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The Current Status and Group Differences of College Students' Patriotic Attitude in the New Era: An Empirical Analysis Based on 1,631 College Students

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Abstract: Precise implementation of patriotic education requires a clear grasp of the actual condition of the educatees. The promulgation and enforcement of the Patriotic Education Law of the People's Republic of China has transformed patriotic education from an advocacy-based requirement into a legally binding norm. Based on a questionnaire survey of 1,862 college students, this study retained 1,631 valid responses (87.6% of the original sample) after excluding cases completed in fewer than sixty seconds and those displaying uniform straight-lining. Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, *t*-tests, and analysis of variance, supplemented by effect-size estimates, were applied to a four-dimensional model of patriotic attitude comprising cognitive, affective, behavioral, and value dimensions. Three findings emerge. First, students' patriotic attitude is generally high (M = 4.786; scoring rate = 95.73%), yet the four dimensions develop unevenly, with affect taking the lead (99.07%) and value lagging behind (92.36%). Second, differences across gender, year of study, and subject track are limited, with homogeneity outweighing heterogeneity; all statistically significant differences are of small effect size, and both affect and behavior decline as students advance through the university, with a comparable gap persisting only between the first-year and third-year cohorts. Third, value correlates only weakly to moderately with the other three dimensions (r = 0.147–0.284), markedly below the intercorrelations among cognition, affect and behavior (r = 0.419–0.600), indicating that rational stance and affective identification do not develop in step; the weakest items cluster in cognitive discrimination and value tolerance. These findings suggest that patriotic education should shift its center of gravity from affective arousal toward rational consciousness, differentiate its provision in response to the limited group differences that do exist, and address the two structural deficits in conceptual discrimination and value tolerance.

Keywords: College students; Patriotic attitude; Four-dimensional structure; Group differences; Empirical study

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1. Introduction

In November 2019, the Outline for the Implementation of Patriotic Education in the New Era, issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council, stressed that patriotism constitutes the national heart and soul of the Chinese nation, its most precious spiritual wealth and a powerful driving force for spiritual motivation, and that patriotic education in the new era should focus on young people, cultivating their patriotic sentiment, strengthening their awareness of patriotism and deepening their affective identification [1]. In October 2023, the Patriotic Education Law of the People's Republic of China was promulgated and entered into force, providing for the first time a systematic statutory framework for the objectives, principal content, implementation measures and supervisory guarantees of patriotic education [2]. From policy document to national law, patriotic education has shifted from an advocacy-based "soft requirement" to a binding "hard norm," and this transition has created an urgent practical need for knowledge: for patriotic education to be precisely targeted, it must first answer the foundational question of what state the patriotic attitudes of its intended beneficiaries actually occupy. College students are a priority group in patriotic education, and the structural characteristics and developmental level of their patriotic attitudes bear directly on the effectiveness of the fundamental task of fostering virtue through education.

The existing literature on patriotic education among college students can be organized into three strands. The first is normative inquiry into the connotation and value boundaries of patriotism, examining its conceptual essence, its historical forms and its relationship to nationalism and national identity [3–4]. The second addresses educational pathways and implementation strategies, drawing on the dimensions of curriculum, culture, practice and online engagement to propose refinements [5–6]. The third comprises preliminary attempts at measurement and empirical research. Within political psychology, patriotism has long been operationalized as "a deeply felt emotional sense of belonging to one's country" [7]; it has also been treated within social identity theory as a set of fundamental group beliefs, and in the United States the distinction between patriotism and national identity, together with the relationship of each to political involvement, has likewise been examined, while some scholars have distinguished the relational orientations that individuals hold towards their country along a blind-patriotism–constructive-patriotism continuum [8–11]. In China, the most systematic measurement work has divided patriotic attitude into affective, value, and behavioral facets and developed a corresponding scale on that basis [12]. Other studies have traced the evolution of young people's patriotic consciousness over time and examined the role of peer guidance in youth patriotic education [13–14].

A review of this literature suggests that, although patriotism has remained a persistent object of inquiry, existing work is still characterized by an abundance of macro-level reflection and a paucity of micro-level empirical evidence. With regard to college students, at least three questions remain to be answered by empirical materials. First, what is the overall level of students' patriotic attitude, and do its constituent dimensions develop in step? Second, in what ways do students of different gender, year of study, and disciplinary background differ in patriotic attitude, and are such differences of a magnitude that would justify differentiated treatment in educational practice? Third, what relationships exist among the dimensions of patriotic attitude, and where precisely are the weak links located? Answering these foundational questions is a necessary precondition for enhancing the practical effectiveness of patriotic education among college students.

Against this background, the present study compiles a College Students' Patriotic Attitude questionnaire on the basis of Schatz et al.'s Measures of Blind and Constructive Patriotism and the index system for measuring patriotic attitude among the general populace developed by Zou and Xiao (2022). The questionnaire survey is designed to answer three questions: (1) What is the overall level of college students' patriotic attitude, and how do its four dimensions develop? (2) How do the four dimensions differ across natural variables such as gender, year of study, political affiliation, discipline category, and senior high school

subject combination? (3) What relationships hold among the four dimensions, and which specific items constitute the most conspicuous deficits? On this basis, the study goes on to discuss feasible strategies for raising the practical effectiveness of patriotic education among college students in the new era.

2. Materials and methods

The College Students' Patriotic Attitude questionnaire served as the measurement instrument. Following the four-dimensional structure of patriotic attitude, 29 items were compiled: 12 for the cognitive dimension, 6 for the affective dimension, 6 for the behavioral dimension, and 5 for the value dimension, all rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = uncertain, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree), giving a theoretical maximum of 145. The cognitive dimension principally assesses students' familiarity with patriotic education policies, laws, and regulations and with national development strategies, together with their ability to discriminate among competing theoretical propositions. The affective dimension measures students' national pride, sense of belonging, and identification with national history and culture. The behavioral dimension assesses students' practical inclination to defend national interests and to participate in patriotic education activities in everyday study and life. The value dimension probes students' rational stance towards the relationship between the nation and its people, in particular whether they can make constructive judgements in the tension between "patriotism" and "criticism" and between "devotion" and "tolerance."

Once the questionnaire had been compiled, its reliability and validity were examined on a pilot sample of 154 cases, and the results indicated that both met the standards acceptable for empirical research; the reliability coefficients and confirmatory factor analysis fit indices for the full sample (N = 1,631) are reported in **Tables 1** and **2**.

Table 1. Reliability coefficients for each dimension and for the total scale (N = 1,631)

Dimension	Items	Mean	SD	Cronbach's α	Split-half reliability
Cognitive	12	4.748	0.377	0.932	0.956
Affect	6	4.954	0.211	0.928	0.944
Behavior	6	4.836	0.349	0.880	0.927
Value	5	4.618	0.576	0.786	0.847
Total scale	29	4.786	0.274	0.911	0.958

Note: Split-half reliability was computed by odd–even splitting and corrected with the Spearman–Brown formula. The value dimension contains relatively few items (5) and requires judgements about rational stances, so its α coefficient is comparatively low, though it remains above the acceptable threshold of 0.70

Table 2. Confirmatory factor analysis: comparison of goodness-of-fit indices for competing models (N = 1,631)

Model	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA
M1 Single-factor model	16,283.51	377	43.192	0.514	0.477	0.161
M2 Three-factor model I (cognitive and affect merged)	11,233.38	374	30.036	0.669	0.640	0.133
M3 Three-factor model II (behavior and value merged)	6,513.71	374	17.416	0.813	0.797	0.100
M4 Four-factor model (hypothesized model)	4,476.42	371	12.066	0.875	0.863	0.082

Note: The four-factor model outperforms all merged models on every fit index, indicating that the four-dimensional structure is

relatively optimal. RMSEA = 0.082 is marginally above the reference value of 0.08, falling to 0.079 in the subsample with straight-line responses removed (N = 1,061)

The survey was administered through an online questionnaire platform, yielding 1,862 returned questionnaires. Two hundred and nineteen responses completed in fewer than sixty seconds and 12 showing uniform straight-lining were removed as invalid, leaving 1,631 valid questionnaires and a validity rate of 87.6%.

The composition of the valid sample is summarized in **Table 3**. Of the respondents, 394 were male (24.2%), and 1,237 were female (75.8%); 1,189 were first-year students (72.9%), 256 were second-year (15.7%), 158 were third-year (9.7%), and 28 were fourth-year (1.7%). With respect to political affiliation, 892 were members of the Communist Youth League (54.7%), 715 had no party affiliation (43.8%), 18 were members of the Communist Party of China, including probationary members (1.1%), and 6 reported other affiliations (0.4%). By senior high school subject combination, 854 students (52.4%) included history (the humanities track) and 777 (47.6%) included physics (the sciences track). Discipline categories were obtained by collapsing the original 18 program categories according to disciplinary family, yielding economics (350), management (864), law and sociology (157), humanities, arts and communication (221), and science, engineering and information technology (39).

Table 3. Basic composition of the valid sample (N = 1,631)

Variable	Category	n	%	Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	394	24.2%	Discipline category	Economics	350	21.5%
	Female	1,237	75.8%		Management	864	53.0%
Year of study	First year	1,189	72.9%		Law and sociology	157	9.6%
	Second year	256	15.7%		Humanities, arts and communication	221	13.5%
	Third year	158	9.7%		Science, engineering and information technology	39	2.4%
	Fourth year	28	1.7%	Senior high school subject track	Humanities (incl. history)	854	52.4%
Political affiliation	Communist Youth League member	892	54.7%		Sciences (incl. physics)	777	47.6%
	No party affiliation	715	43.8%				
	Communist Party of China member (incl. probationary)	18	1.1%				
	Other	6	0.4%				

Note: Discipline categories were derived by collapsing the original 18 program categories according to disciplinary family; senior high school subject track was classified by whether the chosen subject combination included history or physics. Percentages are of the valid sample (N = 1,631)

Statistically, the study uses descriptive statistics to characterize the overall level and distributional features of students' patriotic attitude; Friedman's test for repeated measures with paired-samples t-tests to compare levels across the four dimensions; Pearson correlation analysis to examine relationships among the dimensions; independent-samples t-tests and one-way analysis of variance to test differences between groups; and Cohen's d and η^2 as effect-size indices to supplement the description of the magnitude of those differences [15]. It should be noted that statistical significance does not automatically imply practical

significance: with a large sample, even minute mean differences can reach significance. Accordingly, when judging whether a group difference is substantively meaningful, this study consults both the significance level and the effect size, and interprets and compares means only where $P < 0.05$ and the effect size meets the corresponding criterion ($|d| > 0.2$, $\eta^2 > 0.01$).

3. Results

3.1. Overall level is high, but the four dimensions are unevenly developed: Affect leads, value lags

The survey results show that college students' patriotic attitude is generally high, with an overall mean of 4.786 (scoring rate 95.73%). Among the four dimensions, the affective dimension yields the highest mean (4.954, scoring rate 99.07%), followed by the behavioral dimension (4.836, 96.73%) and the cognitive dimension (4.748, 94.96%), while the value dimension yields the lowest mean (4.618, 92.36%); see **Table 4**. Friedman's test indicates a significant difference in level across the four dimensions ($\chi^2 = 932.17$, $P < 0.001$), and the subsequent paired comparisons show that all six pairwise differences reach significance (Bonferroni-corrected $\alpha = 0.05/6 = 0.008$), with effect sizes all exceeding 0.2. The largest gap is between affect and value ($d = 0.773$), followed by cognition and affect ($d = 0.674$), both of which fall in the medium-to-large range (**Table 5** and **Figure 1**).

Table 4. Overall level of college students' patriotic attitude (N = 1,631)

Dimension	Mean	SD	Scoring rate	% scoring ≥ 4	% scoring = 5
Cognitive	4.748	0.377	94.96%	96.6%	50.0%
Affect	4.954	0.211	99.07%	99.5%	92.2%
Behavior	4.836	0.349	96.73%	97.4%	71.7%
Value	4.618	0.576	92.36%	87.6%	56.2%
Total scale	4.786	0.274	95.73%	98.7%	34.9%

Note: Scoring rate = dimension mean ÷ 5 × 100%. "% scoring ≥ 4" refers to the proportion of students whose personal dimension mean reaches "agree" or above; "% scoring = 5" refers to the proportion of students who selected "strongly agree" on every item of the dimension

Table 5. Tests of differences in level across the four dimensions (N = 1,631)

Dimension A	Dimension B	Mean difference (A − B)	*t*	*P*	Cohen's d
Cognitive	Affect	−0.206	−23.99	< 0.001	0.674
Cognitive	Behavior	−0.088	−9.53	< 0.001	0.244
Cognitive	Value	0.130	8.86	< 0.001	0.267
Affect	Behavior	0.117	16.96	< 0.001	0.407
Affect	Value	0.336	23.22	< 0.001	0.773
Behavior	Value	0.218	14.79	< 0.001	0.458

Note: The omnibus test used Friedman's test for repeated measures, $\chi^2 = 932.17$, $P < 0.001$; pairwise comparisons used paired-samples t-tests, and the *P* values for all six comparisons fall below the Bonferroni-corrected significance level ($\alpha = 0.008$). Cohen's d is reported in absolute values

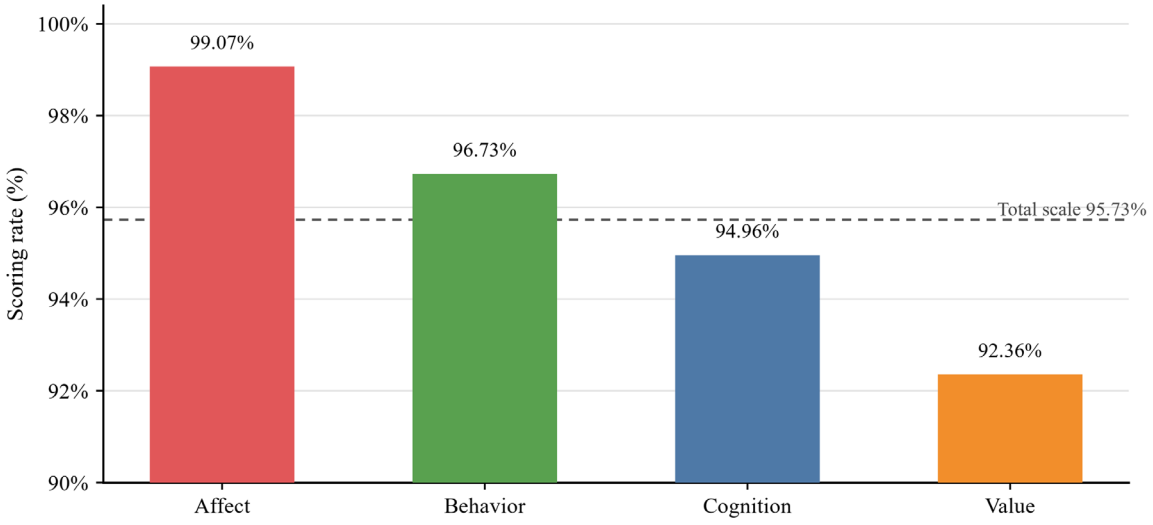


Figure 1. Scoring rates of the four dimensions (N = 1,631). Note: The vertical axis starts at 90%; the dashed line marks the scoring rate of the total scale

The distributional profiles of the four dimensions illustrate this pattern even more directly. As **Table 6** shows, 96.6% of students reach a mean of 4.5 or above on the affective dimension, against 89.1% on the behavioral dimension and 80.5% on the cognitive dimension, but only 69.7% on the value dimension. Correspondingly, students scoring below 3.5 account for only 0.3%, 0.6% and 0.7% on the affective, cognitive and behavioral dimensions, respectively, but 6.7% on the value dimension. In other words, the value dimension is the only one of the four in which a substantial proportion of students falls at a moderate or lower level, and it is also the dimension showing the greatest differentiation among students (SD = 0.576, the largest of the four).

Table 6. Distribution of students by score band within each dimension (N = 1,631)

Dimension	Mean < 3.5	3.5 ≤ mean < 4.5	Mean ≥ 4.5
Cognitive	9 (0.6%)	309 (18.9%)	1,313 (80.5%)
Affect	5 (0.3%)	50 (3.1%)	1,576 (96.6%)
Behavior	12 (0.7%)	165 (10.1%)	1,454 (89.1%)
Value	110 (6.7%)	384 (23.5%)	1,137 (69.7%)

Note: Percentages in parentheses are the proportion of the valid sample falling within the corresponding band

At the item level, the five highest-scoring items all belong to the affective dimension, with means ranging from 4.948 to 4.964, while nine of the ten lowest-scoring items belong to the value and cognitive dimensions (**Figure 2** and **Table 7**). The three lowest-scoring items are, in order, "The statement 'those who criticize China do not deserve to be Chinese' is wrong" (4.503), "I cannot endorse the view that 'as Chinese citizens we should not criticize the state'" (4.510), and "Patriotism does not mean unconditional support for every policy of the state" (4.534). All three belong to the value dimension and converge on a single issue: whether criticism of the state can be tolerated. Particularly notable is the first item, whose standard deviation of 0.993 is the greatest dispersion in the whole instrument; only 73.1% of respondents selected "strongly agree," meaning that more than a quarter of students have yet to articulate an unambiguous rejection of

the statement. The two lowest-scoring cognitive items are "I can clearly expound the essential difference between patriotism and narrow nationalism" (4.625) and knowledge of the requirement to "enrich the practical carriers of patriotic education" (4.643).

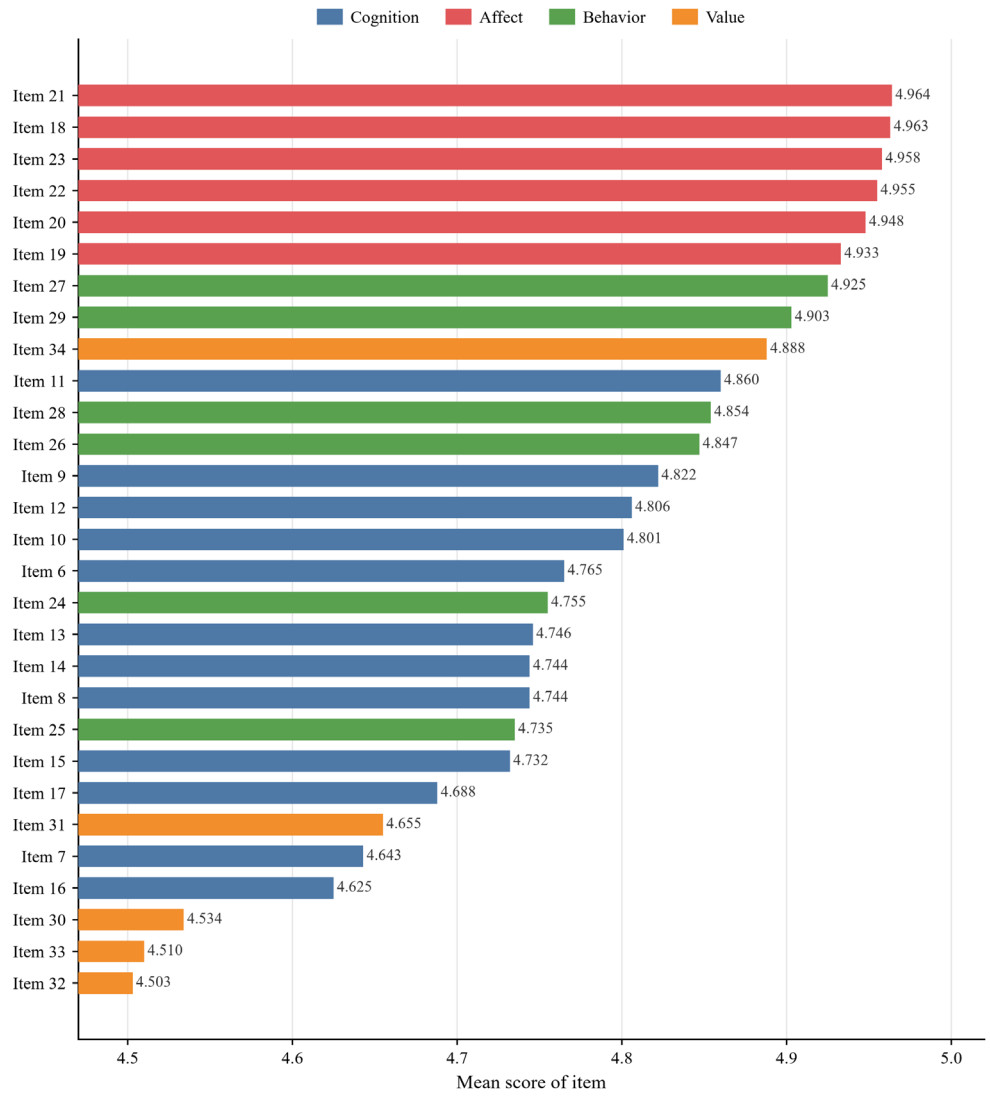


Figure 2. Ranking of the means of all 29 items (N = 1,631). Note: Items are arranged from the lowest to the highest mean; the vertical axis gives item numbers, and bar colours indicate the dimension to which each item belongs

Table 7. The ten lowest-scoring items (N = 1,631)

Item	Dimension	Item content (abridged)	Mean	SD	% at maximum
32	Value	"The statement 'those who criticize China do not deserve to be Chinese' is wrong"	4.503	0.993	73.1%
33	Value	"I cannot endorse the view that 'as Chinese citizens we should not criticize the state'"	4.510	0.915	70.1%
30	Value	"Patriotism does not mean unconditional support for every policy of the state"	4.534	0.816	67.7%

16	Cognitive	"I can clearly expound the essential difference between patriotism and narrow nationalism"	4.625	0.616	68.2%
7	Cognitive	Knowledge of requirements such as "enrich the practical carriers of patriotic education"	4.643	0.564	68.2%
31	Value	"Criticizing the problems of the state is precisely a wish to make the state better"	4.655	0.677	73.6%
17	Cognitive	"A relatively systematic grasp of the history of Chinese civilization and of the struggles since modern times"	4.688	0.545	72.1%
15	Cognitive	Knowledge of strategic deployments such as "strengthening and improving ideological and political work"	4.732	0.510	75.9%
25	Behavior	"If the country needs me, I am willing to devote myself to it, even to sacrifice my life"	4.735	0.592	79.3%
8	Cognitive	Knowledge of the incorporation of patriotic education into the national education system	4.744	0.493	76.7%

Note: The five highest-scoring items all belong to the affective dimension, with means ranging from 4.948 to 4.964; items 14 (4.744) and 13 (4.746) follow closely

3.2. Group differences are limited overall: Homogeneity outweighs heterogeneity, with differences concentrated in year of study and gender

With respect to gender (**Table 8**), only the value dimension reaches statistical significance: male students score higher than female students (4.714 vs. 4.587, $P < 0.001$), with an effect size of d = 0.221 that meets the criterion for meaningful mean comparison, making it one of the few group differences in this study that is both significant and of adequate effect size. Differences on the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions and on the total scale are all non-significant (P between 0.084 and 0.388). The affective dimension (4.933 vs. 4.960, d = 0.128) and the behavioral dimension (4.808 vs. 4.845, d = 0.108) point in the direction of slightly higher female means, but with effect sizes below 0.2, these constitute directional clues only. This pattern suggests that gender plays a very limited differentiating role in patriotic attitude, offering at most a lead worth monitoring in terms of the direction of value positions.

Table 8. Tests of differences in patriotic attitude by gender

Dimension	Male (n = 394) Mean	SD	Female (n = 1,237) Mean	SD	Mean difference	t	P	Cohen's d
Cognitive	4.763	0.411	4.743	0.365	0.020	0.86	0.388	0.053
Affect	4.933	0.293	4.960	0.177	−0.027	−1.73	0.084	0.128
Behavior	4.808	0.432	4.845	0.317	−0.037	−1.59	0.112	0.108
Value	4.714	0.491	4.587	0.598	0.127	4.23	< 0.001	0.221
Total scale	4.799	0.309	4.782	0.262	0.017	0.98	0.330	0.061

Note: Independent-samples t-tests were used, with Welch's correction applied where variances were unequal. Cohen's d is reported in absolute values; $|d| > 0.2$ is taken as the threshold for meaningful mean comparison. Only the value dimension meets this threshold, while the differences on the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions and on the total scale are marginal or non-significant

With respect to year of study (**Table 9**), the affective and behavioral dimensions differ significantly ($F = 8.321$ and 8.042, both $P < 0.001$, with $\eta^2 = 0.015$ in each case, meeting the 0.01 criterion), whereas the cognitive and value dimensions do not differ significantly by year of study. The difference on the total scale reaches significance ($P = 0.026$), but its effect size ($\eta^2 = 0.006$) falls short of the criterion and is therefore not interpreted substantively. Post hoc comparisons with multiplicity correction show that the significant gaps

on both the affective and behavioral dimensions occur only between the first-year and third-year cohorts: on the affective dimension, first-year students (4.968) score significantly higher than third-year students (4.886, corrected $P < 0.05$), and on the behavioral dimension first-year students (4.858) likewise score significantly higher than third-year students (4.725, corrected $P < 0.05$); all other pairwise differences are non-significant. This indicates that the affective and behavioral dimensions decline over the university cycle: levels are relatively high in the first year, and the gap is most marked by the third year, with no further significant post hoc gaps between the second and third years or between the second and first years under this criterion. It should be noted that the effect sizes for these differences remain small and their practical magnitude is limited.

Table 9. Tests of differences in patriotic attitude by year of study

Dimension	Year 1 (n = 1,189)	Year 2 (n = 256)	Year 3 (n = 158)	Year 4 (n = 28)	F	P	η^2
Cognitive	4.751	4.747	4.703	4.875	1.842	0.138	0.003
Affect	4.968	4.931	4.886	4.940	8.321	< 0.001	0.015
Behavior	4.858	4.801	4.725	4.881	8.042	< 0.001	0.015
Value	4.615	4.666	4.590	4.457	1.445	0.228	0.003
Total scale	4.795	4.782	4.726	4.818	3.090	0.026	0.006

Note: One-way analysis of variance was used; the fourth-year group comprises 28 students. Post hoc comparisons used the Tukey HSD procedure: on both the affective and behavioral dimensions, only the Year 1–Year 3 contrast is significant (corrected $P < 0.05$ in each case); on the total scale, only the Year 1–Year 3 contrast is significant (corrected $P = 0.016$), but since the effect size falls short of the criterion, the difference is not interpreted substantively

Political affiliation shows no significant differences on any of the five indicators when Communist Youth League members are compared with respondents of no affiliation (P between 0.235 and 0.689; $|d|$ between 0.020 and 0.059), indicating that political affiliation does not constitute a differentiating variable for college students' patriotic attitude. With respect to discipline category, although the omnibus test for the behavioral dimension came close to significance ($F = 2.227$, $P = 0.064$), no difference on any of the five indicators reached significance, and only the comparison "management higher than law and sociology" can be treated as a directional clue; the cognitive, affective, and value dimensions and the total scale likewise do not differ significantly by discipline category. With respect to senior high school subject track, humanities students score higher than science students on the cognitive dimension (4.771 vs. 4.723), a difference that reaches significance ($F = 6.548$, $P = 0.011$, $d = 0.127$) but whose effect size falls below the 0.2 threshold, making it a marginal difference; the affective, behavioral, and value dimensions and the total scale do not differ significantly. **Table 10** summarizes the pattern of significance across the demographic variables.

Table 10. Summary of the significance of differences across demographic variables

Dimension	Gender	Year of study	Political affiliation	Discipline category	Senior high school subject track
Cognitive	Not significant	Not significant	Not significant	Not significant	Marginal
Affect	Not significant	Significant	Not significant	Not significant	Not significant
Behavior	Not significant	Significant	Not significant	Not significant	Not significant
Value	Significant	Not significant	Not significant	Not significant	Not significant
Total scale	Not significant	Marginal	Not significant	Not significant	Not significant

Note: "Significant" denotes $P < 0.05$ with an effect size meeting the comparability criterion ($|d| > 0.2$, $\eta^2 > 0.01$); "Marginal" denotes

$P < 0.05$ with an effect size below the criterion, to be treated as a directional clue only and not interpreted substantively. For political affiliation, only Communist Youth League members and respondents with no affiliation were compared

Taken together, these results support an overall judgement: differences in patriotic attitude across groups are quite limited. On the total scale, only year of study shows a marginal difference, and gender, political affiliation, discipline category, and senior high school subject track all fail to produce differences that meet the comparability criterion. Among the four dimensions, only two comparisons are both significant and of adequate effect size: the affective and behavioral dimensions on year of study, and the value dimension on gender. This is in itself a finding that warrants attention, for it indicates that homogeneity in college students' patriotic attitude outweighs heterogeneity, and that the gap between groups is not the principal tension confronting patriotic education at present.

3.3. The value dimension is relatively independent: Cognitive discrimination and value tolerance constitute two prominent deficits

The correlation analysis reveals a structure worth noting (**Table 11**). The cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions are moderately to strongly positively correlated with one another, the correlation between affect and behavior being the highest (r = 0.600), followed by cognition with behavior (r = 0.469) and cognition with affect (r = 0.419). By contrast, the value dimension correlates only weakly to moderately with the other three — 0.284 with cognition, 0.147 with affect and 0.244 with behavior — markedly lower than the correlations among the first three. Although all four dimensions are drawn from a single scale, they fall into two distinct lines of enquiry: cognition, affect, and behavior belong to a line of identification intensity, addressing the question of whether students are patriotic at all, and are closely linked with one another, whereas the value dimension, which probes students' rational stance towards the nation–citizen relationship, belongs to a line of judgement addressing how one ought to be patriotic and is relatively loosely coupled to the line of identification intensity. The result also indicates that the value dimension remains empirically separable from identification intensity: strong identification does not automatically imply a mature stance.

Table 11. Correlation matrix among the four dimensions (N = 1,631)

Dimension	Cognition	Affect	Behavior	Value
Cognition	—	0.419**	0.469**	0.284**
Affect	0.419**	—	0.600**	0.147**
Behavior	0.469**	0.600**	—	0.244**
Value	0.284**	0.147**	0.244**	—

Note: $^{**}P < 0.01$ (two-tailed)

Item-level analysis shows that the deficits are concentrated in two positions. The first is the discriminating element within the cognitive dimension. Across the 12 cognitive items, those probing knowledge of policies and legal provisions score comparatively high, such as the provision that insulting the national anthem, flag, or emblem incurs legal liability under the Patriotic Education Law (4.860) and understanding of and agreement with "the unity of patriotism with love of the Party and love of socialism" (4.822), both with means above 4.82. By contrast, items requiring the respondent to draw conceptual boundaries score markedly lower: "I can clearly expound the essential difference between patriotism and

narrow nationalism" averages 4.625, the lowest in the cognitive dimension. The weakness at the cognitive level therefore lies not in the recall and awareness of knowledge but in its discrimination and application — students know what a concept is, but need not be able to say what it is not.

The second is the element of tolerance within the value dimension, the most disquieting finding of the survey. Of the five value items, those formulating a rational stance in the abstract score highly — "I believe that genuine patriotism is rational and open, and able to accommodate differing opinions" attains a mean of 4.888, the highest in the value dimension — but once the question is grounded in concrete circumstances, that is, once students are required to pass judgement on the act of criticizing the state itself, scores fall sharply: "Patriotism does not mean unconditional support for every policy of the state" (4.534), "The statement 'those who criticize China do not deserve to be Chinese' is wrong" (4.503), and "I cannot endorse the view that 'as Chinese citizens we should not criticize the state'" (4.510). A marked gap separates abstract endorsement from situated judgement, and the dispersion of the latter is significantly greater (standard deviations of 0.364 and 0.816–0.993 respectively). This means that students can accept "rational and open" formulations in the general case, but when criticism actually occurs, a substantial proportion cannot translate that acceptance into a stable position.

4. Discussion and educational implications

4.1. Facing the pattern of "affect leading, value lagging": Moving patriotic education from affective arousal towards rational consciousness

The survey results show that the affective dimension attained a scoring rate of 99.07%, that 92.2% of students selected "strongly agree" on every item of that dimension, and that 96.6% reached a mean of 4.5 or above. These data indicate that patriotic education, insofar as it proceeds principally through affective arousal, has already achieved considerable success: students' national pride, sense of belonging and identification with national history and culture very nearly reach the ceiling of the scale. By contrast, the value dimension attained a scoring rate of 92.36%, with 6.7% of students scoring below 3.5, making it the only dimension in which a substantial proportion falls at a moderate or lower level. The gap between the two (mean difference 0.336, d = 0.773) is the largest of the six comparisons. What confronts patriotic education among college students at present, therefore, is not a problem of insufficiently strong affect but one of insufficiently deep reasoning.

Patriotic education is at once an education in knowledge and an education in affect [16]. Affect is the natural foundation of patriotism, but affect that does not rise to rational consciousness readily remains at the level of immediate emotional reaction; it is difficult to sustain under conditions of value conflict, and it may slide into narrowness and exclusion under external provocation. The gap between "high abstract endorsement" and "low situated judgement" described above is precisely an empirical manifestation of this risk: students can endorse general formulations of rational openness yet need not be able to hold that position when criticism occurs. From the internal logic of the attitudinal structure, affect without the support of a cognitive framework cannot settle, and affect without calibration by a value stance easily loses its direction. Patriotic education for college students in the new era should therefore, while continuing to consolidate the affective foundation, shift its center of gravity moderately from "moving" to "reasoning," introducing a reflective stage after affective arousal. Concretely, classroom discussion and debate can be organized around genuine issues such as the boundary between patriotism and narrow nationalism, the relationship between

patriotism and criticism, and the relationship between a national position and a global perspective, so that students clarify their positions through the encounter of competing views and patriotic feeling acquires the support of rational consciousness.

4.2. Attending to the limited differences between groups: Differentiated rather than one-size-fits-all provision

Another result of the present survey is that differences in college students' patriotic attitude across groups are limited overall, homogeneity outweighing heterogeneity. On the total scale, only year of study shows a marginal difference; gender, political affiliation, discipline category, and senior high school subject track all fail to produce differences meeting the comparability criterion, and political affiliation — a variable that intuition might treat as differentiating — has an effect size close to zero. This finding carries a double implication. On the one hand, it suggests that educators need not rely heavily on group labels to predict students' patriotic condition, and that universal provision for all students remains the principal task. On the other hand, it suggests that the focus of educational strategy should point towards common deficits, especially in the value and cognitive dimensions, rather than towards differences between groups.

Two differences nonetheless merit attention in educational practice. The first is that year of study is where the effect size in group differences is clearest: the affective and behavioral dimensions decline as students advance through the university, with the gap most marked by the third year. This is consistent with general observation in educational practice: educational input is most intensive at the point of entry, when student engagement and affective experience are also at their fullest, whereas as students advance, the frequency and appeal of educational activities decline and willingness to participate weakens accordingly. Patriotic education should therefore run through the whole process of talent cultivation, with particular attention to the design of provision in the second and third years, so that patriotic education is not reduced to a component of freshman orientation. The second is that gender meets the comparability criterion on the value dimension, with male students slightly ahead of female students, while differences by subject track and by discipline category are marginal or non-significant, and the cognitive dimension shows humanities students slightly ahead of science students. These differences can only serve as directional hypotheses awaiting further testing and warrant a degree of attention in practice — for example, more targeted training in rational stance for female students, who sit relatively low on the value dimension, and filling the gap in conceptual discrimination for science, engineering and economics students — but they should not ground substantive group-level judgements.

It should be stressed that the effect sizes for all of these differences are small ($|d|$ no greater than 0.221, η^2 no greater than 0.015). Their significance lies in providing cues for the refinement of educational provision, and they should not be read as substantive stratification between groups. Above all, educational practice should avoid labelling students on the basis of such differences.

4.3. Closing the two deficits in cognitive discrimination and value tolerance: Promoting the unity of knowledge, affect, intention and action

The analysis above has shown that the deficit at the cognitive level lies not in the recall of knowledge but in conceptual discrimination, and that the deficit at the value level lies not in abstract endorsement but in situated judgement. Although the two deficits belong to different dimensions, they point to a single underlying problem: patriotic education has exerted insufficient effort on the two transformations from

"knowing" to "understanding" and from "endorsing" to "holding fast." Students can recite policy provisions and express patriotic feeling, yet need not be able to discriminate where conceptual boundaries blur, nor hold their position when values conflict. This is a typical manifestation of the failure to integrate knowledge, affect, intention, and action.

To address the deficit in cognitive discrimination, patriotic education should be moved from "knowledge transmission" towards "discriminative teaching." The Patriotic Education Law and the Outline for the Implementation of Patriotic Education in the New Era themselves contain a rich reservoir of issues open to discrimination, such as the distinction between patriotism and narrow nationalism, the theoretical grounds for the unity of patriotism with love of the Party and love of socialism, and the connection between a national position and shared human values. Educators can convert these issues into concrete materials for case teaching and issue-based debate, guiding students to grasp the boundaries of concepts through discrimination itself. To address the deficit in value tolerance, the training of value judgement should be embedded in practical activities. Reflection and discussion should be added after visits to patriotic education sites, screenings of patriotic films, and participation in voluntary service, so that students can exchange the genuine puzzles they encounter; value positions are more likely to be tested and consolidated in concrete situations. Schools should also strive to create a campus climate of public opinion that is tolerant of rationality, clearly distinguishing patriotic feeling from exclusionary sentiment, and helping students to understand that constructive criticism is itself a form of patriotism, and that tolerance of criticism derives precisely from confidence in the country's development.

5. Limitations and future research

This study has limitations that subsequent research should address. First, the representativeness of the sample is limited. The respondents were concentrated in higher education institutions in a single province, the sample was dominated by first-year students (72.9%), and the proportion of female students (75.8%) markedly exceeded that of male students, so that the composition departs from that of ordinary undergraduate institutions nationwide; the generalizability of the conclusions is correspondingly constrained, and future research should extend to multiple regions and multiple types of institutions and adopt proportionate stratified sampling. Second, the measurement instrument still has room for improvement. The AVE of the value dimension is 0.457, below the reference value of 0.50, and its items require further enrichment; the questionnaire includes no reverse-scored items, so social desirability bias cannot be controlled by the instrument itself, and future revisions should add reverse-scored items together with checks on the validity of responding [17]. Third, the affective dimension displays a pronounced ceiling effect, with the proportion selecting "strongly agree" exceeding 94% on every item and dispersion correspondingly low; the true level of this dimension may therefore be overestimated, and its internal gradations cannot be identified with the existing items.

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Author contributions

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