

Promoting Higher Education Sustainability through Teacher Ethics Development: Government Strategies for Action in China

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Abstract

Higher education is imperative for the fulfillment of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), providing educational underpinning for effective economic growth and environmentally friendly innovations, which is a central pillar for enhancing global citizenship and realizing the SDGs. As the core participants and witnesses, higher education teachers are critical forces in the promotion of sustainable development in higher education and the realization of ESD 2030. For this purpose, a debate on teachers and sustainable development in higher education is essential and indispensable. Teacher professional ethics development is the essence of teacher sustainability and an impulsive motivation for engaging in ESD. However, limited exploration and research is focusing on sustainable development in higher education from the perspective of teacher ethics. Based on the Chinese context, this study selects the research perspective of teachers' professional ethics, and adopts theoretical elaboration, and policy analysis to explore China's governmental action strategies to promote Higher Education for Sustainable Development (HESD). The study indicates that the Chinese Government has adopted a normative, problem-oriented, and evaluation-driven action strategy to improve the long-term mechanism for building teacher ethics. This has accelerated the modernization of Chinese-style education and the realization of the global SDGs.

Keywords

Teacher Professional Ethics, Higher Education Sustainability, Government Strategies, Teacher Development, Action in China

1. Introduction

Pursuing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is the theme of the UNESCO action agenda for the third cycle of global Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) (UNESCO, 2017). It is also a central proposition to confront the essential nature of education in the context of profound global societal change, to answer the questions “Why do we teach?” and “Why do we learn?” (Fan et al., 2023). Education is not only one of the 17 goals of sustainable development, but also an important vehicle for facilitating the progress of many other goals (UNGA, 2015; Heleta & Bagus, 2021). The transformation of the world needs to be fueled by ESD, and it has become a global consensus and a source of practice (Franco et al., 2019; Adomssent et al., 2014; Ma et al., 2023). That is, the three key areas of sustainable development, the environment, the economy, and society, require a boost through education (Lozano et al., 2013; Ma et al., 2023). The fundamental goal of ESD 2030 is to build a more just and sustainable world by enhancing education for sustainable development (UNESCO, 2017; UNGA, 2015). On September 19, 2022, the United Nations convened the 77th Transforming Education Summit (TES), which made it explicit that education must contribute to sustainable development. Overview of the ESD initiated by the United Nations, from environmental education to environment and development education to ESD, higher education and higher education teachers have been important participants and witnesses in a series of educational explorations for solving development problems (Cotton et al., 2009; Mulà et al., 2017; Ma & Shi, 2023). Higher education is an important venue for the implementation of ESD, providing educational support for the unification of effective economic development and environmentally friendly innovation, as well as providing higher education safeguards for the advancement of global citizenship. At the same time, it is both a key element of the quality education goals of the global sustainable development agenda and a central pillar for the realization of all the goals (Ma, 2023).

Higher Education for Sustainable Development (HESD) is a complex system involving multiple stakeholders, pathways, mechanisms, and goals, and is implemented through various initiatives such as systems, policies, science and technology, and culture (Ma et al., 2023; Fan et al., 2023; Su & Tao, 2019). As the core participants and witnesses of HESD, higher education teachers are the essential demonstrators to upgrade students’ way of thinking and acting on sustainable development, which is the crucial force to promote education. Apparently, whether it is exploring pedagogical practices that promote the SDGs or exploring how to carry out and catalyze change in education itself in a sustainable way, teachers are critical enablers in this field, especially in higher education. Higher education teachers overcome the enormous challenges of globalized development by improving students’ emotions, attitudes, and values, enhancing their understanding and technical skills, and developing their capacity for sustainable development, including critical thinking and responsibility. Therefore, a

debate on teachers and sustainable development in higher education is essential and indispensable. No matter what the sustainable development of teachers is explored in terms of professional competence or innovation in learning methods, it cannot be separated from the roots of the teacher's professional ethics. The growth of teachers' professional ethics is the essence of teachers' sustainable development and an incentive to engage in ESD. The issue of teacher ethics has always been the logical point of departure for discussions about teachers, which is a consensus of educational research (Bullough, 2023; David, 2023; Lawrent, 2022). Scholars at home and abroad have also carried out many systematic arguments based on theoretical reflection and empirical research (Li et al., 2020; Tirri, 2023; Su & Tao, 2019).

China, as a globally prominent developing country, has built the world's largest higher education system, which has an outstanding role and influence in forging a sustainable global consensus, formulating country-specific programs, and advancing capacity building in higher education institutions (Ma, 2023). The quality and ethical character of higher education faculty, as an important launching pad for the sustainable development of higher education, should be an area of concern for research on ESD. However, limited explorations and studies are focusing on the HESD from the aspect of teachers' professional ethics.

Therefore, this study, based on the Chinese context, chooses the research perspective of teacher ethics to explore China's governmental action strategies to promote the HESD, and tries to answer the following three questions based on theoretical elaboration and policy analysis: 1) What is the theoretical underpinning of professional ethics for teachers? 2) Why does the development of teachers' professional ethics promote higher education sustainability? 3) What actions have been taken by the government in China? This study aims to analyze the government's decision-making and action strategies at the macro-policy level, to deepen the understanding of teachers' professional ethics, and to provide China's wisdom and solutions to promote sustainable education.

2. Theoretical Perceptions of Teacher Ethics Development

2.1. Literature Review of Teacher Professional Ethics

The international concern and discussion of teacher ethics can be traced back to the formulation of professional ethical norms under the influence of the teacher professionalization movement. Before the 1880s, teachers in the United States were not adequately valued and recognized by society for both their social status and their professional identity (Su & Tao, 2019). In 1896, for response to the trend towards professionalization of teachers, the Georgia State Teachers Association issued the first code of professional ethics for teachers. Subsequently, many states developed their professional codes for teachers (Xu, 2005). In 1929, the National Education Association (NEA) of the United States issued the *National Education Association Code of Ethics*, based on a national questionnaire. Although this code has had shortcomings and has been revised many times in

subsequent practice, it has contributed to the development of the teaching profession and the wave of teacher professionalization (NEA, 2018). In 1966, the International Labour Organization (ILO) and UNESCO issued the *Recommendation Concerning the Status of Teachers*, which for the first time proposed that education should be regarded as a specialized profession, one that requires teachers to undergo a rigorous and continuous course of study to acquire and maintain the knowledge and special skills of a specialized profession (Edgar, 1957). As a corollary to this initiative, a wave of teacher specialization emerged in earnest in the 1970s. The release of the famous *James Report* by the British Government's Committee of Inquiry into Teacher Education and Training in 1972 advanced teacher professional development and professionalization to a new level. In 1975, the NEA promulgated a newly revised *Code of Ethics*. It highlighted teachers' responsibilities to students and teachers' professional autonomy, with an emphasis on teacher ethics as a guide to professional practice. This code served to bind as many as 95% of public-school teachers in the United States and became the core teacher policy for advancing the U.S. teacher's professional ethical development.

With the deepening exploration of the professional development of teachers, after the 1980s, the professional ethics of teachers in many countries in the international arena continued to investigate the professionalization. They were teaching and the elaboration of professional ethics with the goal of pursuing quality education. Many educational professional organizations under the NEA in the United States have conducted research in different categories, considering their own characteristics and social backgrounds, and have formulated professional ethics guidelines that are more in line with different educators and the characteristics of their respective work. Overall, the professional ethics of U.S. college and university faculty are based on relevant codes related to academic research, student development, collegiality, academic community, and social responsibility, and a rigorous implementation and processing mechanism is designed while focusing on the pragmatism of the policy codes (Xu, 2005; Stinnett, 1968; He, 2012).

In the United Kingdom, the development of teacher professional ethics and the management of ethical misconduct have been guided by the introduction of the *Qualified Teacher Status (QTS)* program to ensure teacher ethics and regulate teacher actions. For instance, in 2002, the United Kingdom issued *Qualifying to Teach: Professional Standards for Qualified Teacher Status and Requirements for Initial Teacher Training*, which sets out the corresponding requirements for teacher ethics. In 2012, the Professional Standards for Teachers (PST), which focuses more on guiding the values, conducts, and professional standards of teachers in the United Kingdom, elaborated on the teaching ethics to enhance their sense of responsibility (Wronowski & Urlick, 2021).

In Australia, the development of teacher professional ethics and the building of teacher morality have been mapped out through the enactment of targeted codes of ethics policies in the states and territories. South Australia, Tasmania,

Queensland, and Western Australia enacted *Codes of Ethics* between 2005 and 2009. The Department of Education and Training of the Capital Territory also issued a *Code of Professional Practice and Conduct for ACT Teachers* in 2010 to guide the practice and conduct of teachers, to help teachers clarify their responsibilities in their professional teaching and growth, to enhance public confidence in the teaching profession and to clarify their mandatory obligations, among other things.

In Japan, the Council for the Review of Teaching Personnel Formation, for its part, adopted educational policies entitled *Improvement Program for Pre-service Training in Education in the New Period, Giving Full Role to Master's Degree Programs in Teacher Training*, and *Integration of Pre-service Training, Entry into the Profession, and Post-service Training* respectively during the three-year of 1997-1999, and improved the system of teacher education through the issuance of the national macro-educational policies in the form of the review reports. This clearly defined the standards of professional quality and competence of educational personnel, and greatly accelerated the movement of teacher professionalization and the development of teacher professional ethics in Japan (Tan, 2005).

Throughout the development process of teacher professional ethics in the international community, giving full play to the guiding, disciplinary, and motivational nature of teacher professional ethics policies, and focusing on the relationship between teachers and their stakeholders have been the major dimensions of the research of teacher professional ethics. And all of them have shown their own interests, preferences, and value orientations according to their own country's development orientation and the characteristics of the times in the process of deepening.

2.2. Connotated Description of Teacher Professional Ethics

Teacher ethics, from a semantic point of view, is short for teacher morality. McIntyre, a renowned ethicist, during his reflective study of the divergence of moral theories and the disordered state of moral practice in the contemporary West, has found that the most striking feature of contemporary moral discourse is the divergence of expression (Hao, 2015). The underlying principle is that pluralism creates a conceptual position of "incommensurability", which means that the conclusions that researchers draw about the same concept are not the same depending on their positions, premises, and criteria, but they are all logically valid. Apparently, researcher's conceptual definition can be considered as an individualized interpretation process reflecting the researcher's own cognitive level and theoretical preferences.

From a broad moral and ethical point of view, teacher ethics, namely for all teachers, refers to the collection of their public, professional, and personal private ethics. Teachers' ethics in a narrow sense refers to professional ethics based on the special role position of teachers, the moral norms and codes of conduct

that teachers must abide by when engaging in educational practices, as well as ideological and political levels, moral concepts, and moral qualities at the ideological level (Ma & Shi 2023; Tan, 2005; Liu & Han, 2020). In the Chinese context, many scholars have elaborated on the connotations and implications of teacher ethics. Teacher ethics is the role and profession of general social moral norms (Fu & Yu, 2019). Teacher ethics is a balance between give and take, rights and obligations, passive acceptance and active construction, spirituality, and materiality, and ideals reality (Li, 2020). The connotation of teacher ethics is both a code of behavior for teachers and an ethical requirement for their professional development, in line with the world trend of teacher professional development (Mi, 2018).

In a nutshell, teacher ethics is a special ideological requirement based on professional ethics, with professional attributes, catering to the complexity of the times and education, and is the value basis of educational practice. Teachers' ethics in higher education focuses on the realm of higher education, is closely linked and interacts with functional responsibilities, and is a universal norm regulating the professional relations and moral order formed by teachers in their long-term educational and teaching activities. Without being confined to the limited knowledge of independent teachers or subjective assumptions divorced from realities in society, it has a certain rational awareness component, which needs to be internalized in curriculum teaching, theoretical learning, teaching practice, and scientific research. And at the same time, it needs the support of professional knowledge and professional concepts more than general morality, with the qualities of specialization, complexity, education, growth, and epochal nature.

3. Teacher Professional Ethics as a Core Issue for the HESD in China

China's higher education's awareness and discussion of sustainable development is aligned with the international community's concern for environmental education and the idea of sustainable development, with various strategies and initiatives taken by the government as it actively participates in the deepening and holistic construction of the global goals of ESD (Ma et al., 2023; Ma, 2023). Among them, the HESD is an integral part of the educational strategy to facilitate the realization of the SDGs (Gu & Teng, 2019). China was one of the first countries to make a solemn commitment to the Agenda for Sustainable Development and has repeatedly included the implementation of sustainable development in its national development strategies and macroeconomic education policies. Higher education in China, as a vital component of the country's educational modernization, is an indicator of the country's sustainability in terms of the impetus and basis for its development. In 2022, the 20th CPC National Congress specifically stated that the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation would be comprehensively promoted by Chinese-style modernization, meaning that Chinese-style

modernization is a historical course with the intrinsic attribute of sustainable development (Zhou & Ma, 2017). At present, China's higher education is in a new era of high-quality development and strengthening the construction of a high-quality and professional faculty to promote the HESD based on the construction of teacher ethics is the current national education strategic action. Emphasizing teacher ethics has been a tradition of the CPC with profound cultural heritage and practical experience. The glory of history and the impact of the system have mirrored each other in the development of teacher ethics in higher education, resulting in a path of progressive growth in the standardization and characterization of professional ethics in socialist higher education with Chinese characteristics, in which theory and practice are closely intertwined. In the last decade, under the comprehensive leadership of the CPC with President Xi Jinping as the core, the construction of professional ethics in higher education has become a core issue and a hotspot of academic research for the HESD (Liu & Han, 2020; Fu & Yu, 2019; Li, 2020; Mi, 2018). Through educational system establishment and policy advancement, higher education has made sustained efforts at the level of ethics building, improving the ethical level of teachers in higher education through the implementation of the national strategic target of "Fostering Virtue through Education", providing a solid foundation for the ESD, and providing endogenous support for China to further deepen the favorable trend of sustainable development (Yu & Wang, 2021).

4. Methods

4.1. Research Approach

This study adopts Policy Discourse Analysis (PDA) as a research method. PDA is one of the important research methods in the field of public policy research and modern social sciences, which can not only help researchers to deeply understand and think about the plot and tendency of policy issues, but also reveal the power relations and ideology behind the discourse and help to observe and reflect on the value orientation and behavioral preferences of decision makers. Foucault has argued that discourse is closely related to power. It is an effective statement, while power operates under discourse and triggers discourse (Foucault, 1980). PDA, based on constructivism, phenomenology, and hermeneutics, presents and criticizes the process of constructing meaning about policy issues through the study of a range of linguistic and non-linguistic materials, such as policy-related documents, oral expressions, historical events, and polemics (Fischer, 2003). In other words, PDA can broadly set up the correlation between policy discourse and social behavior, so it has significant academic value in public policy research and social science investigation (Li et al., 2015; Gao & Li 2022).

Public policy text is the physical carrier of the existence of public policy, with political control, blueprint planning, behavioral norms, and task layout function (Ren et al., 2017). Meanwhile, in the process of building the rule of law in China,

the legalization of policy is an essential trend, whereby the content of public policy serves the function of legislative preparation, particularly for macro-policy at the national level. Education policy, as an element of public policy, has both the above functions and qualities. The document of education policy can objectively reflect the regulation and management conduct of the policy subject, which is not only a major carrier of PDA, but also a key basis for policy analysis, which provides a window for observing the process of education development and the government's action strategy. Applying the method of PDA, the government's educational behavior can be scientifically explored, which is conducive to the accumulation of experience and the prediction of prospects. In addition, because of the legitimacy, authority and objectivity of educational policy documents, the PDA method can reduce the measurement error caused by the researcher's intervention than other research methods, such as questionnaire surveys, in-depth interviews, fieldwork, etc., thus has a higher research credibility. Moreover, the method of PDA combines the institutional environment, social structure, and other deep hidden information to provide high validity for the study of national actions and development trends (Huang & Lv, 2020).

To summarize, it is logically reasonable and operationally feasible to select major national-level policy texts on the professional ethical development of teachers, apply the research method of PDA, and use the qualitative analytical tool NVivo14 to code and categorize the policy documents, with the aim of exploring the Chinese government's action strategies and choice preferences for the promotion of the HESD.

4.2. Data Collection

Government promotes policy action through its policy agenda, and the state ensures the effective implementation of governmental action through the promulgation of macro-policies. Policy content directly reflects the will of the state through policy discourse. It can reflect the value meaning of current governmental behavior in a tangible way. This study follows the general principles of public policy text selection, namely, authority, standardization, contemporaneity and representativeness (Ren et al., 2017), combining the national conditions of China's policy and the development trend of education. Taking the *Code of Ethics for Teachers in Higher Education*, the first special policy enacted at the national level in December 2011, as a demarcation point, we examined comprehensive policy agendas and special policy documents issued at the level of the Chinese government in the past 10 years that have a close connection with teacher ethics in higher education. After repeated readings on authoritative official platforms such as the websites of the Chinese government and the Ministry of Education of China, a total of 18 policy documents were collected and screened, including 8 specialized policies and 10 comprehensive policies. 18 relevant policies present the continuous efforts and initiatives of the Chinese government to promote the sustainable development of higher education in terms of the development of

teachers' ethics.

5. Results

The content of the above policy documents screened was extracted by scrutinizing the content of the policy texts and based on the policy meanings referred to by the textual content, related to teacher ethics. The phrases and sentences containing policy meanings, which were assembled from basic morphemes, were coded at three levels and repeatedly compared to ensure a strong connection between the data and the categories. Contextual analysis around the recurring themes and high-frequency words resulted in government action strategies and choice preferences based on teacher ethics development (see **Figure 1**).

5.1. Norms of Teacher Ethics as a Code of Conduct for Teachers' Sustainable Development

National strategies in China prioritize education development in national development. Providing impetus for national development with sustainable education is the kernel of its decision-making. Adapting to the cultural, conceptual, and ideological shocks brought about by the current global economic advancement, upgrading the quality of innovative talents for building a socialist country with Chinese characteristics in the new era, implementing the plans and expectations of the core national leaders on the direction of the country's development, and improving the triumph and well-being of teachers have all become important decision-making factors influencing the actions of China's higher education in terms of sustainable development. However, all the above factors point the focus to teacher ethics.

In December 2011, the Chinese government issued the *Code of Ethics for Teachers in Higher Education*, the first national macro-level policy document specifically guiding teachers' ethics in higher education. It is made clear that the establishment of teachers' ethics in HEIs is of broad social significance for the development of the education and moral education system and for the enhancement of the citizens' quality. It also puts forward the requirements of

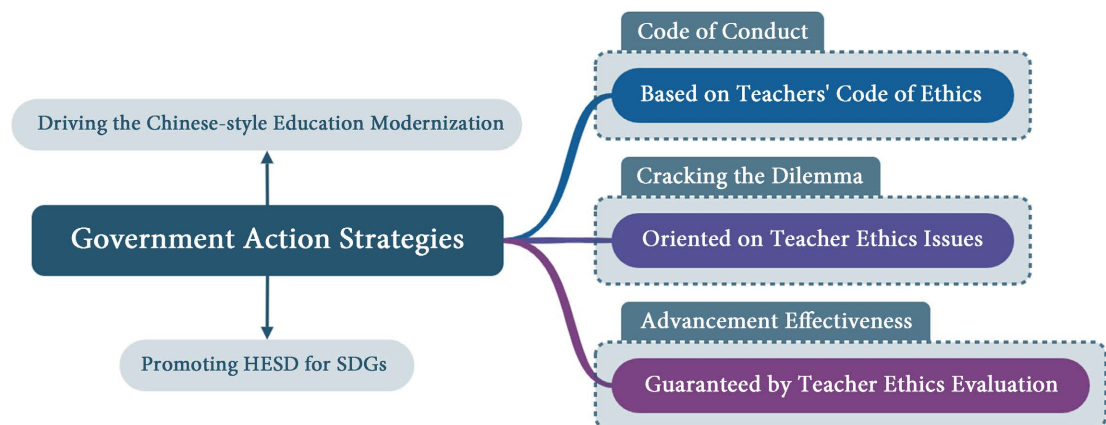


Figure 1. The outline of government action strategies and choice preferences.

creating a strong atmosphere of emphasizing ethics and cultivating virtue through policy propaganda, clarifying the advocacy requirements and prohibitions through policy interpretation, and refining the implementation rules of the code of teacher ethics for higher education (MEPRC, 2011). The purpose is to promote the norms of teacher ethics to become a universally recognized and consciously practiced bottom line of conduct for most teachers, for the sustainable development of college teachers to cultivate the roots of the soul. 2012, the State Council promulgated the *State Council Opinions on Strengthening the Teaching Force*, which points out to build a long-term mechanism for the establishment of teacher ethics and set up a sound mechanism for the construction of teacher ethics that combines education, publicity, assessment, supervision and rewards and punishments (CPGPRC, 2012). Taking the norms of teacher ethics as basic, promotes the sustainability of teacher development. Teachers' professional ideals, ethics, and academic norms are integrated into the whole process of teachers' lifelong development and growth. In September 2014, the Ministry of Education of China issued a specialized policy entitled *Opinions on Establishing and Improving a Long-term Mechanism for the Construction of Teachers' Ethics in Colleges and Universities*. Among them, it is clearly stated that the ideological and political quality and moral sentiments of teachers directly affect the cultivation of young students' worldview, outlook on life and values, determine the quality of talent training, and have a bearing on the future of the country and the nation. Reinforcing and promoting the construction of teacher ethics in HEIs is of great and far-reaching meaning for comprehensively raising the quality of higher education, advancing the scientific growth, cultivating builders and successors for the cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and realizing the Chinese dream of the grand rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (MEPRC, 2014). It also provides a positive policy response to the real problems that hinder the HESD. It points out that a few teachers have a weak sense of nurturing, academic misconduct, poor behavior, and other problems, and put forward a problem-oriented strategy to address the issue to establish a sound long-term mechanism for the building of teacher morality.

5.2. Cracking the Dilemma of HESD with Teacher Ethics Issue Orientation

Problem-oriented, stratified, and categorized solutions to the problem of teacher ethics that impede the HESD are one of the key strategic choices made by the Chinese Government. In 2012, the Chinese government explicitly stated in its macro policy for all teachers that it would build a long-term mechanism for building teacher ethics, and in 2014, the government issued a special policy to promote the establishment of a sound long-term mechanism for building teacher ethics in higher education in a hierarchical and comprehensive manner. The policy discourse has changed from "building" to "establishing" a sound mechanism, reflecting the government's attitude and strength of implementation. And in doing so to respond to and solve the dilemma of higher education

development in the ESD process. In 2016, the *Measures for the Prevention and Handling of Academic Misconduct in Higher Education Institutions* were issued in response to violations of recognized academic norms and breaches of academic integrity in the field of scientific research and related activities in higher education. The principle of adhering to the principle of prevention and combining education and discipline requires a national action response to the problem of academic misconduct. Among them, it is explicitly stated that HEIs are the main body of prevention and treatment of academic misconduct. HEIs should build an academic integrity system that integrates education, prevention, supervision, and punishment, and promote the formation of academic norms and the conscious observance of teacher ethics norms through the optimization of the system and the refinement of the mechanism (MEPRC, 2016a).

In 2018, the Ministry of Education issued the *Opinions on Comprehensively Implementing the Responsibilities of Graduate Student Tutors to Foster Virtue*, which provides policy guidelines for the teacher ethics of graduate student tutors in higher education. Therein, the extreme importance of the teacher ethics of graduate student instructors is made clear. As high-level specialized human resources cultivated by higher education, postgraduates are an important pillar for the sustainable development of society, economy, and environment, and a core element for building an innovative country. Graduate student supervisors are the key force in graduate student training, and their teacher ethics level has an important impact on talent training. Therefore, strengthening the basic quality requirements (including excellent political quality, high moral character, and professional quality) is the foundation for the high-quality training of talents (MEPRC, 2018a). Subsequently, the *Ten Codes of Professional Behavior for Higher Education Teachers in the New Era* was issued, delineating the basic bottom line of teacher ethics in response to major and prominent issues in development. This policy presents the government's warning reminder and strict control and care for higher education teachers in a quasi-sideway form, which is a key move to promote the high-quality and sustainable development of higher education teachers (MEPRC, 2018b). During the same period, the Ministry of Education responded to the issue of teacher misconduct in violation of the code of ethics at the national level by promulgating the *Guiding Opinions on Handling Teacher Misconduct in Colleges and Universities*. Enhanced accountability is used to improve the fairness and impartiality of the handling of teacher misconduct, and it is re-emphasized that there is a one-vote veto on teacher misconduct, meaning that teacher ethics is a precondition for the acquisition of all interests in the development of teachers (MEPRC, 2018c).

In 2019, the government issued the *Opinions on Strengthening and Improving the Construction of Teachers' Ethics in the New Era*, once again emphasizing the central importance of teacher ethics in the HESD in the form of a joint multi-sectoral national policy on teacher ethics development. It clearly states that reinforcing and enhancing construction of teacher ethics in the new era is

an important way to improve the moral literacy of citizens (MEPRC, 2019a). In other words, it is also a concrete action strategy at the national level in promoting the awareness of sustainable development of global citizens, which is not explicitly stated in the content of the policy but is indeed the meaning of the title. Oriented by outstanding problems, the government has carried out the building of teachers' professional ethics throughout the whole process of the sustainable development of institutions in higher education and the lifelong growth of teachers. It also utilizes the trinity of classroom moral education, typical virtue education, and rule-based ethics education to improve teachers' professional ethics, thereby cracking the dilemmas and challenges in the HESD.

5.3. Evaluation of Teacher Ethics to Guarantee the Advancement Effectiveness of HESD

The assessment and evaluation of teachers in higher education is the foundation and basis for their selection, appointment, remuneration, rewards and punishments, and other personnel management. Teacher evaluation in higher education is a necessary tool for mobilizing teachers' motivation for teaching and research, promoting teachers' growth, and facilitating the HESD, and has a global and fundamental impact. In 2016, the *Guiding Opinions on Deepening the Reform of the Assessment and Evaluation System for Teachers in Higher Education Institutions* was released, in which the text of the policy emphasized that teacher ethics is the priority as a precondition for assessment and evaluation, and the state made it obvious that the evaluation of teacher ethics is located at the core of the evaluation of teachers (MEPRC, 2016b). In 2019, in the *Opinions on Strengthening and Improving the Construction of Teachers' Ethics in the New Era* issued by the Ministry of Education and seven other departments, it states clearly that the effectiveness of establishing morality is the fundamental criterion for testing all the work of the school, and that teachers' ethics is the first criterion for evaluating the quality of the teaching force (MEPRC, 2019b). In 2020, the State Council issued the *Overall Program for Deepening Education Evaluation Reform in the New Era* to make overall strategic action deployment for education evaluation. With the aim of perfecting the system and mechanism for establishing moral character and reversing the unscientific education evaluation orientation as the root, this program provides important guidance for promoting the modernization of Chinese-style education and supporting the sustainable development of education

In 2021, the *Guiding Opinions on Strengthening the Reform of the Construction of Higher Education Teachers in the New Era* re-emphasized the testing and controlling nature of the evaluation of higher education teacher ethics on the effectiveness. The policy discourse clearly presents that the evaluation of teacher ethics is the primary requirement and the first standard for teacher recruitment and introduction, title evaluation, post-employment, mentor selection, merit awards, tenure assessment, and project declaration. The rationality of the proc-

ess of teacher ethics evaluation and the utilization of the results of teacher ethics evaluation are important indicators to test the effectiveness of sustainable development of higher education (Yu & Wang, 2021). From the above, teacher ethics evaluation provides positive information feedback for the current state of development of China's educational endeavors, plays a positive role in regulating and controlling, and is a vital action strategy adopted by the government to promote the ESD and the lifelong growth of teachers. It can also be said that with the policy discourse on teacher ethics evaluation clearly presented and repeatedly emphasized in the content of the government's macro-education policy, the strategic preference of the government's action strategy to improve the evaluation mechanism of teacher ethics to guarantee the promotional efficacy of the sustainable development of education is clearly portrayed.

6. Discussion

In 2012, the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) formalized the overall layout of socialism with Chinese characteristics as "Five-in-One". That is, the construction of socialism with Chinese characteristics includes economic construction, political construction, cultural construction, social construction, and ecological civilization construction. 2019, the Chinese government promulgated the *China Education Modernization 2035*, which serves as a programmatic document for the country's education development, highlighting the fundamental and important supporting role of the modernization of China's education for the comprehensive promotion of the "Five-in-One" national strategic layout (CPGPRC, 2019). The "Five-in-One" national development strategy is homologous to the intrinsic value of the global SDGs advocated by the United Nations, and the modernization of China's education is the exploration and innovation of education for sustainable development in China. At the same time, some authoritative Chinese scholars have pointed out that the governmental strategic action of "*China Education Modernization 2035*" is an important initiative of the Chinese government (Ma, 2023; Gu & Teng, 2019). As a responsible big country, the Chinese government proactively realizes the global SDGs, and the Chinese experience and Chinese action strategy contained therein are of great methodological and content value to the international community for the early realization of the 2030 education goals.

Reflecting on the strategic frameworks for ESD advocated by the international community, as well as the series of national action strategies introduced by the Chinese government, anchored in the development of teacher ethics, both repeatedly emphasize the importance and necessity of an active role for the government. As advocated in the Education 2030 Framework for Action, Article 78, "The government should insist on the political leadership of education and on providing process guidance for the realization of the Education 2030 goals in accordance with the country's experience and priorities." (UNGA, 2015) In its education modernization strategy to promote SDG4 through HESD, the Chinese

Government shares the values of equity and inclusion in education, with the comprehensive leadership of the CPC and the socialist system with Chinese characteristics as the fundamental safeguards. By strengthening the foundation of teacher ethics as a strategy for action, China has accelerated the enhancement of teacher competence and comprehensive capacity, demonstrated the historical heritage of respect for teachers in traditional Chinese culture, ensured the pure underpinnings of teachers, and provided a radical guarantee of inclusive and equitable quality education.

High-quality teacher quality is the essential prerequisite for the provision of high-quality education, while high-quality teacher ethics is the underpinning and foundation of excellent teacher quality. “Teachers’ Virtues Foremost” reflects the historical and cultural tradition of Chinese characteristics, and the will of the Chinese government to promote the realization of the goals of ESD. At present, China, based on its national circumstances, inheriting its traditions, and actively drawing on international experience, has creatively formed a “Dual Priority Model” of education modernization with Chinese characteristics, that is, a model in which the State gives priority to the development of education, and a model in which education gives priority to meeting the country’s development needs, with the fundamental aim of promoting ethics and teaching morality (Yuan, 2018). This “Dual Priority Model” provides a two-wheel drive for the modernization and ESD in China. Meanwhile, it has set a Chinese model of political will and governmental action strategies for the international community, especially developing countries, to realize the ESD 2030 goals.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, improving teacher ethics and raising the level of teacher morality is an important educational practice made by the Chinese government to promote ESD, and the specific governmental action strategies are norm-based, problem-oriented, and evaluation-driven to push forward the long-term effectiveness and efficiency of the permanent mechanism for building teacher ethics, which has a strong cultural heritage and Chinese characteristics. The Chinese government recognizes the principles and values of sustainable development, and is actively responding to the multiple social, environmental, economic, and cultural problems and the realities and major contradictions of China’s new era. Reflecting on the role of teachers in promoting sustainable development and the key role of teachers in fostering holistic human development, with the building of teachers’ ethics as a continuous point of strength, it has a distinctive socialist character of the new era with Chinese characteristics. The Chinese government has guided the development of teacher ethics for higher education teachers as a strategy for action by implementing the national development strategy that is fundamental to the cultivation of moral character. This creates a solid cognitive foundation for understanding cultural diversity, gender equality, social justice, environmental protection, and personal development in ESD, and improves the

regularity and science of change and reflection in organizational learning. This is a practical experience that can be shared with the international community in advancing the modernization and the high-quality development of higher education.

This study provides an in-depth discussion of the action strategies adopted by the Chinese government to promote sustainable development from the perspective of teacher ethics development of higher education teachers, but there are limitations and shortcomings in exploring actions to promote ESD from the teacher ethics development level only at the government level. Teacher professional ethics development also requires active participation in decision-making at the individual teacher level, as well as higher education institutions and agencies to guarantee the realization and enforcement of national action strategies. In future research, we will explore in depth the Chinese and international comparisons of teacher ethics development and sustainable development of teachers and education under the synergistic mechanism of multiple actors.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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