On the Role Orientation of China's Higher Education

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Abstract: Through a survey of the role orientation of China's higher education and the evolution thereof, this thesis puts forward that the role orientation of China's higher education undergoes a dynamic development process; however, there have been misunderstandings and even wrong ideas in the orientation. Consequently, the author of this thesis holds that higher education's role orientation should be orientated towards teaching, scientific research and social service.

Keywords: Higher Education, Role Orientation, Teaching, Research and Social Service

I. Evolution of the Role Orientation of China’s Higher Education

i. Higher Education's Role Orientation before the Founding of the P. R. C

The development of China's modern higher education may be regarded as the outcome of learning from western countries. During the time from the end of Qing Dynasty to the initial post-founding stage of the People's Republic of 1915, China focused on learning from Japan, after the May 4th Movement of 1919 from America, and then from the 1950s onwards and the time following from the former Soviet Union. Consideration the time since 1917 when Cai Yuanpei put into effect reformation of educational system in Peking University, China's modern colleges have experienced no more than 100 years of development. What is worth emphasizing is that Cai Yuanpei played an eminent role in the formation and stabilization of ideas about modern colleges and college institutions. In 1912, Cai Yuanpei, acting as the Educational Minister of Beiyang Government, formulated a decree on college institutions, which laid the foundation for modern college institutions. In this decree, the aim of teaching great learning in universities was established, the difference between science and arts was made, the comprehensiveness of universities' teaching courses on science and liberal arts was emphasized and the institution of professor governing universities was established. When acting as president of Peking University, Cai Yuanpei established in the university the spirit of incorporating various scholarships, maintaining the independence of each scholar, encouraging intellectual freedom, and put forward principles that distinguished universities from non-comprehensive schools. From then on, the idea of maintaining scholarship independence has been stressed consistently, and has dominated the development of China's colleges. Under the influence of this idea, based on learning from western colleges, China's colleges developed three functions: teaching, research, and helping social progress and develop-

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ment.

However, China's higher education nurtured its spirit and college institutions in a situation different from that of western colleges, which were rooted, on the one hand, in the fact that China's higher education originated in the Westernization Movement of the late Qing Dynasty, therefore with a profound background of technologism and toolism, and on the other hand, from the fact that with the shift of ideology, the spirit of liberal education was squeezed out by nationalism and authoritarianism. In 1927, Jiang Jieshi put into effect education policy based on the three Principles of the People, i.e. Nationalism, Democracy and the People's Livelihood, and the institution of instructing and guiding in colleges, which turned into a hard and bitter struggle to maintain the essence of college spirits and institution such as humanism, scholarship freedom, professors governing universities and educating all-round students.

**ii. The Evolution of the Role of Higher Education during the Initial Post-Liberation Period and the Causes thereof**

From the 1950s onwards, China turned to the Soviet Union to learn its college system. The adjustment of schools and departments in colleges in 1952 was a dividing line, which divided the educational development of the twentieth-century mainland of China into two parts, and rebuilt China's educational system on a large scale, so as to build up the basic framework of China's educational system. In May 1952, to meet the needs of economic construction, the Educational Ministry of the P. R. C first put forward the blueprint of adjusting and reforming the schools and departments of colleges nationwide. This adjustment followed the policy for educating qualified students and teachers for industrial construction, developing specialized colleges and consolidating comprehensive universities, which clearly stress the developing industrial colleges, especially the specialized colleges. The method of adjustment was that the former schools of colleges were cancelled, and the former courses like engineering, agriculture, medicine, teacher training, political science and law, and finance and economics were separated into a new specialized college, or were merged into the existing colleges teaching similar courses. The nationwide colleges were similarly adjusted and consolidated into courses and configurations according to the differentiation between universities, specialized colleges and vocational schools. As a result of this adjustment, universities were regarded as higher institutions for cultivating scientific researchers and qualified teachers, and in universities, schools, as administrative units, were cancelled and departments were formed as teaching and administrative units; each administrative area was allowed to establish one university, with a maximum of four; as the focal point of this adjustment, engineering colleges were adjusted based on the principle that specialized engineering colleges were encouraged and supported.

Compared to the all-round education mode in Euro-American universities, the Soviet Union higher-education mode was commonly called specialized education. This was directed by unified and centralized government planning, stressing education directly connected with economic construction, especially engineering and scientific and technological education. Schools, departments and majors were instituted according to industrial sections, trades, and products. Enrollment and graduate distribution were planned, and government monopolizes higher education, paying all the fees for students. In one word, the Soviet Union's education system was highly compatible with its planned economy, economic system and social system, and centralized national resources in order to train specialized experts in a short time. However, there were also inevitable weaknesses and disadvantages.

**II. Research and Appraisal of the Role Orientation of China's Contemporary Higher Education**

Here we are, will what role China's contemporary higher education is supposed to play. Scholars
have different understanding, and therefore have made different statements from different viewpoints.

i. Dualistic Theories on Higher Education's Role

Some scholars, from the perspective of national culture and human civilization, divide the higher education into two aspects as follows:

Firstly, universities play a role in accumulating and passing on national culture and human civilization which can be further divided into two aspects: the former is teaching knowledge, that is, transforming thoughts and culture into normalized and systemized knowledge; and therefore makes universities a cultural and spiritual symbol in the overall structure constituted of people, nation, and society, and as fortress defending culture and spirits. Jin Yaoji, a famous scholar, put forward in his works that, with its internationalization, the way it carries out its performance of the universal function common to modern universities of how to make Chinese universities play a proper role in inheriting and developing Chinese culture, and how to contribute to constructing the modern Chinese ordered civilization, poses a great challenge to the wisdom and imagination of Chinese higher educational worker. He then further pointed out that Chinese universities' prime-important mission is to learn from western colleges good institution and outcome on the one hand, and on the other to highlight the purpose of consolidating Chinese people's independence of mind, scholarship, culture, and education.

Secondly, higher education should keep examining, questioning, and criticizing the fixed typology of social development, the existing cultural system and human being itself, and keep creating new thoughts and culture. And it should also give answers not only to all kinds of theoretical problems raised in real life but also to problems about future China and human development, especially some utterly theoretical problems. This will provide people, nation, and human development and revolution with mental resources, new minds, imagination and creativity. All the above statement reflect the revolutionary aspects of higher education; the so-called revolutionary aspect of higher education is a mental state that is never satisfied with the present situation and keeps seeking innovation, progression, freedom, independence, questioning, and creation.

Colleges need to meet utilitarian requests besides its above stated spiritual functions.

ii. Triarchic Theories of the role of Higher Education

Wei Yu, vice minister of the Educational Ministry and Academician of the Chinese Engineering Academy, thinks that higher education has been agreed to possess the functions of teaching, academic research, and social service, or in other words, developing talents, academic research, and social service. Besides developing the individual's capability, teaching includes the propagation of a wide and systematic cultural inheritance and knowledge. Academic research involves the creation, accumulation and development of knowledge. And service concerns the spread and application of information, and the pursuit of topics and capital support for new research. So it can be concluded that teaching with the above stated three functions incorporated the whole process of knowledge creation, propagation and application. In fact, this triarchic idea is the summary and analysis of the stated various dualistic ideas, in which all the functions of colleges can be found.

With twenty years of reformation and development, the function of scientific research and social service has experienced full development. The meaning of the teaching function and the academic research function has been made clear. The function of social service originated from America's Pragmatism. Dewey, the world famous pragmatic educational expert, has put forward that the ideal of realizing the individual's all-round development and that of increasing social efficiency are of equal importance to education. In fact, these three functions are mutual complementing and promoting, and are unified in the role of the colleges.

iii. Neo-triarchic Theories of the role of Higher
Education's Role

Some scholars with a new outlook on knowledge subdivided the role of colleges into economic function, cultural function and critical function. The so-called economic function refers to colleges' participation in economic life and promotion of economic and technological development. Keen competitiveness demands the conversion of findings of academic research, which is the important reason for the existence of the economic function. However, at the same time, the performance of the economic function must be predicted on abiding by the inherent logics of scholarship, and on the principle of mutual support between colleges' growth and social development. The critical function of modern colleges' creation of culture, combine as the promotion of social culture, which should be strengthened, though the way of functioning has changed. And finally, in the era of a knowledge economy, modern higher education is requested to perform more critical functions. Colleges are able to make performance of the critical function, because there is a constellation of intellectuals. In Russia, the intellectuals are called the social conscience. From a worldwide outlook, it can be found that modern higher education has grown with the development of enlightening spirits, and inborn with a tradition of criticizing. Criticizing is essentially a type of sublation, which includes not only negation, but also construction and improvement, and incarnates a rationalist tradition. There are also some scholars, whose scholarship is based on the tasks of teaching and research, subdividing colleges' role into the functions of creating knowledge, learning and propagating knowledge, and an additional function of converting knowledge into practical productive forces.

III. The Critical Assessment of the Role Orientation of China's Higher Education

Modern has been consisted of two complementing aspects all along: one, as a type of human resource development, it is significant for economic revitalization, and scientific and for technological development, and therefore of strong national utilitarian value; and the other is useful to developing social politics, thoughts and culture, maintaining and passing on cultural traditions, unifying and holding together society, and molding people's character, which is essentially the non-utilitarian aspect of education, and realized through education in the liberal arts. Consequently, developing countries determined to surpass developed countries are facing severe tasks of how to maintain education's humane values and meaning at the same time as developing scientific and technological specialized education, and how to universalize education and common education and to prevent imbalance and abnormality of education. The adjustment in the 1950s is a failure to some extent, though there have been some achievements, because this specialized education mode is at the cost of weakening liberal arts, and leads to the narrowing specialized student. The overemphasis of specialized education means the impairment of the comprehensiveness and completeness of science and culture.

The specialized education mode is convenient to train large numbers of students with same specialty-background, but it is difficult to train students in adaptability and creativity. Overspecialized institutions of specialties becomes more and more incompatible with the rapid updating and upgrading of knowledge and technology, shifting careers, and rapid social flow in modern society. It is also one of the causes leading to many specialized workers out of appropriation with practical jobs and therefore resulting in waste of talents.

The specialized education mode has also obscured school's purpose and aim of both teaching knowledge and molding moral character. The aim of teaching knowledge and molding moral character is factually separated, with molding moral character simplified as education of political theories that is carried on by specialized administrative organs, organizations, and personnel. Consequently, the former
dual roles as knowledge instructor and moral model of teachers were separated. The replacement of political education with the cultivation of value, and cultural and moral education exhausted the humane essence of school education. With the adjustment in 1950s, a scientific researching system with academies as centers was established, detached from the college system, which obscured the function of modern colleges as scientific research center, and further led to the dislocation between teaching and research. This dislocation between teaching and research, and the dislocation between specialties and basic courses resulted in the disharmony between school education and social needs, and the overemphasis on theoretical knowledge left most of students short of capabilities in dealing with practical problems.

Fortunately, since the 1980s, these above stated disadvantages have by and by been redressed. In spite of this, one of the primary tasks of reformation and internationalization has been to continue to overcome systematic disadvantages, emancipate minds, update thought, and build up a new higher education system, that is, compatible with the market economic system and democratic political system, international progress and modern life style.

Nowadays, traces of a planned system can still be found in China's higher education, of which post-graduate enrollment can be taken as an evidence. The participants have to acquire approval from their original administrative units before signing on for such examination. If they do not acquire approval, they would have to choose the "trusting mode". In the so-called "trusting mode", the participant has to sign a tri-lateral contract with his original unit and his postgraduate school. This contract poses many constraints upon the participant, among which the file administration is the greatest hindrance for the participant, if he wants to work in another unit. The institution of file administration is the aftermath of the planned economy, which hampers the effective distribution of human resource, and degenerate into a warm-bed fostering corruption and bureaucracy. Obviously, the three functions of modern higher education, that is, teaching, academic research, and social service have nothing to do with files. Consequently, whether based on the theoretical studies or on positive studies, the role orientation of China's higher education proves to be a dynamic and mutual influential process: on one hand, colleges' development calls for such understanding of the role of higher education, and on the other, time entails the revolution in higher education. In light of all the above statement, the author of this thesis thinks that colleges' role should be originated towards to teaching, research, and social service.

Notes:
[1] For convenience of discussion, the term "modern" in this thesis refers to the period from the beginning of the 20th century to the beginning of the 20th century.
[2] For easy wording, this thesis mixes up the use of "higher education" and "college", though they are not completely same in meaning.