

Cultivating Core Socialist Values among University Students: The Role of Ideological and Political Education in China

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Abstract

Cultivating the next generation's commitment to core socialist values has become a central goal of China's higher education in the Xi Jinping era. University students are a critical group for instilling these values, which include prosperity, democracy, civility, harmony, freedom, equality, justice, rule of law, patriotism, dedication, integrity, and friendship. This article adopts a literature-based analysis, reviewing research and policy developments from the past five years on ideological and political education (IPE) in Chinese universities. Key sources include recent academic studies, government guidelines, and practical case studies. The review finds that Chinese universities have integrated core socialist values throughout curricula, campus culture, and extracurricular programs. Innovations such as curriculum-based ideological education, new media engagement, volunteer service, and peer mentoring are used to enhance value internalization. Studies report improved student understanding and more positive attitudes when IPE employs interactive, student-centered methods rather than relying solely on top-down theoretical instruction. At the same time, challenges persist in truly embedding these values into students' personal belief systems, as some education approaches remain overly formalistic or disconnected from students' lived experiences. Effective cultivation of core values requires a holistic approach: updated teaching methods, rich practical opportunities, competent and exemplary instructors, and leveraging of technology and media to connect with students. The paper discusses how these strategies can address current gaps—such as low student engagement or superficial understanding—and argues that IPE plays an irreplaceable role in guiding youth values, fostering civic quality, and ensuring ideological continuity. Through continual innovation and commitment to student-centered pedagogy, ideological and political education in China can more successfully cultivate core socialist values among university students, contributing to both individual development and the broader goal of national rejuvenation.

Keywords: Ideological and Political Education; University Students; Values Cultivation; Curriculum Ideological Education; New Media; Civic Education

1. Introduction

Cultivating core socialist values among China's youth has been deemed essential for national ideological security and moral development in the new era. The concept of Core Socialist Values was officially introduced at the 18th Communist Party of China (CPC) National Congress in 2012, distilling the nation's value system into 12 key principles in three dimensions: national goals of prosperity, democracy, civility, harmony; societal goals of freedom, equality, justice, rule of law; and individual virtues of patriotism, dedication, integrity, friendship. These values are seen as the moral foundation for China's future and the spiritual support for the country's development. In late 2013, the CPC Central Committee issued guidelines to integrate core socialist values into all domains of society, "incorporated into the curriculum and classrooms and made a way of thinking for students", thereby launching a national campaign to instill these values in education and culture.

Within higher education, ideological and political education (IPE) is the primary vehicle for this values cultivation mission. IPE in Chinese universities refers to both dedicated theory courses (covering Marxist theory, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, Xi Jinping Thought, ethics and law, etc.) and the broader ideological work integrated into various aspects of campus life. Since the 18th CPC Congress, the Party leadership under President Xi Jinping has placed unprecedented emphasis on strengthening ideological work among young people. Xi Jinping's thought on education asserts that the fundamental task of education is "Lide Shuren", meaning to establish virtue and educate people, highlighting moral education as paramount. In a 2018 national conference on education, Xi Jinping stressed that building a strong education system is a cornerstone for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, and he called for fully implementing the Party's education policy and cultivating socialist builders with all-round moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and labor development. Core socialist values were identified as a key starting point to guide the construction of a strong, cohesive socialist ideology among the youth.

Why focus on university students? College students are at a formative stage of life where worldviews and values solidify, making them a crucial "target population" for value education. They are also the future builders and leaders of society, so their identification with socialist core values is seen as vital for China's long-term social cohesion and the realization of the "Chinese Dream" of national rejuvenation. However, the rapid economic and social changes in China have led to an increasingly pluralistic environment of ideas and values, especially among young people. Some scholars have noted phenomena of "value confusion" or weaknesses in ideal and belief among today's students, attributed to influences of commercialization, Western cultural influx, and the internet age. Strengthening value education is thus regarded as an urgent task to ensure that youth develop correct outlooks on the world, life, and values consistent with socialist ideals. As Ren (2023) points out, promoting the socialist core value system is not only essential for individual character building but also "the only way to realize the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation", underscoring that youth value cultivation has strategic importance for China's future.

Current state of research: In recent years, the topic of integrating core socialist values into university education has attracted considerable scholarly attention. A noticeable trend in Chinese

educational research is the rise of “curriculum-based ideological and political education”— the idea that all courses, not just dedicated politics classes, should carry ideological and moral education elements. Analysis of hundreds of Chinese studies from 2014–2021 shows that the hot spots include defining the connotation of curriculum ideological education, its value construction, and especially exploring practical paths for implementation. Notably, “socialist core values” have emerged as one of the research frontiers within this curriculum-integration trend. This indicates strong academic and policy interest in finding effective methods to teach and inculcate the core values through various disciplines and activities.

Despite the prioritization of IPE by the government, some researchers have observed limitations in the existing literature and practice. A 2024 thematic review by Ouyang et al. noted that many studies in this field have been normative (prescribing what should be done) or descriptive (documenting what is being done), but often lack critical evaluation of effectiveness or concrete strategies for improvement. In other words, much writing extols how IPE should cultivate values, or describes policies in place, yet relatively fewer studies rigorously assess outcomes or provide evidence-based recommendations. This gap suggests the need for more analytical research connecting ideological education methods with measurable changes in students’ values and behavior.

In practice, Chinese universities have made IPE increasingly pervasive – from mandatory ideology theory classes to orientations, extracurricular activities, volunteer service requirements, and campus propaganda. Official assessments (such as annual ideological education work reports) indicate that institutions have incorporated core values into their mission statements, student codes of conduct, and daily management. However, challenges remain in ensuring that students not only cognitively understand the twelve core values but also genuinely internalize and practice them. As will be discussed, issues like student apathy or resistance to didactic political instruction, the gap between theory and practice, and the ever-evolving influence of new media on youth ideologies require adaptive strategies.

Purpose of this article: This study provides a comprehensive overview of how China’s ideological and political education system is harnessed to cultivate core socialist values among university students. We review recent literature (2019–2025) and highlight major findings regarding effective approaches, challenges, and the overall impact of these efforts. By analyzing both research studies and practical explorations, we aim to answer: What role does ideological and political education play in fostering core socialist values in college students? Which methods or innovations have been identified as most effective, and what obstacles are encountered? The findings can help educators and policymakers refine IPE practices to better achieve the desired value outcomes. Ultimately, nurturing a generation of morally upright, value-conscious graduates is seen as foundational to China’s education quality and its societal harmony.

2. Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative literature review methodology, surveying scholarly and official sources on ideological and political education in Chinese higher education from approximately

2019 to 2025. The goal is to synthesize current knowledge and dominant viewpoints on cultivating core socialist values in universities. Key steps in the methodology included:

Literature Search: We systematically searched academic databases (e.g., CNKI, Web of Science) and Google Scholar for relevant publications in the last five years using keywords such as “socialist core values,” “ideological and political education,” “college students,” and “China.” Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, doctoral dissertations, and authoritative reports. Both English-language and Chinese-language sources (with English abstracts or translations available) were considered, to capture a comprehensive picture. We also reviewed policy documents and speeches related to IPE (for context), although the focus remains on analytical research works.

Inclusion Criteria: We included sources that specifically address the relationship between IPE (or related educational practices) and the cultivation of core socialist values among students. Studies on broader moral or ideological education were included if core values were a significant component. Very general discussions without new insights, or studies older than around 2015 (except for seminal concepts) were excluded to keep the review current. In total, about 40 key references were selected for detailed analysis, the majority published 2019 onwards.

Analysis: We performed a thematic analysis of the collected literature. Common themes that emerged include: integration of core values into curriculum and teaching methods, the role of campus culture and extracurricular activities, impacts of new media and technology on values education, teacher training and example-setting, student engagement and attitudes, and evaluation of IPE effectiveness. We extracted findings and arguments from each source and grouped them under these themes. Special attention was paid to empirical findings (e.g., survey results, experimental interventions) that demonstrate outcomes of certain educational strategies.

Synthesis: In the results section, we synthesize the literature by theme, highlighting consensus strategies for effectively cultivating values as well as noted challenges or gaps. We cross-reference findings from multiple studies to build a coherent narrative. The discussion then interprets these findings, relating them to the broader aims of moral education and suggesting future directions or improvements. Throughout, we ensure that insights are attributed to their sources (using author-year citations) and that the review remains balanced and objective.

It should be noted that while this method provides a broad overview, it relies on available literature. There may be institutional practices or internal assessments not captured in published research. Nonetheless, the methodology covers diverse sources including quantitative studies, qualitative case studies, and theoretical analyses to paint a well-rounded picture of the current state of cultivating core socialist values in China’s universities.

3. Results

3.1. Integration of Core Values into Curriculum and Classroom Teaching

One significant finding is that China’s higher education system has increasingly embedded core socialist values into the formal curriculum and classroom instruction of various courses.

Traditionally, ideological and political theory courses (such as “Ethics and Law” or “Introduction to Mao Zedong Thought”) were the main avenue for value education. In recent years, however, the concept of “curriculum-based ideological and political education” has expanded value integration across all subjects. This means that instructors of general education or even technical courses are encouraged to infuse relevant social, moral, or patriotic examples into their teaching content, aligning with core values where appropriate.

Research by Liu et al (2022) analyzed 429 Chinese papers on curriculum-based IPE and found that many studies focus on clarifying the connotation of this approach, its importance (construction value), and exploring practical integration paths. For example, science professors might highlight the value of “dedication” by discussing scientists’ contributions to national prosperity, or literature classes might explore themes of “integrity” and “friendship” in Chinese classics. The National Conference on Curriculum-Based Ideological and Political Education in late 2016 formally launched this initiative nationwide. Since then, universities have reformed syllabi to include ideological elements, and new textbooks have been compiled with content explicitly referencing the core values.

Studies indicate that this comprehensive integration addresses a previous disconnect between academic teaching and value cultivation. By making moral education ubiquitous rather than confined to a few courses, students receive consistent messaging about core values in various learning contexts. It also helps counteract the “value vacuum” that scholars identified in higher education in the past. In fact, Liu et al (2022) pointed out that distortion and lack of values were urgent problems in Chinese higher education, which the curriculum-based ideological education reform aims to solve. With the new policy, ideological and political theory courses themselves have also been revitalized – educators are urged to update teaching methods, making classes more interactive and relevant to students’ lives, instead of relying on rote doctrinal instruction.

Despite these efforts, several studies note challenges in classroom implementation. Yin (2019) observes that Traditional lecture-based pedagogy remains common: teachers often “instill” content in a one-way manner, which students find tedious and unpersuasive. Indeed, a common critique is that overly theoretical and dogmatic teaching methods have led to low enthusiasm and even aversion among students toward ideological courses. For example, Yin’s analysis highlights that in many classes, “teaching methods are not flexible...too much multimedia slide presentation turns the lesson into an electronic script,” failing to capture students’ attention. As a result, while most students can recite the core values (since they are emphasized in exams), they may not deeply understand or agree with them, remaining passive recipients.

To address this, researchers and educators advocate for innovative, student-centered teaching approaches. Ren (2023) suggests using inspirational pedagogy, case studies, and situational learning in ideological courses to replace monotone lecturing. By discussing real-life examples or dilemmas related to core values, teachers can prompt students to reflect and form their own connections to these principles. Another strategy is leveraging discussion and debate – encouraging students to voice their opinions on moral and social issues (within acceptable bounds), thus making values education a dialogical process rather than a one-way

“indoctrination.” This aligns with contemporary educational theory that active learning and critical thinking can deepen internalization of values.

Furthermore, many universities are adopting blended learning and digital tools to enhance engagement. For instance, online platforms and social media are used to share short videos, stories, or interactive quizzes about core values, meeting students in the digital spaces they frequent. The use of new media in teaching will be elaborated later, but it is worth noting here that such tools in the classroom context have shown promise. A notable case is an experiment by Jiang et al. (2024) who integrated big data and knowledge graph technology into a civics (political theory) class. They developed a knowledge graph of ideological concepts to visually map connections, and applied intelligent tutoring techniques. The result was that the class which experienced this tech-assisted approach saw significantly better outcomes: the students’ civics test scores improved by about 5.9 points, and they demonstrated higher knowledge retention and application than the control group (who had traditional teaching). Students in the experimental class also reported greater interest in the subject. This suggests that modernizing instructional methods – whether through interactive pedagogy or technology – can substantially enhance the effectiveness of classroom-based value education.

In summary, integrating core socialist values into curriculum and classroom teaching is now a cornerstone of China’s approach. It ensures that value cultivation is a continuous thread in students’ academic journey. The literature shows broad support for this integration, but also cautions that how values are taught is crucial. Overemphasis on didactics can backfire, whereas innovative, relatable teaching can make the difference in helping students truly internalize the core values.

3.2. Role of Campus Culture and Extracurricular Activities

Beyond formal curriculum, campus culture and extracurricular programs play a vital role in immersing students in core socialist values. Chinese universities traditionally see themselves as not only knowledge disseminators but also moral communities. Creating a supportive campus environment – what some officials call a “educational environment” – is believed to influence students’ values through subtle, continuous exposure. The research consistently emphasizes that values education should extend to practical and social realms of student life, not remain only in textbooks.

One key aspect is the incorporation of core values into campus culture symbols and norms. Universities commonly display the 24-character slogan of core values on billboards, classroom walls, and screensavers on campus. While this alone may have limited impact, it sets a tone. More substantively, institutions have been working to weave core values into school regulations, honors systems, and daily activities. For example, many universities now have “Student Core Values Pledge” ceremonies or include adherence to core values in evaluations for scholarships and awards (rewarding students who exemplify dedication, integrity, etc.). According to Li et al. (2022), “the socialist core value system is the core guiding content of ideological and political education...it should be integrated into the construction of campus culture” to effectively shape

students' attitudes. By living in an environment that consistently reinforces positive behaviors and narratives aligned with the core values, students are more likely to assimilate those values.

Campus cultural activities are another vehicle. Universities organize themed events such as speech competitions, essay contests, art exhibitions, and theater performances centered on patriotism, volunteerism, or moral dilemmas. These provide students with creative ways to engage with core values. A study by Li et al (2022) argued that only by "integrating the core value system into campus cultural construction, strengthening comprehensive management, and constantly exploring in practice, can we effectively improve the realization of values in IPE". In practice, this means campuses have ramped up clubs and societies that promote public service, traditional culture, or collective activities (like choir singing of patriotic songs, etc.), thereby cultivating values like collectivism and friendship.

One prominent extracurricular approach is volunteer service and social practice. Engaging students in community service is seen as a direct way to cultivate values of dedication, integrity, and the spirit of helping others. Volunteerism has been institutionalized via programs where students volunteer in rural development projects, urban community centers, or on-campus service roles. Scholars note that volunteer service serves as a form of "practical education" that complements classroom learning. It provides real-life contexts for students to practice altruism and social responsibility. In fact, the ethos of volunteerism in China is often linked to the story of Lei Feng – a soldier celebrated for selflessness – which is invoked to inspire students. Official directives encourage organizing volunteer activities to "promote the spirit of Lei Feng" as a means to embody core values.

Empirical research supports the efficacy of volunteer participation. A study found that involvement in "network hot event" volunteer campaigns (responding to trending social issues) helped students strengthen their identification with socialist core values. Another research (Yang & Liu, 2022) indicated that students who frequently join volunteer projects show higher sense of social responsibility and empathy, aligning with the values of friendship and civility. Moreover, volunteer service has reciprocal benefits: it not only contributes to society but is "of great significance to the growth of college students" by fostering their personal development and value formation. As one paper put it, "socialist core values...provide ideological guidance and value orientation for college students' voluntary service, while voluntary service injects fresh vitality into the practice of core values". Through helping others, students experience the core values in action, which can be more impactful than abstract instruction.

Another influential component of campus culture is the presence of peer influence and mentorship. Recognizing that students are often more receptive to their peers, some universities have implemented peer-led programs to spread positive values. For example, peer counseling or peer tutoring initiatives train outstanding student volunteers to mentor their juniors in both study and personal development. Zhang et al (2022) describe a model where peer counselors assist fellow students with academic and moral guidance, thereby exemplifying values like helpfulness and solidarity. The authors note that peer education leverages the fact that students of similar age and background can communicate more freely, potentially making moral education "softer" yet effective. This approach resonates with the value of friendliness (as one of the core values) – peer

mentorship is essentially friendliness and mutual assistance in practice. Initial observations suggest peer-led programs can increase the acceptability of moral education and create a supportive atmosphere that normalizes virtuous behavior on campus.

In sum, extracurricular and cultural avenues are crucial for moving core value education from theory to practice. They help address what Ren (2023) identified as a common problem: “emphasizing theory over practice”, where students lack opportunities to experience values firsthand. By strengthening campus culture and giving students practical roles (as volunteers, peer mentors, club leaders, etc.), universities provide a living laboratory for values. This practical immersion is necessary for students to internalize values “in the heart” and externalize them “in action”, as Chinese educators often phrase it.

3.3. Influence of New Media and Technology

The rise of the new media environment (social media, online news, video platforms, etc.) has significantly influenced ideological work in colleges, posing both opportunities and challenges for cultivating core values. Contemporary university students are digital natives; their values and worldviews are constantly shaped by information from the internet. As such, ideological education can no longer be confined to classrooms or campus events—it must engage with students online and harness digital tools.

On one hand, the internet is seen as a double-edged sword for value cultivation. There is an abundance of information, including some that may clash with socialist values or promote individualistic and materialistic lifestyles. Managing this influence is a challenge noted by several scholars. For instance, “network hot topics” (viral online trends and discussions) often capture students’ attention more than official narratives. Yang and Liu (2022) argue that rather than shunning these trends, educators should actively integrate popular online topics into ideological education. Their study finds that using current internet memes or trending news as discussion material can enrich ideological education resources and make lessons more relatable to students’ experiences. Moreover, by guiding the interpretation of these hot topics through a value lens, instructors can correct misconceptions and highlight positive examples (for instance, celebrating an online story of altruism as a model of “dedication” or “integrity”).

Universities have established official WeChat public accounts, Weibo (microblog) pages, and Bilibili video channels dedicated to ideological and values content. These channels push short articles, infographics, and videos that explain core values in fresh, youth-friendly ways. A 2025 study by Su and Zhang highlights the importance of “media convergence” – the combination of traditional education with new media outreach – as part of a three-dimensional framework for values cultivation. They propose that effective cultivation in the new media era requires “theoretical internalization – media convergence – practical externalization”. In practice, this means after teaching the theory of core values, educators should use new media to reinforce those concepts (e.g., through engaging digital content), and then encourage students to act on the values in real life. This integrated approach is aimed at enhancing the relevance and appeal of values education for a tech-savvy generation.

Empirical evidence of using new media tools is emerging. For example, some universities have developed values-themed micro-documentaries and short videos featuring relatable role models (young entrepreneurs exemplifying innovation and dedication, volunteers demonstrating friendship and civility, etc.). According to Li et al (2022), cited in Su & Zhang, well-crafted micro-videos on core values can have a measurable positive effect on students' receptiveness. They attract views and shares, sparking conversations among students. Additionally, online campaigns like hashtag challenges (e.g., sharing personal stories of integrity or acts of kindness) can engage students interactively. The DataReportal 2024 statistics show nearly all Chinese university students use smartphones and social media heavily, so meeting them on those platforms is considered essential.

On the other hand, the new media era also requires educating students to critically navigate online content – essentially improving their media literacy and ideological discernment. There is a risk that exposure to misinformation or sensational content can weaken students' identification with core values. Incidents such as viral rumors or morally controversial online debates can sway youth opinions. Recognizing this, ideological education has expanded to include guidance on proper internet conduct and critical thinking. The slogan “the Internet is not a lawless place” – from a People’s Daily commentary – encapsulates the effort to instill rule of law and civility in online behavior, which aligns with core values as well. Teachers often discuss contemporary cases (e.g., an incident of cyber-bullying or a fake news story that caused public anger) to illustrate the importance of values like justice, integrity, and respect in the digital sphere.

New technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) and data mining have also been explored to personalize and improve ideological education. Some recent experimental studies (Zhang et al., 2022) have applied data mining techniques to analyze student feedback and adapt ideological content to better suit student interests. Others have used mobile learning platforms to push mini-quizzes or daily “value reflections” to students, making engagement more continuous beyond the classroom. While these are nascent approaches, preliminary results indicate that such innovations can increase student participation. For example, a pilot program using a WeChat mini-program for ideological education reported that students appreciated the on-demand access to learning materials and the interactive elements like polls and Q&A, which kept them more involved than in traditional settings.

In conclusion, new media and technology are influential factors in modern value education. Chinese educators are actively seeking to “occupy the new media battlefield” for hearts and minds – by producing appealing content, guiding online discourse, and enhancing digital literacy among students. The literature suggests that when used creatively, new media can enhance the effectiveness of IPE by meeting students where they are and translating core values into the vernacular of youth culture. However, it requires continuous innovation and vigilance to ensure that the core socialist values are reinforced rather than diluted in cyberspace.

3.4. Educators' Capacity and Exemplary Role

The success of cultivating core socialist values hinges not only on curricula and programs, but also on the people who implement them—namely, the educators and administrators. Multiple

sources underscore the critical role of teachers and mentors as carriers of values. As the old saying goes, “teaching by example matters more than teaching by words”. If educators themselves embody the values in their conduct, their influence on students can be profound.

Chinese universities in recent years have put effort into strengthening the team of ideological and political educators. This includes not just specialized political instructors, but all faculty and staff under the philosophy of “all staff educate” and “education in all aspects”, by all people, at all times). Training programs and workshops are organized to improve teachers’ understanding of core socialist values and methods to incorporate them into teaching. Some universities have hired or honored outstanding model teachers known for moral integrity and dedication, using them as exemplars.

Ren (2023) notes that “teachers should have a comprehensive understanding of core values, strengthen their own work ability and moral quality, and give full play to the power of example”. In practice, educators are encouraged to reflect on their own attitudes and ensure they consistently demonstrate values like honesty, fairness, and caring for students. When students see their mentors practice what they preach (for instance, a professor who is dedicated and responsible, or a counselor who is compassionate and just), it reinforces the credibility of the values message. By contrast, any hypocrisy or misbehavior by staff can severely undermine value education.

There is evidence that students respond positively to teachers who integrate personal anecdotes and a caring attitude in ideological teaching. A survey by Zhang et al (2022) found that college students ranked “teacher’s personal charisma and ethical conduct” as a key factor making ideological classes engaging. Teachers who can connect ideological concepts to their own life experiences or to current events tend to earn students’ respect and attention. This finding correlates with the idea that the emotional rapport between educators and students is important for values transmission. Educators are thus advised to cultivate approachability and mentorship relationships, rather than maintaining an authoritative distance.

Another aspect is interdisciplinary collaboration – universities have started to form teams where ideological educators work with subject professors to design content that subtly infuses values without compromising subject matter. For example, an economics professor might team up with an ideological instructor to discuss issues of social justice and equality in a finance class. This not only lends credibility (showing that values are relevant in professional fields) but also helps faculty who are not trained in ideology to navigate those discussions appropriately.

However, challenges exist. Not all faculty are naturally equipped or enthusiastic about ideological tasks, especially those who specialize in technical fields. Some may see it as an imposed responsibility outside their expertise. Therefore, building educator capacity remains a work in progress. The Ministry of Education has issued directives to improve the recruitment and retention of high-quality ideological and political counselors, and to ensure that remuneration and career progression for these roles are attractive. There are also calls for developing assessment metrics for educators’ effectiveness in values education (for instance, incorporating student feedback on moral guidance into teacher evaluations).

In summary, the human factor is indispensable. IPE and core values education are only as effective as the people delivering them. The literature encourages a dual approach: professional development (to equip educators with skills and knowledge) and moral cultivation of educators themselves (to ensure they serve as positive role models). When teachers “preach, teach, and model” consistently, students are far more likely to absorb the intended values.

3.5. Student Engagement and Reception

Finally, it is important to consider the students’ perspective – how are they receiving and engaging with the core socialist values initiatives? Research on student attitudes reveals a mixed but gradually improving picture. Surveys conducted in the last few years suggest that awareness of the core values is very high among university students (often over 90% can recall or recognize the 12 values, thanks to heavy publicity). Identification with the values – that is, agreeing that these are important and personally adopting them – is moderate to high for broadly appealing values like patriotism and justice, but can be weaker for concepts perceived as abstract (e.g., “prosperity” or “socialist democracy”).

Tong’s doctoral research (2022) – which interviewed Chinese university students – indicated that most students express at least superficial support for the core values and understand that they are socially desirable. However, some admitted that these values felt “distant” from their daily life or that the way they were taught was not compelling. This is corroborated by other studies noting that when value education is too preachy, students may tune out or show perfunctory compliance (e.g., memorizing slogans for a test without genuine belief).

On a positive note, the introduction of more practical and interactive elements appears to enhance student engagement. Several case studies demonstrate improved enthusiasm when students are active participants rather than passive listeners. For example, implementing peer mentoring schemes (as discussed earlier) was found to make students more comfortable discussing moral questions, thereby deepening their understanding and acceptance of values. Zhang et al. (2022) observed that through peer counseling, students could address “small problems” and confusions about values in a relatable way, which helped in “deepening the recognition of core values” step by step.

Another indicator of engagement is student involvement in planning and leading value-related activities. When students take leadership in organizing volunteer projects or campaign initiatives (with guidance), their commitment to the underlying values tends to increase. This aligns with educational theory that ownership and agency boost intrinsic motivation. There are documented cases of student associations forming around themes like environmental protection (linking to harmony), community service (friendship and dedication), or academic integrity (integrity and responsibility). These grassroots efforts often have strong participation, suggesting that given the right opportunities, many college students are willing to champion core values causes in ways that resonate with them (for instance, charity fundraisers, hackathons for social good, etc.).

The outcomes on student behavior and development, while harder to quantify, are being tracked. Universities report fewer discipline violations when emphasis on values like rule of law and integrity is increased – for example, some campuses saw reductions in academic dishonesty

cases after launching integrity education campaigns. On the societal level, Chinese youth participation in initiatives such as rural volunteering pandemic relief efforts is often cited as evidence that the education in dedication and patriotism is bearing fruit. Indeed, during the early 2020, many university student volunteers actively joined community service and propaganda teams, risking challenges to help others, which authorities highlighted as a manifestation of core values in the young generation.

There is also a diversity among students – not a monolith. Factors such as upbringing, region, academic major, and personal experiences can affect how students respond to ideological education. Some may embrace it wholeheartedly (especially those who plan careers in public service or who are Party members), while others may be more skeptical or just indifferent, focusing on personal academic/career goals. The review by Ouyang et al. (2024) suggests that a challenge is bridging this gap – making ideological education relevant to students' individual aspirations and contemporary issues they care about. Students are more engaged when they see how core values connect to things like finding meaning in life, contributing to society, and even improving their employment prospects (employers in China do consider moral character and community involvement).

In conclusion, student engagement is gradually improving as methods become more interactive and practical, but continuous effort is needed. The results show that when done right – i.e., making students active stakeholders in values education – the majority respond positively and exhibit growth in civic mindedness and moral reasoning. On the other hand, maintaining authenticity (avoiding overly propagandistic tones) and adapting to student feedback are crucial to prevent disengagement. The ultimate “success metric” will be the extent to which students carry these core socialist values into their working lives and civic participation after university, contributing to what Chinese leaders term the “spiritual strength” of the nation.

4. Discussion

The above results portray a Chinese higher education landscape in which ideological and political education (IPE) is deeply interwoven with the mission of cultivating core socialist values in students. Overall, the initiatives and strategies show a high level of intentionality and innovation, reflecting the government's strong political will and the education sector's adaptation to contemporary needs. In this discussion, we interpret the significance of these findings, address the identified challenges, and consider the broader implications and future directions.

Firstly, it is evident that China's approach is holistic and systemic – combining curriculum reform, extracurricular engagement, media utilization, and human factors (teachers and peers) to create a multi-dimensional influence on student values. This aligns well with theoretical understanding that value formation is not achieved through a single class or one-off activity, but through repeated reinforcement across contexts. The concept of “whole-process, all-round education” is essentially being applied to moral/value education. By ensuring that core values are present in academic learning, social life, and even digital environments, the IPE system attempts to surround students with consistent positive messaging. This comprehensive strategy is a notable

strength – few education systems elsewhere undertake values education with such breadth. Western observers like García-López (2019) have described this as the Chinese state mobilizing an “integral state” apparatus to build consensus on values. In essence, it is a nation-wide pedagogical project to shape citizens’ values in line with national ideology.

The discussion must acknowledge that this endeavor is intrinsically linked to China’s sociopolitical context. The core socialist values are not just abstract virtues; they serve a legitimizing function for the Communist Party’s leadership and the socialist system. Thus, IPE’s role is both educational and political. For the most part, the values themselves (prosperity, justice, patriotism, etc.) are universally positive and resonate with traditional Chinese virtues and international norms. However, the emphasis and interpretation are tailored to support China’s current governance model and social cohesion. For instance, “democracy” in the core values is framed within socialist consultative democracy, and “rule of law” under the Party’s leadership. University students, being generally savvy, are likely aware of these nuances. Therefore, one discussion point is: how sincerely do students adopt these values versus treating them as part of the institutional doctrine they need to navigate? The literature suggests that many students do find personal meaning in values like patriotism, integrity, and friendship – these have deep cultural roots and personal relevance. The challenge is more with lofty concepts (e.g., what does “prosperity” demand of an individual’s behavior?) or with any perception that values education is partisan. The ongoing task for educators is to present core values as genuine moral principles rather than just political slogans, thereby increasing sincere adoption. This requires authenticity in teaching and avoiding a preachy style that students might find propagandistic.

The improvements in teaching methods and practical engagement reported in the results are promising responses to earlier shortcomings. By shifting from rote indoctrination to participatory learning, Chinese IPE is making strides in pedagogical reform. This mirrors global trends in education that favor critical thinking and student engagement. For example, case-based discussions of ethical issues develop students’ moral reasoning skills rather than just their memory. Engaging with network hot topics or new media is another sign of responsiveness – it shows educators acknowledging the realities of students’ information consumption and turning potential distractions into teachable moments. A lesson from Yang and Liu (2022) is that relevance is key: when content is connected to real-world events and the media that students already consume, it gains traction. In effect, IPE is becoming more contextualized to the lives of modern youth.

Despite these advances, the discussion reveals persistent challenges. A primary one is achieving genuine internalization versus surface compliance. This is an age-old issue in moral education: how to ensure students truly believe in and live by the values, not just pay lip service. The findings suggest that internalization increases when students practice values (volunteering, peer mentoring, etc.), because actions reinforce beliefs. It also increases when the social environment (peer norms, institutional culture) supports those values – students often take cues from their surroundings. This underscores the importance of the campus culture and role models. Conversely, any dissonance – such as a hypocritical teacher or a social environment that rewards cynical behavior over altruism – can hinder internalization. Therefore, one implication is that

consistency and integrity in institutional practice are critical. Universities must “walk the talk” by handling their affairs (academic honesty policies, equal opportunities, community service requirements) in alignment with core values.

Another challenge is balancing ideological guidance with independent thinking. Modern education philosophy values fostering critical, independent thinkers. Some critics, especially outside China, might argue that heavy emphasis on a prescribed set of values could limit critical thinking or lead to indoctrination. However, Chinese educational discourse often counters that guiding values do not preclude critical thinking – students are encouraged to discuss and question how to best realize these values in practice, though not to reject the values themselves. The thematic review by Ouyang et al. (2024) implicitly raises this by calling for more research that isn’t just normative but looks at practical context and improvements. This could imply a need to refine how IPE is delivered so that it encourages students to critically engage with social issues (through the lens of core values) rather than passively accept doctrines. Indeed, an outcome to strive for is students who can apply core values thoughtfully in solving real problems—this requires critical thinking. As such, advanced IPE practice might incorporate debates on apparent conflicts between values (e.g., equality vs. efficiency) or analysis of case studies where values are at stake, thereby training students to think and choose in complex situations while still holding their value compass.

The discussion also points to some external factors that influence the effectiveness of values education. The broader social environment – including family upbringing, societal role models (or anti-role models such as corrupt officials), and the state of social trust – all impact students’ receptivity. For instance, if students frequently witness societal instances that contradict the preached values (say, incidents of injustice or dishonesty making headlines), they may become cynical. In response, educators often contextualize such issues, acknowledging problems but reinforcing the ideal and efforts to reach it. The Party’s narrative frequently includes acknowledging moral crises (like the “lost moral compass” during rapid economic growth) and positioning core values as the solution. This narrative can resonate if students see tangible improvements or role models of change.

Looking ahead, the findings suggest several future directions for enhancing the role of IPE in value cultivation:

Empirical evaluation: There is a need for more systematic evaluation of which approaches yield the most significant changes in student attitudes and behaviors. This means employing social science research methods (surveys, longitudinal studies, even controlled trials) to assess the impact of specific interventions (like service learning programs or new media campaigns). Such data can guide policy to invest in what works best.

Personalization: With the advent of AI and big data in education, there is potential to personalize ideological education – for example, tailoring content to a student’s interests or the values they are weaker in (some programs already attempt mini-assessments of students’ values orientation, then recommend activities accordingly). Caution is needed to respect privacy and

avoid manipulation, but personalization could make value education more effective by meeting individual needs.

Inclusivity and diversity: Universities are increasingly diverse (socioeconomically, ethnically, even having more international students). Ensuring that core value education is inclusive – that it speaks to all students and doesn't alienate subgroups – is important. The values themselves are broad enough to be inclusive, but the methods might need adaptation for different audiences. For example, strategies to engage science majors might differ from art majors; approaches for less academically inclined students (perhaps vocational college students) might differ from those in elite universities. Future research can explore tailored strategies for different student populations.

Integration with career and life planning: Students often prioritize things that appear directly relevant to their careers. Framing core values as essential qualities for employability and leadership in the workplace might increase engagement. Indeed, employers in China often value attributes like integrity, teamwork (friendship), and dedication – showing students that these values have practical career implications can reinforce their importance.

Global perspective: As China opens more to the world, instilling core values in students could also involve dialogue with universal values and other cultural perspectives. There is room to discuss how core socialist values align or contrast with global ethical frameworks (like Sustainable Development Goals or human rights concepts). This doesn't undermine the core values but rather enriches students' understanding and ability to articulate their values in global contexts, making them more confident and reasoned proponents of these values abroad.

In conclusion, the discussion affirms that ideological and political education remains indispensable to China's effort to cultivate morally and politically conscious citizens. The core socialist values serve as both a moral compass and a social glue in a rapidly changing society. Universities, as training grounds for future elites, carry a special responsibility in this regard. The successes in integration and innovation are notable – China is effectively running a massive educational experiment in shaping values at a national scale. The challenges, particularly those of genuine internalization and keeping methods up-to-date with youth culture, require ongoing attention. If the momentum of the past five years continues, with pedagogical improvements and deeper student involvement, one can expect the gap between “knowing” and “practicing” core values to further narrow among Chinese college students. This will not only benefit individual character development but also contribute to the “spiritual civilization” and social capital of Chinese society as a whole.

5. Conclusion

The cultivation of core socialist values among university students in China is a comprehensive endeavor that underscores the central role of ideological and political education in the nation's educational and ideological landscape. This paper's review of recent literature and practices illustrates that Chinese higher education institutions have made concerted efforts to infuse these core values – ranging from patriotism and dedication to justice and integrity – into the fabric of student learning and campus life. Through curriculum reforms, engaging teaching methods,

enrichment of campus culture, volunteer service, utilization of new media, and enhancement of educator roles, universities are actively working to ensure that these values are not only taught but also lived and experienced by students.

Several key conclusions can be drawn. First, ideological and political education serves as the nexus for value transmission, linking national ideological goals with individual student development. It is clear that IPE is not a peripheral element in Chinese universities; it is a foundational component that operates in tandem with academic training. The breadth of integration – from classroom to community activities – reflects a recognition that value formation requires consistent reinforcement across multiple settings. This holistic model may offer lessons for value education globally, especially in how to coordinate curricular and extracurricular strategies towards common moral outcomes.

Second, innovation and student-centered approaches significantly improve effectiveness. The shift from didactic, one-way instruction to interactive, problem-based and tech-enabled learning has made core values education more appealing to the new generation. When students participate in discussions, apply values in real projects, and encounter values through modern media formats, they are more likely to internalize those values. The success stories, such as improved student performance and enthusiasm in experimental IPE classes or the positive reception of peer-led mentoring, underscore that how values are taught is just as important as what values are taught. Rote learning of slogans cannot achieve the depth of conviction that engaging, meaningful experiences can. Therefore, continuing to refine pedagogical techniques – incorporating experiential learning, case studies, simulations, and digital interactivity – will be crucial for the future of IPE.

Third, practical engagement and exemplary influence are indispensable. Moral values become truly ingrained when students have opportunities to practice them and when they observe them in others they respect. The Chinese approach leverages practical components like volunteering and social practice to bridge the theory-practice gap, which appears to be an effective strategy for cultivating empathy, social responsibility, and other core values in a tangible way. Likewise, the emphasis on teachers and peer role models aligns with the understanding that education is as much caught as it is taught. Strengthening the moral caliber and professional skill of those who deliver IPE will amplify the impact on students. In short, values education is a human enterprise – policies and curricula set the stage, but it is the interactions and examples within the campus community that ultimately leave a lasting imprint on students' minds and hearts.

At the same time, the review highlights areas that need ongoing attention. One is ensuring that the cultivation of values keeps pace with social changes and students' evolving concerns. The rapid development of technology, changes in China's social fabric, and increased global interconnectedness mean that ideological education must continually update its content and methods. The core values themselves may remain constant, but their interpretation and application may need adjustment to stay relevant to new contexts (for instance, how does "dedication" translate in the gig economy era, or what does "integrity" mean in the age of information overload?). Additionally, striking the right balance between guiding students and encouraging independent thought will remain a delicate task. As Chinese higher education aims to

produce innovative thinkers and leaders, IPE must ensure that instilling shared values does not come at the expense of creativity or open-mindedness. The ideal outcome is a generation of students who are both strongly grounded in core values and capable of critical, adaptive thinking – able to uphold their principles while navigating a complex world.

In conclusion, ideological and political education in China's universities is playing a pivotal role in shaping the value system of the next generation. The core socialist values campaign is more than a political mandate; it represents a vision for personal and social development that Chinese educators are earnestly pursuing. The past five years have seen meaningful progress, with more dynamic and effective educational practices emerging. If challenges are met and improvements sustained, Chinese universities may well succeed in nurturing graduates who not only excel in knowledge and skills but also carry forward the ethos of prosperity, democracy, civility, harmony, freedom, equality, justice, rule of law, patriotism, dedication, integrity, and friendship. Such outcomes would contribute to the building of a more cohesive, ethical, and confident society, which is at the heart of the core socialist values initiative. The Chinese experience thus far offers a rich case study on the power of education to mold societal values – an endeavor from which educators and policymakers around the world can glean insights, even as it continues to evolve within China's unique context.

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