

New Wine in Old Bottles: Liberal Arts Education in East Asian Universities

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Abstract

This paper first traces the historical and cultural roots of liberal learning in East Asian (Confucian) and Western traditions to show how they resemble each other and where they depart. It argues that despite the strikingly different legacies, liberal arts education in both East Asia and the West faces increasingly the same challenges as a result of globalization. In a context of new social formation and hybridity cultural identity caused by globalization, conventional divide of knowledge into Eastern and Western learning has become antiquated. Practices of liberal arts education in East Asian universities based on such divide are doomed to be ineffective, if not misleading. The paper then interrogates the current endeavor of liberal arts education in universities in some East Asian societies including the Chinese mainland, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore as well Japan and Korea. It maintains that East Asia's present fever on US-style liberal arts education is a continuity of its longstanding encounters with the West. It warns East Asian universities against missing the point in their hubbub of liberal arts education.