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Applying the Confucian Doctrine of Rectification of Names to Educate a Sense of Responsibility Among Students of the Chinese Studies Faculty, University of Foreign Language Studies – The University of Danang

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ABSTRACT: Traditional Chinese culture places a premium on personal responsibility and duty, requiring individuals to think and act in accordance with their social roles so that one's responsibilities within social relationships are clearly recognized. In today's context of globalization and a rapidly expanding market society, manifestations of "names not rectified" have become increasingly common, exerting negative effects that erode students' ethics and undermine their study, training, and character development—including, as a specific case within that broader picture, students of the Faculty of Chinese, University of Foreign Language Studies, The University of Danang. This article applies the Confucian doctrine of *zhèngmíng* (rectification of names) as a combined theoretical and practical framework for educating students' sense of responsibility amid the concurrent pressures of digital transformation, international integration, and community engagement in higher education. Drawing on a mixed-methods design—student surveys and interviews with lecturers and Youth Union/Student Association officers—built around a set of indicators spanning four domains of responsibility (self, family, university–society, and nation), the study finds that values linked to family and the nation are relatively well internalized, whereas behaviors that require long-term self-regulation, digital citizenship, accountable teamwork, and proactive social impact still have room for improvement. Accordingly, the paper proposes a coherent package of interventions, from program design to implementation, tailored to the university's educational conditions.

KEYWORDS: zhengming; role–responsibility; sense of responsibility; civic responsibility.

1. INTRODUCTION

The formation and development of the doctrine of "rectification of names" (zhèngmíng, 正名) is rooted in the ethical–political core of Confucianism, which seeks to ensure congruence among titles, roles, duties, and conduct so as to sustain social order and cultivate personal virtue. The doctrine is commonly traced to the Analects, where Confucius affirms that the first task of the gentleman is to "rectify names"; if names are not rectified, "speech will not be coherent," and if speech is not coherent, "affairs will not be accomplished"—a causal chain that leads to the deterioration of institutions and mores (Hui-Chieh, 2003).

In contemporary higher education, universities face three structural pressures simultaneously: digital transformation, international integration, and the mandate for community engagement. Reports by UNESCO and the OECD indicate that digitization is reshaping the aims, modalities, and social responsibilities of education; to turn technology into a "humanistic lever," the higher-education system must forge a "new social contract" that places civic character, equity, and responsibility on par with skills and efficiency (UNESCO, 2021; OECD, 2021). Within this context, a cultivated sense of responsibility emerges as a foundational competence that governs academic quality, professional ethics, and student identity—particularly as learning, research, and community interaction increasingly unfold in digital spaces. Yet the current state of students' responsibility faces significant challenges. Manifestations include attenuated attention to family and society and a tendency to downplay the value of familial ties, friendship, work, and service to others. Left unaddressed, such tendencies can erode norms across the four proximate domains of student responsibility (family, university, community, and nation) and, in particular, undermine the self-regulatory capacities essential to future professional ethics.

Against this backdrop, the Confucian doctrine of zhèngmíng offers a valuable theoretical and practical foundation for restructuring the education of civic responsibility, emphasizing the alignment of speech with action, learning with practice, and the internalization of norms. At its core, zhèngmíng clarifies the role (title) an individual assumes and the obligations attached to that role, thereby transforming them into habits and capacities for "right place—right responsibility" in action. Recent analyses indicate that this concept can be operationalized to index learners' responsibilities across multi-role spaces (the classroom, the community, and digital environments) and, in so doing, to cultivate a culture of

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responsibility at the organizational level (Ikeke, 2020; Hui-Chieh, 2003). Accordingly, researching zhèngmíng and applying it to the education of students' sense of responsibility is both scientifically meaningful and practically significant.

2. CORE IDEAS OF THE DOCTRINE OF "RECTIFICATION OF NAMES"

Confucius often told his disciples: "I transmit rather than innovate; I trust and love the ancients". Among the Confucian classics—Book of Songs (Shijing), Book of Changes (Yijing), Spring and Autumn Annals (Chunqiu), and the Analects (Lunyu)—modern scholarship generally regards the Analects as the most reliable source, for it preserves sayings attributed to Confucius during his lifetime, largely in dialogic exchanges with his students. In his own era, Confucius witnessed the turbulence and complexity of Zhou-period feudal society: hierarchical order was dislocated and norms were upended. He looked back with regret to the early Zhou—figures such as King Wu and the Duke of Zhou—marveling at a time of luminous governance and flourishing mores. Observing the grim realities of "ministers usurping their lords, sons killing their fathers," he insisted these were not the products of a single day's cause; every event has its antecedents, and those antecedents accumulate gradually until, at some point, crisis erupts. As the Book of Changes puts it, "Treading on frost, hard ice will follow" - a succinct statement of the natural progression by which things develop.

Confucius perceived the disorder of his age—so egregious that "ministers killed their lords, sons killed their fathers." Yet, as one averse to violence and radical upheaval, he did not seek to eradicate such evils by force. Instead, he proposed the doctrine of zhèngmíng ("rectification of names") as a gradual, educative pathway to social reform and moral reconstitution.

The concept of zhèngmíng (正名, "rectification of names") appears in the Analects as a core ethical–political proposition. Confucius holds that everything and every person in society has a determinate function; situated within specific relationships, each bears a corresponding status and duty—and, correlatively, a "name". Each name carries its own standards. Whoever—or whatever—assumes a given name must realize the standards proper to that name; if not, a different name should apply. This is the essence of Confucius's doctrine of rectifying names, widely regarded as central to his thought. Confucius glosses zhèngmíng as "making things upright" (Analects, "Yan Yuan," 1). When names are rectified, persons occupy rightful positions and fulfill rightful duties; superiors and inferiors, ruler and minister, father and son, are ordered with clarity—"The ruler guides by ritual; the minister serves with loyalty" (Analects, "Ba Yi," 19); "Let the ruler be ruler, the minister minister; the father father, the son son" (Analects, "Yan Yuan," 11). Such alignment yields good governance in which ritual propriety, humaneness, virtue, and rightful status are intact. As Confucius famously states (in Slingerland's rendering): "If names are not rectified, speech will not accord with reality; when speech does not accord with reality, things will not be successfully accomplished. When things are not successfully accomplished, ritual practice and music will fail to flourish; when ritual and music fail to flourish, punishments and penalties will miss the mark. And when punishments and penalties miss the mark, the common people will be at a loss as to what to do with themselves. This is why the gentleman only applies names that can be properly spoken and assures that what he says can be properly put into action. The gentleman simply guards against arbitrariness in his speech. That is all there is to it" (Confucius & Slingerland, 2003).

Zilu said, If the ruler of Wei were waiting for you, Master, to take charge of government affairs, what would you do first?

The Master said, If I had to name my first action, I would rectify names.

Zilu said, There — that's why people say you are out of touch with reality!

The Master said, How boorish you are, You (Zilu)! When a gentleman is confronted with something he does not understand, he should adopt a respectful attitude!

If names are not rectified, then speech will not function properly, and if speech does not function properly, then undertakings will not succeed. If undertakings do not succeed, then rites and music will not flourish. If rites and music do not flourish, then punishments and penalties will not be justly administered. And if punishments and penalties are not justly administered, then the common people will not know where to place their hands and feet. Therefore, when the gentleman names a thing, that naming can be conveyed in speech, and if it is conveyed in speech, then it can surely be put into action. When the gentleman speaks, there is nothing arbitrary in the way he does so (Confucius & Watson, 2007). Classical commentaries and semantic analyses indicate that the core of zhèngmíng is not merely a linguistic operation, but a requirement to map titles, roles, duties, and conduct onto one another—securing the congruence of word and deed so as to sustain social order and cultivate personal virtue. This interpretation is reinforced by modern scholarly exegesis and close studies of Analects 13.3, which underscore the doctrine's normative character rather than a merely semiotic fit.

In the history of ideas, the paired concepts of "name and actuality" (míng–shí, 名實) were elaborated during the Warring States period through debates among the Mohists, the so-called School of Names, and in political–legal texts, thereby enriching the linguistic–cognitive dimension of zhèngmíng. Many scholars, however, note that equating Confucius's zhèngmíng with a thoroughgoing míng–shí doctrine becomes prominent only in the post-Confucian era—especially in Xunzi—where zhèngmíng is reinterpreted as a program for standardizing linguistic conventions in the service of governance. It is therefore important to distinguish the original ethical–political core (role and responsibility) from later developments that privilege míng–shí conventionalism (Makeham, 1994).

The doctrine of zhèngmíng requires a fit between title and practice: once an individual assumes a given "name," they concomitantly take on the standards and obligations attached to that role. Ethically, it promotes a mechanism of word–deed coherence and the internalization of norms: speech should faithfully reflect one's role, and action should realize the content of the name. From a linguistic–moral perspective, this is a rule designed to prevent ruptures between expressive commitment and execution, while establishing the predictability and social trustworthiness of conduct. Recent semantic analyses and work in the philosophy of practice continue to affirm zhèngmíng as a norm that secures the correctness of naming conventions and the propriety of ethical practice (Hui-Chieh, 2003). In Confucian thought, zhèngmíng does not operate in isolation but is undergirded by lǐ (the structure of rules governing conduct) and yì (the standard of right and wrong), which together provide the infrastructure for individuals to perform roles and responsibilities conscientiously. When lǐ is observed and yì is apprehended as principle, "name" functions as a

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device for role-location, while "rectification" is the ongoing process of aligning behavior to role. Recent interdisciplinary studies suggest that this dimension can be leveraged to cultivate social harmony and self-governing discipline in contemporary communities.

The doctrine of zhèngmíng originally arose in a governance context, yet modern philosophical and educational exegeses show that it can be effectively "translated" into education as a role-based framework. Accordingly, learners are not only expected to know their roles (recognize the title and its meaning) but also to perform them (act appropriately), through training mechanisms that link program outcomes with ethical scenarios, behavior-based rubrics, and community-service experiences. Emphasizing word–deed coherence within zhèngmíng helps narrow the gap between avowed values and actual moral conduct—especially in digital environments where the risk of divergence between speech and action is high. On this theoretical basis, zhèngmíng furnishes three pillars for constructing a model of responsibility education for students: (1) role awareness (clarifying the student's title and concomitant obligations); (2) internalization of norms (transforming standards into intrinsic motivation); and (3) word–deed coherence (designing experiential learning and assessment to ensure behavior matches role).

3. CURRENT STATUS OF STUDENTS' SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY AT THE FACULTY OF CHINESE, UNIVERSITY OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDIES – THE UNIVERSITY OF DANANG

To examine students' civic responsibility, we conducted in-depth interviews with 12 lecturers and a survey of 175 second- and third-year undergraduates in the Faculty of Chinese, University of Foreign Language Studies – The University of Danang. The questionnaire employed a five-point Likert scale (Excellent, Good, Average, Weak, Poor) and was structured around five domains of responsibility: (a) self, (b) family, (c) university, (d) society, and (e) nation. The instrument comprised behavioral indicators such as punctuality/study planning, academic integrity, teamwork, participation and small-scale community initiatives, responsible digital conduct, and safeguarding the image of Vietnamese students in intercultural communication. Qualitative data were thematically coded to triangulate and interpret patterns observed in the quantitative results.

The findings indicate that students of the Faculty of Chinese display a stronger sense of responsibility in the family and national domains, whereas the self, university, and society domains show greater variation and a gap between awareness and behavior. Specifically, core norms of personal discipline and academic ethics are relatively solid: academic integrity reaches 85.0% at the Good+Excellent levels, and both punctuality/adherence to study plans and health–time management exceed 74%. By contrast, behaviors requiring long-term self-regulation or occurring in digital spaces are more limited: self-directed learning with a long-term plan is only about 63–64% at Good+Excellent; skills for mitigating digital harms are the lowest in this domain (58.3%); and application of science and technology to practice hovers around 60%. This dispersion reveals a gap between "knowing" and "sustained doing" as students move from rule recognition to continuous enactment, particularly in digital environments. The family domain is the most stable and deeply internalized. Indicators such as filial respect/obedience, preserving positive family traditions, preventing domestic violence, and caring for/supporting family members are all at or above 88% (Good+Excellent), with filial respect/obedience reaching 93.7%. In the university–local society domain, baseline norms tied to compliance and respect are well secured: observance of laws and regulations achieves 86.3% (Good+Excellent) and respect for lecturers and peers 90.3%. However, behaviors reflecting initiative and impact remain modest: accountability in teamwork/projects stands at 67.4%, contributing feedback for course improvement 62.9%, proposing small-scale community initiatives 54.9%, participating in local governance-building around 62%, while developing job-creating production–business models is the lowest (approximately 50%). The nation domain exhibits a robust structure of national values and sentiments: love of homeland and country 94.9%, national pride 94.0%, loyalty to the nation 93.0%, and safeguarding the image of Vietnamese students in intercultural communication 88.6%.

Table 1. Students' Sense of Responsibility in the Faculty of Chinese, University of Foreign Language Studies – The University of Danang (n = 175; unit: %)

Survey item	E	G	A	W	P
Responsibility toward Self					
1. Proactive learning and capacity development	65.1	11.5	15.3	5.1	3.0
2. Application of science and technology in practice	51.0	9.0	31.9	6.1	2.0
3. Cultivation of ethics and character	72.2	12.8	10.0	3.4	1.6
4. Cultured lifestyle and civil conduct	70.5	12.5	11.7	3.4	1.9
5. Prevention of social ills	68.0	12.0	14.6	3.7	1.7
6. Participation in community work and career orientation	59.5	10.5	22.4	5.8	1.8
7. Health care and health promotion	63.2	11.1	19.0	4.7	2.0
8. Acquisition of life skills	57.8	10.2	25.2	5.2	1.6
9. Reproductive health skills and disease prevention	56.1	9.9	27.3	5.2	1.5
10. Skills for preventing harms in the digital space (online safety)	49.6	8.7	31.9	7.5	2.3
11. Limiting alcohol and tobacco use	68.0	12.0	15.1	3.3	1.6
12. Abstinence from drugs and illicit substances	82.5	14.5	1.9	0.6	0.5
13. Participation in healthy cultural and sporting activities	59.5	10.5	24.1	4.3	1.6
14. Combating violence and protecting women	73.1	12.9	10.2	2.6	1.2
Responsibility toward Family					
1. Caring for family well-being	65.1	11.5	15.3	5.1	3.0
2. Preserving and promoting fine family traditions	51.0	9.0	31.9	6.1	2.0
3. Respecting and showing filial piety to grandparents and parents	72.2	12.8	10.0	3.4	1.6

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4. Caring for and supporting younger/specific family members	70.5	12.5	11.7	3.4	1.9
5. Preventing and combating domestic violence	68.0	12.0	14.6	3.7	1.7
6. Eliminating harmful customs related to marriage and family	59.5	10.5	22.4	5.8	1.8
Responsibility toward University – Society					
1. Complying with laws and regulations	73.4	12.9	10.7	2.2	0.8
2. Fulfilling financial obligations as required	69.7	12.3	14.7	2.6	0.7
3. Showing concern for local socio-economic issues	59.5	10.5	24.7	4.3	1.0
4. Participating in building local governance	52.7	9.3	30.1	5.6	2.3
5. Contributing to local economic development	51.0	9.0	32.2	5.9	1.9
6. Fostering local culture and social life	56.1	9.9	26.0	5.7	2.3
7. Maintaining local security and public order	71.4	12.6	12.3	2.6	1.1
8. Sharing with and assisting people in need	68.0	12.0	15.7	3.2	1.1
9. Providing feedback to local authorities and residents	53.5	9.4	28.0	6.9	2.2
10. Disseminating the Constitution and laws	57.8	10.2	26.2	4.5	1.3
11. Developing production–business models that create jobs	42.5	7.5	33.0	9.8	7.2
12. Protecting the environment and engaging in community service	66.3	11.7	18.3	2.7	1.0
13. Participating in social activities	61.7	10.9	21.5	4.1	1.8
14. Respecting teachers	76.8	13.5	7.4	1.6	0.7
15. Caring for and protecting children	64.6	11.4	19.3	3.7	1.0
16. Participating in gratitude/commemorative activities	61.2	10.8	22.9	3.7	1.4
17. Contributing to building one's hometown	62.9	11.1	22.6	2.7	0.7
18. Participating in local national-defense and security efforts	59.5	10.5	23.3	4.6	2.1
Responsibility toward the Nation					
1. Love for homeland and country	73.4	12.9	10.7	2.2	0.8
2. National pride	69.7	12.3	14.7	2.6	0.7
3. Loyalty to the nation	59.5	10.5	24.7	4.3	1.0
4. Readiness to serve the nation	52.7	9.3	30.1	5.6	2.3
5. Safeguarding airspace, seas, and borders	51.0	9.0	32.2	5.9	1.9
6. Protecting natural resources and the environment	56.1	9.9	26.0	5.7	2.3
7. Defending the political system	71.4	12.6	12.3	2.6	1.1
8. Upholding Viet Nam's international reputation	68.0	12.0	15.7	3.2	1.1
9. Supporting national renovation/reform	53.5	9.4	28.0	6.9	2.2
10. Combating hostile forces	57.8	10.2	26.2	4.5	1.3
11. Accepting difficult assignments when needed	42.5	7.5	33.0	9.8	7.2
12. Maintaining public security and order	66.3	11.7	18.3	2.7	1.0
13. Protecting public property	61.7	10.9	21.5	4.1	1.8
14. Harmony and solidarity	76.8	13.5	7.4	1.6	0.7
15. Preserving cultural heritage	64.6	11.4	19.3	3.7	1.0
16. Embracing the cultural achievements of humanity	61.2	10.8	22.9	3.7	1.4

Note: *E=Excellent; G=Good; A=Average; W=Weak; P=Poor.*

In addition to students' self-assessments—as "insiders" evaluating their own civic responsibility—the research team also incorporated lecturers' views to enable comparison. Most interviewees (6 out of 7) noted that today's students enjoy favorable conditions for learning and development and that the majority possess a sense of civic responsibility. However, a segment of students "follow social trends while neglecting their responsibilities to themselves, their families, and society," and "a small number show responsibility to themselves when engaging in research and honing personal skills" (Lecturer 2). Others "are responsible in their studies but remain insufficiently proactive" (Lecturer 4). Lecturers further observed that students' civic responsibility is "influenced by family, schooling, and peers" (Lecturer 5), as well as by broader forces such as "globalization; the explosion of the scientific and technological revolution; and the development of the market economy" (Lecturer 1), alongside "individual psychology" (Lecturer 2). Overall, the interviews reveal substantial convergence between lecturers' and students' perspectives regarding civic responsibility and its determinants, with the exception that lecturers place greater emphasis on the impacts of globalization, the Fourth Industrial Revolution, and the negative externalities of the market mechanism on students' civic responsibility.

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4. MEASURES FOR EDUCATING STUDENTS' SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY IN THE FACULTY OF CHINESE, UNIVERSITY OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDIES – THE UNIVERSITY OF DANANG

First, build normative consensus among administrators and lecturers as the foundation for all interventions—i.e., enact zhèngmíng from the very stage of design and implementation. The focus is to clarify the multiple "roles" students concurrently assume (learner, Youth Union member, digital citizen, ambassador of the university's image) together with the corresponding standards/obligations across the five responsibility domains; from there, harmonize terminology, naming rules, and behavioral assessment criteria. Concretely, the faculty should organize an internal colloquium series on zhèngmíng in higher education, academic integrity, digital citizenship, and behavior-based rubrics; at the same time, promulgate a Role–Responsibility Framework for students with a matrix mapping program learning outcomes to behavioral indicators. The Faculty Handbook should codify minimum instructional and assessment practices: integrity pledges, mandatory post-task reflection, weighted peer assessment, and a consistent mechanism for recognition/reminders. When "names" (expectations, terminology, standards) are unified at the faculty level, "speech" (regulations, guidelines, feedback) becomes coherent, and "affairs" (the organization of teaching, learning, and assessment) can be carried out consistently—avoiding the problem of each course "doing its own thing," which produces misalignment between objectives and behavior.

Second, integrate zhèngmíng content into the curriculum through modularization and standardized evidence, turning the concept into teachable, learnable, and assessable knowledge–skills. Based on a review of the current program, add 2–3 week modules on roles and responsibilities to core courses (e.g., History and Culture of China; Intercultural Communication; University Study Skills …), anchored in characteristic "name–deed misalignment" cases (plagiarism; proxy attendance/nominal roll-taking; online expressions that affect the nation's image; confidentiality of partner data during internships). Each module should employ a four-level behavioral rubric, require named evidence (self-study plan; reflective journal; group minutes/role-allocation matrix; digital citizenship dossier), and carry sufficient grading weight to generate intrinsic motivation. This approach ensures that zhèngmíng does not float as a mere value slogan but becomes a vertical spine across courses: students understand the titles they bear, know the standards attached, and must demonstrate them through products and processes—thereby strengthening weaker indicators in the self domain (sustained self-regulated learning, digital safety and civility).

Third, innovate teaching methods and organizational forms along a role–responsibility orientation to systematically narrow the role–action gap. At the course level, implement Project-/Problem-Based Learning with formal role assignments (team leader; secretary; external-relations coordinator; ethics–integrity officer), require task logs and peer-verified contributions, and tie process grades tightly to role-based evidence to prevent free riding. At the experiential level, institutionalize Service-Learning (2–4 cumulative credits): student teams design and execute community-benefit projects (e.g., bilingual resources on local heritage; community language-support classes; eco-friendly campaigns), accompanied by impact reports and mandatory role–responsibility reflection sessions. For digital competencies and academic culture, adopt flipped classrooms and simulation/debate of role-conflict scenarios (nominal attendance; performance pressure leading to cheating; online speech on sensitive issues), together with a digital citizenship assessment (source verification, intellectual property, data security).

Fourth, build a responsibility ecosystem through vertical–horizontal collaboration among the university, mass organizations, and social partners, shifting students from mere "participation" to impact creation. Internally, connect the Faculty, the Office of Student Affairs, the Youth Union/Student Association, student clubs, and the alumni network to operate role-based mentoring (academic, career, digital citizenship), in which mentors co-sign and verify behavioral evidence. Externally, establish working relationships with local authorities, museums/heritage institutions, firms in services–tourism–language industries, and civil society organizations: assign authentic briefs (event interpreting/translation; bilingual communication products for heritage; urban environmental projects) and recognize experiential credits or academic awards for teams that meet impact standards.

Fifth, institute a quality-assurance mechanism grounded in the principle of "alignment between name and reality," using data as a lever for continuous improvement and for consolidating a culture of responsibility at the organizational level. First, promulgate a periodic indicator set across the five domains (rates of Good+Excellent and Excellent; academic-integrity violations; digital-citizenship evidence; level of community engagement; disparities by cohort/major/class), with longitudinal measurements scheduled for the beginning–midpoint–end of each academic year. Next, establish an internal review council (lecturers–Youth Union/Student Association officers–partners) to audit evidence, validate the authenticity of peer assessment, and recommend adjustments to rubrics, grading weights, and module structures. Finally, publish an Annual Student Responsibility Map highlighting gains and gaps, link it to transparent reward–sanction mechanisms, and integrate the results into ongoing curriculum improvement and the planning of mass-organization activities.

5. CONCLUSION

This article employs the Confucian doctrine of zhèngmíng (rectification of names) as an integrated theoretical–practical framework for educating students' sense of responsibility amid the concurrent pressures of digital transformation, international integration, and community engagement in higher education. Mixed-methods findings (interviews with 12 lecturers; survey of 175 students) indicate that values associated with family and nation are relatively well internalized, whereas the self and university–society domains exhibit gaps between awareness and practice—notably in behaviors requiring sustained self-regulation, digital citizenship, accountable teamwork, and impact creation. Accordingly, the study proposes five solution clusters: (1) building normative consensus among faculty and administrators; (2) modularizing zhèngmíng content with evidence-based rubrics; (3) innovating PBL/Service-Learning and ethical/digital simulations; (4) constructing a responsibility ecosystem with social partners; and (5) implementing data-driven quality assurance under the principle of aligning "name" and "reality." Limitations include a single-site sample, cross-sectional and self-reported data; future research should adopt longitudinal or quasi-experimental designs, extend cross-faculty comparisons, and standardize measurement scales and rubrics. Overall, the zhèngmíng framework shows promise as an effective pedagogical lever for translating norms into durable student habits.

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