

Comparing General Education Reforms in Japan and China: Aims, Contents and Institutional Context

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<https://doi.org/10.15017/7385183>

出版情報：国際教育文化研究. 14, pp.115-125, 2014-08-28. 九州大学大学院人間環境学研究院国際教育文化研究会
バージョン：
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Comparing General Education Reforms in Japan and China: Aims, Contents and Institutional Context

Yuanyuan SHI

In recent years, a number of Japanese and Chinese universities have initiated curricular and institutional reforms aimed at promoting ‘general education’. This article introduces an ongoing research project that investigates these reforms comparatively. The project aims first of all to explain why these ostensibly similar reforms have been introduced at around the same time both in Japan and China, examining not only government policies, but also academic discussions and debates, relating to the role of general education in higher education. Secondly, by analyzing the curricula of ‘general education’ courses at Kyushu University and Peking University, this research will compare the content and implicit aims of such programs at relatively ‘elite’ institutions of higher education in Japan and China. It will also examine related initiatives aimed at fostering broader intellectual horizons and interdisciplinary approaches amongst students, namely Kyushu University’s ‘Twenty-First Century Program’ and Peking University’s ‘Yuanpei College’. Focusing in particular on these two initiatives, this paper will discuss the ways in which they relate to and reflect the kinds of concerns that have spurred broader efforts to promote ‘general education’, and what they reveal about the similarities and differences in the terms of current Chinese and Japanese debate over the nature and aims of higher education.

Introduction

While ‘general education’ is a heavily used term in higher education, Leskes and Wright (2005) note that it has multiple meanings: it can refer to those courses that a college or university requires all of its students must pass as a condition for graduation; a common curriculum; a distribution requirement, or even core texts (Warner, Katie and Koeppel, 2009). A general education curriculum rooted in the European liberal education tradition and developed in the United States, according to which students are expected to ‘develop understandings of breadth of topics, enhance the critical thinking abilities, and become well-rounded, educated citizens’, has been adopted by many universities worldwide in recent years, such as the University of the Philippines, the University of Tokyo, and the Chinese University of Hong Kong, to counteract what many see as the increasing specialization and compartmentalization of undergraduate study (Zhang 2011).

The concept of general education in Japan is called ‘kyoyo kyouyiku’(教養), ‘yippan kyouyiku’ or zengaku kyouyiku, and also often translated as ‘liberal arts education’. Recently, in order to responding the impact of globalization, the reform of liberal arts education in Japanese universities has been the focus of much discussion among higher education policy makers and scholars. Since the 1990s, one of the reforms is that the

institution which abolished their general education divisions can be divided into the established new facilities or centers (Aya Yoshinda 2002). For example, to emphasize the university's liberal arts education, the 'institute of liberal arts and science' was built up at Nagoya University in 2001. And at Tokyo University, a key facility in liberal arts education at Komaba (a campus where college of general education 'kyouyo gakubu' is 21 KOMCEE (21 Komaba Center for Educational Excellence), a building that was designed under the concept of 'An ideal education' and opened in the autumn of 2011. The 'institute of liberal arts and science' was established at Kyoto University in 2013. And at Kyushu University, in order to restructure the general education system of 'Faculty of Arts and Science' was established in October 2011, while to respond to repaid changes of 21st century society, as one of the curriculum reforms, 'the Twenty-First Century Program' was initiated.

In China, the terms 'Tongshi' (通識) or 'Boya' (博雅) education are used to refer to 'general education'. In recent years, driven by the goal of achieving 'word-class' status in a 'globalized' world, a number of China's prestigious universities have initiated reforms in general education curriculum. For instance, Peking University established the 'Yuanpei Program' in 2001, named after a former president Cai Yuanpei, who advocated general education for the early 20th century. And then based on the 'Yuanpei Program', in 2007 the 'Yuanpei College' was set up, the first specialty-free undergraduate college. Fudan University similarly established 'Fudan College' in 2005, aiming to explore the new model of undergraduate education and pay attention to general education.

This paper is a product of an ongoing research project investigating these general education reforms in Japan and China comparatively. The paper aims first of all to explain why the general education reforms have been introduced at around the same time both in Japan and China in the 21st Century, examining not only government policies, but also academic discussions and debates, relating to the role of general education in higher education. Secondly, by analyzing the curricula of 'general education' courses at Kyushu University and Peking University this research will compare the content and implicit aims of such programs at relatively 'elite' institutions of higher education in Japan and China. It will also examine related initiatives aimed at fostering broader intellectual horizons and interdisciplinary approaches amongst students, namely Kyushu University's 'Twenty-First Century Program' and Peking University's 'Yuanpei College'. Focusing in particular on these two initiatives, this paper will discuss the ways in which they relate to and reflect the kinds of concerns that have spurred broader efforts to promote 'general education', and what they reveal about the similarities and differences between current Chinese and Japanese debates over the nature and aims of higher education

The origins and development of general education in Japan and China

'Kyoyo' education in Japan

In Japan, the concept behind 'kyoyo' comes from the west. The word 'kyoyo' was initially used in the Meiji (1868-1912) and Taisho (1912-1926) eras to connote the German concept of Bildung ('education' or 'formation'), which was seen as necessary part of the intellectual and moral formulation of state bureaucrats and the 'modern' elite more generally (Masao Hasegawa 2013). Japan's pre-1945 university system was modeled on the German system. After World War II, the 'Report of the First U.S. Education Mission' to Japan was published in 1946. It was of great significance in the history of Japanese education reform and was followed by extensive revisions to university curricula, which including the ideal of general education was emphasized, and also the courses of social science and humanities were promoted. The general education was introduced when the

new postwar university system was launched in order to draw a sharp distinction between the new and the old university system (Yoshida 2002). In 1947, in order to improve the quality of university education, the 'University Standard Association' (Dayigaku Kijyun Kyoukai) was established, and then the 'University Standard' (Dayigaku Kijyun) was published. Based on that, the curricula in all Japanese universities should offer 36 general education credits, which were divided into 12 each in the humanities, social science, and natural sciences for the students.

Japanese universities had another shift when the 'University Establishment Standard' was modified in 1991. Before the modification, the provisions of the 'University Establishment Standard' required categorization of general academic subjects into humanities, social science, and natural science, and also required the categorization of all the courses offered at each university into general education, foreign language education, health and physical education, and specialized education (Murasawa 2002). Since the modification, many universities have started fundamental reforms in their general education faculties as a means of restructuring education. By 1996, of the 30 national universities which had general education faculties, 24 universities restructured their general education faculties (Murasawa 2002).

Tongshi education in China

In Chinese higher education, general education is usually called 'Tongshi' education. The term 'Tongshi' may well have originated in Confucian educational thought, with 'Tong' (通) meaning 'interconnected' and 'shi' (識) meaning 'knowledge' (Zhang 2011). Since the Opium War of 1839-41, in order to save the China from colonization and enrich the country, Chinese higher education was influenced by the Western thoughts and systems. In the first half of the twentieth century, Chinese higher education was influenced by the United States and accepted the general education concept to varying degrees (Xing Jun, Ng Pak-Sheung, and Cheng Chloe 2013). During the period of 1928-1929, Chinese universities set up the course according to their own circumstances and along the lines of European and American models, and the preparatory and primary courses were considered as basic course and were required for all students as common courses (Chen 2001).

After the People's Republic of China was established in 1949, to meet the needs of planned economy development, the higher education system followed the Soviet model and focused on the specialized education. Since the 1980s, with the development of Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening policy, the Chinese higher education has been reformed rapidly. Especially since the 1990s, to explore the new model of training labors and college students, and also build world-class universities, Chinese scholars and famous universities review the demerits of an over-emphasis on specialized education. In 1999, the Ministry of Education initiated a 'Cultural Quality Education Campaign' (文化素質教育運動), the colleges and universities strengthened the common basic knowledge and skills for their students. Therefore, with the development of cultural quality education and the rise of undergraduate education reform and experiments, the adoption and implementation of general education gradually became the focus of undergraduate education reform at many universities.

The reasons for current general education reforms in Japan and China

Through considering the referring higher education policies, examining some academic discussions and mass media opinion, we could observe some reasons of current general education reforms in two countries.

Government policies

In Japan, the background of society can be seen as 1) the present tasks of Japan's just and caring society in an age of globalization; 2) the changing society need citizens with generic skills. So the university education should offer the generative and transferable learning for their students. In 2005, the Central Council for Education report entitled 'the Future of Higher Education in Japan' was released by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). According to this report, it's important to review and reconstruct the form of 'liberal arts education' in undergraduate courses aiming to enhance the quality of higher education. Moreover, the Central Education Council 'Towards the Construction of Undergraduate Education' in 2008 has been complied, which said that general education or liberal arts education are defined as the fundamental role of the undergraduate education, and developing generic skills is necessary to cultivate 21st century citizen in undergraduate education.

Similar to Japan, under the globalization and the building of world-class university, China also need new labor who can master the generic and transferable skills, so university education reforms. In China the Department of higher Education of the Ministry of Education hosted a conference about the Culture Quality Education in 2005, and then in order to explore various forms of culture quality education(文化素質教育)that aims to help students to develop creativities and critical thinking. Therefore a number of top universities have implemented undergraduate general education curricular system. In 2010, the "National Education Reform and Development of Long-term Planning Programs" was put up, and to meet the development needs of the country and the social development, updating the ideals of cultivating talents, initiating the model of cultivating talents were proposed. And In June 2012, 'China's 12th Five-Year Plan for National Education Development (2011-2015)' as published by the Ministry of Education. And in the Article 7 of this plan, we could conclude that creating new models of 'Tongshi Education' is important to strengthen the cultivating talents and improve the quality of higher education.

Academic discussions

Through the first decade of the 21st century during which time globalization has continued to progress rapidly both politically, economically and culturally, Japanese universities are more than ever facing the necessity of having to incorporate non-specialist education (Inoue 2011). In addition, Hyakawa(2013) argued the new role of liberal education of Japanese colleges, including 1) the present task of Japan's society in an age of globalization and the changing mission and role of our higher education; 2) the nature of liberal knowledge is required in an age of uncertainty and polarization; 3) the role of the generative and transferable type of knowledge and skills is inquired and the need for cultivating 'collaborative inquiry' is emphasized among youth. On the other hand, in Japan the general education was considered as failure (Akito 2003). And there are two reasons: 1) a steep rise in the number of students, the diversification of education is necessary, so both the specialized and general education should develop. 2) specialized education can help students for career, but general education don not emphasize the job skills.

Over recent decades, there are three major forces that are driving the Chinese general education movement, including 1) the knowledge-based global economy; 2) an exploding number of interdisciplinary programs; and 3) a major paradigm shift in liberal arts education (Xing and Ng Park 2013). Chen 2004, concluded that the revival of liberal education in China driven by the domestic social changes, and also the needs of students' job hunting (because undergraduate education needs to be broad and flexible for well-prepared changing jobs, but overspecialized education can no longer meet the above demands). Zhang 2012 considered that 'Tongshi education' is tightly linked to efforts to

build a stronger, modernized nation and to catch up with the international standards those Chinese intellectuals and political leaders have sought to achieve. But there are some difficulties in the remodeling of general education in universities, such as the faculties consider that professional education is still the mainstream, and it is useful to talent cultivation, and cost of remolding general education is a waste of resources in universities.

Mass media debates

Recently the necessities of general education are discussed in the mass media. Like the article of “In Asia, Future Appears Bright for Liberal-Arts Education”, is a guest post by Lewis, he suggests that Asia has a great hunger for pedagogy that truly encourages critical thinking and a model of liberal-arts and science education adapted for the 21st century, and also said that although the Asian higher education has generally demanded early specialization, the Asian educators and administrators have realized the importance of a broader sort of education intended to promote flexibility, critical thinking, and acquaintance with broad spans of human knowledge¹. “Technology alone is not enough. It’s technology married with liberal arts, married with humanities, that yields the results that make our hearts sing” and the author said that high schools and universities in Japan have failed to provide their students with opportunities to acquire broad knowledge through the study of liberal arts and humanities before teaching them technologies in their specific fields².

But the disagreement of general education has also exist. “College Grads Need Skills, Not Liberal Arts”, and said that they need to offer specialized courses of study that teach students how to create knowledge, innovate, and blend multiple disciplines to forge new pathways in science and technology³.

Although the debate over general education is serious, and the point is that in university education the cooperation and interplay of the liberal arts with vocation-specific training should be proposed.

The Aims and contents of general education in Japan and China

Aims

The aims of general education in Japan have been designed four aspects: 1) help students to learn a variety of areas and analyze issue from various perspectives; 2) develop students to think individually and comprehensively, make a decision rationally, shape a meaningful life; 3) prepare students to have the ability to balance their own knowledge, life and the society (University Council, MEXT, 1998).

On the other hand, in China general education, which plays a fundamental role in university education, should be committed to helping students with critical thinking, pursuit of truth and self-development, improving their own spiritual life and cognitive

¹ Guest Writer, October 25, 2012, “In Asia, Future Appears Bright for Liberal-Arts Education”, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, <http://chronicle.com/blogs/worldwise/in-asia-future-appears-bright-for-liberal-arts-education/30840> 2014-7-29

² Takamitsu Sawa, Sep 16, 2013, “Lack of liberal arts education is sapping Japan’s creativity”, *The Japan Times*, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2013/09/16/commentary/lack-of-liberal-arts-education-is-sapping-japans-creativity/#.UvDY8RiCgdU> 2014-7-29

³ Robert E. Geer, “College Grads Need Skills, Not Liberal Arts”, *The Debate Room*, http://www.businessweek.com/debateroom/archives/2011/05/college_grads_need_skills_not_liberal_arts.html 2014-7-29

skills (Hu and Cao Li 2013)

Contents

The contents of general education in Japan, are required to take the following categories: 1) basic knowledge and skills which are essential for the social life, including writing/discussion/presentation in English and Japanese, information technology, empirical and scientific reasoning, basic discipline for major, physical and mental health education; 2) thematic lectures and seminars focus on challenges is facing in modern society(such as 'environment and society' 'modern society and law' 'global environment and human being'); 3) interdisciplinary learning from a comprehensive perspective, like 'intellectual history and since history' 'psychology' 'cognitive behavioral science'; 4) a broad perspective for related discipline of professional education(University Council, MEXT, 1998).

In Chinese universities, general education is mainly divided into the following categories: 1) political theory; 2) general elective course (as known as cultural quality education courses); 3) health education; 4) required military training; 5) foreign language; and 6)computer technology. And the courses of political theory, health education, military training, foreign language; and computer technology are required by the Ministry of Education, but the general elective courses are determined by each university and colleges, because they have different faculty system and other resource allocation.

Kyushu University's 'Twenty-first Century Program' and Peking University's 'Yuanpei College'

Both Kyushu University and Peking University are belonging to the type of national universities, which are directly established and governed by the Ministry of Education. And both of them are big-scale university in their countries, they have more than 3000 students. They are similarly top universities, and both of their reform can be seen as models of the other universities in two countries. So in this paper, it is choosing these two universities as case study to examine the issue of general education reform at a level of institute comparatively.

The program of general education reforms at Kyushu University (21st century program)

In April 2001, Kyushu university has launched the '21st century program' with the intention that it would be an unprecedented and creative educational system.

● Aims

At Kyushu University, the educational objective has been the education of individuals capable of leadership in a diverse range of fields in Japan and willing to assume an active role in the world, and Education Charter emphasizes principles of humanity, social responsibility, global citizenship and advancement of knowledge, and it is these principles that have informed education policy across the entire university (Shunichi Maruno). In accordance with the Education Charter of Kyushu University, the 21st Century Program aims to train students to acquire outstanding decision-making and problem solving skills in order to lead our global society in the 21st century.

● Tutorial system

The tutorial system is one of the characteristics of the 21st Century Program at Kyushu University. This system, received the systematic cooperation of teachers from all faculties at the university.

● Curriculum

According to the “The 21st Century Program 2013”, which published by Kyushu University, the students of the 21st Century Program have the opportunities to learn from all lectures, seminars and practice at the whole university. During the first 2years learning, students mainly take the courses about general education (humanities, social, sciences, languages, etc.) and the special courses (“Program Seminar,” “Selected Themes in Today’s World” and “Practical English”) of the 21st Century Program. Through this 2 years learning from various areas, their interests and further specialty are founded and decided, and then during the next 2years study, they are encouraged to take the courses refereed to their specialty, meanwhile they are allowed to study abroad or do some internship, and finish their undergraduate research.

- Students

In 2013, 118 students are enrolled in the ‘21st Century Program’ (The 21st Century Program 2013). All the students are required to take special classes including a “Tutorial,” a “Program Seminar,” “Selected Themes in Today’s World” and “Practical English,” all of which are designed to help them to decide their academic orientation. In addition, referring to the students’ plans after graduation, most of them (60%) has chosen to go further study, and only40% of them has chosen to get jobs (The 21st Century Program 2013).

- Institutional Change

Instead of the former College of General Education, the institute of Faculty of Arts and Science was established in October 2011. Restructuring the education system and providing a consistent and integrated structure from general education through to specialized education and then on to graduate education, led to the establishment of Faculty of Arts and Science, as heading into 21 century (Maruno). The Faculty seeks to encourage students to learn or acquire the following: (1) a creative and critical spirit that will engender reflective thought, (2) flexible thought processes and attitudes, (3) broad perspectives and the skill to take in the bigger picture, (4) deep understanding of ethics and morals, (5) humility and rich sensitivity, and (6) deep understanding of humanity (Maruno).

The program of general education reforms at Peking University (‘Yuanpei College’)

In the process of moving towards a world-class university in China, Peking University has initiated an undergraduate educational reform program, the ‘Yuanpei Program’ for a small-scale experiment in the autumn of 2001,named after a former president of Peking University, Cai Yuanpei. In 2006, Yuanpei Program was attempting to employ mentors and student-counselors from higher grades to give advice to freshmen both in academy and life. In September of the same year, Peking University-Yale Joint Undergraduate Program was launched. In 2007, ‘Yuanpei Program’ grew into ‘Yuanpei College’ with its further development and the major of PPE (Philosophy, Politics and Economics) was set up, making Yuanpei the only college which has this major in China. In 2009, ‘Yuanpei College’ became one of the first “Reformatory Experimental Districts for the Training of National Innovative Talents” launched by Ministry of Education.

- Aims

The goal of Peking University, is that “high quality talents with broad fundamental knowledge, basic human quality, high awareness for innovation, and capacity to play a leading role in the thriving of the nation and the country” (Wei and Chen 2000). Based on this,‘Yuanpei College’, aiming to break the Chinese conventional undergraduate-education, and explore a new undergraduate educational approach to foster a new generation of talented individuals, and the program has been running with the principles of “Strengthening Fundamental Studies, Weakening Inter-major Exclusivity, Instructing

Accordingly, and Differentiating In Line With Academic Field”.

- **Mentoring System**

‘Yuanpei College’ began to implement the Mentoring System from 2002, engaging professors from various departments to provide instructions with students in ‘Yuanpei College’ as mentors. Instructions are as follows: Providing aid in fitting in with campus life as soon as possible; Offering advice on course selection and academic planning; Helping students to choose suitable major in a more rational way, Aiding students gain access to subject-related information, Giving instructions on scientific research and guiding students directly to the academic frontier of the subject; Helping you with problems in everyday life as a friend; Exchanging ideas and sparking inspirations.

- **Curriculum and Extra-curriculum Activities**

Firstly, General education courses are provided to all students in the whole university, that is to say these courses are not just to students in ‘Yuanpei college’, and the ‘Yuanpei college’ students take the same general education courses as all other students. Out of the 140~160 total credits required by each department or school, students need to obtain 16 credits in the 5 following areas of study:(1) math and natural science (2) social sciences (3) philosophy and psychology (4) history (5) language, literature and arts (Chen 2011). Secondly, ‘Yuanpei College’ is the first non-major-oriented college for graduates in Peking University, the specialty of its curricula are as follows: Students are allowed to choose any major in Peking University to make their construction of knowledge system fit in better with their interest and abilities; Offering three unique design of cross-discipline majors “Philosophy, Politics and Economics” “Foreign History and Literature” and “Paleontology” for students; Providing flexible school duration 3-6 years, which insures a systematic education of cross-disciplinary knowledge for students. Thirdly, the Student Union of ‘Yuanpei College’ organizes various social practices. Such as Voluntary Teaching which involved sending students to teach at Lhasa Junior-Senior high school and also helping out at migrant workers school. In addition, Joint Dancing Party, Choral Competition, Cultural Festival, Freshman Cup, Mid-Autumn Evening Show, Funny Sports Meet, International Food Festival and Go Camping.

- **Students**

‘Yuanpei College’ is composed of two classes for each grade, one in humanities, and the other in sciences. In 2012, 209 students have entered ‘Yuanpei College’. The students are enrolled without a major, enter one of the two broad areas of study, and take mainly general education courses and “platform course” for the first one and half years (Chen 2011). After one and half years, students have familiarized with the disciplinary arrangements and educational objectives, according to their need and interests, they are given to choose their major and courses by the help of the mentors. In addition, referring to something about the students’ plan, the rate of ‘Yuanpei College’ students who choose to get jobs after graduation is only about 18%, similarly with ‘21st Century Program’s students, most of them would like to go further study.

- **Mixed lodging arrangement**

Moreover, the students are put in the same dormitory. Specifically in order to provide the space and chance for students to communicate and learn with different perspectives or fields, the students from different departments are living in the same dormitory. Although the students have entered the different departments and schools, they are governed directly by the Yuanpei Management Committee. According to the study (Chen 2011), the mixed lodging arrangement for students likes a double-edged sword. That means on one hand, it has provided to students from different disciplines to communicate with each other, and to accumulate some “social capital” as byproduct; and on the other hand, not living with classmates of the same discipline has prevented them from frequent discussion, often do

not get the information on time, or do not have the convenience to work with the classmate, which has brought about negative impact on the specialty study.

Conclusion

There are several points could be concluded.

Firstly, the two countries, both borrowed and adopted foreign influences about general education of higher education, but Japan since the postwar, has been influenced to reform the general education, while China has revived the ideal of general education since 1980s. And since 2000s, they all restructured the institutes of general education.

Secondly, the reasons for current reforms both in Japan and China, can be summarized by the responding of social change and global era, improving the quality of higher education and a fundamental role of higher education, students' critical thinking & broad knowledge, the importance of general education, but the need of social responsibility is a reason in Japan to emphasize the necessity of general education; but to catch a world-class university and to help the modernization of country are unique reasons for China. That because they have different context of higher education and country's modernization in two countries.

Thirdly, comparing two cases of general education programs at Kyushu University and Peking University, we can conclude that they both have tutorial system, which received the teachers from the whole university to support students' study; and they all have offered the cross-disciplinary courses to broaden their students' view and knowledge; additionally they both have small-scale students, and most of them would go to graduate study. However, the institutional context of general education reform is different, the Faculty of Arts and Science which was established at Kyushu University, aims to support the whole undergraduate students to improve their learning and ability, but the 'Yuanpei College' which manages and offers only for Yuanpei's students at Peking University. Moreover 'Yuanpei College' provides a same dormitory for their students at Peking University, but Kyushu University does not offer the similar dormitory for the students, that because they have different dormitory system of the higher education in two countries. In other words, the Japanese approach is more 'socialist' (at least, more egalitarian). However, in the Chinese case, the 'Yuanpei' program is clearly designed as a sort of hot-house for nurturing academic elite within Peking University.

The last but not least, there are two contradictions should be addressed. One is that between the elite and all students in the program of general education, and the other one is between the vocational aim (career) and the non-vocational ideal.

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