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Reflection and Review of General Education Localisation Research in China

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Abstract

With the reform of the general education curriculum in China's higher education, scholars have universally recognized the importance of general education. The exploration of general education has evolved from the study of theory of attention to practice. General education aims to promote the comprehensive development of the quality of college students. However, the foundation of general education during its integration process is relatively weak in varying degrees of 'the climate does not suit one' phenomenon. Thus, combining localisation theory and practice of general education and analysing the factors that hinder the localisation process for the development of general education in China should be re-examined.

Key words: General education; General education curriculum; Localisation

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of society has resulted in a higher demand for talent structure. It has also brought serious challenges to higher education. The advancement of general education is not only important to the reform and development of Chinese higher education, but is also a complex subject of higher education in general. General

education aims to promote the improvement of the comprehensive quality of university students. However, in the process of integrating into the Chinese education system, this Western education philosophy proved that 'the climate does not suit one'. Academic circles have argued on the obstacles and contradictions in the localisation process of general education. Thus, this paper investigates the localisation of general education through an in-depth review of the restrictions, the responses, and the causes of conflict.

1. LOCALISATION OF GENERAL EDUCATION THEORY AND PRACTICE RESEARCH

Since the general education and formal usage were introduced to China, the purpose, idea, and nature of discrimination of education has never been stopped. The essence of general education should be deeply understood to achieve a scientific and reasonable localisation of general education reform. The localisation of research in general education in China mainly involves the ontology concept, the nature and purpose of the discussion, the epistemological structure, and the curriculum system construction, and practice curriculum creates reality.

1.1 Concept of General Education and Nature of Reading

With the development of modern higher education in China, I have noticed the problem of general education at a very early age. Mr. Mei Yiqi introduced the concept of university education in our country, and "general education" is translated as "general education" (Mei, 1941). However, the idea of Mr. Mei in the wartime was difficult to achieve. After the founding of new China, higher education was under the influence of the Soviet model, and it was developed professionally from the start.

After nearly half a century, the first paper with the theme of general education was published in the *Journal of Higher Education Research* in 1987, No. 2. The title of the paper was, “The general education and the enlightenment of the Chinese University of Hong Kong”. Domestic scholars discussed the cultural quality of education and general education, but only few were concerned about general education at this time. However, in 1999, the Ministry of Education implemented the education curriculum of cultural quality, and general education was not officially built into the teaching system of the University of China until after relevant papers and early research focused on the purpose and nature of the field. The Harvard Red Book stated that the objective of general education is to train students to become responsible citizens. Thus, the ultimate purpose of general education is ‘humanity education’ and “personality”, rather than the “comprehensive talent” of all types of professional education. Scholars analysed the meaning of the concept and defined the philosophical dimension of general education, and the most common interpretation is from nature and the theory of ideas.

With regard to the connotation of general education, domestic scholars, such as Li (1997), stated that from the viewpoint of nature, the purpose and content of the general education concept have resulted in its preliminary construction. General education is a component of higher education. All college students should accept professional education because it aims to develop their active participation, whether it is the development of their social life or social responsibility. The comprehensive development of society and its citizens are broad, and is not a professional and utilitarian education of basic knowledge, skills, and attitudes. General education is designed to provide students with reasonable knowledge and ability structures and make them responsible “people” of the country. Some scholars also believe that general education “establishes human’s subjectivity”, the sense of general education is “the awakening of man”. Just like Zhang Shousong pointed out that general education is an important part of higher education. He referred to the part of management of occupational and professional education, which is a generalised concept. Its carrier (mainly its curriculum) is narrow, and its purpose is to develop a sound and healthy personality of citizens in a free society. It is the essence of “comprehensive human development” or “whole person” training (Zhang, 2005). Some scholars also believe that the university of general education refers to education for the common elements of all college students, including teaching basic knowledge, cultivating civic awareness, nurturing a healthy personality, and some non-professional practical abilities. Its purpose is to make a person complete through education, and comprehensive education should be imposed to develop freedom and harmony in personality

and knowledge, sensibility, body, and all aspects of the person. So that he pointed out that the content of general education has broad, basic, system integrity and profound characteristics.

The study on the promotion of the localisation of general education in China provides an important theoretical basis for general education, which will help in accomplishing localisation direction. However, the purpose of the theoretical study of general education is to recognize the nature of the theory to better guide the practice. It is not caught in the shackles of rationalism and examination of the significance of our most valuable practical. In short, general education in universities is not only a concept, but also a training model, which is primarily concerned with a person’s culture, followed by the development of the student as a professional person. Training students with a lofty vision, accommodation, insight, spirit, and liberal arts produces a graceful emotional, not merely a narrow field of expertise of professional talents. Under general education, students should have an integrated understanding of the overall status of knowledge (including basic idea in the field of basic knowledge, way of thinking, and historical development trend). Based on this understanding, students will form their own professional direction (Chen, 2006). Students should avoid excessive focus on professional field and weaken the flexible thinking. Instead, they should pay attention to more important issues in contemporary society to obtain balanced knowledge and analytical ability and broaden their horizons. They should cultivate academic specialisations by coordinating all aspects of their physical and mental development. They should develop the ability to explore and solve problems and actively participate in public affairs as responsible citizens.

1.2 Structure and System of Deconstruction of a Curriculum

General education is a complete personnel training mode, but it includes education concept, education target, education content, major setting and course arrangement, teaching and learning methods, academic evaluation, student management, and a series of important contents. It is not just a series of courses and is not a specific course content. In the research on the structure of the general education system, more focus is placed on the main manifestation of general education, general education curriculum, and content. Based on the reality in China, Li Manli’s study, introduced four major types of implementation of general education courses, namely distribution of required course, classics course, core curriculum, and free elective course. Scholar (Liu, 2002) analysed the integration of general education courses, method, and knowledge of the course and proposed the ‘fewer but better, independence, penetration’ principle; Some one (Xiong & Jing, 2000) proposed the types of

general education curriculum: history of the country and the problem of knowledge, philosophy of literature and art of accomplishment, and introduction to scientific development. And other scholars (Feng, 2004) consider general education courses emphasised the importance of seizing the two main lines, constructing dominant and recessive courses, preparing related organisation management, teaching construction, and teaching reform work. Besides, Zhang Shousong introduced general education theory to the class as a whole structure, but failed to come up with an idea for a system.

With regard to the existence of general education structure and system issues, the ideas proposed by numerous scholars are as follows: (a) The concept and role of general education is not taken seriously. (b) Considerable misunderstanding still exists for general education and curriculum of understanding. (c) The absence of a rigorous top-level design leads to a series of problems in general education of universities, such as the absence of a truly effective planning system and programs because a rich theory is not put into practice. (d) The curriculum structure is irrational, and the rigid system performance in the course, course type, and content distribution is unreasonable. The proportion of credits set should be considered. (e) Teaching management and teaching evaluation system are not perfect. No good system is incorporated into the general education curriculum. (f) Requirements of knowledge differentiation and integration capabilities caused conflicts regarding compulsory and elective courses, trade-offs, and conflicts of professional education and general education.

1.3 Optimisation of Strategies on General Education

Feedback on the existing curriculum models and practices is effective. Scholars also come up with all types of suggestions and solutions to optimisation measures. Some scholars unanimously emphasise the role of foreign classics and advocate to regain our local culture and develop the classical core curriculum model. They emphasise the role of Chinese and foreign classics to regain the classics that are rooted in the local culture in China. Thus, developing a classic core curriculum model is important. Scholar from the Chinese University of Hong Kong believed that general education in each cultural region should have its foothold, and Chinese universities should maximise their strengths by shouldering the responsibility of a civilisation with a heritage of excellence. Students should develop a multicultural perspective. Scholar believed that the “Chinese culture section” does not interfere with broadening their horizons. In theory, the key is how to design the curriculum, how to teach, and how to share the position in general education. Another scholar, who founded the Sun Yat-sen University Liberal Arts College, considered classic culture as an important part of general education. He advocated the

classics as the main content, the construction of a general education core curriculum, and the development of a general education core curriculum model (Gan, 2007), the classical core curriculum model should be promoted in China. This goal is a bold exploration on general education, which provides an important reference value theory and practice. Researchers offered advice regarding the implementation process of general education. Firstly, appeal must be made in all types of schools to set local conditions and establish the concept and the importance of general education. Secondly, rationalisation course structure and course content quality are required, and arbitrary curriculum and blind pursuit of quantity must be avoided. The curriculum must be diversified. Rigid practices should be avoided, and a balance between science and humanities must be established. Third, the quality of general education elective courses must be enhanced, more attention should be paid to the development of hidden curriculum, and the construction of campus culture courses must be strengthened. Fourth, teacher resources should be rationally used, teacher training and teaching ability should be strengthened, and teaching methods should be enriched to optimise and encourage small classes. Fifth, scientific and effective evaluation systems and indicators, standardised general education teachers, and assessment methods must be developed. Finally, the general education management and incentive systems should be improved, and the administrative and teaching should unite to provide an institutional guarantee for the general education and other facilities.

1.4 Practice of General Education in University

With the deepening of the general education curriculum research, several mainland scholars are no longer limited to an investigation on a theoretical level. They have become involved in the general education curriculum reform of the university for useful exploration and research, and the issues in the implementation of general education have resulted in several investigations and argumentations.

A large number of comprehensive universities in China have started to take the localisation of general education into practice and are courageous enough to explore it. Peking University requires all students in mathematics and natural sciences, social sciences, philosophy and psychology, history, linguistics, literature, and the arts to elect programs in five areas; Fudan University uses a ‘six-module’ course design; Tsinghua University provides the first set of more than 20 core courses, covering eight areas of humanities and social sciences, as well as philosophy, history, literature, art, science, contemporary China, and world science; Chu-kezhen Honors College of Zhejiang University provides six types of specialty courses, namely, history and culture, literature and art, economy and society, communication and leadership, science and research, and technology and design; and Kuang

Yaming Honors College of Nanjing University provides the appropriate platform courses of the liberal arts and science courses in their systems, and these two-module courses also based on the platform. The present domestic modularisation construction of core curriculum is being implemented in university general education curriculum reform. Along with general education, localisation practices related to investigation and deliberation are being conducted: The team of Chen Xiangming discussed the implementation and effectiveness of the “Yuanpei program” in the Peking University curriculum model (Chen, 2008). Wuhan University located in the middle of China was analysed in two aspects: general education curriculum status and results from a student survey (Feng & Zeng, 2003). After analysing data obtained from the questionnaires of Peking University, Tsinghua University, Nankai University, and Zhejiang University and referring to the results of the investigation on American universities conducted by Carnegie Foundation for the advancement of teaching, the issues in the process of adopting general education in Chinese universities were analyzed, and some suggestions for policy makers were proposed (Yu, 2003). In summary, scholars on the implementation of the domestic part of the general education colleges conducted a survey of lateral and longitudinal analysis, and these few studies focused on a specific or a few universities that practice general education. Questionnaires and interviews with the local community on general education were used to quantify or provide qualitative research in varying degrees. A number of scholars believe that problems of general education can be divided into several categories, namely, general education courses at the university of unclear positioning, general education electives facing miscellaneous content, structure and content random miscellaneous, the plight of poor quality and low status, construction and management of a curriculum are constrained by the current system of the university.

By integrating the feedback of scholars in the study of general education, questions that focused on the following aspects were obtained: (a) Mistakes in the recognition performance. The degree of attention to general education is not high, and the three parties (students, teachers, and parents) are held in low esteem. When the general education curriculum is equivalent to course selection and lectures, the general education curriculum, especially the elective courses, can be seen as complementary to professional courses. (b) Construction of courses is weak, which is reflected in the degree of localisation caused by insufficient simple majority transplant. No better model curriculum construction and overall planning exists. A general education curriculum does not integrate the school building characteristics and needs. General education with geopolitical characteristics and difficult confrontation with the existing national system was created. Courses are usually based on teachers' professionalism and interest.

Lack of proper planning results in less development of innovative curriculum and courses. (c) Curriculum implementation has defects, inflexible teaching methods, and low-quality lectures, and professional teachers could not fulfil the general education course requirements. Teachers and students have different degrees of utilitarian orientation. Teachers devote less energy and enthusiasm in teaching because the results of academic research are more important. By contrast, students excessively pursue credit and lack class interaction. (d) Management evaluation is quite loose. Evaluation methods are obsolete with low requirements. Administrative and teaching management is confusing, and the school system support is lacking.

2. MAIN FACTORS THAT HINDER THE LOCALISATION OF GENERAL EDUCATION IN CHINA

A series of rejections occurred during the process of the localisation of general education in China. The factors are complex and diverse, based on historical and cultural traditions, the influence of the national educational system, and the limitation of the system, as well as the teachers who does not adapt to all types of factors, such as learning complex. When the abovementioned factors are summed up, they can be attributed to the upper cultural structures and can hinder the objective reality and conditions.

2.1 Historical Tradition and Cultural Infiltration

The educational and cultural tradition of China and its contemporary tradition is founded on general education. However, China has become powerless. The important reason for this situation is the transformation of the era and cultural break that emerged in the development of China. The 1950s was the time to adapt to the political and economic needs of the community through the development of higher education in the basic education in full accordance with the Soviet model. This education structure resulted in the departmental system. Thus, the liberal arts were despised, and the narrow professional training model became main stream. Focus was placed on the development of various types of specialised colleges, and a variety of practical talents were trained.

Although the new China has trained a large number of specialised personnel and the progress of science and technology significantly contributed to the development of the national economy, general education in the university was neglected. Thus, cultivating talents inevitably resulted in some problems. Many science and technology graduates lack writing skills, and the liberal arts graduates are weak in the aspects of mathematical logic. To adapt to the market economy, several colleges and universities compete to provide quick success to professional and

practical disciplines. This competition further weakened the basic sciences and the humanities spirit of education. Thus, a considerable part of the student foundation is weak, and students lack stamina and basic cultural literacy. Adapting such talent to the requirements of modern social development is difficult. Therefore, the training model used today should be improved. Attention should be focused on the role of general education in improving the overall quality of college students.

2.2 Resistance Caused by Reality Factors and Objective Conditions

First of all, educators and educatees should adapt to one another. General education requires a lengthy process of localisation, and the resistance they experience is far larger than expected. General education courses in teaching requirements are relatively high, and teachers should have a solid professional foundation and accessibility of knowledge. Thus, a large number of high-level teachers are required. The training of Chinese teachers is highly specialised, and teachers who studied in normal universities did not receive a real experience in general education. They encounter difficulties in understanding and conveying the essence of general education. Students still wonder whether they should pursue a certain major even during a school year of pure general education. Students are more concerned with employment problems. Students have a long experience of exam-oriented education, and facing the employment pressure of competition forces them to produce the utilitarian purpose of education. Students then allocate more energy to the professional course learning. Thus, students hardly cooperate with general teachers in the class, which is also the main reason for low efficiency in teaching. In addition, people focus on the teachers' level of seniority, but often forget that students who are on the basic education of long branch education. Their knowledge preparation and study could not adapt to the correspondent of general education. Students require some adaptation and preparation for work.

The institutional constraints of the system are present. The higher education system has long made public courses in universities relatively hard. Public basic courses cannot be shaken. Public courses do not have a general curriculum. When the general education curriculum was adopted, the hours and credits of public courses were always included within the scope of the study, which cause irregularities. Therefore, elective courses in general education in the higher education in China shoulder too much burden in a narrow space. In addition, universities are still evaluated through the results of articles published to measure the professional level of teachers. Under such a system, teachers must strive to fulfil the responsibilities of a personal job title, and extra energy will be assigned to general education courses. Even the classes are very impressive. Research

tasks that are not completed will not be encouraged. This "scientific research is more important than teaching" system further stretches the excellent general education teachers' resources.

3. RATIONAL REFLECTION

From the introduction of the concept of Chinese general education to the large-scale exploration of the practice, the process is worthy of rational reflection. In the study of localisation in general education, the spiritual core of national culture tends to be neglected and is regarded as the culprit. This situation reflects the phenomenon of lack of ethnic culture and lack of self-confidence for the local culture. Meanwhile, revitalisation can be achieved through a cultural Renaissance movement and Chinese classical reading. Presumably, most scholars cannot accept this view because this approach has a certain sense of blindness and adventure. This approach vigorously promotes general education. Whether this approach involves classical reading or modular core courses of study, the key is to learn how to read, how to teach, how to think, how to communicate, and how to identify and solve problems. The reality of "liberal" does not merely involve studying enough classics in college and not sticking to cultural identity. It also involves cultivating the ability of lifelong education. General education is a type of educational ways and means. The "purpose" is necessary to enter the "only means" circle.

Choosing the path of general education is an unavoidable reality. People are accustomed to look for a magic bullet from the success stories, but a master key is nonexistent. Even if education is good therapy, it also requires people to keep the digestive tract to absorb. How do we respond when people question our general education only when its surface is not the essence? The United States and Europe have also experienced numerous setbacks and failures in applying general education. Until now, general education is still being constantly developed. Countries all over the world are at a time of change. Professional and elite educational services and the popularisation of public education are in mutual integration and reference. Hegel said that China is an exception to all the exceptions. In the past, the Chinese were too eager to develop a variety of universal inclusion models, but they ignore the uniqueness of the Chinese civilisation. Meanwhile, our too-profit-oriented mind-set hampers our understanding of the complexity and diversity of the Western civilisation. Contemporary Chinese people should strive to obtain a more relaxed state of mind to understand the atmosphere between China and the world.

The theme of the article "Deepen the comprehensive reform of education views in 2013" by the Ministry of Education of China was "to encourage and support

colleges and universities with reality, to explore a new model of general education”. The general education reform should be placed in a prominent position again, and policy support should be provided to general education curriculum reform and innovation. The present study continues to provide encouragement and motivation of general education. Sun Yat-sen University Liberal Arts College, Yuan Pei College of Peking University, and Fudan University have all attempted in various degrees to develop a model of general education courses, but a very satisfactory model has not yet appeared, although a good start has been achieved. Generalists and specialists may be diametrically opposed, but having both in a parallel track is not a bad idea because the aim of the process of curriculum liberation is to meet the needs of student growth and personality integration. The core of the course is to promote individual self-realisation. Course content selection must be linked to the interests of students, and students must be allowed to explore their own ideas and choose their own direction of development so that students will have the qualifications and research interests to accept an in-depth academic study. Similarly, general education can enable students to have comprehensive adaptation and planning in their social and life. Students require a basic cultural knowledge. Mutual assistance between general and professional education will make university education function. With feelings rooted in China and a global perspective, the road of Chinese-style general education should be taken.

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