

## **Values orientation of contemporary Chinese college students and its changes**

Wang Peng\*

### Abstract

Throughout the latter thirty years, values orientation of Chinese college students has generally tended towards the following trajectory: the core of values has changed from a collective to an individual standard; a previously homogeneous values orientation became diversified; it changed from idealism to realism; from predictability to mobility. This article examines the factors that led to this change in values of college students and offers some countermeasures for higher education institutions to help forming and guide values orientation of their students.

Keywords: China, Higher education, College students, Collective values, Educational reform.

---

\* China Youth and Children Research Center (CYCRC), Beijing, China

Values orientation means the set of principles, beliefs and value judgments that motivate and guide the actions and decisions of an individual. Moreover, it plays a fundamental role in the interpretation of social phenomena such as: behavior, emotion and anxiety of the human being (Schwartz; Boehnke, 2002: 53). Since the proposal, in the 1930s, of the *System of Values* by G.W. Allport, who innovated the studies and research on human values, the study of values orientation has drawn the attention of social psychologists. There have been extensive and in-depth researches on values orientation, both nationally and internationally, with youth – especially college students – as their fundamental object of study.

It is not coincidence that college students have become the main object of study, since as a distinct social group, their values orientation reflect, to some extent, contemporary social values. So, investigating values orientation of college students is, in a way, investigating the orientation of social values, as well as the course of their changes. Although research in this area has never decreased, neither nationally nor internationally, in view of the accelerated development of society, the values orientation of college students has shown distinct characteristics, which are still to be critically studied.

As for college students, values orientation consists in the deeply held “sum of their faith, beliefs and ideals” (Li, 1998). Values orientation of college students usually includes life, moral, political, and professional values, as well as those related to marriage, and sexual orientation, among others. The new century brought about various challenges such as social transformation, economic globalization and the arrival of the knowledge economy, which both directly and indirectly produce changes in values orientation of contemporary college students.

## 1 The historical development of changes in values orientation of contemporary Chinese college students

Previously to the economic reforms and opening policies, under the influence of the traditional culture and the post-unification thought of 1949, the values orientation of Chinese college students remained for a long time stagnant in the collective standard of *no-self*, i.e., the self is never individual, it is always defined in relation to the other(s). However, throughout the latter thirty years, values orientation of Chinese college students has generally tended towards the following trajectory: the core of values has changed from a collective to an individual standard; a previously homogeneous values orientation became diversified; it changed from idealism to realism; from predictability to mobility. Such trajectory can be classified into four periods, presented below.

### ***1.1 From 1978 to the early 1980s: period of the collective standard as mainstream values orientation***

As the ten-year instability of the country was ending, the national higher education entrance examination (*gaokao*) was reintroduced, thus disseminating in the society an atmosphere of respect for knowledge and talented people. Under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, the construction of socialism entered a new period of reforms and open doors, and a broad restructuring of the political-economic system took place. It is observed that the characteristics of college students' values reflected two aspects.

First, college students were committed to ideals to contribute to the construction of the nation. Due to the needs stemming from the restructuring of society, students who entered the university in 1977, 1978 and

1979 became an essential and decisive force for filling the ten-year gap in knowledge production.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, the enthusiastic collective expectation encouraged college students to hold high aspirations. They naturally associated their own future with that of the nation, what provided a feeling of gratitude towards society. In addition, the huge wave of reforms and opening policies raised the attention and expectation of college students regarding the future of the people. Campaigns such as *Recovering lost youth* and *Contributing to the modernization of the country* were the main trends of the collective tradition. Until the early 1980s, the attitude of college students – then comprised by the elite of the country – was always that of activists.

The second aspect was the emergence of an individualistic consciousness. Following the graduation and exit of college students from the latter three classes<sup>2</sup>, recently graduated high school students took the stage at universities. As reforms and opening policies advanced, college students became pioneers of ideological emancipation: on the one hand, they reflected on history; on the other hand, they delved into human values, focusing on the search for knowledge. Democratic awareness increased and the students “got rid of the blind obedience and individual worship of the Cultural Revolution, awakening the self-consciousness as self-confidence, self-respect, independence and self-empowerment” (Zhao, 2005).

In a diverse society where conflicting interests became apparent and Western humanist ideas came to influence, college students were confused about old values such as idealism and political values. Consequently,

<sup>1</sup> It was due to the closure of universities during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), also called the *ten years of instability* or *ten years of calamity*. (Translator's note).

<sup>2</sup> College students admitted, respectively, in the years 1977, 1978 and 1979. (Translator's note).

values orientation has shifted towards deep consideration and criticism. At the time, the emergence of the "Literature of Scars"<sup>3</sup> has further deepened this kind of reflection and criticism.

Nevertheless, the "isms" and ideals still constituted a reference point for values for college students. In spite of the continuous emergence of individualistic consciousness among these young people, who defended values such as individual choice and effort, for the most part, this generation still kept the sense of social responsibility and historical mission, with collective values prevailing.

***1.2 From the second half of the 1980s to the early 1990s: period of dissociation regarding values orientation, conflict between "I" and the "society"***

By the late 1980s, the development of the market economy and the influence of Western culture had major repercussions on Chinese society. In addition, some problems came up with the transition from the old system to the new one in connection with the recent market economy. In this context, economic reforms were fraught with difficulties, and college students experienced a breach with traditional values, whose main characteristics were expressed in the following aspects:

*1.2.1 The radical effervescence of ideas and the instability of beliefs*

In this period, college students were privileged as the "proud children of heaven"<sup>4</sup> and were part of the elite of the time. Under the influence of

<sup>3</sup> It is a Chinese literary genre, which emerged in the early 1970s. The 'literature of scars' portrays people's physical and spiritual impairment as a result of the Cultural Revolution and seeks to reflect on the future of the nation. (Translator's note).

<sup>4</sup> It is an old Chinese expression that was used to designate the nomadic barbarians of northern China. Subsequently, the expression took on the meaning of pampered child and, in 1980, specifically, became a slogan of college graduates, as they symbolized new social forces. (Translator's note).

Western ideas on democracy and the separation of powers into three branches, they took a stance as reformists while being fully aware of the need to restructure society, criticizing it and directly contrasting the various aspects of society.

However, although college students of this epoch were conscious of democracy, they lacked democratic capabilities and a proper conception of a legislative system. Moreover, even desiring political engagement, they lacked theoretical underpinnings, as well as experience.

Therefore, once they established contact with social reality, they detected impassés between their ideals and the reality. This brought about radical emotions. Issues as the diversification of politics, the private economy, and the new authoritarianism became central to debates at universities, triggering thereupon excessive egocentricity, disdain for society, ego exaltation, and self-valuation above all.

The orientation of political ideas in higher education institutions failed because of college students' poor self-control, high expectations regarding reforms and the weakening of political thinking within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and the influence of economic liberalism. There was, then, a deviation of the students' attention causing unstable convictions, excessive sense of participation and submission of the collective to the individual will.

### *1.2.2 The transformation of one's own frustrations into utilitarian pragmatism*

A widespread shift was observed in values orientation from a collective to an individualistic standard. Accordingly, concerns have changed from affairs of state to the dimensions of everyday life; abstract problems

gave way to concrete problems; ideals changed into real factors; soon values tended towards individualism and pragmatism. As the development of market economy got increasingly deeper, students were influenced by fashions such as: capital worship, hedonism, devaluation of both knowledge and intellectuals, and they began to embrace individual and utilitarian values for pragmatic purposes.

***1.3 From the end of the 1990s: towards pragmatic values orientation, seeking integration between the self and the society***

After the speech by Deng Xiaoping, in 1992, during his trip to the south, democratic politics, economic development, the CCP and the government strengthened the pedagogical values orientation addressed to college students. These latter have, thus, reexamined their spiritual foundations and have engaged in new searches, reconsidering both the society and themselves, so that to end their conflicting stance towards society, and to allow the individual integration into society. Instigated by the benefits of market economy, college students started to talk about "climbing the mountain"<sup>5</sup> and "going down to the sea"<sup>6</sup>, "studying" and "making money". At the same time, the encounter with Western and postmodern thought entailed a tendency to deny traditional values. Hence, discussion on values began to be grounded in basic needs and, thus, values orientation has diversified. The advent of the knowledge economy and the corroboration of the strategy of strengthening the country through technological education have brought about recognition of the importance of knowledge. After graduation, the distribution of college students in the job market changed to "reciprocal

<sup>5</sup> Metaphor used to refer to learning as a deed of climbing a mountain, meaning that the higher you get, the most beautiful scenery you'll have. (Translator's note).

<sup>6</sup> Metaphor used to refer to the process of giving up the "iron rice bowl" of a permanent job for engaging in making one's own money. (Translator's note).

choice"<sup>7</sup>, bringing higher education institutions closer to society. In this context, college students began to give priority to practical values and to the search for individual happiness. A major part of the college students began to adopt practical ideals such as their professional success and a comfortable material life. Therefore, values in this period were characterized by self-worship, own effort, search for pragmatism and recognition, and for starting a family.

***1.4 From the late 20th century to the present: period of coexistence and diversity of values orientations, consolidation of the process of exploration***

The expansion of higher education enrolments at the end of the last century led to a rapid change in the character of this level of education, from an elitist to a mass education system. Students of the generation post-1980s followed economic globalization, the ICT era and the advent of internet upon entering the university. Influences such as the transformation of the era, reforms in higher education institutions, changes in the model of society, and the introduction of Western thoughts associated with capitalism have not only engendered new references in terms of values for students, but also brought about significant instability to their values conceptions and conflicts.

According to surveys of the time, values orientation among college students was considered to follow a mainly active and healthy trend, with emphasis on integration of the individual into the society through a process that oscillated between conflict and reconciliation. Reform, progress, innovation, pragmatism, and dialectic are transformations of this main tendency.

However, there are some problems with values orientation of these students. First, its diversification. Changes in the model of society led to

<sup>7</sup> This term refers to the negotiation of job posts between employees and employers.



transformations in both the social structure and the values system, changing values orientation of college students, from monotonous to dynamic, from closed and rigid to open and alive.

Secondly, the contradictory aspects: although traditional values emphasized the priority of State benefits, collective values prevailed, and college students still identified with such values. Nevertheless, these not always had impacts on their actions. On the other hand, individualistic Western values and liberalism were accepted by the students, and even capital worship, hedonism and individualism had space among them. While many students were willing to contribute to strengthening the state and reinvigorating the people, they also sought a moderate purpose and way of life. In other words, if, on the one hand, the students praised the true, benevolent and righteous spiritual state as well as the noble personality, on the other hand, they also prioritized pragmatism, emphasized the utilitarian and material benefits. Although despising avarice and immorality, they tolerated their own indulgence, often tending to give more importance to their own desires and personal development. A rather serious disassociation between knowing and doing is, therefore, established.

Finally, we observe the emergence of ego-centered behavior. Most college students at that time was self-centered only child. In collective activities, they prioritized the realization of their own values, especially after the expansion of higher education. Problems such as identity changes and the pressure regarding employment have left college students thinking primarily about personal development and real benefits.

## **2 The basic characteristics of values orientation of contemporary Chinese college students**

With the deepening of reforms and opening policies, as well as the development of the socialist market economy, a great transformation occurred

in values orientation of college students, which is reflected in the following four aspects.

### ***2.1 The change of orientation from a collective standard to the equal importance of individual and collective standards***

The main characteristic of the change in values orientation of contemporary college students is the passage from a collective standard to an individualistic pattern, although tending to a balance. Many college students, while pursuing the development of their own personality as well as the satisfaction of their emotions, have not necessarily denied traditional values such as the conceptions of community and collectivism.

#### *2.1.1 The impact of the goal of realistic values versus idealistic values*

College students of the 1980s often showed a passionate social responsibility, integrating their future and destiny with those of the state. After the 1990s, college students, in their search for real benefits, also sought a relationship between the individual and the society. They recognized that it was impossible for the individual to dissociate himself from the real society, so they emphasized the adaptation of society to personal development, so that they could: i) seek the integration between idealism and pragmatism; ii) deal in a balanced way with both the sacrifice - for the sake of the motherland - and the pragmatic and utilitarian life; iii) value the search for knowledge, as well as the value of money and enjoyment.

They accept reality, considering it as a condition/requisite for achieving the goal of social restructuring in the process of adaptation to society.

## ***2.2 The transformation of homogeneity into diversity in values orientation***

The diversity of values orientation is an important phenomenon, in which the distance between the society of economic transition and the traditional society stands out. Among contemporary college students, the absolutism of traditional authority and standards has been shaken. They now balance between individualistic and collective values, manifesting relativism and tolerance towards different moral values. Moreover, this diversity of values orientation is manifested in the emergence of an idea of multidimensional happiness, of diversification of sexual orientation and of a pluralistic aesthetic.

## ***2.3 Change from absolute to relative values***

Prior to the 1980s, the conception of social values presented an absolutist, rational and invariable characteristic. The college students of the 1980s challenged these values. After the end of the 1990s, with the opening of society, the individualistic vision of college students has gradually increased. Thus, the evaluation of their values conception revealed relativistic and more tolerant college students. Tolerance was reflected in the understanding and acceptance of things as they exist.

## **3 Factors that influenced changes in values orientation of contemporary Chinese college students**

The factors that influenced change in values orientation of college students are multidimensional, involving both individual aspects and the external environment. Some scholars point as the main factors: the development of the socialist market economy, the opening to the foreign thinking, the

operation of social mechanisms such as ideological education and the orientation of public opinion, as well as the characteristics of physical and spiritual development of the students. On the other hand, there are also those who attributed the aforementioned change of values to factors such as: transformation of economic structure, historical reasons, change of social values, influence of social thought stemming from various cultures and failures in ideological education. In sum, the predominant factors that contributed to the change in values orientation of college students are described below.

### ***3.1 The opening and development of the market economy***

The reforms and development of the market economy has opened many opportunities for college students to apply their learning. The reforms restructured the pattern of distribution of benefits, unbalancing the existing order. This is one of the reasons for the change in values held by college students.

The development of the socialist market economy brought with it a new conception, that of an independent individual personality, awaking the conscience of the self and its continuous strengthening. In addition, the new values also allowed the ideal life to increasingly correspond to reality. The competition mechanism in the logic of the market requires from students to develop an innovative conscience, thus encouraging them to draw the maximum from their qualities and capacities, as well as to exercise their intelligence to progress in search of individual benefits. Thus, the opening of a market economy has not only encouraged college students to break with limitations imposed by their own conscience, but also directly influenced their values orientation.

From a negative point of view, insofar as market economy values influence one's own world and life views and values, some college students may take the view that money is the only measure and standard, tending to glorify materialism, and to establish a contradiction between individual and collective benefits (Liu, 2003). The values of these college students, then, tend to be utilitarian.

### ***3.2 The impact of a diverse culture and the waves of social thought***

Following the reforms, China has opened to the world. While absorbing and introducing advanced technologies drawn from abroad, a wave of Western social thought also accompanied the process and has greatly disrupted traditional Chinese cultures.

First, Western culture and popular culture had a certain influence on college students' values. The clash between Chinese and Western culture has fostered a new system of values through which college students started to see themselves and the society. At the same time, as the world and life views of college students are not yet mature, they are easily influenced by social fashions. In addition, the ideological education was not effective in its cultural orientation and control, leaving room for the wave of Western thought to negatively affect the values of college students (Xin, 2002).

Popular culture also encouraged values change among college students. As a culture of the new era, popular culture promotes the personality, liberal thought, and strengthening of democracy. However, as market mechanisms are controlling the development of mass culture, the essence of the popular may be corrupted to the point of becoming uncultivated and poor, abandoning its deep and noble characteristics. Therefore, college students should be prevented from pursuing mediocre consumer styles.

On the other hand, trendy social ideas further impact the values of the college students. The ideas prevailing in society place expectations regarding one's individual life – in the midst of the collective – and own development.

College students are vanguards of the clash of social cultures. When fashion is made up of wrong ideas, values orientation of college students degrades significantly. Therefore, negative influences should not be overlooked.

### ***3.3 Educational reform and maturing of college students***

By consolidating a system for collecting tuition fees in higher education institutions, reforming the policies for allocating work to new graduates and expanding recruitment to higher education, the university left the ivory tower and opened itself up to society, exited the sacred to enter quotidian. The following reforms have directly affected the interests of college students, leading to changes in their values orientation:

- i) the reform of university recruitment system called *Shared cost between public and private and admission through tuition fees*. With this reform, higher education became paid, clearly affecting values orientation of college students;
- li) the reform of the system for employment allocation called *Choice by Reciprocity*. This change has led college students to seek primarily courses with higher demand for graduates and pragmatic knowledge, aiming at a good job in the future. In this sense, the reform influenced the individual qualitative improvement and the learning of morals. The values of college students are still in the making and therefore are easily influenced by the

environment. Thus, this complex *campus* context, where economic factors operate, is undoubtedly one of the forces that make students tend toward utilitarian pragmatism (Yang, 2001);

iii) the three former generations<sup>8</sup>, the new generation of college students and the contemporary college students came from single-child families, their respective social and personal experiences, as well as the difference of social environment, all this directly influence the respective formation of values. Among these factors, college students consider that the influence of the family and the change in personal life experience are the main elements in the formation of their values. In addition, factors such as increased age, ideas formed from early experiences, school education, magazines and books, videos and films, media and prominent figures also play a role.

#### **4 Countermeasures for educating and guiding values orientation of contemporary Chinese college students**

The college phase is the key period in the formation of values orientation, as well as the best time to carry out education on values. Therefore, it is necessary to focus on the problems in the values of college students to take the appropriate measures for the education and orientation of their values.

##### ***4.1 Start with the education of college students, strengthening education on values***

The main channels for higher education institutions for carrying out education on values are: i) rational education, that is, the education on positive values, aiming at the valuation of rational knowledge; ii) the spirit of the

---

<sup>8</sup> This refers to the graduates of elementary education II and high school of the years 1966, 1967 and 1968 (Translator's note).

higher education institution, having as its main reference the university ethics constituted by the behaviors expressed by teachers and students (Li; Xu, 1999).

Rational education is the most relevant of the two points cited. Higher education must adapt to the environment of reforms and opening, starting from pragmatism, responding to the key issues that concern college students. In addition, it is necessary to take into account the characteristics of the students to organize and develop diversified and lively educational activities, for the effectiveness of moral education.

Regular education should be used to guide the formation of values and guide the students into knowing, understanding and choosing correct values from a pragmatist angle. Moreover, it should be assured that values are to be defined within the dynamics of social development, to help students transcend the orientation of values on an emotional to a rational basis. Finally, a balance must be attained between the goal of individual values and that of collective values.

#### ***4.2 Start by the work of teachers, transforming the educational perspective***

Teachers' activities, by definition, include imparting knowledge, training and resolving doubts. Therefore, a teacher plays the role of server. It is in the spirit of serving that teachers should seek to transform values and conceptions. With students and society, the teacher must embrace responsibilities and be trustful. Teachers should, through teaching, show exemplary behavior, lead and guide the values of their students. Only educators with firm convictions and noble posture, besides having genuine concerns for their student, can generate a pedagogy of excellence.



### ***4.3 Start by the university, strengthening the creation of a university culture***

The university is the laboratory where values are practiced. The quality of a campus culture directly determines the values orientation of its students. It is necessary to compile successful experiences of building values in traditional universities, to seek to raise culture and to develop the human spirit, in order to create conditions for the cultivation of correct values.

It is necessary to strengthen the construction of a university culture, to educate and guide students to live with the wave of social ideas in an active and healthy way, while promoting their independent personality, so that to integrate cultural forces capable to promote the construction of the correct values by college students.

The pedagogical organization of universities, the scientific and human spirit and the environment, all play important roles in the judgment and values orientation of students. The higher education institution must improve in public opinion by actively creating a healthy and lively culture, establishing educational awareness, making the education on values to be spread to every corner of the campus and be developed in each student.

### ***4.4 To leverage the internet for the dissemination of correct values***

The internet has already taken root in various areas of social life, and it has a relevant influence on human being's life, behavior and way of thinking. While the internet promotes globalization, it also brings various conflicts between different ideologies, causing distinct political positions, cultural views, moral standards and lifestyles to collide, significantly influencing the values of college students.

It is necessary to take advantage of the internet in a correct and active

way, guiding students to rationally use the network, as well as to critically analyze its positive and negative aspects, so that it can serve to foster correct values.

In short, the phase of higher education is the key period of formation of values orientation, as well as the best stage for the education on values. Only if college students are systematically given education on values, will they be able to construct the correct orientation and consequently will become qualified for life in society.

Studying the characteristics of the values orientation of contemporary college students presents great practical significance and a theoretical value. It provides clues about strategies for educational policies for ensuring that students complete their studies and graduate. This not only contributes to improve the reform of the higher education system and enhances the quality of higher education, but also guarantees the strategic accomplishment of the development of Chinese society in the 21st century.

**Wang Peng** has a Ph.D. in Political Science and a Master's in Education from the School of the Central Committee of the Party (Communist). He is Research Associate at the China Youth and Children Research Center (CYCRC).

## References

- LI, D. Discussing the establishment of correct values. *Guangming Daily*, [s.l.], 1998 (In Chinese)
- LI, Q.; XU, X. The impact of the higher education institution's culture on integration of college students' values. *Contemporary Youth Research*, [s.l.], 1999. (In Chinese)
- LIU, X. 当代大学生价值观嬗变的原因分析 (Analysis of the reasons for the change of contemporary college students' values). *Journal of Luoyang Teachers College*, 22 (4): 139-140, 2003. (In Chinese)
- SCHWARTZ, S. H.; BOEHNKE, K. *Evaluating the structure of human values with confirmatory factor analysis*. Yale University: Manuscript submitted for publication, 2002, p. 53.

XIN, S. Reflection on the changes of college students' values. *Research in Ideological and Political Education*, [s.l.], 2002. (In Chinese)

YANG, R. On the pragmatic and utilitarian tendency of college students' values. *Higher Education in the Coal Industry*, [s.l.], 2001. (In Chinese)

ZHAO, Y. Exploration and analysis of the path of change in values of college students in the latter 20 years. *Journal of Shandong Youth Political Management College*, [s.l.], 2005. (In Chinese).

Received: Sep 10, 2017

Accepted: Nov 20, 2017