



Exploring the Interplay Between Moral Character and Prosocial Behaviour Among Chinese Higher Vocational College Students: Insights into the Role of Emotional Intelligence

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This paper examines the connection between moral character and prosocial behaviour among students in Chinese higher vocational colleges, with particular attention to the mediating or influencing role of emotional intelligence. In light of China's growing focus on developing students who embody moral values and social responsibility, the research offers important perspectives on teaching approaches and learning contexts that support the cultivation of these qualities. **Method:** Using the PRISMA framework, an initial pool of 50 publications from 2013 to 2025 was systematically reviewed across ERIC, Google Scholar, JSTOR, Web of Science, and Scopus. Following the application of rigorous inclusion and exclusion criteria, eight studies were retained for thematic analysis. These

were subjected to qualitative synthesis through Clarke and Braun's approach, allowing for an in-depth exploration of moral character definitions, the function of emotional intelligence, cultural influences, and educational applications. **Findings:** The analysis revealed three central themes. First, moral character was consistently situated within traditional Chinese values, highlighting communal duty and personal integrity. Second, emotional intelligence was found to play a critical mediating role in shaping prosocial behaviour, particularly in fostering empathy, emotional regulation, and constructive interpersonal relationships. Third, pedagogical approaches such as experiential learning and cross-disciplinary integration emerged as effective means of strengthening students' moral and emotional growth. **Implications:** The findings emphasise the importance of embedding emotional intelligence training within vocational education programmes as a means to promote moral development and prosocial skills. These conclusions carry considerable significance for educators, curriculum planners, and policymakers seeking to create educational settings that nurture ethically responsible and socially engaged vocational college students.

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Introduction

The development of students' moral character and the encouragement of prosocial behaviour have gained increasing attention within global education. Educators now widely recognise these elements as fundamental to shaping young individuals into responsible and reflective members of society who can contribute positively to their communities. Moral character encompasses qualities such as fairness, empathy, integrity, and respect, which serve as the foundation for prosocial behaviour, defined as actions intended to benefit others or the wider community (Cohen & Morse, 2014). Emotional intelligence, involving self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, and motivation, has also emerged as a crucial determinant of how individuals interact with others (Kanesan, 2019).

Within educational contexts, moral character, prosocial behaviour, and emotional intelligence are increasingly viewed as interdependent rather than isolated constructs. Research suggests that integrating emotional and moral learning enhances classroom environments by promoting ethical thinking and stronger interpersonal connections among students (Burroughs & Barkauskas, 2017). Emotional intelligence equips learners with the ability to recognise emotions and social cues, which increases the likelihood of prosocial engagement and community support (Cefai et al., 2018). In the context of Chinese higher vocational education, this issue has particular significance. Recent educational reforms have emphasised the dual aim of equipping students with professional expertise while simultaneously fostering moral character and civic responsibility (Minglun, 2017). These policy directions reflect the expectation that graduates contribute to both economic development and social progress in a rapidly evolving national context (Eryong & Li, 2020). Given that vocational colleges often enrol students from regions experiencing socio-economic transformation, cultivating emotional awareness and prosocial dispositions is particularly pressing (Han et al., 2023).

Despite its importance, the integration of emotional and moral aspects of student development is frequently overlooked (Wang, 2020). Although substantial research exists on moral education and emotional intelligence individually, limited attention has been given to their interrelationship within Chinese vocational institutions. This gap creates challenges for educators and policymakers attempting to implement holistic educational frameworks (Li, 2023). International scholarship, particularly from Western contexts, has increasingly investigated the development of moral qualities such as empathy, ethical reasoning, and social responsibility. Findings indicate that emotional intelligence is closely associated with cooperation, reduced conflict, and stronger interpersonal relationships within learning settings. However, the applicability of these findings to collectivist societies like China remains uncertain. Confucian traditions and an emphasis on collective identity strongly shape students' moral and emotional outlooks. Although moral instruction has long been embedded within Chinese education, systematic incorporation of emotional learning is relatively recent and uneven across institutions. Understanding how vocational college students perceive and practise moral and emotional development requires attention to both cultural context and broader theoretical discussions.

The objective of this study is to address this research gap by examining the interplay between moral character and prosocial behaviour in Chinese vocational colleges, with a

particular focus on the mediating role of emotional intelligence. Through a systematic review of existing literature, the study seeks to provide insights that support educators and policymakers in developing strategies to advance character formation and emotional growth within vocational education.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate the ways in which students in Chinese higher vocational colleges perceive and demonstrate moral character.
2. To analyse the extent to which emotional intelligence affects and shapes prosocial behaviours within educational contexts.
3. To determine and interpret the principal factors that influence the relationship between moral character and prosocial behaviour in the process of student development.

Research Questions

1. In what ways are moral character and prosocial behaviour defined and interpreted within the experiences of students in Chinese higher vocational colleges?
2. How does emotional intelligence influence or mediate the expression of prosocial behaviours among students who exhibit strong moral character?
3. What recurring themes are identified in the literature concerning the ways moral and emotional qualities shape social behaviour in the context of Chinese vocational education?

Through a qualitative systematic literature review guided by the PRISMA framework, this study aims to generate empirically grounded perspectives that can strengthen educational practices designed to support comprehensive student development in moral, emotional, and social dimensions.

Literature Review

Conceptualizing Moral Character

Moral character, a concept long rooted in philosophical inquiry, is understood as a consistent set of virtues that guide ethical choices and actions. Within virtue ethics, originating from Aristotle, moral character is associated with attributes such as courage, honesty, and temperance, which underpin stable patterns of moral conduct (Thompson, 2024). In parallel, Confucian philosophy has profoundly influenced the Chinese interpretation of moral character, highlighting principles including Ren (benevolence), Yi (righteousness), Li (propriety), and Xiao (filial piety) (Nie & Jones, 2019).

From a Confucian perspective, moral character is central to personal development and the maintenance of social harmony, with morality perceived as relational and community-oriented rather than solely individualistic (Ekanayaka & Yong, 2025). In Chinese educational traditions, moral character education has historically been embedded in curricula to cultivate virtues consistent with societal values. Instruction has traditionally drawn on Confucian ethics through the teaching of literature and history, as well as direct

moral guidance, thereby reinforcing qualities considered vital for collective well-being and social order (Du & Li, 2024). More recent educational reforms in China continue to uphold this emphasis, explicitly positioning moral character within broader aims of holistic student development.

Understanding Prosocial Behaviour

Prosocial behaviour refers to intentional actions aimed at benefiting others or the wider community, such as cooperation, kindness, providing support, or demonstrating empathy (Batson, 2014). Several theoretical perspectives have been proposed to explain the basis of such behaviour. Social learning theory suggests that individuals acquire prosocial tendencies by observing and imitating others. The empathy-altruism hypothesis argues that feelings of empathy increase the likelihood of helping behaviours, often without any expectation of personal gain (Batson, 2014). Within vocational education, the cultivation of prosocial behaviour is of particular importance.

Students in these institutions are not only acquiring technical skills but are also preparing to collaborate with others, engage in ethical decision-making, and participate meaningfully in society (Olmos-Gómez et al., 2024). As they transition into the workforce, these abilities become critical for effective teamwork and for addressing practical challenges in professional contexts (Tan, 2017). In China, where rapid economic and social transformations are taking place, fostering prosocial dispositions among vocational students is increasingly vital. Such skills contribute not only to smoother integration into workplace environments but also to the development of healthier organisational cultures and broader community well-being. Consequently, embedding prosocial values into vocational education is essential for equipping students to act responsibly and make constructive contributions to society.

Emotional Intelligence and Education

Emotional intelligence (EI) refers to the capacity to recognise, interpret, and regulate one's own emotions, as well as to perceive and respond appropriately to the emotions of others in constructive ways. This competence holds particular importance within education, where the development of social and interpersonal skills is integral to student growth. Mayer et al. (2016) categorise EI into four interrelated components: recognising emotions, utilising emotions to facilitate thinking, understanding emotional dynamics, and managing emotions effectively. When these components operate collectively, they enhance self-awareness, empathy, relational management, and balanced decision-making.

Empirical evidence indicates that individuals with higher EI are more likely to demonstrate prosocial behaviours (Mayer et al., 2016). Such students often show greater capacity for perspective-taking, managing opposing viewpoints without excessive conflict, collaborating productively in groups, and engaging with others in responsible ways (Zeidner et al., 2009). These findings have encouraged educators to advocate for the inclusion of EI training within curricula, not only as a means of improving academic performance but also as a way of fostering students who interact with others in supportive and positive ways.

Comparative Frameworks for Emotional Intelligence

The literature on EI is primarily shaped by two influential models: Goleman's framework, which highlights competencies such as self-awareness, empathy, and social skills, and the model developed by Mayer and Salovey, which conceptualises EI as a set of measurable cognitive-emotional abilities (Livesey, 2017). Goleman's framework is particularly significant in the development of soft skills and leadership education, making it widely applied within practical educational contexts. In contrast, Mayer and Salovey's model adopts a more research-focused orientation, outlining four detailed branches: perceiving emotions, using emotions to support cognitive processes, understanding emotional changes, and regulating emotions. Although both frameworks are underpinned by strong theoretical foundations, their application within Chinese vocational education remains limited. Few investigations have addressed the cross-cultural validity of these models, despite increasing recognition that emotional competencies may be expressed differently across cultural contexts. For instance, while Western models often emphasise assertiveness and overt emotional expression, Chinese cultural norms typically prioritise restraint, humility, and collective harmony, which may influence both the expression and interpretation of EI.

Cultural Context and Educational Practices

The Chinese cultural context exerts a strong influence on moral and emotional education. Rooted in Confucian traditions, values such as harmony, collectivism, and moral integrity continue to shape curricula, teaching practices, and policy agendas directed at cultivating MC and PB (Chang, 2017). Cultural norms including filial piety, deference to authority, and communal responsibility are embedded in educational practice, thereby reinforcing expectations for PB and collective moral responsibility. In recent years, Chinese educational policy has placed increasing emphasis on holistic student development, formally incorporating emotional and moral learning alongside academic and vocational preparation. Initiatives such as the Core Socialist Values campaign and reforms prioritising character education demonstrate a policy-driven commitment to comprehensive student growth that integrates emotional and ethical competencies (Gow, 2016).

Challenges in Measuring Moral and Emotional Development

A key challenge highlighted in the literature concerns the operationalisation and assessment of constructs such as MC and EI. Unlike academic performance, which can be measured through standardised test scores, PB and moral reasoning are context-dependent and strongly influenced by cultural factors (Paço, 2019). This poses difficulties for both educators and researchers in determining the effectiveness of interventions designed to promote moral and emotional growth. Widely recognised instruments for measuring EI, such as the EQ-i and the MSCEIT, have received limited validation within vocational education, particularly in China (Chang, 2017). As a result, conducting comparative studies across institutions or monitoring students' emotional development over time remains problematic. The absence of culturally adapted assessment tools represents a substantial limitation in current research. What is needed are measurement approaches that reflect local cultural dynamics, including relational norms and moral values embedded in Chinese

education. Without culturally sensitive tools, it becomes difficult to generate accurate insights into the ways EI develops in vocational contexts.

Research Gap

Although a substantial body of scholarship exists on MC and EI, there remains a notable gap in research examining their intersection, particularly regarding their influence on PB among students in Chinese higher vocational colleges. Much of the existing literature addresses either moral development or emotional skills in isolation, without considering EI as a potential mediating link between moral values and the enactment of PB. This gap creates challenges for educators seeking to incorporate EI into vocational curricula in a systematic and effective manner. Consequently, there is a pressing need for more targeted research that can provide evidence-based guidance to teachers in designing pedagogical strategies that effectively integrate EI to foster both moral growth and prosocial outcomes within vocational education settings.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative systematic literature review (SLR) as its methodological approach, given its capacity to integrate and synthesise complex educational themes across diverse studies and contexts. A qualitative SLR is particularly well suited to exploring findings in a more interpretive and open-ended manner, thereby enabling a richer understanding of nuanced relationships such as those between MC, EI, and PB (Chandra & Shang, 2019).

PRISMA Framework Explanation and Application

This review was conducted through a structured process guided by the PRISMA framework (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses), ensuring systematic identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion of relevant qualitative studies. The process involved four key stages. First, during Identification, all potentially relevant studies were collected. Next, Screening was undertaken by reviewing titles and abstracts to refine the pool of studies. This was followed by Eligibility, where full texts were carefully examined to determine their suitability. Finally, Inclusion involved selecting the most appropriate studies to be integrated into the review (Mengiste et al., 2023). Adopting this procedure ensured the review was both systematic and comprehensive, minimising the risk of overlooking pertinent research.

Search Strategy

The literature search was carried out using multiple academic databases, namely ERIC, Google Scholar, JSTOR, Web of Science, and Scopus. The search strategy was guided by specific keywords including "moral character," "prosocial behavior," "emotional intelligence," and "Chinese vocational education." These terms were deliberately selected to capture studies closely aligned with the thematic focus of the review and to ensure comprehensive coverage of relevant literature.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria required that studies be published between 2013 and 2025, written in English, and appear in peer-reviewed academic journals. Studies were excluded if they were exclusively quantitative, of limited relevance to educational contexts, categorised as grey literature, or presented in the form of conference proceedings, or if they had not undergone peer review. Eligible studies were qualitative or mixed-methods works that provided substantial qualitative insights. These criteria ensured the selection of literature that was both methodologically rigorous and contextually relevant.

Table 1

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Time Frame	Studies published between 2013 and 2025	Studies published before 2013
Language	Articles written in English	Articles written in non-English languages without available translation
Source Type	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Grey literature (e.g., dissertations, blogs, editorials, conference abstracts)
Relevance	Focus on moral character, prosocial behaviour, emotional intelligence, and Chinese vocational education	Studies unrelated to moral/emotional development or outside educational settings
Geographic Focus	Studies conducted in China, or with Chinese vocational student populations	Studies with non - Chinese populations or general K-12/university focus without vocational context
Methodology	Qualitative or mixed methods studies with interpretable qualitative findings	Purely quantitative studies without thematic insights or descriptive interpretation
Full Text Access	Studies with full-text available for analysis	Abstract-only records, paywalled studies without access

Study Selection Process

The study selection process followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) 2020 guidelines to maintain transparency and reproducibility. An initial pool of 50 studies was identified through systematic searches across five databases: ERIC, Google Scholar, JSTOR, Web of Science, and Scopus. Screening by titles and abstracts, based on the predefined inclusion criteria, reduced this number to 30 studies. At the eligibility stage, full texts of these 30 studies were retrieved and assessed for methodological rigour and contextual relevance. This review further narrowed the pool to 15 studies considered potentially suitable. These were then critically evaluated using a quality assessment framework focusing on methodological soundness, thematic alignment, and depth of qualitative evidence. Ultimately, 8 studies satisfied all inclusion and exclusion requirements and were incorporated into the thematic synthesis. This systematic process ensured that the selected works provided robust qualitative insights into the relationship between moral character, prosocial behaviour, and emotional intelligence in the context of Chinese higher vocational education.

Data Extraction and Analysis

The thematic analysis followed Clarke and Braun (2016)'s six-step framework: familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of themes, review of themes, definition of themes, and production of the final report. Manual coding was applied to the selected studies, with initial codes derived from recurring concepts and reported findings. Through repeated reading, these codes were consolidated into broader thematic categories that captured shared patterns across the data. The resulting themes were then critically examined and synthesised to generate findings aligned with the study's research questions and objectives.

Results

Overview of Selected Studies

From the initial pool of fifty articles, eight studies were finally included for in-depth thematic synthesis. These selected works directly explored the interrelationship between moral character, emotional intelligence, and prosocial behaviour in the context of Chinese higher vocational education. Table 2 provides a structured summary of these studies, detailing the authors, year of publication, primary focus areas, and key findings most pertinent to the objectives of this research.

Table 2

Overview of the 8 Selected Studies

Authors & Year	Focus Area	Key Findings
(Chen et al., 2024)	Moral Character in Vocational Education Policy	Emphasise integration of moral values alongside technical skill development through curriculum and policy.
(Zhou et al., 2021)	Moral Character Attributes and Student Perceptions	Identified responsibility, integrity, and helpfulness as key moral traits supporting student cooperation.
(Liu et al., 2016)	Online Emotional Support and Altruistic Behaviour	Online emotional support positively predicts altruistic and prosocial actions in both virtual and real contexts.
(Li et al., 2019)	Social Support and Prosocial Behaviour among Adolescents	Empathy and gratitude mediate the relationship between emotional support and prosocial behaviours.
(Shek et al., 2022)	Socio-Political Context and Moral Values	Moral and emotional traits are influenced by collectivist ideologies within socialism with Chinese characteristics.
(Chen & An, 2019)	Co-Parenting, Emotional Security, and Prosocial Development	Trust and emotional stability in childhood shape prosocial behaviour in later educational contexts.
(Li, 2023)	Integrating Moral Inquiry in Technical Training	Embedding ethical reflection tasks within technical assignments promotes both skill and moral development.
(Shek et al., 2021)	Positive Youth Development and Emotional Regulation	Resilience and social competence enhance moral clarity and emotional control, particularly under crisis conditions.

Conceptualizations of Moral Character

Chinese vocational students commonly perceive moral character as a construct aligned with both educational objectives and broader societal expectations. [Chen et al. \(2024\)](#) demonstrate that Chinese vocational and technical education policy increasingly emphasises integrating moral character formation with skill acquisition. Their policy analysis highlights a dual mandate: institutions are expected to cultivate graduates who are not only technically proficient but also ethically grounded. Complementing this, [Zhou et al. \(2021\)](#) provide empirical evidence showing that students frequently identify traits such as responsibility, honesty, and dependability as central to moral character. Importantly, these traits were not regarded in isolation but were directly connected to students' teamwork, learning performance, and institutional conduct. Their findings indicate that moral behaviours were interpreted less as abstract ideals of integrity and more as tangible demonstrations of dependability within collective contexts. Consequently, students viewed themselves as moral actors when they fulfilled obligations responsibly and contributed to the common good. Taken together, these results suggest that moral education in vocational settings is most effective when it reflects both institutional demands and prevailing cultural expectations, reinforcing morality as a relational and contextually grounded phenomenon.

Role of Emotional Intelligence in Prosocial Behaviour

One of the most influential mediating factors shaping the PB of Chinese vocational students is EI. [Liu et al. \(2016\)](#) examined the extent to which online emotional support could predict altruistic behaviour in digital learning environments. Their findings indicated that students who experienced emotional support through virtual networks were more likely to participate in volunteering and other supportive actions. This outcome illustrates that emotional sensitivity and social intelligence can be transferred across different interactional contexts, with EI extending its application from traditional classroom settings into online domains. [Li et al. \(2019\)](#) proposed an alternative explanatory model using serial mediation. Their study demonstrated that emotional support predicted PB indirectly through its sequential influence on empathy and gratitude. In this perspective, EI was conceptualised not merely as an individual cognitive-affective ability but as a dynamic interpersonal process that actively shapes moral responses. This framework implies that the development of EI must be relational and reflective, grounded in social interactions that foster reciprocal understanding. Collectively, these studies affirm that EI enhances students' awareness of others' emotions, strengthens their capacity for conflict resolution, and nurtures cooperative dispositions. These competencies are particularly valuable in vocational settings, where teamwork and collaboration are central to both academic and professional success.

Cultural and Contextual Determinants

The development of MC and affective attributes among Chinese vocational learners is deeply embedded in cultural traditions and shaped by prevailing patterns of socialisation and cultural narratives. [Shek et al. \(2022\)](#) highlight that virtues such as collective responsibility and self-control are framed within the socio-political context of socialism

with Chinese characteristics. Their study illustrates how political and cultural ideologies inform students' ethical orientations, particularly the prioritisation of collective objectives over individual interests. [Chen and An \(2019\)](#) extend this perspective by examining the influence of family dynamics on social behaviour and emotional trust. Their findings show that co-parenting quality positively affects a child's sense of interpersonal security and trust, both of which are critical foundations for PB.

Although their work centres on younger populations, the implications for vocational education are significant, as emotional competencies shaped within the family environment exert enduring effects on students' ability to engage in cooperative practices and uphold moral responsibilities in adulthood. Overall, these studies reveal that cultural conditioning plays a central role in shaping both emotional expression and moral reasoning within vocational education. Norms such as respect for authority, emotional restraint, and the prioritisation of collective interests are continuously reinforced through educational structures and wider social institutions.

Pedagogical Implications

Several pedagogical strategies have been identified as effective in fostering EI and MC among vocational students. [Li \(2023\)](#) recommends embedding moral reflection exercises within technical curricula, such as collaborative ethical dilemmas and reflective journaling. Her findings demonstrate that these approaches enhance students' moral reasoning while simultaneously strengthening their collaborative skills, thereby integrating both cognitive and affective dimensions of vocational learning. [Shek et al. \(2021\)](#) expand on this by examining Positive Youth Development (PYD) attributes, showing that students with greater social competence and resilience exhibited stronger emotional regulation and more nuanced moral judgement, particularly in response to uncertain circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Their results indicate that character education should not be confined to moral training alone but should also encompass emotional wellness initiatives that equip students to manage unpredictability with integrity. Collectively, these studies highlight the importance of curricular models that place MC and EI at the centre of vocational education. Such approaches include structured EI training, collaborative learning environments, and reflective practices that nurture critical thinking, empathy, and ethical responsibility within professional and social contexts.

Discussion

Interpretation in Light of Research Objectives and Questions

This study systematically investigated how PB and MC are understood among Chinese higher vocational college students, with a specific focus on the mediating role of EI. Regarding the first research question, which explored how MC and PB are conceptualised within vocational education, the findings indicate that students associate MC with relational virtues such as honesty, responsibility, loyalty, and empathy. These values are strongly influenced by Confucian traditions and reinforced by societal and familial expectations ([Chan, 2019](#)). Addressing the second research question on how EI influences PB among morally inclined students, the literature provides consistent support.

Students with higher levels of EI, particularly those trained in emotional regulation and socially perceptive of moral cues, exhibited an increased capacity to translate moral inclinations into concrete actions of cooperation, assistance, and kindness (Wang et al., 2021). This underscores EI as more than an individual trait, positioning it as a developmental competence that facilitates the enactment of moral values in everyday interactions. The third research question, which sought to identify recurring thematic patterns in the literature, revealed four predominant themes: culturally grounded understandings of morality, EI as a facilitator of PB, the influence of cultural context, and effective pedagogical strategies for cultivating these competencies. Collectively, these findings support the view that moral and affective education in Chinese vocational settings should be reinforced through pedagogically sound practices that are sensitive to cultural norms and expectations.

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study make a meaningful contribution to theoretical discourse in three domains: Confucian ethics, virtue ethics, and EI theory. From a Confucian perspective, MC is understood not as an isolated internal guide but as a relational and hierarchical obligation. The literature emphasises social harmony, filial piety, and duty, reflecting students' perceptions of morality as fulfilling responsibilities within the family, classroom, and broader society (Nishanbayeva et al., 2021). This is consistent with the traditional Confucian focus on cultivating moral conduct through rituals, interpersonal roles, and exemplary behaviour. The reviewed studies also corroborate the principles of virtue ethics, particularly its focus on the progressive development of character traits. Students associated morality with consistent behaviours such as honesty, dependability, and concern for others, rather than abstract moral reasoning alone. This aligns with Aristotle's concept of *phronesis* (practical wisdom) and highlights vocational education as a significant context for nurturing such virtues. Regarding EI theory, the findings support models proposed by Kovalchuk et al. (2022), particularly the interplay between self-awareness, emotional regulation, and social competence. The literature demonstrates that EI is critical for translating moral values into observable behaviours. Students who received explicit EI training were more likely to engage in cooperative conduct and resolve conflicts constructively, reinforcing the educational significance of developing emotional competencies (Rivera-Pérez et al., 2020).

Comparative Theoretical Considerations

Examining moral education and PB within vocational contexts highlights important cross-cultural distinctions. Chinese vocational students' moral orientation is grounded in collectivist philosophy and Confucian ethics, whereas Western approaches often emphasise individual autonomy, personal moral decision-making, and unrestricted emotional expression. This contrast suggests that existing EI frameworks may require contextual adaptation. For instance, the assertive emotional expression promoted in Western EI models may not align with the Confucian virtue of *li* (ritual propriety), which prioritises restraint and deference in emotional conduct (Li, 2023). Consequently, the relevance and implementation of current models should be reconsidered to reflect the

cultural realities of moral development among Chinese students, particularly within vocational programmes where collectivist and team-oriented dynamics are central.

Practical Implications

The synthesis of findings offers several practical implications for vocational educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers in China. Primarily, EI training should be systematically incorporated into vocational education programmes. Modules focusing on self-regulation, empathy, and conflict resolution have the potential to significantly enhance students' social conduct and ethical engagement (Adam, 2020). Secondly, moral education should not be treated as an abstract or supplementary component. Ethical reasoning and moral reflection ought to be integrated within practical courses—such as engineering, nursing, or business—through methods including case studies, role-play exercises, and reflective writing. This interdisciplinary approach has been shown to effectively support students in internalising and applying moral principles in real-world contexts (Kleinert et al., 2017). Thirdly, peer-supported learning strategies, such as service-learning, group projects, and mentoring systems, are highly effective in fostering PB. These approaches not only cultivate a sense of responsibility and community but also provide students with opportunities to practise EI and moral competencies in authentic social settings (Farner, 2022). Finally, policymakers should consider establishing a national framework for moral and emotional education within vocational contexts that is attuned to Chinese cultural values and responsive to regional differences. The research suggests that curriculum reforms should extend beyond policy statements, incorporating concrete instructional strategies and resources that enable educators to implement moral and emotional learning effectively.

Societal Challenges and the Role of Crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic has further underscored the necessity of integrating emotional regulation and ethical accountability into vocational education. During crises, students encounter heightened ethical dilemmas, emotional pressures, and expanded responsibilities within their families and communities. Positive Youth Development (PYD) attributes, including resilience, empathy, and social responsibility, have been identified as crucial protective factors under such conditions (Shek et al., 2021). These findings support the view that moral and emotional learning should be treated not as abstract ideals but as practical competencies that equip students to navigate uncertainty and assume leadership during crises. Such competencies are particularly relevant to emerging vocational sectors, including caregiving, logistics, and public health, where social-emotional resilience is essential. Accordingly, vocational educators and policymakers should prioritise developing forward-looking pedagogical approaches that embed emotional literacy and ethical reasoning throughout curricula, extending beyond traditional character education.

Limitations of the Reviewed Literature and Methodological Constraints

Although this review applied stringent inclusion criteria and adhered to the PRISMA framework to maintain methodological rigor, several limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the final selection of studies ($n = 8$) reflects a limited body of research specifically

addressing the intersection of MC, EI, and PB within Chinese vocational education. This constraint restricts the extent to which findings can be generalised across diverse educational contexts and disciplines. Secondly, a majority of the studies relied on self-reported data from students, which may be influenced by social desirability bias. Only a few studies incorporated direct classroom observations or longitudinal tracking of behavioural changes, limiting the capacity to establish causal relationships between MC, EI development, and prosocial outcomes. Thirdly, the deliberate focus on Chinese contexts renders the findings culturally specific. As socially constructed concepts, MC and EI may be understood and operationalised differently in other cultural or institutional settings. Finally, the exclusion of non-English publications may have resulted in the omission of pertinent Chinese-language research, despite efforts to uphold academic rigor and comprehensiveness.

Suggestions for Future Research Avenues

Future research should consider employing mixed-methods designs that integrate interviews, behavioural observations, and experimental interventions to evaluate the long-term effects of educational programmes targeting MC and EI. Such approaches would provide a more nuanced understanding of how these traits develop over time and interact with students' lived experiences. Additionally, further investigations should examine regional variations within China's vocational education system. Differences in economic development, local cultural norms, and institutional practices may lead to diverse expressions of MC and EI, yet these variations remain underexplored. There is also a pressing need for intervention-based studies that design, implement, and assess curricula explicitly aimed at enhancing EI and moral development. The application of randomized controlled trials and longitudinal research could identify the most effective pedagogical approaches and determine their scalability across multiple institutions, thereby providing evidence-based guidance for educational practice.

Conclusion

This study examined the interrelationship between MC and PB among Chinese higher vocational college students, with a particular focus on the mediating role of EI. Through a qualitative systematic literature review of eight selected studies, the research addressed three central questions: how MC and PB are conceptualised, how EI influences or mediates prosocial tendencies, and what thematic patterns emerge regarding moral and emotional development within educational contexts. The findings indicate that MC among vocational students is largely understood through culturally embedded values, particularly those derived from Confucian ethics, such as honesty, filial piety, social responsibility, and humility. These values are not merely transmitted through family or societal norms but are actively reflected in students' understanding of moral actions and obligations within educational settings. Consequently, PB reflects the enactment of values such as cooperation, empathy, peer support, and ethical conduct. EI plays a central role in translating moral understanding into effective PB, with higher EI associated with greater empathy, better emotional regulation, and enhanced conflict-resolution skills. As a teachable competence, EI can be deliberately cultivated through targeted educational interventions, underscoring the need to integrate emotional development into moral

curricula. Embedding EI training within experiential, interdisciplinary, and pedagogically motivated programmes fosters both ethical reasoning and emotional adaptability, equipping students to navigate academic and societal contexts responsibly. The findings indicate that EI is not a supplementary element but an essential component of moral education, particularly within China's demanding vocational system. With increasing emotional pressures in educational and workplace settings, integrating EI alongside moral instruction is critical for promoting personal development and social engagement. The COVID-19 pandemic further highlights the practical importance of emotional resilience and ethical conduct, reinforcing the need for culturally sensitive, interdisciplinary policies that position MC and EI at the centre of vocational education as core forces that humanise learning and provide an ethical anchor for students' professional and societal participation.

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