

The Incorporation and Transformation of Spiritual Education within the State Ideology of the People's Republic of China

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Abstract

Spiritual education in the People's Republic of China has grown out of concerns for students' holistic development, socialist ideology education, patriotic education, moral cultivation, and traditional Chinese philosophy. Spiritual education is considered as inner development, emotional awareness, moral character and the quest for meaning in Chinese scholars; however, in practice, it tends to appear more and more in the ideological context of the Party-state. The focus of this article is the incorporation and transformation of spiritual education in the state ideology of the People's Republic of China, and how spiritual education has been conceptually translated into moral education, ideological and political education, patriotic education, socialist core values and cultural-confidence discourse. Based on qualitative documentary analysis and an integrative literature review, the study draws on academic works, laws on education, policy documents, teaching practice and research on spiritual education, moral education, Confucian revival, nationalism and ideological-political education in China and uses the descriptive national education statistics from 2024 to provide context to the institutional scale of the education system. Based on the findings, spiritual education has not yet become a field of religious or theological education as a whole in the PRC. Instead, its language and purposes have been turned into state-friendly education goals like moral values, social responsibility, patriotism, national unity, cultural confidence, and dedication to national renewal. Traditional values and norms, particularly those related to self-cultivation, harmony, filial duty and the affection of family country, have been picked up and incorporated into the process with a specific purpose of strengthening socialist citizenship and ideological cohesion. In modern China spiritual education may be understood as an area of moral-political education. It still includes an interest in inner growth, emotional development, moral character and social responsibility, but has been increasingly influenced by the ideology of socialism with Chinese characteristics and the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party in its institutional form. This situation provides opportunities for holistic education, yet also brings up issues about pluralism, critical thinking, students' autonomy, and moral education and political socialization.

1 Introduction

Education in the People's Republic of China (PRC) has long played an educational, moral, cultural and political role. Beyond transmitting knowledge and skills and preparing people for work, schools and universities are expected to produce citizens who support socialist development, are loyal to the Chinese nation, accept collective responsibility and contribute to national modernisation (Liu, Xiantong, & Starkey, 2023; Tong, 2025). The Education Law of the PRC sets Marxism–Leninism and the successive official ideas of the Communist Party of China (CPC) as the guiding principles of education. It also requires education to foster socialist builders and successors who develop in moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic and labour terms (Education Law, 2021).

Within this system, spiritual education is important but conceptually contested. Chinese scholars commonly link it to students' inner development: awareness of emotions, moral growth, self-reflection, creativity, resilience, social responsibility and an understanding of the meaning of life (Wong, 2006;

Yanmei, Muhamad, & Mustakim, 2023). This literature does not treat spirituality as a purely religious matter. It presents spirituality as a human potential that involves wisdom, moral awareness, meaning, self-transcendence and harmonious relationships with other people and with nature (Sharma, Rautela, & Panackal, 2026; Yanmei, Muhamad, & Mustakim, 2023).

In China, moreover, spiritual education cannot be separated from moral, political and ideological education. The history of moral education (deyu) gave it a strong ideological function and tied it closely to citizenship education and the maintenance of social order (Ping, Minghua, Bin, & Hongjuan, 2004). Spiritual education is therefore not institutionalised mainly as an independent religious field. Themes such as self-cultivation, emotional management, moral duty, service to the community, cultural pride and personal values tend instead to be interpreted through socialist values, national education, patriotism, cultural awareness and national rejuvenation.

This study matters for three reasons. First, it addresses a gap in the literature on Chinese education by treating spiritual education, Confucian revival, moral education and ideological–political education as one analytical field rather than as separate fields. Work on spiritual education in the Chinese context has mainly described its concepts, objectives and methods (Yanmei, Muhamad, & Mustakim, 2023; Zhao & Yu, 2026), whereas work on ideological and political education has mainly examined its political and institutional structures (Liu, Xiantong, & Starkey, 2023). Among the sources we reviewed, few trace explicitly how the former is absorbed into, and transformed by, the latter. This article provides that connecting analysis.

Second, the case matters for comparative and international education research. The use of moral and spiritual vocabulary for civic purposes is unlikely to be unique to China. In the post-Mao period, official aims have been carried through broad developmental notions such as quality (suzhi) education (Vickers & Zeng, 2017), and similar processes can be expected in curricular reform, textbook writing and civic-education policy elsewhere. The PRC case therefore helps to clarify how states use the language of character, meaning and inner growth for civic and political purposes.

Third, the study has practical relevance for people who work in or with Chinese higher education, including international students and partners in cooperative programmes. Understanding that spiritual, moral and ideological education are institutionally combined in the Chinese system is useful for cross-cultural curriculum design, preparation for study abroad and comparative analysis of education policy.

The article addresses four research questions. **RQ1:** How is spiritual education embedded in the moral and ideological education system of the PRC? **RQ2:** How have self-cultivation, virtue, harmony and family–country responsibility been reinterpreted within socialist state ideology? **RQ3:** Which institutional and pedagogical mechanisms transmit this reworked form of spiritual education? **RQ4:** What tensions arise between students’ inner development, critical reflection and pluralism on the one hand and political conformity on the other?

We argue that spiritual education has been both incorporated and transformed in the PRC. It has been incorporated because the Party-state has brought moral and spiritual concerns into the formal education system through law, curricula, textbooks, teacher training, university administration, patriotic ceremonies and family education (Family Education Promotion Law, 2021). It has been transformed because the political aims of socialism with Chinese characteristics, national identity, Party leadership and national rejuvenation have reshaped its meaning (Liu, Xiantong, & Starkey, 2023; Soong, 2025).

Section 2 reviews the literature and sets out the theoretical framework. Section 3 describes the methodology, including how sources were identified and coded. Section 4 presents the analysis. Section 5 discusses the findings, implications and limitations, and presents the conclusion.

2 Theoretical Foundations and Research Background

2.1 Spiritual education in China

Spirituality is a multifaceted concept. Across philosophical, religious, psychological and educational traditions it has been used to refer to meaning, transcendence, connection, moral reflection, identity, compassion, self-awareness and the pursuit of a good life (Sharma, Rautela, & Panackal, 2026). In the Chinese educational literature, spirituality is generally not equated with narrow religious meanings. It is described instead as a human capacity for wisdom, moral awareness, self-reflection, creativity and inner growth (Wong, 2006; Yanmei, Muhamad, & Mustakim, 2023).

Taggart (2001) describes spirituality as a form of consciousness that activates life, encourages self-reflection and opens opportunities for transcendence. Related accounts stress attitudes towards life and oneself, and name love, compassion, empathy, creativity, reverence and virtue as expressions of spirituality (Yanmei, Muhamad, & Mustakim, 2023).

For Chinese scholars, spiritual education is also an approach that goes beyond knowledge and skills. Wong (2006) argues that it focuses on students' feelings, moral character, life wisdom, self-understanding and social responsibility. Lee, Lee, and Zhao (2025) propose that it draws on character education, humanistic education, life education, creativity, imagination and resilience. Yanmei, Muhamad, and Mustakim (2023) likewise present it as education for values, dispositions and moral orientation towards society. Drawing on this work and on related studies (Kora & Eremeeva, 2026; Zhao & Yu, 2026), spiritual education in the Chinese context can be understood through four interrelated dimensions:

- **Inner development:** self-awareness, emotional expression, reflection, resilience and self-management.
- **Moral development:** compassion, integrity, responsibility, virtue and ethical judgement.
- **Meaning and purpose:** reflection on life, suffering, death, nature, beauty, personal aspiration and human purpose.
- **Social relationships:** responsibility towards family, community, society, nation and nature.

Together, these dimensions support a holistic view of student development. They also make spiritual education open to ideological appropriation, because moral values, social responsibility and personal purpose can be tied to officially sanctioned political ends (Liu, Xiantong, & Starkey, 2023; Ping, Minghua, Bin, & Hongjuan, 2004).

2.2 Confucian self-cultivation and moral formation

Chinese spiritual-education discourse refers heavily to the tradition of self-cultivation. Confucian thought is particularly influential because it emphasises moral cultivation through education rather than instruction alone (Peters, 2022). A person is expected to acquire benevolence, righteousness, trustworthiness, respect, responsibility and wisdom through learning, reflection, ritual practice and ethical relationships (Peters, 2022; You & Hu, 2026).

Confucian-based education has recently re-emerged as a topic of debate in China. Zhao and Yu (2026) connect this revival to cultural resurgence and to dissatisfaction with examination-based schooling. In some Confucian schools, parents look for an education that stresses self-discipline, moral behaviour and self-development alongside competitive academic learning.

The modern revival is, however, not simply a return to the classical tradition. It is also a product of cultural governance, national identity and the state's attempt to build a moral and cohesive society. Ambrogio (2017) presents the resurgence of Confucian values in contemporary China as the outcome of political, cultural, educational and ideological agendas acting together. Traditional values are revived selectively when they can promote social harmony, family responsibility, cultural confidence and national cohesion.

2.3 Moral education and state ideology

Moral education in China has traditionally been closely tied to ideological and political education. Ping, Minghua, Bin, and Hongjuan (2004) show that moral education (deyu) acquired significant ideological meanings in the contemporary Chinese context because of its close link with the political agenda and the development of the nation. This remains the case in the present system, where moral education is expected to instil not only moral values but also political awareness, legal consciousness, patriotism, collectivism and devotion to socialism.

According to the Education Law of the PRC (2021), schools must strengthen socialist core values, social responsibility, innovative spirit, practical skills, patriotism, collectivist spirit and socialist ideals and morals (Education Law, 2021). This legal orientation shows that students' moral education is part of a wider political agenda in the Chinese education system (Education Law, 2021; Ping, Minghua, Bin, & Hongjuan, 2004).

Spiritual education is therefore institutionalised through moral education. Inner development is linked to self-discipline, compassion to service to society, cultural identity to national pride, and life purpose to national rejuvenation. What could be an open-ended enquiry into the person becomes an officially

directed project of moral–political formation (Liu, Xiantong, & Starkey, 2023; Ping, Minghua, Bin, & Hongjuan, 2004).

2.4 Ideological and political education in universities

Ideological and political education in Chinese universities is an integrated system rather than a single course. It comprises compulsory political-theory courses, Party organisations, student counsellors, teacher duties, political study, campus activities, educational administration and standardised teaching materials (Liu, Xiantong, & Starkey, 2023). Its stated aim is to foster political identity, patriotic sentiment and loyalty to the socialist system, so that students become citizens who understand their personal development in relation to China’s political and national objectives (Lin, 2025; Tong, 2025).

Teachers have a significant role in this system. They are expected to foster students’ moral and ideological growth as well as their academic results. The policy of “curriculum ideological–political education” encourages teachers in every field to include moral and ideological components in their subjects (Liu, Xiantong, & Starkey, 2023; Tong, 2025). In a science course the emphasis may fall on national technological development, in a medical course on service to the people, and in a literature course on cultural confidence and national identity (Yu & Wang, 2025).

2.5 State ideology, national rejuvenation and patriotism as a moral duty

State ideology is the body of ideas, narratives, values and symbols through which a political system establishes legitimate authority, defines national history, builds a sense of collective identity and guides citizens towards future goals. In the PRC it is rooted in Marxism–Leninism but has been adapted and elaborated by the political thought of successive CPC leaders (Heath, 2014). Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era is now a central ideological system in Chinese politics and education. Tsang and Cheung (2022) treat it as the latest iteration of Marxism–Leninism in China and as a key part of ideological consolidation in the Xi era. Its introduction into school and university education links students’ moral and spiritual cultivation to national rejuvenation, cultural confidence, socialism with Chinese characteristics, the Chinese Dream, national unity and Party leadership (Lin, 2025; Tong, 2025).

Patriotism is one of the clearest examples of the fusion of moral, spiritual and ideological education. Zhang (2025) finds that Chinese moral-education textbooks present patriotism as a traditional virtue, a socialist core value, a public virtue, an extension of family affection and a moral responsibility. Love of country is thereby presented not as a political choice but as a criterion of good character. Confucian ideas of filial responsibility and loyalty can be extended from the relation between family members to the relation between family and country (Wen & Chen, 2025). Citizens are encouraged to see caring for family, respecting elders, serving society and being loyal to the nation as complementary responsibilities, which links personal feeling to public politics (Tong, 2025).

This orientation became more explicit with the Patriotic Education Law of the PRC, adopted in 2023 and in force since 1 January 2024. The law requires patriotic education to be built into the teaching process and gives priority to Chinese history, Party history, traditional culture, national symbols, heroes and martyrs, national unification, national security and national rejuvenation (Patriotic Education Law, 2023; Vickers, 2022). It thereby makes the duty to educate for patriotism a legal obligation.

2.6 Theoretical framework

Two complementary lines of social theory help to explain how personal, moral and spiritual vocabulary becomes part of state-sponsored institutional work. The first is Althusser's (1971) theory of ideological state apparatuses. Althusser distinguishes repressive apparatuses, which secure compliance through coercion, from ideological apparatuses, which secure it by making the ruling ideology appear as common sense in the everyday work of institutions such as education, religion, the family, law and culture. Applied to China, this helps to explain why spiritual-education discourse is not suppressed. Schools are among the ideological apparatuses in which the vocabulary of self-cultivation, meaning and inner growth is reproduced in a form that fits the dominant political-ideological system.

The second is Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) theory of cultural and social reproduction. They argue that pedagogic action always conveys a particular "cultural arbitrary": a selection of values and meanings that is neither natural nor universal but is treated as legitimate because dominant institutions support it. This helps to explain why the moral vocabulary taught in Chinese schools (self-discipline, filial responsibility, collective service, patriotic sentiment) can appear as objectively good morality rather than as one of several ways of understanding spiritual and moral growth. The notion of *suzhi* (quality) in education policy offers a further illustration. It links the intellectual, moral and civic aspects of the child under one apparently neutral term that is in turn tied to the state's image of the ideal citizen (Vickers & Zeng, 2017).

Together, the two perspectives underpin the central argument of this article. The incorporation and transformation of spiritual education in China is not a simple substitution of politics for spirituality. It is a process of ideological and cultural reproduction in which an internationally recognisable discourse of holistic, meaning-oriented education is selectively channelled through nationally specific institutions, laws and symbols.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research design

This study is qualitative. It combines documentary analysis with an integrative literature review (Bowen, 2009; Torraco, 2005). It does not evaluate students' beliefs or psychological outcomes. It focuses on how spiritual education is defined, incorporated, institutionalised and transformed in official and scholarly discourse. Our working definition of spiritual education follows Yanmei, Muhamad, and

Mustakim (2023), who review the concepts, objectives and methods of spiritual education in the Chinese context.

The source material consists of peer-reviewed scholarship on spiritual, moral and ideological–political education in China; three national laws (the Education Law 2021 (Education Law, 2021), the Family Education Promotion Law 2021 (Family Education Promotion Law, 2021) and the Patriotic Education Law 2023 (Patriotic Education Law, 2023)); and descriptive national education statistics from the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2025). A qualitative documentary design suits the research questions, which concern the conceptual definition and institutional organisation of spiritual education rather than individual students’ experiences or internalisation of it.

Document analysis, as defined by Bowen (2009), is a systematic procedure for reviewing and interpreting documentary evidence in order to elicit meaning and develop empirical knowledge. It is especially useful for establishing the institutional and historical context of a phenomenon through official documents (Bowen, 2009; Chand, 2025). It is therefore appropriate for tracing how legal texts, policy statements and scholarly discourse jointly construct spiritual education as a space of moral–political formation.

The integrative literature review complements the document analysis. It is suited to topics on which the literature comes from several partly overlapping fields, here spiritual education, Confucian revival, moral education and ideological–political education, which are rarely reviewed together. An integrative review does more than summarise a body of literature: it generates new understanding of a topic by combining diverse sources (Torraco, 2005; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). We follow that logic. No single strand of current scholarship treats spiritual education, Confucian self-cultivation, moral education and ideological–political education as one analytical object, and the integrative approach allows the incorporation-and-transformation argument to be developed by reading these literatures against each other.

Because the study asks about institutional design rather than classroom reception, a document-based design also avoids dependence on access to classrooms or participants. The corollary is that the study cannot analyse how individual students and teachers interpret, accept or resist the incorporated discourse. We return to this limitation in Section 5.5.

3.2 Source identification and selection

To make the evidence base transparent and reproducible, sources were identified in three streams and screened against explicit criteria, following the reporting logic of PRISMA (Page et al., 2021) where it applies to an integrative review.

Stream 1: legal and policy texts. We purposively selected three national laws that set the legal duties of schools in moral, family and patriotic education: the Education Law (amended 2021), the Family Education Promotion Law (2021) and the Patriotic Education Law (2023). They were chosen because

they are national-level statutes in force that address the aims, content and organisation of education directly.

Stream 2: statistical data. We used the Ministry of Education’s national education statistics for 2024 (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2025) to describe the institutional scale of the system (Section 3.4).

Stream 3: scholarly literature. We searched Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar for works published between January 2000 and August 2026 using combinations of the keywords “spiritual education”, “spirituality”, “moral education”, “ideological and political education”, “patriotic education”, “Confucian revival”, “self-cultivation”, with China or Chinese. We also traced references in key articles. Sources were included if they (i) were peer-reviewed articles, scholarly books or book chapters, or official legal or statistical documents; (ii) addressed spiritual, moral, ideological–political or patriotic education, Confucian self-cultivation or state ideology in the PRC, or provided a theoretical or methodological basis for the analysis; and (iii) were written in English. Sources were excluded if they dealt with the same terms in unrelated fields (for example, clinical, health or business contexts) or offered no substantive treatment of the Chinese education context. The final corpus comprises 37 sources, summarised in Table 1. Every in-text citation in this article was checked against the source it refers to, and sources that could not support the claim attributed to them were removed.

Table 1
Composition of the source corpus

Source type	n	Examples	Main analytical use
National laws	3	Education Law 2021; Family Education Promotion Law 2021; Patriotic Education Law 2023	Legal incorporation of moral, family and patriotic education (RQ1, RQ3)
Official statistics	1	Ministry of Education statistics, 2024	Institutional scale and reach (RQ3)
Scholarship on Chinese spiritual, moral, ideological–political and patriotic education, Confucian revival and state ideology	25	Journal articles, scholarly books and book chapters	Concepts, mechanisms and tensions (RQ1–RQ4)
Theoretical sources	2	Althusser; Bourdieu and Passeron	Interpretive framework
Methodological sources	6	Bowen; Torraco; Whittemore and Knafl; Braun and Clarke; Page et al.; Chand	Design, selection and coding procedures
Total	37		

3.3 Analytical categories and coding procedure

The analysis is organised around four categories derived from the research questions and the theoretical framework (Table 2). Coding was primarily deductive: passages from the laws and scholarly sources were extracted into a coding matrix recording the source, the passage, the analytical category and a short descriptive code. Sub-codes were added inductively where passages did not fit existing codes, in line with the stages of familiarisation, coding and theme refinement described by Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Table 2
Analytical categories and coding rules

Category	Definition	Indicative codes	Typical evidence
1. Conceptual incorporation (RQ1)	How spiritual themes (inner growth, meaning, compassion) are translated into state-approved concepts	Moral education; socialist core values; patriotism; social responsibility; cultural confidence	Laws; scholarly definitions; textbook analyses
2. Cultural transformation (RQ2)	How traditional resources are reinterpreted within socialist ideology	Confucian self-cultivation; filial duty; harmony; virtue; family–country continuity	Studies of Confucian revival; patriotism and moral-education studies
3. Institutional implementation (RQ3)	Which organisations, instruments and practices transmit the reworked content	Law; curriculum; textbooks; teacher roles; campus culture; ceremonies; family education	Laws; studies of university ideological–political education; statistics
4. Student subject formation (RQ4)	What kind of person and citizen is expected to result, and what tensions follow	Self-discipline; patriotic sentiment; service; critical reflection; pluralism	Studies of moral-education outcomes and political socialisation

A passage could be assigned to more than one category when it did so analytically. Findings are reported by category in Section 4, and Table 5 synthesises the mapping from spiritual-education themes to state-ideological mechanisms.

3.4 Descriptive contextual data

To place the ideological and educational analysis in context, we also use descriptive statistics on the national education system. These statistics do not measure students’ spiritual development, political awareness or the effectiveness of ideological education. They show only the potential institutional reach of the system through which moral, patriotic and ideological education is organised. The indicators cover the number of educational institutions, student enrolment and full-time teachers in basic, compulsory, senior secondary and higher education for 2024 (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2025).

The study makes no causal claim linking enrolment to ideological influence. Enrolment figures cannot show students' receptiveness, openness, resistance or reinterpretation of official ideology. They indicate the scale of the infrastructure through which spiritual, moral and patriotic education is organised.

3.5 Rigour, ethics and data transparency

To strengthen rigour, we kept an audit trail of the source corpus and coding matrix, triangulated across legal, scholarly and statistical sources, and discussed interpretations among the authors until a shared reading was reached. The study uses only publicly available policies, legal texts and published scholarly literature. It involves no interviews, surveys, experiments, human participants or personal data, so ethical approval was not required. All secondary sources analysed are publicly available at the time of the study.

4 Data Analysis

4.1 Institutional scale and reach

The incorporation of spiritual education into state ideology takes place within an education system of very large scale. According to the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2025), China had about 470 thousand schools and other educational institutions in 2024, with 286.465 million students and 18.851 million full-time teachers. Compulsory education alone involved 188,400 schools, 159.705 million students and 10.739 million full-time teachers (Table 3).

These indicators matter because the education system is not only a channel for knowledge but also a source of identity and a means of forming a shared historical–cultural outlook. Moral education, ideological and political education, patriotic education, curriculum ideological–political education, school ceremonies, textbooks and youth organisations all operate across it. Scale matters further because school education is compulsory for most citizens: the nine-year compulsory-education consolidation rate reached 95.9% in 2024, and the gross enrolment rate in higher education reached 60.8% (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2025).

Table 3

National education indicators in China, 2024 (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2025)

Indicator	2024 figure	Analytical relevance
Educational institutions at all levels	470,000	Nationwide institutional infrastructure through which educational and ideological programmes can operate
Students in formal education	286.465 million	Potential scale of state-directed moral, patriotic and ideological education
Full-time teachers	18.851 million	Size of the professional workforce responsible for curriculum delivery and student development
Compulsory-education schools	188,400	Broad reach of primary and lower-secondary schooling
Students in compulsory education	159.705 million	Population reached in formative childhood and adolescent years
Full-time teachers in compulsory education	10.739 million	Staffing base for formal moral and civic education
Nine-year compulsory-education consolidation rate	95.9%	Near-universal retention through the compulsory phase
Preschool gross enrolment rate	92.0%	Broad reach of early-childhood education
Senior-secondary gross enrolment rate	92.0%	High participation in post-compulsory schooling
Higher-education gross enrolment rate	60.8%	Mass access to tertiary institutions and their ideological–political education systems
Note. Gross enrolment rate is total enrolment at a level as a percentage of the official age group for that level, so it can exceed the share of the exact age group because of students outside the standard age range.		

Higher education is especially significant. In 2024 there were 4.095 million postgraduate students, 20.859 million academic bachelor's students and 18.053 million students in higher vocational education, as well as 271,064 international students (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2025) (Table 4). Enrolment of this size does not mean that ideological education is delivered or received uniformly across the tertiary sector, but it shows why universities are a major policy arena. University students take compulsory courses in Marxist theory and ideological–political education, and curriculum ideological–political education seeks to bring moral and political content into professional training in most fields (Lin, 2025; Liu, Xiantong, & Starkey, 2023).

Table 4

Higher-education enrolment in China, 2024 (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2025)

Higher-education category	Students enrolled in 2024
Postgraduate education	4,095,436
Academic bachelor education	20,859,138
Higher vocational education	18,053,430
International students	271,064
Note. Categories may not be mutually exclusive in the Ministry of Education's presentation. The figures should be read as descriptive enrolment figures, not as components of a single total.	

4.2 Conceptual incorporation of spiritual education

The first finding is that spiritual education has been institutionalised through translation into moral and ideological categories accepted by the state. It is not presented through the concept of religion. It appears instead as moral quality, civilised norms of behaviour, social responsibility, cultural confidence, patriotism and socialist core values.

Yanmei, Muhamad, and Mustakim (2023) identify emotional intelligence, moral values, inner qualities, social responsibility and peace of mind as the main aspects of spiritual education. These aspects can be aligned with the goal of cultivating citizens who are responsible, patriotic, disciplined, devoted to the motherland and socially solidary (Yanmei, Muhamad, & Mustakim, 2023; Zhao & Yu, 2026). The concept of spiritual education is thus adapted to the officially promoted ideology, which allows it to be legitimised within a secular socialist education system.

The mapping is direct. Self-cultivation, a valued component of spiritual education, becomes moral self-improvement. Harmony is associated with social stability, cohesion and solidarity. The search for meaning in life is linked to service to the people and the country. Resilience is tied to diligence, perseverance, struggle and devotion to the country.

The concept of spiritual civilisation is particularly relevant here. During the reform era the Party-state sought to counter the perception that social problems, loss of moral values, individualism and cultural confusion could follow from material modernisation alone. Spiritual civilisation allowed the Party to promote moral, cultural, social and ideological development alongside material progress. The later promotion of socialist core values built on this approach by emphasising a morally and ideologically cultivated society. Patriotism, dedication, integrity and friendship become personal qualities expected to shape China's socialist civilisation, so the development of a "spiritual" person in contemporary China is difficult to separate from the moral and ideological cultivation of a patriotic citizen.

4.3 Cultural transformation: the selective use of Confucian resources

The second finding concerns the use of traditional resources. Self-cultivation, filial duty, harmony and virtue are not discarded but reinterpreted within the framework of socialist thought. The Confucian revival offers moral resources, yet these are used selectively when they promote social harmony, family responsibility, cultural confidence and national cohesion (Ambrogio, 2017; Zhao & Yu, 2026). Patriotism is a clear case. Moral-education textbooks present it as a traditional virtue, a socialist core value and an extension of family affection (Zhang, 2025), and the Confucian ideas of filial piety and loyalty are extended from duties towards parents to duties towards the country (Wen & Chen, 2025). Family affection, respect and selflessness thereby become a basis for patriotic feeling.

4.4 Institutional implementation

The third finding concerns the mechanisms that transmit the reworked content. The first is law. The Patriotic Education Law, adopted in October 2023 and in force from 1 January 2024, makes patriotic education a legal duty of schools. Li, Zeng, and Kang (2023) report that it obliges schools to include patriotic education throughout the educational process, to put relevant content into teaching plans and to organise students' participation in patriotic activities (Patriotic Education Law, 2023). According to Lavička and Svensson (2026), it requires systematic teaching of Chinese history, Party history, traditional culture, national symbols, patriotic heroes and martyrs, national unity and security, and national rejuvenation. The law thereby institutionalises patriotism not only as a political theme but also as an element of character education, cultural education, affective education and civic responsibility.

The second mechanism is the university system. Liu, Xiantong, and Starkey (2023) show that ideological and political education in Chinese universities aims to develop politically aware citizens committed to patriotism and to China's socialist political and economic system. The institution is designed to produce not only disciplinary specialists but also politically conscious, patriotic and self-disciplined citizens. The ideological competence of teachers plays an additional role: through curriculum ideological–political education, teachers in all subjects are expected to use content and methods that develop students' moral and ideological competence (Liu, Xiantong, & Starkey, 2023; Yu & Wang, 2025). Lin (2025) and Tong (2025) describe the same organisational web of political instructors, student counsellors, extracurricular activities and political study.

The third mechanism is the curricular role of Xi Jinping Thought. Its inclusion strengthens the relationship between spiritual formation and state ideology (Tong, 2025; Tsang & Cheung, 2022). The curriculum teaches not only political doctrine but also the moral and affective dimensions of leadership: ideals, faith, responsibility, commitment, struggle, service and the mission of youth. It invites students to connect their aspirations with the "Chinese Dream" and national rejuvenation through study, activities and social engagement. The doctrine thus promotes the idea that individual aspiration is directed towards serving the country, and equates spiritual fulfilment with contributing to national projects.

4.5 Student subject formation

The fourth finding concerns the kind of person the system aims to form. Considered from the standpoint of spiritual education, patriotism shows how emotional and existential concepts can be politically

organised. Love of country, memory, gratitude to heroes, reverence for national symbols, family–country sentiment and dedication to collective development become part of the ethical and affective repertoire that schools are expected to form in students (Li, Zeng, & Kang, 2023; Patriotic Education Law, 2023). The role of the state therefore extends beyond providing political information to guiding the moral emotions through which students define who they are.

Students’ emotional and idealistic aspects of self-development are not dismissed within this narrative. They are channelled into a specific understanding of patriotism and of China’s socialist development path. Students are not discouraged from cultivating ideals, personality and character, but are urged to invest these qualities in the development of the country as a whole. Table 5 synthesises the mapping from spiritual-education themes to state-compatible concepts and institutional mechanisms.

Table 5

From spiritual-education themes to state-ideological mechanisms (developed by the authors from (Li, Zeng, & Kang, 2023; Yanmei, Muhamad, & Mustakim, 2023))

Spiritual-education theme	State-compatible concept	Institutional mechanism	Example of expected outcome
Inner growth	Moral self-cultivation	Moral education; counselling; classroom reflection	Self-discipline and responsible conduct
Meaning in life	Ideals and national rejuvenation	Ideological–political education; youth programmes	Personal ambition connected to national development
Emotional attachment	Patriotism and family–country sentiment	Patriotic ceremonies; history education; memorial visits	Emotional identification with the nation
Harmony	Social harmony and national unity	Civic education; traditional culture; school rules	Respect for collective order and social cohesion
Compassion	Service to society	Volunteer programmes; community activities	Public responsibility and mutual assistance
Resilience	Struggle and perseverance	Sports; labour education; role-model stories	Endurance and commitment under pressure
Cultural identity	Cultural confidence	Chinese-language, history and traditional-culture education	Pride in Chinese civilisation
Ethical reflection	Socialist core values	Textbooks; political theory; professional ethics	Alignment of moral judgement with approved public values
Self-transcendence	Dedication to collective goals	Youth organisations; Party-related education	Commitment to national rejuvenation

5 Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Principal findings

The analysis indicates that spiritual education in the PRC has become a space of moral–political education. Features of students’ inner worlds, such as emotional growth, self-awareness, resilience, mental balance, moral character and the meaning of life, still appear in the related discussions. But these features are increasingly anchored in the institutional framework of socialist morality, patriotic education, cultural confidence, Party leadership and national renewal. This should not be read as a straightforward substitution of ideology for spirituality. The broader humanistic aims of spiritual education in Chinese scholarship remain: it seeks to fill gaps left by knowledge-centred and examination-centred education and draws attention to emotional intelligence, creativity, self-reflection, social responsibility and all-round development (Yanmei, Muhamad, & Mustakim, 2023; Zhao & Yu, 2026).

5.2 Tensions between moral formation and political conformity

Incorporation into the state curriculum creates a first tension between the moral aspect and political conformity. If patriotism is presented as an unquestionable virtue, students have fewer opportunities to reflect on the differences between attachment to a country, loyalty to a government, moral responsibility and critical citizenship. Analyses of moral-education textbooks suggest that patriotism is mainly described as a positive and uncontroversial moral obligation, leaving little room to examine the possible dangers of excessive nationalism (Zhang, 2025).

This is not, however, a simple story of political socialisation from above, because empirical studies of political socialisation in Chinese-speaking educational systems raise questions about uniform internalisation. Fairbrother (2003) compared Hong Kong and mainland Chinese university students and examined how political education and critical-thinking dispositions relate to national attitudes. Read cautiously, such work suggests that exposure to political education does not necessarily lead to uniform internalisation of its message. This is consistent with our argument that enrolment reflects institutional reach rather than ideological internalisation, and it suggests that embedding spiritual education in state ideology is more likely to produce alignment in form than uniform belief. We treat this as a hypothesis for future empirical work, not as a finding of the present study.

A second tension concerns pluralism. Spiritual education can be inclusive if it enables students to think about diverse religious, philosophical, cultural and ethical traditions. However, the state-ideological context sets moral and political outcomes in advance. Students may be encouraged to reflect on their values, but the reflection is directed towards socialism, patriotism, national unity and Party leadership.

A third tension concerns traditional culture. The revival of Confucianism can enrich education by introducing students to virtue, responsibility, relationship and moral cultivation. Yet Confucianism can be used selectively, as a means of promoting obedience, hierarchy and state-defined social harmony. This is

consistent with Ambrogio's (2017) view that the revival of Confucianism is a cultural and political process.

These tensions are inherent rather than accidental. If schools are an ideological state apparatus (Althusser, 1971), then using spiritual language within moral–political education is what the theory would predict: the institution produces and reproduces one official interpretation of inner development as the only legitimate one. The particular values of self-discipline, filial duty and patriotic sentiment come to be judged as inherently good, rather than as one of several possible ways of constructing spiritual development (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

5.3 Theoretical contribution

Theoretically, the article applies ideological-state-apparatus theory (Althusser, 1971) and cultural-reproduction theory (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) to a substantive area, spiritual education, that has mostly been discussed from humanistic and developmental perspectives (Yanmei, Muhamad, & Mustakim, 2023; Zhao & Yu, 2026). It offers a synthetic “incorporation-and-transformation” model that organises the evidence into four categories (conceptual incorporation, cultural transformation, institutional implementation and student subject formation). The model supplies a vocabulary of incorporation, translation and transformation that can be tested in other national contexts where moral, therapeutic or spiritual discourses are taken into the state's educational and civic agenda. It thereby extends comparative theorising on the politics of moral education beyond the Chinese case.

5.4 Practical implications

The scale of the Chinese education system strengthens the significance of the thesis. Moral, patriotic and ideological education operate in a system of 286.465 million formal students, 159.705 million compulsory-education students and more than 18 million teachers (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2025). They are therefore not mere curricular embellishments but part of a fundamental infrastructure of civic and political socialisation. With near-universal consolidation of nine-year compulsory education (95.9%), state-sponsored moral and patriotic education is positioned to reach the overwhelming majority of young people during critical periods of moral and identity formation. The 60.8% gross enrolment rate in higher education extends the reach of university ideological–political education and of curriculum ideological–political education to young adults (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2025).

For theory, the results suggest that moral-education theories should not be sharply separated from theories of political socialisation in state education systems. Humanistic or developmental approaches to spiritual education, well-being or character formation should be alert to the ideological role these concepts can play in education systems with strong political centralism, following the pattern described through (Althusser, 1971; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

For practice, three implications follow. First, teacher-training institutions could help teachers to incorporate ideological and political content into their disciplines through professional development that

balances disciplinary content, moral formation and space for student reflection, rather than treating ideological content as an add-on requirement. Second, opportunities for critical reflection, pluralism and critical thinking cannot be separated from the existing institutional framework of moral, ideological–political and patriotic education; they would need to be created within existing Chinese moral-education courses. Third, international institutions that engage with the Chinese system through student exchange, joint-degree programmes and comparative-education studies need cultural and institutional literacy about how moral, spiritual and political education are structured in the PRC. Terms such as “character education” or “whole-person development” may carry different institutional and political implications there than in other countries. This matters for the design of joint-degree programmes, exchange curricula and cross-cultural teacher training.

5.5 Limitations and directions for future research

Scale should not be conflated with efficacy. Enrolment figures represent institutional reach, not ideological penetration. Students are not passive conduits for state-mandated discourse: they may absorb, negotiate, selectively interpret, enact, ignore or challenge messages about morality, patriotism, tradition and political identity. Because this study is documentary, it cannot examine such responses. Future empirical work should study classroom interactions, student narratives, pedagogical practices and the lived realities of ideological education across provinces and educational levels.

Two further limitations concern the source base. The scholarly corpus is limited by the databases, search terms, date range and languages described in Section 3.2, and it may under-represent Chinese-language scholarship. In addition, the analysis rests on interpretive coding by the authors, which is subject to the usual limits of qualitative judgement. Systematic inclusion of Chinese-language databases and independent multi-coder procedures would strengthen future studies.

5.6 Conclusion

Spiritual education has been embedded in the state ideology of the PRC through moral education, patriotic education, ideological and political education, the revival of traditional culture and the promotion of socialist core values. It has also been changed: inner growth, self-cultivation, emotional discipline, moral responsibility and the meaning of life are increasingly associated with collective duty, national identity, socialist development and national rejuvenation.

This reworked spiritual education can have positive effects. It can challenge exam-centred education, draw attention to emotional well-being, foster social responsibility, link professional knowledge to moral questions and help students reflect on integrity and life goals. However, its close ties with state ideology pose risks to pluralism, independent moral judgement and critical citizenship. Spiritual education holds great humanistic promise, but realising it would require developing in students not only discipline, patriotism and social responsibility but also empathy, critical thinking, ethical courage, open-mindedness and respect for others’ religious views. A balanced model would teach students to care for their communities and country and also to ask difficult moral and political questions.

The Chinese case therefore points to a productive field for comparative education research. It illustrates the attempt of a modern state to direct the inner life of its citizens towards its own political ends, an attempt that is ideologically and culturally comprehensive but, as the evidence on uneven internalisation suggests, not necessarily fully successful.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval

This study used publicly available documents and published literature and did not involve human participants. Ethical approval was therefore not required.

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Author Contributions

The author was responsible for conceptualization, literature analysis, interpretation, writing, and revision of the manuscript.

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