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Reframing Moral Education Governance in China: Value Co-Creation in Lishui's Ecological Civilization Practice

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Abstract

Moral education in China is usually treated as a curricular and pedagogical issue. This paper argues that it should also be understood as a problem of institutional innovation. The reason is that moral education increasingly depends on coordination across schools, families, communities, and wider public settings rather than on school-based instruction alone. Drawing on a value co-creation perspective, the paper develops a conceptual framework to explain how such coordination is organized. In the Chinese context, this shift becomes especially visible when moral education is examined in relation to ecological civilization. Using Lishui's ecological civilization practice as an illustrative field, the paper argues that the institutionalization of the Two Mountains concept, the ecological product value realization mechanism, and the cultivation of a city-wide ecological ethos together create a governance configuration in which moral education is embedded in cross-actor collaboration. The analysis identifies three mechanisms: collaborative goal formation, coordinated implementation, and feedback-based adjustment. The paper contributes by showing that moral education can be reinterpreted as a field of institutional innovation and that place-based ecological civilization practice can generate new pathways for value co-creation, governance adaptation, and public value formation.

Keywords

Ecological civilization; Institutional innovation; Lishui; Moral education; Public value; Value co-creation

1. Introduction

Moral education has become urgent again because the social conditions that support young people's moral formation are under growing pressure. Recent research shows rising concern over adolescent well-being, especially in relation to mental health, belonging, and social connection (Baird et al., 2025; Brown et al., 2025; Dong et al., 2025; Holt-Lunstad, 2024). At the same time, scholarship on moral education in China has already moved beyond narrow classroom concerns toward broader questions of civic-moral formation and

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educational response to social change (Chen et al., 2023; Shi et al., 2023). Under these conditions, the significance of moral education lies not only in value transmission, but also in whether education can sustain social recognition, shared meaning, and more stable conditions of well-being (Brown et al., 2025; Shi et al., 2023).

Existing research has not yet fully explained how this task should be organized once the social basis of moral education extends beyond the school. Studies of moral education reform in China show continuing progress in curriculum restructuring and policy guidance, which indicates that moral education has been strengthened along a vertical institutional line (Tang & Wang, 2021). Yet schools still remain the formal centre of curriculum organization and implementation (Ye, 2022; Zhu, 2006), while survey evidence also points to continuing constraints in evaluation systems, implementation guarantees, and the mobilization of regional cultural resources (Zhou & Gao, 2023). More recent studies, however, suggest that educational formation increasingly depends on school–family–community collaboration and wider support networks (Cheng, 2024; Human et al., 2024; Ying & Jackson, 2025). The unresolved issue, therefore, is how responsibility, coordination, and alignment can be sustained across multiple settings.

This is why a governance perspective becomes necessary. Collaborative governance research explains how interdependent actors address complex public problems through structured interaction rather than unilateral control (Emerson et al., 2012; Klijn & Koppenjan, 2016). Research on co-creation further shows that public value is generated through interaction, resource integration, and ongoing adjustment among multiple participants (Ansell & Torfing, 2021; Osborne et al., 2021; Vargo et al., 2008). In the Chinese context, this issue becomes especially visible under ecological civilization, which functions as a broader normative and governance framework rather than as environmental discourse alone (Geall & Ely, 2018; Westman & Huang, 2022; Xue et al., 2023). Against this background, this paper reframes moral education as a governance problem and uses Lishui's ecological civilization practice as an illustrative field for examining why moral education can no longer be borne by schools alone (Dai & Liu, 2024; Gao et al., 2020; Liu & Dai, 2024).



Figure 1.1 Problem framing of moral education governance

Lishui provides a particularly compelling setting for this study. Official planning documents show that the city has progressively advanced a four-level GEP accounting framework covering the municipal, county, township, and village levels, and that its GEP increased from RMB 502.446 billion in 2018 to RMB 531.443 billion in 2019. National-level assessments further indicate that, between 2017 and 2021, both GDP and GEP in Lishui sustained relatively rapid growth, with average annual growth rates of 7.0% and 4.5%, respectively. More recent official materials also show that Lishui has continued to institutionalize GEP through its integration into planning, decision-making, projects, transactions, monitoring, and assessment. Taken together, these developments position Lishui not merely as a local ecological case, but as a distinctive institutional field in which ecological governance, value realization, and moral-educational coordination can be observed in combination.

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2.Literature Review and Theoretical Background

This section examines the theoretical foundations of moral education governance. Its purpose is to show that, although existing scholarship has generated important insights through studies of moral education reform, institutional development, and value co-creation, it has not yet fully explained why moral education remains largely organized within school-centred settings, or how schools, families, communities, and public practice settings may jointly assume moral educational responsibility under conditions of weakened social connection and growing pressures on well-being. Against this background, the discussion begins with the value co-creation perspective, then turns to the limits of school-centred governance, before reconsidering moral education as a governance issue and, finally, examining the practical developments that make a broader analytical framework increasingly necessary.

2.1 Moral Education, Human Well-being, and Value Co-creation

Moral education should not be reduced to the transmission of norms, curriculum implementation, or student behavior management. In a broader sense, it concerns how socially valued ways of living are interpreted, sustained, and enacted across everyday life rather than within schooling alone (Shi et al., 2023; Tang & Wang, 2021). In the Lishui ecological-civilization context, this question is inseparable from human well-being, because local theoretical work argues that ecological civilization is ultimately oriented toward people's aspirations for a green ecology and a good living environment, and that ecosystem services should be understood in terms of their contribution to human well-being rather than only as resource supply or economic output (Dai & Liu, 2024; Liu & Dai, 2024). Recent research further shows that well-being is shaped not only by material conditions but also by social connection, belonging, supportive relationships, and opportunities for meaningful participation, all of which are increasingly recognized as central to healthy development and human flourishing (Baird et al., 2025; Brown et al., 2025; Holt-Lunstad, 2024). From this perspective, moral education acquires practical significance insofar as it is tied to the social and ecological conditions that support responsible action and human flourishing.

This broader understanding helps reposition moral education beyond a narrow school-based logic. Reviews of civic-moral education research in China indicate that the field has increasingly expanded from curriculum content and classroom instruction toward wider concerns with social climate, civic participation, cultural resources, and the cultivation of relational and public capacities (Chen et al., 2023; Shi et al., 2023). At the same time, survey-based research on the implementation of moral education in primary and secondary schools shows that, despite overall progress, major constraints remain in evaluation systems, institutional guarantees, top-level design, and the effective mobilization of regional cultural resources (Zhou & Gao, 2023). Emerging work on school–community–family collaboration in China also suggests that educational formation increasingly depends on cross-setting interaction and socially embedded learning processes rather than on isolated school action alone (Cheng, 2024). These findings indicate that moral education is already tied to wider conditions of social life and public well-being, even if this relationship has not yet been fully theorized.

Once moral education is understood in relation to human well-being, its purposes can no longer be determined by schools alone. Value co-creation becomes important here because it rejects the assumption that val-

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ue is unilaterally delivered by a single institution and instead understands value as emerging through interaction, resource integration, and contextual use among multiple actors (Vargo et al., 2008; Osborne et al., 2021). In public governance research, co-creation is further understood as a process in which diverse actors jointly shape public purposes, contribute different resources, and negotiate workable orientations under conditions of interdependence and complexity (Ansell & Torfing, 2021; Bentzen, 2022). Earlier work on co-production likewise shows that public outcomes are not generated by professional organizations alone but are shaped through the constitutive involvement of users, communities, and other participating actors (Bovaird, 2007; Voorberg et al., 2015). For this reason, moral education is better understood as a socially shaped, relationally sustained, and practically realized process of value formation across schools, families, communities, and wider public contexts.

2.2 Deficiencies of school-centered governance models in moral education

Existing studies show that moral education reform in China has made substantial progress in curriculum restructuring, stage articulation, and institutional consolidation, especially through stronger connections among national guidance, local adaptation, and school practice (Tang & Wang, 2021). In organizational terms, however, this progress has mainly strengthened moral education along a vertical institutional line rather than reorganized it across social settings. Schools still occupy the formal centre of curriculum organization, textbook use, implementation routines, and evaluation arrangements, while families and communities are more often positioned as supportive or supplementary actors than as constitutive participants (Ye, 2022; Zhu, 2006). The first problem of the school-centred model, therefore, is not that it neglects moral education, but that it continues to define the school as the primary unit through which moral education is organized.

This school-centred definition becomes increasingly problematic once the actual basis of moral formation is considered. Recent research suggests that educational formation is shaped not only within schools but also across school life, family relations, local communities, and wider support environments. Cheng (2024) shows that school–community–family collaboration can generate meaningful forms of intergenerational learning. Brown et al. (2025) further argue that belonging and well-being are relationally constituted across school life, social life, local community, and wider society. Human et al. (2024) likewise show that school-based support becomes more effective when linked to broader community service networks. The second problem of the school-centred model, therefore, is that it narrows the actual relational basis of moral education by treating it as if it were generated mainly inside the school.

In the Chinese context, this narrowing has already produced visible governance tension. Although moral education in primary and secondary schools has generally progressed, important constraints remain in evaluation systems, implementation guarantees, top-level design, and the effective mobilization of regional cultural resources (Zhou & Gao, 2023). At the same time, policy expectations have widened, and schools are increasingly asked to respond not only to value education in the narrow sense but also to broader issues of ecological civilization, mental health, belonging, and developmental support. The third problem of the school-centred model, then, is that it places expanding social tasks onto an organizational structure that remains largely internal to the school. What is at stake is no longer a minor implementation weakness, but a structural mismatch between the widened social basis of moral education and the narrow responsibility structure through which it is still governed. For this reason, the issue is not whether schools should remain central, but whether

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school-centred governance is still sufficient once moral education is clearly shaped across multiple relational and institutional settings.

2.3 Moral education as a governance problem rather than a pedagogical issue

These limits suggest that moral education cannot be adequately understood through pedagogical categories alone. Curriculum design, teaching method, and classroom implementation remain important, but they do not fully explain how moral purposes are coordinated across actors, settings, and institutional boundaries. A governance perspective becomes relevant precisely because it shifts attention to actor configuration, responsibility allocation, and the conditions under which shared educational purposes can be sustained. In this regard, collaborative governance scholarship is instructive, as it explains how interdependent actors engage across boundaries, develop shared motivation, and build capacity for joint action in response to complex public problems (Emerson et al., 2012).

This point becomes clearer when one considers concrete educational situations. Ye (2022), in examining textbook-teacher interaction under the "One Guideline, One Textbook" policy, shows that moral education is not merely a matter of classroom delivery; it also involves the allocation of interpretive authority among curriculum standards, textbook design, and teachers' professional judgement. Cheng (2024) similarly indicates that when school, community, and family collaborate in intergenerational learning, the question is no longer simply how something should be taught, but how different actors share educational responsibilities. Human et al. (2024) provide a comparable insight from school-based psychosocial support: once educational concerns become linked to belonging, support, and relational repair, schools can no longer function as the only effective centre of action. These examples suggest that the significance of governance lies not in displacing pedagogy, but in recognizing that pedagogy itself is embedded within wider institutional and relational arrangements.

Even so, governance concepts cannot simply be imported into moral education without adjustment. Moral education is a strongly value-laden field, and questions of legitimacy, normativity, and moral purpose are central to its organization. Moreover, when governance studies enter education, the focus often falls on policy networks, institutional steering, or system reform rather than on moral formation itself as a cross-field process (Hooge et al., 2022). What therefore remains insufficiently explained is not simply whether governance concepts are relevant to education, but how they can be adapted to explain moral education under conditions of value plurality, widening social embeddedness, and persistent school-centred institutional design.

2.4 Reorganizing moral education practice under ecological civilization

Recent developments in Chinese schools suggest that what is entering moral education is not simply an ecological theme, but a broader ecological-civilization governance architecture. Local interpretive work based on Liu and Dai presents Xi Jinping Thought on Ecological Civilization not as a single environmental agenda, but as a systematic framework organized around development goals, major tasks, key ideas, system-building, and guiding principles (Liu & Dai, 2024). Educational research likewise shows that ecological civilization education cannot be reduced to environmental knowledge delivery alone, because it also concerns responsibility formation, practical learning, and broader educational orientation (Wu & Liu, 2021; Zhou, 2024). In this sense, the practical issue for schools is no longer whether ecological content should be added, but how

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moral education should be reorganized under a wider normative order.

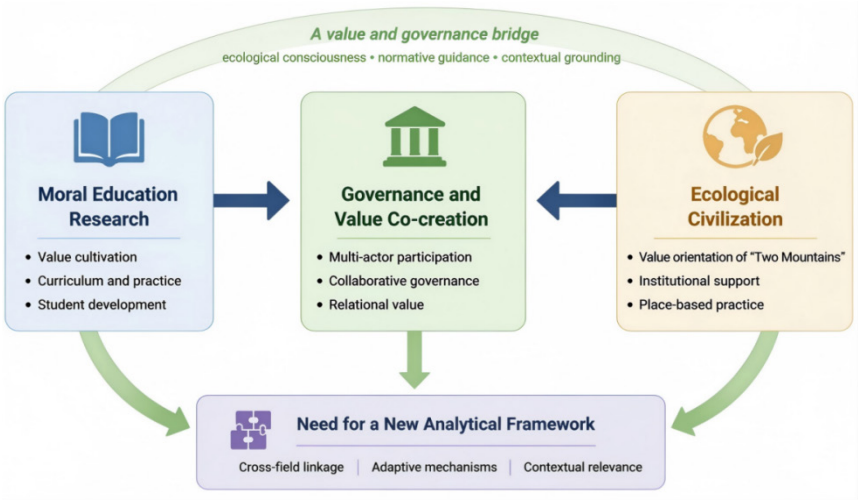


Figure2.1 Ecological Civilization as a Bridging Framework for Moral Education Governance

Note. This figure illustrates how ecological civilization connects moral education research with governance and value co-creation, highlighting the need for a new analytical framework.
Source: Created by the author.

This normative architecture is being translated into an observable institutional trajectory. At the national level, ecological civilization education has been incorporated into the formal moral education agenda. At the provincial level, Zhejiang has supported it through ecological civilization education bases. At the municipal level, Lishui has further linked this agenda to research-practice bases, social-practice bases, and emerging local teaching norms (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2017; Zhejiang Provincial Department of Environmental Protection, 2011; Lishui Municipal Education Bureau & Lishui Municipal Bureau of Culture, Radio, Television, Tourism and Sports, 2022; Lishui Municipal Education Bureau, 2023, 2025). As shown in Table 2.1, the progression is not random. It follows a clear sequence from policy incorporation, to platform building, and then to local standardization.

Table 2.1 Institutional cascading of ecological-civilization-based moral education from national to local levels

Level	Document	Year	Institutional significance
National	Guidelines for Moral Education in Primary and Secondary Schools	2017	Formally incorporates ecological civilization education into the school moral education agenda.
Provincial (Zhejiang)	Guiding Opinions on the Construction of Ecological Civilization Education Bases	2011	Translates ecological civilization into educational infrastructure and learning bases.
Municipal (Lishui)	Notice on announcing the 2022 research-practice education bases for primary and secondary school students in Lishui	2022	Connects school moral education with place-based ecological and social learning sites.
Municipal (Lishui)	Notice on announcing the sixth batch of social practice bases for primary and secondary school students in Lishui	2023	Expands the linkage between schools and wider public practice settings.

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Level	Document	Year	Institutional significance
Municipal (Lishui)	Public consultation notice on the local standard Ecological Civilization Education Teaching Guidelines (draft for comments)	2025	Indicates movement toward localized teaching norms and institutional stabilization.

Read together, Figure 2.1 and Table 2.1 indicate that ecological civilization is reshaping moral education through normative framing, institutional cascading, and coordinated advancement. This also helps explain why the role of schools is changing. Schools are no longer positioned only as sites of value transmission, but increasingly as organizational nodes connecting curriculum, place-based platforms, and wider actors across the local governance system. Lishui is analytically significant in this respect because it condenses value narrative, ecological policy instruments, and educational platforms into the same observable field (Liu & Dai, 2024; Gao et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2024; Zhu et al., 2024). What recent practice reveals, therefore, is not the insertion of ecological themes into moral education, but the reorganization of moral education through an ecological-civilization governance architecture.

3. Analytical Framework and Governance Mechanisms

Building on the preceding discussion, this chapter develops an analytical framework for examining moral education governance through a value co-creation perspective. Treating moral education as a cross-actor and cross-setting governance process, the chapter proceeds in three steps. It first defines the basic structure of the analytical framework. It then distinguishes the structural differences between a school-centred model and a value co-creation-oriented model. Finally, it specifies three core governance mechanisms: collaborative goal formation, coordinated implementation, and feedback-based adjustment.

3.1 An analytical framework for moral education governance

The analytical framework proposed in this study is grounded in three interrelated bodies of literature: value co-creation, collaborative governance, and governance networks. From a value co-creation perspective, value is not unilaterally delivered by a single institution, but generated through interaction, resource integration, and contextual use among multiple actors (Vargo et al., 2008; Osborne et al., 2021). From a collaborative governance perspective, the central issue in cross-boundary public problems is not unilateral control, but how interdependent actors are organized for coordination, deliberation, and joint action (Emerson et al., 2012; Ansell & Torfing, 2021). Governance network scholarship further shows that such coordination unfolds under conditions of cognitive, strategic, and institutional complexity, requiring forms of steering that go beyond hierarchical command (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2016). Taken together, these perspectives suggest that moral education should not be treated simply as a school-led process of value transmission, but as a relational governance process unfolding across multiple actors and settings.

Based on these theoretical foundations, this study conceptualizes moral education governance through three interrelated dimensions. The first is governance actors, referring to the participants involved in moral education governance and their respective institutional positions, including schools, families, communities, ecological practice bases, and other public spaces. The second is governance mechanisms, referring to the key

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processes through which interaction is organized, responsibilities are linked, and cross-setting coordination is sustained. The third is governance coherence, referring not to a measurable performance outcome, but to the extent to which moral education arrangements remain aligned rather than fragmented across different settings. In this sense, the framework does not treat governance models as static institutional blueprints. Rather, it treats them as different ways of organizing interaction, distributing responsibility, and maintaining adaptability in a field where no single actor can fully secure moral development alone.

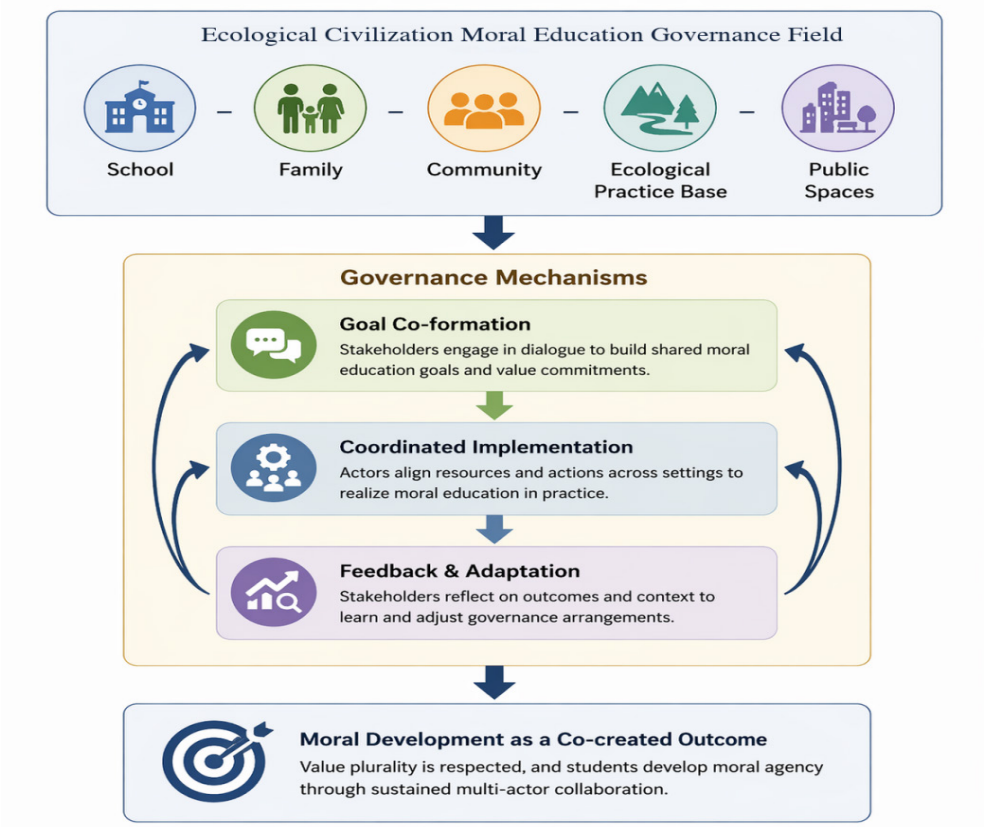


Figure3.1. A Value Co-creation Mechanism for Moral Education Governance

Source: Developed by the author.

As shown in Figure 3.1, moral education governance is analysed here as a process in which multiple actors are connected through three linked mechanisms. The figure does not replace the textual argument. Rather, it visualizes the internal logic of the framework: actors are linked through governance mechanisms, and moral development is treated as a co-created outcome rather than as a product delivered by schools alone.

3.2 From a school-centred model to a value co-creation-oriented model

The distinction between a school-centred model and a value co-creation-oriented model lies not simply in the number of actors involved, but in the underlying logic through which moral education is organized. In a school-centred model, schools define objectives, organize implementation, and evaluate outcomes, while other actors are positioned primarily as supporters of a process whose authority remains concentrated within the school. Even where participation is formally acknowledged, the governance logic remains largely delivery-oriented and vertically structured (Bovaird, 2007; Voorberg et al., 2015). Such arrangements may provide organizational clarity, but they also tend to weaken cross-setting coordination and limit responsiveness to plu-

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ral and changing value expectations.

By contrast, a value co-creation-oriented model starts from the premise that moral education is constituted through sustained interaction among multiple actors whose roles, expectations, and resources are interdependent. In this model, schools remain important coordinating institutions, but moral education is no longer understood as an outcome produced and transmitted by schools alone. Rather, it is organized through structured interaction, negotiated orientation, and differentiated but shared responsibility across settings (Ansell & Torfing, 2021; Nabatchi et al., 2017; Osborne et al., 2021). In this sense, moral development is treated not as a unidirectional output, but as a co-created accomplishment emerging from linked practices across school, family, community, and public life (Vargo et al., 2008).

Table 3.1 summarizes the structural differences between the two governance models. The table is analytical rather than evaluative. Its function is to clarify how different governance logics shape actor roles, coordination modes, value processes, adaptability, and accountability, and thereby generate different conditions for moral education governance.

Table 3.1 Structural comparison of school-centered and value co-creation-oriented governance models in school moral education

Dimension	School-Centered Governance Models	Value Co-creation–Oriented Governance Models
Actor roles	School as dominant authority; other participants in supportive roles	Multiple actors function as co-governors and co-creators of value
Governance logic	Hierarchical control and institutional compliance	Interaction, negotiation, and shared responsibility
Coordination mode	Fragmented and unilateral implementation	Cross-boundary coordination across school, family, and community
Value process	Predetermined and instruction-based	Emergent, relational, and co-constructed
Adaptability	Low responsiveness; limited adjustment mechanisms	Continuous feedback and adaptive learning
Accountability	Outcome-focused school responsibility	Distributed accountability and shared evaluation

Source: Developed by the author

Taken together, the comparison shows that the shift from a school-centred model to a value co-creation-oriented model is not merely a shift from one actor to many actors. It is a shift from hierarchical control to organized interaction, from unilateral implementation to cross-setting coordination, and from concentrated responsibility to distributed but connected accountability. On this basis, the following section specifies the three governance mechanisms through which value co-creation is organized in moral education governance.

3.3 Core governance mechanisms of value co-creation

A value co-creation-oriented model is organized through three interrelated mechanisms: collaborative goal formation, coordinated implementation, and feedback-based adjustment. These mechanisms correspond respectively to the formation of a shared direction, the linkage of cross-setting practice, and the capacity for ongoing learning and adjustment (Emerson et al., 2012; Ansell & Torfing, 2021; Bentzen, 2022).

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3.3.1 Collaborative goal formation

Collaborative goal formation refers to the process through which schools, families, students, communities, and other relevant actors develop a sufficiently shared understanding of the purposes, priorities, and boundaries of moral education. Because moral education is highly value-laden, actors often attach different meanings to moral formation, cultural identity, civic responsibility, or ecological awareness. Governance therefore cannot begin with unilateral prescription alone, but must involve communication, interpretation, and negotiation at the level of goals (Emerson et al., 2012; Ansell & Torfing, 2021; Sørensen & Torfing, 2018).

The importance of this mechanism lies in its capacity to reduce interpretive fragmentation across settings. Without some degree of shared orientation, actors may formally endorse moral education while enacting it according to incompatible assumptions. Collaborative goal formation does not require complete consensus. Rather, it helps establish a workable common reference point through which actors can coordinate across settings. This is especially important where moral education extends beyond classroom instruction and becomes embedded in school–family–community interaction (Sørensen & Torfing, 2018; Cheng, 2024).

3.3.2 Coordinated implementation

Coordinated implementation refers to the process through which shared orientations are translated into linked practices across school, family, community, ecological practice bases, and other public settings. If collaborative goal formation addresses how direction is established, coordinated implementation addresses how this direction enters practice. Once moral education is understood as a cross-setting process, implementation can no longer be treated as a school-internal matter alone, but must be understood as a problem of cross-boundary linkage and sustained coordination (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2016; Hooge et al., 2022).

From a governance network perspective, coordination is not equivalent to centralized command. Rather, it involves the organization of interdependence under conditions of complexity (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2016). In education, this often takes the form of higher-order steering rather than full control, which is why meta-governance is analytically useful here (Hooge et al., 2022). Chinese research also shows that moral education implementation is not a mechanical transmission of policy intent, but is mediated by standards, textbooks, teachers' judgement, and wider collaborative relations. Schools' responses within governance networks are likewise shaped by capacity, leadership, and relations with external actors (Ye, 2022; Tao, 2022; Ying & Jackson, 2025).

3.3.3 Feedback-based adjustment

Feedback-based adjustment refers to the process through which governance actors revise existing goals, responsibility configurations, and coordinating practices in light of experience and feedback generated during implementation. Because moral education governance unfolds under conditions of value plurality, institutional pressure, uneven capacities, and social change, it cannot rely on one-time design alone. It must remain capable of learning, correction, and recalibration. Feedback, in this sense, is not merely ex post evaluation or compliance checking, but a process through which practical experience is transformed into governance knowledge (Bentzen, 2022; Centeno, 2025).

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The importance of this mechanism lies in its capacity to move governance from one-off arrangement to sustained adjustment. Continuous involvement is a condition of co-creation, while knowledge circulation determines whether feedback can be re-entered into governance as institutional learning (Bentzen, 2022; Centeno, 2025). In moral education, this means that actors must be able not only to implement existing arrangements, but also to revise goals, responsibilities, and coordination in response to emerging problems and contextual variation. Only when such adjustment becomes embedded in routine operation can moral education governance avoid remaining project-based, symbolic, or short-lived (Mortensen et al., 2025; Osborne et al., 2021).

3.4 Integrating the three mechanisms

Taken together, collaborative goal formation, coordinated implementation, and feedback-based adjustment constitute a recursive governance logic. The first establishes a shared direction, the second translates that direction into cross-setting practice, and the third enables learning and recalibration. Although analytically distinguishable, the three mechanisms are operationally interdependent: goals shape coordination, coordination generates feedback, and feedback in turn reshapes both goals and implementation. This recursive understanding is consistent with collaborative governance research, which emphasizes iterative interaction rather than linear sequencing (Emerson et al., 2012).

This integrated view also clarifies the significance of the framework. A value co-creation-oriented model does not simply multiply the number of participants in moral education governance; rather, it redefines moral education as a relational, cross-setting, and adaptive process in which value is sustained through interaction, coordination, and adjustment across settings (Vargo et al., 2008; Osborne et al., 2021).

At the same time, such arrangements should not be romanticized. Collaboration may also involve asymmetries of power, intensified coordination demands, and continuing negotiation over responsibility and direction, especially when multiple actors are drawn into the same governance process (Livingstone, 2025; Mortensen et al., 2025).

4.Moral Education Governance under Ecological Civilization: Lishui as an Illustrative Place-Based Field

4.1 Ecological civilization as a governance context for moral education

Ecological civilization is not an additional topic attached to moral education, but a governance context that reshapes educational purposes, practical organization, and actor relations. Existing studies show that ecological civilization has moved beyond environmental policy language and has become a central governance narrative in contemporary China, shaping how sustainability, public responsibility, and institutional change are understood and organized (Geall & Ely, 2018; Westman & Huang, 2022; Xue et al., 2023). In the education sector, this shift is equally visible. Ecological civilization education cannot be reduced to the transmission of environmental knowledge alone; rather, it increasingly functions as a broader educational and institutional orientation (Wu & Liu, 2021; Zhou, 2024).

This shift has also acquired explicit policy status. The Guidelines for Moral Education in Primary and Sec-

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ondary Schools formally include ecological civilization education within the content of school moral education, while Zhejiang has promoted the institutionalization of ecological education through the construction of ecological civilization education bases (Ministry of Education, 2017; Zhejiang Provincial Department of Environmental Protection, 2011). Under these conditions, ecological civilization matters not because it simply adds a new educational theme, but because it makes moral education more clearly visible as a cross-field governance process extending across schools, families, communities, and public practice settings.

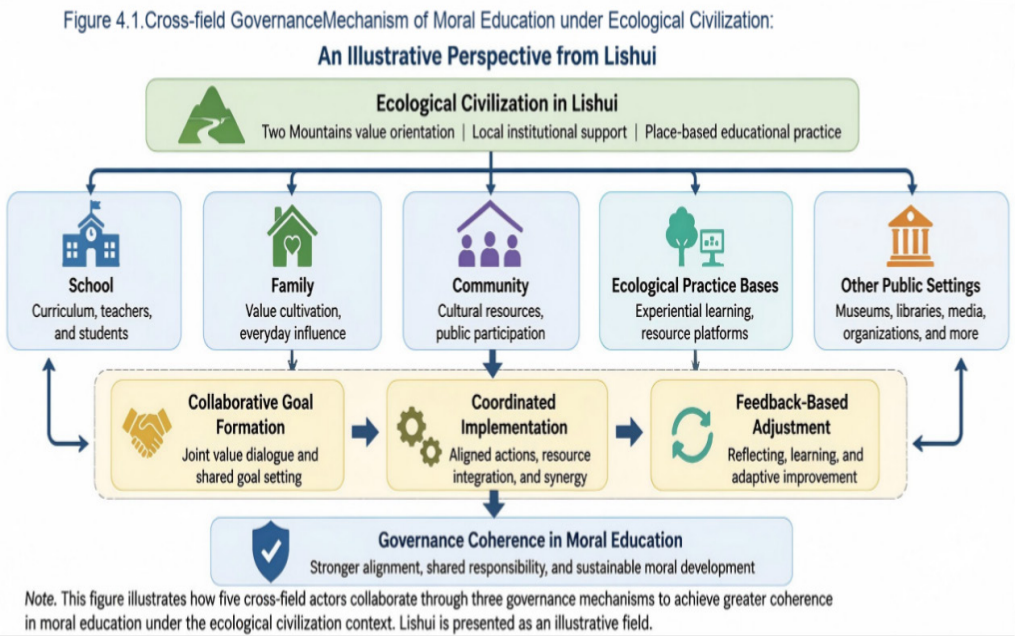
At the practical level, ecological civilization becomes especially important because it naturally requires coordination beyond the school. Compared with relatively closed classroom-based moral education, ecological civilization education depends more heavily on real-world settings, local resources, public participation, and cross-setting learning. In this sense, moral education is no longer confined to value transmission within schools, but increasingly depends on connections across schools, families, communities, and public settings. Put differently, ecological civilization makes moral education more visible as a cross-actor and cross-setting governance process. In doing so, it not only expands the substantive content of moral education, but also changes the way moral education is organized and understood (Zhang & Fu, 2023).

4.2 Lishui as a place-based governance field with analytical significance

Lishui is analytically significant not only because of its outstanding ecological resources, but also because it has developed a relatively clear linkage among value orientation, institutional instruments, and educational practice platforms. Existing studies show that Lishui has explored distinctive local pathways in ecological product value realization, the marketization of ecological governance, and green transformation (Gao et al., 2020; Ouyang et al., 2020). Research related to the Two Mountains concept further indicates that this value orientation has not remained at the level of policy rhetoric; rather, it has been continuously embedded in local public governance through Ecological Civilization Day activities, green development platforms, and the cultivation of a broader ecological ethos (Dai & Liu, 2024; Liu & Dai, 2024). In this sense, Lishui is not merely an empirical case, but a place-based governance field in which it is possible to observe more directly how value discourse enters institutional arrangements and public practice.

A further source of Lishui's significance lies in the fact that ecological civilization governance has become substantively articulated with educational platforms and public learning spaces. Official notices on research-practice education bases and social-practice bases show that the local education system has already connected schooling with wider forms of social practice through institutionalized platforms, while the consultation draft of the Ecological Civilization Education Teaching Guidelines further suggests that Lishui is attempting to move ecological civilization education from scattered project-based activities toward relatively stable teaching norms (Lishui Municipal Education Bureau & Lishui Municipal Bureau of Culture, Radio, Television, Tourism and Sports, 2022; Lishui Municipal Education Bureau, 2023, 2025). Place-based resources such as Baishanzu further link ecological experience, public learning, and local cultural meaning. Accordingly, Lishui matters not because it has accumulated a large number of local practices, but because it makes the convergence of value discourse, ecological governance, and moral educational practice more clearly visible.

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Source: Developed by the author based on Dai and Liu (2024), Gao et al. (2020), Ouyang et al. (2020), and Liu and Dai (2024).

4.3 Moral Education Governance under Lishui's Ecological Civilization Context

Lishui makes the three governance mechanisms more visible in practice. The Two Mountains concept has strengthened collaborative goal formation by linking moral education to ecological responsibility, public value, and local identity (Dai & Liu, 2024; Liu & Dai, 2024). Coordinated implementation has become more feasible because research-practice bases, social-practice bases, and ecological education platforms connect school curricula with local resources and wider social practice (Lishui Municipal Education Bureau & Lishui Municipal Bureau of Culture, Radio, Television, Tourism and Sports, 2022; Lishui Municipal Education Bureau, 2023). Feedback-based adjustment is also more visible, as local authorities are moving from dispersed activities toward more stable teaching guidance, while multi-scale GEP research shows an increasing reliance on monitoring, recalibration, and fine-grained decision support (Lishui Municipal Education Bureau, 2025; Zhu et al., 2024). In this sense, Lishui matters not because it represents all Chinese experience, but because it makes the internal logic of moral education governance easier to observe.

This also carries broader theoretical significance. It shows that moral education governance cannot be understood as an issue internal to schools alone, but must be situated within wider normative environments, institutional layers, and place-based practices (Geall & Ely, 2018; Xue et al., 2023). It further suggests that value co-creation-oriented governance in moral education need not rely on abstract participation alone, but can draw strength from existing value narratives, institutional platforms, and local public practices (Wu & Liu, 2021; Zhou, 2024). China's ecological civilization context is therefore significant not because it offers a universally replicable model, but because it shows how value co-creation-oriented governance can gain stronger institutional grounding and more concrete practical support when moral education is linked to civilizational narratives, local governance, and public practice (Zhang & Fu, 2023; Huang et al., 2024).

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5. Discussion and Implications

This study argues that the renewal of moral education governance has become urgent. Under conditions of value plurality, weakened social connection, rising concerns about youth mental health and wellbeing, and the growing mismatch between school-centred arrangements and socially embedded moral formation, moral education can no longer be adequately organized through school authority alone. Recent evidence on the growing burden of mental disorders among children and adolescents in China further underscores the urgency of reconnecting moral education with broader conditions of wellbeing, support, and social belonging (Dong et al., 2025).Ecological civilization makes this urgency more visible, because it places moral education in direct relation to public responsibility, social cooperation, and the human–nature relationship. In this respect, moral education governance is no longer only about how schools transmit values, but about how different actors, institutions, and practice settings jointly sustain the conditions of human flourishing.

5.1 Theoretical implications

The first implication is that moral education should be understood as a governance problem rather than primarily as a matter of instruction, curriculum, or classroom management. The central issue is not only what is taught, but how moral purposes are aligned and sustained across schools, families, communities, and public practice settings.

The second implication is that value co-creation offers a stronger conceptualization of moral education governance. Its contribution lies not in celebrating participation in general, but in clarifying three mechanisms through which moral education is organized: collaborative goal formation, coordinated implementation, and feedback-based adjustment. This mechanism-based account shows that co-creation is less about adding actors than about organizing responsibility, practice, and revision across settings.

The third implication concerns the significance of ecological civilization. In this study, ecological civilization is not treated as a decorative theme, but as a broader normative and policy framework that reorients moral education toward public meaning, social connection, and human–nature coexistence (Geall & Ely, 2018; Zhang & Fu, 2023). At the same time, this perspective also reveals tensions, since greater collaboration may involve higher coordination costs and less clear accountability boundaries.

5.2 Practical implications

The practical implication is not that schools should withdraw, but that moral education must move beyond closed school-centred arrangements. If moral formation unfolds across multiple settings, governance must connect school education with family life, community participation, ecological practice bases, and wider public spaces. This requires stronger cross-sector coordination and clearer institutional support rather than fragmented effort by schools alone. Recent research on ESD governance points in the same direction (Balonier & Huber, 2025).

It also suggests that moral education should engage more seriously with nature-based and place-based practice. Study tours, ecological education bases, national park learning, and seasonal practice arrangements matter not simply as extracurricular activities, but as potential carriers of moral education with public value.

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Their significance depends on whether they can be organized into coherent models supported by stable governance rather than remaining episodic events.

A further implication is that moral education governance must be learning-oriented. Feedback should be built into governance so that practice, responsibilities, and institutional arrangements can be revised in response to changing conditions.

5.3 Limitations and future research

This study is primarily conceptual and document-based rather than fieldwork-based. It develops a governance framework through the analysis of publicly available secondary materials, but does not test the operation of its mechanisms through interviews, surveys, or comparative fieldwork. Future research should therefore examine how collaborative goal formation, coordinated implementation, and feedback-based adjustment function in different local settings, how actors negotiate responsibility over time, and under what conditions co-creation-oriented governance becomes stable rather than symbolic.

Future work should also examine whether nature-based moral education practice can generate durable moral educational value rather than short-term activity effects, and which parts of this framework are specific to China's ecological civilization context and which may be more broadly transferable.

6. Conclusion

This study argues that the governance model of moral education in China's school system requires renewal. Moral education can no longer be understood as a unilaterally delivered school task, because the conditions shaping moral formation extend across schools, families, communities, public institutions, and ecological practice settings. A school-centred model therefore remains necessary but is no longer sufficient.

Drawing on a value co-creation perspective, the study reconceptualizes moral education as a relational, cross-field, and adaptive governance process organized through three mechanisms: collaborative goal formation, coordinated implementation, and feedback-based adjustment. In the Chinese context, ecological civilization gives this shift particular force by linking moral education to public responsibility, institutional support, and ecological practice. The contribution of the study lies in showing that moral education should be understood not only as an instructional task, but as a governance issue that must be organized across social and ecological settings.

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