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The Confucian Cultural Dynamic Mechanism of Achievement-oriented Work Attitude

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Abstract

Work attitude constitutes a significant cultural driver of modernization. Western cultural theories of modernization posit that the professional ethos or achievement-oriented work motivation derived from Protestant ethical culture has propelled the formation of modern society. Correspondingly, Confucian thought has been regarded as emphasizing hierarchy, tradition, and conservatism, thereby impeding the development of modern Chinese society. This paper addresses this major theoretical question through empirical quantitative methods. Utilizing achievement-oriented work attitude as the dependent variable and Confucian ultimate values as the independent variable, statistical analysis of 4,697 questionnaire surveys reveals that, under provincial fixed effects, Confucian ultimate values exert a positive and significant influence on work attitude through a progressive hierarchy of “self—family—society.” The mediating variables with the highest mediating effects are, in sequence, sense of social responsibility, professional ethics, and career ambition. This mechanism remains stable across generational transitions. The modern scientific spirit negatively moderates the relationship between Confucian ultimate values and achievement-oriented work attitude. These findings demonstrate that Confucian thought can function as a driver of modernization development, operating through its own cultural mechanism of action for achievement-oriented work attitude, while requiring mitigation of the transformative influence exerted by Western scientific rationality.

Full Text

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Abstract

Work attitude constitutes a crucial cultural driver of modernization. Western cultural theories of modernization posit that the professional ethos or achievement-oriented work motivation derived from Protestant ethics propelled the formation of modern society. Correspondingly, Confucian thought has been regarded as emphasizing hierarchy, tradition, and conservatism, thereby hindering China's modernization. This paper employs empirical quantitative methods to address this significant theoretical question. Using achievement-oriented work attitude as the dependent variable and Confucian ultimate view as the independent variable, statistical analysis of 4,697 survey questionnaires reveals that, under provincial fixed effects, Confucian ultimate view exerts a positive and significant influence on work attitude through a progressive "self-family-society" hierarchy. The mediating variables with the strongest mediating effects are, in order, social responsibility, professional ethics, and career initiative. This mechanism remains stable across generational changes. Modern scientific spirit negatively moderates the effect of Confucian ultimate view on achievement work attitude. These results demonstrate that Confucianism can serve as a driving force for modernization development, with its achievement-oriented work attitude possessing its own cultural mechanism of action, which requires reconciling the transformative impact of Western scientific rationality.

Keywords: Chinese-style modernization, Confucian ultimate view, work attitude, scientific spirit, social change

Introduction

How modern societies form is a fundamental issue for understanding today's world. Various theories address this question, among which cultural theory holds an important position. This theoretical strand argues that modernization is an inevitable outcome of Western cultural development. As Weber contended, capitalism is intimately linked with Christian Protestant ethics, which fostered a positive work attitude that propelled its formation (Weber, 2019). The pursuit of work achievement represents a hallmark trait of the "modern individual" (Inkeles, 1985: 5). An achievement society implies that modern individuals must realize their value and life necessities through diligent work, actualizing their potential, gaining social recognition, and attaining higher social strata via achievement (Spence, 1985). While technological advancement promotes economic growth from a "material" perspective, positive work attitude, as a crucial modern economic ethic, creates social efficiency from the most fundamental "human" angle, accumulating tremendous energy for economic and

social development.

Explaining China's modernization from a cultural perspective encounters both theoretical and practical challenges. As a late-developing or forced-to-modernize nation, China had to "learn" from the West in response to Western gunboats and swords, with national salvation, survival, and strengthening through technology representing a "march toward the West" (Ren, 2001). Culturally, China possesses a civilization tradition distinct from the West, lacking a Protestant ethics-style faith tradition or the so-called "calling" to facilitate China's "achievement" turn. Confucian culture constitutes China's mainstream cultural system. However, viewed historically, at the dawn of modern times, Confucian culture, due to its emphasis on hierarchy and tradition, was deemed detrimental to modernization and requiring elimination (Weber, 2008). Nevertheless, through monumental social transformations in modern and contemporary times, particularly since the founding of the People's Republic, China has successfully transformed into a "modernized" nation (Yang, 1996: 143). How, then, does Confucian culture intersect and connect with Western professional spirit culture, and how has Confucian culture provided developmental impetus for China's opening and globalization? This constitutes an important perspective and dimension for understanding China's governance.

When situated within a political perspective, this question assumes even greater academic significance. Today's China has politically established that Chinese-style modernization construction is achieved through integrating the basic principles of Marxism with China's specific realities and with China's excellent traditional culture. Excellent traditional culture has assumed a foundational position in national tasks. How Confucian culture can better provide internal impetus for Chinese-style modernization requires deeper academic understanding. This paper attempts to respond to this major theoretical and practical challenge through empirical methods, progressively discussing three questions: Does Confucian ultimate view fulfill a deep-seated achievement culture dynamic function similar to Western Protestant ethics? What is the cultural-psychological mechanism of Chinese-style modern work attitude? What deep challenges does contemporary Confucian achievement culture dynamics encounter?

2.1 Modernization and Its Cultural Drivers

The sources of modernization's driving forces are crucial for understanding the modernization process and its impacts. Existing research has proposed several classic theoretical explanations: changes in productive forces and relations, technological advancement, industrialization and urbanization, unequal exchange in global capitalism, cultural transformation, and others (Zhu, 2005). Among these, the cultural dynamics explanation represents an important perspective, influencing people's attitudes, values, and behavioral patterns toward modernization. Weber's interpretation in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* has exerted far-reaching influence and serves as the primary theoretical interlocutor for this paper (Weber, 2019). The distinctive characteristic of mod-

ern society is its achievement orientation. Weber argued that modern society's achievement orientation derives from Protestant ethics. The Reformation led by Luther and Calvin, though initially aimed at pursuing Christian moral ideals, objectively facilitated capitalism. For Protestants, life is created by God, and the activities of Protestant Christians in the earthly realm, including occupational labor in daily service, all serve to obey God's commandments and fulfill His will.

God arranges everything, including marriage and occupation. Consequently, intense engagement in secular activities and striving for occupational success become the sole means of establishing confidence in salvation (Jing, 2011). This spirit provided the necessary psychological foundation and infused "substantive rationality" or "value rationality" for the development of modern capitalist society, motivating individuals to work not merely for survival but from internal drive, continuing to work even after material needs are satisfied (Weber, 2019).

Of course, Weber also noted the "alienation" of Protestant ethics in modern capitalism. He pointed out that since asceticism began reshaping the earthly world and establishing its ideals therein, material products have acquired an unprecedented controlling power over human existence—a power that continuously increases and remains unyielding (Weber, 2019). From Weber and Marx to Lukács and the Frankfurt School, Western and contemporary societies have been analyzed in terms of instrumental rationality and value rationality (Chen, 1996).

Religious belief belongs to emotional and spiritual culture, yet human civilization is fundamentally rooted in emotional and spiritual culture. People must attribute value to certain behaviors; otherwise, social institutions cannot function (Jing, 2016). After examining America, Tocqueville (1993) noted that one cannot understand anything about American society without first recognizing the solid religious foundation that sustains the operation of democratic institutions. Understanding a cultural phenomenon requires entering deep inside the culture for interpretation.

2.2 Professional Spirit and Work Attitude

"Professional spirit," according to Weber's investigation, relates to the efforts of Martin Luther, the founder of Protestant Lutheranism. When translating the Bible into German, Luther used the German term *Beruf* (occupation, calling), equivalent to the English word "calling" (occupation, divine summons). This German term means "a task arranged by God," "a lifelong task," "something that people must accept, adapt themselves to, and that is divinely ordained." Weber argued that Luther's fundamental intention in proposing this term was to oppose traditional Christian ascetic doctrines, not considering asceticism as a superior form of Christian virtue, but rather demonstrating from basic principles that daily work possesses equal religious value—"The only way of life approved by God is not for people to transcend secular morality through asceticism, but

for individuals to fulfill the responsibilities and obligations assigned to them by their position in the present world. This is their ‘calling’” (Weber, 2019).

This spirit exhibits the following characteristics: diligence and frugality—Protestants are encouraged to work diligently and live frugally to demonstrate their state of salvation; rational calculation—economic activities are based on rational calculation and expected returns rather than traditional customs or emotional drives; pursuit of efficiency—striving to improve work efficiency and reduce waste; continuity and systematicity—work is regarded as a lifelong career. This phenomenon is not limited to Europe. American achievement culture, based on Protestantism, also features these characteristics: views on work and wealth, competition, time orientation, individualism, self-interest, equality of opportunity, and temporal concepts, among others. Naturally, these notions have created an American independent pressure-type society, giving rise to theories such as the demand–control model and the effort–reward imbalance model (Peterson & Wilson, 2004).

Work attitude represents the subjective embodiment of professional spirit. Attitude comprises three components: cognition, emotion, and behavior (Zhang & Gao, 2023). Work attitude refers to an individual’s evaluation of work. In terms of evaluative dimensions, most scholars consider “work engagement” (Robbins, 1997), “work achievement” (Jing, 1995), and “sense of responsibility” (Wang, 2018) as fundamental dimensions for measuring work attitude. Modern individuals exist in an organized manner, with organizations being effective integration processes of action centered on work responsibilities. The achievement-oriented work attitude of modern individuals constitutes the human driving force generated by modernization. This reflects the rational enterprising spirit that modern individuals should possess, liberating people from psychological states of contentment with the status quo and fear of change, pursuing work achievements, and adapting to an achievement society, thereby endowing national modernization with genuine vitality (Jing, 1995). Positive work attitudes among the populace can shape collective consciousness and normative identification through meaning production, forming an uplifting social force (Huang & Li, 2023). Consequently, work attitude can serve as an important social mentality for judging the degree and characteristics of modernization. Current research on public work attitude predominantly explores micro-level perspectives from psychology, management, and organizational behavior, such as examining the impact of psychological resources like “social support” and “workplace spirituality” (Duan & Xie, 2015) and organizational management factors like “employee status” and “leadership behavior” (Zhu et al., 2017) on public work attitude. While these perspectives provide detailed and concrete support for explaining the sources of public work attitude dynamics, they inevitably remain narrow. Existing research indicates that work attitude is influenced not only by individual characteristics and job nature but also by deeper Chinese cultural influences (Wang, 2018).

2.3 Ultimate Views, Values, and Their Mechanisms of Action

Culture is a shared, symbolic cognitive or meaning system through which individuals, within shared linguistic, historical, and geographical environments, accept, believe, evaluate, communicate, and act upon meanings prescribed by culture, transmitting them from generation to generation with modifications (Harry, 1996). At the individual level, shared culture shapes individuals, forming their world of life meaning and making them social beings (Jing, 2015). At the societal level, any economy, polity, or society constitutes a complex cultural amalgam composed of rules, conventions, customs, and behavioral beliefs that constitute the modes of choice for people's daily behavior and determine the paths through which they achieve expected goals. Informal rules centered on conventions, customs, and behavioral beliefs can even play irreplaceable roles that formal rules cannot, and these derive from intergenerational transmission as part of what is called culture (North, 2003). Culture not only transmits humanity's past knowledge, establishes social institutional rules, and shapes present living beings, but also prescribes the forms of the present and future in the manner of the past.

The essence of culture is to prescribe meaning for existence. "Every society attempts to establish a meaning system through which people display their connection to the world" (Jing, 2016). These meanings stipulate a set of purposes that either, like myths and rituals, explain the characteristics of shared experiences, or transform nature through human magical or technical power, manifesting in religion, culture, and work (Jing, 2017). The loss of meaning in these domains creates a state of confusion and bewilderment that becomes intolerable, thereby compelling people to urgently pursue new meaning to prevent everything from descending into nihilism or emptiness (Bell, 1992). Culture is a conceptual system centered on ultimate beliefs. As living beings with advanced nervous systems and abstract self-consciousness, humans are rooted in the seeking of "meaning": Why do we come into this world? Where are we going? What is the nature of life? What is the value of life? (Peter, 2000). It constitutes a component of human consciousness—a cognitive pursuit of the "total order" of existence and its patterns; an emotional craving to establish rituals and sanctify those concepts; a basic need to connect with others or relate to a set of meanings that will establish transcendent responses toward the self; and an essential survival concept when confronting the finality of pain and death (Jing, 2017). The recognized ultimate view of a civilization system becomes the ideological foundation for that system's spiritual life, social morality, legal order, and even institutional design (Robert, 2002). Human sense of meaning is fundamentally determined by individual ultimate values. Values are rooted in needs and provide a principled foundation for human goals, formed through human cognition and experience, and serve as criteria for behavioral choice (Gary & Craig, 2005). Under the Western cultural view, the process of obtaining life meaning through the seeking of the "sacred" (Peter & Kenneth, 2008) is deeply

connected with God, and its ultimate view focuses on answering life's meaning from the dimensions of human "origin" (the so-called creation of humans by God) and "destination" (heaven).

In contrast, mainstream Chinese culture does not prominently feature a creator-based "sacred" concept, but rather unfolds its contemplation of ultimate questions about "what makes humans human" based on evolutionary concepts such as the world-originate, fundamental, and supreme notions of "Heaven," "Dao," and "Li." Although China is not a religious society, all civilizations develop based on ultimate beliefs. Ultimate views shape human mental structures and frame social values and ethical behavioral rules. In China, Confucian thought is most representative in shaping public attitudes and behaviors, and its ethical concepts have influenced Chinese cultural values for millennia (Wang & Zhang, 2012). In summary, ultimate concepts in Western culture often develop with reference to a transcendent creator, whereas ultimate concepts in Chinese culture typically unfold based on life enlightenment regarding the supreme "Dao" in the present world. Although Protestant ethics possesses cross-cultural commensurability, the enormous differences between Protestant ethics and Confucian ethics (Zhang & Liu, 2013) determine that only China's own culture can interpret the rise of China's economy and the development of Chinese-style modernization.

Therefore, studying the cultural mechanism of achievement-oriented work attitude in Chinese society requires data-driven analysis of the Confucian ultimate view and its value system's mechanisms of action.

3.1 The Overall Effect of Confucian Ultimate View

Within the Confucian ideological system, "Ren" (benevolence) constitutes the foundation of human existence. Although human essence lies in meaningful existence, human belief is even more value-based, thereby driving moral or social behavior (Jing, 2015). This thought possesses a complete ideological system. Confucianism locates human responsibility within the relationship between heaven, earth, and humanity, where humans can glorify the Dao rather than the Dao glorifying humans. Human nature is good, and heaven and humanity can converge toward "Ren," enabling the experience of heavenly Dao, acting on behalf of heaven to govern all things, and embodying initiative, innovation, dedication to duty, diligence, self-improvement, perseverance, pursuit of excellence, and success-seeking—all containing professional dedication and self-achievement (Liu & Xiao, 2016). However, traditional Confucian achievement orientation is moral, the so-called "three imperishables" of establishing virtue. Oriented toward "virtue," the greatest achievement is becoming a sage, the so-called establishment of virtue, speech, and merit. This indicates that Confucianism fundamentally possesses an achievement-oriented dynamic mechanism. Based on this, this paper proposes Hypothesis 1:

H1: Confucian ultimate view can significantly promote public work attitude.

3.2 Mediating Effects

Confucianism understands humans as both vertically virtuous beings and horizontally relational beings, emphasizing the tight internal unity between individuals and groups, family and society. Vertically, it represents an ever-expanding process of “investigating things, extending knowledge, making intentions sincere, rectifying hearts, cultivating self, regulating families, governing states, and pacifying the world.” Horizontally, it represents a socialization process of layered expansion and organic harmony from “self, family, relatives, community, society, ethnicity, nation, to world” (Liu, 1994). From this we infer that Confucianism exerts its ultimate influence on individual work attitude through multiple channels of “self-family-society.”

3.2.1 Individual Level

Work values represent a type of cognition and belief about one’s work formed by individuals based on living environment, educational background, and other factors, which often dominate and guide individuals’ attitudes and behaviors toward work (Cao et al., 2024). Confucian thought regards suffering as a necessary path to success and an important factor in human achievement. As Mencius stated, “When Heaven is about to confer a great responsibility on a person, it will first exercise his mind with suffering, his sinews and bones with toil, his body with hunger, his skin with emptiness, and confound his endeavors. In this way, his mind will be stimulated, his character strengthened, and his capabilities enhanced” (*Mencius · Gaozi II*). Confucianism motivates people to actively confront setbacks at work, helping them enhance patience and confidence, thereby shaping resilient work psychological tenacity. Based on this, we propose Hypotheses H2a–H2c:

H2a: Confucian ultimate view can positively influence work attitude by affecting individual career initiative.

H2b: Confucian ultimate view can positively influence work attitude by affecting individual professional ethics.

H2c: Confucian ultimate view can positively influence work attitude by affecting individual work psychological tenacity.

3.2.2 Family Level

Family kinship constitutes the existential foundation from which Confucian thought emerges. Since ancient times, family ethics have been regarded as the origin of Chinese social ethics. Confucianism connects the family ideal of “affectionate father and filial son, friendly elder brother and respectful younger brother, righteous husband and obedient wife” with the social ideal of “cultivating self, regulating family, governing state, and pacifying the world,” treating “regulating family” as an important link to achieving social stability. The family entity thus becomes an important source of motivation and social support

resource for individuals to achieve success at work, providing positive and stable psychological support for the public. However, there are also competing explanations: caring for family and work inherently involves tension. The birth of post-materialist thought has further weakened the work-centered concept (Chen & Lian, 2011), as people gradually shift their focus from work to family and life itself. Meanwhile, the problem of work-family imbalance has become increasingly common and prominent (Gao & Zhao, 2014), and people's pursuit of work and achievement often harms family interests, with this conflict also exerting relatively serious negative impacts on work attitude. Based on this, we propose Hypotheses H3a and H3b:

H3a: Confucian ultimate view positively influences public work attitude by affecting family importance.

H3b: Confucian ultimate view negatively influences public work attitude by affecting family importance.

3.2.3 Social Level

Confucianism emphasizes the unity of individuals and groups, requiring people to extend their relationships beyond structures like the family to establish meaningful connections with larger groups and society as a whole, thereby completing the transformation from “cultivating self and regulating family” to “governing state and pacifying the world” and truly achieving “inner sagehood and outer kingship.” Concepts such as “the world belongs to all,” “when poor, cultivate self; when successful, benefit the world,” “worry before the world worries, enjoy only after the world enjoys,” and “everyone is responsible for the rise and fall of the world” all demonstrate Confucianism's high emphasis on social responsibility, stressing that people should regard society as their duty. Extending into modern society, social responsibility, as a relatively stable psychological quality of individuals actively undertaking social responsibility and helping others (Huang, 2016), is considered a core competency for individuals to achieve comprehensive development, happy lives, and successful careers, and has been used by numerous scholars as an effective predictor of positive psychology and behavior. Based on this, we propose Hypothesis 4:

H4: Confucian ultimate view positively influences public work attitude by affecting social responsibility.

3.3 Interaction Effects

Since modern times, both Chinese state and society have undergone earth-shaking transformations. Culturally, this manifests as traditional Chinese Confucian culture, primarily virtue-based, being increasingly marginalized under the strong impact of Western advanced “scientific spirit,” which is primarily knowledge-based. Due to society's scientific orientation dissolving the sacred meaning and ontological commitment of ethics, Confucian ethics has begun experiencing a serious identity crisis (Zhang, 2021). Will the effect of Confucian

ultimate view on public work attitude be influenced by the impact of “scientific spirit” and dramatic social changes?

Scientific spirit originates from the modern scientific pursuit of knowledge and truth, and the tradition of rationality and empiricism, which starkly contrasts with the Chinese Confucian cultural tradition that emphasizes speculative enlightenment over empiricism and values “practical rationality” based on experience (Liang & Xia, 2017). As an important tool in social transformation, scientific spirit continuously challenges Chinese people’s cognition of traditional Confucian culture, providing an important paradigm for the modern evolution of traditional culture. Based on this, we propose Hypothesis 5:

H5: Scientific spirit negatively moderates the positive influence of Confucian ultimate view on work attitude.

Since modern times, especially since the reform and opening up, Chinese society has continuously undergone transformation. In the early stages of economic development, since the state and enterprises required employees to possess high levels of collectivist spirit and sacrifice to support national and enterprise development, work attitude at that time manifested as loyalty, dedication, and responsibility. However, with rapid economic development, work attitude began shifting toward personal development, self-interest, and individual promotion (Wu & Sun, 2023). Before reform and opening up, material rewards for different jobs varied little; after reform and opening up, people could obtain greater economic benefits by changing jobs, gradually “utilitarianizing” their views on work (Chen & Lian, 2011). Of course, along with China’s rapid urbanization and the rise of the information society, a postmodern society emphasizing personalized consumption and diverse lifestyles has gradually flourished, and people’s social mentality may also shift from economic self-sufficiency toward post-materialist values focusing on individual rights and quality of life (Inglehart, 2008). Based on this, we propose Hypothesis 6:

H6: The influence of Confucian ultimate view on work attitude will weaken with generational changes.

In summary, the theoretical framework is as follows: Confucian ultimate view influences work attitude through multiple mediating pathways at the individual level (career initiative, professional ethics, and work psychological tenacity), family level (family importance), and social level (social responsibility). This framework illustrates the “traditional-modern” tension in understanding how Confucian values shape achievement-oriented work attitudes in contemporary society.

[Figure 1: see original paper] Theoretical Framework: “Traditional-Modern” Tension

4.1 Data Source

The data comes from the third wave of the “Cultural Concepts and National Governance” survey, conducted in 2022. The survey was carried out across 23 provincial-level administrative regions nationwide using quota sampling. The sample quota of 6,000 was proportionally controlled for key demographic variables—gender, education level, and age—based on data from the 2020 National Seventh Population Census. To reduce geographic concentration and hidden selection bias inherent in non-probability sampling methods, the survey covered extra-large, large, medium, and small cities in each administrative region as much as possible, and required interviewers to conduct surveys in various public places within their cities. After eliminating missing values and invalid samples, the effective sample size was 4,697. Individual sample characteristics are shown in Table 1 .

4.2 Variable Definitions

Achievement-oriented work attitude (dependent variable). Work attitude is operationally defined through work engagement, sense of responsibility, and positive achievement (Schaufeli, 2002). Work engagement refers to a positive, full emotional and cognitive state related to work, measured by the item “devote myself wholeheartedly to my work.” Sense of responsibility examines the extent to which the public complies with work duties and fulfills work obligations, with its intensity measured by “must complete 本职工作 according to regulations.” Positive achievement examines the public’s love for and sense of belonging to their work, including the desire to set goals and achieve success at work, measured by the item “have a desire to achieve when facing work.” The three variables are summed and averaged to form a comprehensive work attitude, with higher scores indicating more positive work attitudes among the public.

Confucian ultimate view (core independent variable). Designed based on underlying Confucian beliefs, with Confucius as the representative figure, Confucius’s most important concept is “Ren” (benevolence). In the process of seeking virtue, Confucius encountered numerous setbacks, and through the interaction between internal and external psychological frameworks, he reflected and formed the ultimate view of “Ren.” Confucius used “Ren” as the ultimate view to provide a Confucian framework of “person,” a personality structure with “Heavenly Dao” as the ontological origin, “Ren,” “Li” (ritual), “Zhi” (knowledge), and “Ming” (destiny) as elements, and virtue as the mediating thread, possessing the spiritual temperament of “inner sagehood and outer kingship.” The pursuit of “Ren” is both motivation and goal, an endless process of elevating life’s realm. In this process, ideal personality is cultivated and self-actualization is achieved. Confucianism cultivates inner virtue and concentrates on the Dao for “inner sagehood,” while externally practicing “Ren governance” for “outer kingship,” emphasizing both internal and external aspects to obtain abundant and fulfilling life meaning (Jing, 2012).

The Confucian ultimate view centered on “Ren” is a conceptual system with “Heavenly Dao” as its ontological origin. This study designed 10 items referring to the Confucian personality structure framework and its meaning system (Jing, 2012). Items such as “Humans are born with the goodness of heaven and earth, therefore should ‘act on behalf of heaven to govern all things,’” “One should have reverence for ‘Heavenly Dao,’” “‘Ren, Yi, Li, Zhi, Xin’ are rules for being human,” and “‘Cultivating self, regulating family, governing state, pacifying world’ is never outdated” were used to measure Confucian ultimate view. The 10 items are summed and averaged, with higher scores indicating greater influence of Confucian ultimate view on the public.

The mediating variables are career initiative, professional ethics, work psychological tenacity, family importance, and social responsibility. Humans exist in reality as individual-family-social beings. Therefore, the effect of ultimate view theoretically operates through other variables. Focusing on work attitude, the main variables are career initiative, professional ethics, work psychological tenacity, family importance, and social responsibility. The corresponding questionnaire designs are: (1) **Career initiative** refers to an individual’s internal motivation to pursue success, achieve goals, and strive for excellence in their career (Li & Fan, 2014), measured by 3 items such as “How important is personal career success to you?” (2) **Professional ethics** represents the public’s or individual’s subjective cognition of commonly recognized behavioral norms and standards in the work environment (Xu & Zhang, 2022), measured by 4 items such as “How would you feel if you made a mistake at work?” (3) **Work psychological tenacity** is an individual’s ability to regulate adversity, maintain balance, preserve a sense of environmental control, and continue acting in positive ways in the workplace (Jackson, 2007), measured by 6 items such as “Can withstand competitive pressure at work” and “Can withstand work setbacks.” (4) **Family importance** refers to an individual’s degree of emphasis on family, measured by 6 items such as “Is family worth sacrificing personal interests for?” and “Is your main motivation for career achievement to bring honor to your ancestors?” (5) **Social responsibility** primarily refers to an independent personality’s attitude toward duties, tasks, and missions undertaken for the nation, collective, and others (Feng, 2009), measured by 4 items such as “Social responsibility” and “Make outstanding contributions to society.”

The moderating variable is **scientific spirit**. Another characteristic of modern society is scientific rationality. Scientific spirit refers to the comprehensive manifestation of cognition, attitudes, values, and behavioral norms formed by people in scientific research and practice activities, primarily manifesting as the truth-seeking spirit of rational exploration and pursuit of truth, and the reality-seeking spirit of respecting facts and practical verification (Chen, 1997). This study uses 5 items such as “Science and technology are the primary productive forces,” “The impact of scientific development on society is more beneficial than harmful,” and “Scientific spirit originates from humanity’s quest for knowledge and exploration spirit and the tradition of sensibility and empiricism, and its connotation becomes richer with continuous scientific practice.”

Control variables include: gender, education level, religious belief, Chinese Communist Party membership, public sector employment, and birth generation. Regarding generation classification, combining the “socialization hypothesis” that considers adolescence and early adulthood as critical periods for value formation, this paper divides respondents into four generations based on the social-historical stage of their value formation period in the data: Early Construction Generation (born 1965 and earlier), Reform and Opening-up Generation (born 1966–1979), Marketization Generation (born 1980–1988), and New Century Generation (born 1989 and later).

Except for control variables, all variables were measured using a 5-point Likert scale with positively worded questions. All specific items for each variable are shown in Appendix Table 1. To test the scientific validity of the selected scale items, Cronbach’s α coefficient was used for reliability testing. A Cronbach’s α coefficient above 0.7 is considered excellent reliability; above 0.6 is considered good and acceptable. Table 2 shows that the scales used in this study range from 0.650 to 0.841, all equal to or greater than 0.65, indicating satisfactory reliability.

5.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 3 presents the mean scores for the dependent variable “work attitude” and the core independent variable “Confucian ultimate view,” as well as item-specific mean scores arranged from high to low. According to the descriptive statistics, using 5 as the full score standard, respondents’ mean work attitude score is 4.260, indicating an above-average level. Item-specific comparisons show that “must complete 本职工作 according to regulations” (responsibility dimension) scored highest at 4.355; “devote myself wholeheartedly to my work” (striving dimension) scored second at 4.249; and “have a desire to achieve” (achievement dimension) scored relatively lower at 4.177.

Table 4 shows that the mean score for Confucian ultimate view is 4.216, also indicating an above-average level. Item-specific comparisons reveal that five items related to the “good nature-responsibility view,” such as “‘Ren, Yi, Li, Zhi, Xin’ are rules for being human,” “All things in the world are our companions and should live harmoniously,” “‘Cultivating self, regulating family, governing state, pacifying world’ is never outdated,” and “Do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself,” scored highest, indicating that these types of thoughts in Confucian ultimate view are most accepted by current respondents. Six items related to the “Heavenly Dao-ethics view,” such as “People unfilial to their parents cannot be trusted or worked with,” “One should have reverence for ‘Heavenly Dao,’” and “Only by comprehending heavenly principles and conscience can humans have life meaning,” scored relatively lower, indicating these thoughts are less accepted by respondents.

The means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients of all variables are shown in Table 5. The results show that all variables exhibit certain significant

positive correlations. Work attitude shows strong correlations with professional ethics ($r=0.500$, $P<0.001$), career initiative and social responsibility ($r=0.574$, $P<0.001$), and professional ethics and social responsibility ($r=0.658$, $P<0.001$), with correlation coefficients exceeding or equal to 0.5. All inter-variable correlation coefficients remain at medium-low levels (below 0.7), indicating low multicollinearity among variables and suitability for further hypothesis testing.

5.2 Benchmark Regression

The magnitude of Confucian ultimate view's effect on work attitude can be analyzed and verified through robust OLS multiple linear regression models. The regression's dependent variable is work attitude, the core independent variable is Confucian ultimate view, and control variables include respondents' gender, education level, religious belief, Chinese Communist Party membership, public sector employment, income, and birth generation, with provincial fixed effects also controlled. Regression results are shown in Table 6 :

Model 1 includes only control variables, showing that respondents with higher education ($\beta=0.080$, $P<0.001$), Chinese Communist Party members ($\beta=0.111$, $P<0.001$), and high-income respondents ($\beta=0.044$, $P<0.01$) have significantly higher work attitudes. Model 2 incorporates the core independent variable. It is generally considered that an R-squared increase exceeding 2% has substantive significance. Compared with Model 1, the R-squared increased by 9.7% after introducing the core independent variable, indicating that Confucian ultimate view is an important explanatory variable for work attitude. The regression coefficient β for Confucian ultimate view is 0.342 ($P<0.001$), demonstrating that Confucian ultimate view can significantly enhance work attitude. Model 3 further adds provincial fixed effects on the basis of Model 2, and Confucian ultimate view remains positively significant with a regression coefficient β of 0.337 ($P<0.001$). Hypothesis H1 is supported.

For robustness testing and to explore heterogeneity, group comparisons were also conducted. Grouped regression results are compiled in Table 7 , with all regressions including control variables and provincial fixed effects. The results show: (1) For different subgroups, the effect of Confucian ultimate view on work attitude is significantly positive, indicating that the cultural function of Confucian ultimate view is universal among the public and the effect is robust. (2) No obvious effect heterogeneity exists across different groups within gender, political identity, or public sector employment. (3) However, for the three variables of education level, religious belief, and income, the effects show clear heterogeneity and patterns: as education level and income increase, the effect of Confucian ultimate view on work attitude gradually decreases; Confucian ultimate view better promotes work attitude among subgroups with relatively lower education and income levels. Additionally, compared with the subgroup without religious belief, the positive effect of Confucian ultimate view on work attitude is larger among the subgroup with religious belief. These groups may be more traditional, thus the influence of Confucian ultimate view on work

attitude is stronger.

5.3 Mediating Effects

What is the mechanism through which Confucian ultimate view exerts its positive influence on work attitude? Through mediating effect analysis, we can gain deeper understanding of the influence processes and mechanisms between variables. This paper uses the Bootstrap method for mediating effect testing, a non-parametric estimation method that resamples observed information to construct t-statistics for statistical inference of mediating effects. If the 95% confidence interval of the mediating effect does not include 0, the mediating effect is considered significant. In this paper's mediating effect test, the dependent variable is "work attitude," the independent variable is "Confucian ultimate view," and the mediating variables are, in order, "work psychological tenacity," "professional ethics," "career initiative," "family importance," and "social responsibility." In the mediating analysis, 500 resamples were performed on the original sample.

Table 8 shows that the confidence interval for the mediating effect of work psychological tenacity is [0.008, 0.019], for professional ethics is [0.172, 0.209], for career initiative is [0.141, 0.179], for family importance is [0.033, 0.051], and for social responsibility is [0.164, 0.202], none of which include 0. Therefore, we can conclude that all five mediating pathways are significant, indicating that Confucian ultimate view can positively influence public work attitude through multiple "individual-family-society" channels. Hypotheses H2a, H2b, H2c, H3a, and H4 are supported, while H3b is rejected. In terms of effect size, professional ethics has the largest mediating effect (Ind-effect=0.190), followed by social responsibility (Ind-effect=0.184), then career initiative (Ind-effect=0.159), with family importance (Ind-effect=0.042) and work psychological tenacity (Ind-effect=0.013) having the smallest mediating effects. The largest mediating effect of social responsibility indicates that fulfilling social responsibility is the most important psychological driver for positive work among the public. Among individual work values, the mediating effects of professional ethics, career initiative, and work psychological tenacity decrease in order, indicating that positive work attitudes among the public derive more from requirements for professional ethics, secondly from pursuit of career achievement, and less from avoiding setbacks and pressure at work. Family importance can positively influence work attitude, verifying Hypothesis H3a and indicating that family is also an important spiritual motivator for work initiative.

5.4 Interaction Effects

The above analysis shows that Confucian ultimate view, as a deep value among Chinese people, continues to exist and perform its social functions to this day. However, in the tide of modernization, will Confucian ultimate view face challenges from modern society? The tension between Confucian ultimate view

and scientific spirit reflects the tension between tradition and modernity. To analyze the situations and challenges faced by Confucian ultimate view in its applicability in modern society, moderation effect analysis was conducted. The moderation effect regression uses work attitude as the dependent variable, Confucian ultimate view as the independent variable, and scientific spirit as the moderating variable. Analysis results are shown in Table 9 :

Model 4 includes the independent variable and control variables, with Confucian ultimate view positively significant ($\beta=0.337$, $P<0.001$). Model 5 adds the moderating variable “scientific spirit” based on Model 4, with Confucian ultimate view positively significant ($\beta=0.309$, $P<0.001$) and scientific spirit also positively significant ($\beta=0.123$, $P<0.001$). Model 6 further adds the interaction term “Confucian ultimate view \times scientific spirit” for testing, but shows the interaction coefficient is significantly negative ($\beta=-0.071$, $P=0.060<0.1$). Evidently, although both Confucian ultimate view and scientific spirit are important explanatory variables that promote work attitude, their logics of action differ, involving contradictions and conflicts. The higher the scientific spirit, the more the positive influence of Confucian ultimate view on work attitude is weakened. Hypothesis H5 is supported.

Confucian ultimate view must discard the dross and select the essence when facing challenges from modern science, making adaptations suitable for modern society.

The challenges encountered by Confucian ultimate view in modern social transformation also need to be understood through comparing generational changes. From the mid-20th century to the present, China has gradually entered modern society. Along with social transformation and generational turnover, does the effect of Confucian ultimate view on modern work attitude change? We test this through generational effect analysis. From the simple trend of changes in work attitude and Confucian ultimate view across generations, both show an upward trend from the Early Construction Generation through the Reform and Opening-up Generation and Marketization Generation, with a slight decline in the New Century Generation. Work attitude and Confucian ultimate view show similar changing trends across generations, further confirming their positive connection.

Generational differences in the effect of Confucian ultimate view on work attitude are tested through moderation effect analysis. The moderation effect regression uses work attitude as the dependent variable, Confucian ultimate view as the independent variable, and different generations as moderating variables, constructing interaction terms between Confucian ultimate view and dummy variables for different generations. Analysis results are shown in Table 10 . Model 7 results show that although the interaction effect is negative—that is, the effect of Confucian ultimate view is smaller in later generations compared to the Early Construction Generation—this interaction effect is not significant. This indicates that the influence of Confucian ultimate view on work attitude is stable and has not significantly diminished with generational changes. Hypoth-

esis H6 is not supported.

5.5 Summary of Empirical Results

In summary, this paper consolidates the empirical results as shown in Table 11 :

Table 11 Summary of Empirical Results

- Confucian ultimate view can significantly promote public work attitude.
- **H2a:** Confucian ultimate view positively influences work attitude through individual work psychological tenacity.
- **H2b:** Confucian ultimate view positively influences work attitude through individual professional ethics.
- **H2c:** Confucian ultimate view positively influences work attitude through individual career initiative.
- **H3a:** Confucian ultimate view positively influences work attitude through individual family importance.
- **H3c:** Confucian ultimate view negatively influences work attitude through individual family importance.
- Confucian ultimate view positively influences work attitude through individual social responsibility.
- Scientific spirit negatively moderates the positive influence of Confucian ultimate view on work attitude.
- The influence of Confucian ultimate view on work attitude will weaken with generational changes.

6 Discussion and Implications

The above methods of OLS regression analysis, Bootstrap mediating effect analysis, and interaction effect analysis were used to analyze the data, revealing the positive influence effects and characteristics of Confucian ultimate view on Chinese public work attitude. This gives rise to several discussion questions.

First, Confucian ultimate view possesses a cultural dynamic function similar to Protestant ethics under the Western “calling” concept. Western cultural theories argue that Confucianism’s emphasis on hierarchy, stability, harmony, and tradition all contradict the modernization process that drives innovation and pursuit of personal economic interests. In contrast, it is more inclined to believe that Protestant ethics provided spiritual impetus for modernization development (Weber, 2008). However, this paper’s statistical analysis demonstrates that the Confucian ultimate view held by the public can significantly enhance work attitude in modern society, and this influence effect has not significantly weakened due to generational changes. This cultural dynamic similarly provides spiritual impetus for modernization. Weber’s perspective oversimplifies complex cultural and social phenomena and fails to identify the diverse interpretations and developmental paths within Confucian culture itself. Confucian

culture is not inherently incapable of modernization or completely incompatible with modernity. Intuitively, promoting work attitude based on Confucian ultimate view may seem abstract, but this paper shows that in today's rational society profoundly shaped by the modern market economy, work has far transcended the scope of mere livelihood and profit-seeking, becoming an important pathway for practicing morality, fulfilling social responsibility, and achieving self-improvement. Confucian thought, as the core of Chinese traditional culture, with its concepts of "benevolence," "responsibility," and "cultivating self, regulating family, governing state, pacifying world," provides rich ideological resources for understanding the meaning of work for Chinese people. It offers a remedy for the widespread problems of job burnout and value loss in contemporary society.

Second, work attitude driven by Confucian ultimate view possesses unique Chinese cultural characteristics. Mediation analysis shows that Confucian ultimate view influences public work attitude through the organic connection of "individual-family-society" values, with typical characteristics in effect sizes. Unlike the Western Protestant calling view that serves an ultimate existence "God" through personal wealth accumulation (Ye, 2014), Confucian ultimate view achieves positive work attitude through a layered psychological structure extending from self to world. Among these, professional ethics is the most effective pathway for Confucian ultimate view to influence public work attitude, showing similar characteristics between China and the West in emphasizing moral responsibility in profession and serious work attitude. However, professional ethics emphasized in Confucian culture differs from the Western calling view. In comparison, the "junzi" (gentleman) in Confucian thought connects personal moral cultivation with social responsibility, using excellence in 本职工作 to rectify one's character and practice traditional virtues such as Ren, Yi, Li, Zhi, Xin. The Western calling view, by contrast, emphasizes individuals achieving personal salvation and moral purification through work. Social responsibility ranks second in mediating effect, likely stemming from Confucian "Ren" thought and "collectivist" cultural influence, where people place society and "the world" in important positions and achieve internal-external harmony of "junzi" personality and social achievement through social contribution. This also better aligns with China's current social orientation of integrating personal dreams with national development. Career initiative ranks third in mediating effect size. This achievement motivation is not the occupational or wealth achievement emphasized by Protestant ethics, but rather a "career," spiritual, and value-based achievement, obtaining social recognition and respect through diligent work—an achievement motivation oriented toward society. Interestingly, "family importance" plays a positive mediating role, but with a small effect. This indicates that Confucian values at least provide a psychological mechanism for reconciling the tension between family and work. However, unlike traditional large kinship-based families that particularly emphasized work achievement to "bring honor to the family name" (Xiao, 2002), the mediating effect of "family importance" has weakened in modern society, as Chinese "fam-

ily” structure is shrinking and the role of “family” is fading. Work psychological tenacity, as a psychological bottom-line mechanism, has a relatively small mediating effect, which also aligns with common sense.

Reflecting on the present, China’s rapid social transformation has caused certain negative impacts on public work attitude, with 思潮 such as “lying flat” and “sang” (dispirited) culture emerging. Some viewpoints have proposed cause analyses and governance 对策 from practical dimensions such as economic downward pressure, severe employment situations, social wealth disparity, and class solidification. However, a deeper yet less widely discussed dimension is that the loss of work meaning has gradually become a spiritual dilemma people face. The development of the modern market economy often continuously nurtures “instrumental rationality” while eroding “substantive rationality,” leading people into “value nihilism.” Especially when economic and social growth slows and limited social resources make it difficult for work to bring expected returns, this sense of confusion becomes more prominent. Modern individuals urgently need spiritual resources to answer—what are we working for? Due to cultural influences, Western professional spirit cannot become Chinese people’s ultimate professional spirit view in an ultimate way. Thought based on Confucian ultimate view, however, emphasizes that humans have social responsibility obligations due to their good nature, that occupation itself is an embodiment of human responsibility, and that in modern society, occupational responsibility embodies human value and the goodness of life. If so, its significance should be no less than Luther’s professional spirit based on Christian doctrine.

Thus, how China can cultivate a professional spirit built upon its own culture while adapting to Western modernity becomes an important issue of mentality construction. Jing (2008) proposed the idea of constructing Chinese professional spirit based on traditional Chinese ultimate human nature. He argued that besides absorbing Western experience, consideration should be given to seeking resources from Chinese cultural traditions. Chinese traditional culture, represented by Confucianism, fundamentally emphasizes human inner transcendence, believing that humans have a good side and advocating that through self-effort, the good side of human nature can be revealed and developed. This process is an embodiment of human commitment, responsibility, and obligation. In terms of commitment, Confucian culture does not contradict the sense of responsibility in modern society. Of course, the cultivation of professional spirit cannot rely solely on cultural advocacy; there should be strengthening of institutional measures for professional spirit, achieving culturally grounded ultimate professional spirit cultivation through long-term shaping by rational and responsible professional spirit institutions. More attention and in-depth reflection are needed regarding this issue.

Third, Confucian achievement-oriented work attitude has inherent issues of temporal transformation. The interaction effect results show that both Confucian ultimate view and scientific spirit can positively promote positive work attitudes among the public, yet the interaction term coefficient is negative. This

reflects the inherent logical contradictions between Chinese traditional culture and modern scientific spirit (Liang & Xia, 2017). Specifically: First, from an empiricist perspective, much knowledge and wisdom in Chinese traditional culture were accumulated through generations of transmitted experience, whereas modern scientific spirit emphasizes evidence, logical reasoning, and repeatable experiments. Second, Confucian culture advocates respecting teachers and elders and following the ways of ancient sages, whereas scientific research upholds skepticism and critical thinking, where even authoritative views require rigorous testing before acceptance. Additionally, the innovative thinking advocated by scientific spirit may also conflict with the harmony, stability, and “doctrine of the mean” in Confucian culture. All these mean that when traditional Chinese Confucian thought collides with modern scientific spirit, it may cause cognitive inconsistency for individuals when dealing with work issues, thereby weakening the cultural dynamic effect of Confucian ultimate view on work attitude. However, both serve as important content of China’s mainstream ideology and the construction of advanced socialist culture, and both can help elevate public ideological quality, thereby promoting China’s economic and social development. Therefore, it is necessary to carefully sort out the “pragmatic” spirit in Confucian thought such as “investigating things to extend knowledge,” “renewing the old,” and “down-to-earth” that are similar to the connotation of “scientific spirit,” promoting the coordination, integration, and development of excellent Chinese traditional culture and modern scientific spirit, making them complementary. It is necessary to promote Confucian thought in ways compatible with modern society and integrate it into modern work concepts. This can provide individuals with a spiritual orientation beyond material pursuits, enhance internal motivation and satisfaction in work, and serve as an effective path to strengthening national cultural confidence.

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Appendix Table 1. Main Variable Scale Items

Note: The original appendix table content is preserved in the manuscript but omitted here for brevity.

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

Source: ChinaXiv — Machine translation. Verify with original.