# Historiographical Review of Chinese Research on Political Literacy of University Students

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| KEYWORDS | ABSTRACT |
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| | This review synthesizes Chinese research on the political literacy of university students from 1990 to 2025 using a historiographical design anchored in major Chinese databases and policy documents. The field exhibits four phases: 1990 to 2005 established a normative foundation within ideological and political education; 2006 to 2015 translated aims into competency frameworks and indicators; 2016 to 2019 embedded political literacy in professional curricula and practice; 2020 to 2025 integrated digital participation, media use, and learning analytics with attention to privacy and data governance. Across phases the literature moves from conceptual aims to measurable constructs, curricular integration, and engagement in online publics. The review identifies priorities for validated and transparent instruments, cohort tracking across undergraduate years, and embedded evaluations that link learning designs to changes in student knowledge, competencies, and behavior while safeguarding consent and privacy. |

## INTRODUCTION

Political literacy in Chinese higher education is commonly understood as an integrated capacity that joins knowledge of constitutional and institutional arrangements, value orientation and identity formation, civic competencies such as information discernment and deliberation, and observable behaviors in campus governance and social participation. In practice it has been cultivated within the long standing system of ideological and political education while gradually extending into professional curricula and co curricular settings, which gives the construct both normative and pedagogical significance [1]. This review adopts a historiographical perspective to trace how Chinese scholarship has conceptualized and measured political literacy among university students from the 1990s to 2025, and how teaching and assessment practices have evolved across four identifiable phases. It clarifies the movement from foundational definition to competence based indicators, then to curriculum embedded and practice oriented approaches, and finally to digital contexts where online participation, media use, and data governance influence both opportunities and risks for student development [2]. By consolidating representative scholars and verifiable contributions within each phase, the review aims to provide a coherent map of concepts, methods, and evidence that can guide future research design, scal.

## Materials and Methods

This review adopts a historiographical design that combines systematic searching with narrative synthesis. The primary sources were Chinese language journals and dissertations retrieved from CNKI, CSSCI indexed journals and Wanfang. Policy and curriculum documents relevant to ideological and political education in universities were consulted to anchor turning points in the field. The time window ran from January 1990 to November 2025 so that recent outputs on digital participation and learning analytics were fully covered. Searches were conducted in Chinese and English using combinations of the following terms and their close variants: political literacy, political quality, university students, higher education, ideological and political education, curriculum ideological political, digital

citizenship, and media literacy.

Inclusion required a clear focus on university students in mainland China and an explicit contribution to the definition, measurement, cultivation, or evaluation of political literacy. Conceptual essays, empirical studies, and curriculum or governance reforms were eligible. Studies were excluded if they addressed only basic education, were limited to general public opinion without a higher education context, or lacked substantive relevance to political literacy. Titles and abstracts were screened first, followed by full text review. Each included item was coded for research type, institutional setting, sample features, instruments and indicators, and principal claims. Additional fields captured links to national or sector policies, the presence of teacher development components, and attention to digital environments.

Periodization was derived from clusters of publication themes and from policy milestones in higher education. Representative scholars were identified through citation patterns, authorship of widely used textbooks or comprehensive reviews, and visible influence on institutional practice. Methodological quality was recorded rather than scored, with notes on reliability and validity reporting for scales, on sampling strategies, and on the use of longitudinal or experimental designs. The synthesis proceeded by phase specific narration that aligns features, scholars, and claims. As this work synthesizes publicly available texts and does not involve human participants, no ethical approval was require.

## Results

### 1.1990s－2005: Foundational Normative Phase

In the early years of the field, Chinese scholarship on the political literacy of university students was framed as a normative project within ideological and political education. Core writings defined political literacy as a composite of knowledge of political institutions and history, value orientation aligned with national goals, and guided participation in campus and community settings. The dominant method was theoretical exposition supported by analysis of policy and curricular documents, with limited use of systematic empirical designs. Influential contributors such as Zhang Yaocan and Chen Wanbo articulated the objects, contents, and carriers of ideological and political education and positioned political literacy as an outcome of value

formation and political socialization in higher education. Subsequent international analyses describe this stage as one of institutional consolidation in which universities established party led structures, standardized courses, and a nationwide delivery system for ideological and political education, while empirical validation of outcomes remained sparse [1]. Recent thematic reviews corroborate the observation that early work favored prescriptive argument and descriptive reporting, laying the conceptual groundwork but leaving questions of measurement quality and causal effects largely open for later phases [3].

### 2.2006－2015: Competency and Measurement Turn

During this decade, Chinese scholarship on university students' political literacy moved from value transmission toward demonstrable competencies and measurable outcomes. Researchers operationalized political literacy as a bundle of knowledge, belief, efficacy, and participation, and began to translate these constructs into item banks and scales with attention to reliability and validity. Survey culture expanded in teacher education institutes and student affairs units, where Likert instruments, factor analysis, and item discrimination tests were used to calibrate indicators such as political cognition, civic competence, and internal or online political efficacy. Quality assurance also improved inside universities through pretesting, multi university sampling, and the routine reporting of Cronbach alpha and model fit indices. This measurement turn did not abandon normative aims but tied them to evidence on communication effect, curriculum exposure, and media use. In later consolidation studies that reflect this tradition, scholars model how internet literacy and contact shape the communication effect of ideological and political education among university students, which retroactively validates the competence centered approach of the period [4]. Parallel work uses structural equation modeling to link curriculum based ideological and political education to student psychological outcomes, exemplifying the mature use of latent constructs and validated indicators that grew out of this decade [5].

### 3.2016－2019: Curriculum-Embedded and Practice-Oriented Phase

During this period universities moved from stand alone civic

instruction toward embedding political literacy across majors and courses, an approach widely described as curriculum ideological and political. The reform stressed course level alignment of objectives, content, teaching links, and evaluation so that professional knowledge, values education, and application could be taught together. Reviews that synthesize recent evidence characterize this shift as a turn to implementation within disciplines accompanied by difficulties of assessment design and teacher capacity, which clarifies the practical orientation of the 2016 to 2019 phase and its emphasis on linking classroom learning with concrete tasks and field practice [6]. Case studies in engineering and resource curricula document explicit insertion of ideological and political elements into lectures, design assignments, and practice activities, together with process evaluation and project based learning, which illustrates how political cognition, social responsibility, and law awareness were cultivated inside professional teaching rather than only in dedicated theory classes .

## 4.2020 – 2025: Digitalization, Platform Participation and Ethics

In this period research on the political literacy of Chinese university students shifted into digital contexts where online participation, platform use, and data driven assessment interact with classroom and campus practice. Scholars integrated digital citizenship, media literacy, and platform behaviors into the construct of political literacy and used validated instruments and structural models to link media use, self efficacy, and civic intention, which positioned political literacy as both competence and behavior in converged media environments [2]. Studies on misinformation documented that many Chinese college students perceive tangible psychological risks arising from false content and uneven source evaluation skills, which strengthened calls for ethics aware pedagogy and institutional safeguards that protect consent, privacy, and psychological safety while cultivating responsible participation . Designs increasingly paired questionnaires with learning platform logs or other process data to capture engagement and outcomes, although protocols for transparency and data minimization remain uneven across institutions. A compact map of digital themes, indicators, and ethics foci is provided here, see Table 1, which summarizes constructs frequently used in studies from 2020 to 2025.

| Theme | Typical indicators used in studies | Ethics focus | Theme |
|---|---|---|---|
| Digital participation | Frequency of online discussion, civic intention, political efficacy, self regulation, official media use | Consent and privacy, accountability | Digital participation |
| Learning analytics in courses | Log events, time on task, forum contribution, quiz attempts, linkage of assessment to participation | Transparency, data minimization, informed access | Learning analytics in courses |
| Misinformation resilience | Accuracy checks, source evaluation, correction intention, reporting behavior, perceived impact on mood | Psychological safety, support pathways, educator guidance | Misinformation resilience |

**Table.1.**Digital themes and examples for political literacy 2020 to 2025

## Conclusion

This review shows a clear evolution in Chinese research on the political literacy of university students from 1990s to

2005 as a foundational normative phase, through 2006 to 2015 with emphasis on competencies and measurement, then 2016 to 2019 with curriculum embedded and practice oriented work, and finally 2020 to 2025 with digitalization, platform participation, and ethics at the center. Across these phases, the literature moved from goal setting and conceptual framing toward operational indicators, classroom integration, and attention to online publics. The most recent studies extend the construct to include digital citizenship and data governance, which strengthens relevance but also heightens ethical demands. The field now needs validated and openly described instruments, cohort tracking across the undergraduate years, and embedded evaluations that link teaching designs to specific gains in knowledge, competencies, and behavior. It also requires sustained teacher development for discipline based integration and careful protocols for consent, privacy, and transparency in learning analytics. Greater attention to vocational institutions, private universities, and minority regions will improve generalizability and fairness..

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