

## Beijing Forum 2019

### Liberal Education through College: World's Experience and Asian Experience (IV)

On the afternoon of November 2nd, the panel session “Liberal Education Through College: World’s Experience and Asian Experience” was held at Meeting Room M11, Stanford Center, Peking University. The fourth section of this session, hosted by Wu Yanhong from Peking University, was titled “Liberal Education and Professional Education I”.

The first person to give a speech was Prof. Xie Shi from Boya College, Sun Yat-sen University. His lecture was titled “Residential College: An Exploration of Liberal Arts College of Boya (Liberal Arts) College, Sun Yat-sen University”. In his opinion, residential colleges like Boya were typically interdisciplinary and inter-domain institutions. In Boya College, the ancient and the modern, along with the East and the West, were integrated, and with the number of courses cut down, and the quality of the remaining courses were refined. The two difficulties that Boya faced were impacts from other publicly funded universities in China whose concepts were not supportive of Boya’s, and the fact that the framework of knowledge has been changing dramatically nowadays. Thus, the College solicited comments and suggestions from its students. On the one hand, older students cherished the interactions and tutorial guidance experienced in residential college but pointed out that the bonds between students were not tight. Xie opined that living together did not necessarily mean communication or mental resonance; but a closely bonded collective did enhance individual personality improvement. He then pointed out that the gap between liberal arts education and major courses should be bridged. Finally, he suggested that colleges develop a reciprocal relationship with comprehensive universities affiliating them.

The second speaker was Robert Rebelein, from Vassar College. The title of his presentation was “Academic Elements of a Liberal Arts Education”. He began the talk by listing top research colleges and liberal arts colleges in the USA, and pointed out that only 3~4 % of students in the US choose liberal arts colleges. However, liberal arts schools win reputation and funding by enhancing the teaching quality, thus winning higher enrollment rate to graduate projects, high teacher (teaching undergraduate courses)-student ratio and smaller class scale. Moreover, academic requirements for students are high. Most colleges designated at least one writing-intensive course and at least one in

natural sciences, social sciences, humanities as compulsory. Also, some of them required foreign language competence, physical education and a graduation thesis. The attempts residential colleges had made included classroom experiments, cooperative learning, interactive lectures, etc. He concluded that deep learning must be treasured more than class learning.

The third person presenting his ideas was Prof. Li Meng from Peking University, whose speech was titled “Human Ecology in Liberal Arts Education”. He began with introducing about a survey he conducted of PKU graduates that reflected contemporary students’ GPA complex. GPA was not the only determinant in course choosing but was a part that could not be neglected. A time schedule of a Tsinghua student who slept for five hours every weekday was then put forward, indicating the symptoms of isolation, anxiety and lack of confidence in students with “GPA Syndrome”. This put a threat on liberal arts education, leading to students cramming overnight to pass a test of liberal arts course. From a global perspective, the density of courses are just the opposite in China and in the USA. Chinese schools put ahead major core courses like “Principles of Sociology” in the freshmen and sophomore years, while in the US students study liberal arts first. Apart from these, the predicament of liberal arts education lies in obstacles in interdisciplinary cooperation and the lack of establishment of a comprehensive evaluation mechanism.

The fourth and final speaker was Jiang Shigong from Peking University. He presented the speech titled “The Dilemma of General Education in the Post-industrial Era”, further discussing Prof. Li’s comments on the difficulty of liberal arts education. Some media had been preaching that “liberal arts” was a pretext for creating losers. Then he pondered upon the ultimate goal of education: it it for success or for happiness? By valuing the ranking of “top universities”, the criterion has been homogenized, leading to universities deviating from the foundation of culture and civilization. In our post-industrial world, the osmosis of scientific technologies and scientifically modified humanities has stretched its tentacles into universities. Localization was on the edge of collapse, and meritocracy robbed upper classes of their leisure time of thinking. The “Master of Studying” (“学霸”) was a machine of learning, enslaving students according to their marks and papers to some extent. Under these circumstances, liberal arts education appeared to be a “noble lie”. But all this doesn’t mean that educators should be pessimistic. As Confucius said, 知其不可而为之 (Go for it even though I know it won’t necessarily work), educators must fulfill a seemingly “Mission Impossible”.