

Spiritual Heritages of Humboldt's Idea of University: Classical Tradition and Personality Shaping

HU Jiali^{[a],[b],*}; CUI Yanqiang^[c]

^[a]Ph. D., Faculty of Education, Southwest University, Chongqing, China.

^[b]Associate Professor in Department of German, Sichuan International Studies University, Chongqing, China.

^[c]Professor, Doctoral Tutor, Faculty of Education, Southwest University, Chongqing, China.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

Humboldt's idea of university has produced profound influence on higher education in German and even the whole world. Humboldt has inherited classics and personality shaping in European and German educational tradition, comprehensively absorbed educational thoughts of German idealist philosophy and new humanism in the same era, made himself into a typical representative of classical tradition and personality shaping, and applied the concept of classical tradition and personality shaping to educational practice, especially in universities representing national higher academic institutions. He emphasized humanist tradition and the status of institutes of philosophy assuming heavy responsibilities of personality shaping in the university, which is one of the important spiritual heritages left by him.

Key words: spiritual heritage; classics; personality shaping

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INTRODUCTION

Schaffenstein (1952) said in the autobiography of Wilhelm von Humboldt,

those things integrating different aspects of his essence as the highest principle and the pursuit of integrating human power into an entirety determined his core influence on educational management. He made educational concepts in his era with Rousseau, Pestalozzi and Fichte idealist academic theories and new humanism enter the educational career of the country and primary schools, middle schools and universities, which had great significance especially during this short 16-month period.

This refers to Humboldt's contributions to educational reform when he acted as the director of Educational Department of the Ministry of the Interior. The University of Berlin established according to Humboldt's idea of university has caused a big stir. People visiting the University of Berlin thought that all wishes had been satisfied even beyond their imagination. Savigny said, "everything is well in the university. There is no freer atmosphere and thought." (Weischedel, 1960, p.221) Fichte wrote to his friend, "it is most likely that the University of Berlin will be the future model." (Ibid., p.222) Theologian Wilhelm Martin Leberecht de Wette wrote on April 19, 1811, "we have a better time in Humboldt. If peace lasts, this university will be only...." (Staehelin, 1956, p.69) Barthold Georg Niebuhr wrote to Caspar Friedrich Freiherr von Schuckmann on May 2, 1811, "we have surpassed all German universities.... Such excellence will be accepted widely soon. The University of Berlin will establish our reputation and prove our excellent performance in the future...." (Weischedel, 1960, p.226)

Humboldt's idea of university has produced profound influence on German higher education. When people in Germany appealed to strengthen humanist tradition in university courses, supporters required recovering the tradition constantly based on Humboldt's idea of university and the success of the University of Berlin. Meanwhile, Humboldt's idea of university has been widely spread around the world,

Russian university system completely imitated Germany in the 19th century, including the University of

Goettingen first, followed by the University of Berlin. More wonderfully, the University of Athens was first established by German liberators or occupants in 1837 in fact. Its framework was established completely according to German universities, especially the University of Goettingen and the University of Berlin. (Clark, 2013, p.515)

American research universities also adopted the pattern of the University of Berlin. Josiah Royce said in 1891,

the dream of that generation was German universities. British universities were outdated and considered not to be academic enough, so were French universities. Therefore, they were ignored. German scholars were our tutor and guide.... A man who was a skeptic before going to Germany turned into an idealist when coming back and spared no efforts in making contributions to the establishment of an American university. (Ibid., p.545)

Humboldt's idea of university has been widely spread in Asia. The most typical case is that Cai Yuanpei reformed Peking University according to the concept of the University of Berlin after coming back from Germany where he studied.

Humboldt's idea of university was the product of the historical environment and his personal experience. The University of Berlin established under the guidance of his idea of university was a specific historical phenomenon occurring in Prussia under the situation of difficult domestic and foreign policies as well as a typical feature in that era. The argument against it has never stopped since the establishment of the University of Berlin. Discussions on university phenomena and their principles still exist up to this day. Is it necessary to discuss Humboldt's idea of the university in this era with a lot of changes? Is it valuable and appropriate, especially in the 21st century far away from him and in China with university reform in the ascendant? To answer these questions, it is necessary to look at spiritual heritages of Humboldt's idea of university. This paper first discusses classical and personality shaping tradition in Humboldt's idea of university.

1. CLASSICAL AND PERSONALITY SHAPING TRADITION IN EUROPEAN AND GERMAN EDUCATIONAL THOUGHTS

Ancient Greece is the source of western civilization. Education had been almost systematized in Athens in the 4th and 5th centuries BC. Greek people thought that education aimed at promoting and building the development of human personality, because education could enrich the rational life and allow people to achieve a satisfactory and moral life finally while expanding their horizon and improve their moral integrity. In the opinion of Greek, liberal arts, i.e. grammar, figure of speech, logic, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music had special

values in the improvement of cultural literacy of people and educational objectives could be achieved through the study of these subjects. This opinion of Greek has laid a foundation for literary education in universities in the Middle Ages and western humanistic education.

According to the historical development of Europe, Europeans would look for inspiration and source in classical culture each time during social transformation. Classical culture in Middle Ages did not disappear completely and Greek philosophy still produced influence on Christian theology. Since renaissance, people have had clearer understandings of advantages and disadvantages in modern and ancient times and ancient culture has influenced the way of thinking, artistic creation and life attitude of people. By the second half of the 18th century, classical literature became popular again for a time. However, people's view of ancient culture changed. They no longer adored classical culture blindly. Instead, they gave new contents, form and functions to ancient culture so that it could adapt to the new spirit of the time. As other countries in Western Europe, Germany also continued the tradition of classical culture: people imitated ancient culture stiffly before the 18th century. However, they used the style of ancient culture for reference in the way and method of literary and artistic creation and mostly directed at the reality in contents after the 18th century. The objective was to transform the present era by promoting the spirit of classical culture and promote the development of human culture by studying classical literature. Different from classicists in England and France etc., Germans more advocated the people-oriented cultural thought of ancient Greece and paid more attention to the free education of ancient Greece - achieve wisdom training and spirit evolution through philosophy, theology, history and linguistic poetry. They considered ancient Greece as the real founder of culture of European countries and the real source of classicism. They tried to find the root of their nation in the traditional culture of ancient Greece and prove that both Germany and ancient Greece focused on philosophy, literature and art and had closer relationship in spirit. New humanists represented by Herder, Kant, Goethe and Schiller thought that the people-oriented thought achieved perfect unification in ancient Greece, ancient Greek culture was the manifestation of nature and improvement, ancient Greek world was the highest state of human development and ancient Greeks embodied the human image with natural creative spirit in the process of studying ancient Greek culture. Such human image also accorded with that advocated by Rousseau. The perfect model of the culture and education pursued by Rousseau could be found in ancient Greek world. New humanists endeavored to promote ancient Greek culture. Their objectives were to get rid of the influence of French culture, encourage people to study from ancient Greek culture directly, learn the spirit of ancient Greece, create works comparable to Greek culture and solve problems

in the great change of the real society with ancient Greek thought. Therefore, new humanism has strong national sentiments.

New humanists' worship and acceptance mode for ancient Greece influenced educational objectives and methods. They first believed that education had the power of shaping a person and could make people overcome inner conflicts and get along with the outside world harmoniously, including nature. Second, they considered that educational objectives should be to shape people according to the mode of Greeks, especially in the training of soul and spirit. Therefore, new humanists put forward and especially emphasized the concept of *Bildung* (accomplishment, education, shaping) and *Selbstbildung* (self-education).

As the representative of new humanist movement, Humboldt grew up in Berlin in the period of enlightenment, received classical philology education of Heinrich and studied Kant's philosophical thought while studying in a university in Goettingen, and then continued to study classical culture deeply and explore the culture and thought of ancient Greece while contacting with Wolf, Schiller and Goethe. The 6-year period when he worked in Rome laid a solid foundation for his study on ancient Greek culture. Therefore, an important constituent part of Humboldt's research work is classical study. Classical culture is an educational wealth that cannot be abandoned for Humboldt. Classical culture has participated in shaping his thought, world experience and world view. As Goethe and Schiller, he applied the thought absorbed from classical culture to modern times. However, contents he learnt from classical culture were not applied to literary and artistic creation and theories; instead, they were actually used in educational practice. His innovation consists in applying *Bildung* and *Selbstbildung* to modern universities.

2. CLASSICAL TRADITION AND PERSONALITY SHAPING IN HUMBOLDT'S IDEA OF UNIVERSITY

Humboldt formed his unique educational theories and idea of university by inheriting classical tradition in European and German culture and absorbing thoughts of great people in the same era.

Firstly, he defined the purpose of human: the real purpose of human is to develop all forces into an entirety most fully and regularly. "The highest state of coexistence of the human is that everyone develops from and for himself only." (Humboldt, 1998, p.33) Humboldt considered,

the ultimate task of our existence is to give the fullest possible content to the concept of humanity in our own era and even beyond our era through the impact of actions in our own lives
This task can only be implemented through the links established

between ourselves as individuals and the world around us. (Ibid., p.25)

In the opinion of Humboldt, the development of human history is the development process of human becoming themselves; education aims at all-round development of personality. The existence and life of human are a place for retaining the morality of human, obtaining useful educational wealth creatively and finally achieving highly harmonious development of human. People with self-education have the power of shaping life and such power is completely based on human themselves. That is to say, humans are their own creators.

Secondly, Humboldt inherited thoughts of Spinoza, Leibniz and Kant in European modern philosophy and believed,

humans are the center of all activities which start from individuals and come back to them. Humans are born to have creative gifts and carry out activities in the world with such gifts. To train their nature, humans need a material. Only the world can give them such material. Therefore, humans are connected with the world through their behaviors. (Ibid., p.24)

Humans can train their nature comprehensively only through their own activities. Therefore, the significance of human actions is the reaction upon human. In *Theory of Education of Humans*, Humboldt said, "humans should try to master the colorful world as much as possible so as to form their unique personality." (Ibid., p.25) Humboldt realized the self-education of human in the process of taking actions in the world and the formation of their own personality. Therefore, actions play a vital role in the exertion of all-round abilities of individuals. In addition, as the education of human can only be achieved in the contact with the world, humans have reaction upon the world and personality characteristics of a man reflect his surrounding environment, nationality, era and gender features.

If one wants to show respect to a nationality, an era and humans, what do people require him? People require that education, wisdom and virtue should be enhanced and popularized to the greatest extent and hold a dominant position. His inner value should be improved to such a height that the concept of humanity has great and valuable connotations when people separate the concept of humanity from the person as the only example. (Ibid., p.25)

When a person studies this world more carefully and thoroughly, his personality will develop more comprehensively and harmoniously. The power of humans develops constantly and their self-education improves in the interaction with the world and humans change the surrounding environment. When their power develops to a certain extent, they have the ability of reform once the time is ripe (Flitner & Giel, 1984, p.51).

Moreover, Humboldt's theory of education of humans also includes human behaviors and environment etc. with individuals as the starting point. Humboldt also thought, "human personality cannot be lost. The impetus of

humans playing a role is mainly the pursuit for inner self.” Humboldt emphasized, “all pursuits of humans should direct at their inner unification and everything should be understood as a whole.” (Humboldts, 1903-1936) He thought that Greeks could manifest this overall harmony to the greatest extent. His first sentence in *Discussions on Characteristics of Personalities of Greeks*, “Greeks are not only a useful and historical nationality that we can understand, but also an idea for us.” (Ibid.) The idealized Greek image was not only used as the life criterion by Humboldt, but also applied to his idea of university and education. In the opinion of Humboldt, “modern people understand the meaning of human existence through the learning of Greek (Blankertz, 1982, p.105). Researchers are shaped in a similar way through such exploration (study) and a beautiful image is created through Greek mind and spirit transferred to them in combination with themselves.” (Humboldt, 2013, p.21) Therefore, he made an utmost effort to promote the learning of Greek in senior liberal arts and believed that the learning of Greek could promote harmonious development of students’ abilities. He said in the letter written to the king, “language not only is a practice promoting memory, but also can improve intellect and make people gain general opinions even if it is forgotten. Language study should surpass the purpose of pure speaking.” (Scuria, 1970, p.307) Meanwhile, he required universities “seeking for harmonious development of all abilities of students, training their power with as few objects as possible in an all-round way and using all knowledge to train temperament so that creations in understanding, knowledge and mind and spirit distribute charm through inner accuracy, harmony and beauty rather than external environment.” (Humboldt, 2013, p.95) It is thus clear that the task of universities is to train young people and allow them to give full and harmonious play to their power in the opinion of Humboldt, i.e. personality shaping for young people.

Finally, how to achieve harmonious cultivation of all human forces? Humboldt said in *On internal and eternal organization of higher academic institutions in Berlin* that, “through pure academic idea”, “through academics which are from the internal and rooted in the internal”. In the opinion of Humboldt, academics can transform character, but academics must “come from the bosom of ideological spirit; academics are not gained through ranking the knowledge collected”. Academics serve as “pure idea”, “comes from internal academics” and “comes from academics at the bottom of ideological spirit”. These expressions fully demonstrate that academics are speculative idealism philosophy. As a student of Kant, Humboldt saw the force of ideological spirit. For him, academics are a rational product. When he surpassed criticism and turned to idealism, he was seeking decisive force in the idea. Such force dominates internal characteristics of human history and nation. He also believed that the force of ideological spirit could

control materials. A general task of education is to “create profound and pure academic views” in growing human disposition and to guide them to realistic road. On this road, academics guides the whole nation itself. In this process, the highest stage of education – university plays a special role. On the one hand, universities study pure academics; on the other hand, it is entrusted to train future national talents. In this respect, Humboldt held the consistent views with Schelling and Fichte: pure academics, i.e. traditional philosophy serves as the highest and most general interpretation of reality and owns the ability to transform reality. Humboldt also put forward that pursuing academic spirit must be guided by three principles: All come from the original; all come down to an ideal; the principles and ideals are combined with an idea (Ibid., p.92). Idealism philosophy is a bond connecting each discipline. All individual disciplines should be classified philosophically and related to the entirety. Thus, Humboldt particularly stressed the position of philosophy in college in the university. He held that philosophy reflected organic unity of all scientific knowledge. Teaching and learning philosophy should become one of the basic tasks of the university. Universities should teach students of classics and shape their personalities through the philosophy college. Humboldt’s such ideas of requiring philosophy occupying an important position continues German classical idealism thought represented by Kant, Schiller, Fichte, Schelling and Schleiermacher, Schelling considered research of strict and theoretical philosophy could make us know ideas most directly, only ideal emphasized actions and gave morality significance, and that philosophy could grasped human beings themselves and all human natural instincts. Thus, philosophy is more suitable for liberating ideological spirit from the one-sided education constraint and improving ideological spirit to the general and absolute kingdom than mathematics. Thus, it is required to carry out special education in allusion to individual discipline after overall cognizing academics. Fichte also believed “actual art should be separate from our art school and set up another institutions for them”. (Fichter, 1845-1846). Brotgelehrten described by Schiller are those who tale actions for actual life. In his opinion, real scholars should be dedicated to academics and get rid of the idea of conducting researches for his future occupation (Chen, 2006, p.194). *Werkkundiger* mentioned by Kant is consistent with Schiller’s *Philosophischer Kopf*. He said,

all efforts of human beings aim to perfect their knowledge. His noble impatience cannot stop until his all comprehension reaches a harmonious entirety, and he is in the center of academics and makes a general survey of the academic field with satisfying vision. (Kant, 1960, p.87);

Humboldt creatively absorbed idealism philosophy, combined it with his classical humanism concept and served it as the guiding idea of University of Berlin: the universities and advanced middle schools of letters and

science do not aim at vocational education, but intent to take general human education. Such education without any purpose aims to oppose dull, one-sided and practical education tendency of German didacticism. Humboldt thought, "two kinds of education – general and special education should be guided by different principles. General education should enhance, purify and deploy strength, i.e. improve human beings; through special education, people should gain application skills." "If the two are confused, education will be no longer pure. Human beings can neither become complete human beings nor complete citizens in each social bracket." (Humboldt, 2013, p.82) It thus can be seen that Humboldt considered education aimed at the whole nation and that education should make human personality development in an all-round manner. Such personality should consciously shape social life, change nature and live in a substantial and happy life with human dignity. The status of philosophy and the university idea of transforming character through academics stressed by him inherit the traditions of Greek philosophy. The idea is not just the product of German Classical Philosophy, but also intensively reflects new humanism ideology in the 19th century in the education field. Meanwhile, it also reflects the awakening of national consciousness of German innovationists and objection of the popular view of learning from French colleges.

CONCLUSION

Humboldt regards the university as the most advanced institution to cultivate general people. He considered the university should create new academic views, serve for human education and make sure people have the ability to be responsible for human behaviors in future conditions. The university makes students gain a balanced development and reach the purpose of self-education through academics and finally plays its own strength in interactions with the world so as to reach the purpose of transforming the world. Such talents are just those needed by reformers. They believe reform makes people improve cruel and intelligence rather than cruel fighting and transforms the world through peaceful modes. Hence, it can be said that although Humboldt considered the final task of universities was to cultivate talents for the country, but not to train talents needed for an occupation. Instead, based on European and German classical human concept, universities aim to cultivate independent talents with independent thinking to make contributions to the country through deeming general human education under the guidance of idealism philosophical thought. "Spirit and cultural development proposed by Fichte, Schleiermacher,

Humboldt and other idealists and romanticists influences profoundly. Until 1830s, although natural science developed rapidly, they still took activities on social culture stage set up by idealism and romanticism. The purpose of advanced middle schools of arts and sciences as well as universities is still education and culture. They still pay attention to human cultivation. General education focuses on personality shaping rather than skill training." (Clark, 2013, p.528)

In conclusion, Humboldt's idea of communicating classics by philosophy college in the university and shaping human personality through academic researches is one of spiritual heritages of the most important university idea.

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