CHAPTER 6

Critical Thinking in the Context of Liberal Arts Education

In the last decade or so, educating students who are critical thinkers, creative, and innovative has become a primary concern for many instructors, policy makers, administrators, and even some parents in China. Almost every university’s mission statement these days boasts broad goals related to critical thinking, innovation, and moral character (Y.L. Yang 2012). However, there is also a common saying among many Chinese teachers and administrators: everybody likes to talk and teach critical thinking and innovation, but nobody wants a university full of critical thinkers. This is a real conundrum in China because of its political context. Current education reform in China indicates that policymakers are, to some extent, taking this seriously.

A liberal arts program that develops critical thinking must offer pathways that allow students to distinguish social, moral, spiritual, political, and cultural perspectives, several interviewees stated. The three universities studied here, as mentioned earlier, have educational goals and visions related to critical thinking and innovation. Nevertheless, concern over the labor market, measures of accountability, and standardized testing have nudged the goal of education toward the acquisition of information, and technical skills. Educational policies and individual schools do not encourage students to examine important issues—such as fair wages, immigrant farmer’s rights, religious freedom, social justice, equity, human rights, support for the elderly, and the Cultural Revolution—in a profound or meaningful manner.

During my interviews, almost every policymaker, administrator, and faculty member agreed that skills in critical thinking and innovation gained through a liberal arts education are crucial for student development and educating future global leaders, but they also said that there are many challenges to be overcome in order replace transmission pedagogy with a pedagogy that stimulates critical thinking. Despite extensive discussion on critical thinking by Chinese policy makers, administrators, and faculty members, there are still debates over the question of why the Chinese higher educational system suppresses (or rather does not encourage) critical thinking skills. This chapter discusses the theme of critical thinking in the context of liberal arts education at Fudan, Shanghai Jiaotong, and ECNU. It covers the definition of critical thinking, challenges within critical thinking education in the Chinese context,
tension between critical thought and political education course requirements, and mentorship programs.

**Defining Critical Thinking**

The concept of critical thinking can be traced back to the teaching of Socrates (Fasko 2003). Socrates’ pedagogical technique included asking probing questions that led students to think for themselves and critique commonly accepted opinions. Although the term “critical thinking” is widely used in Western countries, it is difficult to define and explain. Since the period of Socrates and Aristotle, philosophers and educators have defined critical thinking differently. Ennis (1985, 45) defined critical thinking as “reasonable reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do.” Lipman (1988, 39) stated that critical thinking is “skillful, responsible thinking that facilitates good judgment because it (1) relies upon criteria, (2) is self-correcting, and (3) is sensitive to context.” Halonen (1995, 76) stated that critical thinking is the “propensity and skills to engage in activity with reflective skepticism focused on deciding what to believe or do.” Paul (1993, 20) defined critical thinking as “a systematic way to form and shape one’s thinking. It functions purposefully and exactly. It is thought that is disciplined, comprehensive, based on intellectual standards, and, as a result, well-reasoned.” Since the early 1980s, critical thinking has been promoted as one of the main goals of education in the United States (Fasko 2003). While some people claim that critical thinking is a Western product and conception and is unrelated to Asian traditions (Atkinson 1997), Patton (2005) argued that Chinese students’ lack of critical thinking is due to insufficient knowledge about the subject. Patton thought that training rather than culture is the key factor that affects Chinese students’ critical thinking.

From his research, Patton (2005) concluded that over the past two thousand years, the idea and concept of critical thought existed in Chinese culture; for instance, the concept of cultivating students as critical thinkers has already been discussed in relation to ancient Confucian writings, but because Chinese culture does not encourage students to question authority—for example, teachers and administrators—Chinese students are not well equipped to think in a reflective or innovative manner. Chinese students follow what the authorities or teachers instruct them to do. Teachers have absolute authority and are highly respected, students are not expected to challenge them, and lecturing is a major means of teaching in most of classes. Moreover, the Chinese educational system for centuries has not provided an opportunity for students to think and reflect. Teachers emphasize a transmission style of learning and do not encourage