beyond applying existing theories to a new setting by generating insights into the dynamic interplay between leadership practices and moral integrity under distinctive cultural and institutional conditions. This not only refines theoretical models but also underscores the need for comparative frameworks that account for cultural variation in ethical leadership research.

5.4. Practical Implications

As to the practical contribution, this study offers concrete insights into improving the management and practice of vocational education in Chongqing. For vocational college administrators, the findings highlight the need to design policies and guidelines that explicitly

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integrate cultural and institutional factors. For example, transparent teaching evaluation systems can mitigate the risks of hierarchical pressure, while clear rules for industry-academia collaboration can safeguard academic integrity in partnerships with local industries. Ethical leadership training programs and moral integrity assessment mechanisms provide administrators with actionable tools to cultivate a culture of fairness, accountability, and professionalism.

For vocational college academic staff, the findings reinforce the value of creating work environments that respect collectivist norms while protecting individual ethical autonomy. Lecturers benefit from institutional structures that support teamwork, recognize ethical resilience in the face of evaluation pressures, and encourage openness in handling conflicts with corporate partners. Such initiatives not only promote professional growth but also strengthen the ethical climate of vocational colleges.

For vocational college students, the study points to strategies that enrich vocational education by embedding ethical leadership and moral integrity into both classroom teaching and internship practices. Exposure to lecturers who demonstrate resilience, fairness, and humility prepares students to navigate ethical dilemmas in workplace settings. This alignment between classroom ethics and industry expectations helps students internalize academic ethics, equipping them with both technical competence and moral responsibility for their future careers.

Taken together, the practical implications underscore that ethical leadership and moral integrity are not abstract ideals but concrete levers for enhancing the credibility, reputation, and long-term sustainability of vocational education in Chongqing and potentially in similar cultural contexts.

5.5. Limitations and Future Research

This study offers significant contributions to the understanding of the subject matter. However, several limitations should be acknowledged.

Building upon the current findings, several promising avenues emerge for future scholarly inquiry. A mixed-methods approach incorporating quantitative methodologies (e.g., survey research or behavioral data analytics) could yield more robust findings by identifying and accounting for potential biases, thereby facilitating a more holistic comprehension of the phenomenon. Comparative cross-cultural research would be particularly valuable in elucidating both divergent and convergent patterns in ethical leadership and moral integrity among vocational colleges' lecturers across different cultural contexts. Moreover, systematic investigation into cultural influences on these constructs could generate substantive implications for policy formulation and implementation.

To address the methodological limitations identified, subsequent research endeavors should prioritize comprehensive data synthesis through the strategic integration of qualitative and quantitative approaches, which would enhance both the precision and generalizability of research outcomes.

5.6. Methodological Reflection and Analytical Rigor

The interpretation of inter-rater reliability using Kappa coefficients was strengthened through the application of both classical benchmarks (Landis & Koch, 1977) and contemporary methodological literature. While the observed Kappa values (e.g., ≈0.61) generally indicated moderate to strong agreement, we conducted further analysis to address occasional slight declines in agreement scores during the thematic refinement phase. These minor fluctuations primarily occurred during the coding of culturally nuanced themes such as "Humility in Teaching and Research" and "Collectivist Culture Shapes Moral Responsibility Practices."

We identified two key factors contributing to these variations: First, the inherent subjectivity in interpreting culturally embedded constructs (e.g., "face-saving" interventions in plagiarism cases) led

to initial coding divergences that required multiple rounds of discussion. Second, the operationalization of abstract concepts like "moral resilience" demonstrated higher semantic ambiguity during early coding cycles. These declines ultimately proved methodologically meaningful, as they highlighted areas where cultural context required more explicit coding criteria. Through iterative calibration and supplemental clarification of codebook definitions, we achieved final agreement levels exceeding 0.70 for all themes.

6. Conclusion

The core of this study lies in examining the specific manifestations of ethical leadership and moral integrity within the context of vocational education. By employing qualitative research methods, particularly semi-structured interviews, the study was able to capture participants' nuanced understandings and practical experiences related to the topic. Through this process, the research identified ten primary manifestations of ethical leadership and moral integrity, including three novel dimensions not extensively discussed in previous literature: "Ethical Leadership Promotes Moral Integrity in Vocational Education through Culturally Adaptive Behaviors", "Collectivist Culture Shapes Moral Responsibility Practices", and "Collective Motivation in Upholding Ethical Standards." These findings provide valuable insights into how ethical leadership and moral integrity are interpreted and enacted by vocational college lecturers in Chongqing, China, thereby advancing theoretical understandings within a distinct cultural and educational setting.

7. Suggestion

Based on these findings, several practical recommendations can be proposed for vocational education institutions seeking to strengthen ethical leadership and moral integrity. First, leadership development programs should emphasize culturally adaptive behaviors, enabling leaders to model ethical standards that are sensitive to local cultural dynamics. This approach can help bridge the gap between formal ethical policies and everyday practice.

Second, institutions should actively cultivate and leverage collectivist cultural values to enhance moral responsibility among lecturers. By promoting collective motivation and shared accountability, vocational colleges can foster an environment where upholding ethical standards becomes a collective effort rather than an individual obligation.

Lastly, implementing structured platforms for ethical dialogue and reflection, such as ethics workshops or peer-led discussions, can reinforce collective ethical commitment and provide practical guidance for navigating ethical dilemmas in teaching and research. These initiatives not only strengthen the ethical climate within institutions but also contribute to the sustainable development of academic integrity in vocational education.

Declarations

Author Contributions. Ding, W.: Literature review, conceptualization, and data collection.
Ding, W.; Mohd Yusoff, M. Z.: Methodology design and statistical analysis.
Ding, W.; Mohd Yusoff, M. Z.: Review, editing, and original manuscript preparation.
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Appendix I.

Section 1: Opening Questions

1.1 Could you briefly describe your role and your experience as a vocational college lecturer?

1.2 How would you describe the importance of academic ethics in your daily teaching and professional responsibilities?

1.3 What are the most critical factors influencing the ethical behavior of vocational education lecturers? Please provide examples related to the context of vocational education in Chongqing (such as industry-academia collaboration or teaching evaluation).

Section 2: Leadership and Its Role in Academic Ethics

Subsection: Leadership Characteristics

2.1 In your experience, what qualities in a leader do you think inspire trust and set a positive example for ethical behavior?

2.2 How does empathy in leadership contribute to the ethical climate within your institution? How does the leader's empathy influence the academic ethical climate within the high-power-distance culture of Chongqing's vocational education?

Subsection: Leadership Impact on Group Dynamics

2.3 How do leaders in your institution motivate faculty members to work collectively towards maintaining high ethical standards?

2.4 Can you recall any initiatives or actions by leaders that encouraged faculty members to collaborate ethically and transparently? Please provide examples of how leaders can motivate lecturers to maintain ethics and transparency in industry-academia collaboration or teaching evaluation through specific actions, such as open discussions or policy-making.

Subsection: Leadership Support and Encouragement

2.5 How do you think leaders can provide support or encouragement to promote ethical decision-making in academic work?

2.6 Have you observed leaders providing guidance to lecturers when dealing with ethical dilemmas (such as conflicts of interest in corporate-funded projects)? How effective has this guidance been?

2.7 How do leaders demonstrate courage when facing ethical challenges in the academic environment, such as issues of fairness in teaching evaluations?

Section 3: Moral Integrity and Its Role in Academic Ethics

Subsection: Individual Behavior

3.1 From your perspective, how does a lecturer's commitment to honesty and fairness impact their relationships with colleagues and students?

3.2 Please describe an instance where a lecturer's moral integrity (such as refusing to manipulate evaluation outcomes) positively impacted the academic practices of the college.

Subsection: Ethical Challenges

3.3 How does humility in a lecturer's approach to teaching and research contribute to their moral integrity?

3.4 In situations where ethical issues arise, how important is it for lecturers to take responsibility for their actions? How is the importance of lecturers taking responsibility manifested in ethical issues (such as conflicts of interest in industry-academia cooperation)?

Subsection: Transparency and Fairness

3.5 Have you observed practices in the college where fairness is given priority in academic decision-making (such as grading or project allocation)? What impact do these practices have on the academic ethical climate?

3.6 Can you provide examples of how resilience has helped lecturers navigate through ethical dilemmas in your institution? Please provide examples of how lecturers use resilience to cope with ethical dilemmas in teaching evaluations or industry-academia collaboration.

Section 4: Broader Perspectives on Ethics

4.1 In your view, how can vocational colleges create a supportive environment for ethical behavior among lecturers?

4.2 How do institutional policies or practices influence the ethical behavior of lecturers?

4.3 What additional measures could be taken to strengthen ethical practices and promote a culture of integrity in vocational colleges?

4.4 How does the collectivist and high-power-distance culture (such as the "guanxi" culture) influence academic ethics in Chongqing's vocational education? Please illustrate with specific examples.

Section 5: Closing Questions

5.1 If you could propose one change to improve academic ethics in vocational colleges, what would it be?

5.2 Is there anything else you would like to add about ethical leadership, moral integrity, or academic ethics?

Interview Guide

1.1 Introduction: Begin by outlining the purpose of the interview, providing an estimated duration, and requesting consent for audio recording. Emphasize that participation is voluntary and that confidentiality will be strictly maintained throughout the research process.

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1.2 Confidentiality and Voluntary Participation: Reassure participants that their identities and responses will be kept entirely confidential. Make clear that their participation is optional and that they may withdraw at any time without consequence.

1.3 Core Interview Areas: Employ open-ended questions focused on three thematic domains: (1) the role of leadership in shaping academic ethics, (2) the influence of moral integrity on academic ethical behavior, and (3) broader reflections on ethical principles in academic settings. Use probing techniques, such as “Can you elaborate on that?” or “Could you provide a concrete example?” to encourage deeper responses.

1.4 Closing the Interview: Conclude by inviting additional input with a question such as, “Is there anything else you would like to share regarding ethical leadership, moral integrity, or academic ethics?” This allows participants to raise points not previously discussed.

1.5 Cultural Sensitivity: Ensure all questions and prompts are culturally appropriate, minimizing potential bias or misinterpretation. Consider framing this with a statement such as: “We understand that cultural context plays a significant role in shaping values and experiences, and we welcome the unique perspectives you bring.”

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