

Liberal Arts Education in the Chinese Perspective

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In China, there has been a revival of interest and new thinking about liberal arts education, in the past decade. This revival, in part, shows that the government and universities realize the influence of educating citizens to think creatively, critically, and innovatively—to help students meet global needs and challenges. It also indicates that current curricula focus too much on professional training.

The model of specialized training has been increasingly criticized over the past 20 years. Most Chinese students view education primarily as a means of securing good jobs, high salary, and mobility. The pursuit of humanistic values and personal and academic integrity is eroded by utilitarianism and money-oriented commercialism. Many college graduates lack the capacity for critical thinking, creativity, problem solving, and innovation and moral reasoning. Chinese policymakers and educators are aware of the challenges that universities now face and think that a liberal arts education will produce college graduates, with the requisite moral and critical skills.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION

In 1998, the Ministry of Education issued the *Outline of Cultural Quality Education for University Students*, which focused on the cultivation of humanistic qualities. This outline is at an early stage and poorly articulated, with respect to career paths. In the past decade, some small-scale experimental faculties of liberal arts education began to appear at top universities—to meet the goal of educating students in critical thinking, creativity, integrity, and innovative skills. Leading research universities—such as, Peking University, Zhejiang University, Fudan University, Tsinghua University, Nanjing University, and Zhongshan University—are the pioneer institutions that promote a liberal arts education college or programs to improve students' capacity for critical thinking and broad analysis.

In 2005, Fudan University established Fudan College, an institution to implement liberal arts education and to manage the teaching of freshmen and sophomores. Since 2006, Tsinghua University has defined its undergraduate education, on the basis of a liberal arts education for a broader professional education. Nanjing University established Kuang Yaming College in 2006; Peking University initiated its Yuanpei College in 2007; and Zhongshan University established the Liberal Arts College in 2009. Other universities at the national and provincial level also developed additional courses in the liberal arts as elective courses, which were commonly called “public courses for humanistic education or cultural quality education.” Some specialized institutes of technology and engineering and Normal Universities—for example, in Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Beijing Institute of Technology, and East China Normal University—have also implemented the liberal arts. The liberal arts education

curriculum includes courses in political, moral, and physical education, as well as foreign languages, social sciences, literature, history, philosophy, arts, and military training. Liberal arts education has thus become a landmark in the development and transformation of Chinese higher education, to cultivate more well-rounded students. Challenges face liberal arts education in China.

The Chinese higher education system has recognized the importance of shifting from specialized education to educating graduates to be creative and competitive in a globalized world. However, pressure from exam-oriented education and a lecture-style teaching method impedes faculty and university administrators from wholeheartedly embracing liberal arts education. Relatively narrow professional studies still dominate the curricula of most Chinese colleges and universities. In addition, course requirements are extremely tight and, therefore, leave no room for reflection or thinking.

Despite the educational aim of nurturing students for critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving skills through a liberal arts education—the evaluation system for faculty promotion, ranking, and awards focuses more on publication than on teaching. This is a real obstacle to achieve the cited goals. Every teacher, administrator, and policymaker describes a liberal arts education as a wonderful thing, but places many barriers to putting it into practice.

The contemporary Chinese secondary system usually divides its curriculum into the humanities and science. Thus, university students tend to select liberal arts courses related to their high school interests. High school students spend most of their time learning how to get high scores on China's national college entrance examination. Thus, most Chinese high school students

become excellent memorizers, without knowing anything about teamwork, class presentation, problem solving, creativity, and innovative thinking.

Lecturing and memorization have dominated past approaches. Examination papers are based mostly on lecture content and textbook. Students are not encouraged to think creatively or to reflect and interact with teachers. Many students eventually either lose the ability to think independently or are afraid to offer criticism.

Advancing China to the world-class stage through science and technology has become a central concern and goal of the Chinese government and the entire nation. Many universities are rushing to embrace globalization and internationalization in order to keep in line with world development. As a result, liberal arts education is considered unimportant.

FUTURE TRENDS

Despite the lack of institutional autonomy, the low regard for humanism, and the preponderance of materialism and utilitarianism in educational goals, Chinese higher education reform has revived liberal arts education in some elite places and universities—to educate more students with critical thinking, creativity, innovative skills, and balanced development. Government policy, the education system, the engagement of faculty members, and market demands will continue to have an impact in implementing liberal arts education. Some universities in China have already started programs in the liberal arts, as a means or pilot experiment to prepare students for responsible, innovative, and creative lives, in a global world. The Chinese education system, education institutions, and faculty members still have a long way to go, if they are to embrace and practice the

liberal arts education. Despite the emergence of liberal arts education in China as a new phenomenon, this has not had a critical impact on the approach to higher education. Nor has a liberal arts education become a revolutionary force in Chinese higher education. Thus, the expansion of the liberal arts education in the Chinese education system is still in its infancy.