

A Study on the Formation Mechanism and Influencing Factors of Value Choices among Chinese University Students

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ABSTRACT

To investigate the formation mechanism and influencing factors of value choices among university students in China, a survey was conducted among 520 students from 10 universities across the country. These participants came from a wide range of academic disciplines, with undergraduates accounting for 86.35% and postgraduates 13.65%, and a gender ratio of 100:107 (male to female). The findings suggest that the value development of Chinese university students adheres to a tripartite interactive model of "cognitive shaping-emotional motivation-practical feedback". Their value choices are shaped by structural factors such as family upbringing, school education, and socio-cultural immersion, while also being challenged by contemporary phenomena including algorithm-driven information cocoons and cognitive dissonance arising from cultural collisions. The process by which Chinese university students develop their values involves three interrelated stages: establishing a foundation for value identification through emotional bonds within the family, constructing cognitive frameworks through school education, and achieving value internalization and externalization through social practice.

KEYWORDS

Chinese university students; Value choices; Family education; School education

1 Introduction

A clear understanding of the formation mechanisms and influencing factors behind Chinese university students' value choices is of vital importance for promoting harmonious social development, enhancing national cohesion, and advancing Chinese path to modernization. The shaping of values among Chinese university students is influenced by multiple factors, including family upbringing, school education, and the broader social environment.

2 The three dimensions of the formation mechanism: the interaction of cognition, emotion, and behavior

In the context of the new era, cognition, emotion, and behavior are the three key dimensions shaping value choices among Chinese university students. These dimensions provide a systematic explanatory framework for the formation of value orientations.

2.1 Cognitive dimension: the foundation of value formation

The internet has become the primary source of information for Chinese university students and has had a profound impact on their value formation. According to data from the questionnaire survey, 96.35% of students obtain information through social media platforms (such as Weibo and Douyin), and 64.23% agree that algorithmic recommendations influence their value judgments. These findings highlight that the rapid development of the internet has effectively turned Chinese university students into a loyal "algorithm-fed generation." Through search engine topic framing and trending recommendations on social media platforms, information disseminators, powered by artificial intelligence, are able to precisely deliver news, articles, videos, and other content aligned with users' interests. This algorithmic targeting significantly shapes students' value perceptions and orientations.

The cognitive development of Chinese university students has long been deeply influenced by both family and school education, which serve as critical foundations for shaping their understanding of the world. In a survey on the factors with the greatest influence on students' value orientations, 86.35% of respondents identified family education, 73.46% pointed to school education, and 79.23% highlighted personal experience as the most influential factors. Therefore, strengthening family education in China by enhancing parents' capacity for child guidance and fostering sound value orientations is imperative, and should be regarded as an integral component of the broader agenda for social development. As a distinctive feature of Chinese education, ideological and political education in universities must focus on cultivating the core values of students^[1]. It is imperative to uphold the dual mission of higher education, which comprises imparting knowledge and cultivating character, as it entails not only delivering disciplinary instruction but also fostering university students' critical thinking and their capacity for independent value judgment.

2.2 Emotional dimension: the driving force behind value identification

Emotion is regarded as an intuitive reflection of cognition, exerting significant influence in the formation of value choices across multiple dimensions. The emotional dimension constitutes a crucial factor in shaping the value orientation of university students in China.

First, a direct correlation has been identified between emotion and value identification. The sense of identification is not only viewed as an individual's immediate response to value concepts, but also serves as a fundamental motivational source for value selection. According to the results of the questionnaire survey, 83.46% of students reported that the family atmosphere exerted a significant influence on their personal value formation. It is thus suggested that family education should provide sufficient emotional communication, thereby encouraging children to pursue value goals aligned with their emotional experiences and cognitive understanding.

Second, emotion functions as a vital bridge in the construction of ideals and beliefs among university students in China. According to survey data, 90.57% of students indicated that emotional influences from family, school, and society play a significant role in shaping their ideals and beliefs. In this context, emotion emerges as a key factor in the pursuit of recognition and support when students confront social transformation, economic pressure, and ideological tension. Consequently, it is imperative that families, schools, and society at large establish effective emotional communication with students by fostering aspirational ideals, sound value systems, and expansive platforms for practical engagement. Through such efforts, students can be guided to develop a sense of value belonging, form stable value orientations, and ultimately realize their ideals and aspirations within a complex social environment.

Third, the emotional dimension plays a critical role in the development of self-identity among university students in China. Amid the impact of cultural diversity and the entanglement of plural value systems, the affirmation of self-identity among Chinese university students is necessitated through the emotional dimension. The realization of self-worth occurs through the process of value selection, wherein emotional mechanisms support the internalization and externalization of values, thereby providing both emotional grounding and value-based guidance that enable students to make informed choices and sustain a stable sense of self amid future challenges.

2.3 Behavioral dimension: the practical expression of values

The behavioral dimension reflects the practical manifestation of value choices among Chinese university students. Behavior serves as an externalization of internal values and beliefs. In the context of global industrial transformation, technological revolutions, and the influence of multiculturalism, value selection among Chinese university students increasingly unfolds through participation in social and productive activities, thereby demonstrating alignment with mainstream values in China.

A strong sense of dedication and collective consciousness constitutes a key expression of the behavioral aspect of value orientation, particularly evident in engagement with public welfare and volunteer service. An increasing number of Chinese university students participate in voluntary teaching programs as a means of realizing and embodying their personal values. According to the current survey, 86.92% of students reported experiencing a strong sense of value identity through involvement in volunteer or public service activities. Data from the "Teach for China" project, as of February 2025, indicate that since its establishment in 2008, over 3,690 program teachers—primarily recent university graduates—have been placed in 523 under-resourced primary and secondary schools across China, delivering more than 3.858 million lessons and benefiting over 1.1 million students.

Participation in volunteer services and charitable initiatives has been regarded as a concrete expression of self-worth and a reflection of emotional commitment, through which Chinese university students actively contribute to national revitalization and social development. During their time in university, students have been consistently involved in various forms of public welfare and volunteer activities. According to *China University Student Network* (2017.05.19), the average annual volunteer service time for university students ranges from 40 to 100 hours, with some students exceeding 1200 hours over four years. This active participation highlights students' efforts to reconcile personal interests with social responsibilities, allowing their value choices to be actualized through acts of service.

Career decisions likewise serve as a reflection of students' value orientations. As noted in existing literature, "Such values not only reflect the individual's ideals, beliefs, and worldview but also play a central guiding role in every stage of career development."^[2] Shifts in economic and social structures exert a particularly direct and rapid influence on career-related values among Chinese university students. The emergence of new professions driven by socioeconomic development has broadened students' career options, prompting many to move beyond purely economic considerations and instead pursue career paths aligned with long-term goals and personal values. In the questionnaire, how Chinese college students perceive social phenomena such as "lying flat" (reflecting a mentality adopted by young people to reject the rat race.) and "Buddha-like attitude" (referring to a life philosophy of non-competitiveness and going with the flow.) is investigated. Among the respondents, 39.42% emphasized the importance of making rational choices,

42.69% interpreted such attitudes as reflections of employment pressure, and 11.73% believed they embody a psychological resistance rather than genuine disengagement. These perspectives suggest that such mindsets function as coping strategies in response to intense competition and stress, rather than as indicators of complete withdrawal from employment aspirations.

The value choices of Chinese university students result from the interplay of three dimensions: cognition, emotion, and behavior. Cognition functions as the foundation, emotion serves as the connective medium, and behavior represents the outcome. These dimensions form a closed-loop value realization mechanism: cultivating sound cognitive foundations can enhance patriotic sentiment, fostering positive emotional connections can strengthen national aspirations, and practicing corresponding behaviors can drive acts of national service. Clarifying these underlying mechanisms not only contributes to the cultivation of sound values among university students, but also establishes a solid foundation for talent development in higher education.

3 Three key influencing factors: the role of family, school, and socio-cultural context

3.1 Family education: the enlightenment and foundation of values

The family serves not only as the initial setting for the construction of students' worldviews, life perspectives, and value systems, but also as a critical support system in their value selection. "According to a survey jointly conducted by the Social Survey Center of China Youth Daily (Wenjuan.com), which involved 1001 Chinese university student respondents, 74.6% of the participants perceived that greater importance has been attached to parent-child relationships in recent years. Meanwhile, 63.3% identified 'disregard for children's opinions and authoritarian parenting' as a major reason for children's dissatisfaction with their parents.^[3]" Evidence suggests that a family context marked by consistent support and emotional security facilitates the formation of constructive attitudes and effective coping strategies, which are integral to the establishment of stable and well-integrated value systems.

The core of family education lies not only in the transmission of knowledge, but also in the cultivation of emotions and the shaping of values. In a survey on "primary parental pathways in influencing value formation," 82.88% of respondents cited parental words and deeds (e.g., treating others with honesty) as the most influential. This highlights the significant role of parental modeling in guiding university students in the practice of China's core socialist values.

"Family tradition is regarded not only as the embodiment of core family values and a form of valuable spiritual heritage, but also as a reflection of the cognitive concepts and orientations shared among family members. A sound and well-established family culture has been shown to exert a significant influence on the personal development of family members.^[4]" It was found through the survey that 88.27% of the students believed that family tradition has had a significant influence on their values. This impact is primarily attributed to the role of positive family traditions and effective family education, which first facilitate the formation of sound value judgments and internalized moral norms, and subsequently serve as crucial sources of psychological support and motivational resilience.

The family environment plays a guiding and normative role in shaping Chinese university students' value consciousness and rational decision-making. In the survey regarding the mechanisms of value transmission within the family, 57.88% of the students identified family discussions on social issues, while 64.81% indicated joint participation in traditional festival activities as key channels. These findings suggest that parents should place greater emphasis on enhancing their own cultural literacy and cognitive awareness, while also fostering a relaxed and supportive domestic atmosphere. Such an environment is essential in helping students maintain value stability and cultural confidence amid a pluralistic society.

3.2 School environment: knowledge transmission and value formation

Education is often viewed as an extension of political functions, and school-based education plays a pivotal role in shaping students' value orientations and guiding their value-based choices. "Colleges and universities are important places for cultivating talents for education and economic construction, and they bear the important responsibility of arming young college students with socialist core values.^[5]" The Master Plan on Building China into a Leading Education Country (2024–2035) explicitly states that education must adhere to its three fundamental attributes—political, people-centered, and strategic—and calls for the development of six key strengths: strengthening ideological and political guidance, enhancing talent competitiveness, reinforcing scientific and technological support, improving the capacity for ensuring public well-being, promoting social synergy, and expanding international influence to build a socialist education leading country with Chinese characteristics. Universities shoulder the vital responsibility of cultivating students' values and character, making it imperative to foster a sound teaching environment and a rich cultural atmosphere that guides university students in China toward continuous self-improvement and moral development.

University students' value systems are also susceptible to the influence of online discourse. As observed, "In the

network era, young students often use the network to achieve their goals and aspirations, and also express their feelings and appeals through the network, and respond to their inner voice through the network.^[6] Survey data indicate that 77.31% of students believe that ideological-political education in schools has influenced their values, and 64.62% report that their views have changed due to online public opinion. These findings suggest that, in the current era, the value formation of Chinese university students is shaped by a dual influence: ideological-political education and digital media environments. As a distinctive feature of the Chinese educational system, “Higher education throughout China, especially ideological-political education (known as ‘Sizheng Education’), places great emphasis on the values of education held by young people.^[7]” Accordingly, schools are expected to improve students’ media literacy through formal education, and to promote scientifically sound and reasonable ideological-political instruction. This will enhance students’ sense of social responsibility and guide them to reflect deeply on their individual values and social roles, thereby contributing to the construction of a correct worldview, value system, and outlook on life. In addition, data on students’ participation in traditional cultural practice activities reveal that 51.15% have taken part in learning intangible cultural skills (e. g., calligraphy, paper-cutting), 62.31% have participated in volunteer services aimed at cultural heritage preservation, and 37.2% have engaged in rural revitalization initiatives. Based on this foundation, it is recommended that schools further optimize their curricula by integrating theoretical education with practical experience. This will enable Chinese university students to deepen their understanding of socialist core values through concrete social practice and actively contribute to the country’s development process.

A positive campus cultural atmosphere is also an important factor influencing the value choices of Chinese university students. According to the survey data on the impact of campus cultural atmosphere on value choices, 78.46% of the students reported being influenced. When asked about specific cultural elements that affected their value formation, 34.81% cited the university’s history, traditions, and institutional norms; 41.15% highlighted aesthetic, physical, and labor education activities; and 23.46% identified academic exchanges and knowledge lectures. Therefore, Chinese university students are more likely to be positively guided in a campus environment filled with positive energy, which fosters their pursuit and willingness to practice noble values. Universities should, give full play to the educational function of culture by organizing diverse activities in academia, arts, sports, and volunteer services, thereby promoting students’ deeper understanding and identification with core socialist values through multifaceted experiences.

3.3 Socio-cultural context and individual experience: plural influences and value identification

Survey results indicate that 90.10% of students acknowledge the impact of major national achievements—such as space exploration and poverty alleviation—on their personal value orientations. This suggests that Chinese university students, deeply immersed in national culture during the process of socialization, gradually establish their own value systems through practical engagement, thereby enhancing their understanding and acceptance of social norms. According to the questionnaire, 92.89% of students express a strong sense of identification with traditional Chinese virtues. Specifically, 82.31% regard the Confucian values of “ren (benevolence), yi (righteousness), li (manners), zhi (wisdom), and xin (credit)” as most influential in shaping personal values; 59.62% emphasize the importance of the moral dictum “survival of a nation is the responsibility of every individual”; and 76.92% highlight the significance of the traditional ethos “strive continuously to strengthen oneself and have ample virtue and carry all things” in their value formation. Moreover, 84.81% of respondents are able to accurately recite the 24-character core socialist values. These findings clearly demonstrate that the Confucian ethical system, centered on the principles of “ren (benevolence), yi (righteousness), li (manners), zhi (wisdom), and xin (credit)” has, through millennia of development, evolved into a widely accepted framework of social values and moral norms within Chinese society. Deeply aligned with the Core Socialist Values, such a system is now deeply ingrained in public consciousness.

Individual engagement in socio-cultural practices serves as a critical factor in shaping personal value choices. Survey data show that 67.31% of students believe it is necessary to strike a balance between personal development and national rejuvenation, while 64.23% emphasize the importance of balancing personal development with national strategies. The questionnaire results indicate that respondents generally hold the view that the pursuit of personal development should be accompanied by a conscientious concern for social progress and national priorities. As individuals enhance their competencies through learning and practice, they are also expected to proactively assume social responsibilities. This reflects an increased emphasis on aligning personal aspirations with societal obligations in a dynamic and balanced manner.

4 Conclusion and future prospects

The mechanism through which value orientations are formed among Chinese university students has been found to exhibit a dynamic and continuously evolving character, fundamentally driven by the interactive integration of three

dimensions: cognitive shaping, emotional motivation, and practical feedback. At the level of influencing factors, the formative dynamics of value orientation among Chinese university students are primarily shaped by the foundational influence of familial upbringing, the systematic and institutionalized guidance provided by school education, and the multifaceted penetration of broader socio-cultural forces. In the foreseeable future, the cultivation of value systems in this demographic necessitates the construction of an integrated, multi-actor coordination mechanism. This includes: This involves: (1) strengthening collaboration among families, schools, and society to integrate core socialist values into everyday life; (2) improving digital and media literacy to overcome the limitations of algorithm-driven information barriers and expand students' understanding of the world; and (3) drawing on the rich resources of traditional Chinese culture to build cultural confidence and reinforce value stability.

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