The generative logic of "refined egoism" and the disintegrating effect of collectivism: research on the practical dilemmas and integrated approaches in ideological and political education at universities

Qing'an Zheng

School of Marxism, Wuhan Polytechnic University, Wuhan, China

hbwhzqa@126.com

Abstract. This research focuses on the phenomenon of "refined egoism" and adopts Marxist theory as its analytical framework to construct a "logic-effect-dilemma-path" model. It systematically deconstructs the three-tiered generative logic of refined egoism, reveals its four-dimensional disintegration effect on collectivist values, and subsequently diagnoses five major structural dilemmas currently faced by Ideological and Political Education (IPE) in universities. Based on this, the paper innovatively proposes a six-dimensional path of integration. The aim is to respond to the construction demands of the "Great Ideological and Political Course" system, rebuild the spiritual cornerstone of collectivism in an era of growing individualism, and ultimately achieve a dialectical unity between personal pursuit and social contribution.

Keywords: refined egoism, disintegration of collectivism, university ideological and political education, disintegration effect, structural dilemma, integration path

1. Introduction

Contemporary China is undergoing a critical phase of profound social transformation. While the deepening development of the socialist market economy has unleashed tremendous momentum for growth, it has also inevitably triggered complex tensions and fundamental shifts in the domain of values. In 2012, renowned scholar Qian Liqun issued a sharply critical and thought-provoking assertion: Chinese universities are now producing, in large numbers, a new type of individual—"refined egoists" [1]. This judgment, like a boulder cast into a tranquil lake, sparked waves of sustained and far-reaching reflection across the educational field and broader society. By 2024, China's Gini coefficient had reached 0.465, indicating a persistent widening of disparities in the distribution of social resources. This ongoing inequality has unavoidably intensified the existential anxiety and competitive pressures faced by younger generations. At the same time, Ideological and Political Education (IPE) in universities is confronting unprecedented challenges: its core function—value guidance—appears increasingly disconnected from, and at times even in conflict with, the diverse and pragmatic developmental needs of today's students. How to effectively respond to this challenge and reinvigorate the contemporary appeal of collectivism has thus become a pressing question of the times.

Although academic inquiry into the phenomenon of refined egoism has yielded a substantial body of research, notable limitations remain. In particular, existing researches often lack a comprehensive and integrated theoretical framework to explain how this behavioral model systematically erodes collectivist values. Likewise, on the level of intervention strategies, many proposed solutions fail to bridge theory with practice, resulting in insufficient specificity and effectiveness. This research seeks to address these gaps by constructing an innovative, four-dimensional analytical framework: the "Logic-Effect-Dilemma-Path" Model. This integrative model systematically links the formation logic of refined egoism, its erosive effects on collectivist values, the practical dilemmas facing IPE, and a set of comprehensive counter-strategies, thereby offering a more coherent and explanatory lens through which to examine the issue.

The theoretical foundation of this research is firmly grounded in the classical Marxist proposition that: "The essence of man is not an abstract being inherent in each single individual. In its reality, it is the ensemble of social relations [2]." This assertion profoundly illuminates the inherently social nature of human existence and provides a foundational philosophical rationale for understanding the interdependence and mutual shaping of individual and collective identity, as well as the indispensable role of

collectivism as the cornerstone of social cooperation. On the practical level, this research closely aligns with the core principles of the Central Committee's Outline for the Implementation of Moral Development for Citizens in the New Era [3], and actively responds to the Ministry of Education's most recent reform directives articulated in the Action Plan for Advancing the Construction of "Great Ideological and Political Courses" [4]. The ultimate aim of this research is to explore a viable and effective path to reconstruct the contemporary appeal of collectivist values in an increasingly individualized era, thereby promoting a dynamic integration of personal value pursuit and social commitment among university students.

2. Conceptual definitions and theoretical foundations

As a distinctive cultural phenomenon and psychosocial expression emerging during China's period of profound social transformation, "refined egoism" was precisely conceptualized by Professor Qian Liqun in his critique of deficiencies in talent cultivation at Chinese universities. It refers specifically to a highly rationalized, strategic, and concealed mode of individualistic behavior. Its typical characteristics include individuals who possess a combination of "high intelligence, worldliness, sophistication, high performative ability, a cooperative demeanor, and an adeptness at leveraging institutional rules to achieve personal ends" [1]. What distinguishes this form of egoism as "refined" is its contrast to the more overt and crude forms of selfishness. It often cloaks itself in the appearance of compliance, rationality, or even sociability, skillfully avoiding direct conflict and moral condemnation. Through calculated and strategic behavior, it seeks to maximize personal gain, and such actions tend to exhibit a strong orientation toward goals and effective outcomes.

Socialist collectivism, as a cornerstone of the core values of socialism with Chinese characteristics, fundamentally emphasizes the primacy of collective interests over individual ones, while simultaneously respecting and safeguarding individuals' legitimate rights. It advocates for the realization of personal development through collective progress. In the historical context of the new era, this principle has been enriched with a more inclusive and dialectical interpretation—dialectical collectivism. This updated conception not only inherits and promotes the traditional collectivist values exemplified by the "Red Flag Canal Spirit" and the "The spirit of Two Bombs, One Satellite ," which emphasize unity, cooperation, and selfless dedication, but also integrates contemporary values such as "co-construction and sharing," "common prosperity," and the vision of a "community with a shared future for mankind." Dialectical collectivism underscores the organic unity between individual development and collective advancement, as well as the mutual reinforcement between personal striving and societal contribution. However, it is increasingly evident that collectivist education, both at the university level and within society at large, is facing severe challenges. The spread of refined egoist thinking is, to a certain extent, undermining the spiritual foundation of collectivism.

To fully understand the emergence of refined egoism and its disintegrative effects on collectivism, one must begin with the core ontological principle of Marxist philosophy: "The essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality, it is the ensemble of the social relations [2]." This foundational statement affirms the inherently social nature of human beings. It suggests that individual existence, development, and meaning are deeply embedded in—and dependent upon—a complex network of social relationships. Without the collective and the social, individuals are unlikely to achieve genuine self-actualization and development. Thus, collective cooperation and mutual support are not merely moral imperatives, but rather intrinsic requirements rooted in the essential conditions for human existence and progress. From this perspective, we can clearly observe the existence of a mutually reinforcing negative cycle between the spread of refined egoism and the weakening of collectivist values. The erosion of collectivism diminishes social cohesion and the foundation of shared values, thereby creating fertile ground for the growth of refined egoism. In turn, the prevalence of refined egoism further undermines collective identity and the willingness to cooperate, accelerating the disintegration of collectivism. Breaking this vicious cycle hinges on achieving systematic and structural breakthroughs and innovations within the core components of Ideological and Political Education (IPE) in higher education—specifically: the depth and credibility of theoretical content, the breadth and effectiveness of practical platforms, and the strength and sustainability of institutional guarantees.

3. A three-tiered analysis of the generative logic

The emergence of the phenomenon of refined egoism among university students is not accidental; rather, it is the result of the intertwined effects of multiple factors. This research systematically deconstructs its generative logic into three interrelated and progressively deepening levels: macro, meso, and micro.

3.1. Macro-structural pressures

The deepening development of the socialist market economy has, while unleashing immense productive forces and enhancing overall social well-being, also inevitably infused the logic of marketization—centered on efficiency, competition, and cost-benefit calculation—into nearly every aspect of social life. The generalization of this efficiency-oriented logic provides the fertile

societal soil and contextual backdrop for the proliferation of refined egoism. Numerous sociological researches on the mindset of contemporary university students reveal a marked increase in their pursuit of material wealth and social status. In contrast, recognition of public-oriented values such as "contributing to society" and "serving the people" has comparatively weakened. At the same time, consumerist culture, backed by strong capital forces and the wide reach of digital media, is spreading among youth with unprecedented speed and depth. It constructs an elaborate success narrative and aspirational model rooted in material possession and symbolic consumption, binding personal worth excessively to quantifiable material achievements. On the level of social relationships, traditional close-knit social bonds are loosening. In urban communities, neighborhood interactions are generally declining in both frequency and depth. Within university settings, this sense of disconnection is concretized in the form of "solitary-style socialization" in dormitory life—students, though sharing a room, often immerse themselves in isolated virtual worlds or individual affairs, lacking substantial, warm, face-to-face interactions and mutual cooperation.

3.2. Meso-level educational mechanisms

Certain institutional deficiencies and operational biases within the educational system have directly fostered an environment conducive to refined egoistic behavior. Among these, the overly utilitarian orientation of the educational evaluation system is a key contributing factor. Whether in course grading, scholarship selection, or eligibility for postgraduate recommendation, assessments tend to be excessively quantified and focused on short-term, measurable outputs (e.g., grades, certificates, number of projects), while relatively neglecting internal qualities such as integrity, cooperative spirit, and social responsibility. This evaluation bias readily induces strategic student behavior: some students approach coursework, extracurricular activities, and even interpersonal relationships through a meticulous cost-benefit lens, treating them as forms of "capital" for enhancing personal competitiveness and résumé strength. This instrumentalization of the educational process directly contradicts the reform goals outlined in the Ministry of Education's Overall Plan for Deepening the Reform of Education Evaluation in the New Era [5], which advocates improving outcome evaluation, strengthening process evaluation, exploring value-added assessment, and developing comprehensive evaluation systems. Furthermore, partial malpractices in university management—such as unfair resource allocation, lack of transparency in awards and honors, or favoritism—can convey the impression that rules are manipulable, thereby eroding students' trust in collective fairness. More crucially, the core function of value guidance within university ideological and political education faces limitations in addressing students' real-life concerns. Some IPE instructors lack the theoretical capacity to respond to rapidly evolving societal realities (e.g., gig economy, platform algorithm governance, hypercompetition), and fail to effectively integrate Marxist principles and collectivist values with students' actual existential challenges and anxieties. The inability to clearly, forcefully, and accessibly articulate viable pathways for practicing collective values under complex conditions results in value education becoming detached from lived reality.

3.3. Micro-psychological strategies

At the micro level, individuals—under the shaping influence of macro structural pressures and meso-level educational environments—develop specific psychological adjustment and behavioral strategies in response to survival and development needs. This forms the psychological foundation for refined egoistic behavior. The internalization of instrumental rationality—which emphasizes the efficient calculation of means toward ends—has deeply reshaped students' value judgments and decision-making standards. This rationalization is particularly evident in students' choices of campus organizations and extracurricular activities. Increasingly, students assess whether a given activity will help improve personal skills, enrich their résumés, or expand their social networks, rather than participating out of genuine interest or a desire to serve the collective. The intensifying competitiveness of the job market has further driven widespread risk-avoidance strategies. Faced with profound uncertainty, students seek to increase their "security index" by engaging in phenomena like the certification craze and GPA inflation—efforts to accumulate standardized credentials and academic scores to hedge against future risks. These defensive and self-protective strategies eventually penetrate daily practices, leading to the shrinking and disintegration of collective life. A highly symbolic example at the micro level is the abandonment or mismanagement of dormitory common spaces (e.g., lounges, laundry rooms, study areas). Due to the difficulty of clearly assigning responsibility for shared use, such areas are often neglected or misused. Instead, students tend to pursue individualized solutions—buying personal washing machines, studying at their own desks—representing a shift toward the privatization of collective space. This vividly illustrates how, at the micro level, the spirit of collective life is gradually eroded and the logic of individualized existence takes hold.

4. A four-dimensional landscape of erosion effects

The emergence and spread of "refined egoism" has produced a systematic and profound erosion of the socialist collectivist value system. This erosion is not limited to isolated instances; rather, it unfolds progressively and interdependently across four key

dimensions: value identification, emotional affiliation, behavioral practice, and organizational efficacy. Together, they constitute a deeply concerning panorama of ideological and practical disintegration.

4.1. Blurring of value identification

The most fundamental erosion manifests in the weakening of university students' identification with the core values of collectivism. Within the discursive space of youth subcultures, there exists a subtle yet pervasive trend of mocking, deconstructing, or questioning collectivist ideals. Heated debates revolve around topics such as "personal ambition versus collective dedication" and "how to balance self-actualization with social responsibility," often accompanied by oversimplified characterizations of collectivism as "sacrifice," "constraint," or even "obsolete." This cognitive displacement and blurring of values are deeply rooted in students' perceived disjunction between ideals and lived realities. When students witness institutional dysfunction, lack of transparency, or experience bureaucratic formalism in daily life—and observe their divergence from the collectivist rhetoric taught in classrooms—the moral appeal and persuasive force of collectivist discourse face serious challenges. Consequently, students' internal foundation for value identification becomes unstable and increasingly ambiguous.

4.2. Alienation from emotional affiliation

A crucial pillar of collectivist spirit is the sense of emotional attachment and belonging that individuals feel toward a community —be it as small as a class or club, or as large as a university or nation. Yet the rise of refined egoism is leading to an intergenerational dilution of collective consciousness among the youth, becoming a pressing issue that cannot be ignored. Survey data repeatedly indicate that young people's level of general social trust is lower than in previous generations. Within university settings, this emotional alienation manifests as a shrinking scope of collective identification: students tend to form stronger emotional bonds with small, homogenous social circles (e.g., dormitory friends or niche interest groups) than with broader collectives (e.g., class, department, or university). The evolving participation patterns in college sports organizations offer a vivid illustration: individual-focused activities that emphasize personal performance and flexible scheduling—such as fitness training and app-tracked running—have seen a steady rise in popularity, while participation in team-based, goal-oriented, and interdependent sports (e.g., basketball, football, or group calisthenics) has declined in both frequency and cohesion. This shift in engagement patterns reflects a loosening of emotional ties to collective experiences.

4.3. Instrumentalization of behavioral practice

When value identification becomes blurred and emotional affiliation wanes, participation in collective activities increasingly takes on an instrumental character. Engagement is driven more by pragmatic considerations than by internalized values or genuine emotional belonging. This is particularly evident in the field of volunteer service on campuses: some students approach volunteering with a focus on formality and superficial performance, favoring short-term, low-effort, easily certifiable service opportunities (e.g., event ushering, document sorting) over in-depth, sustained, and complex public service projects that require deep community engagement and long-term commitment. Responsibility avoidance is also becoming more prevalent in group-based tasks. For instance, the common use of group collaboration models in university courses often results in significant imbalances in individual contributions—some students actively engage, while others "free-ride" or passively comply—leading to widespread concerns about fairness and sparking pedagogical reflection. A more subtle and harmful form of instrumentalization lies in the strategic use of collectivist rhetoric for personal gain. Some students adeptly invoke collectivist moral language (e.g., "serving the group," "teamwork," "collective honor") to package individual goals, access specific resources, or evade personal responsibility. Such rhetorical appropriation transforms the language of collective responsibility into a tool for pursuing private interests, seriously undermining the authenticity and inspirational power of collectivist discourse.

4.4. Decline in organizational efficacy

The blurring of value identification, alienation from emotional affiliation, and instrumentalization of behavior ultimately converge in a visible decline in the efficacy of collective organization. The success of collective action depends on shared values, mutual trust, and a willingness to cooperate. When these foundations are eroded, an organization's cohesion, mobilization capacity, and operational efficiency inevitably suffer. In the university context, this decline is reflected in a structural shift: collective activities initiated by institutions or departments—especially those with compulsory or highly organized features (e.g., military training, major celebrations, mandatory practice components)—can still maintain relatively high participation rates. However, voluntary collective activities organized spontaneously by students, based on shared interests or altruistic goals and lacking direct utilitarian incentives (e.g., charity associations, academic salons, cultural heritage initiatives), often experience low cohesion, shallow engagement, and limited sustainability. A telling example is the widespread decline of student organizations

dedicated to cultural heritage, artistic cultivation, and social service. These groups commonly face recruitment difficulties, weak organizational capacity, and shrinking membership—reflecting the broader loss of enthusiasm and warmth among youth for public engagement, as well as a diminished internal drive for collective action.

5. Structural dilemmas of ideological and political education

In addressing the challenges posed by refined egoism and attempting to reconstruct the spirit of collectivism, Ideological and Political Education (IPE) in Chinese universities finds itself mired in a series of interwoven and mutually reinforcing structural dilemmas. These dilemmas form the key bottlenecks that impede the effectiveness of ideological and political education.

5.1. Suspension of value guidance

This represents one of the core predicaments facing ideological and political education. The process of value transmission ¥ is seriously detached from the lived realities and developmental anxieties of contemporary youth, creating a sharp contradiction between educational content and students' actual needs. Some IPE instructors lack timely updates to their knowledge systems and theoretical foundations, resulting in an inadequate understanding and interpretive capacity concerning emergent socio-economic phenomena that profoundly affect young people—such as the precariousness of gig economy labor rights, algorithmic control in platform economies, the intensification of workplace "involution," and shifting perceptions of social mobility. As a result, instructors are often unable to provide meaningful responses to students' concrete and pressing questions regarding social justice, the balance between personal dedication and reciprocal return, or the real-world value of collective cooperation. Value guidance thus remains confined to abstract conceptual exposition and normative preaching, failing to effectively connect grand theoretical narratives with students' lived experiences and the pain points of the current era. This suspended state of value transmission is further exacerbated by the lagging content of teaching materials, which often fail to incorporate the latest social issues and youth discourses.

5.2. Disjunction between knowledge and action

The translation of value cognition into moral behavior and practical engagement is severely hindered by institutional obstacles. The "practical education" component of IPE in universities often suffers from formalism and superficiality. A salient example is the tendency of some institutions to rigidly quantify participation in volunteer or social service activities—prioritizing service hours as the primary or sole metric for evaluating student engagement and eligibility for awards or recognition. This approach has led to behavioral distortions: many students gravitate toward low-threshold service projects that are time-efficient, low-skill, and easy to certify (e.g., sign-in for large events, distributing flyers). In contrast, high-threshold, deep-engagement public service projects—such as community governance, legal aid, or long-term support for vulnerable groups—face persistent volunteer shortages and sustainability challenges. This emphasis on form over substance and quantity over quality significantly undermines students' potential to deepen value identification and cultivate collective competencies through practice, resulting in a serious disjunction between knowledge and action.

5.3. Squeeze by societal pressure and environmental

University-based IPE is further encumbered by systemic and multidimensional pressures from the broader social environment. There exists a marked value tension—and in some cases, outright contradiction—between the societal domain and the educational domain. One major source of external squeeze comes from the instrumentalization of values in family education. Driven by anxiety over fierce social competition, many parents view their children's involvement in collective or volunteer activities as distractions from academic achievement and career advancement. Some even explicitly discourage such participation, urging their children to focus instead on enhancing personal competitiveness—such as obtaining certifications, boosting academic scores, or securing internships. The digital space forms another potent arena of value deconstruction. A vast array of information and ideologies that undermine mainstream values—promoting extreme individualism, consumerism, and even historical nihilism—are widely disseminated on social media platforms. These discourses exert a persistent and subliminal influence on students' value judgments. When students are constantly exposed—outside the university—to messages that conflict with the collectivist and altruistic ideals promoted by IPE (through family, online content, and social interactions), the influence of ideological and political education is inevitably diminished. It falls prey to a multidirectional value pull, giving rise to what some educators have metaphorically termed the "$5+2 \leq 0$" dilemma—meaning that five days of school-based education may be entirely offset by two days of external social exposure during the weekend.

5.4. Disjunction in educator competence

There exists a notable gap between the competencies of ideological and political educators—including instructors of political theory courses and student counselors—and the developmental requirements of education in the new era. Some educators lack sufficient understanding of the complex transformations underway in Chinese society and thus struggle to accurately grasp the underlying social roots of young people's existential anxieties, psychological dilemmas, and value uncertainties. When communicating with students, these educators often fail to achieve effective generational discourse conversion, continuing to rely on traditional, didactic, and top-down discourse frameworks. Such approaches are ill-suited to contemporary youth, who are accustomed to interactive, experiential, and subcultural forms of expression. Moreover, these educators often lack the ability to translate theoretical language into practical discourse that resonates with young people's everyday lives and answers their real concerns. This shortfall has continuously weakened the emotional appeal and persuasive power of ideological and political education.

5.5. Barriers to collaborative educational systems

The mechanism of cross-departmental collaboration within universities aimed at holistic education frequently fails, undermining collective efforts to strengthen collectivist education. There is often a lack of clarity in role boundaries and poor coordination among various educational entities, such as student affairs offices, academic affairs departments, the Communist Youth League, schools of Marxism, and academic faculties. In the design and execution of specific educational activities, this dysfunction manifests in blame-shifting, resource competition, and siloed operations—resulting in activities that should have been carefully crafted educational experiences being reduced to tokenistic formalities. A particularly salient issue is the existence of data silos. Although the Ministry of Education has vigorously promoted comprehensive reforms under the "All-round Education" (San Quan Yu Ren) framework, many pilot universities have yet to establish effective mechanisms for sharing key data—such as students' ideological trends, mental health status, depth of practical engagement, or academic performance warnings. The fragmentation of such critical information hinders IPE practitioners' ability to accurately identify student needs, target specific groups, and design tailored intervention strategies, thereby significantly limiting the precision and personalization of ideological education.

6. Systematic construction of integrated pathways

To resolve the structural dilemmas facing ideological and political education in its efforts to counter refined egoism and revitalize collectivism, it is essential to adopt a systems-thinking approach and construct a comprehensive, multi-dimensional integration framework. Based on current research and practical experiences, we propose six integrated pathways that aim to achieve synergy across theory, practice, technology, institutions, subjects, and educational contexts.

6.1. Integrating theory with lived reality

The fundamental solution to the suspended state of value guidance lies in deeply embedding Marxist theoretical principles into the concrete pain points and developmental concerns of contemporary youth. Educational practice must be bold in confronting real-life contradictions. For instance, courses could include modules on "Labor Rights in the Digital Economy," guiding students to apply Marxist theories such as the labor theory of value and class analysis to dissect the evolving labor-capital relations in gig and platform economies. Students should be encouraged to explore how collective actions—such as collective bargaining and trade unions—can serve as mechanisms for defending workers' rights and enhancing individual dignity, thereby realizing the practical value of collective power. In addition, institutional ethical dilemmas in real-life governance—such as tensions between fairness and efficiency, or between procedural and substantive justice—should be candidly addressed. Case-based scenario simulations and in-depth seminars may be developed to foster critical thinking and constructive debate among students. Through such analysis, they can explore how institutional improvements may better balance collective values and individual rights, thereby deepening their understanding of collectivism as a principle with institutional and normative significance.

6.2. Reconstructing deeply immersive practice contexts

To transcend the formalistic and superficial tendencies in volunteer activities, it is necessary to build immersive, life-oriented spaces for experiencing collective responsibility. Key strategies include lengthening the practice duration, enriching the substance of engagement, and reinforcing emotional involvement. Zhejiang University's "Qingzhi Plan" (Youth Knowledge Program) offers a valuable model: students are dispatched to grassroots communities where they participate in concrete public affairs, such as rural revitalization or targeted poverty alleviation. By resolving complex real-world problems and engaging

directly with community life, students develop a profound understanding of what it means to be part of a "community of shared responsibility," experiencing firsthand the tight interconnection between personal effort and collective well-being. Similarly, red education bases can organize role-playing and scenario restoration activities, allowing students to assume the roles of historical collective actors—such as villagers during the War of Resistance or industrial workers during the socialist construction era. Immersed in reconstructed historical settings, students face challenges and complete tasks collaboratively, thereby reviving a deep emotional and cognitive connection between the individual, the era, and collective destiny.

6.3. Intelligent IPE precision intervention platforms

To counteract the instrumentalization of behavioral practice and the blurring of value identification, it is necessary to leverage digital technologies—such as big data and artificial intelligence—to empower Ideological and Political Education (IPE), provided that strict compliance with the Personal Information Protection Law of the People's Republic of China [6] and the protection of student privacy are upheld. Some pioneering initiatives in higher education are worth emulating. For instance, anonymous, behavior-based intelligent analysis systems can be developed to identify students who exhibit weak collective participation or strong individualistic social behavior patterns. This can be achieved through anonymized analysis of behavioral data in shared learning spaces (e.g., libraries, self-study areas, discussion zones) and desensitized activity participation records. The system may then automatically recommend interest-matched team-building activities, collaborative project invitations, or micro-community links—customized to students' inferred preferences—to provide targeted and personalized guidance. Further, Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) collaboration platforms could be developed, allowing students to rotate through various team roles (e.g., leader, executor, coordinator) in controlled virtual environments. By completing complex tasks through dynamic team collaboration, students would gain firsthand insight into the critical role of teamwork in enhancing both organizational effectiveness and individual capability, thereby cultivating a subconscious yet lasting sense of collaboration.

6.4. Value-oriented reform of evaluation systems

To reverse the overly utilitarian and individualistic tendencies in educational evaluation, it is essential to restructure value orientation through institutional reforms that elevate collective contribution and social responsibility as core criteria. In pilot reforms of postgraduate recommendation systems, greater weight can be given to evaluating students' real contributions to collective undertakings. This should go beyond merely recognizing formal positions and instead adopt a multi-source review mechanism to assess students' actual input in group projects, initiative and effectiveness in solving collective problems (e.g., class building, community service, interdisciplinary collaboration), and concrete efforts in fostering group harmony and development. Similarly, the honors and awards system should integrate a more scientific framework for certifying public service. Rather than simply tallying service hours, emphasis should shift toward assessing continuity, depth, tangible outcomes, and the spirit of responsibility demonstrated in service. Clear institutional incentives should be established to reward long-term, in-depth involvement in community governance or tackling complex social issues. Such a system would foster a positive feedback loop, encouraging students to pursue meaningful, effective, and emotionally resonant forms of collective contribution.

6.5. Deepening educators' responsiveness to real-life pain points

Bridging the competence gap among IPE educators requires systematically enhancing their capacity to interpret and respond to the concrete challenges confronting today's youth. A multi-level empowerment strategy is vital to this goal. One approach is to promote co-training mechanisms involving universities and enterprises. For example, ideological and political instructors could be regularly assigned to conduct fieldwork, internships, or research rotations in frontline environments such as tech firms, emerging manufacturing industries, or community service organizations. These experiences would expose educators to new economic patterns, emerging conflicts, and evolving societal challenges. Additionally, instructors should be encouraged to develop long-term collaborative relationships with professionals from other fields—such as industry experts, social workers, and psychological counselors—to co-create teaching cases and thematic seminars. Through such interdisciplinary exchanges, educators would be better equipped to translate grand theories into practical, relatable discourses that address contemporary issues such as algorithmic fairness, digital divides, workplace mental health, and intergenerational communication. This transformation would significantly enhance the relevance and persuasiveness of IPE, aligning value guidance with the lived realities and dilemmas of young people.

6.6. Tri-dimensional synergy: family-school-society collaboration

Building a synergistic educational community encompassing families, schools, and society is fundamental to resisting the transmission of negative social values and cultivating a robust ecosystem for collectivist education. Universities must take the

initiative as central nodes within this collaborative network. At the community level, higher education institutions should partner with neighborhood communities, memorial halls, and cultural institutions to co-develop immersive learning experiences. For instance, history museums could employ advanced technologies such as holographic projection and immersive theater to recreate pivotal historical scenes. Students could assume the roles of ordinary citizens or key historical figures, making critical decisions and collaboratively resolving dilemmas—such as wartime resource allocation or post-disaster reconstruction—under the guidance of instructors. These experiences would enable students to reestablish an emotional and cognitive connection between personal destiny and collective history, helping them understand the significance of individual choices within broader social and historical contexts. The family-school-society triad aims to align value guidance across all life domains, generating a cohesive and immersive environment that supports the development of collectivist consciousness among youth.

7. Conclusion

This research focuses on the emerging phenomenon of "refined egoism" among university students in contemporary China and its profound erosion of collectivist values. By constructing and applying a systematic analytical model encompassing logic-effect-dilemma-path, the research engages in both theoretical deconstruction and practical exploration.

The research first unpacks the complex mechanisms underlying the formation of refined egoism, identifying three interwoven layers of causality. At the macro level, the phenomenon stems from the overextension of the logic of efficiency brought by deepened marketization and the loosening of social bonds. At the meso level, it is rooted in institutional flaws such as utilitarian evaluation systems, managerial disarray, and the insufficient responsiveness of ideological and political education (IPE) to real-life issues. At the micro level, it manifests in students' internalization of instrumental rationality, risk-averse strategies, and contracted life practices under pressure. These three layers are nested and mutually reinforcing, together forming the fertile ground for the proliferation of refined egoism.

The research further reveals how refined egoism exerts a systematic and gradual corrosive effect on collectivist values. This erosion unfolds along four dimensions: at the value recognition level, it results in blurred core beliefs and a widening disconnect between ideals and reality; at the emotional affiliation level, it leads to alienation due to the dilution of community consciousness and a narrowing of identity hierarchies; at the behavioral level, it manifests as instrumental participation marked by strategic engagement, evasion of responsibility, and discursive disengagement; and finally, at the organizational level, it weakens collective cohesion and drains the vitality of spontaneous activities, culminating in a structural decline in organizational effectiveness. These four dimensions are not isolated phenomena, but interconnected dynamics that together portray a sobering reality: the foundational spirit of collectivism is under sustained erosion.

In confronting this critical challenge, IPE practices in universities are severely constrained by multiple structural dilemmas: value guidance becomes detached from the lived experiences of youth and "floats above" reality; theory–practice transformation is fractured due to the formalism of practical mechanisms; the educational environment suffers from external pressures such as family-level utilitarianism and digital deconstruction; educators face a competence gap caused by outdated knowledge systems and discursive paradigms; and internal educational systems struggle with collaboration due to institutional silos and fragmented data structures. These five entangled dilemmas have significantly weakened the capacity of IPE to reconstruct collectivist values in a meaningful way.

To address these challenges, this research proposes a comprehensive, six-dimensional integration pathway: Theoretical–Realistic Integration: Deeply integrate Marxist theory with youth-relevant issues (e.g., gig economy rights, ethical dilemmas of institutional design), using scenario simulations and case-based discussions to ground value guidance in lived experience; Reconstruction of Deep Practice Spaces: Move beyond superficial engagement by designing long-cycle, immersive, and responsibility-oriented practice arenas that address real public issues (e.g., the "Youth Knowledge Project"), thereby reinforcing a sense of community; Smart IPE Precision Intervention: On the basis of legal compliance, employ big data analytics to identify students with low collective participation, and use algorithmic matching to push tailored collaborative activities or offer VR-based experiential learning to cultivate team-oriented competence; Evaluation System Reorientation: Use institutional levers to reshape value orientation by increasing the weight of collective contributions (via multi-source evaluations) and sustained, effective public service in scholarship and graduate recommendation systems; Deepening Educators' Responsive Competence: Empower educators through mechanisms like "dual mentorship" with enterprises and cross-sector collaborations, enhancing their ability to decode contemporary challenges and adopt persuasive, practice-grounded discourse for intergenerational engagement; Tri-Dimensional Family-School-Society Collaboration: Foster integrated value ecosystems by linking universities with communities and cultural institutions (e.g., immersive history classrooms), generating a cohesive front to resist the negative influences of the broader environment.

These six dimensions are not parallel components but an organically interlinked whole: theoretical integration provides direction, deep practice fosters lived understanding, intelligent platforms ensure precision, evaluation reforms shape the environment, educator empowerment strengthens agency, and tri-sector collaboration optimizes the ecosystem. Together, they

aim at a central goal: to reconstruct the spiritual foundation of collectivism in an era of individualization, guiding young people toward finding their spiritual home in the dialectical unity of personal development and service to society.

Nevertheless, this research acknowledges two primary limitations that future researches must address. First, it is imperative to establish a large-scale, longitudinal, multidimensional database that tracks students' values from enrollment to graduation and beyond. Such a dataset would provide empirical grounding for identifying value transformation patterns and evaluating intervention efficacy. Second, deeper interdisciplinary methodological integration is required. Future IPE research should explore the application of tools and methods from cognitive psychology, communication research, and organizational behavior—such as eye-tracking, social network analysis, and Agent-Based Modeling (ABM)—to enhance scientific rigor, explanatory depth, and predictive capability.

As the tide of individualization surges forward, we find ourselves in an era where material abundance coexists with spiritual disorientation. This calls for a reanchoring of educational values. Reconstructing collectivism is not a denial or suppression of individual value, but rather an effort to realize the profound truth that "the essence of man is the ensemble of social relations." It seeks the harmonious unity between individual freedom and collective progress. As Marx once wrote in his youth: "If we have chosen the profession which offers us the most opportunities to do good for mankind, then burdens cannot bend us, because they are sacrifices for the benefit of all."[7] When IPE is able to pierce the icy veneer of refined egoism and ignite the flame of working for the happiness of humankind in the hearts of young people, then we can truly hope that the new generation will not only possess the intelligence and ability to strive for excellence, but also find profound meaning in life through collective dedication to the people and society. This is not only the fundamental mission of moral education in universities but also an indispensable spiritual pillar for national rejuvenation.

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