

# The Value of Newman's Ideas for Higher Education in China

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**Abstract:** With the expansion of higher education in China, it is essential to reconsider the very fundamental issue of education, namely the purpose of higher education. This essay aims to firstly discuss the idea of university by Newman, an undoubted pioneer in the field. Then his ideas will be discussed in the context of Chinese higher education in particular. And finally the value of Newman's ideal for Chinese education will be analysed and concluded.

## 1. Introduction

Over the past three decades, China has seen a dramatic expansion of higher education fostered largely by ever faster economic growth. Since 1978 when higher education was restored after the Great Leap Forward (1958-1966) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the number of higher educational institutions (HEIs) grew from 598 to 2305 in 2009, with the number of students reaching a record high of 21,446,570 in 2009 (China Statistical Yearbook 2010, 2010). This rapid expansion has aroused much worry and debate on the Chinese educational system. It is believed that when the traditional elite HE system is transforming into mass education with the ever increasing participation rate, there will be increased uncertainty as to how to define the characteristics and the nature of a university.

In exploring and defining the nature and scope of higher education, John Newman is an outstanding figure in this domain. Despite the fact that Newman's ideas were formed one and a half century ago, these ideas are among one of the most frequently quoted and discussed themes in today's higher educational context. His ideas such as "liberal education", "cultivation of the mind", and "knowledge as its own end" never fail to embark discussion and inspiration for contemporary educational theorists and practitioners.

This essay, therefore, aims to assess the value of Newman's ideas for higher education in China by applying Newman's ideas into the Chinese higher educational context. Firstly, some of Newman's most important ideas will be identified and analyzed. Then each of these ideas will be examined in a Chinese higher educational context. It will also be suggested how these ideas can help improve Chinese higher education. Finally, a summary of all areas discussed will conclude this essay.

## 2. Introduction of Newman's Ideas

Before introducing Newman's ideas, some relevant biographic information needs to be provided to make it easier for readers to identify with Newman's ideas. Once a student at Trinity College and later a fellow at Oriel College in Oxford, John Henry Newman (1801-1890) was deeply influenced by the collegiate educational system in Oxford University (Turner, 1996). After being vicar of the Oxford University church for 15 years, Newman converted to Roman Catholic Church in 1845 and was asked to preside over a Roman Catholic university in Dublin in 1851 (Turner, 1996). Newman then started to publish his lectures and essays which were later gathered together and published by Newman in 1873 entitled *The Idea of a University Defined and Illustrated I.Nine Discourses delivered to the Catholics of Dublin II.In Occasional Lectures and Essays addressed to the Members of the Catholic University* (Turner, 1996). These nine discourses together with the letters and essays form the very essence of Newman's ideas (Wyatt 1990). In this essay, four basic values of Newman will be identified and analyzed--the cultivation of the mind and

the formation of the character, liberal education and the pursuit of universal knowledge, the academic community, and institutional autonomy and academic freedom.

### **2.1 Liberal Education and the Pursuit of Universal Knowledge**

First of all, Newman believes that higher education should be liberal education, which means knowledge should be “as its own end” (Wyatt, 1990). To be specific, liberal education is about personal enrichment and enlargement, which can be illustrated by “knowledge for its own sake” (Barnett, 1997). In other words, a university is a place to teach intellectual knowledge rather than to make scientific or philosophical discovery or provide religious training (Wyatt, 1990).

Meanwhile, distinctions are made between universal knowledge and useful knowledge. To Newman, higher education should go beyond useful knowledge which is confined to “the particular” (Wyatt, 1990). Rather, a university should develop a general approach to all subject matters and provide a broad view for students. Newman further illustrates this point by emphasizing the wholeness of knowledge and the unity of all subject matters, by which he means all subject matters are interconnected in the model of liberal education (Wyatt, 1990).

### **2.2 The Cultivation of the Mind and the Formation of the Character**

Another important idea of Newman is the cultivation of the mind and the formation of the character. He thinks the ultimate goal for higher education is not only for students to acquire the facts, but to form the habit of reasoning and to digest and master knowledge through enlargement or illumination (Wyatt, 1990). In other words, what really matters is what we can get from the process of pursuing knowledge rather than the knowledge itself.

Newman goes further into this issue by pointing out that a university should produce “Gentleman” through character formation. In Newman’s work, a gentleman by no means refers to someone with noble origin, nor is it in line with the definition in a dictionary. A Gentleman is “a good man who is able to reason, compare, discriminate and analyze, and who benefits a society which shared with him good intentions” (Wyatt, 1990). In this sense, the formation of a character is to “give power to educated minds to create value to the society” (Wyatt, 1990).

### **2.3 The Academic Community**

In order to put into practice his ideas of liberal education and the cultivation of the mind, Newman designs a framework for his ideal university which to a great degree resembles the Oxbridge model in his age. In the pursuit of achieving the wholeness of knowledge and avoiding specialization, Newman comes up with the idea of the academic community. In this academic community, a group of scholars will live together to form a community within which they share with each other their knowledge in their respective field. With this mutual abstraction, students can ideally get to know a broad range of subjects through the interaction with others from the community. In a real sense, Newman’s model of university is “to create a hidden curriculum as opposed to the explicit curriculum through the collegiate system” (Wyatt, 1990). Precisely the hidden curriculum is provided by the academic community that draws people from different domains together and makes mutual learning possible.

### **2.4 Institutional Autonomy and Academic Freedom**

The idea of institutional autonomy and academic freedom is frequently seen in Newman’s discourses and lectures. It can be easily assumed that Newman is a strong supporter for academic freedom through his famous argument of “knowledge for its own sake”. Newman’s idea concerning university autonomy is largely based on his own experience and his time and the idea is twofold.

On one hand, Newman argues that a university should be free from political intervention by publicly objecting the role Parliament took in the affairs of the university (Wyatt, 1990). On the other, Newman seems to be a little ambiguous when talking about the intervention from the Church. Newman argues that a university is by nature independent from the Church but cannot accomplish its goal duly without the assistance of the Church (Wyatt, 1990). He concludes that “the Church steadies the university but leaves it free to fulfill its distinct purposes” (Wyatt, 1990).

### **3. Examination of Newman's Ideas in a Chinese Context**

The past one and a half century has seen tremendous changes in the world. Industrialization and globalization have fundamentally altered the way people think and do things. At the same time, China and Britain are two very different countries with wildly differed ideologies, histories, and cultures. Despite the fact that Newman lives in an age that is fundamentally different from ours and in a place thousands of miles away from China, his ideas can still be of value to Chinese higher education. This part of the essay, therefore, will be devoted to assessing the value of Newman's ideas to higher education in China.

#### **3.1 Utilitarianism in Chinese Higher Education and the Cultivation of the Mind**

China has a long history to regard education as the only way to material success. Dating back to Confucius's time, people regarded education as the only way to overcome their humble origins and to win fame and fortune. This mindset has not changed much since 2000 years ago. Today in China, most people still see higher education only as a way to find a good job and make a living. Perhaps there is nothing wrong for people to see higher education from a utilitarian perspective, especially in an age full of pressure and competition. But it is also true that many people do not really enjoy their learning experience because they have no interest in what they have been learning.

The idea of cultivation of the mind can then come to our rescue. It is uncertain if Chinese people can fully accept Newman's idea of "knowledge as its own end", but we can at least try to see education as a way to achieve personal enlargement and enrichment. The value of Newman's ideas, therefore, is to remind us that the function of higher education is much more than to ensure better job prospects. If one sees higher education from a slightly idealist perspective rather than a utilitarian one, he may find it more likely for him to follow his own heart and enjoy the learning process. And the character formed during this active learning process can benefit the individual for a lifetime. Because in an active learning process, a person learns to reason, to compare, and to analysis, which is far more important than just to know how to read the financial report or how to do certain calculations.

So the point here is to suggest people to follow their own heart, to pursue their true interests, and to see higher education as a way to achieve "assent" of human character. This is not to say we should become idealists in an ivory tower, but a change in the motivations of students, higher education providers, and the society as a whole will surely make a huge difference.

#### **3.2 Specialization in Chinese Higher Education and Liberal Education**

In an age of knowledge explosion, China is no exception to follow the global trend of specialization. Like in many other countries, universities in China are offering increasingly diversified and specialized courses to cope with the market demand. But it is argued that this specialization in higher education course design will eventually produce narrow-minded students who are unable to adapt to a globalizing world.

This counterargument clearly conforms to Newman's idea of liberal education and the wholeness of knowledge. I would not argue all universities in China should produce generalists, but it would be beneficial if we put Newman's idea of liberal education into some elite universities in China. Actually some elite higher educational institutions in China are piloting a similar model by providing two-year comprehensive courses plus two-year specialized courses for some extremely talented students. In the first two years, students will have access to a wide range of subjects and may focus on one area in the last two years. This is certainly a compromised version of Newman's liberal education, but at least it is a daring practice for Chinese higher education.

#### **3.3 Possibility to Establish an Academic Community in China**

Newman's model of an academic community with scholars living together and learning from each other is truly an interesting but also an ideal one. But it can still give inspirations to improve Chinese higher education.

In Chinese universities, almost all full-time students are required to live in university

accommodations during term dates. For the purpose of convenience and effective management, students from the same class and department are very likely to be allocated to the same flats or buildings. But it might be a better arrangement if we imitate Newman's model by mixing students from different departments into the same flat. This model is indeed far from Newman's ideal academic community, but it can at least broaden students' minds and knowledge to some extent.

### **3.4 Institutional Autonomy and Academic Freedom in Chinese Higher Education**

Since the Reform and Open-up policy was adopted in China 30 years ago, the government has been gradually decentralizing in various sectors, including in higher education. But until today, politics still permeates in almost every aspect in higher education, and the call for institutional autonomy is increasingly louder. Universities call for more rights in admitting students, recruiting staff, and in the management of the university. Teaching staff call for more freedom to decide on the curriculum, teaching methods and evaluating methods.

Newman's divided attitude towards the role of Parliament and the Church implies that there is no one hundred percent autonomy but only perceived autonomy. In China's case, the institutional autonomy perceived by a university president may be conflicting with the academic freedom perceived by a professor. This is to say, all parties need to make a compromise in terms of institutional autonomy to maximize the benefits generated by HEIs.

## **4. Conclusion**

To sum up, given the fact that Newman's ideas were developed 150 years ago and China is fundamentally different from UK in many aspects, Newman's ideas are still of value to Chinese higher education in modern time. Newman's model of a university is certainly an ideal one, but it can still be put into practice to some extent.

Firstly, as suggested above, Newman's idea of "the cultivation of the mind" can help to address the problem of the over-utilitarianism in Chinese higher education by changing people's perception of the function of a university. Secondly, the concept of liberal education proposed by Newman lays down the theoretical framework for China to cultivate generalists in elite universities as opposed to the global trend of specialization. Thirdly, the picture of an academic community drawn by Newman gives us inspirations to improve the mutual exchange between students by changing the accommodation arrangement. Lastly, Newman's standing in defining and defending institutional autonomy and academic freedom reminds us that autonomy can only be achieved by compromising the interests of different parties.

Overall, despite the limitations, Newman's ideas of the cultivation of the mind, liberal education, academic community, and institutional autonomy and academic freedom can still spark inspirations to improve Chinese higher education. No matter how fast the world is changing, we still can draw merits and wisdom from the ancient intelligence and voices.

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