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Building Excellence in Ideological and Political Education: Evidence from China's National First-Class Undergraduate Courses

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Abstract

This study analyzes 210 outstanding teachers from China's National First-Class Undergraduate Courses to identify characteristics and development pathways for excellence in ideological-political education. Empirical data reveals key group features: balanced gender distribution (52.4% female), senior-dominated age structure (89.9% aged 41–60), and doctoral prevalence (78.8%). Regional disparities show Eastern/Northern China accounting for 50.5% of faculty, while disciplinary backgrounds concentrate in Law (59.5%), Philosophy (15.0%), and History (8.5%). Teaching practices emphasize team instruction (94.3%) and high social-practical course representation (11.4%). Research excellence is evidenced by 48.6% securing National Social Science Foundation grants and 70% publishing >5 high-level papers. Critical challenges include succession risks (only 6.2% under age 40), regional imbalances, and limited international exposure (13.8%). To address these, we propose a five-path framework: (1) youth capacity building, (2) Western-region equity policies, (3) integrated training systems, (4) expanded teaching recognition, and (5) research-teaching synergy. Successful implementation requires scaling competitive teaching exhibitions, strengthening Marxist theory doctoral pipelines, and leveraging National Key Marxist Colleges' demonstration effects. These strategies advance curriculum-centered faculty development for new-era ideological education aligned with China's higher education modernization goals.

Keywords: ideological and political education (IPE), faculty development, curriculum excellence, higher education reform, teacher characteristics

1. Introduction

Ideological and Political Education (IPE) constitutes the foundational mechanism for cultivating virtue within China's higher education system. Teachers of Ideological and Political Courses (IPCs) serve as the primary agents in this endeavor, directly shaping educational quality and modernization outcomes (X. Liu, Xiantong, & Starkey, 2023). The landmark "3.18 Speech" (Xi, 2019), unequivocally affirmed faculty centrality in IPC effectiveness, emphasizing that "the key to effectively managing ideological and political courses lies in the teacher" while mandating institutional support for educators' professional agency. This directive catalyzed nationwide reforms recognizing that IPE quality directly correlates with faculty capacity to integrate theoretical rigor, political acuity, and pedagogical innovation.

Significant structural progress has characterized IPC faculty development since 2018. Institutions now maintain robust cohorts of qualified full-time instructors supplemented by part-time specialists, fulfilling the policy vision of establishing "sufficient numbers of politically upright, professionally competent, and morally exemplary teachers"(Xi, 2019). Academic scholarship has correspondingly expanded post-18th CPC National Congress, generating valuable insights into professional identity formation, pedagogical innovation, and teaching effectiveness. Yet critical limitations persist across extant research: studies by (Li & Yan, 2022; W. Wang & Zhou, 2019; Zhang, 2017) analyze compartmentalized traits using limited awardee samples ($n \leqslant 500$), while (Zheng & Lv, 2021) model growth patterns exclusively among teaching competition laureates. Though (Gao & Hui, 2023) and (Z. Wang & Cao, 2023) offer important regional and early-career perspectives, their findings lack generalizability. Crucially, no investigation

systematically examines comprehensive group characteristics of nationally accredited IPC teachers through curriculum-centered evaluation—despite scholarly consensus that teaching excellence fundamentally resides in course delivery (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Gan, He, & Mu, 2019) and (Tanaka, 2011) epistemological principle that "all evaluation is inherently curriculum-focused and aligned with its core tenets."

This empirical gap impedes the development of evidence-based faculty cultivation systems. Conventional evaluation approaches risk formalistic assessment when decoupled from curricular outcomes, particularly problematic for IPE's distinctive mission to balance ideological fidelity with pedagogical effectiveness. The absence of nationally representative benchmarks further constrains policy optimization during China's accelerated higher education modernization.

This study addresses these limitations through systematic analysis of teachers leading National First-Class Undergraduate Courses—China's premier accreditation mechanism evaluating curricular quality across six dimensions: ideological depth, pedagogical innovation, student engagement, instructional resources, assessment rigor, and societal impact. Our curriculum-centered framework transcends traditional assessment paradigms by positioning course leadership as the fundamental mediator of teaching excellence. This approach operationalizes three core principles: (1) Contextual Validity: Accredited courses reflect post-2019 policy priorities; (2) Pedagogical Materialization: Curriculum design embodies teaching philosophy; (3) Impact Measurability: Learning outcomes verify instructional effectiveness.

We examine 210 instructors responsible for courses that have undergone rigorous multi-stage evaluation—university nomination, provincial review, national accreditation, and public scrutiny—making them ideal proxies for excellence. Through this lens, we: (1) Profile demographic, academic, and institutional characteristics; (2) Identify teaching-research integration patterns; (3) Derive developmental pathways for scaling quality. Subsequent findings illuminate how curriculum leadership mediates professional growth while offering actionable insights for constructing sustainable IPE faculty ecosystems during China's new-era educational transformation.

2. Materials and Method

The Method section describes in detail how the study was conducted, including conceptual and operational definitions of the variables used in the study, Different types of studies will rely on different methodologies; however, a complete description of the methods used enables the reader to evaluate the appropriateness of your methods and the reliability and the validity of your results, It also permits experienced investigators to replicate the study, If your manuscript is an update of an ongoing or earlier study and the method has been published in detail elsewhere, you may refer the reader to that source and simply give a brief synopsis of the method in this section.

2.1 Selection of research samples

To advance higher education quality, China's Ministry of Education (MOE) launched a national initiative establishing two cohorts of first-class undergraduate courses. The inaugural cohort (5,116 courses) was released in November 2020, followed by a second cohort (5,750 courses) in June 2023. These courses comprise five categories: First-class online courses; First-class blended (online/offline) courses; First-class offline courses; First-class virtual simulation courses; First-class social practice courses. Within this framework, ideological and political courses (IPCs) include six theoretical components: *Ethics and the Rule of Law*, *Outline of Modern Chinese History*, *Basic Principles of Marxism*, *Introduction to Mao Zedong Thought and the Theoretical System of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics*, *Introduction to Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era*, and *Contemporary Situation and Policy in China and the World* (abbreviated *Situation and Policy*). Practical IPC components consist of ideological-political practice courses and virtual simulation courses.

Due to inconsistent classification of ideological-political practice courses and virtual simulation courses—and given some social practice courses' relevance to ideological-political education—we manually excluded courses taught by non-full-time IPC teachers. Only practice and virtual simulation courses explicitly designated for ideological-political education were retained. Undergraduate major-specific courses (e.g., Principles of Ideological and Political Education, Methodology of Ideological and Political Education) were excluded from the sample.

The final dataset comprised 211 public IPC courses (including both theoretical and practical categories) taught by 210 instructors (When multiple directors existed, only the primary course director was counted; one instructor taught two courses). Comprehensive sample characteristics are presented in Figure 1.

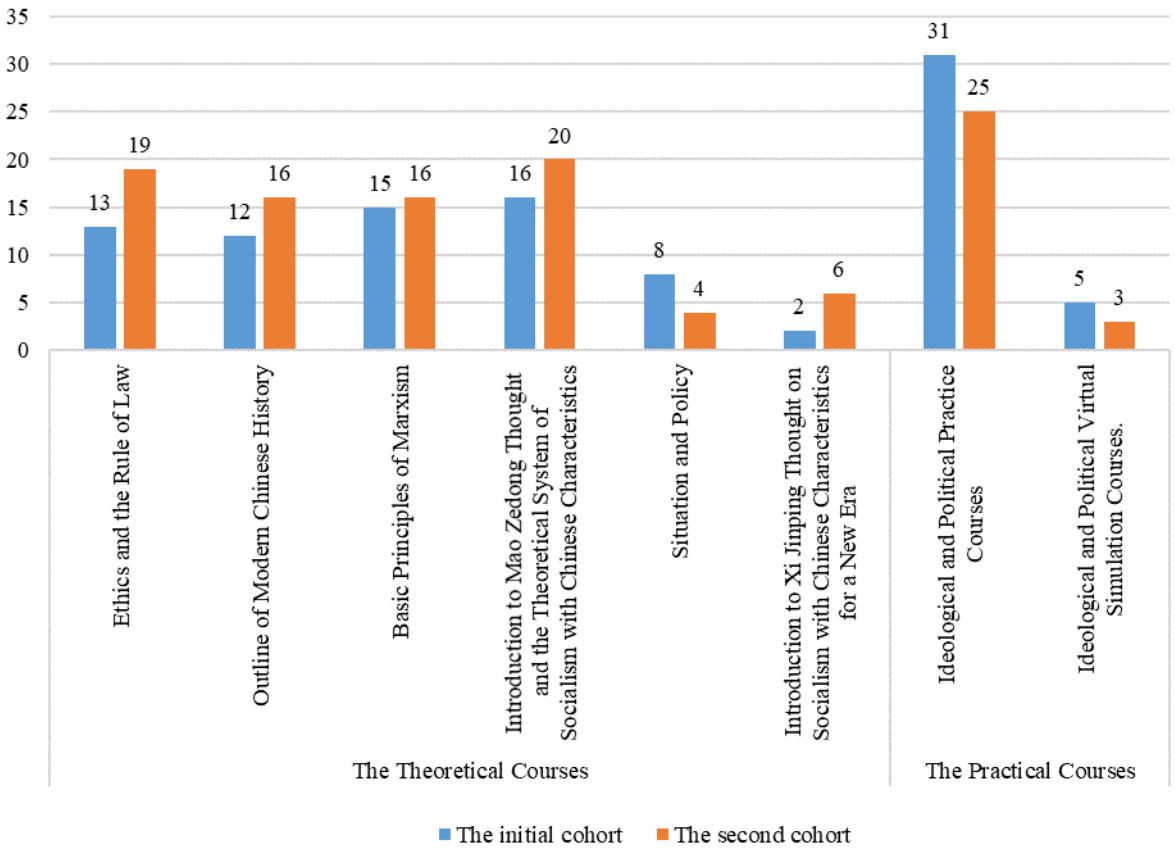

Figure 1. IPCs designated as National First-Class Undergraduate Courses

As shown in Figure 1, courses were manually classified to facilitate analysis. Theoretical courses predominated, constituting 64.71% and 74.31% of the first and second batches respectively. Notably: *Introduction to Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era* had only eight first-class courses due to its recent introduction; Situation and Policy (S&P) courses were underrepresented; the other four core courses maintained consistent representation across batches, with minor increases in the second batch. The total IPC courses remained stable (102 in first batch; 109 in second). This balanced distribution across course types provides a robust foundation for analyzing IPC teacher cohorts, ensuring comprehensive representation of China's ideological-political curriculum landscape.

2.2 Data Collection and Processing

Following sample determination, comprehensive data on 210 instructors was collected through multi-source verification. Initial information on personal backgrounds and academic contributions was sourced from: Institutional websites and CVs; Faculty public homepages; Baidu Encyclopedia profiles; News reports and search engines; Ministry of Education IPC influential teacher records. Supplementary data was obtained from: Ministry of Education IPC funding awards; National IPC Teaching Exhibition winners; China Knowledge Network (CNKI); National Social Science Fund (NSSFC) databases. Unavailable data was acquired through manual inquiries, email correspondence, and indirect verification. All information (current through 1 February 2024) was cross-validated to create standardized instructor profiles, with additional award data from the Third National IPC Teaching Exhibition added on 18 March 2024.

The aggregated curriculum vitae (CV) database forms the analytical foundation of this study, systematically documenting teacher development trajectories. Beyond basic demographic and institutional data (gender, ethnicity, birth date, affiliation, degrees, discipline, teaching history), CVs include: Research outputs; Teaching accomplishments; Competition awards; Talent honors and titles. These elements collectively reflect markers of teaching excellence (Avalos, 2011). For analytical coherence, data is structured into four dimensions: Basic Information; Educational Background; Teaching Experience; Academic Achievements. Each dimension contains specific variables enabling econometric analysis through CV content analysis and statistical methods.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Personal Background

3.1.1 Gender Distribution

Among the 210 IPC teachers, gender distribution is balanced (male: 100, 47.6%; female: 110, 52.4%), indicating no significant disparity. This contrasts with research universities where 71.0% of first-class offline course instructors are male (H. Wang & Fang, 2022). The equitable ratio holds particular significance in China's sociocultural context where: Female academics often shoulder greater family responsibilities, increasing burnout vulnerability (Blithe, 2020; Watts & Robertson, 2011); Male academics typically maintain central institutional positions with resource advantages (Sigudardottir, Rafnsdottir, Jónsdóttir, & Kristofersson, 2023; Sliskovic & Sersic, 2011). This balance demonstrates female educators' substantial contributions to IPCs and affirms women's critical role in ideological-political education (IPE). Empirical observations suggest female IPC teachers often exhibit: Stronger student engagement; More nuanced pedagogical techniques; Responsive feedback mechanisms; Enhanced communication efficacy (Huang, Li, Pan, & Ren, 2023). Such qualities facilitate emotional connections and knowledge transmission – essential for moral education. The pedagogical diversity arising from gender balance fosters complementary teaching approaches, representing a vital advantage for future IPC faculty development.

3.1.2 Age Structure

IPC instructors leading first-class courses are predominantly aged 41-60 (89.82%), with a mean age of 50.57 years. The cohort distribution comprises:

13 teachers (6.19%) aged ⩽40;

86 teachers (40.95%) aged 41-50;

102 teachers (48.57%) aged 51-60;

9 teachers (4.29%) aged ⩾61.

Professor Zhang Lei (b. 1985) of Qinghai University was the youngest participant at age 35, while Professor Zhou Xiangjun (b. 1952) of Qilu Polytechnic was the oldest at 71. This distribution reflects teaching experience accumulation, where seniority typically enhances pedagogical mastery and curriculum development capabilities (Hitka, Lizbetinova, Javorcikova, Lorincova, & Vanderkova, 2023). However, the underrepresentation of teachers under 40 (only 6.19%) raises succession concerns. Strategic cultivation of early-career educators is therefore essential to maintain a sustainable age structure within IPC faculty.

In 2012, China's Ministry of Education launched the "National Selective Funding Program for Outstanding Young and Middle-Aged IPC Teachers in Higher Education." This initiative targets exemplary teachers under age 45, supporting professional development through project funding. The program has since established four specialized research tracks: IPC Teaching Research Projects; IPC Teaching Method Reform Promotion Projects; Outstanding Young/Middle-Aged Teacher Selective Funding Projects (age ⩽40); IPC Teaching Research Youth Projects (age ⩽35). The progressive lowering of age thresholds—from the original 45 to current limits of 40 and 35—demonstrates strategic prioritization of early-career development. This trajectory promises to accelerate young faculty growth, strengthening the long-term sustainability of IPC teaching teams.

3.1.3 Regional Distribution

IPC teacher distribution exhibits significant regional concentration (Table 1):

Table 1. Regional Distribution of IPC teachers

Region	Teachers	Percentage (%)
East China	55	26.19
North China	51	24.29
Central China	30	14.29
Southwest	23	10.95
Northeast	22	10.48
Northwest	16	7.62
South China	13	6.19

Note: East + North China exceed all other regions combined (106 teachers, 50.48%)

This disparity reflects broader higher education resource inequalities, where eastern regions maintain entrenched advantages (Han, Ni, & Gao, 2023). Metropolitan hubs like Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing, and Hangzhou exemplify this resource concentration (L. L. Wang & Xiao, 2017). To address imbalances, we recommend: Strengthening inter-institutional partnerships between National Key Marxist Colleges/Model Marxist Colleges and remote institutions; Establishing targeted development programs for western/border regions. Such measures would shift from resource-dependent to policy-driven development (Ye, 2019), systematically reducing regional gaps while leveraging demonstration effects.

3.1.4 Institutional Affiliation

Institutional analysis reveals that the 210 first-class IPC instructors represent 165 distinct higher education institutions, with Double First-Class Universities (DFCUs) comprising 61 institutions (36.97%) and ordinary institutions accounting for 104 (63.03%). Faculty distribution shows disproportionate representation: though DFCUs constitute just over one-third of institutions, they employ 91 instructors (43.33%), while ordinary institutions' 119 teachers (56.67%) reflect their numerical majority. This indicates DFCUs' stronger capacity to secure multiple first-class course designations, a pattern aligning with Section 3's regional findings given DFCUs' concentration in eastern/northern China (Peters & Besley, 2018). Notably, institutions with three or more first-class IPCs—particularly National Key Marxist Colleges—demonstrate concentrated presence within the DFCU cohort, underscoring institutional stratification in China's ideological education landscape (Table 2).

Table 2. Institutions that have obtained more than three first-class IPCs

Name of University	Number of first-class IPCs	Whether it is a National Key Marxist College
Peking University	6	Yes
Jilin University	4	Yes
Tsinghua University	3	Yes
Fudan University	3	Yes
Shandong University	3	Yes
Dalian University of Technology	3	Yes
Tianjin University	3	No
Shanxi Normal University	3	No

Between 2016-2019, the Central Propaganda Department and Ministry of Education designated 37 National Key Marxist Colleges, increasing to 41 with incubator institutions. These colleges secured 58 national first-class IPCs across two accreditation batches (27.62% of all such courses). Distribution analysis shows: 6 institutions obtained ≥3 courses; 13 obtained 2 courses; 10 obtained 1 course; 12 secured none. As Table 2 indicates, 75% (6/8) of institutions with ≥3 first-class IPCs are National Key Marxist Colleges, confirming their exemplary role in IPC development. However, despite regional balancing in the selection process, 75% (9/12) of colleges without first-class courses are located in peripheral regions (Southwest, Northwest, Northeast, South China). To address this imbalance, we recommend: Strengthening western Marxist College development alongside existing demonstration programs; Expanding the National Key Marxist College cohort; Broadening funding scope for the "Western Project" within the National Ideological-Political Teaching Model initiative. These measures would enhance western regional IPC quality through targeted curriculum capacity building.

3.2 Educational Background

3.2.1 Educational Attainment

Doctoral degrees characterize 78.82% (160/203) of first-class IPC instructors, with master's degrees held by 19.70% (40) and bachelor's degrees by only 0.99% (2). Notably, both bachelor's degree holders exceed age 55. Eight teachers >50 with unavailable degree data were excluded from analysis, though existing data demonstrate statistical significance for current qualification patterns. This credential distribution reflects critical developmental benchmarks: doctoral attainment signifies scholarly maturation and academic recognition (Kowalczuk-Waledziak, Lopes, Menezes, & Tormenta, 2017). Advanced degrees enhance pedagogical collaboration while fostering self-directed learning capacities—essential traits for continuous professional development in ideological education.

Nationwide data reveals a significant credential gap: while 41.74% of undergraduate faculty held doctoral degrees in 2021 (Ministry of Education, 2022), only 19.63% of full-time IPC teachers attained this qualification—falling substantially below the national average (Xinhua News Agency, 2021). This disparity underscores the urgent need to elevate IPC teachers' academic credentials, particularly doctoral attainment, to meet higher education's quality development requirements.

Since 2008, China's Ministry of Education has addressed this through a specialized doctoral program in Marxist theory, expanding from 50 to 100 annual placements. Future efforts should both sustain this initiative and enhance theoretical training programs to strengthen academic qualifications. Crucially, as theoretical rigor constitutes the foundation of ideological-political studies, advancing IPC teachers' scholarly capabilities remains essential to their professional authority and pedagogical effectiveness.

3.2.2 Discipline Background

The study details the disciplinary backgrounds of outstanding IPC teachers based on China's latest Graduate Discipline Catalogue. Law constitutes the dominant discipline (59.5%), followed by philosophy (15.0%), history (8.5%), and economics (5.9%). Combined, these four fields represent 89.9% of backgrounds. Within law, political science and Marxist theory demonstrate particular prominence. The concentration in core disciplines (law/philosophy/history: 83.0%) confirms strong disciplinary alignment among elite IPC teachers. Non-core backgrounds (17.0%) primarily derive from adjacent fields like economics, management, and education, while STEM/medical/arts representation remains negligible—highlighting specialization's critical role in IPC teacher development.

Longitudinal analysis reveals 56.8% of teachers developed interdisciplinary expertise across academic levels. Common crossovers occurred with philosophy, history, economics, and education. Undergraduate transitions typically involved science/engineering/literature, shifting toward political science/Marxist theory at graduate levels. Such interdisciplinary exposure enhances teacher competency (Schoon, 2015), though integrated undergraduate-doctoral training remains essential for professional formation. The 2018 launch of Marxist Theory undergraduate programs at Renmin University of China represents a significant step toward unified talent development.

3.2.3 Mobility Patterns

This study analyzed geographical and professional mobility among first-class IPC teachers, including origin-posting misalignment, inter-institutional experience, and international exposure. Key findings reveal: 121 teachers (57.6%) work outside their home provinces; 85.8% possess cross-institutional experience. Such mobility significantly enhances career development through expanded academic networks, research capacity, and pedagogical innovation—particularly during graduate studies.

However, only 29 teachers (13.8%) have international experience, substantially below comparative disciplines (B. Liu & Peng, 2019; D. Liu, Xu, Zhao, & Che, 2022). This gap indicates insufficient alignment with global academic standards. While ideological education maintains distinctive characteristics, strategic international engagement remains crucial for professional development (Rosenfeld, Yemini, & Mamlok, 2022). We recommend: Adopting more open academic exchange policies; Expanding foreign training programs alongside domestic exchanges; Integrating global perspectives to advance higher education modernization (Du, 2024; Mok & Marginson, 2021).

3.3 Teaching Situation

3.3.1 Teaching Duration

Teaching experience analysis reveals: 81.97% of first-class IPC instructors have taught their course >10 years; 13.93% have 5-10 years' experience; Only 4.10% have <5 years' tenure. This distribution reflects curriculum development as a longitudinal process requiring sustained refinement of content, pedagogical skills, and instructional artistry—typically demanding >10 years of cultivation. Courses with <5 years' development (primarily new offerings like *Introduction to Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era* and virtual simulation courses) remain exceptional.

Teaching duration correlates positively with instructor age (Podolsky, Kini, & Darling-Hammond, 2019), explaining the concentration of first-class IPC teachers among 41-60year-olds (89.92%). To address this experience gap: Enhance support systems for early-career teachers; Sustain exemplary leadership programs (e.g., Master Teacher Studios, Outstanding Teaching Teams); Expand provincial-level implementation of development initiatives. These measures will establish curriculum-centered teacher development pipelines, elevating overall IPC faculty quality.

3.3.2 Teaching Modalities

Analysis of 211 national first-class IPCs reveals five teaching modalities with distinct prevalence patterns:

Offline courses: 65 (1.84% of national total, N=3,539);

Blended courses: 65 (2.44%, N=2,668);

Social practice courses: 56 (11.41%, N=491);

Online courses: 17 (0.57%, N=2,968);

Virtual simulation courses: 8 (0.67%, N=1,200).

The significant social practice representation—markedly higher than in other disciplines—reflects national prioritization of practical ideological education, aligning with recent "Great Ideological and Political Courses" and "Practical Education for Human Development" initiatives. Team teaching characterizes 94.31% (199/211) of courses, demonstrating its pedagogical efficacy. Collaborative instruction enables: Optimized educational resource integration (Pinzón-Ulloa, Arciniegas, & Flores, 2021); Intellectual cross-pollination and complementary expertise (Krammer, Rossmann, Gastager, & Gasteiger-Klicpera, 2018; Ni, Liu, & Wei, 2011). As digital transformation accelerates,

developing specialized teams for online/blended formats presents both opportunities and challenges, making digital literacy acquisition imperative for future IPC faculty development.

3.3.3 Teaching Honors

Teaching competition achievements are widespread among first-class IPC instructors:

National-level awards: 48 teachers (22.86%);

Provincial/ministerial awards: 103 (49.05%);

University-level awards: 11 (5.24%).

Cumulatively, 77.14% hold competition honors, with nearly half achieving provincial-level recognition or higher. This demonstrates competition pedagogy's significant role in professional development, effectively "promoting teaching through competition, reform through competition, and development through competition" (Muskhanova & Avtaeva, 2023).

Notable national platforms include: Ministry of Education's biennial National Higher Education IPC Teaching Exhibition (since 2019, three iterations); All-China Federation of Trade Unions' National Young Faculty Teaching Competition (with dedicated IPC category). Sustaining these competition-based development models remains essential for enhancing IPC teaching quality through demonstration effects.

Beyond competitions, honor systems and funding programs further drive excellence: 2013-2017: Ministry of Education recognized 496 IPC teachers as Model Figures, Influential Figures, or Nominees; Since 2012: Merit-based funding for outstanding young/middle-aged teachers. Our data show 28.10% (59/210) received national honors and 34.29% (72/210) secured special funding. Combined with competition achievements, these mechanisms form a comprehensive cultivation system established since the 18th CPC National Congress. While provincial-level programs (estimated ≥50% participation) aren't fully captured, this integrated framework has substantially elevated IPC teaching quality. As China advances in the new era, continued refinement of these teacher development pathways remains essential for ideological-political education excellence.

3.4 Academic Achievements

3.4.1 Professional Titles

Professional titles among first-class IPC teachers show pronounced stratification:

Professors: 161 (76.7%);

Associate Professors: 44 (21.0%);

Lecturers: 5 (2.4%).

Professors constitute the primary intellectual force, with this senior title signifying: Substantial research and teaching contributions; Institutional recognition; Cumulative advantages in resource acquisition (Guo & Wang, 2017). Their extensive curriculum involvement significantly elevates ideological-political education quality. To further leverage this expertise: Prioritize professor-level undergraduate instruction, particularly in research universities; Formalize professorial modeling in teaching teams.

This aligns with Point 8 of China's Overall Plan for Deepening Educational Evaluation Reform (2020), which mandates undergraduate teaching by professors. Given IPCs' distinctive pedagogical requirements, we recommend institutionalizing regular undergraduate lectures by all IPC professors as a core accountability metric.

3.4.2 Research Output

Academic publications reflect teachers' research capabilities and disciplinary literacy (Trede, Macklin, & Bridges, 2012). This study analyzes high-level papers published by first-class IPC teachers since their current appointment, focusing on first-author publications in China's premier databases: CSSCI, CSCD, and Peking University Core journals (these three databases represent the highest level of ideological and political education in the Chinese language). Key findings:

70% (147/210) published >5 papers;

60% published 5-50 papers (modal range);

21 teachers published >50 papers.

Publication volume correlates strongly with institutional tier: all 7 teachers with >100 papers are from Double First-Class universities, while only 2 of 14 with 51-100 papers represent ordinary institutions (e.g., Tang Zhihua-Guangxi Normal; Jin Lifu-Jiangsu University). This research foundation enables teaching-research synergy essential for quality IPCs (van Dijk, Geertsema, van der Schaaf, van Tartwijk, & Kluijtmans, 2023).

3.4.3 Research Funding and Recognition

Beyond publications, 48.6% (102/210) of first-class IPC teachers secured National Social Science Foundation (NSRF) grants, with half receiving ≥2 awards. This aligns with the analysis of 496 IPC awardees where 63.1% held NSRF grants (W. Wang & Zhou, 2019). Such high success rates in nationally competitive funding demonstrate significant research-teaching synergies (Shephard, Rogers, & Brogt, 2020), particularly notable given project rigor.

Research awards further validate academic standing: 85 teachers (40.5%) won provincial/ministerial awards; 9 (4.3%) secured national awards. Though quantitatively modest, these reflect exceptional scholarly recognition given award prestige. Collectively, our tripartite analysis (publications, NSRF, awards) reveals research's underappreciated pedagogical influence. Comparative data show stronger research-course development correlations than teaching honor correlations, suggesting future IPC enhancement should strategically leverage research-driven curriculum innovation.

4. Conclusions

Analysis of the aforementioned data demonstrates measurable progress in the development of Ideological and Political Course (IPC) faculty within higher education institutions, particularly during the five-year period following Xi Jinping's "3.18" speech. This advancement is evidenced by systemic enhancements across multiple dimensions of IPC teacher development. At the fifth-year commemoration of the "3.18" speech, the General Secretary Xi Jinping reaffirmed these achievements while underscoring enduring challenges and emerging opportunities during the 2024 New Era Ideological and Political Course Development Symposium (May 11). He emphasized the necessity to cultivate a new operational ethos and implement decisive action strategies, given the evolving educational landscape and expanding mission requirements.

Central to this evolution is the imperative to assemble IPC faculty teams characterized by six core competencies: (1) unwavering political discernment, (2) profound pedagogical passion, (3) innovative intellectual agility, (4) global strategic vision, (5) rigorous professional integrity, and (6) constructive optimism. To achieve comprehensive institutional advancement, higher education leaders must prioritize strategic attention to three interconnected domains: systemic capacity-building mechanisms, sustainable professional development ecosystems, and evaluation frameworks aligned with contemporary ideological education paradigms. These focused interventions will ensure continued progress in developing IPC educators capable of addressing 21st-century pedagogical demands.

4.1 Optimizing Team Age Balance through Enhanced Youth Support

Teaching faculty constitute the foundational resource for curriculum development, yet our data reveal a critical age imbalance threatening sustainable succession in high-performing IPC teams: only 47.1% of first-class course leaders are under 50, with a severe shortage of early-career faculty evidenced by merely 6.2% (13/210) under age 40. To address this demographic challenge, institutions should strengthen support systems for teachers under 40, expand age-inclusive funding mechanisms (e.g., National Social Fund and Ministry of Education Humanities grants now capped at ≤40 years), and develop structured pathways from induction to leadership. These measures strategically leverage younger educators' greater adaptability to digital learning environments—enhancing IPC relevance and student engagement—while transforming potential succession crises into opportunities for ideological education capacity renewal through comprehensive development frameworks rather than isolated initiatives.

4.2 Advancing Regional Equilibrium Through Targeted Western Development Strategies

Empirical findings reveal significant regional disparities in first-class IPC teacher distribution, reflecting broader imbalances in faculty development between eastern and western China. While this pattern remains consistent with higher education's developmental stage, it necessitates strengthened western support policies to accelerate equitable progress. Existing initiatives—including the "Western Project" for national teaching-research teams and the National Social Science Fund's western programs—should be strategically expanded through enhanced development of National Key and Model Marxist Colleges in western regions alongside discipline-focused mentorship programs for IPC curriculum development. Such targeted interventions will systematically shift western IPC development from resource dependency to policy empowerment, ultimately elevating ideological-political education quality through comprehensive capacity building.

4.3 Enhancing Professionalization Through Training System Reform

Analysis confirms IPC teachers lag behind national averages in doctoral attainment (19.6% vs. 41.7%), disciplinary consistency, and international exposure. Addressing these gaps requires systematic professional development to strengthen four core competencies: robust theoretical foundations, academic acuity, societal perspective, and pedagogical dedication—essential for delivering resonant ideological education. Critical reforms include: Implementing integrated BA/MA/PhD programs in Marxist theory; Expanding in-service doctoral opportunities for current faculty; Developing digital pedagogy training at all institutional levels; Scaling international exchange programs. Only through

such comprehensive competency development can IPC teachers effectively equip students with requisite knowledge and critical capacities.

4.4 Enhancing Teaching Recognition Systems and Expanding Leadership Models

Empirical evidence confirms that teaching competitions, demonstration activities, honors systems, and targeted funding significantly boost IPC teachers' motivation and pedagogical innovation. These mechanisms promote teaching excellence and specialization, serving as pivotal demonstration-leadership tools. Our data reveal 77.14% of first-class IPC teachers possess competition experience, with nearly half winning provincial/ministerial awards. While national-level IPC competitions and funding programs demonstrate maturity, provincial initiatives—particularly teaching research grants and pedagogical innovation dissemination—remain underdeveloped. We recommend: Strengthening provincial funding mechanisms; Leveraging multi-level competitions to showcase excellence; Systematically identifying exemplary teachers as reform catalysts. These strategies will amplify demonstration effects and accelerate teaching quality improvements across institutional tiers.

4.5 Strengthening Research-Teaching Synergy for Mutual Advancement

A robust academic foundation is essential for enhancing the ideological depth, theoretical rigor, and relevance of IPCs. Our findings reveal that first-class IPC instructors typically demonstrate strong research profiles, with significant achievements in high-impact publications, national grants (48.6% secured NSRF funding), and scholarly awards. Effective IPC teachers excel at integrating research with pedagogical praxis, demonstrating the symbiotic relationship between academic inquiry and educational excellence.

This research-teaching dynamic constitutes a critical dimension of faculty professional development. Recent national higher education reforms have transformed evaluation systems—shifting from narrow metrics (scores, degrees, publications) toward holistic assessment aligned with evolving research paradigms. Contemporary academic priorities now emphasize: National strategic needs; Socioeconomic development; Core educational missions. As moral education's cornerstone, IPE must institutionalize research-teaching reciprocity, leveraging scholarly inquiry to: Guide pedagogical innovation; Enhance educational quality; Maintain ideological integrity while advancing curricular modernization.

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Authors' contributions

Hong Du led the conceptualization and design of the study, developed the methodological approach, conducted formal analysis, and contributed to manuscript writing. Yiye Hu provided critical feedback throughout the writing and editing stages. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

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No additional data are available.

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