

# The Curriculum of Liberal Studies in National Peking University during the Republic of China and its Implications

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**Abstract:** During the Republic of China period, China's higher education field began to pay attention to the basic courses and interdisciplinary liberal studies courses, forming the concept of liberal studies education, which is "liberal studies as the foundation and specialization as the end". National Peking University, as the first national comprehensive university in the Republic of China period, opened many courses compatible with arts and sciences in national universities earlier, which had a positive influence on the general education of colleges and universities in the Republic of China period or nowadays, and also laid a solid foundation for cultivating composite talents in our country. This paper provides useful experience for the setting of general education courses in colleges and universities nowadays.

**Keywords:** Republican Period; National Peking University; Liberal Education Programs

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The concept of liberal education first appeared in an 1829 essay by Professor Packard of Boulder College in the United States, stating that it was to be used as a means of providing academic instruction in all branches of knowledge<sup>[1]</sup>. In our country generalist education as the educational idea of running a university is in the late Qing dynasty Zhang Baixi drafted the "qin ding jingshi university hall charter" put forward. "The establishment of the Peking University Hall, so as to inspire loyalty and love, open up the wisdom, revitalize the industry, and to comply with the purpose of the Lord, the correct tendency to create generalists, as the platform for the whole school"<sup>[2]</sup>. The implementation of the general education program in the Republic of China (R.O.C.) period benefited from a group of educators who had the experience of studying abroad and were concerned about the country and the people, such as Cai Yuanpei, Mei Yiqi and others, who put into practice their ideals of general education, and the scholars in the R.O.C. often referred to the "general education", and the education goal of general education was considered to be differently by different scholars. Some scholars believed that the implementation of liberal education was to cultivate students' unified personality, while others believed that liberal education was to teach students unified knowledge. Whether it is to cultivate students' unified personality or to teach them unified knowledge, it can be seen that the Republican period had higher requirements for the cultivation of talents, and the first batch of national universities that offered general education courses had a far-reaching influence on the curriculum construction of Chinese universities and the development of higher education in China.

## 1. The Formation of the Liberal Studies Program of Peking National University (1912-1927)

### 1.1 The Background of the Formation of the Liberal Studies Program of Peking National University

In 1911, China's monarchical dictatorship, which had lasted for more than 2,000 years, was overthrown, and the first bourgeois regime was established on the Chinese soil. This drastic change was the first impact of reform on the field of higher education, and colleges and universities had to make adjustments to themselves in order to cultivate talents who were suitable for the development of society and economy, and the curriculum, as a nutrient base of the university's educational activities, became the focal point of the reform of the university. If the change of political environment is the coercive force for the formation of liberal arts education, then the ideological environment is the endogenous driving force for the formation of liberal arts education. A large number of publications such as "Education Magazine" and "New Education" have been founded one after another to explore the emerging education theories and practices at home and abroad, which provide a platform for the domestic understanding of the advanced education concepts in the West, and the liberal arts education programs of American universities have also taken this platform to enter into the field of vision of China's university education. At the same time, a large number of scholars

in China returned from studying in developed countries in the West, and the then president of Peking University, Cai Yuanpei, was deeply influenced by the liberal education ideas of German classical universities, which contributed to the formation and development of liberal education in Peking University. Cai Yuanpei believed that universities should adhere to the study of basic theories and emphasized the non-vocational nature of universities. The political and ideological and cultural environments contributed to the formulation of relevant documents and policies. 1912-1913, the Republican government successively promulgated the University Decree and the University Regulations, which clearly defined the educational purpose of the university as “to teach profound learning and to raise a scholarly body”, reflecting the distinctive purpose of liberal education. 1917, the Revision of the University Decree was promulgated, which stipulated that “the university should emphasize the study of fundamental theories and emphasize the non-professional nature of the university”. In 1917, the Revised University Decree was promulgated, stipulating that “the duration of undergraduate study shall be four years, and that of matriculation shall be two years<sup>[3]</sup>”. The restructuring of matriculation and university years has led to changes in the structure of the liberal arts university. The curriculum emphasizes the importance of the general class of subjects and the foundation, and the 1919-1920 “National Peking University Subjects Curriculum List” stipulates: “The curriculum of the first year of undergraduate study is based on the basic subjects indispensable to university students and the foreign languages that have been studied in the preparatory course as the common compulsory courses, which all students study together, in addition to the elective subjects. They are divided into five groups, each with its own emphasis, so that students can choose eight or eleven units or more within a group as they wish, in order to be prepared to specialize in a particular department one year later<sup>[4]</sup>.”

## 1.2 The Practice of Liberal Studies Curriculum Formation in National Peking University

From 1912 to 1917, Peking University took the lead in implementing the Liberal Studies Curriculum in the matriculation department. The curricula of different disciplines were different, with the liberal arts matriculation focusing on geography, history, and other literature and philosophy courses, and the science matriculation focusing on physics, chemistry, museums, and other basic disciplines, among which the common courses were Chinese language, foreign language, and mathematics, etc. The general education curriculum of this period attached great importance to foreign languages, with the liberal arts matriculation students required to study French and German in addition to English, and the science matriculation students to study English and German, and the science students to study English and German while taking English and German courses. English and German, and science students were also meticulously categorized into different types of courses for systematic study, such as grammar, readings, and composition, which shows the importance that Peking University attached to language learning at that time. In addition, corresponding internships and drawing courses were also offered, which enriched the content of the courses to a certain extent, but on the whole, Peking University appeared to be thin in terms of the categories and contents of the general education courses at this stage.

From 1918 to 1924, Peking University's preparatory and undergraduate programs were conducted in parallel. The curriculum of the preparatory course system consisted of “common elective subjects, branch compulsory subjects and elective subjects”, in which the branch compulsory subjects were divided into two parts, A and B, with A focusing on the study of science and B focusing on the study of liberal arts, while the elective subjects embodied a stronger generalization and the interconnection of literature and science, and the elective subjects included chemical experiments, drawings and paintings, the general theory of law, the general theory of economics and the general theory of literature. The electives include Chemistry Lab, Drawing, General Law, General Economics, and Literature, which students can choose according to their own interests. At this stage, BYU's pre-university general education program still emphasizes the study of language subjects as well as mathematics and museum courses, while taking into account the knowledge of natural, humanities and social sciences, focusing on courses in natural sciences and linguistics. In terms of undergraduate curriculum, it is divided into common compulsory courses and group elective

courses, in which the group elective courses are divided into five groups according to the different majors of the students, namely, the departments of mathematics, astronomy and physics, chemistry and geology, philosophy, literature, and history, which is conducive to the students to have a broad knowledge base of their majors in the first year of the university, and to lay a foundation for their future professional studies. At the same time, it can also prevent students from choosing courses blindly and help to guide them. Upon entering the second, third and fourth years of undergraduate studies, the elective system requires that “each person shall take between thirty and forty units in a particular department and its relations during these three years<sup>[5]</sup>”. Foreign language study requires the continuation of the first and second foreign languages, with six units of each, for a total of twelve units, which, together with the units of foreign languages acquired during the first three years, means that each person must acquire at least twenty-three units of the first foreign language and fifteen units of the second foreign language, and is a system of limited free electives based on a common elective.

In 1925-1927, the Regulations of the National University clearly stipulated that “the university is no longer attached to a preparatory course, and the university curriculum adopts the elective system.” The original curriculum of the preparatory stage was moved to the undergraduate stage, and the curriculum of Peking University began to be liberalized, with different patterns among the faculties and departments, among which the curriculum of the geology department of Peking University focused on professional education, requiring students to study only geology-related fields, while the curriculum of the history department and philosophy series of Peking University embodied the strong implication of general education, and the categories of the courses were common compulsory subjects, separate compulsory subjects, and free electives, with common compulsory subjects covering natural sciences, humanities and social sciences, and. The Common Compulsory Subjects cover the three fields of natural sciences, humanities and social sciences, and students are required to take 40 units of each of the elective and compulsory subjects, focusing on the development of professional education while emphasizing on general education.

## **2. The Development of the Liberal Studies Program of National Peking University (1928-1937)**

### **2.1 Background of the Development of the Liberal Studies Program of National Peking University**

The change of political power made higher education divided into three phases in this period, which were the early stage of the national government, the anti-Japanese war period, and the period of defeat and death, with the first phase being the period of relative stability and development, the second phase in the period of turbulence, and the third phase in the period of transition from prosperity to decline. During this period, China's higher education was developed. The National Government implemented one-party dictatorship and party-oriented education, formulated educational policies, changed curricula and reviewed textbooks in order to control school education, and stipulated that the education of the Nanjing National Government was centered on the Three Principles of the People and served to realize the politics and economy of the Kuomintang, and that the Three Principles of the People played a significant role in cultivating students to form a consensus of social values in the general education curriculum. The goal of training students to form a consensus on social values. In terms of policy and system, the University Regulations promulgated in 1929 emphasized the practicality of the university curriculum and stipulated the curriculum structure of the university general education program, forming “common compulsory subjects, minor subjects, and free elective subjects,” but focused too much on language and other instrumental subjects and ideological courses, and lacked the common basic knowledge courses needed for students' development. In 1931, the Principles for the Implementation of the Three Principles of Education stipulated that the education of general education needed to complete the cultivation of students' unified social values, and in 1934, the National Government promulgated the Law on the Organization of Universities, which redefined the educational policy of universities as follows “to study profound learning and to raise specialized personnel<sup>[6]</sup>”. This was due to the demand for practical talents at that time, which led to a change in the university's policy of educating people and a shift to practical education. 1937 saw the promulgation of the “Program for Supervising Educational Work in the Time of General

Mobilization” by the Nationalist government, which required that changes in the curriculum must still be made in accordance with the scope of the ministry's decision. However, during this period, the right to set university curricula was still vested in the schools.

## **2.2 The implementation of the general education curriculum of the National Peking University**

When Peking University set up the common compulsory courses at this stage, the system and form of the courses were still in accordance with the model of the previous stage, but the content of the general education courses reflected the will of the state and society, and presented the content of the localized general education curriculum, which was more focused on practical education, and in addition to the setting of the state-required courses of the Party's doctrine, the state language, English, the second foreign language, and other common compulsory courses. In addition, the College of Arts and Letters of Peking University released the adjustment of the bulletin, taking into account the communication between the arts and sciences subjects, the College of Arts and Letters released the first year of the common compulsory courses, students have to choose one of the general psychology and logic to study in the Introduction to Science and Introduction to Philosophy in any one of the courses. But the Faculty of Science issued a bulletin requiring students to choose a minimum of two of the four kinds of mathematics, physics, chemistry and biology, all science elective mode, which was related to the country's urgent need for engineering talent at that time, based on national conditions to strengthen the training of scientific and technological specialties. 1936 Peking University, based on the situation at that time and the understanding of the national crisis, increased the number of five mandatory subjects, which are the methodology of the social sciences, the international form, Introduction to National Defense, History of Social Evolution, and History of Imperialist Aggression, each course requiring two hours of study time to be completed each week.

## **3.Improvement of the General Education Program of National Peking University(1938-1948)**

### **3.1 Background of the Improvement of the General Education Program of National Peking University**

The outbreak of the War of Japanese Aggression affected the higher education in China. Peking University was affected by the war and had to move westward to Yunnan, forming the National Southwest Associated University with National Tsinghua University and National Nankai University. The national government adjusted the policy of running the university according to the situation, implementing the principle of “treating the wartime as the ordinary time”, guaranteeing the normal development of teaching and scientific research activities in the light of the conditions at that time, and cultivating talents needed for the war against Japanese aggression. In the anti-Japanese war period, although the Southwest Association of Universities was in a turbulent environment, Peking University still insisted on scientific research and teaching activities, adjusted the faculties and departments, and organized a series of effective measures to ensure the quality of education, and the general education courses were still developed rapidly. Mei Yiqi's idea of general education has a great influence on the curriculum of general education in SWU. He thinks that the center of gravity of university education should be in general rather than in specialization, and that on the one hand, general education should enable students to have a basic understanding of the three major sciences of humanities, nature and society, and on the other hand, enable students to learn to integrate and integrate them, and at the same time, the academic freedom of SWU is still a basic guarantee for the development of general education, and the Convocation and the Professors' Association constitute the management system of democratic governance. In 1938, the national government issued the “Objectives of Educational Facilities at All Levels and the Objects of Teaching”, which required that university education should be aimed at cultivating students who are capable of learning and teaching, and that students should be able to learn to integrate the sciences, and on the other hand, students should learn to integrate the sciences. Education should be an education to cultivate generalists and specialists who can manage studies, affairs, people, and business. It advocated the goal of educating generalists and specialists, and positioned university talents as “perfect human beings” with knowledge, ability, character, and creativity. In the same year, the national government began to manage the curriculum of universities, stipulating

uniform standards, starting with the required subjects, and leaving the elective subjects incomplete, but emphasizing the basic training and essential subjects. The national government also kept revising the list of compulsory and elective subjects, and the knowledge of the general education program was very broad, involving three major fields of humanities, social and natural sciences, and specific to the knowledge of many disciplines such as language, literature, history, politics and geography, etc., and the structure of the general education program in this period has been very comprehensive.

### **3.2 General Education Curriculum Practices of National Peking University**

In order to carry out the education policy of combining generalists and specialists, NWU has developed a relatively strict course selection system. In the eight years of its operation, more than 1,600 courses were offered, with more than half of them being compulsory courses, and the elective system of course specification, which centers on the three major disciplines of humanities, nature, and society to set up the courses, and assists the students' learning of the general education courses through practice and internships. The curriculum is organized around the three major disciplines of humanities, nature, and society. In order to allow students to learn a wide range of knowledge, the National South West Associated University (NSAU) implements both arts and sciences and carries out the "credit system" and "elective system". The compulsory courses for the first year of NSAU are arranged by the Ministry of the University, and in addition to the compulsory courses, the first-year freshmen, regardless of college, need to study the compulsory Mandarin, English, and Chinese. In addition to the compulsory courses, all first-year students, no matter what faculties, are required to take Chinese Language, English Language and General History of China; students majoring in literature and history are required to take elective science and technology subjects; students majoring in science and technology are required to take elective literature and history subjects; such an arrangement allows students to have a comprehensive understanding of various disciplines, and students have the right to choose their own courses, and they can freely choose their own courses across different faculties. In addition, the required basic courses at WSU are taught by professors with high academic standards and rich teaching experience, who stimulate students' interest in the courses through high-level lectures and improve the quality of the general education courses.

## **4. The inspiration of the general education program of National Peking University**

### **4.1 The combination of general and specialized education to cultivate all-round development of talents**

Universities should carry out general education based on the foundation of professional education, and some colleges and universities are currently in the implementation of general education in the form of formality, ignoring the quality of the course content, and focusing on the pursuit of the number of courses rather than the quality of the course. Lack of overall design in the curriculum of general education, the purpose of education is not clear, Harvard University general education red book has proposed: "The goal of education is to cultivate the whole person."<sup>[7]</sup> The purpose of the general education curriculum is to cultivate human rationality, and to take sound personality as the main purpose of general education. Peking University advocates general education in line with its philosophy, focusing on the cultivation of students' comprehensive quality, so that students from a multidisciplinary perspective on the world for an objective understanding of the in-depth and systematic professionalism should be carried out during the master's and doctoral degrees, more colleges and universities have neglected the cultivation of students' all-round qualities, which hinders the development of students' adaptability and comprehensive ability, and we should draw lessons from the Peking University's curriculum, set up a flexible curriculum, and combine the theoretical and practical, professional and generalist training. Combination of theory and practice, professional and generalist training, under the process of globalization and fierce competition for talents, it is of great significance for us to cultivate composite talents by drawing on Peking University's curriculum concept and talent cultivation experience.

### **4.2 Enhance the comprehensiveness and value of the content of the general education courses**

The current implementation of the general education courses in various universities and colleges has a single

content, and the value of highlighting the lack of Peking University in the period of the Southwest United University, the humanities, natural and social sciences will be integrated into three major parts of the opening of the core system of courses, to promote the breadth of students' knowledge, to meet the development of students on the development of the knowledge of various disciplines of knowledge literacy for the depth of the student's professional education at the same time do not lose the sound personality and free character, and to be able to have the ability to face challenges outside the professional field. The comprehensiveness of the content of the general education curriculum does not mean that it should be all-encompassing and teach everything, but rather it should increase the breadth of knowledge and give students the basic knowledge and basic methods of various disciplines, so as to lay the foundation for students' future development. At the same time, attention should also be paid to the value guidance of the content of the general education curriculum for students. The implementation of the general education curriculum of Peking University in the Republic of China period showed obvious values, one of which is the penetration of traditional culture in the curriculum, and the other is the inculcation of the mainstream social values to educate the students in the party-oriented education. Throughout the reform of the liberal arts education curriculum in recent times, the crises of culture and social crises behind them have revealed the changes in the content of the curriculum influenced by the crisis of culture and society, which shows that the value of the liberal arts education curriculum is of great significance to the soundness of the students' values and national consciousness.

#### 4.3 Management Optimization of Liberal Studies Curriculum

Liberal Studies Curriculum of Peking University in the Republican period has experienced three changes in the right to set up the curriculum. In the University Statute promulgated in 1913, the courses offered by each department and each major of the disciplines were clarified, and the university had no right to decide on the opening of the curriculum. In 1924, the Regulations of National Universities decentralized the curriculum to the schools, and Peking University began to manage the curriculum on its own. After 1938, the Ministry of Education issued a list of common compulsory subjects for the three faculties of arts, science and law, and the government regained the power of curriculum management. Changes in the power of curriculum management are in line with the law of development and human understanding, and each form of management has its own positive significance. What we need to pay attention to is the balance of power between the state and the universities in the power of curriculum management, we can not be afraid to follow the standard and ignore the special needs of the university itself and the situation of the students. We need to insist on the combination of macro-control by the state and autonomous control by the universities, and to design and implement the curriculum in accordance with the development of the region and the actual situation of the students in accordance with the universities themselves.

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