
“Safeguarding”, “Breaking-Through” and “Surpassing” in the Construction of “New Liberal Arts” in China

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Abstract: The innovation and construction of “New Liberal Arts” in recent years has aroused widespread concerns and discussions in the circles of education and social sciences in China. However, some issues have yet to be clarified and are still in the exploratory stage. Through extensive study and analysis on the related literature in the past three years, the paper proposes the principles of “safeguarding”, “breaking-through” and “surpassing” for the reform and construction of “New Liberal Arts”. “Safeguarding” means to uphold the essence and connotation of the disciplines of liberal arts. On the basis of it, it is suggested to “break through” outdated concepts of running colleges/universities, to break free from the confinement of administrative management of scientific research system, and break down the disciplinary barriers within/ between the humanities and social sciences and natural sciences. Thereafter, considering the advantages and characteristics of their disciplines comprehensively, colleges/universities should innovatively optimize their disciplinary positionings and layouts, talent cultivation mechanisms, teaching methods, and research approaches. Ultimately, “surpassing” is achieved through interdisciplinary integration and advancement of technology in the teaching and research of humanities and social sciences. This aims to better cultivate high-quality talents required by the country in the new era and better serve the society. In the reform and construction of “New Liberal Arts”, innovative measures taken by pioneering universities have provided useful references for other universities.

Keywords: The Construction of “New Liberal Arts”, Safeguarding, Innovation

1. Introduction

On August 24, 2018, a document was jointly issued by the General Office of the country’s Central Committee and the General Office of the relevant government department, suggesting that higher education should focus on the development of the “New Engineering, New Medicine, New Agriculture, and New Liberal Arts” (“Four News”) [1]. In a speech at the first plenary meeting of “the Higher Education Professional Setting and Teaching Guidance Committee”, Yan Wu, the director of the Higher Education Division, pointed out, regarding the construction of “New Liberal Arts”: “We must make the wings of New Liberal Arts strong so that higher education can fly stably and soar high” [2]. In April 2019, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Science and Technology, and other 13 departments jointly launched the “Six Excellences and One Top” Plan 2.0, once again proposing to comprehensively promote the construction of the

“Four News” and stating that its purpose is to enhance the ability of universities to serve the economic and social development. Regarding the construction of “New Liberal Arts,” it explicitly states the need to promote the cross-fusion of philosophy, social sciences, and the new technological revolution, cultivate philosophers and social scientists of the new era, and better inherit and promote the national culture. It can be seen that the construction of “New Liberal Arts” will become the core task of the future higher education development efforts.

2. The Proposal and the Ensuing Discussions on “New Liberal Arts”

Since the proposal of the construction of “New Liberal Arts”, it has attracted wide attention and lively discussions in the fields of education and social sciences. How should we

understand the meaning and characteristics of this “new” concept? How does it differ from traditional liberal arts? The term “New Liberal Arts” was first put forward by Hiram College in the United States in 2017. It refers to the reorganization and cross-disciplinary integration of traditional liberal arts, incorporating new technologies into subjects such as philosophy, literature, and languages, providing students with comprehensive interdisciplinary learning opportunities. With the beginning of educational reforms in the United States, China quickly initiated the construction of “New Liberal Arts”.

The proposal and construction of “New Liberal Arts” hold great significance. It represents a trend of integration. Professor Zhiqiang Zhou pointed out that “New Liberal Arts” is a backlash against the fine specialization, professionalization, and disciplinary distribution of traditional knowledge [3]. “New Liberal Arts” is not only a new concept but also a new ideology and methodology. It represents a comprehensive reform in the field of liberal arts. Universities need to deeply reflect on how to face the challenges brought by the construction of “New Liberal Arts”. Traditional liberal arts disciplines need to quickly contemplate and take measures to respond to these challenges. Many universities and teachers are still unclear about how to effectively embark on the path of constructing “New Liberal Arts”.

In 2020, the “Journal of Shanghai Jiao Tong University (Edition of Philosophy and Social Sciences)” introduced a new column called “Pen Talk by the Shores of Siyuan Lake”. The second issue of this column focused on the theme of “Constructing the Knowledge System of New Liberal Arts”. Qinglong Peng, the editor-in-chief, pointed out that since the Ministry of Education launched the construction of “New Liberal Arts”, there is still no consensus on the concept, connotation, and extension of “New Liberal Arts”. There is still no definitive conclusion, and some issues remain unclear, still in the exploration stage [4]. “When discussing the ‘New Liberal Arts’, we should not overly instrumentalize, technologize, or apply this concept. The fundamental mission of ‘New Liberal Arts’ is to respond to the changing concept of ‘humanity’ under the new historical conditions, as humanities disciplines are about the study of ‘humans’” [5].

The construction of “New Liberal Arts” represents a new integration of humanities disciplines and science and technology. It involves using advanced scientific techniques to study problems in the field of humanities and social sciences, particularly those complex issues that have persisted and cannot be solved solely relying on traditional humanities knowledge and skills. For instance, in the realm of sociological and spiritual studies, some problems that are difficult to address within a single discipline can be explored using advanced scientific technologies and methods, leading to new interpretations.

Therefore, the significance of the construction of “New Liberal Arts” extends beyond the discipline itself and encompasses social development. From this perspective, the construction of “New Liberal Arts” is “not a superficial or patchwork-like innovation, but a comprehensive innovation in

terms of disciplinary positioning, professional layout, and evaluation systems. Comprehensive innovation is certainly a goal, but its achievement requires a breakthrough point. Such a breakthrough point should fundamentally innovate the characteristics of humanities and social sciences disciplines, while also being practical, feasible, and effective” [6].

3. “Safeguarding”, “Breaking-Through” and “Surpassing” in the Construction of “New Liberal Arts”

The construction of “New Liberal Arts” is closely related to the development and innovation of humanities and social sciences, as well as what type of talents to cultivate and how to cultivate them in these fields. Compared to the popularity of publishing related papers, the progress of implementing “New Liberal Arts” in various universities has been relatively slow. The discussions around “New Liberal Arts” indicate that there is no consensus within the academic community regarding its definition and how to construct it, which has hindered its practical implementation. From the terminology itself, “New Liberal Arts” represents a new approach to liberal arts, involving reforms and innovations based on the foundation of liberal arts, empowering and revitalizing the field. This involves both “safeguarding” and “breaking-through” traditional approaches in liberal arts, ultimately leading to a “surpassing” of the field, namely “New Liberal Arts”.

3.1. “Safeguarding” of “New Liberal Arts”

In the context of the current discussions and construction of “New Liberal Arts”, some disciplines in liberal arts have embarked on a model of cross-fusion. However, the concept of “New Liberal Arts” lacks a thorough reassessment of its origins. Beneath the heated debates among scholars, various “misunderstandings”, “confusions”, and “errors” are lurking. The higher the enthusiasm for reform, the more disciplines of liberal arts in universities need to “safeguard” their original intentions and missions: What kind of talents should they cultivate? Whom are they cultivating them for? How should they be cultivated? Disciplines of liberal arts need to uphold the importance of their respective fields, adhere to the disciplinary principles, and clearly define the humanistic connotations of each major. This is the “safeguarding”, i.e., preserving the essence or the nature of the discipline. Otherwise, disciplines of liberal arts will find themselves in an awkward situation of being neither truly humanistic nor scientific. The primary methods of managing knowledge in humanities disciplines include “inheriting” and “guarding”, which significantly differ from the paradigm and characteristics of natural science knowledge management, characterized by “changing” and “conquering new territories” [7].

The main goal of liberal arts disciplines is to cultivate individuals, fostering them humanistic literacy and understanding. Each discipline needs to clarify its purpose: What is the essence of the discipline? What are its core

courses? The essence and core of the discipline must be upheld, and we should not abandon them to cater to popular reform trends. Superficial reforms may produce graduates with empty titles, lacking a solid professional foundation, and only possessing superficial knowledge of the subject, becoming mere “jack-of-all-trades”. Discipline construction and the cultivation of talents with core competitiveness rely on curriculum development. A high-level curriculum system is crucial for the knowledge accumulation and skill enhancement of outstanding talents. Therefore, even in the wave of “New Liberal Arts” reforms, it is still necessary to firmly establish the foundation of the respective disciplines. The foundation and professional knowledge of the discipline must not be weakened or shaken. “Safeguarding” the discipline is the basis of reform. Only on this basis can we discuss the “new” in liberal arts. Otherwise, the reform of “New Liberal Arts” will have no foundation to build upon.

In addition, it is also necessary to guard against excessive innovation pursued in the name of “New Liberal Arts”, which could ultimately lead to the “abuse” of new technological means. It is crucial for universities to have a proper grasp of the “degree” in the specific practical process; otherwise, they “easily fall into the trap of excessive pursuit of innovation in form and content, thereby losing their own subjectivity”. “Excessiveness” is a key factor that affects the threshold of effectiveness in the “innovation” of “New Liberal Arts”. The “abuse” of new technological means can lead to negative effects caused by the squeezing of teaching contents within a limited time frame, resulting in the “generalization” of disciplinary knowledge during restructuring or the excessive pursuit of knowledge space reconstruction in multiple disciplines. Ultimately, this could lead to a superficial and content-lacking approach to the study of professional knowledge. Additionally, the essence of the discipline may also undergo “alienation” [8].

3.2. “Breaking-Through” of “New Liberal Arts”

Once the essence and connotation that the disciplines in liberal arts should “safeguard” are clearly defined, it is necessary to conduct specific research on the current requirements for liberal arts. Each discipline needs to explore how to make “breaking-throughs”. At the same time, it is also important to analyze the specific problems and challenges faced by each discipline, as well as any deviations from serving national strategies. How to face challenges, solve problems, and achieve “breaking-throughs” becomes a matter of studying innovation by each discipline while “safeguarding” the foundational principles.

“The ‘New’ in ‘New Liberal Arts’ lies in breaking through the construction standard of social sciences based solely on physics and the analytical framework centered around nation-states. It transcends the classical color of self-imposed limitations in the disciplines of liberal arts and bridges the knowledge production mode that relies on disciplinary specialties” [9]. Jiang Zhang [6], the former chief editor of China Social Sciences Magazine, pointed out that the entire academic history is a process of continuous differentiation and

specialization within disciplines, as well as a process of constant cross-disciplinary integration and reintegration, where the two aspects are intertwined. In modern society, the development of natural sciences increasingly requires the guidance of liberal arts, while the development of liberal arts increasingly relies on the support of natural sciences. The intersection and fusion of liberal arts and natural sciences aim to gradually break the existing boundaries between disciplines and carry out transformative, innovative, and upgraded approaches to traditional disciplines. It nurtures new growth points for disciplines and achieves innovation in paths, methods, theories, and models. In short, cross-disciplinary integration is a development trend, an innovative path, and an unavoidable practical need.

Reforming the education and teaching system of liberal arts, identifying key areas for breaking-throughs, is a crucial aspect that needs to be researched and explored in the construction of “New Liberal Arts”. This requires planning talent cultivation from the perspective of university and discipline development in the long run, implementing the autonomy of university management, establishing a modern university system, reforming and improving the evaluation system, changing the mindset and practices that prioritize science over liberal arts, effectively enhancing the status of liberal arts, and abandoning one-sidedness and utilitarian thinking.

At the institutional level, the management model of higher education urgently needs reform. Firstly, it is necessary to break through the existing educational concepts, break free from the administrative imprisonment of research system management, and break down the disciplinary and professional barriers between humanities and social sciences and natural sciences. Talent cultivation in universities needs to consider the development of the disciplines of liberal arts more, transcend existing disciplinary barriers, and integrate and reorganize academic specialties.

In the process of constructing and practicing “New Liberal Arts” in the disciplines of liberal arts, the first step is to refine the core functions and qualities of liberal arts disciplines. It needs to break away from the old model that no longer meets the requirements of talent cultivation in the new era, and explore new directions for the majors of liberal arts that suit the characteristics of the university. Based on the situations and needs, it needs to actively make appropriate adjustments and enrich the comprehensive development of students’ abilities.

By combining the advantages of the universities’ disciplines and emphasizing “characteristic development”, universities should promote the “diversification” of talents in the education model. In the talent training program, they should not only emphasize solid knowledge in the respective disciplines but also integrate modern and advanced scientific research achievements and methods into the talent cultivation paradigm of each discipline. This will empower and enhance the cultivation of talents in the disciplines of liberal arts, while also demonstrating the “abilities” and “qualities” resulting from interdisciplinary integration, highlighting the cultivating of “composite” talents [10].

Facing the construction of “New Liberal Arts”, university teachers need to consider whether their curriculum designs, classroom teaching methods, teaching philosophies, and evaluation systems are suitable for the new requirements. They should be good at recognizing, adapting to, and actively seeking changes. They should reexamine textbooks and teaching materials from a disciplinary perspective and promote interdisciplinary integration and innovation. They should use modern scientific and technological means from a professional perspective to inspire and help students in terms of their professional knowledge and life confusion in reality. They should bravely explore and seek scientific methods and paths to solve professional problems.

3.3. “Surpassing” of “New Liberal Arts”

Today, in the era of “Internet+” and “AI+”, the media has greatly expanded the connotation and extension of human beings, extending their thoughts and vision. The Internet provides human beings with previously unimaginable technological attributes such as knowledge sharing, immediacy, and convenience. Currently, university students are mainly from the “post-2000 generation”, who have grown up with the explosive development of information technology. University teachers should break through traditional concepts and the constraints of disciplinary attributes to some extent, surpass the boundaries between arts and sciences, and integrate modern new technologies and information into humanities and social sciences education to adapt to the learning habits of the “post-2000 generation”. The interdisciplinary integration between humanities and sciences is an important manifestation of the “newness” of “New Liberal Arts”. The current construction and reform of liberal arts aim to break through traditional teaching models, emphasize the use of research, communication, and teaching models such as data collection and analysis, artificial intelligence algorithms, new media communication, virtual interaction, and support the innovation of the “New Liberal Arts” with new technologies, demonstrating the deep integration of liberal arts and technological support [11].

“New Liberal Arts” not only represents the integration of disciplines, but also shares similarities with “Trans-discipline”. The core idea of “Trans-discipline” is that scholars from different disciplines and practitioners from various fields work together to address the disconnect between knowledge production and social demand caused by professional division of labor in education and research. It aims to better solve complex problems in real life. Therefore, the similarity between “New Liberal Arts” and “Trans-discipline” not only means the integration of disciplines, but also represents a new type of education and research that is dedicated to solving complex problems in life and breaking the boundaries between disciplines and non-disciplines.

It should be noted that “Trans-discipline” does not completely surpass disciplines or make them disappear. Instead, it represents the highest level of cross-disciplinary, cross-boundary integration between different disciplines and

between disciplines and non-disciplines. It also advocates for interdisciplinary collaboration between scholars within a profession and professionals outside the profession. Thus, it represents a higher or the highest level of “interdisciplinarity”. Only in this way can we cultivate new talents such as scientific philosophers and thinkers of “Trans-discipline”, who can use the spirit and methods of science to solve complex societal problems at the forefront of science, or combine humanistic knowledge with cutting-edge science to effectively reveal truths and solve practical problems. “Trans-discipline” opposes the separation of science and society, knowledge and practice, and rejects the fragmentation of knowledge caused by specialization and disciplinization.

Today’s rapidly changing world is full of uncertainties; humanity is facing increasingly complex and challenging problems, such as climate change, environmental governance, biodiversity loss, poverty, diseases, and security. Individual disciplinary knowledge alone cannot provide breakthrough solutions. Trans-discipline not only surpasses and integrates disciplinary paradigms, but also focuses on the real-world problems of human life, advocates for participatory research, and seeks the integration of knowledge beyond disciplines [12].

Thirteen Ministries and Commissions have clearly pointed out that the purpose of building “New Liberal Arts” is to promote the cross-integration of philosophy, social sciences, and the new technological revolution. The cross-integration of disciplines aims to enhance the ability of higher education institutions to serve the economic and social development, and to better solve the complex problems in the real world. This goal has the characteristics of “Trans-discipline”, therefore, the construction of “New Liberal Arts” is also the construction of “Trans-discipline”. Contemporary university and college students are the backbone of future social service and development. Relevant courses should be offered to familiarize them with modern technological means, teach them quantitative methods, mathematical statistics, and computer-related skills for professional research, so as to better cope with the problems and challenges of the new era, master the ability to solve complex problems, and possess the capability to overcome challenges.

4. The Innovation Paths and Measures of the Construction of “New Liberal Arts”

The “New” in “New Liberal Arts” emphasizes innovation and expansion of research fields. The humanities and social sciences encompass three fundamental disciplines (philosophy, history, and literature) and five applied disciplines (economics, management, law, education, and art). The important content of the construction of “New Liberal Arts” is to promote interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary integration.

Specifically, the fundamental disciplines can cross and integrate with each other, meaning that literature, history, and

philosophy are not separate disciplines. The combination of “fundamental liberal arts + social sciences” can be integrated into the “trinity” of PPE (Philosophy, Politics, and Economics). Furthermore, the combination of “liberal arts + engineering” can integrate into areas such as “economy of energy and climate”, and “new media of art and design”. The combination of “liberal arts + medicine” can integrate into fields such as “bioethics”, “medical informatics”, and “health management”. The combination of “liberal arts + agricultural science” can integrate into areas such as “sustainable development and rural construction”, “ecological civilization construction and management”, and “agricultural economics”. The combination of “liberal arts + natural sciences” can integrate into fields such as “computational law”, “big data management and application”, “financial technology”, and “business intelligence”. Fei Xu, the Chairman of the Innovation and Entrepreneurship Education Branch, pointed out that “New Liberal Arts” should break free from the thinking of “narrow liberal arts” and establish a “broad liberal arts” [13].

In today’s world, there is no problem that can be fully solved by a single discipline, which requires universities to break down disciplinary barriers in their talent cultivation mechanisms. At the university level, there should be strong interdisciplinary collaboration, taking into account the strengths and distinctive subjects of each discipline, and working together to cultivate talents capable of solving complex problems. For example, financial and economic research involves disciplines such as economics, management, law, and sociology, as well as mathematics, mathematical statistics, and computer science. Similarly, liberal arts face significant pressure for academic innovation, and there is an urgent need to expand and explore academic space and potential. The “digital-intelligent + humanities”, which has interdisciplinary characteristics, is an important path for breakthroughs in the humanities. The connection between “digital-intelligence” and “humanities” can be achieved through platforms for text and image analysis research and structured intelligent data. The combination of “digital-intelligent + humanities” assists in the integration of quantitative and qualitative research, greatly improving and innovating research methods and paradigms in the humanities, deepening the academic connotation of the humanities, and stimulating new research topics and opportunities, thereby promoting the restructuring and reconstruction of the academic mechanism in liberal arts [13].

Liming Fan, the head of the Ministry of Education’s New Liberal Arts Construction Working Group, pointed out that in the construction of “New Liberal Arts”, continuous reflection and research are necessary to deepen the understanding of the connotation of “New Liberal Arts”. The direction determines the way forward. The paths and measures for the construction of “New Liberal Arts” can include new disciplines (cross-disciplinary programs/programs of combining bachelor’s and master’s degrees/art and design + new media), new models (joint training of dual degrees/major and minor programs/micro-programs across universities), new courses

(development of new courses/revamping old courses), and new theories (discipline system/academic system/discourse system/textbook system) [14].

Universities should combine their own development plans and goals, establish talent cultivation types and orientations based on the setting of liberal arts majors, carefully analyze their disciplinary advantages, and actively seek cross-integration with the advantageous STEM disciplines within the university. The establishment of distinct disciplinary characteristics needs to closely align with the type of university and consider students’ actual situations, as well as the faculty. Ultimately, it is important for universities to effectively highlight and leverage their disciplinary strengths, lead in quality, cultivate diversity, achieve classifications of excellence, and serve national and regional development needs.

Over the past two years, some liberal arts disciplines in universities have made various reform attempts in the construction of “New Liberal Art” based on the guidance of serving the national strategic development and their own expertise. They have targeted the cultivation of professionals urgently needed by the country, leading the way in innovative talent cultivation models such as “one expertise + multiple capabilities” and “one specialty + multiple abilities”. Universities such as Tsinghua University, Renmin University, and Zhengzhou University have established experimental classes for humanities and social sciences, and some universities have begun to explore new college-style teaching models under the guidance of the “New Liberal Arts” ideology. Shanghai International Studies University has initiated innovative practices in “New Liberal Arts” based on its training programs and strategic goals, including the following five strategic elements: focusing on moral education and character building, cultivating solid “multilingual +” humanistic quality, developing comprehensive “regional and country-specific +” capabilities, fostering excellent “cross-disciplinary and compound +” professional abilities, and integrating information technology towards “language + technology” approaches [15]. The Center for Humanities at Southern University of Science and Technology aims to comprehensively explore new fields of knowledge from various perspectives, such as architecture, design, media, and literature. Harbin Institute of Technology’s liberal arts program adopts a major-minor model with “English as the major + independent choice of minor”, adhering to the concept of integrated innovation talent cultivation, reflecting the characteristic of cross-cultivation between liberal arts and the university’s advantageous disciplines [16].

Furthermore, some universities make full use of the resources in their foreign language programs to implement the “New Liberal Arts” construction model of “foreign + specialized” or “specialized + foreign”. Specifically, this means promoting the “foreign language + specialized discipline” and “foreign language A + foreign language B” dual-degree training model in foreign language programs, where students in foreign language programs pursue a second

degree in a non-foreign language discipline as a minor or take another foreign language as an additional course. In non-foreign language programs, the “specialized discipline + foreign language” model is implemented. For example, in fields such as accounting, business administration, and finance, students can integrate their study of certified professional qualifications such as the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA), the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants (CIMA), and the Chartered Financial Analyst (CFA) with their study of a foreign language [17].

5. Conclusion

In the rapidly developing contemporary era of high technology, information technology is constantly updating at an accelerating pace. Unprecedentedly active technological innovation is reshaping various professional fields worldwide. The intensity of competition in the international community is increasing day by day, and the international political environment is becoming increasingly complex. “New Liberal Arts” is an active response to this situation, which not only focuses on the construction of disciplines itself but also relates to social and economic development. Interdisciplinary integration mainly revolves around the expansion of research areas brought about by new technologies such as “Internet +”, “AI intelligentization”, “virtual reality”, and “digitization”. It involves updating research methods, talent cultivation, and teaching methods, as well as incorporating the latest developments in science and technology and the industry’s latest requirements for talent cultivation into the teaching process. The reform and construction of “New Liberal Arts” are related to how humanities can adapt to deepening social changes and serve the ever-changing demands of the times.

It is inspiring that in the past year, numerous professors and teachers have embarked on contemplating the majors and researching the courses they teach, actively engaging in the construction and reform of “New Liberal Arts” curricula, leading to significant achievements. An advanced search has been conducted on the CNKI academic journal database using the keywords “reform of New Liberal Arts” within the timeframe of September 1, 2022, to September 1, 2023, which yielded 332 relevant articles. Further analysis of these articles reveals that the most common titles revolve around “Reflection, Analysis, Research or Exploration of Reforming a Specific Disciplinary Major/Talent Training System/Course under the Background/from the Perspective of New Liberal Arts”, such as “Reflections on the Teaching Reform of Environmental Design Major under the Background of New Liberal Arts Construction” [18], “An Analysis of the Teaching Reform of Journalism Major from the Perspective of New Liberal Arts” [19], “Research on the Construction of Local College Network and New Media Talent Training System under the Perspective of New Liberal Arts” [20], “Exploration of the “Introduction to Literature” Course in Higher Education from the Perspective of New Liberal Arts” [21], etc.

While actively embracing the reform of “New Liberal Arts”, universities need to further clarify the concepts of “safeguarding”, “breaking-through”, and “surpassing” in the construction of “New Liberal Arts”. They should also take rapid action based on their own characteristics in terms of the positioning of humanities disciplines, professional layout, evaluation system, etc., in order to cultivate talents who can better solve complex real-world problems. As university teachers, it is necessary to continuously learn, update educational concepts, enhance teaching methods, adapt to the trend, and actively promote the reform and innovation of higher education, thus cultivating outstanding individuals who meet the needs of the times and the society.

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