

# **Liberal Arts Education in a Changing Society**

*A New Perspective on Chinese Higher Education*

*By*

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**BRILL**

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# Foreword

*Liberal Arts and China's Higher Education*

*Ruth Hayhoe*

Much of the current literature on Chinese higher education focuses on its expansion, its efforts to create world-class universities, and its contribution to China's economic development. This volume merits attention for its unique focus on the reemergence of an interest in liberal arts education in Chinese universities, which it places in a historical context, both in terms of Western traditions of the liberal arts and China's Confucian tradition. The extensive use of Chinese language source materials relating to the liberal arts brings an unusual balance to this topic. Also, current viewpoints of Chinese scholars and higher education leaders are captured through extensive interviews carried out in three leading universities in Shanghai. Given China's emerging leadership role in the international economy and geopolitics, the insights provided here into the cultural and spiritual dimensions of the vision of Chinese universities for their graduates are extremely important. After all, these young people are destined to take up leading roles at the national, regional, and global level and contribute to the shaping of our common future.

The core argument of this volume emerges gradually and becomes more compelling as it proceeds. A well-organized introductory chapter acquaints the reader with the research process and approach, while the second chapter provides an overview of the history of Chinese higher education in the modern period. The third chapter focuses on definitions of the liberal arts in the Western world and China, as well as key historical aspects of their development, such as the educational contributions of the Jesuit order, the initiatives of institutions such as Harvard and Yale, and persisting influences from China's distinctive educational civilization. Chapters 4 and 5 bring us to the three cases that were selected for intensive study—each a leading institution of a different type and all three located in Shanghai, which is probably China's most cosmopolitan city due to its history. While Fudan University is a leading comprehensive university, Shanghai Jiaotong University has an equally distinguished tradition of leadership in scientific and technological arenas, while the East China Normal University, youngest of the three, carries forward the model of the normal university as an institution giving education and the role of teachers the highest profile. Liberal arts has a distinctive meaning and interpretation for each of these leading institutions, and the degrees of engagement and response on the part of students, faculty, and administrators are different. At the same

## Liberal Arts Education in the Chinese Context

Numerous books and articles have been dedicated to the study of Chinese higher education, but liberal arts education is still a little-researched subject. This is due, in part, to the effort and emphasis placed on specialized or professional education since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 (Gan 2006). Since the early 1990s the reemergence of liberal arts education in China has drawn the attention of Chinese universities, and the Chinese government has realized that this is an important part of "comprehensive quality education" (i.e., a well-rounded education). This chapter provides the academic and historical context for understanding the current state of liberal arts education in Chinese universities. It begins with a focus on liberal arts education in its historical context and variations in the way the liberal arts have been defined. It then introduces the development of Chinese higher education over the past three decades, following China's institution of its Open Door policy and its undertaking of reform in its social, economic, political, and educational sectors. Special emphasis is placed on the last fifteen years, when liberal arts education emerged. This chapter also reviews the history of Chinese education and the development of liberal arts education. The last section of the chapter examines how the Chinese Ministry of Education's policy initiatives have impacted liberal arts education reform at the university level in China.

### Confucian Tradition

The emergence of liberal arts education in China in the last two decades is a new phenomenon (M.L. Li 2006). Nevertheless, higher learning and liberal arts education have a long history dating back more than 2,500 years to the Confucian era. For example, in the *Analects* (2:15), "the Master said: 'To study and not think is a waste. To think and not study is dangerous.'" Hayhoe (1989, 54) states that "traditional Chinese higher education can be traced back as early as the Eastern Zhou dynasty (771–221 CE). By the Tang Dynasty (618–907 AD), there was a whole range of higher institutions, headed by the *Guo Zixue* (school for the sons of the emperor) and the *Tai Xue* (often translated university or greatest learning and study) which took major classical texts of the Confucian school as their curricular content." Around the tenth century CE, during the Tang dynasty, the *Shu Yuan* (書院, academy of classical learning), a system of

## The Liberal Arts Tradition in Education

Liberal arts education has traditionally been related to the classical ideal of the cultivation of well-rounded people who are expected to be well integrated as well as knowledgeable in the sciences, the humanities, the arts, and morality. It can be traced back to fifth-century BCE Greco-Roman and European origins. Socrates' teaching on the reflective life and Aristotle's thought on the examined life not only became the foundation of Western philosophy and tradition, they also had a great impact on Western humanistic studies and particularly influenced modern pedagogical theory and the development of a liberal arts education. In the early twentieth century, the Western model of liberal arts education influenced Chinese society and Chinese higher education. This chapter presents the historical development of liberal arts education in the Western tradition as well as its development in China. The chapter covers several topics: first, liberal arts education in historical context; second, the definition of liberal arts education; and third, a review of literature on liberal arts education in China.

### Liberal Arts Education in the Western Historical Context

The classical Greek model has been a dominant paradigm in liberal arts education (*artes liberales*) globally (Flannery and Newstad 1998). The quest for truth and knowledge in a cosmic-centered world led the ancient Greeks to create a learning *polis* (city), which prepared learners for *paideia* (education). The classical model assumes that truth is both universal and accessible and emphasizes the pursuit of truth through reason as its ultimate end. A curriculum for seeking truth, knowledge, and wisdom was established and consisted of two categories: the trivium (logic, grammar, and rhetoric) and the quadrivium (mathematics, geometry, music, and astronomy). Although it follows in the classical Greek tradition, the humanistic tradition of liberal arts education places more emphasis on seeking freedom. Two aims of a humanistic education are morality and civilization (Glyer and Weeks 1998). Through the study of great works, humanistic education enables one to be a cultured, civilized, and good citizen as seen in Socrates' vision of "the examined life" and Aristotle's idea of "reflective citizenship" (Nussbaum 1997). For Socrates and Aristotle, liberal arts studies were appropriate for the education of free citizens and

## Fudan University, Shanghai Jiaotong University, and East China Normal University: Background and Context

Over the last two decades, a liberal arts education curriculum has been implemented in some top Chinese institutions of higher education to broaden students' learning experience, with the aim of cultivating critical thinking, creativity, moral reasoning and innovation skills. This reform reflects a shift in education away from specialization toward liberal arts education, a shift from training experts in specialized disciplines to educating students so as to "develop understandings of a breadth of topics, enhance their critical thinking abilities, and become well-rounded, educated citizens" (Bourke, Bray, and Horton 2009, 221).

This chapter explores liberal arts education in three well-known universities—Fudan University, Shanghai Jiaotong University, and East China Normal University in Shanghai—by discussing each school with respect to its curriculum development and liberal arts core curriculum modules. It begins by examining some key dimensions of each university: historical background, educational initiatives, and the present implementation of a liberal arts curriculum. The process of how a liberal arts curriculum came into being at each university and how it differs from the old curriculum is analyzed and examined. These portraits of the three universities provide a foundation for the development of the main themes of this book in the following chapters.

### **Fudan University**

Fudan University is unique among the three institutions as the only university founded by the private sector prior to 1949, when the Chinese Communist Party took power in China. It is affiliated with the Society of Jesus, a Roman Catholic religious order founded in 1540. This section begins with a brief historical overview as a background for understanding Fudan's reform of liberal arts education. The overall content of the university's curriculum, institutional policy, development of liberal arts education, liberal arts education curriculum, and common course selection are examined. The tension of course selection is then analyzed. Finally, issues arising from the predominance of utilitarianism are discussed. The conclusion seeks to identify the challenges that lie ahead.

## The Development of Liberal Arts Curricula at Fudan University, Shanghai Jiaotong University, and East China Normal University

From 1949 to the late 1990s, the curriculum in Chinese schools (from primary to college level) was totally unified, and the standard pedagogy was lecturing and memorization. A required common curriculum consisting of Marxist theory, a foreign language, and physical education had always been imposed on all Chinese college students, regardless of the institution. There was little room for creativity and analytical thinking. Since the late 1990s, much of the reform in the Chinese education system, especially with respect to liberal arts education, has focused on the curriculum; the utmost goal of this curriculum reform is to improve the quality of education for the whole nation, enabling it to compete more effectively on the global level. The implementation of the liberal arts curriculum by universities marked a change in the orientation of Chinese academe, from a test-centered pedagogy to the development of well-rounded individuals. Major universities are expected to offer a series of liberal arts education courses outside the students' majors. Under the new curriculum system, students are required to take a particular number of credits in diverse categories: basic core courses, liberal arts courses, distribution courses, concentration courses, and free electives.

Chapter 5 continues the presentation of liberal arts education at Fudan, Shanghai Jiaotong and ECNU universities begun in the previous chapter by focusing on two topics: (1) factors that shaped the development of liberal arts curricula at Chinese universities, and particularly at the three Shanghai institutions; and (2) themes derived from interview data. Factors that influenced curriculum development include the role of instructors, core course development, student attitudes, administrative influence, and the challenge of the labor market. According to many interviewees, those factors are vitally important to the success of liberal arts curricula in the three Shanghai universities. The analysis of these themes is significant for an understanding of the present situation of liberal arts education and the challenges it faces in the three universities and, to a certain degree, the problems of implementing liberal arts education in other universities nationwide.