



## On American and Chinese Higher Education

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### Abstract

The main differences between American and Chinese higher education are displayed in administrative system, teaching methods, curriculum, assessment and moral education. However, the two countries also have enlightened each other for the past periods in educational idea and other aspects of higher education. The two countries both have advantages and shortcomings, so they open to each other and take into some advanced ideas and measures that will make great contributions to the rapid development of higher education.

**Keywords:** China and America, Higher education, Educational idea, Outlook

### 1. The simple introduction to American and Chinese higher education

In December 1977, Chinese government recorded the examination for higher education which marked the Chinese education system reformation from the "Great Cultural Revolution" and ended "the recommended systems for entrance of higher education." As a social consequence, all students were so encouraged to follow this policy that they began to understand that the fortune was no longer left to tender mercy of officials at various levels, but depended on the efforts of one's knowledge, and they began to make much effort in an all-time concentration of learning. Obviously, it was a great achievement in the development of Chinese higher education and even a positive movement to expedite the science and technology in China. Now, Chinese higher education systems, which were established since the reform in 1977 have been carried out and developed for about 30 years. When reviewing and meditating up on this system, we can find out some negative problems. Under this system, there were so many compulsory subjects that they forced all students to develop at a same pace. Therefore, it was impossible to groom the student individually, which is inevitable to train higher level talent. At the beginning of 1990s, Chinese higher education gradually introduced the credit system, in which students can select some subjects upon their own interest. At this time, so many optional subjects were set up. However, Students in Chinese higher education must spend much time and efforts cramming such trashes only for the diploma and the academic degree, which is only issued from the Chinese higher education. On one hand, most students are only concerned what is with in the examination when they studied for it. Passing the lottery examination is the only purpose of their study and learning. We call this a test-oriented learning method. Therefore, there are so many students who make tricks in such lottery examinations regardless of discipline. Under this method, the student's background knowledge is so narrow that they can not be convenient or competent in the practice. On the other hand, most subjects are still taught in the traditional Chinese way -- the teacher does all the talking and writing on the blackboard and the students write down what the teacher says and copies from the blackboard. Furthermore, teachers always teach what the textbook says, and then give the students the test context that contains the test question, so the student can only cram up the context to get high marks in the lottery examinations. However, we should be aware that the Chinese higher education has its strong points, such as strict management system of student's eligibility, the respect and love between students and teachers.

Over the past several decades, American higher education has undergone a remarkable expansion and democratization. In 1900, only four percent of high school graduates attended college. Today, 75 percent of high school graduates will spend some time in college. As Louis Menand (*an official of American Education Administrative Department*) recently noted in the New York Times Magazine, the democratization of higher education is one of the American greatest accomplishments after the World War II. Half the work forces now pass through college, while colleges and universities initially opened up their enrollments to returning girls and other primarily whites, males of the middle and working classes. Today many more white women and ethnic minority students are gaining access to higher education. In the current higher education job market, there are many qualified minority and white women candidates seeking faculty positions. A diverse faculty will mean better educational outcomes for all students. To serve current and future students, multiple and diverse perspectives are needed at every level of college teaching and governance. The more diverse college and university faculty are, the more likely all students will be exposed to a wider range of scholarly perspectives and to ideas drawn from a variety of life experiences. It is also important that colleges and universities transform what and how they teach to serve new students well and to prepare all students for an increasingly diverse world. Since white

women and minority faculty are also frequently those who take scholarship and teach in new directions, their presence on campus also makes this goal easier to obtain. Colleges and universities are indeed interested in hiring more white women and ethnic minorities as faculty members. And in industry, many colleges and universities have set up narrowly-tailored affirmative action goals and timetables for diversifying their faculty. For those white women and ethnic minorities who manage to attain a Ph.D., enter the academic job market, and finally obtain an interview, so racial or gender background may be one of many factors considered in hiring. However, it is more likely that the prestige of a candidate's graduated schools and the connections of a candidate's mentors will be more decisive in the hiring process. In a word, American higher education is still on the way of development in order to keep balance of employment.

In the recent centuries, American economy is continuously at the world leading position. The science invention and the technology advancement also are among the best. In this century, 1/3 of all Nobel Prize new owners are Americans. These achievements obtained, besides benefit from the natural and humanistic environment of US, also give credit to the very great degree of the American educational system. The American higher education was recognized as the best education in the world, said the American Embassy in China culture official's speech. The distinctive characteristic of American higher education is the broad knowledge, which involves the domination to be multitudinous, and teachers can choose the contents freely. It does not have the national uniformed educational system, and every state authority is responsible for the local education. US has the multitudinous institutes of higher education, some 3,600 colleges and universities provide the undergraduate courses to educate, and some 1,700 colleges and universities provide the postgraduate courses to students. The related investigation indicates that on the education quality of elementary and middle schools stage, US in the world place is only about 30, but to the university stage, the situation has changed. The students start to rely on their creativity to give full play. Thus every year it attracts more than 500,000 foreign students to accept the higher education in US. This phenomenon is indeed worthy thinking.

## **2. The comparison between American and Chinese higher education**

To compare American and Chinese higher education slightly will discover that the educational idea between them differs greatly. China pays more attention to the construction of knowledge system as well as the knowledge accumulation, training students to inherit the knowledge and respect the academic authority; comparatively, US emphasizes the student's ability to utilize the knowledge and exert themselves, cultivating their critical spirit as well as the ability of knowledge development and active innovation. Especially the differences between Chinese and American higher education mainly displays in the following aspects:

### *2.1 Education administrations system*

To be different with other countries, the American higher institutions have not the uniformed system of taking an examination of matriculation. The majority of colleges and universities evaluate students according to their achievements and performances at high schools. Students can choose their major according to their own hobbies and the individual development, and also may continuously finish all curriculums to graduate or choose to take the midway temporary leave till conditions are ripe when again completing the studies. However, this does not mean reducing the requirements to students, because it is quite difficult to attain the degree. On the contrary, Chinese higher education still follows the procedure which is strict at entrance but casual to out. Students entering a university need layer upon layer to take tests and overcome one difficulty after another. Once they stride in the university gate then to be of great success, obtaining the degree also is an easy matter. This pattern "tests deciding the lifelong" nurturing humanity makes the young unable to realize their dreams of pursuing advanced higher education. Some materials demonstrate that, US is the first country to realize the higher education popularity in the world.

### *2.2 Teaching methods*

In US, teachers' duty is not what they have taught the students, but to help them construct knowledge. The teaching process takes the students' independent thoughts and encourages them to propose something new and different. In the teaching method, emphasizing indefinite teaching methods, teachers encourage the students to take participate in the teaching process, even encourage them to challenge the academic authority. In this kind of free and loose environment, students can be more positive on studies and initiative concretion, applying theory to the practice easily. But in China, many teachers still adopt "force-feed type" teaching method. They teach with sweat streaming, while the students hear drowsily. This kind of teaching method, not only has violated the original intention of teaching and studying, but leads students' comprehensive quality and the lifelong study skills to sell at a discount greatly. Teachers sing "the one-man show" in the teaching process phenomenon, while in the American university is extremely rare. Whether students can make great progress or not, the teaching method plays an important role.

### *2.3 Curriculums*

The American higher education inherits one kind of coherent fusion the "liberal education". Students in university period except compulsory subjects like chemistry, economic, politics or literature, but also must surmount the different disciplines, from the moral philosophy, ethics to the mathematical logic, form the science to the humanities, all widely browses from

the history to other cultural research. The American university is clear about “service for the economic development”, “the scientific research” and “the teaching” together as the three big functions of higher education. The education service manifests in the curriculum and the specialized establishment must continuously satisfy the social demands, setting up curriculum and specialty which the society needs. We may see its broad specialty according to the various bachelors and degrees. Except the traditional degrees such as science, labor, economic, politics, literature, history, bachelors or degrees which the American universities newly increase also have: humanities bachelor, financial bachelor, teaching method bachelor, nurses bachelor, religious education bachelor, lectures bachelor, social work B.A. degree and so on. But China on premature has implemented so-called “the professional education” in the higher education stage. This kind “the professional education” in disguised form evolution is eager for quick success and immediate gain of “the employment education”, which is separated from the social demand in the discipline establishment, artificially dividing into separated fields to cause the students' knowledge to be narrow, and the comprehensive quality and the innovation ability cannot follow the modern development. Renowned economist Professor Li Yenning believes that the specialized and meticulous division of university does not favor of students' development and the students' wide browses can form the perfect knowledge structure, which is the foundation of innovative ability.

#### *2.4 The evaluated criteria to students*

In American disposition universal characteristics, one always is full of self-confidence and also praising and encouraging other people, which is the general evaluate criteria to students and believe that each student has the potential of development by themselves. Students can achieve a lot at the interesting subjects; therefore, American universities emphasize students' ability of innovation, analysis and the ability of solving questions. Identical tests often do not have the only answer, but request students to display the imagination and the creativity as far as possible, even if “indulges in fantasy”, as long as stand to reason can result in the high score. A doctor of the People's University of China in US reasonably utilizes “Contradictory Discusses”, “On Practice” to write an article from the different viewpoints with teachers, but finally gain “A”. However, in Chinese university, the test still is the main weapon for teachers to inspect the students' studying situation, and the score still is the students' lifeblood. The tests pay more attention to student's memory and the description ability. Moreover, only high-scored students are good ones, but the common academic students who are clever in trivial matters belong to another kind. This kind of one-sided evaluation criteria has written off many students' creativities, the enthusiasm and the desire to do better.

#### *2.5 Students' personal characteristics and the way of moral education*

The American universities take students' character guidance extremely, especially honesty education. The schools hope all students to learn the useful things, if the students are not honest, they will be given the serious punishment, even lose the school degree. Moral education then is mainly through strengthening the citizen education, enhancing the students' service consciousness. Therefore, the university organizes the students to participate in the social service frequently, raising students' citizen consciousness. Some students have also established “the national homeless question-teaching”, “the student voluntary committee” and the associated organization, participating in the environmental government of community, either soliciting donations for some social groups, or visiting mental-disease hospital, nursery institution or joining in the activity of saving drug addicts. But the so forth social activities are also rare in Chinese universities, majority of our moral education also limit to preaches and the system restraint with the deficiency in humanity, efficiency and direction.

### **3. The enlightenment on educational idea**

At present, Chinese higher education is switching from “the education for exams” to “the education for all-around development”. Choosing any type of the education idea not only relates to the success or failure of the education for all-around development, moreover, will relate to each young scholar's life development and even the entire nation's future. The higher education reform should respect the history and national conditions, inheritance and development developing simultaneously, absorption and innovation compatible, might as well first grasp “the individual education” in the education for all-around development. So-called “the individual education” refers that teachers should take the students' individual development as the basis, discover and develop each student's advantages in the process of adopting “the individual teaching” method, and fully respect their individual values and demands. Their differences lead to guide action according to the individual circumstances, training students in accordance with their aptitude. Advanced management idea and successful measures in the American higher education have greatly influenced the “the individual education” in Chinese higher education.

#### *3.1 Higher education should establish humanist educational idea.*

Persisting in humanist and education serving for society is the dialectical unification. Individual development is the premise and foundation of social development. Progress and innovation in society depend on educated people. Therefore, in choosing teaching goals, the higher education will have to face the modernization, face the world truly, face the future, and will set up the scientific talented personal values. So in all educational reform practice, taking students as the main body and

fully respecting the individuality and the personality, will train students to have the rich spirit, innovative and creative ability as a new generation.

### *3.2 Teaching tubes should realize the unification and flexibility of the system.*

The teaching control system guarantees the school interior normal teaching work and the entire set of rules and regulations. The system management is necessary, but the key point is that system purely for the tube person, or management for the person. At present, many universities still carry out the management of making the person dissimilation, pay more attention to the seriousness, humanities and unification of system, but insufficiently to humanities, rational and flexible consideration. "The individual education" needs the control system that can take into consideration of the community and the individual. For example, in the school register controlling system, there is a richer elasticity permitting the students' midway temporary leave because of the economic condition, the family and other reasons, then again goes back to school. Schools should respect the students' specialized option and allow them to transform specialty freely, cross-specialized choice, and an elective specialty with auxiliary repairs.

### *3.3 Teaching practices should give full prominence to students' sense of participation.*

"The individual education" puts the emphasis on awaking and transferring students' main body consciousness, initiating and displaying students' creativity. It both pays great attention to encouraging their activities and teachers' leading role in the process of teaching and learning. Therefore, the teaching should aim at the different aspects according to their personalities, such as the strategy, the technology, and the widespread use of "the free discussion type", "the independent research type" and so on the science teaching method. Let the teachers and students produce the collision and the spark in the thought exchange, encouraging the students boldly to innovate and challenge new concepts.

### *3.4 Multiplex appraisal system to students should be established and consummated.*

"The individual education" cannot leave off the transformation of students' evaluated criteria. Since long ago the evaluated criteria were too simplified and patterned that lead the college education to deviate directly from students' intrinsic development requests. While the American universities' appraisal is worthy thinking deeply very much, for example, the Princeton University's appraisal target to students mainly has 3, named the brains quality (the intelligence quality, learning capability, creativity and so on), the moral character quality (sense of responsibility, values, judgment and so on), the quality of making contribution to the school.

Chinese higher education also has its advantages. For example, it pays more attention to the master of knowledge, which is the basis to cultivate students' capability and helpful for the research of theory. This advantage has been absorbed by American higher education, which greatly emphasizes the ability and neglects the basic knowledge all the time. American higher education is still on its way to all-round development.

## **4. The 21st century outlook on American and Chinese higher education**

Higher education in China, CCHEE (Century China Higher Education Exhibition) is held overseas every year. The project is supervised and coordinated by the Department of International Cooperation and Exchange, the Ministry of Education of China, organized by China Education Association for International Exchange (CEAIE), and implemented by China Center for International Educational Exchange (CCIEE), which is affiliated to CEAIE. Having been successfully held in Russia, France, Canada and USA in 2002, 2003, 2004 and 2005 respectively, the 21st Century China Higher Education Exhibition (CCHEE) is a brand project of the "going out to reach the world" for the Chinese higher education, approved by Ministry of CCHEE intends to implement the policy of "intensifying education exchanges" along with the 16th National People's Congress of China (NPC), the principle of "Chinese universities going out to the world" raised by Madame Chen Zhili, the State Counselor at the Sino-Foreign University Presidents Forum, "to promote the long-term collaborative modules between Chinese higher institutions and high level foreign universities" advocated by Minister Zhou Ji at the 2004 Annual Conference on Education. As an important move for China's higher education going out to the world, the theme of CCHEE is "Opening, Cooperation, Innovation, Development", with emphasis of the following:

- To present the achievements of China's higher education, highlight the "211 Project";
- To promote international communication and cooperation between Chinese senior educators and their foreign counterparts in higher education;
- To attract overseas students and teachers from other countries to study, teach, and conduct scientific and technological research in China. The best way to improve the Chinese higher education is opening it to the world. About fifty Chinese higher institutions and organizations are going to send the exhibition and its associated events to other countries.

American higher education in the 21st century: social, political, and economic challenge. American colleges and universities are social institutions--embedded in the wider society and subject in various ways to its constraining forces. In American Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century, researchers who share this understanding explore the new realities of higher education and consider its greatest challenges for the next century. In order to increase scrutiny by the media and the public,

universities must wrestle with a wide range of issues generated by their various external constituencies. Academic leaders rearrange their curricula to meet demands for multiculturalism. They seek an appropriate response as race-based admissions procedures coming under attack. They assess students learning and monitor faculty productivity--while simultaneously responding to call for the end of tenure and for explanations of why the cost of attending college has risen so dramatically. Using the changing social, political, and economic contexts of colleges and universities as lens for examining these complex issues, the contributors seek to understand the forces--whether unique to our era or rooted in the past--that currently influence higher education and will continue to do so in the next century. Whether discussing finance or technology or academic freedom or the canon, the authors find that relationship between academic institutions and their surrounding societies has generally been ambivalent: both involved and withdrawn, servicing and criticizing, needing and being needed. Understanding the complex interplay between institutions and external forces is the key to guide the endeavors of faculty, students, and administrative leaders alike. Synopsis Largely critical of recent attacks on the state of American higher education coming from advocates of privatization, reinventing government, total quality improvement, and so on, the eighteen contributions in this collection are presented by Altbach (higher education, Boston College), Berdahl (emeritus, higher education, U. of Maryland at College Park), and Gumport (education, Stanford U.) as an attempt to situate American higher education in broad social context in order to evaluate the legitimacy of the arguments of its critics. Papers explore the roles of external constituencies such as the federal government, state governments, the courts, and nongovernmental entities; as well as internal constituencies such as the faculties, the students, and administrations. Others examine particular issues, including autonomy and accountability, academic freedom, finance, technology, graduate education, the curriculum, race, and the commercialization of higher education. Universities focus on the complex relationships between higher education and the social and political forces that affect higher education. Specific topics include academic states and higher education, the dilemma of presidential leadership, financing higher education, and the multicultural revolution and traditionalist revolt. In a word, US and China should take into the advantages from each other and overcome the shortcomings. The best way to improve the Chinese higher education is opening it to the world, which means introducing the competitiveness into it through inviting foreign teachers into Chinese universities and sending Chinese teachers to the Western countries to update their knowledge. It is necessary to expand the academic field to employ the foreign teachers. Every one should be responsible for the education career with enough confidence and efforts.

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