

Empiricism and Idealism: Do we need a mode shift of general education in China?

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In the second half of 2014, a time about to celebrate the tenth year of the implementation of its first round general education reform, Fudan University launched a second round reform of its general education core curriculum after two years' preparation. Tsinghua University has announced to establish "XinYa Academy", following the reform of "BoYa Academy" of SYSU. The two cases mark a turning point of the general education reform in Chinese universities. The paper will study why and how it happened and the mentalities behinds the events, promoting general education reform going further. Models of idealism and empiricism will be used as the ideal types in identifying and comparing the institutional experience of the pioneers and the potential development in the future.

I . Idealism and empiricism

Idealistic-oriented route from holistic way means a set of education programs and curriculum system established according to certain spontaneous general education ideals which is deeply rooted in the spiritual tradition of the university. Another alternative is to implement the ideals successfully in a smaller experimental zone. They both require the leaders with high capacity of combining visions with practices. Meanwhile, it should be supported by sufficient educational resources, such as high quality faculties and enough courses. These conditions are hard to find, and only few universities adopt the route at the beginning .

Empiricism-oriented route means transformation, expansion and integration based on the existing non-professional educational resources, so as to gradually conform to the standards and requirements of general education. Empiricism-oriented action starts from the reality, even though the ideas of the reform come from the

outside. So in recent years most universities have adopted this empiricism-oriented route when the idea of general education sways across China's universities.

II. The initial phase: the rectification and imitation of empiricism

After 1952, influenced by political factors, all of China's universities completely imitated the USSR mode, taking on a highly-professional and vocational education, so as to speed up China's modern science and technology. This utilitarianism-oriented layout, which violates the nature of general education, continued its way through 1990s. In the end of the last century, the reform and opening-up has brought international vision. The two typical empiricism-oriented ways have emerged, though the goal of general education has not been settled yet.

One is the idea of "cultural quality education" including a series of educational goals which could not provided by professional education, serving as a reflection on over-specialization, a rectification rather than a guidance. The other is the introduction of free elective system under the credit system, as an operable practice of the "quality education", in order to broaden students' interest and horizon besides professional courses.

The new trials provide a chance for the professors to convey their expertise to students of other majors and open a window for students to observe the world and life in different perspectives. However, the lack of far-sighted educational goal as guidance led to the situation that the elective courses were only superficial introduction and the idea of "cultural quality education" was being eroded in practice, weighed less by most teachers and students than professional education.

In a chronological view, cultural quality education and free elective courses are the prelude of the general education in China and many universities has to begin its way in the name of "cultural quality education" and to reconstruct the existing elective courses.

Educational reform, including general education, is not a matter of quantity, but to spare room for self-consciousness, self-reflection and self-development of the university students. With the progress of the general education in China, it requires further systematize the ideal and goals of general education which will lead to the spirit of idealism.

III. The deepening phase: the self-consciousness and construction of idealism

The general education based on the idealism is not directly feasible in many Chinese universities and the major problems they confronted with are the following: first, whether the distribution of disciplines is comparatively balanced in the idea of general education? Second, how much does the faculty identify themselves to the ideal and whether they are qualified to put the ideal into their teaching/learning process? The third, how much do the educational vision and the development goals of the students match to each other. The last and the most challenge we are facing now is that how we can form up a set of educational ideals rooted in Chinese tradition and conformed to the student's need in modern society. Some case studies will be taken to depict the process and mode shift of general education in China.

VI. Conclusion

Types-empiricism and idealism, as ideal types, are deliberately extracted from the practice in analyzing general education in China. Of course in reality, we cannot separate the two distinctively, since the undertaking and reforming routes in the real world only have the traits of one of the two tendencies, both of which have their own advantages. Starting from empiricism-oriented route may be a wise choice, since it is reality-based and effectiveness-bounded. The idealism-oriented route is closer to the ideal state, but its prerequisites may be hard to reach for many universities even now. So it is not the intention in this paper to push for the replacement of the empiricism by the idealism, but rather to identify a constructive process for improving general education in China at its turning point. The most notable characteristics of the idealism is that it has a broad vision and a stable value system supporting the general education practices, which rooted in the deep soil of the Chinese society and absorb nutrition from other cultures in the global time.

There is no doubt that the boundary between empiricism and idealism may not be that clear. The key is to understand the valuable treats of the two and to find the best way to play their roles. Wise decision-makers adjust their orientations in certain phases according to the existing resources and keep moving towards the better future by absorbing the advantages of both routes.