

# General Education in China's Universities from 1911 to 1949

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(2001年9月28日受理)

## Abstract

The Revolution of 1911 represented an important turning point in China's history. It is widely considered that China established the modern higher education system since 1911. The purpose of this study is to make clear the historical development of general education in China's universities from 1911 to 1949, which is roughly divided into two phases: (1) General Education in the Transition Period: 1911-1927; (2) General Education in the Nationalist Period: 1928-1949. This paper mainly examines the general education program from the curriculum in the universities, especially Qinghua University.

Key Words: general education, China, university

## Introduction

There have been a great number of books and articles concerning Chinese higher education, but general education is the most neglected area among the various studies. This is mainly because since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, and especially after the higher education reform started in 1952, China's higher education placed significant emphasis on specialized education, and general education programs disappeared from higher curriculum. However, since the late 1970s general education has been receiving renewed attention in Chinese universities and the proportion of the undergraduate curriculum allocated to general education appears to be on the increase.

There is no doubt that the reemergence of general education since the late 1970s in China's universities not only has closed connection with the social, cultural, and scientific and technological development and change, but also has roots in its historical tradition. For a better understanding of the re-emergence of general education in China's universities, this paper examines historical development of the general education in China's higher education institutions from 1911 to 1949, which is roughly divided into 2 phases in this paper: (1) General Education in the Transition Period: 1911-1927, (2) General Education in the Nationalist Period: 1928-1949.

## 1. General Education in the Transition Period: 1911-1927

The Revolution of 1911 in China overthrew the Qing Dynasty and established the Republic. Considerable educational legislation passed in the first few months of the early Republic.

In September, 1912, the Ministry of Education promulgated "Decree of School System", according to which the higher institutions consisted of universities, special training colleges, and higher teachers college. In October of the same year, the "University Decree" was legislated, which clearly designated the classification of fields, subjects and years of study in a university. Universities were divided into seven major fields: arts, science, law, business, medicine, agriculture, and engineering. Universities were to have a higher status, and their curriculum was defined by three possible combinations: (1) pure arts and sciences; (2) arts plus law of commerce; (3) science plus agriculture, medicine, or engineering.<sup>1)</sup> This legislation was strongly influenced by the German-educated Chinese scholar Cai Yuanpei.

Cai Yuanpei, who spent many years in Germany and France, is one of the most important figures in the history of modern Chinese education, especially in this period. As the first Minister of Education of the Republican in 1912,

though it was a brief tenure, Cai set forth five goals for Republican education, that is military education, education for citizenship, practical education in technical fields, education for a world view and aesthetic education. After Cai returned from Germany in 1917 to take up the position of president of Beijing University, he reformed the university along the lines of the German model. Academic freedom and university autonomy were two of the most significant steps. In terms of curriculum, the patterns that he set at Peking University in 1919 whereby all students had to take courses in the core areas of philosophy, psychology, and education, in addition to specialized courses in the sciences and arts, can be seen the early practice of general education in Chinese modern universities. For example, the students specializing in philosophy were required to take the following common course: psychology, biology, anthropology, logics, pedagogy, aesthetics, linguistics, and foreign language.<sup>2)</sup>

New educational legislation in 1922 (an educational system modeled upon the American example) and 1924, gave a much broader definition to the "university". Many universities were established after this, for example, Dongbei University(1923), Guangdong University (1924) Shandong University (1926), Hunan University (1926), and Kaifeng Zhongshan University (1927), and so on. It should be noted that many private universities were also set up during this period, and many of them became the distinguished universities in China, such as Nankai University, Fudan University, Xiamen University and Tongji University, and so on. The table 1 shows the development of universities in China from 1912 to 1925.<sup>3)</sup> From the table 1, we can see a dramatic development of universities in China during this period.

Table 1 : The Development of universities in China from 1912 to 1925

| Year | Number of Universities | Number of Staff | Numbers of Students |
|------|------------------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| 1912 | 4                      | 229             | 481                 |
| 1913 | 7                      | 319             | 1371                |
| 1914 | 7                      | 312             | 730                 |
| 1915 | 10                     | 319             | 1219                |
| 1916 | 10                     | 420             | 1446                |
| 1921 | 15                     |                 |                     |
| 1922 | 18                     |                 |                     |
| 1923 | 24                     |                 |                     |
| 1924 | 32                     |                 |                     |
| 1925 | 50                     | 4669            | 25278               |

The use of the credit system to facilitate curricular breadth was endorsed and an American-inspired style of academic organization, with colleges between universities and departments, was established. As a result, many universities revised their curriculum along the lines of the American pattern. In particular, a general education program was introduced to the universities. For example, Qinghua University was originally a language school established with American Boxer indemnity funds, but by the late 1920s became one of China's leading national universities under the leadership of some outstanding American-returned Chinese scholars. Education in Qinghua University was divided into 2 phases: (1) General Program for the first two or three years, and (2) Professional Program for two years.<sup>4)</sup> Table 2 and 3 show the course for the students in the first two years in Qinghua University in 1925.<sup>5)</sup>

Table 2 : First Year Courses in Qinghua University (1925)

|   | Course   | Credit |
|---|--|--------|
| 1 | Purpose and Methodology of Study   | 1      |
| 2 | Chinese  | 2      |
| 3 | English  | 2      |
| 4 | History of Development of Modern Thoughts of Science (half a year)<br>Technological Practice (half a year) | 2      |
| 5 | Experimental Science: Biology/Chemistry/Physics  | 3      |
| 6 | History (Chinese/Foreign)  | 4      |
| 7 | Electives: Second Foreign Language/Mathematics/Reading   | 3      |
| 8 | Physical Education   | 1      |
|   | In total   | 18     |

Table 3 : Second Year Courses in Qinghua University (1925)

|   | Course  | Credit |
|---|---|--------|
| 1 | Chinese   | 1      |
| 2 | English   | 2      |
| 3 | Contemporary Problems in China  | 2      |
| 4 | Literature (Chinese/Western) / Philosophy (Chinese/Western) / Social Science (Economics/Politics/Sociology) | 3      |
| 5 | Electives   | 9      |
| 6 | Physical Education  | 1      |
|   | In total  | 18     |

## 2. General Education in the Nationalist Period: 1928-1949

The Nationalist government that came to power in 1927 reformed the structure and organization of higher education system along the lines of American-inspired patterns. First, consider the development of China's higher education from 1928 to 1937 that is showed by Table 4.<sup>6)</sup>

Table 4 : The Development of universities in China from 1912 to 1925

| Year | Number of Institutions | Number of Staff | Numbers of Students |
|------|------------------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| 1928 | 74                     | 5214            | 25198               |
| 1929 | 76                     | 6218            | 29123               |
| 1930 | 85                     | 6985            | 37566               |
| 1931 | 103                    | 7053            | 44167               |
| 1932 | 103                    | 6709            | 42170               |
| 1933 | 108                    | 7209            | 42936               |
| 1934 | 110                    | 7205            | 41768               |
| 1935 | 108                    | 7234            | 41128               |
| 1936 | 108                    | 7560            | 41922               |
| 1937 | 91                     | 5657            | 31188               |

In 1928, the Nanjing Nationalist Government held the First National Conference on Education in Nanjing and obtained many suggestions on reforming higher education. In 1929, the "University Regulations" was adopted, in accordance with which most institutions embraced a wide range of pure and applied knowledge fields. The credit system was used to ensure that students had exposure to a range of knowledge areas, and most attended a general first year before following more specialized courses of study from the second year. A university was decreed to be an institution of higher learning having at least three colleges among arts, science, law, education, agriculture, engineering, business and medicine, one of which must be in the pure or applied sciences, and broad curricular areas were organized within colleges, which consisted of several departments. According to this legislation, each university should offer Principle of Party, Chinese, Physical Education, Military Training and First and Second Foreign Language as common required courses, and provide the freshmen students basic courses.

The "Committee on Standard of Curriculum and Facility at University" was also organized in 1929, and its tasks being mainly the following: the establishment of standard of courses at university and college including required course and electives; the establishment of textbook standard for each subject; and the establishment of standards of distribution for required courses and electives in each academic year. In this period, however, the development of curriculum at universities was very slow, and there was no national standard for curriculum. The universities set up the courses according to their own circumstances and along the lines of European and American models. In general, the courses in universities were divided into four groups: preparatory courses, primary courses, professional courses, and supplementary courses. The first two, preparatory and primary courses were also considered as basic courses and were required for all students as common courses.

Qinghua University serves as an example. From 1934-37, common courses for freshmen students in the Faculties of Arts, Sciences and Law of Qinghua University were shown as the table 5.<sup>7)</sup>

Table 5 : First Year Courses in Faculties of Arts, Sciences and Law

|          | Course  | Credit |
|----------|---|--------|
| 1        | Chinese   | 6      |
| 2        | English   | 8      |
| 3        | History (Chinese/Western)                                 | 8      |
| 4        | Logic/Higher Mathematics/Differential Calculus            | 6-8    |
| 5        | College Physics / College Chemistry / Geography / Biology | 8      |
| In total |   | 36-38  |

In 1938, the Ministry of Education organized the First National Conference on Curriculum in Universities, and published standards for required courses, which were to be the same across all institutions, as well as guidelines for elective courses.

Table 6 and 7 respectively show the common required courses for students at Faculty of Arts and Faculty of Science in the first 2 years.<sup>8)</sup>

Table 6 : Common Required Courses for Students at Faculty of Art

| Course   | Credits   | First year |                          | Second year              |                          |
|--|-----------|------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
|  |           | 1 semester | 2 <sup>nd</sup> semester | 1 <sup>st</sup> semester | 2 <sup>nd</sup> semester |
| Three Peoples Principles   | 4         | 2          | 2                        |                          |                          |
| Logics   | 3         |            |                          | 3                        |                          |
| Chinese  | 6         | 3          | 3                        |                          |                          |
| Foreign Language   | 6         | 3          | 3                        |                          |                          |
| History of China   | 6         | 3          | 3                        |                          |                          |
| Western History  | 6         |            |                          | 3                        | 3                        |
| Philosophy   | 4         | 2          | 2                        |                          |                          |
| Lize Xue   | 3         |            |                          |                          | 3                        |
| Introduction to Science,<br>Mathematics<br>Physics<br>Chemistry<br>Biology<br>Psychology<br>Geology<br>Physical geography<br>(one course of the above) | 6         | 3          | 3                        |                          |                          |
| Introduction to Social Sciences<br>Foundations of Law<br>Politics<br>Economics<br>Sociology<br>(one course of the above)                               | 6         |            |                          | 3                        | 3                        |
| <b>Total</b>   | <b>50</b> | <b>16</b>  | <b>16</b>                | <b>9</b>                 | <b>9</b>                 |

Table 7 : Common Required Courses for Students at Faculty of Science

| Course  | Credits | First year |                          | Second year              |                          |
|---|---------|------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
|   |         | 1 semester | 2 <sup>nd</sup> semester | 1 <sup>st</sup> semester | 2 <sup>nd</sup> semester |
| Three Peoples Principles  | 4       | 2          | 2                        |                          |                          |
| Logics  | 3       |            |                          | 3                        |                          |
| Chinese   | 6       | 3          | 3                        |                          |                          |
| Foreign Language  | 6       | 3          | 3                        |                          |                          |
| History of China  | 6       | 3          | 3                        |                          |                          |
| Mathematics/<br>Differential<br>Calculus  | 6-8     | 3-4        | 3-4                      |                          |                          |
| Introduction to Social Sciences<br>Foundations of Law<br>Politics<br>Economics<br>Sociology<br>(one course of the above)  | 6       |            |                          | 3                        | 3                        |
| Physics<br>Chemistry<br>Biology<br>Psychology<br>Geology<br>Physical geography<br>Psychology<br>(two course of the above) | 12-20   | 3-5        | 3-5                      | 3-5                      | 3-5                      |
| Total   | 49-59   | 17-20      | 17-20                    | 9-11                     | 6-8                      |

The students in the Faculty of Arts were required to obtain 50 of a total of 132 credits from the common required courses. Students in the Faculty of Science were required to obtain 49-59 of a total of 132 credits from the common required courses. A strong American influence on the curriculum is evident. This situation lasted until further reforms by the Communist Party after the establishment of the People's Republic of China.

When Japan attacked, in 1937, three of the most outstanding institutions of higher learning of China, Beijing University, Qinghua University and Nankai University, fled to the interior and were located, from 1938 to 1946 in Kunming in an amalgamation known as Southwest Associated University or "Xi Nan Lian Da". One purpose of general education here was to expose the mind to different ways of thought, to alien institutions, and to varied approaches to life. At Southwest Associated University, as elsewhere, anthropology, philosophy, literature, and history were considered avenues to these goals. Before specializing, all the students at Southwest Associated University took a common curriculum of Chinese and Western language, literature, and history, and basic courses in the sciences and social sciences. Moreover, there was ample room in the curriculum for electives, audits, and general experimentation.

## Conclusion

The establishment of China's modern higher education system was greatly influenced by many distinguished Europe-returned and America-returned scholars. As a consequence, both its organization and structure were clearly modeled upon European and American patterns. Since the strengthening of American influence following 1922, a kind of general education program occupied a considerably large proportion of the university curriculum. The effects of this initiative endured until 1949 with the foundation of the People's Republic of China.

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