

A Grounded Theory Study of the Rules Governing Chinese Teachers' Emotional Labor from a Cultural Perspective

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Abstract

This study employs grounded theory to systematically review and analyze the content related to the emotional labor of Chinese teachers in policy texts and authoritative journals. A multi-level attribution model, referred to as the "Onion Model," is developed to examine the influencing factors of teachers' emotional labor rules. This model comprises five levels: the environmental level, the behavioral level, the ability level, the belief level, and the mission level. The study reveals the dynamic process of teachers' emotional labor within specific cultural and policy contexts. Driven by traditional cultural values and professional missions, teachers internalize beliefs and utilize emotional regulation skills, which are ultimately externalized as specific emotional behaviors. This research challenges previous perceptions that regarded emotional labor merely as organizational discipline. It highlights the central role of cultural factors in shaping teachers' emotional labor, enriches the theory of cross-cultural emotional labor, and offers theoretical support and practical insights for the formulation of educational policies and the professional development of teachers.

Keywords

Emotional Labor, Cultural Factors, Grounded Theory, Chinese Teachers.

1. Introduction

Emotional labor is a core component of teachers' work in the educational process, involving the effective management of emotions to meet both educational goals and students' developmental needs^[1]. The rules of teachers' emotional labor refer to explicit or implicit organizational guidelines that require employees to express appropriate emotions toward service recipients in specific situations^[2]. Essentially, these rules form a normative framework for emotional labor practices. From a sociocultural perspective, teachers' emotional labor is not just about following external rules, but is also a deeply socialized process. Teachers must continually learn, internalize, and adjust their emotional responses to align with the cultural expectations and professional norms embedded in specific educational settings^[3]. This involves both the management of genuine inner feelings and the careful shaping of external emotional expressions, aimed at maintaining the professional image, authority, and approachability expected of educators.

In recent years, Chinese education policy has increasingly refined and standardized teachers' behaviors, particularly in emotional interactions. For example, the *Ten Professional Conduct Guidelines for Primary and Secondary School Teachers in the New Era (2018)* clearly call for a balance of strictness and kindness, transforming traditional expectations for teachers—being both strict and caring—into binding moral requirements. The "double reduction" policy (2021), while aiming to lessen students' academic burdens, has also implicitly increased teachers' emotional responsibilities in after-school services and home-school communication. These

policy texts, deeply contextualized, attempt to integrate Confucian values—such as respect for teachers, moral exemplarity, and tireless guidance—into modern standards for professional conduct within the national governance framework. Following these policies, teachers must continually adjust their emotions to meet the expectations of students, parents, and administrators, highlighting the complexity of emotional labor rules amid multiple role demands and emotional regulation.

Against this background, this study aims to systematically examine the formation mechanisms and practical characteristics of Chinese teachers' emotional labor rules from a sociocultural perspective. By analyzing policy texts and classical literature, this research explores how emotional labor rules are embedded within China's unique cultural logic and educational governance, and reveals the internal tensions and balancing strategies teachers employ under the dual influences of tradition and modernity. The findings intend to enrich cross-cultural emotional labor theory with empirical evidence from China and to support the culturally adaptive design of educational policies and the development of teacher emotional support systems.

2. Literature Review

The theory of emotional labor originated from sociologist Hochschild's pioneering work on the modern service industry^[4]. This theory reveals how individuals manage their emotions to meet organizational or societal expectations, distinguishing between "surface acting"—adjusting outward expressions—and "deep acting"—attempting to alter internal feelings. This emotional regulation process is guided by socially and culturally defined "feeling rules" and "display rules." Grandey further developed the emotional labor model by integrating emotion regulation strategies and their effects on individual well-being^[5].

In the field of education, emotional labor research affirms that "education is an emotional practice," and that "teaching is a profession of high emotional labor"^[6]. A teacher's emotional labor is not merely a personal psychological activity; it is profoundly shaped by broader socio-cultural contexts, school organizational culture, and policy regulation⁴. At its core, this labor revolves around "caring for students," requiring teachers to invest deep emotions, foster a positive emotional climate, and regulate negative emotions to support students' interests and maintain classroom order^[7].

Early research focused on the specific content of emotional rules. For instance, Winograd was the first to systematically summarize five core emotional labor rules for teachers (see Table 1), covering student-teacher relationships, subject attitudes, emotional intensity, professional identity, and situational response^[8]. These rules aim to achieve a balance between emotional necessity and appropriateness, involving the elicitation of expected emotions and suppression of unwelcome ones, in service of both hedonic (self-feeling) and instrumental (teaching goal) objectives. Subsequent studies clarified that social rules profoundly influence teacher emotions, with emotional labor being the management of emotions to express socially accepted feelings^[9]. Emotional rules are prescriptive, constraining when, where, and how emotions may be expressed. Hargreaves, from a political and sociocultural geography perspective, pointed out that differences in power (e.g., seniority, rank) and social-cultural identity (e.g., race, class, gender) significantly affect emotional states and interpersonal distance in teacher interactions, whereas cultural homogeneity can help reduce this distance and enhance belonging^[10]. Ke Zheng proposed that cultural factors influencing teacher emotional labor can be examined from three dimensions: educational regulations, educational norms, and cultural cognition^[11].

Chinese scholars have deepened the understanding of the ethically caring, "quasi-familial" teacher-student relationship, and identified culturally specific emotional rules. Yin and Lee (2012) proposed a four-dimensional model including teaching passion, suppression of negative

emotions, maintenance of positive states, and instrumental use of emotions^[12]. Wang Jikang (2022) further extracted implicit (e.g., emotional cultivation and cognition) and explicit (e.g., emotional behaviors and image) sociocultural rules from educational policies^[13]. Teachers need to use diverse emotional labor strategies in practice. Chinese teachers often try to maintain harmonious relationships and organizational identity by showing happiness and hiding negative emotions^[14], and may use cognitive restructuring strategies (Lazarus) to reduce internal conflicts and rethink the meaning of their profession^[15]. The choice of these strategies is also affected by individual differences (personality, self - efficacy, etc.) and the work environment (workload, school culture, etc.)^[16].

However, there are still significant deficiencies in existing research. First, there is a lack of depth and systematicness: Many studies remain at the level of describing emotional experiences and fail to deeply explore the internal laws, formation mechanisms, and operation modes of emotional rules (the “how” and “why”). There is a lack of a systematic explanation of how teachers’ emotions are shaped and “disciplined,” which affects the effective guidance of practice. Second, there is a lack of theoretical construction and mechanism exploration: There are limited studies specifically dedicated to extracting teachers’ emotional rules and deeply exploring their connotations and operation mechanisms. The construction of theoretical frameworks and core concepts is relatively weak, the quality of research varies, and theoretical accumulation is slow^[17].

3. Research Design

3.1. Research Methods

This study adopts grounded theory as the methodological framework to systematically explore the formation mechanisms and cultural influences of emotional labor rules among teachers. Emotional rules embedded in policy texts are often implicit, multidimensional, and intertwined with ideology, cultural traditions, and management objectives. The systematic procedures of grounded theory—including open coding, axial coding, and selective coding—are utilized to unpack this complexity.

Data sources include two main parts:

- (1) twelve national and local education policy texts published between 2010 and 2025, covering topics such as teacher professional conduct, ethics, and educational administration (e.g., The Teachers Law of the People’s Republic of China [2015 Revision], The Code of Professional Conduct for Primary and Secondary School Teachers in the New Era [2018], The Code of Professional Ethics for Primary and Secondary School Teachers [2008 Revision], and Policy Recommendations on the Implementation of the “Double Reduction” Policy [2021]), which reflect the normative expectations of teachers’ emotional labor at the policy level;
- (2) fifteen peer-reviewed articles from authoritative Chinese and international education journals focusing on case studies, teacher interviews, and empirical research concerning teachers’ emotional labor, to enrich both theoretical and practical perspectives.

NVivo software is used to assist with data management and analysis. Following grounded theory procedures, the analysis involves three stages:

- Open coding: Line-by-line deconstruction of texts to identify initial concepts and phenomena;
- Axial coding: Integrating and categorizing related concepts to form themes and categories;
- Selective coding: Constructing a theoretical model of teachers’ emotional labor rules and revealing the structural relationships and cultural pathways.

In summary, this study aims to reveal the core dimensions, structural characteristics, and potential cultural implications of teachers’ emotional labor in the context of China by deeply exploring and systematically coding relevant cases and data from policy texts and academic

papers. This provides a systematic analytical perspective for understanding the national-level shaping of teachers’ emotional roles.

4. Research Process

This study employs the three-tier coding procedure of Grounded Theory (open coding, axial coding, selective coding) to systematically analyze the collected policy texts and the relevant content from fifteen authoritative Chinese and English journal articles (including case studies, teacher interview quotes, etc.), aiming to construct a theoretical model of teachers’ emotional labor rules.

4.1. Initial Coding

This phase focuses on breaking down the original data through detailed reading and continuous comparison, sentence by sentence and paragraph by paragraph, to uncover the basic meaningful units that reflect the norms of teachers’ emotional labor. The researcher maintains an open mindset, continually questioning the content of the data and conceptualizing specific expressions that describe teachers’ beliefs, behaviors, feelings, strategies, and external requirements. For example, the concept “passion for education” is derived from the policy or literature statement “dedicated to one’s job and loving the education cause”; the concept “establishing teacher authority” is identified from the description “you must maintain a stern face, so students will be afraid, and you will establish authority”; the concept “suppressing true negative emotions” is summarized from “shifting attention to suppress or avoid anger and other negative emotions”; and the concept “spirit of dedication” is extracted from “willing to be a stepping stone for others and happy to contribute.” Through this process, a large number of initial concepts closely related to the original data are generated, such as “self-improvement,” “caring,” “strategic anger,” “not showing dissatisfaction,” “maintaining a calm mindset,” “experiencing joy in teaching,” “caring for the organization,” “enhancing teaching appeal,” and “balancing strictness and kindness,” which lay the conceptual foundation for subsequent analysis.

Table 1. Three-Tier Coding Table for Chinese Teachers’ Emotional Labor Rules

No.	Original Data	Concept Coding	Category (Axial Coding)	Main Category (Selective Coding - Onion Model Layer)
1	Dedicated to the profession, passionate about education.	Commitment to education	Professional values and ethics	Belief Layer
2	Teachers should focus on professional development.	Self-improvement	Professional development requirements	Belief Layer
3	Caring, responsible, patient, and careful.	Caring, patience, and carefulness	Core quality requirements (external traits)	Behavior Layer
4	Be patient, instruct without tiring.	Patience (in teaching)	Teaching methods and attitudes	Behavior Layer
5	Care for all students, treat every student equally.	Caring for students, treating them equally	Teacher-student interaction norms	Environment Layer / Behavior Layer ¹
6	“You need to put on a stern face so students will fear you and respect your authority.”	Establish authority as a teacher	Strategically displaying negative emotions	Behavior Layer

7	Teacher’s displeasure in class is not genuine but serves as a reminder to students.	Pretending to be angry	Strategically displaying negative emotions	Behavior Layer
8	Sometimes, even when students do well, say it’s not good enough but acknowledge some positives.	Pretending disappointment (strategic)	Strategically displaying negative emotions	Behavior Layer
9	Creating a happy and encouraging atmosphere beyond real feelings to motivate students.	Amplifying positive emotions (performance)	Displaying positive emotions (enhanced)	Behavior Layer
10	Teachers express more positive emotions than they feel, offering more encouragement and recognition.	Reinforcing students’ correct behaviors (enhanced)	Displaying positive emotions (enhanced)	Behavior Layer
11	Diverting attention to suppress or avoid anger and other negative emotions.	Suppressing genuine anger (strategy)	Use of emotion regulation strategies	Ability Layer
12	Even when students or parents are rude, teachers are not allowed to show dissatisfaction.	Not showing dissatisfaction or grievance	Rules for emotion suppression (towards others)	Behavior Layer
13	After patiently explaining to parents, the teacher still feels aggrieved and sad in private.	Hiding grievance and sadness (externally)	Rules for emotion suppression (towards others)	Behavior Layer
14	Despite feeling unfairly treated by school management, teachers comply without showing dissatisfaction.	Obedying organizational arrangements, suppressing dissatisfaction	Rules for emotion suppression (towards organization)	Behavior Layer
15	Expressions of negative emotion reduce student motivation and learning outcomes, and classroom participation.	Negative emotions hinder teaching	Cognition of emotional impact	Belief Layer
16	When facing negative emotions in class, teachers remain patient, holding back anger toward students.	Enduring, not losing temper in class	Rules for emotion suppression (towards students)	Behavior Layer
17	Publicly criticizing students’ negative attitudes could be counterproductive.	Suppressing criticism/dissatisfaction (strategic reason)	Cognition of emotional impact	Belief Layer
18	If I lack patience in class, I suppress my negative emotions first.	Having patience with students (through suppression)	Use of emotion regulation strategies	Ability Layer
19	Teachers should not display aberrant behavior or get annoyed by small things.	Maintaining patience and not displaying annoyance (norm)	Norms for emotional display	Behavior Layer / Belief Layer ²
20	Faced with uncooperative parents, the teacher remains patient and communicates calmly to seek support.	Suppressing disappointment and anxiety with parents	Emotion suppression and communication strategies	Behavior Layer
21	“Good at self-regulating emotions and maintaining a calm mindset.”	Maintaining calmness (ability)	Goal and ability of emotion regulation	Ability Layer
22	Feeling happiness and satisfaction at students’ achievements and progress (internal feeling).	Joy for students’ progress	Profession-related emotional experiences	Belief Layer

23	Teachers should feel excited and happy when students achieve good results (expected emotions).	Excitement for students' achievements (expected)	Expected occupational emotions	Belief Layer
24	Teachers feel a sense of achievement from positive changes in students or parents (internal feeling).	Achievement from positive changes in parents	Experience of job achievement	Belief Layer
25	A sense of achievement comes when every student shows progress over the term (internal feeling).	Students' progress brings achievement	Experience of job achievement	Belief Layer
26	Teachers should care for the collective and cooperate with colleagues.	Caring for the organization, respecting colleagues	Organizational norms and interpersonal requirements	Environment Layer
27	Colleagues should be tolerant and improve together.	Tolerating colleagues	Organizational norms and interpersonal requirements	Environment Layer
28	Teachers use techniques such as pacing, humor, exaggerated expressions/gestures to attract students.	Enhancing teaching appeal (skills)	Teaching strategies and skills	Ability Layer
29	Emotional performance in teaching boosts class vividness and student engagement (performance effect).	Enhancing vividness and engagement	Function of emotional performance	Behavior Layer
30	Teachers ignore small troubles or emotional events in class to focus on teaching goals.	Ignoring minor negative events, redirecting attention	Attention regulation strategies	Ability Layer
31	Teachers' emotions should match teaching content, supporting achievement of goals (goal/principle).	Emotion facilitates teaching goals	Emotion serves teaching objectives	Belief Layer
32	Teachers must consider emotion's duration and impact on achieving teaching goals (considerations).	Emotion matched to teaching goals (consideration)	Emotion serves teaching objectives	Belief Layer
33	"If learning is enhanced by emotion, I allow it; if it hinders or delays, I stop it." (regulation strategy)	Adjusting emotion with instruction (strategy)	Emotion regulation strategy (goal-based)	Ability Layer
34	Enthusiastically teaching and using voice or gestures to regulate emotional expression for student learning.	Emotional labor improves teaching	Teaching strategies and skills	Behavior Layer / Ability Layer ³
35	Teachers use facial expressions and gestures to deepen students' impression (behavior).	Providing emotional scaffolding (action)	Emotional display behaviors	Behavior Layer
(35 Continued)	Teachers strategically display sternness or kindness to maintain balanced teacher-student relationships.	Creating emotional climate	Strategic emotional display	Behavior Layer
36	Being both strict and caring—the ideal teacher as both mentor and friend.	Balanced strictness and kindness	Culturally expected role	Mission Layer
37	"Lax teaching is teachers' fault" & "Strict teachers produce	Outward strictness, inner care (culture)	Traditional teacher ethics	Mission Layer

	excelling students” (cultural belief).			
38	Teaching implies caring, and female teachers are especially expected to show care, including caregiving roles.	Carer/caregiver (gender expectation)	Sociocultural expectations (gender)	Mission Layer
39	Never give up on any student, treating them as one’s own children (cultural/role expectation).	Treating students as own children (cultural metaphor)	Parent-like role	Mission Layer
40	Different roles affect emotion display; head teachers are authoritative and strict, subject teachers more gentle.	Authority, strictness (role requirement)	Role-based influence on emotional display	Behavior Layer
41	Care for students’ health and protect their rights (duty/requirement).	Safeguarding student interests	Teacher responsibility requirements	Environment Layer
42	Reducing negative emotional impact on students’ learning and psychological health is a goal for Chinese teachers.	Protecting students’ emotional health (goal)	Regulation targets in cultural context	Mission Layer
43	Teachers should have high moral standards (cultural/social expectation).	Moral conduct	High moral standards required	Mission Layer
44	Being upright and a role model for others (cultural/social expectation).	Being a role model	High moral standards required	Mission Layer
45	“Willing to serve others selflessly” (cultural value)	Spirit of dedication	Traditional teacher ethics	Mission Layer
46	For primary school teachers, dedication, care, and love are seen as correct and natural; the opposite would violate conscience and morality (internalized cultural belief).	Having the spirit of dedication (internalized belief)	Internalized cultural values	Belief Layer

4.2. Axial Coding

During the axial coding stage, the focus shifts to systematically relating and categorizing the numerous concepts identified during open coding. The analysis centers around the core phenomenon, examining logical connections between concepts, such as causal relationships, contextual links, attribute dimensions, and coping strategies. Concepts with similar properties and meanings are grouped together to form more generalized and abstract categories. As shown in Table 3, for example, concepts related to teachers’ intrinsic beliefs and value judgments—such as “commitment to education,” “self-improvement,” “recognition of emotional impacts on teaching,” “joy for students’ progress,” and “emotion serves teaching objectives”—are subsumed under categories like “professional values and ethics,” “professional development requirements,” “cognition of emotional impact,” “profession-related emotional experiences,” and “emotion serves teaching objectives.” Similarly, behaviors such as “establishing teacher authority,” “pretending to be angry,” “pretending disappointment,” “amplifying positive emotions,” and “reinforcing correct student behaviors” are aggregated into overarching categories of “strategic display of negative emotions” and “displaying positive emotions (enhanced).” Regulation techniques including “suppressing real anger,” “being patient through suppression,” “maintaining calmness,” “ignoring minor negative incidents,” and “regulating emotions according to teaching goals” are grouped under “use of emotion regulation strategies” and “attention regulation strategies.” Meanwhile, behaviors such as “not displaying dissatisfaction,” “hiding grievance,” “complying with organizational arrangements,”

“endurance,” and “maintaining patience” constitute categories like “rules for emotion suppression” and “norms for emotional display.” Through axial coding, the data begin to exhibit structure, revealing different dimensions of teachers’ emotional labor and the preliminary map of their interactions.

4.3. Selective Coding

In the selective coding stage of grounded theory, the primary task is to identify the core category that integrates all the major categories from axial coding and to develop a comprehensive theoretical framework that can systematically explain the research phenomenon—in this case, the rules and influencing factors of Chinese teachers’ emotional labor. By analyzing, constantly comparing, and dialoguing with the original data, major categories such as “professional values and ethics,” “cognition of emotional impact,” “experience of job achievement,” and “internalized cultural values” are integrated into the Belief Layer, reflecting teachers’ intrinsic value systems and cognitive foundations. Categories like “strategic display of negative emotions,” “displaying positive emotions,” “rules for emotion suppression,” “norms for emotional display,” and “role-based influence on emotional expression,” which represent specific external behaviors and compliance with rules, are grouped in the Behavior Layer. Categories related to specific techniques, strategy use, and psychological adjustment abilities—such as “use of emotion regulation strategies,” “teaching strategies and skills,” “attention regulation strategies,” and “emotion regulation goals and abilities”—are placed in the Ability Layer. External “organizational norms and interpersonal requirements” and “teacher responsibility requirements” constitute the Environment Layer. Finally, categories that reflect deep cultural values, professional identity, and societal expectations—such as “cultural role expectations,” “traditional teacher ethics,” “sociocultural expectations,” and “high moral standards”—are incorporated into the innermost Mission Layer. Through this process, fragmented data are organized into a theoretically coherent model, clearly illuminating the multi-level factors that influence teachers’ emotional labor and their structural relationships. The findings demonstrate that the factors affecting teachers’ emotional labor rules are not isolated; rather, they form an interconnected and hierarchically structured system that moves from the external to the internal layers.

Based on this, an integrated multi-level conceptual framework has been identified and established, as shown in Figure 1. Using the metaphor of the onion model, this framework systematically organizes the complex factors influencing teachers’ emotional labor within five mutually nested layers: the Environment Layer, Behavior Layer, Ability Layer, Belief Layer, and Mission Layer. This nested structure effectively accommodates and organizes the complex categories generated in previous coding stages and reveals their internal logic. According to the nature and position of each factor within the underlying mechanism, they are systematically related and form the following “storyline”: Teachers’ emotional labor is not a series of isolated acts but a dynamic, integrative process embedded in specific contexts. The framework illustrates how teachers, operating within specific macro- and micro-level environmental expectations and rules, rely on their internal belief systems (values, cognition) and sense of mission (cultural role, professional identity), utilizing relevant emotional regulation abilities (skills, strategies), and ultimately manifesting a set of regulated or negotiated emotional labor practices at the observable behavioral layer (such as strategic performance and emotion suppression). These five layers interact and influence each other, jointly shaping the specific features and rule systems of teacher emotional labor in the Chinese context.

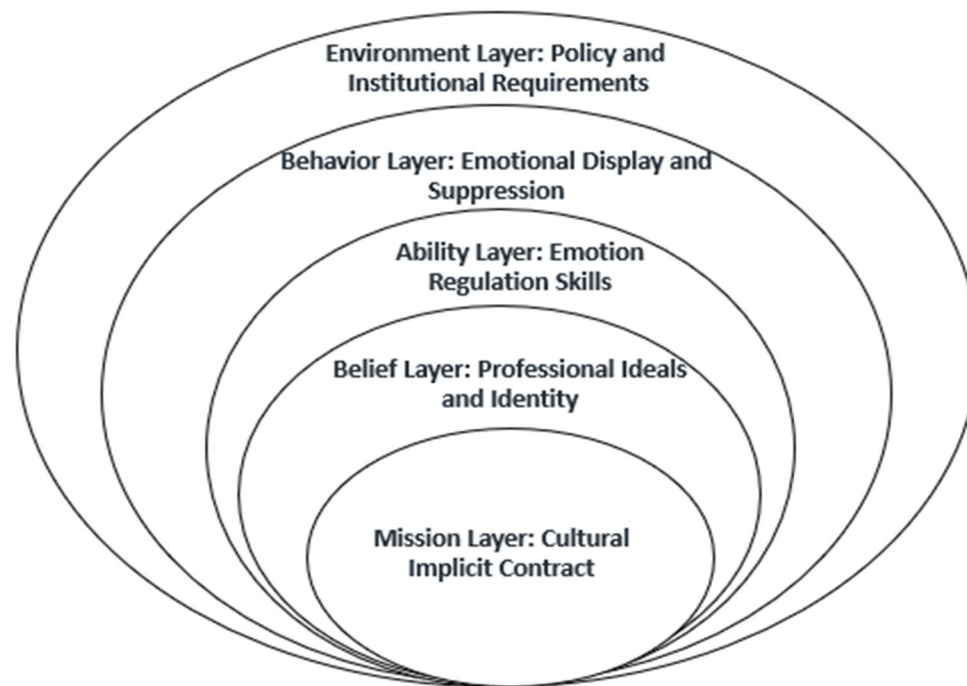


Figure 1. The “Onion Model” of Factors Influencing Chinese Teachers’ Emotional Labor Rules

1.Environment Layer (Context & Interactions):

This layer represents the most immediate and explicit context and interactional field in which teachers operate. It primarily encompasses the objective job demands, interaction norms, and organizational culture defined by institutions, interpersonal relationships, and professional roles. Core coding categories include “organizational norms and interpersonal requirements” (e.g., managing collegial relations, participating in collaborative work [codes 26, 27]), “teacher-student interaction norms” (e.g., caring for students, treating them equally [5]), and “basic professional responsibilities” (e.g., safeguarding student rights, maintaining classroom order [41]). The environment layer sets the foundational stage and script for teachers’ emotional labor. It prescribes the codes of conduct and implicit emotional expectations governing teachers’ interactions with students, colleagues, parents, and administrators, thereby forming the external constraints and triggers for emotional labor rules.

2. Behavior Layer (Observable Actions & Displays):

This is the most directly observable manifestation of teachers’ emotional labor, referring to the actual emotional behaviors, expressive strategies, and rule compliance displayed by teachers in teaching, management, and other interpersonal interactions. Empirical data indicate this is the most densely coded layer, directly reflecting the practical forms of emotional labor. Core coding categories include “external manifestations of core qualities” (such as caring, patience, meticulousness [3]), “emotional display in teaching methods and attitudes” (e.g., patient guidance [4]), and extensive “strategic emotional displays” (performed emotions), which cover purposely expressed negative emotions (e.g., feigned anger/disappointment to establish authority [6, 7, 8]), positive emotions (e.g., enthusiastic encouragement and affirmation [9, 10]), use of emotions to enhance classroom engagement and vividness [29], and providing emotional scaffolding or establishing a lesson context [35]. Also prominent are the “rules for emotional suppression,” which may pertain to students (e.g., suppressing dissatisfaction toward student behavior [16]), to parents (e.g., hiding disappointment or anxiety during parent interactions [20]), or to the organization (e.g., complying with directives and hiding organizational dissatisfaction [14]), as well as a general rule against displaying personal negative emotions (e.g., dissatisfaction or grievance [12, 13]). Further categories include compliance with

“emotional display norms” (e.g., maintaining patience at all times [19]) and “role-influenced emotional display differences” (e.g., varying emotional expressions between homeroom and subject teachers [40]).

The behavior layer is the ultimate point of output and practice for emotional labor. Through these concrete behaviors, teachers manage their classrooms, guide students, maintain relationships, and achieve teaching goals. These behaviors directly respond to environment-layer rules and requirements, while also expressing the translation of inner beliefs and missions through the mediating role of abilities. The strategic and suppressive characteristics of this layer underscore the instrumental and managerial nature of emotional labor in teaching.

3. Ability Layer (Skills & Competencies):

This layer refers to the inner skills, strategic knowledge, and psychological qualities that underpin the effectiveness of the behavior layer. It relates to whether teachers possess and can apply relevant abilities for self-regulation, influencing others via communication, or achieving work goals. Core coding categories include “application of emotion regulation strategies” (e.g., using distraction, cognitive reappraisal, or suppression of negative emotions [11, 18]), “goals and abilities in emotion regulation” (e.g., striving for and maintaining emotional equilibrium [21]), “emotional expression skills within teaching techniques” (e.g., attracting student attention through proper emotional expression [28]), “attention regulation strategies” (e.g., consciously ignoring negativity to stay focused [30]), and “goal-based emotional regulation” (e.g., adjusting emotions according to instructional needs [33]). As a vital bridge, the ability layer connects implicit states (beliefs, missions) and observable behaviors. Skills in emotion management, empathy, pedagogical wisdom, and strategic communication directly determine the effectiveness and quality of emotional labor, as well as resilience in the face of emotional challenges. Lack of such abilities may result in difficulty in performing emotional labor, emotional exhaustion, or failure to meet intended outcomes.

4. Belief Layer (Values, Beliefs & Cognitions):

This deeper layer reflects the cognitive and value systems driving teachers’ behavioral choices and professional competencies. It encompasses their professional values, educational beliefs, understandings of emotional function, interpretations of emotional experiences, and role identity. Core coding categories cover “professional values and ethics” (e.g., dedication to education, seeking self-improvement [1, 2]), “internalized values of dedication and care” [46]; “cognition of emotional impact” (e.g., believing negative emotions hinder teaching, viewing restraint of blame as more effective than venting [15, 17]); “role-related emotional experiences and expectations” (e.g., joy or excitement from student progress [22, 23], seeing positive change in students/parents as major sources of professional achievement [24, 25]); and “belief in emotions as serving pedagogical goals” (e.g., seeing emotional expression as a tool to promote teaching objectives [31, 32]). The belief layer provides the internal rationale, motivation, and direction for emotional labor. What teachers “believe” (e.g., “education is a loving profession,” “teacher emotions are contagious”) and how they “feel and interpret” their work-based emotional experiences (e.g., deriving achievement from overcoming challenges) profoundly impact which abilities they develop, what behavioral strategies they adopt, and how they interpret and internalize external emotional rules.

5. Mission Layer (Identity, Purpose & Culture):

This is the core of the model, encompassing teachers’ professional identity, sense of life purpose, and culturally shaped expectations, moral standards, and value orientations. It reflects macro-level cultural and societal structural influences beyond individual choice. Core coding categories include “cultural role expectations” (e.g., “balancing strictness and kindness,” being a mentor and friend, embodying “tough love” [36], shouldering parent-like duties [39]); “traditional ethical concepts of teaching” (e.g., “lax teaching is the teacher’s fault,” “strict teachers produce

excellent students” [37], stressing unselfish devotion [45]); “sociocultural expectations” (e.g., special expectations for women teachers to be gentle and caring [38], bearing social responsibility for students’ emotional wellbeing [42]); and “requirements for high moral standards” (e.g., “possessing ideals and moral sentiment, solid knowledge, and compassion,” “being a role model” [43, 44]). The mission layer provides the ultimate cultural script, value benchmark, and legitimacy base for teachers’ emotional labor. It defines, within its specific cultural context (in this study, China), the social image, core responsibilities, and moral standards of the “good teacher,” powerfully shaping professional identity and, from the top down, influencing beliefs, ability development, and behavioral choices. Many seemingly individualized emotional rules (e.g., strategic use of “strictness”) and behaviors (e.g., high emotional suppression) can be traced back to this deep cultural and mission layer.

5. Model Interpretation and Key Findings

The onion model reveals several core characteristics shaping the rules of Chinese teachers’ emotional labor, underscoring the profound interplay of instrumental intentions, cultural norms, and individual competencies. At the behavioral level, teachers’ emotional expressions are seldom spontaneous; rather, they are carefully managed and strategic performances deliberately deployed to achieve pedagogical or relational aims, such as sustaining classroom order and motivating students. This strategic management of emotion closely echoes Hochschild’s concepts of “surface acting” and “deep acting,” and demonstrates their particular salience within the Chinese educational environment. Among these rules, the pervasive emphasis on emotional suppression stands out: the need to conceal or regulate negative emotions—including dissatisfaction, grievance, anger, and anxiety—emerges repeatedly as a fundamental expectation, rooted in both explicit professional codes and the necessity to navigate pressures from students, parents, colleagues, and institutions.

The model highlights the complexity of this dynamic, driven by multidirectional forces. From the top down, broad cultural imperatives and professional missions shape teachers’ beliefs, which in turn inform the development of emotion regulation abilities that become manifest in daily classroom behaviors; for example, cultural ideals may legitimize “feigned anger” as effective discipline. Conversely, from the bottom up, everyday challenges and contextual demands directly trigger emotional management in the moment and, cumulatively, may transform a teacher’s regulatory skills and value orientations. The mission layer’s codes illuminate how Confucian traditions, high moral expectations, and collective societal values create a deep cultural imprint on what is considered appropriate emotional labor, both prescribing and justifying its persistent forms. In navigating these layers, teachers’ emotion regulation competencies—encompassing skills, adaptive strategies, and resilience—become essential not only for fulfilling educational objectives but also for maintaining personal wellbeing. Ultimately, a persistent tension exists between teachers’ authentic internal emotional experiences and their mandated external displays: while they may feel genuine satisfaction from student achievements, they are often compelled to suppress or recalibrate negative emotions to conform with professional norms, highlighting an inherent conflict that defines the everyday practice of emotional labor for teachers in contemporary China.

6. Conclusion

Using grounded theory, this study developed a multi-level “onion model” that reveals the dynamic interactions shaping Chinese teachers’ emotional labor. It demonstrates that emotional labor is not merely rule-following or personal management, but a culturally embedded, value-driven, and context-dependent process. Key findings show that Chinese teachers’ emotional labor is driven by deep cultural contracts and professional missions,

strengthened by internalized values and identities, dependent on emotion regulation abilities, and continually influenced by external norms. This dynamic, multi-dimensional model distinguishes Chinese teachers' emotional labor from purely organizational or commercial forms. Traditional cultural ideals such as "respect for teachers" and "moral teaching" fundamentally motivate emotional labor in China, making emotional investment a sacred responsibility. While this enhances professional identity and meaning, it also creates a risk of emotional exhaustion, highlighting the need for greater emotional support and professional development.

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