

# Social Changes and the Revival of Liberal Education in China since the 1990s

**Chen Xin**

Hiroshima University  
Japan

China's higher education placed exclusive emphasis on narrowly specialized education and neglected liberal education before the 1990s. However, along with the dramatic social changes since the 1990s, liberal education has revived in China. This paper first examines the characteristics of higher education in China before the 1990s, and then explores the ideas, policies, and specific measures in higher education reform since the 1990s within the larger social context, and thirdly, with a case study on the "liberal education curriculum" introduced by Peking University in 2000, it investigates the ideas, contents and characteristics of liberal education. Finally, it reveals the rationale for the liberal education revival in China.

Key Words: social changes, liberal education, revival, China, 1990s

The two terms, liberal education and general education, are perceived to have similar meanings and are used interchangeably in discussing higher education (Ben-David, 1977; Boyer, 1987; Gaff, 1983; Harvard Committee, 1945; Kellams, 1985; Levine, 1978; Task Force on Higher Education and Society, 2000), though controversial opinions exist (Bell, 1966; Gary, 1988). Moreover, that the concept of liberal or general education has been variously described and interpreted appears inconsistent and contradictory (Boyer & Levine, 1981, pp. 2-3; Levine, 1978, pp. 3-4). This paper regards the two terms as synonyms and utilizes liberal education to indicate "that part of a student's whole education which looks first of all to his life as a responsible human being and citizen" (Harvard Committee, 1945, p. 51) and to specify "the breadth component of the undergraduate curriculum" that "generally involves study in several subject areas and frequently aims to provide a common undergraduate experience for all students" (Levin, 1978, p. 3).

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**Chen Xin**, Graduate School of Education, Hiroshima University. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Graduate School of Education, Hiroshima University, Higashi-Hiroshima, 739-8524, Japan. Electronic mail may be sent to chenx@hiroshima-u.ac.jp

Liberal or general education has widely been considered the continuing theme in the American undergraduate program for a long period of time. Since the Yale Report of 1828 (Hofstadter & Smith, 1961, p. 275), perhaps the first American statement defending liberal education, there have been several periods of curriculum reform in the United States (Rudolph, 1977). In the twentieth century there were three times when liberal education was revived across the country (Boyer & Levine, 1981), namely, the two earlier periods occurred immediately preceding and following the World Wars, and the third one took place from the late 1970s. As regards the rationale of the three revivals, Kellams (1985) argues that, along with the progress of industrialization and the shift of social preoccupations in the United States, liberal education reform has been initiated continuously and cyclically as a counter-balance to the overspecialization which occupies a predominant position in the undergraduate curriculum. In this sense, the revival of liberal education is seen as the corrective for the increasing concentration of a narrowly specialized education in order to meet the demands of social changes (Kanter, Gamson, London, Arnold, & Civian, 1997; Thomas, 1962, p. 68).

Chinese higher education had a long tradition of liberal education (Israel, 1983, 1998). During the period from the

1920s to the 1940s, under the leadership of some outstanding American-educated Chinese scholars, many prestigious Chinese universities developed and implemented the American-style undergraduate programs (Hayhoe, 1996; Huo, 1999; Li, 1999). For example, in the year 1935 Qinghua University, one of the prominent national universities, offered a liberal education program to all its freshmen students in the faculties of arts, sciences and law, which was composed of Chinese, English, Mathematics or Logic, History of China or Western History, and at least one subject of natural sciences, viz., Physics, Chemistry, Geology or Biology (Qinghua Daxue Xiaoshi Yanjiushi, 1991, pp. 170-171).

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Chinese higher education was "converted into new specialized education from the old liberal education" ("Gaodeng Xuexiao", 1953, p. 1) by the Soviet-derived reform in the early 1950s summarized under the term "the reordering of colleges and departments". Both studies of Otsuka (1996) and Hu (2001) explore in detail the process of the reform mentioned above, while the latter focuses on the establishment of narrowly specialized education in higher curriculum. Since then, liberal education had been neglected in China. According to Israel (1983), Chinese higher education in the early 1980s was "light years away from liberal education" and the recreation of liberal education remained "a Utopian aspiration" (pp. 97, 115).

However, along with the transformation of the economic system, i.e. from a centrally planned economy to a market economy in the 1990s, tremendous changes have taken place in Chinese higher education. One of the most striking changes is the undergraduate curriculum reform toward recreating liberal education program. In September, 2000, less than 20 years later, Peking University, the leading university of China, launched a new program called "liberal education curriculum" in order to offer liberal education to all its undergraduates (Beijing Daxue Jiaowubu, 2000). Following Peking University, other top universities, such as Qinghua University and Fudan University, have also recreated liberal education program in undergraduate curriculum (Shen, 2002, p. 1; Zhou & Fan, 2001, p. 2). In addition, ordinary universities and colleges as well have restructured the over-specialized program toward a liberal one. Therefore, reconstruction of liberal education can be considered the focus of undergraduate curriculum reform in today's China.

This paper first examines the characteristics of higher education in China before the 1990s, and then explores the ideas, policies, and specific measures in higher education reform since the 1990s within the larger social context, and

thirdly, with a case study on the "liberal education curriculum" introduced by Peking University in 2000, it investigates the ideas, contents and characteristics of liberal education. Finally, it reveals the rationale for the liberal education revival in China.

Being the largest developing country in the world, the Chinese experience may have implications for other developing countries with reference to the necessity for creating liberal education programs in a rapidly changing world (Task Force on Higher Education and Society, 2000).

### **Characteristics of Higher Education before the 1990s**

By the early 1990s, Chinese higher education had the following striking characteristics.

#### ***Fragmentation and Disproportion of Disciplines***

As the legacy of the well-known Soviet-inspired higher education reform initiated in 1952, higher education institutions at the undergraduate level in China in the early 1990s generally included two types: comprehensive universities, and specialized universities and colleges. The so-called comprehensive universities, offering only programs in theoretical disciplines, were actually like colleges of arts and science. The specialized universities and colleges consisted of institutions of science and engineering, agriculture, forestry, medical science, teacher education, languages, finance and economics, political science and law, physical education, and fine arts. The specialized institutions in the field of science and engineering were set up in accordance with particular governmental sectors or product areas such as mechanical engineering, iron and steel engineering, aeronautics and astronautics, metallurgy, geology, and textiles, etc. Each specialized institution mainly offered programs in their own field. Higher education institutions almost had no connections with each other because of the rigid barriers between them.

Under such a model of a higher education system, the theoretical and practical disciplines were separated. For example, basic sciences such as mathematics, biology and physics were only established in comprehensive universities, being separated from agriculture, medicine, and engineering; law was founded in specialized institutions of political science and law without philosophy departments.

Moreover, in the whole higher education system, the numbers of specialized institutions were disproportionately

larger than that of comprehensive universities. In 1990, among the total 1,075 regular higher education institutions, there were merely 50 comprehensive universities, but 286 specialized institutions in engineering, 122 in medicine and pharmacy, 80 in finance and economics, and 59 in agriculture etc. (Zhongguo Jiaoyu Nianjian Bianjibu, 1992, pp. 95-96).

Such a higher education system with no genuine comprehensive universities can hardly provide a diverse academic atmosphere on campus. Moreover, the fragmentation of disciplines runs in the opposite direction to the contemporary trends of scientific integration.

### ***Narrowness, Overspecialization and Uniformity of Programs***

By the early 1990s, the main organizing unit of Chinese undergraduate curriculum was “specialization” (*Zhuanye*) established within the department, which was also a reproduction of the Soviet model in the 1950s. Specialization was the core and fundamental unit in universities, because enrollment of students, organization of courses, requirement for graduation, and job-assignment for graduates, etc. were all carried out based on it. Moreover, while teachers belonged to the departments, they were organized within teaching and research groups in accordance with their specializations. Each group was responsible for teaching several related courses in a particular specialization.

China’s universities set up specializations based on the “List of Specializations at the Undergraduate Level in Regular Higher Education Institutions” (*Putong Gaodeng Xuexiao Benke Zhuanye Mulu*) formulated by the Ministry of Education, which stated purpose, standards, and key required courses for each specialization. By the early 1990s, specialization was defined according to fields of study, fields of profession, and even products. Its definition, especially in the fields of science and engineering, was extremely narrow. For example, mechanical engineering was divided into 28 specializations, such as mechanical designing and production, heat working engineering and facilities, casting, forging engineering and facilities, textile machinery, food machinery, agricultural machinery, printing machinery, etc. (Guojia Jiaoyu Weiyanhui, 1989, p. 3).

Universities organized undergraduate programs for each specialization, and the program for one specialization was “self-sufficient” and irrelevant to others, even within the same department (Hayhoe, 1996, p. 79). The teachers of theoretical mechanics were not able to offer courses on material mechanics and vice versa, and students specializing in solid mechanics almost knew nothing about fluid

mechanics (Qian, 1986, p. 53).

With regard to the structure of the undergraduate curriculum, the program was organized in an extremely narrow and specialized way. Chen (1984), professor of economics at Peking University, noticed the problem that, “for the students specializing in political economics, courses in humanities and natural sciences, even courses about economics, which were not specified in the teaching plan of the specialization, were considered something outside the specialization” (pp. 20-21).

As regards the curricular content, the undergraduate program was organized in an exceptionally uniform way, which was demonstrated by the large proportion of required courses in the curriculum. According to the undergraduate program for the students specializing in physics of Peking University in the early 1990s, the number of credits in the free electives was 9, which was limited to specialized or specialization related courses offered by the same department, merely 5.5% of the total 164 credits required for graduation (Du & Ju, 1998, p. 242).

Students trained under such narrow, overspecialized and uniform curricular pattern were “intellectually narrow, unenlightened in their thinking, slow to react, and short-sighted” (Xia, Liu, Feng, & Zhang, 1981, p. 38), and “lack of individuality - one thousand persons with one face” (Jin, 1998, p. 238).

The above characteristics of the higher education in China before the early 1990s reflect the fundamental features of a higher education system under a centrally planned economy, and also reveal the strong influence of the Soviet model on the Chinese higher education (Huang, 2001, p. 147).

While liberal education has various definitions, the fundamental feature of its curriculum is broad and flexible. From this perspective, Chinese higher education by the early 1990s with the above characteristics can be seen as being completely opposite to liberal education.

## **Social Context of Higher Education Reform since the 1990s**

Howard (1992) argues that “the problem of curricular reform is an instance of the larger problem of social reform, and must be seen within the larger context of a society” (p. 73). Since the 1990s, China has enjoyed relative social stability with a constantly rapid economic growth. It is commonly accepted that, in this period, the most significant social change in China is the adoption of a market economy, promoted by the celebrated speeches of Deng Xiaoping

during his visits to the south of China in the early 1992. The transition from a centrally planned economy to a socialist market economy has led to a series of profound social changes in China (Min, 1998, p. 105), which has strong impact on the undergraduate curriculum.

### ***Loosening of State Control***

In a market economy, it is the market demand and supply, not the governmental plan, primarily determines the allocation and utilization of resources. Consequently, the introduction of market mechanism in the 1990s has radically changed the role of Chinese government in the economic processes. The most fundamental change is the loosening of state control of production by separating government from enterprises and allowing enterprises greater autonomy to make decisions. In the field of higher education, the famous official document issued in 1993, "Guideline for Educational Reform and Development in China" reiterates the necessity for allowing more autonomy to universities and colleges (He, 1998, pp. 3467-3472).

### ***Contracting of Employment System***

China's employment system in the period of the centrally planned economy was characterized by what were called the "three irons", i.e. life-time employment (the "iron rice bowl"), state-administered wages (the "iron wage"), and state-controlled assignment of jobs (the "iron chair"). The "Labor Law", promulgated in 1994, requires that all employees, regardless of the ownership type of their employers, be placed on labor contracts. From the state-controlled job assignment to a comprehensive labor contract system that represents the establishment of market-oriented employment system in China (Ding & Warner, 2001). In contrast to the period of job assignment under the planned economy, the emerging market-oriented system will probably be characterized by frequent job and career shifts (Agelasto & Adamson, 1998, p. 135).

### ***Shifting of Social Values***

Zai (1998) reveals the dispute about whether the social values in China are collective-oriented or individual-oriented. However, it is widely considered that under the period of planned economy, the main stream of social values were collective-oriented or altruism while the collective will and interest had supreme power and absolute authority (Lu, 1998;

Williams, Liu, & Shi, 1997). Along with the process of implementation of a market economy, altruism has declined and individual-oriented social values (or individualism) have obtained tremendous attention from the public and individuals. The rise of individualism in China means that the ordinary Chinese may have the opportunity to make their own choices and to achieve their personal goals in life and in work as well (Williams, et al., 1997).

## **Ideas and Policies of Higher Education Reform since the 1990s**

This part will examine the ideas and policies of higher education at the undergraduate level since the 1990s.

### ***Status of Higher Curriculum Reform***

Before the early 1990s, Chinese higher education either overemphasized its political function in the 1960s and 1970s, when higher education was employed as an "instrument of political struggle", or stressed its economic function in the 1980s, when higher education was required to contribute to the "main battlefield" of economic construction, both neglecting its educational function (Mi, 1994, p. 34). However, at the 4<sup>th</sup> National Conference on Regular Higher Education held in November 1992, training of professionals was prescribed as the fundamental task of higher education. As a result of this policy change, curriculum reform was officially regarded as the core of the whole higher education reform (He, 1998, pp. 3452-3459).

The "Higher Education Law", promulgated in 1998, states that the tasks of higher education are "to train high-level professionals possessing creative thinking and practical capability, to develop science, technology and culture, and to promote socialist modernization construction" (Jiaoyubu, 1999, p. 170). Training of professionals is positioned at the front rank among the tasks of higher education, which highlights the status of curriculum reform as the core of higher education reform. This is the principal reason why the higher curriculum reform has been so actively undertaken since the 1990s.

### ***Status of Undergraduate Education***

The goal of Chinese undergraduate program was prescribed as "to train scientist and experts" in the 1950s, and "to train advanced specialists" in the 1980s, showing no difference with that of graduate education. At the same time,

however, the undergraduate program was called to emphasize basic knowledge and skills, which was inconsistent with its goal. Consequently, the status of undergraduate education in the whole higher education system was not defined clearly (Wang, 1999, pp. 176-178).

In the 1990s, undergraduate education was widely recognized as the fundamental stage of higher education (Jiaoyubu, 2000). According to the “Higher Education Law”, Chinese higher education includes three levels, i.e. short-cycle program, undergraduate education, and graduate education. Each level has its own goal of training. The Law states the goal of undergraduate education as following:

Undergraduate education should enable the students to master systematically the basic theories and knowledge of their own field of study, to master the basic skills, methods and relevant knowledge of their own specializations, and to acquire the preliminary ability to do practical work and research in their own specializations. (Jiaoyubu, 1999, pp. 172-173)

The statement emphasizes the basic knowledge and skills in undergraduate education, which strengthens the fundamental status of undergraduate program in the higher education system. This can also be seen as an opposition to the narrowly defined and overspecialized undergraduate education.

### ***Idea of Cultural Education: Forerunner of Liberal Education in China***

The Ministry of Education (Jiaoyubu, 2000) officially pointed out the following problems in the undergraduate curriculum in the 1990s: narrowly defined specializations, lack of humanistic studies, extremely uniform curricular pattern, obsolete curricular content, and inflexible teaching method (p. 9). Among these problems, the lack of humanistic studies was the mostly criticized, even by the overseas Chinese scholars as the following:

Students from China know ABC, XYZ, and US dollar and British pound, but do not know the Great Wall, the Yellow River, Wen Tianxiang and Shi Kefa (Chinese national heroes), and History of China (as cited in Guojia Jiaoyu Weiyuanhui, 1996, p. 26).

That is to say, Chinese students are good at foreign languages and mathematics (specialized knowledge), and are capable of living a life, but do not understand Chinese geography, history, and culture. This criticism reflects the significant feature of the traditional Chinese higher education

that places extreme emphasis on the studies of classics, philosophy, history and literature while overlooking the practical knowledge and skills. Actually, the lack of humanistic studies is generated by the narrowly defined undergraduate program established in the 1950s.

Taking the strengthening of humanistic studies as a breakthrough in reforming the narrow and overspecialized undergraduate education, the Ministry of Education in 1995 launched a project called “Experimentation of Cultural Education (*Wenhua Suzhi Jiaoyu*) in Universities”, and selected Peking University, Qinghua University, and Huazhong University of Science and Engineering and the other 52 top universities as the pilot institutions (Hao & Long, 2000, pp. 551-553).

The most important official document relating to the cultural education, “On Strengthening Cultural Education for University Students” issued in 1998 by the Ministry of Education, states that, cultural education is referred to non-specialized education of basic knowledge in humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and fine arts. The purpose of cultural education is “to enhance the students’ ability in cultural understanding and aesthetic appreciation, and to improve the students’ humanistic and scientific qualities” (Liu, 1999, pp. 3-4).

The document also makes a number of policy recommendations including:

1. The creation of a cultural education program, which includes the required and elective courses in literature, history, philosophy, fine arts, and natural sciences;
2. The offering of lectures on special topics, instruction of selected classic works, appreciation of masterpieces in music and arts, and physical activities, etc.;
3. The construction of an academic and cultural atmosphere on campus;
4. The development of various social practice activities. (Liu, 1999, pp. 5-6)

Y. Q. Zhou (2000), Vice-minister of Education in charge of higher education throughout the 1990s, argues that cultural education should cultivate humanistic spirit and emphasize the completion of healthy personal character. Cultural education fundamentally aims at the development of a whole human being (p. 4).

These ideas of cultural education reflect the influence of proposals for liberal education continuously presented by many scholars since the early 1980s (Chen, 1984; Li, 1990; Mi, 1994; Qian, 1986; Xia, et al., 1981; Yang, 1989). In terms of its purpose and contents, cultural education, being

directed against narrowly defined specialized education, is almost the same as liberal education (Li, 1999, p. 231; Liu & Liang, 1999, p. 18; Wang, Wang, Wang, & Luo, 1998, p. 83).

As regards the term “cultural education”, although some scholars argued that there is no necessity to introduce the new term to the Chinese higher education, and suggested employing the term liberal education directly (Liu & Liang, 1999, p. 18), the Chinese government officially use cultural education instead of liberal education. This is probably because that the Communist government in the 1950s criticized liberal education as something belonging to the “Old China” (“Gaodeng Jiaoyubu”, 1952, p. 1).

Despite of the official refusal to use the term liberal education, however, it has been a popular term in academic periodicals and newspapers, and widely employed in the universities’ documents.

### **The Reform of Higher Education System at the National Level**

Along with the changes in ideas and policies since the 1990s, Chinese higher education reform has involved all aspects of higher education, including administration, finance, enrolment and employment system, etc. This part of the paper will focus on two national reforms: the restructuring of higher institutions, and redefinition of undergraduate specializations.

#### ***Recreation of Genuine Comprehensive Universities***

From 1992, China initiated a new round nation-wide restructuring of higher education institutions, which was carried out under the following principles: joint construction, transference of jurisdiction, institutional cooperation, institutional amalgamation, coordination with other social sectors (Hao & Long, 2000, pp. 528-531). The massive restructuring lasted until the year 2000, with more than 900 higher institutions involved throughout China.

The amalgamation, merging two or more higher education institutions in the same geographical area, is the most influential and spectacular in this new round of restructuring. From the perspective of curriculum, the purpose for the amalgamation is to confront the fragmentation of disciplines, and to develop genuine comprehensive universities (Xu, 2002, p. 60; Zhou, C., 2000, p. 69).

After 1952, as mentioned earlier in this paper, most of the Chinese universities and colleges were specialized institutions, and comprehensive universities only offered

programs in theoretical arts and sciences. Although in the 1980s, some comprehensive universities established applied disciplines and restored social sciences such as sociology and anthropology, and specialized institutions such as polytechnic universities established departments of basic sciences and even social sciences, there were still no genuine comprehensive universities in China (Guojia Jiaoyu Weiyuanhui, 1998, pp. 6-7). However, after the amalgamation of universities and colleges in the 1990s, genuine comprehensive universities, national and local, reemerged in China, which demonstrates the breakaway from the Soviet model and a return to the higher education model before 1949 (Hayhoe, 1996, p. 259). For example, Zhejiang University, which was dismantled from a comprehensive university to polytechnic university in the 1950s, through combination with Zhejiang University of Agriculture, Zhejiang University of Medicine, and Hangzhou University in 1998, became a genuine comprehensive university again with undergraduate programs in humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, engineering, agriculture, and medical science, etc. While the number of comprehensive universities increased from 50 in 1990 to 83 in 2000, which marked a 1.7 times increase, at the same time, the specialized institutions decreased.

Yang (2000) argues that the amalgamation of several specialized institutes does not automatically lead to the emergence of genuine comprehensive universities (p. 330); however, a university with comprehensive fields of study makes it possible to overcome the fragmentation of disciplines and to offer broad and inter-disciplinary programs (Dong, 2002, p. 6).

#### ***Establishment of Broadly Defined Specializations***

As noted above, China’s undergraduate curriculum was organized within different specializations. Therefore, changes that occurred in specializations produce sequent effects on the curriculum and bring about curriculum reform.

The Ministry of Education revised the national list of undergraduate specializations twice in the 1990s. The principles of the revisions were:

1. Specializations should be defined, not in accordance with the profession or product sectors, but with the following 11 fields of study, philosophy, economics, law, education, literature, history, science, engineering, agriculture, medicine, and management (see Table 1).
2. Specializations should be defined in a broad way, combining the narrowly defined specializations with the related ones in the same field of study, having an emphasis on the

Table 1. *Undergraduate Specializations by Fields of Study in 1990 and 1999*

1990		1999	
Field	Number	Field	Number
Engineering	364	Engineering	70
Science	130	Science	30
Agriculture	53	Agriculture	16
Forestry	17	Medicine	16
Medicine	26	Philosophy	3
Teacher Training	43	Economics	4
Humanities	70	Law	12
Finance & Economic	46	Education	9
Politics & Law	12	Literature	66
Sports	13	History	6
Fine Arts	67	Management	18
Total	841	Total	249

Source: Zhongguo Jiaoyu Nianjian Bianjibu, 1992, 2001.

adaptability.

- Corresponding to the new development of science and technology, and the social demands as well, the obsolete specializations should be removed and new ones should be added to the national list. (Jiaoyubu, 1998, pp. 242-243)

Through the two rounds of revision, the number of specializations decreased from 841 in 1990 to 249 in 1999, representing a decrease of about 70%. As shown in Table 1, changes in the fields of sciences and engineering were striking. For example, the number of specializations in mechanical engineering, reduced from 28 to 4. This illustrates the dramatic change in terms of breadth of specialization. The establishment of broadly defined specializations overcomes the narrowness of undergraduate curriculum by offering broad programs (Liu, 2002, p. 2).

Creation of comprehensive universities and establishment of broadly defined specializations, representing the fundamental changes in Chinese higher education system, provide institutional possibilities for the revival of liberal education in undergraduate curriculum.

### **Liberal Education Reform at Peking University: A Case Study**

Being the first national university founded in 1898, Peking University is the most prestigious higher institution in China. After merging with Beijing University of Medical

Sciences in 2000, Peking University became a truly comprehensive university offering undergraduate programs in various fields of study like philosophy, law, economics, education, literature, sciences, management, engineering, and medicine, etc.

#### ***The Introduction of a Liberal Education Curriculum***

Peking University has a long history of liberal education. Under the advocacy of President Cai Yuanpei in 1919, the students majoring in arts and sciences were required to take courses in philosophy, psychology, and education aside from the specialized courses (Xiao, Sha, Zhou, & Liang, 1981, p. 44).

In the early 1980s, accompanied with the introduction of a credit system, Peking University required its undergraduates specializing in humanities and social sciences to take at least one course in natural sciences, and students in science to take at least one course in humanities or social sciences (Jinri Beida Bianxiezhu, 1988, pp. 24-25). In 1990, Peking University introduced fine arts as common required courses for all students, and at the same time, offered double-degree and major/minor programs to its talented students (Jinri Beida Bianxiezhu, 1993, 1998). All these reforms are toward broadening of the undergraduate curriculum.

In December, 1999, Peking University established "Research Group of Strategy on Undergraduate Curriculum Development" (*Beijing Daxue Benke Jiaoxue Fazhan Zhanlue*

*Yanjiu Xiaozu*) which is comprised of 15 distinguished professors from different faculties and departments. The main task of the group is to study the target and measures of undergraduate curriculum reform in Peking University, and to provide advices on university reforms to the university authorities (Beijing Daxue Nianjian Bianweihui, 2001, p. 160). In June, 2000 the group submitted to the university authorities “Report on Undergraduate Curriculum Reform in Peking University”, which was conducted with the cooperation of faculties and departments, based on interviews and surveys to all teaching staffs and senior undergraduates. Based on the report, on August 29 of the same year, Peking University released “Notice on Offering Liberal Education Curriculum” declaring to offer the liberal education curriculum in September, 2000.

### ***Idea and Purpose of Liberal Education Curriculum***

In 1998, the year of its one hundredth anniversary, Peking University put forward the strategy to construct a world-class university, and formulated the following idea of an undergraduate program (Beijing Daxue Nianjian Bianweihui, 2000):

To empower the students to have broad basic knowledge, to cultivate strong creative consciousness, to master the scientific methods, to develop rich humanistic qualities, and to develop practical and adaptable capabilities (p. 16).

Based on the above idea, the university set up the directions for undergraduate curriculum reform:

1. To offer liberal education in the lower years of undergraduate programs;
2. To offer a broadly-defined specialized education in the upper years of undergraduate program;
3. To established a complete credit system gradually, under the guidance of syllabus and advisors (Beijing Daxue Jiaowubu, 2000, p. 2).

Peking University declares clearly that the starting point of liberal education curriculum is to “confront the narrowness, fragmentation and overspecialization of undergraduate curriculum, to break through the boundaries between different disciplines, and to transfer the single-sided specialized education to an overall liberal education at the undergraduate level” (Beijing Daxue Jiaowubu, 2000, p. 5).

The purpose of liberal education is to “enable the student to learn basic knowledge in various disciplines, to master the

thinking and methods of various disciplines, and to develop personal qualities and character” (Beijing Daxue Jiaowubu, 2000, p. 2).

### ***Principles of Offering Courses in Liberal Education Curriculum***

As prescribed in the “Notice on Offering Liberal Education Curriculum”, courses in the liberal education curriculum are offered through the following process: application of the teachers, recommendation of the department or faculty, and then examination of the experts. The liberal education curriculum gradually offers 150-200 courses and updates 10-15% of the courses every year.

Moreover, Peking University set up the following principles for the offering of courses in liberal education curriculum. The “Notice on Offering Liberal Education Curriculum”, states that the courses should

Enable the students to learn the art of thinking and methods of understanding and transforming the world through the basic fields of knowledge;

Enable the students to strengthen the development of personal qualities and creativity;

Enable the students to understand the connections between disciplines and to improve interdisciplinary learning;

Enable the students to develop critical thinking skills and analytic ability;

Enable the students to understand new developments, new tendencies, and new information in certain disciplines;

Enable the students to master the fundamental spirit of classic works and to enlighten their thoughts;

Enable the students to take courses offered by distinguished professors;

Enable the students to better understand the fields of study (Beijing Daxue Jiaowubu, 2000, pp. 6-7).

### ***Content and Requirement of Liberal Education Curriculum***

While there has been an argument about the classification of fields in liberal education curriculum (Beijing Daxue Jiaowubu, 2000, p. 3), Peking University offers liberal education curriculum in the following five fields:

A. Mathematics and natural sciences;

B. Social Sciences;

C. Philosophy and psychology;

D. History;

E. Languages, literature and fine arts.

The five fields demonstrate the emphasis on humanistic

Table 2. *Structure of Undergraduate Curriculum at Peking University, 2001-2002*

Undergraduate Curriculum	Credits	Proportion
Required Courses		60.15%
Common Courses	34	
Required Specialized Courses	55	
Required Electives		18.24%
Computer	3	
Specialized Theoretical Courses	16-22	
Specialized Courses	6-8	
Readings of Physics Literatures	2	
Free Electives	6	4.05%
Liberal Education Curriculum	16	10.81%
Graduation Thesis	10	6.75%
Total Requirement	148	100%

Source: Beijing Daxue Jiaowubu, 2002, pp.16-18.

education in the liberal education curriculum. Also, from the classification of the fields, we can see a strong American influence, especially the core curriculum of Harvard University.

All freshmen students after September, 2000, are required to complete at least 16 credits in the liberal education curriculum, with at least 2 credits in each field and at least 4 credits in the field E. Students specializing in arts are required to take at least 4 credits in the field A (Beijing Daxue Jiaowubu, 2000, p. 3).

Table 2 shows the curricular structure of undergraduate program after the introduction of liberal education curriculum in Peking University.

Common courses comprise political subjects (8 credits in total), foreign language (14 credits), computer science subjects (6 credits), physical education (4 credits) and national defense education (2 credits). The political subjects include Chinese History of Revolution, Marxist Philosophy, Introduction of Capitalism, and Chinese Socialist Construction, of which the function has been changed and contents have been broadened since the 1980s (Hayhoe, 1996, p. 123). In its broad sense, these common courses have the same character as that of a liberal education curriculum. If combining the common courses with a liberal education curriculum, the credits required in liberal education will be 50, about 33.8% of the total 148 for graduation, which demonstrates liberal education has occupied a significant proportion of the whole undergraduate program.

## Conclusion

There is no doubt that China has been recreating liberal education since the 1990s, which has brought about fundamental changes in its undergraduate programs (Jiaoyubu, 2000, p. 4). The liberal education revival remarkably overcomes the problems of narrowness and overspecialization in higher education (Liu, 2002). In contrast with the radical reform in the 1950s, the recreation of liberal education is undertaken in a relatively gentle and steady pace, for it is a self-improvement of the higher education system (Yang, 2000, p. 325).

In brief, the liberal education revival in China since the 1990s can be seen an antidote to the overspecialization in response to the social changes, which similarly experienced by the three liberal education revivals in the United States in the twentieth century.

Concretely, as regards the rationale for liberal education revival in China, first, it is directly driven by the domestic social changes in China while transforming itself from a planned economy to a market economy. The latter type of economy is characterized by “volatility, competitiveness, openness and information network”, which requires professionals who are “practical, flexible, versatile, international and innovative” (Agelasto & Adamson, 1998, p. 4). In addition, with the abolishment of state-controlled job assignment, most of the students must find jobs by themselves according to the market demands. Therefore, the students trained under the narrowly specialized education can no longer meet the above demands, and undergraduate education needs to be broad and

flexible enough so that its graduates are well-prepared to change jobs.

Second, since the adoption of the policy of opening to the outside in the late 1970s, China's interchange with the world has been drastically strengthened and developed. Chinese trade-to-GDP ratio, which has risen from 18.9% in 1980 to 30% in 1990, then to 49.3% in 2000, is evidence of it. In the field of higher education, liberal education has increasingly become a concern worldwide (Burn, 2002, p.1); not only the developed countries, but also the developing countries should develop liberal education (Task Force on Higher Education and Society, 2000). Against the above background, liberal education revival in China reflects the international and global trends in higher education reform.

Third, liberal education revival closely connects with the ideological changes since the 1990s in China. Deng Xiaoping's argument, released in the spring of 1992, that socialism should devote itself to "the development of productive forces, growth of national strength, and improvement of people's living standard", and should "absorb all the achievements in human history" and "utilize the experiences of developed capitalist countries for reference" (He, 1998, pp. 3266-3270), emancipates the Chinese dramatically from the ideological dispute over the distinction between socialism and capitalism which puzzled China for decades. Consequently, it enables liberal education, ever criticized as something belonging to capitalism ("Gaodeng Jiaoyu", 1952), to revive China. Although the term, liberal education has not been used in government documents as mentioned above, its significance has been widely recognized. It is hard to find a university or college without a liberal education program in China today.

The Chinese constantly shows a great desire for the advanced development of higher education in the United States (Liu, 1997; Shen, 1999; Yang, 1995; Zhu & Chen, 2002). Both the recreation of genuine comprehensive universities and the establishment of broadly defined specializations, reflect that Chinese higher education is breaking away from the Soviet model, and approaching the American pattern. The liberal education curriculum of Peking University is, to a great extent, a reproduction of the core curriculum of Harvard University, which is extremely appealing to Peking University in its ambitious strategy to build a world-class university. It should be noted here, however, to what extent, China should develop an American-style liberal education in its undergraduate curriculum in the foreseeable future, because of the enormous differences in the social, economic and educational

development between the two countries.

Finally, before the 1990s, there were always two general tendencies while China followed the foreign experiences to reform its higher education: one was to make a certain model fixed with supreme authorities, like the reform in the 1950s. The other was to formalize a certain model but neglect its essence, as the introduction of the credit system in the early 1980s. The former tendency produces obstacles to reform, and the latter one always leads to superficial reform (Wang & Wu, 1993). With respect to the revival of liberal education, that it will avoid the above tendencies or not remains uncertain. Hopefully, it will create a Chinese-style liberal education solidly rooted in the Chinese social, economic and cultural context.

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