What do We Lack, How Shall We Face
—Preface of “Textbook on Humanistic Literacy”
Edited by Ma Xiaoping

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“Never underestimate the meaning and the value of a secondary school teacher, nor the height his power of life could reach and his potential.” I said once. When I was saying these words, I was thinking of a teacher, Ma Xiaoping who had been teaching in Dongguan Secondary School and Shenzhen Secondary School successively. During the past decade, I had the honor to make friends with a batch of outstanding teachers from primary and secondary schools all over the country. Mr. Ma caught my eyes, with his global educational insight, broad and long-term visions and in-depth thoughts. Therefore, I was really shocked when I learnt that Mr. Ma had cancer. I heard later that he edited a book, Humanistic Literacy for secondary students, during his hospitalization. After he was discharged from the hospital, he offered a course on that, and the course was very popular among students. I was moved and inspired. Why did Mr. Ma devote his last years in humanistic literacy education? What were his ideals, idea and worries behind this? I wrote an article A Education Project Racing against the Disaster as the preface of Humanistic Literacy. I sent this article to Mr. Ma who was in critical ill. His wife told me, he was too weak to speak, but he smiled thankfully. We hoped that Mr. Ma could see the published book, but he left us too early unexpectedly. We felt sorry for not being able to realize his last wish in time. Now, after a half year of hard working, this book, which embodies the strength of Mr. Ma’s whole life, has been published finally. His soul can be comforted now. In order to increase the influence of the book, the publisher decided to extend the targeted readers form secondary school students to all young people. I understand and agree with this decision. And I believe it was Mr. Ma’s wish too. The reason why he concerned about the education of secondary school students is because he wanted to lay the foundation of raising the populace’s cultivation. Therefore, when I rewrote the preface, I kept the original contents and added some words for new readers.

Mr. Ma put forward a question at the beginning of the foreword of this book: “What do the contemporary secondary school students lack most?” This might be the most disturbing question when he was seriously ill. And this question made me and all who claimed themselves as the people caring about the secondary school education feel ashamed. Because we have been too insensible to ask such questions.

In fact, every Chinese shall ask himself this question: What indeed do we lack in our lives?

Mr. Ma's answer to this question was even more striking: People we trained do not lack knowledge and skills. “They have knowledge, but are incapable of making judgments. They have skills, but lack consciences.” They have deficiencies in “human civilization, humanistic literacy and civic literacy.” Under our current education system, a generation with knowledge and skills but no humanistic literacy and care might appear.

It’s not only the secondary students that have deficiencies in “human civilization, humanistic literacy and civic literacy.” I said several times that, the economic development in China, didn’t raise our moral level, but caused the moral crisis. We have been caught in the materialism, utilitarianism, consumerism, nihilism and cynicism. The symptoms of moral crisis are reflected in the three deficiencies pointed out by Mr. Ma.

I have to remind everyone, human civilization, humanistic literacy and civic literacy are widely publicized and promoted today in China. We could even say to harangue the humanistic literacy and civic literacy has become a fashion. Just as Lu Xun said, Chinese people like the paronomasia. What they say and what they think could completely be different. Those “Absolute and delicate egoists”, whom I often talked about, are like this. The “absolute” means their only motivation is their own profit. Everything they have done for others and the society is a kind of investment. “Delicate” means they have high intelligence, and they are “well” educated. Everything they have done seems reasonable and legal at surface level. Meanwhile, they are surprisingly sophisticated. They usually show their “loyalty”. They know how to cooperate and act. They are good at using the power of the institution to maximize their benefits and become the members of the vested interest group. Therefore, it’s natural that they will become the successors. These egoists with high IQ talk about “humanism” better than others. But they are only showing their knowledge. As one article in this book says, “Humanistic knowledge does not equal to humanistic literacy”. Only when the knowledge “permeates one's life and behavior, it becomes literacy”. The souls of these egoists have been permeated by lust of power and acquisitiveness. Knowledge (including humanistic knowledge) becomes their tools and measures to gain powers and benefits. Yet, our current system of training, evaluation and selection is very likely to select these people, who are good at cooperating and acting, as leaders. And many of them are being selected continuously. This will really harm the society, and influence the future of our nation badly.