INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION & DEVELOPMENT

OPEN ACCESS JOURNAL

Vol 15, Issue 3, (2026) E-ISSN: 2226-6348

Pre-Qin Confucian Moral Education Cognition and Social Responsibility among University Students: The Mediating Roles of Value Orientation and Moral Judgment

Du Ningning[12], Mohd Syaubari Bin Othman[3]

[1]Faculty of Human Development, Sultan Idris Education University, Perak, Malaysia, [2]Faculty of General Education, Shandong Huayu University of Technology, Dezhou, China, [3]Faculty of Human Development, Sultan Idris Education University, Perak, Malaysia

DOI Link: http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v15-i3/28895

Published Online: 12 September 2026

Abstract

This study investigates how Pre-Qin Confucian moral education cognition relates to university students' social responsibility and the underlying psychological mechanisms involved in this relationship. Although traditional cultural education has been widely emphasized in higher education, its empirical linkage to students' civic and moral development remains insufficiently examined. Drawing on Confucian moral education theory, data were collected from 372 undergraduates in Shandong Province, China, and analyzed using SPSS, AMOS, and Hayes' PROCESS Macro (Model 4). The results demonstrate that Confucian moral education cognition is significantly associated with higher levels of social responsibility. Moreover, value orientation and moral judgment function as significant parallel mediators in this relationship. Among them, moral judgment exhibits a stronger mediating effect than value orientation, indicating the prominent role of moral reasoning in translating cultural cognition into responsible social behavior. The findings highlight that the influence of Confucian moral education on social responsibility is not limited to a direct association, but is also connected with students' value formation and moral judgment. This study extends current understanding of traditional culture in moral education by empirically validating a dual-path mediation mechanism and provides evidence for integrating Confucian moral resources into contemporary ideological and political education in higher education contexts.

Keywords: Pre-Qin Confucian Moral Education, Social Responsibility, Value Orientation, Moral Judgment, University Students, Mediation Model

Introduction

University students' social responsibility has become an important issue in research on higher education, moral development, and civic socialization. Social responsibility involves not only concern for others and collective interests, but also students' willingness to participate in public life and contribute to broader social development. Existing research has shown that universities can shape such responsibility through curriculum, community engagement, service learning, and other educational experiences (Godonoga & Sporn, 2023; Hudson &

Brandenberger, 2023). However, a broader social-scientific question remains unresolved: how do students internalize moral and cultural resources and translate them into contemporary social responsibility? This question is closely related to ongoing debates in moral psychology, cultural psychology, and the sociology of education concerning whether moral and civic development is primarily shaped by institutional experiences and general developmental processes, or whether culturally embedded moral traditions also provide distinctive resources for understanding responsibility, obligation, and the public good.

This question is particularly relevant in the Chinese higher education context, where moral and civic education has historically been intertwined with culturally grounded conceptions of self, obligation, and social relationships. Pre-Qin Confucian moral education provides one such framework. Its emphasis on ren (benevolence), yi (righteousness), li (ritual propriety), zhi (wisdom), and xin (trustworthiness), together with the ideal of extending self-cultivation toward responsibility for others and society, represents a culturally situated model of moral development. Recent research on Confucian heritage societies suggests that Confucian traditions remain associated with collective self-understanding, moral worldviews, relational responsibility, and moral self-construction (Takamatsu et al., 2024; Wang, 2023). These findings raise an important empirical question: whether university students' cognition of Confucian moral education is merely a form of cultural knowledge, or whether it is meaningfully associated with how they understand and assume social responsibility in contemporary life.

Recent empirical studies provide important but still fragmented evidence concerning the formation of university students' moral and social responsibility. Hudson and Brandenberger (2023), for example, found that community engagement experiences were associated with college students' moral and prosocial responsibility, highlighting the importance of socially meaningful educational experiences. Research on ethics education has likewise shown that structured moral and ethical learning can contribute to the development of students' moral judgment (Poje & Zaman Groff, 2023). From a cultural perspective, Takamatsu et al. (2024) demonstrated that Confucian heritage is meaningfully related to collective self-construal and moral worldviews. Together, these findings suggest that responsibility development is shaped by both educational experiences and internal moral processes. Nevertheless, these strands of research have largely developed separately. Studies of university students' social responsibility have tended to emphasize experiential or institutional antecedents, whereas research on Confucian education has focused more heavily on cultural transmission, moral worldviews, and educational practice. Consequently, there is still limited empirical evidence concerning whether cognition of a culturally specific moral tradition such as Pre-Qin Confucianism is systematically associated with university students' social responsibility.

A second unresolved issue concerns the psychological mechanism through which culturally grounded moral cognition becomes associated with social responsibility. Moral cognition does not necessarily translate directly into responsible attitudes or conduct; rather, this transformation may depend on how individuals internalize moral values and how they interpret morally relevant situations. Research on moral development has emphasized the importance of both value formation and moral reasoning in connecting moral knowledge with social behavior (Killen & Dahl, 2021; Tian et al., 2025). Value orientation reflects the extent to which individuals prioritize fairness, public interest, collective welfare, and responsibility-

related values, whereas moral judgment concerns their ability to interpret moral situations and determine what ought to be done. These two processes are theoretically related but conceptually distinct: value orientation concerns what individuals regard as important, whereas moral judgment concerns how they evaluate appropriate action in specific situations. Yet previous research has rarely examined these two mechanisms simultaneously in explaining how culturally specific moral cognition is associated with university students' social responsibility.

Against this background, the present study examines whether Pre-Qin Confucian moral education cognition is associated with university students' social responsibility and whether value orientation and moral judgment operate as parallel mediating mechanisms in this relationship. Using survey data from university students in Shandong Province, China, the study addresses two related questions: first, whether stronger cognition of Pre-Qin Confucian moral education is associated with higher social responsibility; and second, whether this association can be explained through students' value orientation and moral judgment. The study extends previous research in three ways. First, it extends the literature on university students' social responsibility beyond the institutional and experiential factors emphasized in previous studies by examining culturally grounded moral cognition as a potential antecedent. Second, it complements research on Confucian education by moving beyond cultural transmission and general moral worldviews to examine its empirical association with a contemporary civic-moral outcome. Third, by distinguishing value orientation from moral judgment, it provides a mechanism-based explanation of how traditional moral cognition may become connected with social responsibility. In this way, the study contributes to broader social-scientific discussions of moral socialization, value internalization, and culturally situated moral development.

Theoretical Framework

Building on the social-scientific problem outlined above, this study integrates Confucian moral education theory with moral development theory to explain how culturally grounded moral cognition may become associated with university students' social responsibility. Rather than treating Confucian moral education cognition simply as knowledge of traditional culture, the framework conceptualizes it as a form of moral understanding that may shape both students' value priorities and their judgments concerning responsibility, public interest, and ethical action.

Pre-Qin Confucian Moral Education Cognition and Social Responsibility

Pre-Qin Confucian moral education cognition refers to students' understanding, recognition, and internalization of core Confucian moral principles. It is different from general familiarity with traditional culture because it carries an explicit moral and value-oriented meaning. Concepts such as benevolence, righteousness, ritual propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness do not simply represent historical cultural symbols; they also imply expectations about how individuals should conduct themselves in relation to family, community, and society. In this sense, Pre-Qin Confucian moral education cognition contains a clear concern for the connection between personal moral cultivation and social order.

This feature is closely related to the Confucian understanding of responsibility. Confucian ethics emphasizes that individuals are embedded in social relationships and that moral self-

cultivation should eventually be reflected in responsible conduct toward others and the wider community. Recent studies have also shown that Confucian cultural traditions are associated with relational responsibility, social harmony, and moral self-construction (Takamatsu et al., 2024; Wang, 2023). These studies suggest that Confucian moral education provides a cultural and ethical basis for understanding how individuals connect the self with society.

Social responsibility, in this study, refers to students' awareness of and commitment to obligations toward others, collective groups, and social development. It is expressed through concern for the public good, willingness to participate in social affairs, and attention to collective welfare. Previous research has indicated that university students' social responsibility is shaped not only by educational environments but also by their value systems and moral beliefs (Hudson & Brandenberger, 2023). From a Confucian perspective, the ideal of cultivating oneself, regulating the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world reflects a moral route through which personal cultivation is extended into broader social responsibility. Therefore, students who have a deeper understanding and stronger recognition of Pre-Qin Confucian moral education may be more likely to develop a sense of responsibility toward society, others, and the public interest. This connection is important because Confucian self-cultivation is not a purely private moral pursuit. It provides students with a way to understand how personal moral growth may be extended to care for others, concern for public order, and responsibility toward society.

Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:
H1: Pre-Qin Confucian moral education cognition positively predicts university students' social responsibility.

The Mediating Role of Value Orientation
Value orientation refers to the values and behavioral principles that individuals regard as important when evaluating themselves, others, and society. In this study, it mainly concerns students' endorsement of fairness, public interest, collective welfare, and social contribution. Moral education can influence students only when the values it conveys are not merely understood at the cognitive level, but are gradually accepted as part of their own value system.

Pre-Qin Confucian moral education contains strong value guidance. Its emphasis on benevolence toward others, righteousness over personal gain, and the pursuit of the common good encourages individuals to move beyond narrow self-interest and to place personal development within a wider moral and social context. For university students, understanding these moral ideas may help them form a stronger orientation toward public responsibility and collective well-being. In this sense, value orientation may be an important pathway through which Confucian moral education cognition becomes connected with social responsibility.

Previous research has shown that moral education contributes not only to students' cognitive development, but also to the formation of values and responsibility awareness (Tian et al., 2025). When students develop a stronger understanding and acceptance of Confucian moral principles, they may become more inclined to endorse values related to public interest, social service, and responsibility. These value orientations, in turn, provide a foundation for the development of social responsibility.

Based on this reasoning, the following hypothesis is proposed:
H2: Value orientation mediates the relationship between Pre-Qin Confucian moral education cognition and university students' social responsibility.

The Mediating Role of Moral Judgment

Moral judgment refers to individuals' ability to analyze moral situations, evaluate the legitimacy of different actions, and make decisions based on moral principles. It involves the application of concepts such as fairness, responsibility, rights, and care in concrete situations. Social responsibility does not depend only on whether individuals endorse certain values; it also depends on whether they can make appropriate moral judgments when facing real social issues or conflicts of interest.

Pre-Qin Confucian moral education places strong emphasis on moral discernment and reflective practice. Ideas such as distinguishing righteousness from personal gain, learning from virtuous persons, and engaging in self-reflection all require individuals to evaluate their own actions in relation to moral standards. These teachings may help students develop clearer criteria for judging what is responsible, appropriate, and ethically justified in specific situations. In this way, moral judgment may serve as another psychological mechanism linking Confucian moral education cognition with social responsibility.

Previous studies have also emphasized the role of moral judgment in connecting moral cognition with social behavior. Killen and Dahl (2021) argue that moral reasoning is central to both individual development and broader social change. From this perspective, students with stronger moral judgment are more likely to identify responsibility-related demands in social situations and to respond in ways that are consistent with ethical principles. Therefore, Pre-Qin Confucian moral education cognition may contribute to social responsibility by strengthening students' moral judgment.
Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:
H3: Moral judgment mediates the relationship between Pre-Qin Confucian moral education cognition and university students' social responsibility.

Conceptual Model

Based on the above theoretical discussion, this study proposes a parallel mediation model. In this model, Pre-Qin Confucian moral education cognition is expected to be positively associated with university students' social responsibility. At the same time, this relationship may also be transmitted through two psychological pathways: value orientation and moral judgment.

Value orientation reflects students' endorsement of public values and social responsibility, whereas moral judgment reflects their ability to evaluate responsibility-related situations according to moral principles. These two variables represent different but complementary aspects of moral development. Value orientation provides a relatively stable value basis for social responsibility, while moral judgment helps students apply moral principles in specific situations. Together, they help explain how traditional cultural cognition may be transformed into students' responsibility awareness.

Accordingly, the conceptual model shown in Figure 1 is developed. In this model, Pre-Qin Confucian moral education cognition serves as the independent variable, university students' social responsibility serves as the dependent variable, and value orientation and moral judgment function as parallel mediating variables..

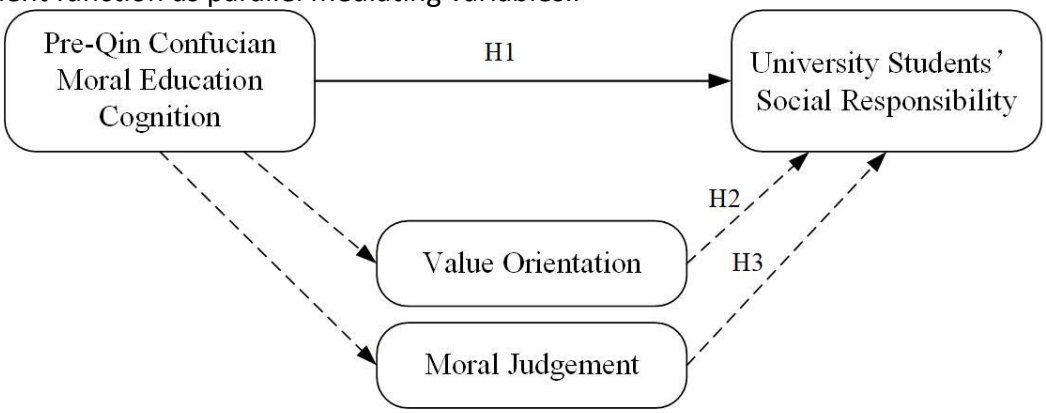

Figure 1. Conceptual Model

Note: H1 = Direct effect; H2 = Mediating effect through Value Orientation; H3 = Mediating effect through Moral Judgment.

Methodology

Research Design and Participants

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationship between Pre-Qin Confucian moral education cognition and university students' social responsibility, as well as the mediating roles of value orientation and moral judgment. Data were collected from undergraduate students enrolled in three universities in Shandong Province, China, including a Double First-Class university, a provincial key university, and an application-oriented university. Shandong Province is selected as the research setting because of its strong historical and cultural connection with Confucianism.

A total of 372 valid questionnaires were obtained and included in the final analysis. Participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous.

Measures

All variables were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). Higher scores indicated higher levels of the corresponding construct.

Pre-Qin Confucian moral education cognition was measured by students' understanding and recognition of core Confucian moral principles, including benevolence, righteousness, ritual propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness. Social responsibility was assessed through students' sense of responsibility toward others, collective interests, society, and national development. Value orientation reflected students' endorsement of public responsibility, collective welfare, fairness, and social contribution. Moral judgment referred to students' ability to evaluate moral issues and make responsible decisions in specific situations.

The reliability and validity of all measurement scales were examined prior to hypothesis testing.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS and AMOS. Descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, correlation analysis, and multicollinearity diagnostics were first performed. Common method bias was assessed using Harman's single-factor test, and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to evaluate the measurement model.

To test the proposed hypotheses, mediation analyses were performed using Hayes' PROCESS Macro (Model 4). The significance of indirect effects was examined through 5,000 bootstrap resamples, with 95% confidence intervals used to determine statistical significance.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Analysis

Table 1 reports the descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients for the main variables. The mean scores for Pre-Qin Confucian moral education cognition, value orientation, moral judgment, and social responsibility were all higher than 4.00, indicating that the participating students generally reported relatively high levels on these constructs. The Cronbach's α coefficients ranged from 0.953 to 0.980, suggesting strong internal consistency for all four measures.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Results of the Main Variables

Variable	Items	Mean	SD	Cronbach's α
Pre-Qin Confucian Moral Education Cognition	12	4.19	0.78	0.980
Value Orientation	5	4.32	0.73	0.953
Moral Judgment	5	4.27	0.77	0.959
Social Responsibility	7	4.28	0.77	0.972

Note. N = 372.

Common Method Bias and Measurement Model Assessment

Before testing the hypotheses, common method bias and the distinctiveness of the main constructs were examined. Harman's single-factor test was used as an initial check, and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was then conducted to compare the hypothesized four-factor model with a one-factor model and three alternative three-factor models.

The results are presented in Table 2. Compared with the one-factor model and the three competing three-factor models, the four-factor model showed the most acceptable fit. It had the lowest χ^2/df, RMSEA, and AIC values, and the highest CFI, TLI, and IFI values among the tested models. These results indicate that treating Pre-Qin Confucian moral education cognition, value orientation, moral judgment, and social responsibility as four separate latent constructs provides a better representation of the data than the alternative models.

Table 2
Comparison of Competing Measurement Models

Model	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	CFI	TLI	IFI	RMSEA	AIC
One-factor model	4071.461	377	10.800	.782	.765	.782	.163	4187.461
Three-factor Model A (Value Orientation and Moral Judgment combined)	1893.373	374	5.062	.910	.903	.910	.105	2015.373
Three-factor Model B (Value Orientation and Social Responsibility combined)	1951.842	374	5.219	.907	.899	.907	.107	2073.842
Three-factor Model C (Moral Judgment and Social Responsibility combined)	1973.234	374	5.276	.905	.897	.906	.107	2095.234
Four-factor model	1851.768	371	4.991	.912	.904	.913	.104	1979.768

Correlation Analysis and Multicollinearity Diagnosis

Pearson correlation analysis was used to examine the initial associations among the study variables. As shown in Table 3, all variables were positively correlated at the .001 significance level. Pre-Qin Confucian moral education cognition was significantly associated with value orientation (r = .818), moral judgment (r = .785), and social responsibility (r = .819), providing initial support for the expected relationships among the core variables.

Table 3
Pearson Correlation Matrix of the Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Pre-Qin Confucian Moral Education Cognition	1			
2. Value Orientation	.818***	1		
3. Moral Judgment	.785***	.932***	1	
4. Social Responsibility	.819***	.927***	.932***	1

Note. N = 372. ***p < .001.

Given the relatively high correlations among some variables, multicollinearity diagnostics were further conducted. As presented in Table 4, all variance inflation factor (VIF) values were below 10 and all tolerance values exceeded 0.10, indicating that multicollinearity was not a serious concern in the present study.

Table 4
Results of Multicollinearity Diagnostics

Predictor	Tolerance	VIF
Pre-Qin Confucian Moral Education Cognition	.3268	3.0603
Value Orientation	.1116	8.9641
Moral Judgment	.1292	7.7390

Parallel Mediation Analysis of Value Orientation and Moral Judgment

To examine the mediating roles of value orientation and moral judgment in the relationship between Pre-Qin Confucian moral education cognition and social responsibility, Hayes' PROCESS Macro (Model 4) was employed. Bootstrap analysis with 5,000 resamples was conducted to estimate the indirect effects.

The results indicated that Pre-Qin Confucian moral education cognition significantly and positively predicted both value orientation and moral judgment. After including the two mediators, the direct effect of Pre-Qin Confucian moral education cognition on social responsibility remained significant. In addition, both value orientation and moral judgment exerted significant positive effects on social responsibility (see Table 5).

Table 5
Path Coefficients of the Parallel Mediation Model

Dependent Variable	Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p	95% CI
Value Orientation	Pre-Qin Confucian Moral Education Cognition	.7737	.0283	.818	27.3640	< .001	[.7181, .8293]
Moral Judgment	Pre-Qin Confucian Moral Education Cognition	.7791	.0319	.785	24.4108	< .001	[.7164, .8419]
Social Responsibility	Pre-Qin Confucian Moral Education Cognition	.1466	.0282	.148	5.1973	< .001	[.0911, .2021]
Social Responsibility	Value Orientation	.3661	.0511	.350	7.1719	< .001	[.2658, .4665]
Social Responsibility	Moral Judgment	.4872	.0452	.489	10.7730	< .001	[.3983, .5761]

Note. N = 372. R^2 = .6693 for the Value Orientation model; R^2 = .6169 for the Moral Judgment model; and R^2 = .9021 for the Social Responsibility model.

Bootstrap analyses further revealed that the total indirect effect was significant and that the 95% confidence intervals for both specific indirect effects did not include zero (see Table 6), indicating significant mediating effects of value orientation and moral judgment.

Table 6
Bootstrap Results for the Parallel Mediation Effects

Indirect Path	Effect	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI	Result
Total indirect effect	.6629	.0487	.5674	.7574	Significant
Pre-Qin Confucian Moral Education Cognition → Value Orientation → Social Responsibility	.2833	.0651	.1535	.4090	Significant
Pre-Qin Confucian Moral Education Cognition → Moral Judgment → Social Responsibility	.3796	.0737	.2403	.5327	Significant

Based on the above analyses, all proposed hypotheses were supported.

Table 7
Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Path	Result
H1	Pre-Qin Confucian Moral Education Cognition → Social Responsibility	Supported
H2	Pre-Qin Confucian Moral Education Cognition → Value Orientation → Social Responsibility	Supported
H3	Pre-Qin Confucian Moral Education Cognition → Moral Judgment → Social Responsibility	Supported

Overall, the findings indicate that Pre-Qin Confucian moral education cognition promotes university students' social responsibility both directly and indirectly through value orientation and moral judgment. Among the two mediating pathways, the indirect effect through moral judgment was relatively stronger, suggesting that individuals' interpretation and evaluation of moral situations play a particularly important role in translating traditional cultural cognition into social responsibility. The results provide support for H1, H2, and H3 and validate the proposed parallel mediation model.

Discussion

Relationship Between Pre-Qin Confucian Moral Education Cognition and Social Responsibility

The findings of this study indicate that Pre-Qin Confucian moral education cognition significantly and positively predicts university students' social responsibility, thereby supporting Hypothesis 1. This result suggests that university students' understanding and recognition of Pre-Qin Confucian moral education are not merely reflected in their acquisition of traditional cultural knowledge, but are also closely associated with the development of their sense of social responsibility.

This finding can be explained through the ethical logic of responsibility embedded in Pre-Qin Confucian moral education. Confucian thought emphasizes a moral developmental pathway of self-cultivation, family regulation, state governance, and the realization of social harmony, highlighting the intrinsic connection between personal moral cultivation and the fulfillment of social responsibilities. The values embodied in benevolence, which emphasizes care for

others; righteousness, which stresses moral responsibility; and ritual propriety, which provides normative guidance for social conduct, collectively form a value foundation that extends individual moral cultivation to public responsibility. Consequently, students with a higher level of cognition of Pre-Qin Confucian moral education are more likely to connect personal development with social progress, thereby developing a stronger sense of social responsibility.

This relationship is also meaningful in the context of Chinese higher education. For university students, social responsibility is not formed only through formal civic education or external behavioral requirements. It also depends on whether students can find a moral language through which they understand their relationship with others, with collective life, and with society. Pre-Qin Confucian moral education offers such a language by linking personal cultivation with concern for public order and social harmony. In this sense, Confucian moral education may help students interpret responsibility not as an abstract obligation imposed from outside, but as part of their own moral development.

The findings are generally consistent with previous studies on Confucian cultural values and the ethics of responsibility. Existing research suggests that Confucian moral education extends beyond individual virtue to emphasize responsibility within social relationships and concern for collective well-being (Takamatsu et al., 2024; Wang, 2023). The present study extends this literature by showing that Confucian moral education cognition is also positively associated with university students' social responsibility as a contemporary civic-moral orientation. It further complements research emphasizing community engagement and educational experience by indicating that social responsibility may be associated not only with external educational contexts, but also with culturally grounded moral cognition and its internalization.

From the perspective of ideological and political education in higher education, these findings also highlight the educational value of China's excellent traditional culture. The significance of traditional cultural education lies not merely in cultural transmission, but in its capacity to guide students in developing a sound sense of responsibility and public consciousness through value cultivation. When students understand the relationship between personal moral cultivation and social responsibility through Pre-Qin Confucian moral education, the development of their social responsibility is likely to receive deeper cultural and moral support.

The Mediating Roles of Value Orientation and Moral Judgment

The mediation results add a further layer to the relationship between Pre-Qin Confucian moral education cognition and students' social responsibility. The positive association between the two is not explained only by students' general familiarity with Confucian moral ideas. Rather, the relationship appears to work partly through how students organize their values and how they judge morally relevant situations. In this sense, value orientation and moral judgment help explain why cultural-moral cognition is associated with a stronger sense of social responsibility.

Value orientation represents one route through which this process may occur. Students who better understand Pre-Qin Confucian moral education are more likely to recognize values

such as fairness, responsibility, public interest, and collective well-being as personally meaningful. This is consistent with the moral logic of Confucian education, which does not treat self-cultivation as a purely private matter. Instead, self-cultivation is understood in relation to one's obligations within social relationships. When students internalize this value logic, responsibility is more likely to be viewed not as an external requirement, but as part of a broader moral orientation toward others and society. Value orientation therefore serves as a channel through which Confucian moral cognition becomes connected with social responsibility.

This path is important because social responsibility usually involves a choice among values. In university life, students may encounter situations in which personal convenience, individual benefit, collective interest, and public norms do not fully align. In such situations, whether students regard public interest and responsibility as important will influence how they understand and respond to these tensions. From this perspective, value orientation does not simply reflect whether students agree with certain moral ideas, it reflects the value standards they are likely to rely on when making judgments about responsibility.

Moral judgment provides another pathway. Social responsibility requires more than endorsing positive values in general terms; it also depends on whether students can recognize moral obligations and evaluate appropriate courses of action in concrete situations. Pre-Qin Confucian moral education gives particular weight to the distinction between righteousness and personal gain, encouraging individuals to make choices according to moral principles rather than immediate self-interest. Students with a stronger understanding of this ethical tradition may therefore be better prepared to interpret public affairs, interpersonal tensions, or social issues through a responsibility-oriented lens. This interpretation is in line with research showing that ethics-related education can support the development of moral reasoning and judgment (Poje & Zaman Groff, 2023).

Compared with value orientation, moral judgment is more closely tied to specific situations and decisions. A student may recognize responsibility as an important value, but still needs to judge what responsible action means in a particular context. For example, responsibility may involve balancing personal rights with collective needs, distinguishing genuine public concern from formal compliance, or evaluating the consequences of different choices for others. This situational dimension may help explain why moral judgment showed a numerically larger indirect effect in the present study. It suggests that the ability to interpret and evaluate concrete moral situations may be especially relevant when Confucian moral cognition is linked to students' social responsibility.

The two mediating paths also point to different aspects of social responsibility formation. Value orientation is concerned with what students regard as worth pursuing; moral judgment is concerned with how they evaluate what should be done in particular circumstances. The former provides a relatively stable value basis, whereas the latter connects those values with situational decisions. In the present study, the indirect effect through moral judgment was numerically larger than that through value orientation. This pattern suggests that the ability to interpret and evaluate concrete moral situations may be especially relevant when Confucian moral cognition is linked to students' social responsibility.

The relatively high correlations among value orientation, moral judgment, and social responsibility should also be understood in light of the Confucian ethical context. In this tradition, responsibility is not separated from value commitment or moral evaluation. It is grounded in how individuals understand the relationship between self-interest, righteousness, and obligations to others. The close statistical associations among these constructs therefore reflect, at least in part, their conceptual proximity within the moral framework examined in this study.

Implications and Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between Pre-Qin Confucian moral education cognition and university students' social responsibility, with value orientation and moral judgment considered as parallel mediators. The findings show that students with stronger cognition of Pre-Qin Confucian moral education tend to report higher levels of social responsibility, and that this relationship is partly explained by value orientation and moral judgment. This indicates that traditional cultural cognition becomes educationally meaningful not only through students' knowledge of Confucian concepts, but also through its connection with their value formation and moral reasoning.

The study contributes to the literature by providing empirical evidence for the link between Confucian moral education and university students' social responsibility. More specifically, it identifies value orientation and moral judgment as two psychological pathways through which Pre-Qin Confucian moral education cognition is associated with social responsibility. In this sense, the findings offer a more detailed explanation of how traditional cultural education may support students' moral and civic development.

The findings also have practical implications for higher education. Traditional cultural education should not be limited to the transmission of classical knowledge; it should also help students connect Confucian moral ideas with contemporary social responsibilities. Teaching strategies such as case discussion, social practice, and moral dilemma analysis may be useful for strengthening students' value reflection and moral judgment.

In addition, the stronger role of moral judgment suggests that universities should pay attention not only to whether students accept traditional values, but also to whether they can use these values to interpret real moral issues. Courses and educational activities may therefore include more scenario-based discussions, reflective writing, community engagement, and analysis of responsibility-related conflicts. Such practices can help students connect traditional moral resources with the practical demands of contemporary social life.

Several limitations remain. The cross-sectional design limits causal inference, and the sample was drawn from universities in Shandong Province, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Future research could use longitudinal or multi-regional designs to further examine how traditional cultural cognition shapes students' social responsibility in different educational contexts.

References

Godonoga, A., & Sporn, B. (2023). The conceptualisation of socially responsible universities in higher education research: A systematic literature review. *Studies in Higher Education, 48*(3), 445–459. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2022.2145462

Hudson, T. D., & Brandenberger, J. (2023). College students' moral and prosocial responsibility: Associations with community engagement experiences. *Journal of Experiential Education, 46*(1), 52–79. https://doi.org/10.1177/10538259221090599

Killen, M., & Dahl, A. (2021). Moral reasoning enables developmental and societal change. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 16*(6), 1209–1225. https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691620964076

Takamatsu, R., Park, J., & Matsuo, A. (2024). Morality through the lens of Confucian heritage countries: Collective self variations and moral worldviews. *Frontiers in Psychology, 15*, 1454425. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1454425

Tian, X., Tang, Y., & Li, Y. (2025). The long-term impact of moral education on college students' psychological well-being: A longitudinal study revealing multidimensional synergistic mechanisms. *Behavioral Sciences, 15*(2), 217. https://doi.org/10.3390/bs15020217

Wang, C. (2023). Resurgence of Confucian education in contemporary China: Parental involvement, moral anxiety and the pedagogy of memorisation. *Journal of Moral Education, 52*(3), 325–342. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2022.2066639

Jing, S., & Doorn, N. (2020). Engineers' Moral Responsibility: A Confucian Perspective. *Science and engineering ethics, 26*(1), 233–253. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11948-019-00093-4.

Poje, T., & Zaman Groff, M. (2023). Ways ethics education toolkit impacts moral judgment of accounting students. *Accounting Research Journal, 36*(2/3), 251–267. https://doi.org/10.1108/ARJ-10-2022-0258

Wang, F. (2004). Confucian thinking in traditional moral education: Key ideas and fundamental features. *Journal of Moral Education, 33*(4), 429–447. https://doi.org/10.1080/0305724042000327984

Zhang, L. (2022). Chinese traditional culture education: Implementing the child's position and perspective in the elementary school textbook Morality and Law. *ECNU Review of Education, 5*(4), 590–610. https://doi.org/10.1177/2096531121990509