

Constructing “New Liberal Arts” in China’s Universities: Key Concepts and Approaches

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Abstract

Inspired by the concept of “New Engineering” in China’s universities and considering the features and values of the humanities and social sciences, this paper discusses issues of constructing “New Liberal Arts” in China’s universities. Firstly it states the general characteristics of the humanities and social sciences that find their realization in “New Liberal Arts”, and the qualities of “New Liberal Arts” such as being strategically important, innovative, integrated and promising. Then it proposes that a cluster of first-rate undergraduate programs with Chinese characteristics and global competitiveness be set up. The paper finally suggests new ways in which “New Liberal Arts” are to be constructed, such as to recognize new research objects, new research paradigms and new social needs of the humanities and social sciences, to break through conventional thinking stereotypes, and to do well in five aspects -- concept reconstruction, structural reorganization, model regeneration, platform building and differential development. In so doing, the paper is hoped to provide useful considerations for universities elsewhere.

Keywords: *the humanities and social sciences; New Liberal Arts; construction; universities; China.*

1. Introduction

The humanities and social sciences are important means by which human beings understand and transform the material world, and they are also vital forces to push history forward and bring about social progress. Just as Chinese president Xi Jinping pointed out at the Symposium on Philosophy and Social Sciences on May 17, 2016, “A country without developed natural sciences cannot rank in the forefront of the world, nor can it without prosperous philosophy and social sciences.” In order for China to train ethical professionals who are socially responsible and know how to meet the challenges of working in their fields in the best manner possible, both “New Engineering” and “New Liberal Arts” are necessary in China’s higher education. Wu Yan, Director of the Department of Higher Education of China’s Ministry of Education (MOE) said at the “2018 MOE Meeting on the Industries-Academia Collaborative Talent Program” that China will comprehensively promote the construction of “New Engineering, New Medicine, New Agriculture, and New Liberal Arts” to form a cluster of first-rate undergraduate programs covering all disciplines with Chinese characteristics and global competitiveness.

Internationally, Altbach (2016) summarizes the global trends of higher education as: a growing private sector, a deterioration in the quality of education, more distance education, increased efforts to measure academic productivity, attempts to assure quality, differentiated academic institutions with varied missions, and an industry of student mobility. Against this background and apart from successful examples from the developed world (see for example Keller, 2014), more universities worldwide become increasingly concerned with providing revised curricula in response to social change. For example, Olvera (2015) describes the transition and advance at the School of Accounting and Administrative Sciences of a Mexican university through different stages of curricular design, from the needs evaluation and diagnosis up to the proposal of the final format. Similarly, Hu (2015) did a case study of the tourism management program in China’s Guangdong Province, stressing the building of an integrated learning situation for liberal arts graduate students. In this context, the present paper will discuss a relatively new concept in China’s higher education -- the construction of “New Liberal Arts” -- by proposing some strategies and approaches to this construction.

2. Categorization and Characteristics of Liberal Arts

In the Chinese academia, “liberal arts” is understood as a general term that covers all the disciplines in “the humanities and social sciences”, with “the humanities” specifically concerning the studies of ideas, feelings, emotions and values of human beings and “social sciences” concerning various social phenomena and their law of development. Therefore, “the humanities” cover such disciplines as literature, history, philosophy and the religions,

ethics, arts and so on, while “social sciences” encompass economics, management, education, law and their branches including political science, sociology, ethnology and so on. In the Chinese context, there is another term, “philosophy and social sciences”, that is also used to refer to “the humanities and social sciences”. Despite all these different terms, however, “liberal arts” normally include disciplines like philosophy, economics, law, education, literature, history, management, and art. This is based on the categorization made on the *Catalogue of Undergraduate Programs in China (2012)*, which puts science, engineering, agriculture and medicine in parallel categories.

Since it usually takes several generations to understand human development and to continuously accumulate and develop knowledge, the humanities and social sciences are characterized by strong historical inheritance and knowledge accumulation. In terms of their objects of research, issues in the field of politics, law, ethics, art, religion, and philosophy are investigated in the way that bear the marks of ideology, class and nationality. As to the subject of studies, researchers do not only pay attention to social reality, but attach more importance to value judgment, which is closely related to their life experience. The purpose of such researches is to enrich the spiritual world of human beings and to transform their social practice, which also has a lot to do with value judgment.

3. Necessity of Constructing New Liberal Arts

If science education is a process of seeking truth, liberal arts education is a process of seeking virtue and beauty. In the process of building up a personality, liberal arts education enables individuals to consciously and actively have a correct understanding of themselves and the society at large, and to train them in thinking correctly and independently. Liberal arts education cultivates the humanistic literacy of individuals so that people can properly handle their relationships with nature and with social groups and enhance their ability of survival and communication as social beings.

Due to utilitarianism in educational ideas, however, some Chinese universities haven't paid due attention to courses in the humanities, which are either given insufficient lecture hours or marginalized. These universities offer courses of the humanities without being clear about their function, and their curricula are extremely similar without distinct features, neither can these courses adequately respond to the important theoretical and practical issues of today. Consequently the students are restricted in their vision, awareness of innovation and the ability to apply what they learn.

“New Liberal Arts” is different from such arts education and attempts to innovate the traditional liberal arts. It is set against the context of the world's new technological revolution and the new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Breaking through the thinking patterns of traditional liberal arts and by means of inheritance and innovation,

crossover and integration as well as collaboration and sharing, it attempts to promote in-depth interdisciplinary integration, to accelerate the upgrading of traditional liberal arts, to shift from being discipline-oriented to being demand-oriented, from isolation of programs to cross-integration, and from being “driven” to offer adaptive services to social development to playing a “leading” (Giannakou, 2006) role in it. Apart from the general characteristics of the humanities and social sciences, “New Liberal Arts” possess the following new properties:

First, it is strategically important. This is precisely the value of new liberal arts. The construction of new liberal arts is supposed to help China cope with the complicated situations home and abroad, to promote Chinese discourse in communication with the international community so as to offer service to China’s comprehensive economic and social reform, and to solve the major theoretical and practical problems in people’s values and ideas.

Second, it is innovative. This is the attribute property of the new liberal arts. The construction of the new liberal arts is supposed to seek new breakthroughs in the humanities and social sciences, to find new growth point of disciplines, so as to transform and upgrade traditional disciplines and to achieve theoretical innovation, mechanism innovation and mode innovation.

Third, it is integrated. This is the disciplinary property of the new liberal arts. The construction of the new liberal arts can be made possible by the integration, infiltration or expansion of many disciplines within the humanities and social sciences, or by integrating the humanities and social sciences with other disciplines, such as with science, medicine and engineering.

Fourth, it is promising. This is the dynamic property of new liberal arts. Needless to say, many new things are to appear that need to be explored in the field of humanities and social sciences. Besides, many new problems are constantly emerging with social development, and there is no fixed mode for solving the problems. Therefore, it is necessary to make constant explorations, adjustments and improvements in the course of social practice.

4. Approaches to Constructing New Liberal Arts

To construct the “new liberal arts”, a profound understanding of the development law of humanities and social sciences is necessary and, at the same time, the issues concerned must be investigated thoroughly. In order to reach a consensus of the construction of New Liberal Arts among universities and the general public in China, we propose some concepts and initiatives.

4.1. Key Concepts

First, the new liberal arts emerges from the innovation of new industries. In the new round of technological revolution and industrial transformation, a large number of technological fields are emerging, such as artificial intelligence, block chain, genetic engineering, virtual technology and so on. One of the important contents of the new liberal arts will involve adapting humanities and social sciences to China's national strategy of "empowering the country with science and technology", and integrating arts with the emerging fields of science and engineering. For example, as automated driving technology develops, it is necessary to study the laws and public policies related to this technology and social issues caused by this technology.

Second, the new liberal arts is brought about by the transformation of traditional research paradigms. Along with the popularization of the big data technology, the analysis and processing of the full sample data in humanities and social sciences has brought new convenience in solving the problems of economic and social development and people's ideological change, hence bringing new growth points to liberal arts. One focus of new liberal arts research will be social science subjects based on programming, acquisition and processing of big data and artificial intelligence technology, such as machine learning or knowledge map.

Third, the new liberal arts is brought about by social development and change in people's needs. As the development of the human society and people's intellectual life results in new demands in different fields and industries, the new liberal arts will inevitably involve the fields related to artificial intelligence, such as intelligent law, intelligent political science, intelligent sociology, intelligent ethics, intelligent journalism, intelligent education and so on.

4.2. Approaches

4.2.1. Concept Reconstruction

China's educational practice and theoretical innovation are carried out with an aim of training the students to have a global perspective and at the same time to be firmly anchored in the Chinese culture. Therefore, China's education ought to remain "student-oriented" and take root in the land of China, highlighting the characteristics of the new era and an international perspective, and cultivating students who love their homes and nation while having a global vision (Ramirez, 2006: 125). A university is an institution of educational operation and therefore should be given full autonomy. Universities should be encouraged to reform their operating modes and mechanism, and good examples of running a university should be legitimately acknowledged.

4.2.2. Structural Reorganization

In order to adjust the structure of programs in the humanities and social sciences in universities, we should make a good incremental plan, set up new programs of the “New Liberal Arts”, follow the law of education and the law of disciplinary development, and explore ways to establish frontier and scarce disciplines and disciplines that are in urgent need. For example, some work should be done to develop interdisciplinary studies by integrating the construction of new disciplines and crossover disciplines into the systematic construction of humanities and social sciences with Chinese characteristics. It is necessary to adjust the disciplines at stock and speed up the upgrading and transformation of traditional disciplines, for instance, by adapting economics and management to better address major issues concerning national strategy and social development, such as energy, ecological and climate issues. It is also important to do a good job in the integration of disciplines and apply a problem-oriented approach in social researches (Nwaka, 2000). Take the study of regional issues for example, national strategies such as the Belt and Road initiative can be brought to regional (ethnic) studies, and comprehensive studies can be carried out from the perspectives of linguistics, political science and economics.

4.2.3. Model Regeneration

On the basis of reforming the traditional way of talent training a new type of training model should be created to meet the needs of students’ growth. First, to ensure the standards for judging the quality of liberal arts education. Comparative studies should be made between China’s national standards for teaching quality of all university programs and the corresponding standards in other countries, so as to revise and adjust the programs to bring about a quality system and monitoring system which not only meet the needs of the new era but also demonstrate the distinctive character of a university. Second, to build a cluster of interdisciplinary curricula. Oriented by knowledge and themes and going beyond disciplinary chauvinism, a university should enable students to have multidisciplinary perspectives and a unique way of thinking and a university should endeavor to turn out the “T-shaped” innovative talents who know both extensively and intensively about a certain field. Third, to explore a model of instruction with an open curriculum. Restructuring the curriculum is expected to carry out based on achievement-oriented and question-based learning concepts, when curriculum knowledge points are sorted out, and scientific achievements and new technological measures are applied. And a mechanism of collaborative education should be set up in which industries and research institutions may get involved in education, and a university may collaborate with businesses or foreign universities.

4.2.4. Platform Building

Platform building involves the overall planning and top-down design of the construction of the New Liberal Arts. First, in terms of organization, disciplines should collaborate instead of being isolated. A university should set up interdisciplinary research centers, research plans and curricula based on research topics, and establish a fully integrated academic structure with no “walls”. Second, in terms of management, a university should be administrated in a way that is flexible rather than rigid. It ought to break through the original definitions of colleges, departments and programs of undergraduate education, restructuring the framework of disciplines and programs, and shift from the traditional rigid mode of instruction to an autonomous learning model which is more flexible, customizable, like a menu. Third, to shift the institution from constraint to encouragement. A university should eliminate the restrictions on discipline construction, and reform research evaluation policies, curriculum and talent training mechanism, as well as regulations of fund operation and administration. An open and sharing mechanism of liberal arts should be built, which is conducive to construct and guarantee innovation in interdisciplinary studies.

4.2.5. Differentiated Development

In the construction of New Liberal Arts, universities of different types are not supposed to work in a way of rigid uniformity. Universities with traditional liberal arts should give full play to their advantages of being closely related to the industries, and promote the interdisciplinary studies within liberal arts. In this way can they strengthen the construction of the neglected and marginalized disciplines which are urgently needed in the national strategy, highlighting their advantage of being large and strong in the agglomeration of liberal arts. Universities with liberal arts and natural sciences (including engineering) enjoy their disciplinary advantages of being comprehensive, so they should focus on the national development strategy and facilitate the borrowing and lending of strength between liberal arts and other disciplines. They should highlight their advantage of being strong and specialized with Chinese characteristics by innovating their mechanism and developing their disciplines. Universities of science and engineering should concentrate on the interface between science and engineering and humanities and social studies, and pay close attention to the complicated humanistic values in some industry domains, and highlight their advantages of being outstanding and distinctive in the humanities and social studies. Local colleges and universities should make full use of their regional advantages and focus on the needs of local economic, social and cultural development. Their goal of constructing liberal arts is to meet the local demands, so it is necessary for them to engage in sound and solid development in promoting the transformation and upgrading of traditional liberal arts.

5. Concluding Remarks

Today’s multi-polar world is undergoing economic globalization and a revolution of information, which leads to a culturally diversified in-depth development and intense ideological and cultural exchanges in the world. China is in such a world. Since China began its policy of reform and opening up in 1978, new situations and new problems have emerged in China’s economic system, social structure, as well as people’s ideas and pattern of interest, and various ideological trends have been on the rise one after another. There have been increasingly frequent academic exchanges and dialogues between China and the world. Under such circumstances it is urgent for Chinese universities to play a better role in developing the humanities and social sciences. It is hoped that after doing some substantial work in concept reconstruction, structural reorganization, model regeneration, platform building and differentiated development, New Liberal Arts will be given due attention and implementation in universities in China, featuring a cluster of first-rate undergraduate programs with Chinese characteristics and global competitiveness.

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