

# The Yuanpei Program in Peking University



Wanying Wang

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A Case Study of Curriculum Innovation

 Springer

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# Abstract

The Yuanpei program is an institute-wide program curriculum innovation, modeling on the core curriculum in Harvard University which is committed to carrying out general education. This research investigated the major conflicts that arose in the process of initiation and implementation of the Yuanpei program, how these conflicts evolved during the process, and what were the sources of these conflicts. The conflict model, primarily derived from conflict theory, was adopted to interpret and analyze the process of curriculum innovation in this context.

The study employed a qualitative case study approach. Data were collected primarily through interviews, observations and document analysis. Administrators, teachers and students were interviewed to gain insight into areas where major conflicts arose, their processes and sources in the process of curriculum innovation. The researcher primarily observed program practices and operations, including program setting, the human, social environment (how participants interacted and communicated), and program activities and participant behaviors.

The researcher distinguished between conceptual conflicts and practical conflict in light of the different stages in which conflicts emerged. The researcher mainly identified three conceptual conflicts that represent the focus of debates: first, two opposing opinions on how to balance general education and specialized education; second, potential incongruence in the idea of the Yuanpei program; third, conflict between the changing needs of society and traditional system of training. The researcher delineated four categories of practical conflicts in light of various issues: free-course selection, free-major selection, faculty advisor as well as general education elective courses, in each of which sub-themes were identified and analyzed.

The researcher describes how both conceptual and practical conflicts evolved. Each major conceptual conflict seems to go through similar stages based on the data, involving issue, confrontation and integration of claims of both sides. For practical conflicts, factors contributing to the escalation and de-escalation, moderation of conflicts were found by the researcher. The research identified different roles, incompatible values, contested resources and structural constraints as the

main sources of conflict. Any conflict may involve more than one category or may be mainly due to one category.

As such, the study is exploratory and contributes to the scholarship on educational change through its analysis of the curriculum innovation for general education in Peking University.

# Preface

In a way, higher education in China has ever been an arena where utilitarianism prevails. However, such utilitarianism also has ever been challenged by attempts to introduce elements of liberalism since the birth of contemporary higher education institutions in China at the beginning of the twentieth century.

It would not be exaggerating to say that in ancient China, “education” was but preparation for the imperial civil examination. The civil examination drove millions of young people (mainly men) to “study” for a large part of their lives, in the hope of succeeding in the examination. There was nothing else that would be called “education”. However, analysts tend to ignore the reality that the sole purpose of the civil examination, which existed since 603 until 1905, was for the pragmatic selection of civil servants. It was perhaps the most rigorous and sophisticated method of identifying the finest people for the officialdom. It was a very overt machinery to create officials.

The utilitarian nature of the powerful examination was in a way challenged by the pioneering educationalists in the early twentieth century. Influenced by education thoughts in the west, mainly the German philosophy of education and Dewey’s idea of progressive education in the US, they attempted to create institutions for life and for democracy. In hindsight, the political instability and uncertainty of the polity during the transition from an imperial dynasty to a republic had created space for liberal thoughts to blossom. Government intervention was almost zero.

Cai Yuanpei, who was once President of the young Peking University, was among the progressive educationalists. His idea of “tolerance and accommodation of diversity” (my translation for 兼容並包) is a direct negation of the orthodox and conformity tradition in Chinese education. His adoption of Hu Shi’s [?] duality of “Mr De and Mr Sai” (Democracy and Science) was a deliberate effort to reinterpret the *moral* and *intellectual* dimensions which had been the core values of Chinese education.

Such a momentum of liberalism sustained even during WWII. For 8 years, normal lives were disrupted by Japanese occupation. However, in the unoccupied west, the Southwest Allied University [?], a consortium of institutions which fled the war, gained breathing space for further development of liberal education, and

produced many prominent scientists (including Nobel Laureates) and humanities scholars.

The establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 marked a resumption of a strong sense of utilitarianism in higher education, yet under centralisation. Expectedly, the strong ideological underpinning and the comprehensive planned economy rendered higher education a crucial element in manpower planning. Ironically, as a counteraction to the capitalist economy, the socialist planned economy actually reinforced and exacerbated the production mode that the capitalists had started. It went to the extreme of industrialisation: very detailed division of labour, very strict departmentalisation, very rigorous classification of labour layers, and so forth. The rigid Soviet model became a logical and convenient choice. Even after the breaking up with the "reformist" Soviet Union in the early 1960s, there were only minor adjustments in the higher education sector.

The Cultural Revolution, which attempted to totally undermine the ideological basis of capitalism, could have undermined the very basis of the Soviet model of higher education. However, on the contrary, the revolution evolved into a thorough destruction of the intellectual institutions, replacing them by organs of ideological training.

Hence, after 1978, when the market economy was introduced, and when higher education resumed its order, the utilitarian nature of the system was restored still unconsciously along the Soviet model. Although there were several government attempts to reduce the rigidity of the system, and there were major responses of the system to the increasing pressure from the market economy, the higher education organizations remain rigid and inflexible. Utilitarianism sustains only that people attempt to reinterpret the meaning of *rencai* (often translated as "talents", meaning variously as personnel, manpower, human resources).

In this context, Peking University, which has ever been the most liberal institution and the initiator of new ideas in China, started the Yuan Pei program, which was the first of its kind to re-introduce liberal education. The program was further institutionalised and was developed into the Yuan Pei College. Wanying Wang has therefore chosen a critical episode at an important juncture of higher education development in China. Since the 1990s, higher education in China, with ever expanding student population and enormous resources is the envy of many other countries. However, intellectuals in China continue the tradition of soul searching for the real meaning of a university. It is in that sense that Cai Yuanpei is being remembered.

Understandably, the creation of such a program and a college was an insertion of a foreign element into a well established institution. It is a bold innovation based on very strong theoretical underpinning, but is therefore also a very courageous move against a strong convention. The book, through rigorous qualitative research in the ethnographic convention, vividly delineates the encounters of such an innovation by describing and analysing the conflicts, through the many episodes and issues as perceived by insiders who are akin to the innovation. It is a very truthful account of the reality, which is very different from pure conceptual deductions from minimal data, or crude speculations albeit based purely on statistical data.

The book will have sustained value over time. Echoing Cai Yuanpei's initiatives in the early twentieth century, the Yuan Pei College is likely to leave a mark in the history of higher education in China. The book will be seen as a very good documentation of the process of evolution of a liberal endeavour amidst an evolving socialist system. Painful and clumsy the process might seem, it indeed symbolises a breakthrough which may bring about long-term and far-reaching implications.

From a broader perspective, the account of the conflicts may also reflect a broader picture of what innovations may encounter in higher education institutions anywhere which, nonetheless, are admittedly bureaucracies.

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Kai-ming Cheng



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