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New liberal arts education in China: Implications for foreign language teachers and students

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Abstract. Strategically, higher education in China aims to transform China into a modernized socialist country with Chinese characteristics. Against this backdrop, New Liberal Arts (NLA) education serves a special mission in the new era with a diversity of connotations. Clarifying the mission and connotations therein, this paper probes into the implications of NLA education for foreign language teachers and students in China, aiming to encourage them for self-development in view of NLA education.

Keywords: new liberal arts, education, implications, foreign language, teachers and students

Новое гуманитарное образование в Китае: значение для преподавателей иностранных языков и студентов

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Аннотация. В качестве стратегической меры высшего образования в Китае, призванной способствовать превращению Китая в модернизированную социалистическую страну с китайской спецификой, образование новых гуманитарных наук (NLA) имеет свою особую миссию в новую эпоху с богатым подтекстом. Разъясняя миссию и коннотации, эта статья исследует последствия образования NLA для преподавателей иностранных языков и студентов в Китае, стремясь помочь им принять меры для самосовершенствования на фоне образования NLA.

Ключевые слова: новые гуманитарные науки, образование, подразумеваемое, иностранный язык, учителя и студенты

1. Introduction

'New Liberal Arts (NLA)' is a concept first proposed by Hiram College, USA, five years ago to integrate new technologies into professional education and provide students with a comprehensive and interdisciplinary learning experience. According to Shaohua Wang (Wang 2022, 14), it simply means the 'disciplinary restructuring of traditional humanities' and the 'integration of social and natural sciences'. In November 2020, the Conference on NLA Education was held in Shandong Province, China, to launch the nation-wide NLA education reform. In the past three years, NLA education reform has attracted widespread attention in the Chinese higher education academia with publication numbers soaring. According to the latest statistics

from China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) as of July 2023, academic papers whose titles include NLA amount to 1,908, covering law, education, art, economics and seven more disciplines. Among the 245 papers in the field of foreign languages, research topics involve the development of foreign language programs in the context of NLA (Zhu 2022), training foreign language professionals (Liu, He 2022; Wang, Song 2021), curriculum design for moral education reform (Jing 2022; You 2021), smart teaching (Yan, Zhang 2022), reform of teaching methods (e. g. Wang, Fu 2022), and other macro-level studies. Along with that, little attention has been paid to the implications of NLA for foreign language teachers and students at the macro level.

In this respect, this paper, starting from the macro perspective of the new missions entrusted

to Chinese higher education and foreign language practitioners by the NLA education in the new era, will probe into the implications of NLA education for foreign language teachers and students in an attempt to provide them with guidance.

2. New mission of NLA education in the new era

The new mission undertaken by the NLA education reform lies in its connotations and the new goal of China's higher education. A deep understanding of this new mission makes it necessary to clarify the new goal of China's higher education in the new era.

2.1. New goal of China's higher education in the new era

The new goal of China's higher education in the new era is the key to grasp the new mission of NLA education reform. According to the Working Report of the 19th CPC National Congress (2017), the new era (2017–2050) is the time to transform China into a modernized socialist society in all respects: by the middle of the 21st century, we must transform China into a prosperous, democratic, civilized, harmonious, and beautiful socialist modernized society. Since education is an important yardstick of modernization, such a goal can hardly be achieved without high-quality development of higher education. It was reiterated at the 5th Plenary Session of the 19th CPC Central Committee held in 2021: we should implement overall modernization and become an educationally strong country by 2035. Therefore, being educationally strong is a fundamental project for the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Priority should be given to high-quality development of education and the cultivation of talents who are responsible for the realization of the stated goal. This is the new goal of higher education development in China in the new era.

The setting of this goal can be attributed to the tremendous changes that have taken place in China's higher education. Yan Wu, Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Education of China, summarized these changes from four perspectives at the Launching Ceremony of NLA Education in 2020. In the first place, the role of China's higher education has changed. In the construction of socialism with Chinese characteristics, higher education has always played a supporting role, and in the new era, it is the biggest driving force for sustainable development. In consequence, its role has shifted from a basic support to a guiding driving force. Secondly, China's higher education has entered a new stage. As of 2021, the total number of on-campus

college students in China has reached 44.3 million with the gross enrollment rate in higher education of 57.8%. Higher education in China has developed from the stage of mass education into the stage of popularization. At the same time, a large number of Chinese universities and disciplines have come into top rankings of the world; the overall level of China's higher education, globally, is very much advanced (Wu 2022). According to him, China's higher education has made a milestone breakthrough both in terms of quantity and quality. Thirdly, changes have taken place in the types and structure of higher education. Its structure is becoming more reasonable, comprehensive, and systematic. One of the most prominent features of China's higher education is diversification. Finally, the landscape of China's higher education has changed. As a key driving force, major contributor, and important source of high-quality development in China, higher education of China in the new era shoulders the responsibility of building a modernized socialist country with Chinese characteristics and realizing the Chinese Dream of the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Consequently, it needs to seek development on the world stage against a bigger global landscape.

In a nutshell, the four-fold changes mentioned above indicate that China's higher education has made a milestone breakthrough and will play a fundamental, leading, and global role in China's building of a socialist modernized country in the new era.

2.2. New connotations of NLA education in the new era

The launching of NLA education is a measure to promote high-quality development of higher education in China in the new era. Its inherent logic is that in order to build a modernized socialist country with Chinese characteristics in the new era, it is necessary to transform China into a socialist country with a strong education system. The mission of NLA education is to encourage this transformation. Therefore, as a new reform in China's higher education in the new era, NLA education has special connotations.

First, NLA education aims at building a world-class liberal-arts talent training system with Chinese characteristics. According to the 'Declaration of NLA Education' issued 3 November 2020, the overall goal of NLA education is to 'promote the innovative development of liberal arts, develop a new pattern of philosophy and social sciences, form a comprehensive education system that integrates students, academic research and disciplines, help to form Chinese schools of humanities, promote

the going-global of Chinese culture, and enhance the self-confidence and influence of that culture.' It can be seen that the major goal of NLA education is to facilitate the transformation of China into a socialist modernized country, promote the innovative development of liberal arts, and build a world-class liberal-arts talent training system with Chinese characteristics.

Second, the measures for NLA education include the following five aspects: moral education, optimization of teaching programs, improvement of curriculum design, innovation of talent-training models, and development of a quality culture. The strengthening of moral education requires us to promote ideological and political education and cultivate talents who can shoulder the responsibility of national rejuvenation. The optimization of teaching programs requires all liberal-arts programs to serve for national needs, promote the integration of social and natural sciences, and build first-class liberal-arts programs. The improvement of curriculum design requires us to grasp the key points of curriculum design, integrate the latest theoretical research results, promote interdisciplinary development and enhance students' comprehensive abilities. The innovation of talent-training models requires us to innovate current models and cultivate innovative talents by crossing the boundaries of disciplines, departments, industries, and countries. The development of a quality culture requires us to prioritize quality, form a quality assurance system and improve the students' abilities. The above five measures are both a pathway and a method, distinguishing China's NLA education from the philosophy of Hiram College (Liu 2022, 117).

3. Implications of NLA education for foreign language teachers

As is argued in (Liu 2022, 117), China's NLA education inherits the values of the 1919 New Culture Movement and can be regarded as the New Culture Movement in higher education in China in the new era. Therefore, foreign language teachers and students should attach great importance to it and take an active part in this education reform. Then, what actions should foreign language teachers take? What implications does NLA education have for them?

3.1. Take an active role in moral education

The core task of China's NLA education is to strengthen moral education and cultivate talents who can contribute to national rejuvenation. Cultivating talents for the country has always been the fundamental task of higher education institutions.

Foreign language teachers in colleges and universities should follow this goal and take an active part in strengthening the students' moral education.

Foreign language teachers need to grasp four key points to fulfil this goal. Number one is to grasp the focuses and guiding principles of moral education. According to the 'Guiding Principles of Moral Education in Colleges and Universities' issued by the Ministry of Education of China, moral education should focus on 'strengthening the students' ideals and beliefs, love of the Party and the country,' and 'enhancing their political awareness, patriotism, cultural qualities, constitutional and legal awareness, and moral qualities.' The second is to find a reasonable ground in combining moral education with different fields of study. Since different fields of study have different educational goals, foreign language teachers should figure out the factors suitable for moral education in their field of study. The third is to form a scientific curriculum system. Systematic thinking is needed to guide the moral education in the curriculum design, so that the moral elements can be reasonably embedded in the curriculum. The fourth is to pay attention to the effect of education. The effect is the only standard for good moral education. Efforts should be made to enhance the learning effect and students' interest in moral education. Indicators should be developed to ensure that moral education is an important part of evaluating the effectiveness of talent training.

3.2. Engage in the development of first-class undergraduate programs

University teachers of foreign languages, especially heads of foreign language departments, are those responsible for the development of first-class undergraduate programs. One of the focuses of China's NLA education is the optimization of teaching programs. In order to fulfill this goal, the Ministry of Education launched the 'Double 10,000 Plans' in 2019, aiming at building 10,000 first-class undergraduate programs both at the national and the provincial level. As of May 2022, the Ministry of Education had already designed 8,031 national and 8,632 provincial-level first-class undergraduate programs. Although the 'Double 10,000 Plans' has almost come to an end, the optimization of teaching programs and the development of first-class undergraduate programs in humanities has just begun.

In order to get more deeply involved in the development of first-class undergraduate programs, foreign language teachers should bear in mind the following three points. In the first place, meeting the demand is what matters most in developing

a first-class undergraduate program. We have to make sure that our programs serve the national needs, meet the new demand for different types of talent and have their own unique features. The second is to actively develop new liberal-arts programs. We must closely follow the new trend of technological revolution and industrial transformation, establish the concept of 'foreign language+', and promote foreign language programs that embrace language intelligence, smart finance, health services and management, big data management and application, aviation service art and management, art management, supply-chain management, and financial technology. On the one hand, we will promote the transformation and upgrading of existing foreign language programs, and, on the other, we will actively develop new liberal-arts programs. The third is to remove disciplinary barriers to promote interdisciplinary learning. According to Jianjun Liu (2021: 22), NLA education should 'break through the thinking mode of traditional humanities, and promote interdisciplinary learning through inheritance, innovation, integration, collaboration and sharing'. What he means by the 'thinking mode of traditional humanities' refers to the one that emphasizes the independence of different humanities through the division of liberal arts and sciences. The NLA education in the new era strives to break through disciplinary barriers, advocate for the integration of humanities with science, engineering, agriculture, medicine and even humanities of different branches, and achieve the merging of knowledge, abilities, and qualities.

3.3. Play an active role in the development of first-class undergraduate courses

Undergraduate courses are the most fundamental and crucial element in higher education institutions, and they are also the most direct link between university teachers and students. Teaching quality has always been the lifeline of education. In order to improve the quality of higher education, the Ministry of Education has launched the plan to design 10,000 first-class undergraduate courses. As a matter of fact, they fall into five types: online first-class courses, offline first-class courses, online-offline hybrid first-class courses, virtual simulation first-class courses, and social-practice first-class courses. As of May 2022, the first batch of 3,559 national first-class courses had been launched, but since this plan was newly started, foreign language teachers have a big role to play.

Against this backdrop, they should bear in mind the following four points. One is to form a quality awareness. An undergraduate course can never be recognized as first-class unless it is highly innova-

tive and challenging with a high academic level. The building of first-class undergraduate courses requires foreign language teachers to devote themselves to teaching and strive for teaching excellence. Therefore, the forming of a quality awareness is extremely important. The second is try to make the courses as academic as possible. Foreign language teachers should take the development of first-class courses as an opportunity to improve themselves, increase their knowledge, and enhance their academic competence. The third is to enrich the forms and formats of courses. The rapidly developing information technology today has made the learning resources unprecedentedly abundant. Massive online resources such as CNN, BBC, VOA, Bloomberg, iTUNES, TED, and various British and American newspaper portals are readily available. Online courses such as NetEase Open Class, Wisdom Tree, Rain Classroom, Coursera, and Open Education Resources (OER) are easily accessible for learners at large. In this context, foreign language teachers must re-examine the forms and formats of their own courses and make them more diversified. The fourth is to reform their teaching methods. With the rapid development of technology, multi-modal educational technology and resources are continuously applied into foreign language classroom teaching. Flipped classroom, blended teaching, micro class, split classroom, MOOC+SPOC+flipped classroom and other new modes of teaching are emerging one after another, posing great challenges to traditional teaching methods. This requires foreign language teachers to form innovative awareness and reform their teaching methods.

3.4. Form a student-centered awareness and make classroom-teaching revolution

Building a quality culture is an important lever in NLA education where the student-centered awareness matters most. Therefore, foreign language teachers should have this awareness. As a teaching philosophy, the phrase 'student-centered' refers to 'shifting the focus of teaching from teachers to students, aiming to improve learners' autonomy and independence. By doing so, the responsibility of learning is entrusted to students, and the focus is on achieving the practical needs of lifelong learning and possessing the ability to solve problems independently' (Guo 2022). In NLA education, the student-centered awareness lies first and foremost in the transformation of the role of teachers. Teaching is no longer a one-way process where the teachers teach and the students learn (Liu 2021, 25). Instead, it is a process in which the students take an active participation, construct knowledge

and learn through the active interaction between teachers and students.

To achieve this goal, foreign language teachers need to make a revolution in classroom teaching. We need to change the traditional model where teachers impart and students passively learn. The success of classroom teaching should be measured by the students' active learning and acquisition of knowledge. Here the ideas of two scholars are worthy of attention. One is Professor Liu Runqing, a famous Chinese educator, who argues that five factors can be used to judge whether a class is successful or not. According to him, these factors are: (1) A class is full of information; (2) All the information is made into facts; (3) The facts form a system of knowledge; (4) The knowledge is filled with wisdom; (5) The wisdom is transformed into a philosophy. Liu's five factors are proposed from the logic of acquiring knowledge, improving abilities and nurturing of critical thinking. In a similar way, Deputy Minister Yan Wu proposed five realms of classroom teaching at the 11th China University Teaching Forum in 2018: silence, answer, dialogue, criticism and debate. 'Silence', the first level, refers to a state where students passively learn and do not speak. The second level — 'answer' — is the situation where students can answer questions that their teachers ask. The third level is 'dialogue' through which teachers and students interact. The fourth one refers to the situation where students 'criticize' their teachers based on the acquired knowledge. The fifth level, which is the highest one, involves debating with teachers, where students apply what they have learned. Different as the two scholars' ideas are, the student-centered awareness is the same, which can help foreign language teachers to carry out classroom-teaching revolution.

3.5. Strengthen collaborative education to innovate talent-training models

Promoting the innovation of talent-training model is an important measure for NLA education, among which the collaboration between universities and enterprises, domestic and foreign countries is of utmost importance. Although there is no consensus on the definition of 'collaborative education' in academia, some scholars believe that collaborative innovation is 'an effective interactive process where two or more parties adhere to the principles of resource sharing and mutual benefit, and make a joint effort to cultivate high-quality talents that meet the needs of society' (Yuan 2014, 100). Based on Yuan's definition and the common practice in the education community, we believe that the essential characteristics of collaborative innovation are shared goals for talent cultivation,

interaction among multiple stakeholders, and multiple resource sharing.

On such a basis, the first step to strengthen collaborative education is to clarify the talent-training goal. If the purpose of NLA education is to train future social scientists and applied talents in humanities, foreign language teachers should aim at cultivating interdisciplinary foreign language professionals who can take on the great task of national rejuvenation, especially those who can serve for the 'new round of opening-up' and the Belt and Road initiative. This should become the consensus of foreign language teachers in collaborative education. Secondly, the innovation of talent-training models lies in the effective interaction between different parties, especially enterprises, governments, industries, and universities. We should learn from the advanced collaborative models in the USA, the 'dual-factor model' in Germany, the TAFE model of Australia, and the 'Sandwich Model' in the UK to form a diverse collaborative mechanism. Finally, it is necessary to remove barriers between universities and enterprises to open up channels for resource sharing. We need to build a collaborative network that connects universities, fields of studies, industries, and countries, achieve unobstructed resource integration, and make joint efforts to innovate the model of talent training.

4. Implications of NLA education for foreign language students

Now that foreign language teachers are clear about what they should do in NLA education, what about the students? What implications does NLA education have for foreign language students? Colleges and universities are the very place where students acquire knowledge and improve their abilities and qualities. In the context of NLA education, foreign language students in China should not only acquire the knowledge and linguistic competence in their majors, but also improve their comprehensive abilities and qualities from the following four aspects.

4.1. Be competent in political translation and cross-cultural communication

The world is changing rapidly and China is now playing an increasingly important role on the world stage. It has become the mission of foreign language majors to tell good China's stories to the world. Given such a mission, foreign language students in China, however, are facing the dilemma of not being good bridges between China and the other parts of the world. What they say cannot be fully understood or effectively spread, especially when they are talking about Chinese politics.

Therefore, they should strive to improve their foreign language competence in political translation and cross-cultural communication. First, they should be competent in translating and interpreting political texts in a precise way. Precise translation here refers to the ability to translate politics in a faithful, accurate and natural way so that our listeners can understand the political discourse of socialism with Chinese characteristics. This requires foreign language students to be familiar with our party and the national and social conditions of China. In the second place, they should know the discourse of telling China's stories. Discourse matters, otherwise cross-cultural communication will fail. To know the right discourse and grasp the proper way of expression, they should know well the cultural differences between China and the other countries, and improve their cross-cultural communication skills so that they can tell China's stories in a way that can be well understood by foreigners.

4.2. Improve human-machine collaborative ability and raise awareness about a possible professional crisis

The rapidly developing information technology in the new era is reshaping higher education in a profound way. The application of cloud computing, artificial intelligence, 5G, block chain and other new technologies is influencing contemporary education in all aspects, restructuring and reshaping the ecology of education (Brooks, McCormack 2020). According to (Zhu, Fei 2017, 21), the deep integration of technology and education has made smart human-machine collaboration a new goal for educational information technology and a new paradigm for future education. Competence in digital culture, digital creativity, digital construction, digital communication, digital confidence, digital cognition, digital criticism, and digital citizenship are becoming essential digital abilities in the 21st century¹. Will foreign language education disappear under the influence of digital technology and artificial intelligence? Will machine translation replace human translators and interpreters? While the influence of ChatGPT is still fresh in our memory, some scholars are trying to address these questions (Chen 2020; Zhu 2018). Though no consensus has been reached, one thing remains clear: human-machine collaboration has become a future trend, and human-machine collaborative ability has become essential for foreign language university majors in the new era.

Therefore, foreign language students must become aware of a possible professional crisis and cultivate their human-machine collaborative abilities. In addition to computer literacy and skills, they should also improve their digital skills, familiarizing themselves with Trados, Yaxin, CAT, DeepL and

other translation software. Meanwhile, they should find opportunities to have internships at translation companies and get to know the procedures and processes of language service industry.

4.3. Enhance interpersonal communication and leadership

Contemporary society and cyberspace have made interpersonal communication increasingly important. Among the eight core abilities developed by the European Union, native and foreign language communication abilities rank top two². In the 21st Century Skills Framework released by the US Department of Education, abilities in interpersonal communication, critical thinking, independent innovation, and teamwork cooperation are regarded as the four core competencies of 21st century talents. In the framework of School 4.0 proposed by the World Economic Forum, interpersonal communication and collaboration skills are also among the eight most important abilities of future students³.

Therefore, foreign language students should enhance interpersonal communication and leadership skills. To fulfil this goal, they should first strengthen communication with their teachers and classmates. To overcome the 'social communication phobia' in contemporary society, they should seize every opportunity to keep contact with others and improve their communication skills. Secondly, they should participate actively in various extracurricular activities. Student organizations and clubs are bodies formed by students with the same interests and hobbies. They should actively utilize these platforms to make friends and improve their communication and coordination skills by participating in, planning, and organizing activities. These abilities will lay a good foundation for their future in the workplace. Thirdly, they should try to gain experience in international student exchange programs. The different languages we learn means the diversity of cultures. They should take an active part in overseas student exchange. By doing so, they can have real foreign language learning environment, have opportunities to talk with people of different cultures, and learn how to cope with cultural differences. Only this way can they have a deeper understanding of heterogeneous languages and cultures, making them better prepared for cross-cultural communication between China and other countries.

4.4. Improve independent thinking and innovative abilities

Independent thinking and innovation are important abilities of today's university students. When facing complex and difficult problems, foreign

language majors should be able to think independently to form their own viewpoints, put them into practice and solve actual problems. Since NLA education in the new era aims at cultivating talents who can undertake the task of national rejuvenation, they should try to improve their independent thinking and innovative abilities. They should learn to ask questions and show readiness to solve problems. To do this, they should first form a sense of critical and independent thinking. Meanwhile, they should make efforts to expand the breadth and depth of knowledge. Based on a deep understanding of Chinese and Western cultures, languages, modes of thinking, histories, and philosophies, they should be able to contrast them, identify the differences, keep asking themselves questions, form their own way of thinking and only then solve the problems in cross-cultural communication.

For innovative abilities, foreign language students should have the courage to challenge, explore, and overcome difficulties. They should be bold enough to question the existing knowledge and criticize authorities. They should step out of their campus, enter the workplace, and understand the new requirements and expectations of the language service industry. They should try to put into practice what they have learned. For what they want to achieve, they should persevere until they succeed. Only this way can they improve their practical and innovative abilities, and lay a solid foundation for a better service to their country in the future.

5. Conclusion

NLA education is a new requirement for higher education in China which is striving to transform itself into a modernized socialist country. It has many implications for foreign language teachers and students. They should accurately grasp the new requirements for talent cultivation in the new era, continuously improving their knowledge, abilities, and comprehensive qualities to contribute to the early realization of the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation.

Notes:

¹ Digital Literacy in the 21st Century, see: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318508429_Digital_Literacy_For_The_21st_Century and <https://blogs.rockyview.ab.ca/2017/05/18/digital-literacy/>

² The other six abilities include basic mathematical and technological abilities, digital abilities, learning abilities, social and civic abilities, creativity and cooperative spirit, cultural awareness and expression.

³ The World Economic Forum School 4.0 Framework, see <https://intelligence.weforum.org/topics/a1Gb0000000LPDFfEAO?Tab=publications>

Conflict of Interest

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