CHAPTER 3

Transformation of China's Higher Education Thoughts during Thirty Years of Reform and Opening-up

A review of the development in China's higher education over the past thirty years shows that the spirit of China's higher education has undergone earth-shaking changes: from the notion that education is the tool for the dictatorship of the proletariat to the idea that education is aimed at serving the socialist modernization drive; from the belief that education is useless to the strategy of developing the country through science and education; from regarding class struggle as the key link to giving priority to education development; from regarding intellectuals as the Stinking Old Ninth and dictators to respecting knowledge and respecting talents. Transformation of this series of ideas is not only a great achievement of education but also a major breakthrough in educational thought. The powerful energy produced by this transformation has been continuously released with the reform and development of China's higher education, leading to consistent development; this energy has been continuously showcased through the progress and development of the entire society, giving expression to the strategic significance of higher education in the enhancement of China's overall national strength and social development.

Over the past thirty years, development changes in China's higher education have covered each and every aspect of the ideological system of higher education. Among them, what has exerted the most profound influences are changes in such aspects as higher education values, higher education development philosophy, and the view of quality in higher education.

1 Higher Education Values: Transformation from Social Standard to Unification of Social Development and Individual Development

Education values refer to people's understanding of the value relationship between education, on the one hand, and people and their value orientation of education, on the other, behavior determined on the basis of such understanding.

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Education values and education functions are closely interrelated. From an objective point of view, education boasts two major functions, namely, social functions and individual functions. For higher education, its social functions include such aspects as economic functions, political functions, and cultural functions; its individual functions cover such aspects as promotion function, vocational function, and growth function. Sound higher education should embody sound functions of higher education. However, what education values reflect is not education itself, but the value relationship between education, people, and society. Due to different understandings and value judgments, the value orientations of education differ from each other. In addition, although education values are invisible, they are always playing their roles. Deviations will occur if we only emphasize a certain function of education while neglecting or depreciating other functions.

In the past, China’s higher education values have undergone profound changes, which have exerted profound influences on the development path of China’s higher education. The primary change among them is the transformation from social standard to mutual consideration of social development and individual development.

1.1 With Deepened Understanding of the Functions of Higher Education, Higher Education Values have Evolved from Single-faceted to Comprehensive

Since the 1950s, China’s education theories have been under the influences of the former Soviet Union, which advocates that education is the superstructure of society and underlines the social functions of education, with special emphasis on the political functions that stem from its social functions. During the Cultural Revolution, due to influences of the “left” ideology, further emphasis was laid on such notions as regarding class struggle as the key link, education is aimed at serving the proletarian politics, and education is the tool for class struggle, and priority was given to pushing forward education revolution through political means. This resulted in the absolutization and extremism of the “politicization of education,” causing great harm to its development. On the other hand, it not only depreciated the economic functions and cultural functions of education but also neglected the individual functions of education. What’s worse, it regards people as tools, thus leading to the prevalence of such wrong notions as “study is useless,” despising education, despising knowledge, and despising talents. This not only undermined the development of education but also misled people’s understanding of it.

Since the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh CPC Central Committee held in December 1978, with the establishment of the strategic decisions of reform