CHAPTER 9

Rethinking the Transmission of Culture and Philosophy in the Liberal Arts

Over the past decade, educational reform in China has resulted in many changes, including the emergence of liberal arts education in some top research universities such as Fudan, Shanghai Jiaotong, and ECNU in Shanghai. Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8 of this book have focused on several factors that shaped the development of liberal arts education in these three universities, as well as the Chinese higher education system in general. Each of those chapters explored a theme reflected in my survey and interviews with faculty members, administrators, policy makers, and students: curriculum reform, critical thinking, moral reasoning, and spirituality. These four themes are essential elements in the project of cultivating individuals with a broadly informed intellect, critical thinking skills, creativity, moral reasoning powers, and a spiritual dimension. This cultivation of well-rounded individuals is the goal of a liberal arts education as it is understood by many interviewees. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss in more detail the findings presented in the previous four chapters.

People who work in the three universities studied here have a unique role in helping students to define internal change and reform. Since the year 2000, university enrollment has sharply increased and campus facilities have expanded tremendously, but the goal of Chinese higher education is becoming increasingly commercialized and utilitarian (Y.L. Yang 2012). Higher education institutions have a central role in preparing future leaders in civil service and other social sectors. Students should be taught to think critically, morally, creatively, and compassionately, as the interviewees stated. As discussed in previous chapters, these four major objectives are not well developed in the Chinese higher education system.

Traditionally, the university’s missions have been defined as teaching, research, and community service. One of the primary goals of education is to graduate creative, critical, innovative, and responsible students. A liberal arts curriculum is widely believed to be a valuable academic path to achieving this goal and is available to students in colleges and universities throughout the world (Peterson 2012a). Current thinking about liberal arts education in China is a new phenomenon in its higher education system. But there are serious challenges to the development, implementation, and effectiveness of liberal
arts programs, such as faculty commitment, policy making, pedagogy, access, and efforts to create world-class universities. Generally, all of the faculty members, administrators, and policy makers interviewed expressed concerns about the importance of educating students to think critically, creatively, innovatively, spiritually, and morally through a liberal arts education. Additionally, all interviewees indicated that the central government and the Shanghai municipal government should be aware of the strategic plan of education. They also talked about challenges to implementing liberal arts programs. Although administrators and faculty members at Fudan, Shanghai Jiaotong, and ECNU as well as policy makers in the Shanghai municipal government support a general liberal arts education, they lack a common understanding of what a liberal arts course should look like and how it should be taught. The reality is that many of them are still associated with highly specialized departments and thus the idea of a liberal arts education is easy to embrace in theoretical form but difficult to put into practice.

Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) ecological systems model takes environments as the foundation for discussing human organizations. This model helps to identify specific aspects related to individual demography, the development of students, family status, population, political situation, communism, and globalization, as well as other overall social and historical contexts that can affect the implementation and outcome of a liberal arts education. Although this chapter does not apply Bronfenbrenner’s model, the model does provide some perspective on the context in which a liberal arts education is embedded. In Bronfenbrenner’s view, human development is affected by the immediate environment—for example, family, friends, parents, and teachers. However, these environments are also affected by a larger social and global context. Hence, this model is relevant for analyzing how different environments affect the development of liberal arts education in China.

Developing a Curriculum to Cultivate Critical Thinking

Over the last two decades, the Chinese government and higher education institutions have repeatedly emphasized the importance of “quality education” (suzhi jiaoyu), but it is hard to define what this is or how to measure its effectiveness. The Chinese term is vaguely defined and does not encourage students to develop as a whole person; instead, “quality education” in Chinese schools is primarily associated with academic knowledge and achievement and cognitive development—it does not prepare students to build a better world and become responsible global citizens; to care more about universal love, peace,