

Introduction:

Nowadays, general education has come across the Pacific Ocean and spread to more and more top universities in China. Chinese feel confident about this type of education originated from western countries because such education can bring college students extensive knowledge about the world, human cultures, art, spirits and so on. However, there exists the ones who worry about general education.

Qin's (2017) essay found the following:

Just as Xie Qinglong, a Taiwan scholar has said: "General education. seems to contain everything we can imagine——developed humanity, social responsibility, broaden knowledge, notional culture, humans' future.....But if we consider it carefully, we will recognize that this kind of education which contains everything is just an empty box without principle, determination and the possibility to imply." (p.197)

Xie really concerns about the fact of general education and points out the cold reality. In this essay I'm going to argue that the compulsorily required Chinese general education for college students needs to be reviewed and modified.

Background information:

Wang's (2017) essay found the following:

The theory of college general education was first proved by the American professor Alpheus Spring Packard in Bowdoin College. "Our college expects to provide the teenagers a kind of general education, a classic, liberal and scientific education, an education as comprehensive as possible. This kind of education is the preparation of any professional education, an education to give all the students the branches of knowledge and can give the students an integrated and rounded knowledge before they devote themselves to explore a specific field." Professor Packard said (p.79).

Packard’s words indicate the importance and benefits of American general education. However, Though the Chinese general education which comes from the American one seems wonderful based on the American success, the fact is still disappointing. General education originated from Europe, and when this kind of education became mature, America was just established. Because of this historical special, the American college education system kept a lot from matured general education. According to Wang (2017), that’s why American scholar Martha Nussbaum thinks that “general education is mostly an American notion, at least in field of practice” (p.79). The Chinese type of general education systems come from the American type, but the key is that this foreign good is not so suitable for Chinese education system. Here is a chart for us to better understand the similarities and differences between American universities, Chinese universities and neutral universities (Hong Kong and Taiwan’s education system are both western and eastern because of historical reasons).

Chart 1. An overview of general education systems of 5 top universities
(According to the office of academic affairs in Renmin University of China)

University	Subject areas	Course Requirement	Proportion for graduate
Harvard University	Aesthetic and annotation Cultures and beliefs Demonstration and mathematical inference Ethical inference Biosystem science Cosmic physics science Societies around the world America in the world	Complete 8 courses	25%

Taiwan University	<p>Literature and art</p> <p>Historical thought</p> <p>Cultures</p> <p>Philosophy and ethical thinkings</p> <p>Civic awareness and social analysis</p> <p>Quantitative analysis and mathematical literacy</p> <p>Material science</p> <p>Bioscience</p>	18 credit hours	23%
Chinese University of Hong Kong	<p>Divided into 2 parts: common general education and sub-college general education</p> <p>Common general education:</p> <p>1.Chinese culture inheritance</p> <p>2.Nature science and technology</p> <p>3.Societies and cultures</p> <p>4.Ego and humanity</p> <p>Sub-college general education:</p> <p>Regulated by sub-colleges.</p>	<p>15 credit hours for common general education, 6 credit hours for sub-college general education</p>	17%
Peking University	<p>Mathematical and natural science</p> <p>Social science</p> <p>Philosophy and psychology</p> <p>History</p> <p>Linguistics, literature, art and aesthetic</p> <p>Sustainable development of the society</p>	12 credit hours	9%
Fudan University	<p>Literacy and historical classics and their inheritance</p> <p>Philosophical wisdom and critical thinkings</p> <p>Cultural comparison and international horizon</p>	<p>12 credit hours (4-6 courses)</p>	8%

	Scientific spirit and scientific exploration		
	Environment and caring of life		
	Art creation and aesthetic experience		
	Social analysis and modern China		

PS: the data comes from the 5 universities’ official website

(Chart translated from <The Comparison and Experience Revelation of General Education in Several Research-Oriented Universities at Home and Abroad>, Wang Jianshe (2017))

Bad simulation----hasn’t been localized well:

We can notice that the general education system in Fudan university seems similar to that in Harvard University. This agrees with that “all of the Chinese colleges are actually learning from American education systems, especially learning general education from MIT and Harvard patterns” (Qin, 2017, p.193). However, this leads to a fatal problem—the Chinese general education may not suit for domestic college students. “General education was originally from the liberal education in Europe in the Middle Ages. After several large-scale educational campaign in the US, general education had become more and more important in American universities” (Wang, 2017, p.79). Take Harvard as an example—— “Harvard University attaches importance to general education and has reformed its Curriculum Provision deeply 4 times since 20th century, and every reformation referred to liberal art education” (Wang, 2017, p.81).These successful reformation has pushed the general education in Harvard into a very localized position. Though Chinese general education simulated a lot from the US one, the general education in China is still in the initial phase, which means the Chinese general education may not correspond to the Chinese education view, and thus not so suitable for domestic Chinese students who had been educated in the Chinese education view for nearly 20 years.

<Newspaper of Chinese Science> (2019-08-21) published the following:

“Chinese respect the professional courses, while thinking the liberal art lessons not essential. This may result from the different understanding of the word ‘general’. Chinese tend to the meaning of ‘normal’, ‘common’, while the western understanding tends to ‘fundamental’, ‘necessary’.” Huang Kunjin, the one who is honored as “father of Taiwan general education” once said when interviewed by <Newspaper of Chinese Science> on 21st August 2019.

Huang’s words notionally indicate the difference between Chinese and American in the field of general education. It is nice to see that China is trying to improve the education system by using educationally developed countries for reference, but we Chinese must consider our own culture and our own notion. Only if we review, modify the foreign education systems we referred to successfully localize them can we achieve our own success in education field.

A lot of students don’t like, some teachers act disappointingly, Curriculum Provision needs improvement:

One of the cruel facts about Chinese general education is that some Chinese general education courses damage students’ interest. On the one hand this may be resulted from the teachers’ behavior in the courses, as “a group researching about general education thinks that the key of Curriculum Provision is to select and encourage excellent teachers to set up some intriguing lessons” (Qin, 2017, p.193). But according to the survey done by Zhang et al, only 42% of the students in the Xinan Jiaotong University are satisfied with their general education teachers (Zhang et al, 2016, p.80). The bad acts of teachers cause serious problems, for instance “45.2% of the students who drop the class think the drop result from the boring teaching method” (Yang et al, 2016, p.85). On the other hand, this may simply result from that students don’t like the curriculum itself. According to a friend of mine who is studying mathematics in Fudan University, he had to choose one classic from several ancient documents and several foreign literature works. He said that these documents have no relate to his major, so he doesn’t understand why he was required to study them. Many Chinese college students even say that such

courses are “the course where we can boat” because students can do everything they want to do in class as long as not disturb the class order and turn in the final report, and for the final report a lot of students just search online and revise dreaming that the revision can avoid plagiarism immorally.

There is also a special Chinese general education course which is called the ideological and political education. Such courses are not reckoned in the chart above because these are not traditional general education courses. In such courses we students are expected to learn situation and policy, Marxist philosophy, ideological and moral cultivation and so on. Some say that such courses are very necessary for Chinese regime because we are a socialism country, I agree, but some teachers often echo what the books say and the classroom atmosphere is dull, and “88% of the students think the ideological and political courses are boring” (Zhang, 2017, p.152). “By the way, the students in Columbia University who choose Marxist as liberal art lessons study Marxist a lot more carefully than our students in Peking University.” Li Chenjian’s words (Enrollment Office of Peking University, 2017) remind us that we Chinese need to think up ways to review and modify such courses into better ones.

Benefit less compared to the time consumed:

The Chinese general education doesn’t benefit college students so much compared to the time and effort consumed. Simply from chart 1, we can sense that 4-6 courses for 8% is unfair compared to 8 courses for 25%, let alone considering the ideological and political courses. This means that we Chinese students pay a lot for liberal art lessons but get credit hours less than deserved. The imbalance between the time consumed and the benefit gained brings impacts to college students in China. Take science and engineering majors as examples. On the one hand, I admit that receiving diverse education can improve the interdisciplinary ability and help science and engineering majors to be more creative. But on the other hand, general education does consume much time, and more time to receive general education courses, less time to receive professional education courses. However, professional education courses are the most important courses for science and engineering majors to get the knowledge in their fields. After

all, the goal to develop science and engineering is to know the world and benefit people by specified professional discoveries and creations. If a science or an engineering major cannot do well in getting enough professional knowledge, discoveries become fantasies, and creations become imaginations. General education does consume time and thus hinders the mastering of science and engineering knowledge, but there are still people arguing for general education as expected.

Enrollment office of Peking University (2017) published the following:

“An argument issue about general education is the relationship between general education and professional education. My point of view is that successful general education facilitates professional education. Knowing the development of human thought, contacting original documents, daring to do deep and independent thinking, students do a lot better in their major field, doesn't they?” Li Chenjian, vice-president of Yuanpei college, Peking University once argued.

In fact, I pretty agree what he said, but the point is that whether China has got a successful general education. Unfortunately, the answer is no. So far, we haven't succeeded in having an appropriate understanding about general education; We haven't succeeded in having enough excellent teachers to set up some intriguing lessons. We haven't succeeded in finding out Curriculum Provision which suits Chinese students. And most importantly, we haven't succeeded in localizing the general education completely. If we don't review and modify the general education we have, how can we say that Chinese general education is successful and thus facilitates professional education based on the disappointing reality?

There is another possibility that general education could waste college students' time. Sometimes receiving general education courses is just a kind of repeat for those students who already knows the area well because general education is common-orientated education that not only elites can enjoy. In that case the effort we make becomes the waste of talents' time instead of making the students versatile. Some may state: “This could also happen for any course the students will take if the students know what will be taught in class!” I admit that this does happen for any course, but the possibilities are definitely

not the same——do you think it's easier for college students to master their own fields' specific knowledge, or it's easier for college students to know some basic music knowledge and some basic history issue? The truth is, in college, the students who can master a kind of musical instrument and thus master the basic music theories are a lot more than those who knows the knowledge which will be taught in the junior year when they're freshmen. Therefore, why don't we review and modify the Chinese general education system to stop wasting student's time?

Conclusion:

All in all, American-originated Chinese general education system needs to be reviewed and modified because there do still exist several vital shortages which can destroy its initial meanings, such as having not been localized well, damaging students' interests, and occupying too much time.

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