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From Compliance to Moral Agency: Rethinking AI Ethics and Academic Integrity in Sino-Foreign EAP Classrooms

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Abstract
This problem review explores the ethical and pedagogical dilemmas posed by Generative AI (Gen-AI) in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) instruction within a Sino-foreign university context. As AI tools like ChatGPT and QuillBot become embedded in students' writing practices, existing academic integrity frameworks, largely imported from Western institutions, struggle to accommodate culturally diverse understandings of authorship, learning, and moral responsibility. Drawing on classroom experiences and supported by current literature, the paper argues that students' engagement with AI reflects not a breakdown of ethics, but a misalignment between institutional norms and culturally grounded moral reasoning. The review critiques the limitations of punitive and policy-driven responses, and instead advocates for a virtue ethics approach that centers reflection, judgment, and moral development. The EAP classroom, it suggests, can become a site for ethical inquiry rather than enforcement, where students are supported in navigating AI-related ambiguity with cultural awareness and moral agency. This discussion is grounded in the pedagogical legacy of Professor Marina Dodigovic, whose work exemplified the bridge between research and classroom realities, and whose early insights into language learning remain prescient in today's academic landscape.

Keywords
AI Ethics, EAP, academic integrity, Sino-foreign university

Introduction: Situating the Ethical Challenge of AI in Transnational Classrooms

This paper begins with a simple observation that nonetheless carries significant weight: the integration of Generative AI (Gen-AI) into higher education (HE) is not merely a technological shift, but an ethical and pedagogical turning point. In what follows, I offer a critical reflection on how this technological emergence intersects with deeper, pre-existing tensions around academic integrity, student morality, and cultural assumptions, particularly within the distinct milieu of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) instruction at a Sino-foreign university in China.

The impetus for this inquiry arises not only from the accelerating ubiquity of AI tools like ChatGPT, QuillBot, or GrammarlyGo in students' academic life but from the interpretive challenges they introduce. These tools have not only disrupted how students produce academic work; they have unsettled the very frameworks by which such work is evaluated, ethically and institutionally. Concepts such as originality, authorship, and intent, once relatively stable within Western academic paradigms, have become increasingly ambiguous in AI-mediated environments (Dabis & Csáki, 2024; Khan, 2024; Okina, 2024). This is particularly true in transnational contexts where students' moral intuitions may not align neatly with institutional norms.

Drawing on my experience as an EAP instructor at a Sino-Foreign university in China, I explore how students navigate the moral uncertainty introduced by AI tools. Many of the first-year students I encountered viewed AI-supported paraphrasing as a legitimate writing strategy or perceived unattributed quotation as an act of respect. These perceptions, while discordant with institutional definitions of plagiarism, are not simply misunderstandings. Rather, they reflect culturally rooted epistemologies that view knowledge as communal, iterative, and relational, a perspective well-documented in studies of Confucian-influenced learning (Bikowski & Gui, 2018; Introna et al., 2003).

This paper, then, seeks to move beyond narratives that pathologize students for failing to adhere to Western integrity standards. Instead, it argues for a broader, more dialogic understanding of how students' cultural backgrounds, institutional policies, and emerging technologies interact in shaping ethical dispositions. The paper is grounded in the premise that moral agency is not universally defined but locally negotiated, and that pedagogical responses must be attuned to this reality.

To structure this inquiry, the next section clarifies the conceptual terrain: distinguishing between AI ethics, academic integrity, and student morality as overlapping but non-identical domains. Subsequent sections trace how institutional integrity policies, often imported wholesale from Western systems, fail to resonate with students' lived moral frameworks; how AI tools amplify this dissonance; and how pedagogy might be reimagined not as rule enforcement but as the cultivation of moral reasoning. The conclusion considers the implications of this shift for educators, institutions, and students navigating the ethical frontiers of AI-enhanced learning.

Conceptual Terrain: Navigating the Intersections of AI Ethics, Academic Integrity, and Student Morality

Before examining institutional responses or classroom implications, it is important to clarify the conceptual scaffolding that underpins this discussion. The ethical challenges introduced by GenAI in HE cannot be fully understood through a single lens. Rather, they emerge at the intersection of three interrelated but analytically distinct domains: AI ethics, academic integrity, and student morality. Each shapes how AI use is framed, judged, and negotiated, yet each operates according to different logics, values, and institutional assumptions. Clarifying their boundaries and tensions is therefore foundational to any meaningful pedagogical or policy response.

AI ethics: From external principles to embedded dilemmas

At its broadest level, AI ethics constitutes a set of normative principles designed to guide the responsible development, deployment, and use of AI technologies (Contreras & Jaimes, 2024; Mauti & Ayieko, 2024). These principles, fairness, transparency, accountability, and

explainability, are typically positioned as universal ideals, detached from specific cultural or disciplinary contexts. In educational settings, this framing is often aspirational, emphasizing what AI *should* do without engaging how students actually *use* these tools or interpret their ethical implications.

Several recent studies have begun to complicate this idealism. Chan (2023a) and Boddington (2023), for example, underscore the difficulty of operationalizing ethical ideals such as transparency or bias mitigation within real-world applications. Balalle and Pannilage (2025) go further, arguing that technical safeguards alone are insufficient: AI ethics must also engage pedagogically, through critical literacy, user education, and culturally situated reflection. This distinction between ethics as design principle and ethics as lived practice is particularly salient in transnational contexts, where the uptake of AI tools is shaped by heterogeneous values, expectations, and constraints (Hongladarom & Bandasak, 2024).

Academic integrity: Institutional frameworks and cultural blind spots

In contrast to AI ethics' theoretical ambition, academic integrity is a more codified and procedural domain. It encompasses institutional rules and expectations designed to preserve the credibility of scholarly work. Most academic integrity policies are grounded in Western epistemologies that prize originality, authorship, and intellectual property, values with deep roots in Enlightenment liberalism and individualism (Bloch, 2007; Sapp, 2002). These policies tend to define misconduct in binary terms: one either plagiarizes or produces original work; one either adheres to citation protocols or cheats.

However, these frameworks often presume a universal understanding of ethical academic conduct, a presumption that becomes problematic in culturally hybrid environments like Sino-foreign universities. As Hu and Sun (2017) and Gow and Sun (2024) have shown, institutional plagiarism policies in Chinese universities frequently mirror Western standards without adequate adaptation to local epistemological traditions. This transplantation may inadvertently construct Chinese students as ethically deficient when they fail to align with imported norms. Thus, academic integrity, while ostensibly neutral, often functions as a site of cultural imposition.

The challenge intensifies with the rise of GenAI. Institutional codes rarely offer clear guidance on whether using tools like ChatGPT or DeepSeek constitutes acceptable support or ethical breach. As Neff et al. (2024) argue, students and educators often hold fundamentally different perceptions of what constitutes "misuse," particularly in the absence of explicit norms. Without clear conceptual boundaries, academic integrity frameworks risk becoming reactive rather than instructive, penalizing students without preparing them to navigate evolving ethical landscapes.

Student morality: Situated reasoning in ambiguous terrain

If AI ethics and academic integrity are institutionally defined, student morality is lived and situated. It reflects the internalized beliefs, values, and cognitive strategies that students use to make sense of right and wrong in academic contexts. Unlike codified rules, student morality is often tacit, intuitive, and culturally shaped. It cannot be assumed to mirror institutional expectations, especially when students are embedded in sociocultural frameworks, such as the Chinese one, that value deference to authority, collective learning, and the respectful reproduction of knowledge (Bikowski & Gui, 2018; Introna et al., 2003).

Kohlberg's (1985) Moral Development Theory has often been used to trace how individuals evolve from rule-based obedience to autonomous ethical reasoning. However, its applicability

to collectivist educational contexts is limited. As Vozzola and Senland (2022) note, Kohlberg's stages rest on Western assumptions about individual agency and universal principles, which may not resonate in hierarchical or relationship-oriented cultures. In such contexts, virtue ethics, with its emphasis on moral character, community, and habitual practice, offers a more culturally congruent framework (Gichuru, 2023; Ivanhoe, 2013; MacIntyre, 2007). This model foregrounds the cultivation of virtues such as honesty, responsibility, and empathy, not as fixed outcomes but as dialogic, socially embedded practices.

Critically, students may act in ways that are morally defensible within their own frameworks yet deemed academically dishonest by institutional codes. The phenomenon of "AI-giarism" (Chan, 2023b, 2025), for instance, is illustrative: many students perceive AI-generated paraphrasing not as deceit, but as academic support akin to a thesaurus or grammar checker. The problem, then, is not malice, but moral misalignment.

Bringing the domains into dialogue

These three domains, AI ethics, academic integrity, and student morality, are not reducible to one another. Yet they frequently collide in the classroom, especially when students rely on AI tools without shared understandings of what constitutes ethical use. Institutions may frame AI-supported writing as misconduct; students may see it as efficient learning. Designers may embed ethical principles in AI systems; users may bypass them through cultural heuristics or peer advice. Bridging these interpretive gaps requires more than clearer policies; it demands a pedagogy that engages with ethical pluralism, fosters reflexive moral reasoning, and situates integrity within lived, cultural contexts.

In the next section, I turn from conceptual distinctions to institutional responses, examining how academic integrity policies in Sino-foreign universities have attempted, but often failed, to accommodate these ethical complexities.

Institutional Disjunction: Misfitting Policies in Culturally Hybrid Spaces

Having clarified the conceptual distinctions between AI ethics, academic integrity, and student morality, this section turns to the institutional level, specifically, the ways in which academic integrity policies are designed and operationalized within Sino-foreign HE contexts. It argues that these policies, though often well-intentioned, are frequently misaligned with the sociocultural realities of their student populations. The result is a pervasive sense of ethical dissonance, where students are caught between institutional expectations and culturally shaped moral intuitions. Nowhere is this disjunction more evident than in the regulation, or lack thereof, of AI-assisted academic work.

Imported frameworks, local tensions

Sino-foreign institutions operate at the confluence of two educational traditions: Western academic policy frameworks and Chinese cultural-epistemological norms. These institutions typically adopt integrity codes modeled on their parent universities, emphasizing originality, authorship, and autonomous knowledge production. Yet, as Gow (2013) and Gow and Sun (2024) illustrate, the transplantation of these frameworks often fails to engage with students' lived experiences, let alone the sociocultural norms that shape their understanding of academic conduct.

Chinese educational traditions, grounded in Confucian values, tend to emphasize memorization, respect for authoritative knowledge, and the reproduction of established ideas (Introna et al., 2003; Sapp, 2002). Within such a framework, practices like close paraphrasing or quoting

without attribution may be understood not as deceit but as homage. The issue, then, is not necessarily a deficit of morality but a misalignment of cultural assumptions. Hu and Lei's (2015, 2016) comparative work reveals that even Chinese university instructors exhibit ambivalence about where the line lies between acceptable assistance and misconduct, further complicating the moral landscape for students.

This misfit becomes particularly acute when it intersects with technology. As Neff et al. (2024) and Chan (2023b) have shown, students often engage with Gen-AI tools in ways that reflect broader social norms around efficiency, collaboration, and tool use, rather than strictly adhering to institutional boundaries around authorship. The use of these tools is not necessarily intended to deceive, but to support learning within a pragmatic, high-pressure educational environment. When integrity policies do not acknowledge this context, they risk criminalizing behaviors that students view as legitimate.

Policy gaps in the AI era

Despite the transformative impact of Gen-AI on student academic practices, institutional responses remain largely reactive. Most universities, including Sino-foreign collaborations, have yet to revise their integrity policies to explicitly address AI-generated content. Where policies do exist, they tend to mirror older paradigms of plagiarism, framing misconduct as the reproduction of someone else's work without attribution, without acknowledging the grey zones that AI tools introduce (Balalle & Pannilage, 2025; Jin et al., 2025). This regulatory lag not only fails to guide students but also exacerbates their uncertainty, leaving them to navigate ethical decisions in a vacuum.

The ambiguity around acceptable AI use is further complicated by mixed messaging from instructors. Some may tacitly endorse grammar tools and AI-based paraphrasers; others may denounce them as breaches of academic integrity (Dabis & Csáki, 2024). This inconsistency undermines the coherence of institutional messaging and places the burden of ethical interpretation on students, many of whom lack the conceptual or linguistic resources to navigate such dilemmas. As Chan (2024) notes, this inconsistency gives rise to "AI guilt;" a state of anxiety and self-doubt among students who are unsure whether their use of AI constitutes learning enhancement or rule-breaking.

Moreover, as Bretag (2013) and Mejía and Garcés-Flórez (2025) argue, integrity policies that prioritize compliance over engagement tend to foster surface-level adherence rather than deep moral reflection. In the context of AI, this results in performative conformity, students may avoid certain tools out of fear, not ethical conviction. Worse, others may internalize the idea that avoiding detection is the central ethical task, thereby eroding the very values that integrity policies claim to uphold.

To address this disjunction, what is needed is not simply clearer rules, but more dialogic, culturally responsive approaches to policy design, ones that recognize student agency, engage with moral complexity, and reflect the hybrid identities of transnational learners.

AI in the Ethical Gray Zone: Classroom Dilemmas and Cultural Frictions

Having examined the institutional disconnect between imported academic integrity frameworks and students' moral reasoning, I now turn to the classroom, the lived space where these tensions manifest most viscerally. This section explores how students engage with AI tools in ways that both challenge and reconfigure dominant understandings of academic ethics. It argues that student behavior cannot be reduced to compliance or defiance; rather, it must be

understood as a form of situated reasoning shaped by cultural norms, institutional ambiguity, and pedagogical practice.

Between innovation and infringement: How students experience AI tools

One of the most immediate effects of Gen-AI in EAP classrooms is the disruption of boundaries that once appeared stable. Tools such as ChatGPT, QuillBot, and GrammarlyGo do not merely support writing; they generate it, rephrase it, and even mimic disciplinary tone. For many first-year students, particularly those navigating a second-language academic environment, such tools are not framed as ethical dilemmas but as pragmatic aids. They are extensions of the digital literacies already familiar through social media, translation apps, and online learning platforms.

As Chan (2023b, 2025) shows, students' engagement with AI is rarely malicious. Instead, it reflects a logic of assistance, where AI is used to scaffold clarity, correct grammar, or reword ideas. In classroom discussions and written reflections, many students describe these tools as "helpful," "time-saving," or "necessary to compete." Few view them as violating academic principles, especially when institutional policies remain vague or contradictory. The term "AI-giarism," while useful analytically, may therefore obscure the student experience: what institutions name as misconduct, students often perceive as technological literacy.

This disjunction is amplified by the cultural context. In Confucian-informed educational traditions, knowledge is communal, cumulative, and often transmitted through imitation. As Introna et al. (2003) and Bikowski and Gui (2018) argue, the valorization of originality in Western academia does not always translate. For many students, the re-use of authoritative ideas, whether via peer models or AI paraphrasers, is not only acceptable but expected. The classroom thus becomes a site of ethical confusion, where students are caught between divergent logics of learning.

Moral ambiguity, not moral failure

It is tempting, especially from a policy perspective, to interpret such behaviors as evidence of declining ethical standards. Yet such a reading misses the more pressing reality: students are navigating an ethical landscape in flux, with little institutional guidance and few culturally relevant touchpoints. Their choices reflect not a lack of integrity but an absence of moral clarity, a theme echoed in Neff et al.'s (2024) recent study on AI use in EFL contexts.

The consequence of this ambiguity is what Chan (2024) has called "AI guilt," a condition marked not by defiance but by uncertainty. Students are unsure when help becomes cheating, when rewriting becomes misrepresentation, or when efficiency becomes erosion of authorship. As a result, many default to a cautious pragmatism, adopting a "don't ask, don't tell" approach to AI use. In practice, this fosters a culture of silence and suspicion, rather than open ethical inquiry.

Importantly, this condition is not evenly distributed. Students with greater linguistic confidence or prior exposure to Western academic norms often navigate these tensions with more fluency. Others, particularly first-generation or less confident L2 learners, may feel doubly vulnerable: uncertain about ethical expectations and unequipped to meet them without AI support (Ngo & Hastie, 2025). Thus, the classroom becomes not only an academic space but a moral one, where inequality is reproduced not just through grades, but through access to ethical confidence.

The role of the EAP classroom: From policing to moral development

In this context, the EAP classroom is uniquely positioned. As both a skills-based and values-based learning environment, it offers rare opportunities for students to explore academic conventions, question ethical assumptions, and reflect on their roles as learners and knowledge producers. Yet such potential is often underrealized. Too often, AI is treated as a compliance issue, raised only in plagiarism warnings or software policies, rather than as a subject of inquiry in its own right.

An alternative approach would treat the EAP classroom as a site for ethical dialogue. Drawing on virtue ethics, particularly as adapted to education by Gichuru (2023) and Ivanhoe (2013), teachers might ask: What does it mean to write with integrity in an age of machine assistance? What kinds of support and reflection are needed for students to answer that question for themselves? These are the kinds of dialogic, situated inquiries that virtue ethics can help scaffold, and they are especially resonant for first-year, multilingual students negotiating unfamiliar academic landscapes.

Concrete strategies might include reflective journals on digital writing practices, scaffolded discussions around AI-use scenarios, and collaborative inquiry into evolving definitions of authorship. Educators might also model ethical uncertainty, sharing their own evolving practices, inviting critique, and framing integrity as a shared, evolving pursuit rather than a fixed doctrine. These moves are not merely tactical; they reflect a deeper ethos of teaching-as-character-formation, where the aim is not only linguistic competence but moral confidence. In this view, AI becomes not a threat to academic values but a catalyst for rethinking how those values are taught, lived, and adapted.

These classroom-level strategies, while essential, remain incomplete without a deeper ethical framework that can support sustained moral development. To this end, the following section considers how virtue ethics might provide a more enduring foundation for fostering ethical agency in a technologized learning environment.

From Policing to Pedagogy: Toward Virtue-Oriented Moral Education

If earlier sections have diagnosed the institutional and cultural dissonance shaping Chinese students' engagement with AI in the academy, this section turns toward the pedagogical implications of that diagnosis. Specifically, it argues for a shift from rule-based enforcement to virtue-oriented education, an approach that treats ethical development not as a matter of policy compliance, but as a process of cultivating moral agency, cultural awareness, and critical reflection. This is not simply a strategic pivot; it is a philosophical commitment to teaching students how to think ethically, not just what to avoid.

The limits of procedural integrity

At present, much of HE's response to AI-enhanced writing has focused on refining detection, revising policies, or enhancing surveillance. While these measures are understandable, they often reinforce a compliance mindset. Students are told what not to do, rather than invited into a conversation about why certain practices matter, or how they might ethically navigate ambiguous terrain. As Mejía and Garcés-Flórez (2025) warn, this reactive orientation can reduce integrity to a checklist, stripping it of pedagogical depth and moral texture.

Moreover, when integrity policies are divorced from cultural sensitivity, they risk becoming disciplinary rather than developmental. This is particularly problematic in transnational contexts, where students may feel ethically adrift, subject to rules that do not reflect their

cultural epistemologies or learning histories. Punitive approaches, even when cloaked in academic language, tend to provoke either quiet resistance or fearful conformity. Neither response nurtures the kind of ethical confidence required to navigate AI-laden educational futures.

Virtue ethics and the possibility of moral formation

While classroom interventions provide immediate support, a more enduring response lies in rethinking what kind of learners, and people, we, the educators, aim to cultivate. This question invites us to shift from policy compliance and short-term solutions toward a more expansive view of education as character formation. In doing so, virtue ethics offers a compelling framework for understanding the moral dimensions of learning in an age of generative AI.

Unlike deontological ethics, which emphasize rule-following, or consequentialist models that prioritize outcomes, virtue ethics foregrounds the development of moral character, shaped over time through habits, community, and reflective engagement. It is less concerned with isolated acts of misconduct and more invested in the kind of judgment students build through repeated encounters with ethical ambiguity. As Gichuru (2023) and Ivanhoe (2013) suggest, this model resonates particularly well in collectivist, relationship-centered contexts, where values like trust, humility, and responsibility are cultivated interpersonally rather than prescribed externally.

In this view, academic integrity is not a checklist but a disposition, a cultivated way of being that includes diligence, honesty, intellectual humility, and ethical discernment. When students face ambiguous decisions about using AI tools, virtue ethics offers more than a binary of right or wrong. It asks instead: Does this choice align with the kind of learner I'm trying to become? What virtues are being exercised or eroded through this action? This kind of reflection, while slow to develop, equips students not only for academic contexts, but for a broader professional and civic life (Hagendorff, 2020, 2022).

The implications for pedagogy are significant. Our task is not only to correct or warn, but to model ethical inquiry, invite reflection, and create conditions under which virtues can be practiced and internalized. Moral formation, in this sense, is not a supplement to education, it is its very core.

Legacy and pedagogical inheritance

This final pedagogical turn carries, for me, a particular personal resonance. I was one of Professor Marina Dodigovic's students in the MATEFL program at the American University of Armenia, a place where she not only taught, but mentored with a kind of intellectual generosity that remains rare. For many of us, she was more than a teacher. She was the first person who encouraged us to think of ourselves not just as language instructors, but as ethical practitioners and reflective researchers. Her courses were never only about language learning theories or methods; they were about the moral shape of teaching, how we respond to uncertainty, how we carry our students' struggles, and how we model integrity, not just enforce it.

Long before AI became a mainstream concern in education, she was asking precisely the kinds of questions that this paper returns to. What does it mean to write responsibly in a second language? How do students make ethical decisions when institutional codes don't speak their language, culturally or linguistically? How do we, as educators, prepare learners not just to comply, but to think?

This paper, situated in a Sino-foreign classroom and grounded in the lived experiences of first-year EAP students, is in many ways a continuation of that legacy. It reflects a vision of teaching that Prof. Dodigovic championed, one that bridges research and classroom practice, institutional policy and human experience. I hope, in some small way, it carries forward her belief that ethical complexity should not be feared or policed but welcomed as an opportunity for growth, for both students and teachers.

Conclusion: Moral Agency in a Machine Age

This paper began with a paradox: that the very technologies designed to support learning have, in many classrooms, eroded clarity about what learning ethically entails. In a context where institutional policies often misfit student moral reasoning, and where AI tools outpace regulatory guidance, the temptation is to respond with control, more detection, more surveillance, more rules. But such responses, while perhaps institutionally reassuring, fail to address the underlying issue: students do not need better enforcement; they need better ethical formation.

What is required, then, is a shift, from rule-based models of academic integrity to reflective, culturally aware approaches to moral education. This shift will not be achieved through policy alone. It demands pedagogical imagination, cultural humility, and a renewed commitment to the classroom as a site of moral and intellectual becoming.

In honoring the legacy of educators like Dr. Marina Dodigovic, we are reminded that ethical teaching is not a reactive task. It is an aspirational one. It asks us to meet students not where they fail, but where they wonder, and to accompany them in making sense of academic life in a world where machines now write with them, and sometimes for them.

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