Business Ethics Education for MBA Students in China: Current Status and Future Prospects

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Abstract. By 2007, 127 universities had obtained permission from the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China to run MBA programs. To gain a thorough understanding of the status of business ethics education in MBA programs in China, we conducted a national survey. This survey was begun in October 2006 and concluded in December 2007. Our goal in conducting this survey was twofold. We wanted to understand, first, the extent of business ethics teaching currently being offered in MBA programs, and second, the prospects for the development of business ethics teaching in the near term. Our survey results show that business ethics instruction is presently offered on a limited scale, and there are constraints impacting business ethics education. However, we also discovered that future prospects for business ethics teaching are promising.

Keywords: business ethics, teaching survey, MBA, China.

1. Purpose

Understanding the current status and future prospects of business ethics education is a vital first step for further development and refinement of MBA programs in China. Presently, there are a number of reports and surveys on the teaching of business ethics in the USA, UK and Europe (e.g., Business Roundtable Institute for Corporate Ethics 2006, Cowton and Cummins 2003, Forum Wirtschaftsethik 2008, Hoffman and Moore 1982, Mahoney 1990, Piper et al. 1993, Schoenfeldt et al. 1991). But there are no similar national reports or surveys on the teaching of business ethics at the MBA level in China. Therefore, we undertook the first comprehensive survey of business ethics teaching in MBA programs in China.

MBA education in Mainland China started in 1991, when the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China authorized nine universities to run MBA programs. By 2004, the number of universities with permission increased to 96. In 2007, 31 more schools were authorized to offer MBA programs, for a total of 127. MBA education in China has certainly developed very quickly since its introduction in 1991 (Chen 2009).

Has business ethics education in MBA programs developed as quickly as the whole of MBA education in China? Or to put it specifically, what is the current status of educating MBA students on this vital topic? What are the main difficulties? And what are the future prospects? To clearly answer these questions, we launched a nation-wide survey from October 2006 to December 2007, addressed to Chinese mainland business schools and their MBA office directors and, if possible, instructors of business ethics. In this paper, we present the methodology of the survey, discuss its findings, and offer several suggestions to expand the scope of business ethics education for MBA students in China.

2. Methodology

After designing the questionnaire, we conducted a preliminary investigation to ensure that the questions were clear and easy for the respondents to answer accurately. As a result, we modified some wording to make sure all the survey items were clear and explicit. For example, some respondents were not sure what was meant by the question, "When was the course offered?" Was it the time a course was added to the curriculum, or the time the course was actually taught? We made it clear that "a course offered" meant it was actually taught.

The final questionnaire contained the following twelve inquiries (specified later on in the survey results):

- 1. Is there a course for business ethics or any related courses?
- 2. What is the name of the course?
- 3. When was the course first offered?
- 4. How many class hours are allocated to the course?
- 5. Is the course mandatory or elective?
- 6. What is the professional background of the instructors?
- 7. Which textbooks are used?
- 8. What teaching methods are employed?
- 9. How do you evaluate the different teaching objectives?
- 10. What are the main difficulties in teaching the course?
- 11. What do you think of the importance of teaching business ethics?



12. What are the prospects for the teaching of business ethics?

3. Sample

The scope of this survey was limited to schools that received authorization before 2004. By 2004, the number of universities with permission to run MBA program was 96. The number was reduced to 95 due to the fact that two universities that received the authorization separately merged later. Schools with MBA programs authorized later (i.e., 2007) were not included.

Step 1. Each MBA office director of the 95 business schools was sent an email containing the questionnaire in October of 2006. Subsequently, the surveys were followed by telephone calls to each MBA office director explaining the purpose of the survey and requesting their support, to confirm whether ethics instruction was being offered in the MBA program. Additionally, the MBA office directors were instructed to complete the survey themselves if business ethics instruction was not conducted in the school. If a business ethics course was offered, the questionnaire was to be completed by the course instructor.

Of the 95 questionnaires sent out, a total of 44 replies were received by email. These responses constituted a 46.3 percent response rate. We felt the response rate was too low and wanted to enlarge the sample size to increase the quality of our data and extent of our knowledge. To increase our sample size, we first called each MBA office director who did not respond in the first round and sent the questionnaire again by email. For those schools that offered the course, we tried to contact the instructors directly. The end result was that 25 more questionnaires were returned.

Step 2. We then distributed the questionnaire during the National Conference on Business Ethics Education in MBA programs held at Shanghai Jiao Tong University on December 1-2, 2007. We were able to acquire an additional 45 questionnaires through this channel. Of them, 34 were from schools that had already responded earlier, and we replaced their previous responses with these newer ones. The other eleven responses were from schools that had not responded before.

Because the survey lasted more than one year, there were some possible curriculum changes during that period in those schools that had responded at the initial stage of our survey. We therefore reconfirmed the current status of their business ethics curriculum by calling those business schools that did not attend the conference. We discovered only one change.

As a result of steps one and two we were able to collect 80 questionnaires with a return rate of 84.2%. Among them, 37 responses were from schools that taught business ethics in their MBA programs. The return rate for those schools

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was 100%. There were 43 responses from schools that have not offered business ethics courses. The return rate for them was 74.1%.

4. Survey Results

Number of schools offering business ethics courses

By December 2007, of 95 schools surveyed, 37 had offered a business ethics course in their MBA programs, a rate of 38.9%. The remaining 58 schools in the survey had not, a rate of 61.1%.

Further analysis reveals that the percentage of schools offering the course in eastern China, where economic development is more advanced, is much higher than that in western and middle China (Table 1).

Table 1: Regional Differences in Schools Offering Business Ethics

	Eastern China	Western & Middle China	Total
Schools	55	40	95
Schools offering business ethics	30	7	37
Percentage	54.5%	17.5%	38.9%

Name of the course

Among all 37 schools offering business ethics, twenty-eight schools labeled the course Business Ethics, four schools offer Corporate Culture and Business Ethics. As for the rest, they named their courses Business, Government and Society, Traditional Chinese Culture and Management Philosophy, Business Law and Ethics, Management Philosophy and Business Ethics, and Corporate Social Responsibility, respectively (Table 2).



Table 2: Course Names Adopted by Schools

Course Name	No. of schools
Business Ethics	28
Corporate Culture and Business Ethics	4
Business, Government and Society	1
Traditional Chinese Culture and Management Philosophy	1
Business Law and Ethics	1
Management Philosophy and Business Ethics	1
Corporate Social Responsibility	1

Time line for offering the course

All 37 schools offering business ethics courses in their MBA programs indicated the years in which the courses were offered (Table 3).

Table 3: Years in Which Business Ethics Courses Were Offered

	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Added	1	2	4	1	2	4	3	2	3	10	2	3
Total	1	3	7	8	10	14	17	19	22	32	34	37

Class hours

All schools with business ethics courses answered this question. The number of class hours ranges from 15 to 48 (Table 4).

Table 4: Number of Class Hours

Class hours	15	16	18	21	24	30	32	36	40	48
No. of schools	1	2	2	1	3	1	11	9	5	2

Nature of the course

Of the 37 schools offering business ethics courses, fifteen of them offered business ethics as a compulsory course, accounting for 40.5%, while 22 of them offered it as an elective, accounting for 59.5%.



Educational background of the instructors

All schools offering business ethics responded to the questions regarding the background of the instructors teaching business ethics courses. Because there can be more than one instructor at a school teaching business ethics courses, we discovered in our survey that there are 51 instructors specializing in the subject matter at the 37 schools. Among the 51 instructors, the majority have business administration or economics background, and only 21.6% have a background in ethics. The rest of the instructors have backgrounds in areas such as law, philosophy, engineering, and British and American literature (Table 5).

Table 5: Educational Background of the Instructors

Educational Background	No. of Instructors	Percentage
Ethics	11	21.6%
Business administration	25	49.0%
Economics	7	13.7%
Others	8	15.7%

Textbooks used

All the schools offering business ethics responded to this question. Of these, 59.5% of schools used domestically written textbooks, 24.3% used textbooks written by foreign professors, and the rest did not have assigned textbooks.

Table 6: Textbooks Used

	No. of schools	Percentage
Instructor's own textbook	10	27.0%
Other domestically written textbooks	12	32.5%
Textbooks written by foreign professors	9	24.3%
No assigned textbooks	6	16.2%

Instructional methods

Of the 37 schools offering business ethics, thirty-five responded this item, resulting in a 94.6% response rate. Lectures and case studies were used by all 35 schools, exchange of experiences by 24, reading and discussion of relevant articles by eighteen, guest lectures by twelve, and debate by four.



Teaching objectives

Respondents were asked to rank the importance of the eight teaching objectives listed in Table 7. The scores ranged from 1 for the least important to 5 for the most important. Respondents were also encouraged to add any comments they felt were relevant or necessary to increase the quality of their response.

	fron	onses n all ools	from s offeri	onses schools ng the arse	Responses from schools not offering the course	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Understand the internal relationship between business and ethics	3.83	1.17	3.94	1.24	3.74	1.11
Understand corporate social responsibility	4.24	1.00	4.11	1.18	4.35	0.84
Master key ethical concepts and theories	3.36	1.11	3.29	1.17	3.41	1.07
Improve moral judgment skills	3.76	1.15	3.58	1.23	3.90	1.08
Improve the ability to manage ethics	3.61	1.06	3.41	1.23	3.76	0.8
Explore the possible approaches to doing business well with ethics	3.90	1.20	3.77	1.28	3.97	1.14
Enhance sense of moral responsibility	3.84	1.08	3.76	1.18	3.90	1.00

Table 7: Teaching Objectives of Business Ethics

Of 80 questionnaires received, 79 included responses to this survey item, among them 36 from schools that had offered the course and 43 that had not.

3.41

1.06

3.35

1.18

3.45

0.97

All respondents agree that the teaching objectives listed are important (above 3). The top 3 objectives were: (1) to understand corporate social responsibility, (2) to explore the possible approaches to doing business well with ethics, and (3) to enhance a sense of moral responsibility.

Using t tests, we examined whether there are significant differences in teaching objectives between responses from schools offering the course and those that did not. The results suggest that no significant differences exist across the eight objectives.

Difficulties in teaching business ethics

Improve ethical conduct of students

Respondents were asked to rate the degree of difficulty of twelve possible hurdles that could affect the teaching of business ethics. A score of 1 means the lowest level of difficulty, while 5 is the highest level of difficulty (Table 8).



	fror	Responses from all from schools offering the course		Responses from schools not offering the course		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Vague teaching objectives	2.42	1.36	2.0	1.24	2.80	1.38
Lack of appropriate textbooks	3.05	1.28	2.91	1.44	3.18	1.11
Lack of appropriate teaching materials, such as cases, video and film	3.54	1.19	3.39	1.30	3.68	1.10
Lack of qualified instructor	3.16	1.40	2.56	1.37	3.63	1.26
Lack of effective teaching methods	2.93	1.07	2.70	1.16	3.13	0.97
Lack of interest from the students	2.68	1.29	2.66	1.23	2.71	1.35
Lack of interest from the instructor	2.21	1.11	1.80	0.90	2.54	1.17
Too many courses and no room for a new course like business ethics	2.15	1.24	2.03	1.05	2.26	1.39
Lack of importance attached by business school	2.69	1.27	2.53	1.32	2.83	1.24
Lack of support from corporations	2.83	1.23	3.00	1.16	2.70	1.29
Lack of importance attached by the educational administrative department	3.00	1.25	3.26	1.16	2.78	1.29
Lack of incentives and pressures from society	3.58	1.26	3.64	1.22	3.53	1.30

Table 8: Difficulties in Teaching Business Ethics

Of 80 questionnaires received, 78 included responses to this item. Of these, 36 were from schools that had offered the course and 42 that had not.

The most significant difficulties in business ethics education were (1) the lack of societal incentives and pressure, (2) the lack of appropriate teaching materials, and (3) the lack of qualified instructors. The tight schedule of MBA curriculums, lack of interest from the instructors, and vagueness of teaching objectives were the least important difficulties.

We performed t tests to examine whether there are significant differences between schools offering business ethics course and others. The results show that a significant difference exists for a lack of qualified instructors (t = 2.66, p < 0.01). The business schools that did not offer business ethics courses reported higher scores on this item than those offering such courses, indicating that a lack of qualified instructors is a more important issue for the schools that do not offer business ethics.



Importance of teaching business ethics

Respondents were asked to rate the importance of business ethics teaching. The survey question was, "What do you think about the importance of business ethics instruction?" There were four options: very important, important, hard to say, and not important (Table 9).

	Responses from all schools	Responses from schools offering the course	Responses from schools not offering the course
Very important	43	22	21
Important	30	13	17
Hard to say	3	0	3
Not important	1	0	1

Table 9: Importance of Teaching Business Ethics

Of 80 questionnaires received, 77 included responses to this question, among which 35 were from schools that had offered the course, and 42 that had not. Of the 77 responses, 43 chose "very important," accounting for 55.8%; 30 chose "important," accounting for 39%; 3 chose "hard to say," accounting for 3.9%; and only 1 chose "not important," accounting for 1.3%.

We conducted a chi-square test to examine whether the distribution of answers is significantly different between schools offering the course and those not. No significant difference was found ($\chi^2=3.95,$ n.s.). In other words, all the business schools included in our survey agreed that business ethics courses are a very important component of MBA programs.

Prospects for teaching business ethics

Respondents were asked to express their opinion on the prospects of business ethics teaching in China. The options were very optimistic, optimistic, hard to say, and not optimistic (Table 10 below).

Of 80 questionnaires received, 78 included responses to the question, among which 36 were from schools that had offered the course and 42 that had not. Of 78 responses, 8 were "very optimistic," accounting for 10.3%; 59 were "optimistic," accounting for 75.6%; 6 were "hard to say," accounting for 7.7%; and 5 were "not optimistic," accounting for 6.4%.

We conducted a chi-square test to examine whether the distribution of answers is significantly different between schools offering the course and those

not. No significant difference was found ($\chi^2 = 5.17$, n.s.). In other words, all the business schools included in our survey believe that the prospect of offering business ethics in the future is very promising.

	Responses from all schools	Responses from schools offering the course	Responses from schools not offering the course
Very important	8	4	4
Opimistic	59	30	29
Hard to say	6	2	4
Not optimistic	5	0	5

5. Discussion

5.1. Unsatisfactory Current Status

By December 2007, of the 95 schools that obtained permission to offer MBA degrees before 2004, only 38.9% had offered business ethics courses, and of those, only 40.5% made it a compulsory requirement for graduation. There are two main reasons for this unsatisfactory situation.

First, Chinese society has been experiencing a massive social transition since the open door policy was introduced in 1978. During this period, such problems as an orientation toward economic interest, immature market mechanisms, unsound legal infrastructure, and an eagerness for quick success and instant benefit have been pervasive. An orientation toward economic interest has included a motivation to pursue benefit while sacrificing moral principles. Unsound legal infrastructure and immature market mechanism have provided ample opportunities to place gain ahead of principles. The desire for quick success and instant benefits have also led to short-term thinking and pragmatism. People prefer to learn topics or acquire skills that can be helpful for solving practical problems and generating instant rewards. As a result, business ethics courses are not in high demand by students and therefore do not receive proper attention from business schools.

Second, teaching and research into business ethics began in the 1990s. Because of the cross-disciplinary nature of the subject, it is difficult to create a pool of qualified instructors and produce the proper textbooks and reading materials in a short period of time. Lack of qualified instructors and proper



textbooks and reading materials result in poor instruction, which places business ethics teaching in a worse situation.

5.2. Main Difficulties

Based on the survey, we found three main difficulties for business ethics education, as follows.

First, there is lack of incentives and pressures from society. There is little criticism from academia, corporations, or society for inadequate teaching of this topic in domestic business schools. Meanwhile, there is little praise for those business schools that attach importance to teaching business ethics. The China MBA Educational Committee has so far stipulated no clear requirements for the teaching of business ethics. The committee only encourages and suggests that MBA programs offer business ethics courses as part of the curriculum.

Second, there is a shortage of case studies, because the subject matter is not sufficiently prestigious or economically rewarding to encourage instructors to produce them. Writing high quality business ethics cases is time consuming and contributes little to individual academic careers at this time. Instructors are therefore not eager to take the time or make the effort to write business ethics case studies

Third, there is lack of qualified instructors. Business ethics involves two major disciplines—business administration and ethics. Business administration itself is a broad topic and includes marketing, management, accounting, finance, and so on. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that very few local instructors have solid backgrounds in both business administration and ethics. The same is true even in developed countries, but it is especially prominent in China, where business ethics research and education began in the mid-1990s.

Of the 51 ethics instructors in our survey, 62.7% had a background in business administration or economics, while only 21.6% had a background in ethics.

Professors with business administration and economics background usually work in business schools. They have a better understanding of business issues and the demands of MBA students. Some of them have established their academic fame in specific fields encompassed by business administration. Therefore, it is relatively easy for them to be accepted by MBA students as business ethics course instructors. But they usually lack formal philosophical training and expertise in ethics. To make things worse, most of these instructors cannot fully devote themselves to business ethics education and research because (a) this is not their core discipline, and (b) the subject matter is currently not very lucrative. These two points combine to make the shortage of qualified instructors a major hurdle for the development and expansion of business ethics education in China for the foreseeable future.

5.3. Optimistic Prospects

Though the current status of business ethics education in China is not satisfactory and there are difficulties, the prospects are still optimistic, based on our survey. The reasons for optimism about the direction of business ethics education are as follows

The macro environment—including political, economic, and social—is developing in favor of business ethics education.

Political environment. The national development policy requires corporate social responsibility and business ethics. In October 2003, the "Scientific View of Development" was explicitly put forward by the central government. This view stresses consistent and sustainable development, with people development as its foremost objective. In September 2004, the "Construction of Socialist Harmonious Society" was also formally put forward by the central government. This document refers to a society of democratic rule by law, social justice, trustworthiness and amicability, vigor, and order, with steady, harmonious coexistence between human being and nature. Both the scientific view of development and the construction of harmonious society require businesses to pay attention to social responsibility and business ethics.

Economic environment. As the economy develops, the number of corporations and business people who are willing and able to pay more attention to business ethics is increasing. Furthermore, the Chinese economy is merging into the global economy to a considerable degree, and the international community is pushing hard for corporate social responsibility and business ethics.

Such a push may have three effects. (1) When MNCs purchase in China, they require suppliers to meet certain ethical requirements, such as SA8000. (2) The beliefs and behavior, as well as the operations, of socially responsible MNCs in China could become a role model for local companies in the same industry. (3) As Chinese companies expand their operations overseas, the international community expects them to assume greater ethical responsibilities.

Social environment. Social problems, such as wealth disparity, unbalanced regional development, pollution and waste of resources, injustice, and business bribery are major components of the social environment. Although not all these problems are caused by business, business does contribute or exacerbate these problems to some extent, depending on industry type and location. Due to the existence of these problems, the public will exert persistent pressure on business to assume more moral responsibilities. Meanwhile, public opinion on corporate reputation is playing an increasingly important role in society, which increases the pressure on as well as the motivation of business to assume greater moral

responsibility. As a case in point, strong public expectations were raised after the May 2008 earthquake in Sichuan Province that businesses nationwide should hasten to help the earthquake victims and their families. In fact, many companies have taken up the challenge with much generosity.

These factors are somewhat diverse, and yet they do combine to exert pressure on academic institutions offering MBA degrees to integrate business ethics into their curricula. In December 2006, the fifth plenary session of the third National MBA Education Committee, as well as the Deans' Conference of Chinese Business Schools with MBA Education, was held in Hangzhou. The plenary session recognized that there are urgent needs for Chinese business leaders to have a sense of social responsibility. The necessity of including social responsibility and business ethics into the MBA curriculum was reiterated. In 2009, the fourth National MBA Education Committee reaffirmed business ethics and CSR as one of fifteen core courses. The Committee designated three coordinators for the course: Professor Weiying Zhang, Dean of Guanghua School of Management, Peking University, and one of four vice chairmen of the Committee; Professor Dongning Yang of Peking University; and Professor Zucheng Zhou of Shanghai Jiao Tong University.

International accreditation and ranking of business schools also play a role in encouraging Chinese business schools to pay more attention to teaching business ethics.

On 29 March 2006 the Global Business School Deans' conference took place at Antai College of Economics and Management of Shanghai Jiao Tong University. The deans from Chinese business schools unanimously agreed that the internationalization of Chinese business schools is inevitable and has indeed begun. A group of top Chinese business schools have received or are applying for international accreditation as well. In 2006, the MBA program of Zhejiang University was accredited by the Association of MBAs (AMBA). In 2007, the School of Economics and Management of Tsinghua University received the accreditation of the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). In 2008, the Antai College of Economics and Management of Shanghai Jiao Tong University received both the AMBA and EQUIS accreditation.

The new trend for domestic universities in China offering MBA degrees is to secure an international ranking. For example, the Antai College of Economics and Management of Shanghai Jiao Tong University participated in the *Financial Times* ranking in 2008 and ranked 41st in the list of top MBA programs worldwide. It is expected that the number of Chinese business schools seeking an international ranking will increase significantly in the future.

International accreditation and ranking of domestic business schools also play a role in encouraging Chinese business schools to pay more attention to

teaching business ethics, because (a) the international accreditation agencies stress the importance of teaching business ethics, and (b) all top business schools in the world include business ethics education more or less as part of their MBA curriculum.

Strides have been made in teaching business ethics in the past decade.

As we have demonstrated in our survey, several business schools have been teaching business ethics for years, and as a result have accumulated valuable experience that can be shared with other schools. At the same time, remarkable progress has been made especially in the development of textbooks. In recent years, several foreign textbooks have been introduced, including:

- 1. Business Ethics (5th edition), by Richard T. De George.
- 2. Business Ethics and Society: Ethics and Stakeholder Management (5th edition), by Archie B. Carroll and Ann K. Buchholtz.
- 3. Business Ethics: A Global and Managerial Perspective, by David J. Fritzsche.
- 4. Business Ethics: A Stakeholder and Issues Management Approach (3rd edition), by Joseph W. Weiss.
- 5. *The Ethics of Management* (5th edition), by LaRue Tone Hosmer.
- 6. Action-Oriented Business Ethics, by Georges Enderle.

Additionally, there are more than a dozen textbooks on business ethics by Chinese authors currently available in China. Some of them are highly rated (Zhou 2008):

- 1. *Introduction to Business Ethics*, by Bingfu Chen and Zucheng Zhou (1st edition in 2000 and 2nd edition in 2008).
- 2. Business Ethics, by Dajian Xu (2002).
- 3. *Introduction to Business Ethics*, by Yinghang Zhang (2002).
- 4. Contemporary Business Ethics, by Yong Su (2003).
- 5. Business Ethics, by Runping Ouyang (2003).
- 6. Business Ethics, by Zucheng Zhou (2005).



As these textbooks can be improved, the lack of textbooks is no longer an obstacle to teaching business ethics in China.

6. Conclusion

The research reported and discussed in this paper represents the first comprehensive survey of business ethics teaching in MBA programs in China. It presents a picture of the current status and shows some future prospects, explained in the previous sections. The results are primarily based on the views of MBA directors and business ethics instructors. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the role of business ethics education in China, it would be necessary to conduct additional surveys of students (especially those who attended business ethics courses), corporations, and other organizations and agencies.

Although the provision of business ethics teaching is still rather limited and there exist difficulties, the survey provides some reasons to be optimistic about the future. However, in order to promote business ethics teaching in China, both external and internal efforts are needed.

With regard to external efforts, here are two concrete suggestions: (1) The National MBA Education Committee should clearly delineate the requirements of business ethics teaching in the MBA programs in China. It should also require all MBA programs to offer at least one business ethics course. (2) The business school accreditation and ranking agencies should have clear requirements for the business schools to include business ethics or related courses in their MBA curriculums.

As for the internal efforts, they are even more important, particularly with regard to improving the quality of instruction itself. For this purpose the following steps need to be taken: (1) Further clarify the objectives of teaching business ethics; (2) integrate ethics into the MBA education in general; (3) produce better textbooks; (4) explore effective instruction methods; (5) have PhD programs that train future instructors with knowledge both in business administration and ethics; (6) establish training centers for existing business ethics instructors; (7) invite more influential business people who run businesses ethically into the classroom to share their experiences with students; (8) establish a national organization for business ethics teaching and research to coordinate the efforts; (9) construct a website to share teaching resources.

With these recommendations in mind, and with an increasing demand for ethical conduct in the business community, we believe improvement in the quality and extent of business ethics teaching at the MBA level in China will be apparent in the near future.



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