CHAPTER 5

The Development of Liberal Arts Curricula at Fudan University, Shanghai Jiaotong University, and East China Normal University

From 1949 to the late 1990s, the curriculum in Chinese schools (from primary to college level) was totally unified, and the standard pedagogy was lecturing and memorization. A required common curriculum consisting of Marxist theory, a foreign language, and physical education had always been imposed on all Chinese college students, regardless of the institution. There was little room for creativity and analytical thinking. Since the late 1990s, much of the reform in the Chinese education system, especially with respect to liberal arts education, has focused on the curriculum; the utmost goal of this curriculum reform is to improve the quality of education for the whole nation, enabling it to compete more effectively on the global level. The implementation of the liberal arts curriculum by universities marked a change in the orientation of Chinese academe, from a test-centered pedagogy to the development of well-rounded individuals. Major universities are expected to offer a series of liberal arts education courses outside the students’ majors. Under the new curriculum system, students are required to take a particular number of credits in diverse categories: basic core courses, liberal arts courses, distribution courses, concentration courses, and free electives.

Chapter 5 continues the presentation of liberal arts education at Fudan, Shanghai Jiaotong and ECNU universities begun in the previous chapter by focusing on two topics: (1) factors that shaped the development of liberal arts curricula at Chinese universities, and particularly at the three Shanghai institutions; and (2) themes derived from interview data. Factors that influenced curriculum development include the role of instructors, core course development, student attitudes, administrative influence, and the challenge of the labor market. According to many interviewees, those factors are vitally important to the success of liberal arts curricula in the three Shanghai universities. The analysis of these themes is significant for an understanding of the present situation of liberal arts education and the challenges it faces in the three universities and, to a certain degree, the problems of implementing liberal arts education in other universities nationwide.
Historical View

In the 1950s, after the CCP came to power, Chinese universities (public and private) were forced to reorganize and remerged as professional schools on the model of the Soviet Union. In the CCP’s view, the Soviet Union had made great strides along the path of industrial modernization and, therefore, had much to offer China with its expertise and support. Although the Soviet model had the most direct and lasting impact on the Chinese higher education system from 1952 until the 1980s, its limits and deficiencies were exposed when Chinese universities aspired to become world-class comprehensive universities (combining humanities and sciences courses) and to educate global citizens, since the Soviet model did not provide students with an education that was both comprehensive and cutting-edge. The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) in China also affected Chinese higher education. Although some recent studies on the Cultural Revolution have found new evidence that peasants and workers experienced gains in education and that losses were mainly suffered by the children of intellectuals and the old elites, the entire educational system deteriorated over the course of a decade.

As noted above, until the late 1990s there was a bias toward specialization in the undergraduate curriculum in the Chinese higher educational system. Those who studied science or technology were not familiar with Li Bai, one of the most famous poets of the Tang dynasty. On the other hand, those who studied literature or humanities were ignorant of John Newton. In addition, Chinese students often displayed a lack of creativity and critical thinking skills. Hence, policy makers in China pointed out the need to broaden students’ comprehensive knowledge in humanities and sciences. According to them, liberal arts education would provide students with a field of knowledge that had breadth as well as depth, extending beyond their specialized major fields of concentration. Through courses in liberal arts education, universities would be able to provide students with more electives in the social sciences, natural sciences, humanistic studies, and some applied sciences. These courses could broaden students’ learning and skills, and cultivate within students critical thinking and innovation.

The renaissance of liberal arts education in some key universities in China was also a result of the reorientation of the economic system from a planned economy to a market economy in the mid-1980s (Gan 2012). Hence, the market became an essential force or key factor in the ascendancy of liberal arts education and raised questions about the nature of higher education itself: What type of citizen does a university need to graduate? Does the curriculum or pedagogy meet both student needs and societal socioeconomic needs? How