CHAPTER 3

The Liberal Arts Tradition in Education

Liberal arts education has traditionally been related to the classical ideal of the cultivation of well-rounded people who are expected to be well integrated as well as knowledgeable in the sciences, the humanities, the arts, and morality. It can be traced back to fifth-century BCE Greco-Roman and European origins. Socrates’ teaching on the reflective life and Aristotle’s thought on the examined life not only became the foundation of Western philosophy and tradition, they also had a great impact on Western humanistic studies and particularly influenced modern pedagogical theory and the development of a liberal arts education. In the early twentieth century, the Western model of liberal arts education influenced Chinese society and Chinese higher education. This chapter presents the historical development of liberal arts education in the Western tradition as well as its development in China. The chapter covers several topics: first, liberal arts education in historical context; second, the definition of liberal arts education; and third, a review of literature on liberal arts education in China.

Liberal Arts Education in the Western Historical Context

The classical Greek model has been a dominant paradigm in liberal arts education (artes liberales) globally (Flannery and Newstad 1998). The quest for truth and knowledge in a cosmic-centered world led the ancient Greeks to create a learning polis (city), which prepared learners for paideia (education). The classical model assumes that truth is both universal and accessible and emphasizes the pursuit of truth through reason as its ultimate end. A curriculum for seeking truth, knowledge, and wisdom was established and consisted of two categories: the trivium (logic, grammar, and rhetoric) and the quadrivium (mathematics, geometry, music, and astronomy). Although it follows in the classical Greek tradition, the humanistic tradition of liberal arts education places more emphasis on seeking freedom. Two aims of a humanistic education are morality and civilization (Glyer and Weeks 1998). Through the study of great works, humanistic education enables one to be a cultured, civilized, and good citizen as seen in Socrates’ vision of “the examined life” and Aristotle’s idea of “reflective citizenship” (Nussbaum 1997). For Socrates and Aristotle, liberal arts studies were appropriate for the education of free citizens and
pursuing human happiness. Nussbaum (1997, 8) further observes that in addition to its significant influence on American higher education in the middle of last century, a liberal arts education is based, “above all, on Greek and Roman Stoic notions of an education that is ‘liberal’ in that it liberates the mind from the bondage of habit and custom, producing people who can function with sensitivity and alertness as citizens of the whole world.” The idea of educating citizens of the world had a significant influence on Western higher educational institutions and on many educators and philosophers, such as David Hume, Cardinal John Henry Newman, and Adam Smith in the English tradition, and Thomas Paine and other significant founding fathers of American liberal arts education (Nussbaum 1997).

In the beginning of the thirteenth century, the first universities in Salerno, Paris, and Bologna in medieval Europe adopted the Roman and Hellenic tradition of liberal arts education. These universities utilized the courses of the trivium and the quadrivium as a foundation on which to prepare students for more advanced learning in medicine, law, philosophy, and theology. With the establishment of Oxford and Cambridge universities, the idea of a liberal arts education with a focus on seven arts courses, classics, religious studies, and moral education became the basis for educating English gentlemen.

The Jesuit Tradition of Liberal Arts Education

In the middle of the sixteenth century, Ignatius Loyola, a Spanish soldier from a noble family, founded a Catholic religious order, the Society of Jesus, that eventually dedicated enormous resources and personnel to education as one of its core missions. Originally the Jesuits were not devoted to educational work but it eventually became one of the most important apostolates of the Society of Jesus and had an enormous impact on the modern era. By the early eighteenth century, the Jesuits had more than eight hundred colleges (equivalent to modern high schools) and universities in both the Old and New Worlds. Jesuit institutions of higher education were unique and successful “because they wedded the views of the humanists, grounded in the classical conception of rhetoric as training in clear thinking and expression, to a methodical pedagogy that the first Jesuit had learned at Paris” (O’Malley 2008, 39).

In addition, the Jesuits began to develop their own famous classical curriculum: the *Ratio Studiorum*, or plan of studies. The general purpose of the *Ratio* was the balanced development of intellect and will, of mind and spirit, to educate a person regardless of gender and background. Besides mastering the Latin and Greek languages and literatures, students in Jesuit schools had