

Current Situation, Dilemmas, and Optimization Paths of Marxist Belief Education for Generation Z College Students: A Case Study of Nanjing ZJ College

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Abstract: Generation Z has become a major cohort in universities worldwide. Its acceptance of Marxist theory and construction of belief bear on the effectiveness of cultivating critical thinking in the humanities and social sciences, and profoundly shape young people's cognitive models for viewing capital operation, social stratification, and human emancipation. Taking students at Nanjing ZJ College as the survey sample and drawing on first-hand questionnaire and interview data, this paper sorts out the actual patterns of Generation Z's exposure to Marxism, analyzes practical obstacles in belief education, and explores educational implementation paths that fit this group's cognitive characteristics and are applicable to ordinary undergraduate colleges. It aims to encourage young people to expand self-understanding through theoretical reflection and form independent perspectives on structural problems in modern society.

Keywords: Generation Z college students; Marxist belief; Education in ideals and convictions

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1. Introduction

Firm ideals and convictions are the core spiritual support for young people to devote themselves to the great cause of national rejuvenation. Marxist belief, as the most core and fundamental political adherence and ideological foundation for contemporary Chinese youth, is the primary basis for college students in the new era to establish a scientific worldview, outlook on life, and values^[1]. Marxism, born in the nineteenth century, provides analytical tools for dissecting capital logic, labor alienation, and class stratification, and has been included in the reading lists of philosophy, sociology, and political science courses at many universities worldwide. Generation Z grew up in an environment of explosive internet information, interwoven pluralistic value narratives, and awakening individual rights consciousness, and it has a natural aversion to dogmatic

theoretical preaching. Fragmented online information continuously erodes deep reading habits, while consumerism and an individual-supremacist culture permeate daily life, leading young people to exhibit divided beliefs, fluctuating cognition, and an emphasis on practical utility in their exposure to Marxism. How to optimize the classroom theoretical teaching model in universities and narrow the distance between theory and young people's real experience has become a practical proposition that humanities education research needs to address.

2. Current situation of Marxist belief among Generation Z college students

At present, "Generation Z" youth born between 1995 and 2009 have comprehensively become the main body of college students. Internet iteration, market economy development, collisions of globalized ideas, and the rise in national comprehensive strength have jointly shaped this group's unique ways of thinking, value concepts, and behavioral paradigms. To objectively depict the true picture of Generation Z's Marxist belief, the research group took students from Nanjing ZJ College and neighboring universities as survey subjects, comprehensively used questionnaire surveys, in-depth interviews, and classroom observation, and collected 579 valid questionnaires. The sample covered six major disciplines—humanities, science, engineering, economics, management, and law—with students from 23 provinces across the country. Combined with semi-structured interviews with students of different grades, majors, and political statuses, an empirical analysis was carried out through mutual verification of quantitative and qualitative materials.

2.1. Overall belief trends: Mainstream positive and stable, with local ambiguity and fluctuation

The survey shows that Generation Z college students' Marxist belief is generally positive, and the mainstream position is stable. 67.18% of surveyed students said they firmly or relatively firmly believed in Marxism, could recognize its scientific value and contemporary significance, and possessed relatively strong political identification, theoretical consciousness, and practical identification, with high cohesion around national governance performance and the "Four Confidences." However, 28.84% of students were in a state of cognitive ambiguity and could not form coherent and complete theoretical judgments. These students could accept some of Marxism's social-critical views but found it difficult to identify with the entire theoretical framework. The reason is that young people's channels for acquiring theory are scattered, and they are accustomed to fragmented information reception, without a complete grasp of the logic of theoretical deduction. Facing various contradictory interpretations online and constrained by insufficient reflective accumulation, different ideas pull against one another, causing wavering in belief cognition.

2.2. Theoretical cognition: High overall identification but prominent superficiality

Generation Z college students show an unbalanced characteristic of "high identification with grand narratives but insufficient grasp of micro-level theoretical principles." 82.21% of respondents recognized that Marxism is not outdated and believed that it can respond to real issues in the new era and possesses the power of truth and practical value. However, there is an obvious gap between emotional identification and active reading of original texts. Only 8.29% of students actively read original works or excerpts by Marx and Engels. Most students' theoretical learning is limited to classroom lecture notes, and the proportion who actively expand theoretical reading outside class is low. Information sources are limited, learning remains at the level of

concept memorization, and it is difficult to use theoretical tools to analyze real social phenomena. When facing issues such as labor–capital contradictions and the wealth gap, most students passively accept ready-made online views, and superficial cognition replaces rigorous reflection, creating a disconnect between theoretical texts and real life.

2.3. Belief motivation: Sufficient positive willingness but obvious utilitarian tendency

The survey shows that college students' ideological and political value orientation is generally stable, their subjective willingness to pursue political progress and establish ideals and convictions is positive, and most students can recognize the important role of Marxist belief in personal growth. However, practical utilitarian considerations occupy a prominent proportion in learning motivation. Questionnaire data show that 55.44% of students regarded enriching their academic credentials as the primary motivation for learning; 41.28% believed that course and club experiences could enhance their competitive advantage in job hunting; only 31.43% studied out of the spiritual pursuit of understanding social reality and exploring the path of human emancipation. Excessive consideration of practical returns weakens the spiritual appeal of theory. Some students treat courses as perfunctory tasks, making it difficult to generate heartfelt ideological identification and hindering the internalization of theory into individual cognitive structures.

2.4. Knowledge–action practice: Positive value cognition but prominent disconnection between knowledge and action

In the dimension of transforming value identification into behavior, the disconnection between knowledge and action among Generation Z college students is relatively obvious. 94.82% of students highly recognized the development achievements of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and more than half would actively pay attention to national development and social hotspots. However, only 6.74% of students could consciously use Marxist standpoints, viewpoints, and methods to analyze social hotspots. The survey also shows that 94.47% of students could practice the Marxist spirit in daily study and life, and 39.21% would actively participate in volunteer service, social investigation, red practice, and other activities. This indicates that Generation Z has a strong sense of national and familial commitment, but the transformation of theoretical belief into behavioral consciousness is insufficient, and the guiding efficacy of belief on practice has not been fully realized.

3. Practical dilemmas of Marxist belief education for Generation Z college students

3.1. External environmental dilemma: Impact of pluralistic trends of thought and erosion of belief foundations by online ecology

The proliferation of global digital media drives cross-regional dissemination of various social interpretations, bringing multiple external interferences to Generation Z's understanding of Marxism. Short videos and social platforms are flooded with simplified and rewritten second-hand interpretations. Some texts extract isolated concepts detached from the original context for elaboration, and even deliberately distort core propositions, using entertainment narratives to output one-sided views. Algorithmic distribution reinforces fragmented browsing and squeezes the space for reading long texts, making it difficult for young people to fully grasp the logical chain of theory. Objective contradictions such as distribution gaps and labor predicaments exist in real society, and comments from different positions interweave in the online field. Young people with

limited social experience receive complex social events through fragmented information and easily attribute practical problems simplistically to theory itself, thereby questioning Marxism's ability to explain reality. Consumerist mass culture highlights individual material gains, and some students prioritize practical returns when studying humanities theory, setting aside the social-critical dimension contained in theory.

3.2. Educational supply dilemma: Lagging content and methods, insufficient adaptability and precision

The content and models of current university belief education are clearly mismatched with Generation Z's cognitive characteristics ^[2]. Classroom teaching mostly relies on fixed lecture notes, and conceptual explanations emphasize abstract speculation, rarely responding to practical issues such as digital platform exploitation and survival pressure on youth. Students' real ideological confusions are difficult to resolve effectively. Teaching is mainly one-way lecturing by teachers, and interactive forms such as thematic debates, case analysis, and close reading of original texts are insufficiently used, leaving the classroom lacking a reflective atmosphere. At the same time, disciplinary barriers are prominent. Sociology, literature, and economics classrooms rarely introduce Marxist analytical perspectives, and theoretical discussion is limited to ideological and political courses, unable to form all-round educational synergy.

3.3. Practical education dilemma: Weak practical links and difficulty in achieving unity of knowledge and action

Against the background of building the "Great Ideological and Political Course," the importance of practical education has become increasingly prominent ^[3]. However, practical education in universities still suffers from formalistic and fragmented problems. Activities such as red study tours, volunteer service, and social investigation lack a complete process of pre-training, mid-term exchange, and post-review, making it difficult for students to deeply perceive the power of Marxist truth. Practical projects are mostly carried out in scattered stages and have not yet established a normalized and institutionalized operating mechanism; practice themes, content, and carriers lack continuity. The construction of the practical evaluation system lags behind, and there is a widespread problem of emphasizing participation over reflection and form over effectiveness. It is impossible to promote deep student understanding; the educational goal of "internalizing belief and externalizing behavior" is difficult to achieve, and the disconnection between theory and practice has not been fundamentally resolved.

3.4. Online education dilemma: Weak position construction and insufficient guidance by mainstream values

As digital natives, Generation Z's cognition and social interaction are highly dependent on cyberspace, and the construction of online belief education in universities lags behind youth growth needs. On the one hand, the supply of high-quality theoretical content is insufficient. Official new media platforms mostly focus on notices and campus publicity, while products such as short videos, theoretical interpretations, and hotspot analyses addressing youth ideological confusion are scarce. Content is homogenized and preachy, with limited communicative appeal. On the other hand, an integrated communication matrix has not yet been built. New media accounts of various departments within the university act independently; content is miscellaneous and lacks theoretical depth, and educational synergy is dispersed. In addition, the cultivation of students' media literacy is absent, and their ability to identify and resist erroneous online trends of thought

is insufficient. They are easily misled by negative public opinion, which further affects belief stability ^[4].

3.5. Teacher and subject dilemma: Insufficient educational adaptability and lack of intrinsic motivation

The teaching staff is key to improving the quality and efficiency of belief education. Some ideological and political teachers have shortcomings in theoretical foundation, new media teaching, and hotspot analysis. They cannot accurately grasp youth ideological trends, find it difficult to explain theory with vivid discourse, and cannot respond to students' deeper ideological confusions. From the perspective of educated subjects, Generation Z has a strong sense of autonomy and critical awareness and resists indoctrination-style preaching. Under a passive learning model, intrinsic motivation is insufficient, and enthusiasm for actively studying theory and practicing belief is not high, further reducing the actual effectiveness of education.

4. Optimization paths for Marxist belief education of Generation Z college students in the new era

4.1. Deepening theoretical arming and precisely optimizing the supply of educational content

In response to cognitive limitations caused by Generation Z's fragmented information reception, teaching resources that balance original texts and practical experience should be constructed. Classroom teaching should strengthen original text reading training, arrange class hours to sort out core Marxist texts, and clarify the generative threads of concepts such as historical materialism, critique of alienation, and capital analysis, thereby compensating for cognitive gaps caused by fragmented information. Thematic discussion materials should be expanded, seminars on selected classics should be offered, and relevant discussions of twentieth-century Western Marxism should be introduced as references to compare extensions and reflections on classics by scholars of different eras, broadening the boundaries of youth reflection. It is necessary to adhere to reality-driven reading, introduce practical issues such as digital labor, flexible employment, and class mobility into the classroom, use original texts to analyze real events, demonstrate the explanatory power of theory for contemporary society, and guide students to study independently and form independent judgments.

4.2. Innovating teaching models to enhance the affinity and effectiveness of ideological and political education

With reference to Generation Z's thinking patterns, it is necessary to move beyond the traditional classroom paradigm of lecture-note preaching and reform the organizational form of humanities classrooms. Textual exegesis and real cases should be balanced, moving beyond mere concept repetition, combining close reading of original texts with analysis of contemporary cases, reserving space for rebuttal, tolerating collisions of diverse views, and weakening the tone of one-way preaching. Classroom activities such as group reading, viewpoint debate, and case review should be carried out to ensure opportunities for students to express doubts and stimulate motivation for independent inquiry. The auxiliary teaching function of digital media should be leveraged. Core passages from original texts can be selected to produce concise reading materials, online discussion sections can be built, and differentiated views of different scholars can be gathered, thereby lowering the threshold for understanding classic texts, aligning with young people's information reception habits, and improving the effectiveness of classroom education.

4.3. Deepening the construction of great ideological and political education and building an education system integrating knowledge and action

It is necessary to comprehensively implement the policy requirements for building the “Great Ideological and Political Course,” break down barriers between theoretical classrooms and social practice, and solve the problem of disconnection between knowledge and action ^[5]. First, integrate social resources such as red education bases, rural revitalization front lines, enterprises, and communities, build a normalized practical education platform, and carry out red study tours, national conditions surveys, volunteer service, and grassroots practice in an orderly manner. Second, improve the whole-process practice mechanism of “pre-class theoretical preparation, in-class deep experience, and post-class summary and sublimation,” guiding students to perceive the power of theory and elevate belief cognition in real social scenarios. Third, improve comprehensive practical evaluation, incorporate practical reflection, theoretical application, and behavioral performance into assessment, use scientific evaluation to compel deep participation, and promote the transformation of belief from theoretical cognition to emotional identification and behavioral consciousness.

4.4. Strengthening Online Positions and Creating a Clear Online Education Ecosystem

It is necessary to adapt to Generation Z’s networked survival characteristics and create an all-media belief education pattern. Resources on WeChat, Douyin, Bilibili, and Weibo should be coordinated; a collaborative and interconnected new media matrix in universities should be built; and a normalized online ideological and political position should be consolidated. It is important to deeply cultivate a youth discourse system and create lightweight, high-quality content such as theoretical talks, youth role models, red stories, and hotspot interpretations, disseminating Marxism in discourse that is easily accepted by young people. Special courses on online critical thinking, identification of ideological trends, and ideological security should be offered, media literacy education should be strengthened, and students should be guided to consciously resist erroneous trends such as historical nihilism and money worship, thereby consolidating the online ideological defense line.

4.5. Building a strong teaching staff and consolidating the foundation of professionalized education

The “Six Requirements” construction standards for ideological and political course teachers should be strictly implemented, and a professional teaching staff that is firm in belief, professionally competent, and suited to youth should be built ^[6]. Regular training in Marxism and the Party’s innovative theories should be carried out to consolidate teachers’ theoretical foundation and use teachers’ own beliefs to guide the formation of students’ beliefs. Teachers’ comprehensive abilities in new media teaching, hotspot interpretation, analysis of youth thought, and answering questions should be improved, and teaching should precisely match youth ideological characteristics. Teacher assessment and incentives should be optimized, incorporating ideological and political teaching reform, effectiveness of belief education, and improvement in student thought into the evaluation system, thereby mobilizing teachers’ initiative for reform and innovation.

4.6. Improving collaborative mechanisms and building an all-domain education pattern

It is necessary to adhere to the concept of “three-all education,” integrate multiple resources, and build a four-in-one collaborative education pattern of school, family, society, and online space ^[7]. It is important to promote ideological and political courses and curriculum-based ideological and political education to move

in the same direction, excavate ideological and political elements in various specialized courses, and realize education through all courses. Home–school collaboration should be strengthened, parents should be guided to establish scientific education concepts, and home–school educational synergy should be consolidated. Social resources such as local red culture, achievements of the times, and advanced role models should be fully activated to achieve belief immersion. A dynamic monitoring and early warning mechanism for student thought should be established to timely grasp fluctuations in belief cognition, carry out precise targeted assistance, and consolidate the foundation of young people’s Marxist belief.

5. Conclusion

Generation Z college students’ acceptance of and reflection on Marxism is a long-term issue of concern in global higher humanities education. For over a century, Marxism has always been subject to ongoing interpretation and debate; readers from different regions and generations develop differentiated understandings from the original texts. Universities need to grasp Generation Z’s media environment and living conditions, respect young people’s ideological confusion, comprehensively use close reading of original texts, case seminars, and realistic observation in teaching, optimize classroom lectures, expand extracurricular reflective scenarios, guide young people to break free from the constraints of second-hand fragmented information, and engage directly with classic texts. Young people should be encouraged to study theory from a critical perspective, grasp its intellectual power for analyzing modern society, discern divergences among various derivative interpretations, cultivate independent social observation ability, and use Marxism to respond to social propositions raised by the times.

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