

Research on the Higher Education Ideas in Ancient Greece and Its Modern Values

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Abstract

Higher education institutions of ancient Greece, represented by the philosophy schools which rose in 387 BC in classical Athens and its history ended in 529 AD, it played a significant role in higher education history. The ideas, systems and structures of higher education institutions had been completed in the form of philosophy schools during these 916 years' development. Here, the core ideas of them have been reviewed and analyzed at two main aspects: The virtue cultivation, the practical ideas of liberal arts education, the free view reflected in this process worthies our attention too. The continuous research back on them will help us to deepen our understanding of the origin of the university ideas and the development of its systems, and also it will promote the modern value of its spiritual heritages. In practice, universities are the main forces of the modern higher education, while we focus on the system development of the universities, attention should still be drawn that it is the place for virtue cultivation and the truth and freedom pursuing, which are the core parts for the university ideas, they should be well maintained and carried on in the development of the modern universities.

Key words: Ancient Greece; Higher education; Virtue cultivation; Liberal arts education; Modern value

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INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions of ancient Greece rose up in classical Athens, represented by Plato's Academy and Aristotle's Lyceum school. The former was founded on the 387th BC by Plato, which was the first officially founded higher education institution in the western world; the later one was founded on the 335th BC by Aristotle. (Through the semantic evolution during the years, the word "academy" has become an academic term.) Then, knowledge classification system became further refined and higher education institutions' system was further improved. The common feature of these two schools is that both of them are philosophical schools conforming to the features of higher education institutions, that is, being guided by the certain clear educational ideas, having their own operation system and owning certain social functions, and they were the prototypes of the university in that time. Higher education ideas of ancient Greece directly influenced the creation of medieval universities of ideas and they owned the enduring value till nowadays.

By Karl Jaspers,

From the beginning the university ideas of ancient Greece have been the elements of western tradition. The university is aimed at pursuing truth and human progress to present the essence of human virtue. Humanities is its lifeline, no matter how fantastic this word is and how deeply the word has changed its meaning. (Jaspers, 2007, p.190)

The root of the modern university is in ancient Greece. To be specific, the aim of the university is to cultivate ideal arête inside each individual and it presents the feature of "liberal arts education", and it is with a freedom view shown in the process of cultivating, these are the indivisible parts of university ideas of later ages.

1. CULTIVATION AIM: A MAN WITH THE IDEAL ARÉTE

The education purpose of ancient Greece was to cultivate the individual with ideal arête. After the decay of

Crete—Mycenaean civilization, there was about 300 years darkness age from the 12th BC to the 9th BC. Homer, the first universally acknowledged educator of ancient Greece, presented in *The Iliad* the earliest education purpose of ancient Greece through the example of Phoenix teaching Achilles the Greek hero, “to be both a speaker of words and a doer of deeds”, which the later Greeks regarded as the expression of the earliest Greek education ideal and efforts to realize human potentialities.”¹ (Jaeger, 1945, p.8)

In Greece of the classical age, “education means the practice and development of ‘muscle’ made up the mind, imagination and character, rather than getting so called ‘useful’ information gaining.” (Freeman, 2013, p.228) For the city-state at that time, “its future depends on the character of its citizens. The real national education, like that of Sparta and Athens, was dedicated to cultivate the character of its future citizens, once it was needed.” (Freeman, 2013, p.228) The major aim of education in ancient Greece was to cultivate ultimate *arête* among the citizens. The citizen class included farmers, handicraftsmen, protectors and ruling class. Among them, Plato and Aristotle insisted that only protectors and the ruling class could be able to have ideal *arête* during cultivation. As for the nobility, their responsibility was not to make fortune, which did not determine their social status and economic achievement. In a word, their work was to supervise and fight: They were the voters of city-state and responsible for consul election; they were also the members of ecclesia and capable of being officers; they created and kept laws running, and they controlled the domestic and foreign policies of city-state, therefore, the glory and morals of country lying in their hands; they formed the culture circle, deciding the standards of appreciation of the city-state.

Citizen cultivation aiming at virtue cultivation, it was mainly reflected in physical training, aesthetic and intellectual education. Socrates claimed that knowledge was the main virtue, which could be taught through education and practice, therefore, virtue could be possibly gained in practice. The idea of virtue cultivation was reflected in the following aspects of specific teaching practice. Aesthetic education and physical training went through the whole process. Intellectual education included mathematics, geometry, music, art, grammar, rhetoric and logic. Different educational stages had different emphases. Basic and secondary education started when baby was born till 18 years old, during this time, mathematics, geometry, music, art and grammar were the major contents to be taught and trained. All these could be learnt and would be helpful to citizen’s occupation development no matter what it was. After secondary education, citizens were sent to the military school Ephebia (from age 18 to 20), where they would receive

¹ Nobility and *Arête*, “The later Greeks were right in believing this verse to be the earliest formulation of the Greek educational ideal, of its effort to express the whole of human potentialities.”

the systematic military training and help them to deepen the cognition for collective honor. In Ephebia, they were supposed to practice and grasp the use of all kinds of weapons, such as fencing, throwing; they carried out drills, too. They, getting dressed in uniforms, attended national ceremony, took part in some social practice, received the visitors to the city-state, patrolled border posts, identified their duty and obligation and acknowledged the highest glory to safeguard the city-state. After Ephebia, they could choose to go to higher educational academy to pursue their rhetoric and philosophical training. Rhetoric academy and philosophical academy were universities in Athens as the main places for systematic theory learning. Besides, debated in gyms and citizen square as well as other ways of political life was the important means to examine theory leaning.

Karl Jaspers, the educator and philosopher, reflected the function of education by analyzing the educational problems in his day, “how to mix together the cultural function of education and its function of casting soul has become the origin of rethinking human education.” (Jaspers, 1991, p.1) The main characteristic of ancient Greek education ideas was to cultivate citizens with ideal *arête*, which is also the key issue of the contemporary educators are thinking about. Based on the aim of the virtue cultivation, the current teaching practice embodied the obvious feature of liberal arts education.

2. TEACHING IDEAS: LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION

The most unique characteristic of ancient Greek education ideas is the liberal arts education, which was highlighted especially in the stage of higher education owing to the rising of philosophical academy of Athens in Classical Ages. Education during the period of philosophy schools did not exist to produce the specific knowledge of certain subject. Because “for the Greeks, technological education was not the value of education thereby being excluded out of schools. To a great extent, learning the contents of subjects was regarded as the means rather than the goal of education.” (Freeman, 2013, p.228) Here, the educational objects were “citizens”, which determined that the current education was not for all people. In Athens the city-state, which was then in the stage of slave society, slaves assumed absolute superiority in the whole population. Ehrenberge the Greek history scholar elaborated in his book *Athens The City-State* that in 432 BC, the population of Athens were between 215,000 and 300,000 persons, the number of citizens and their family were between 80,000 and 110,000, the number of real citizens were between 30,000 and 45,000, the population of other city-states were between 25,000 and 40,000, and slaves were between 80,000 and 110,000. The population numbers between different classes decided education was essentially designed only to serve the minority of the ruling class.

In Aristotle's opinion, there was not only simply one kind of virtue, as "the *arête* of citizens lies in ruling successfully or being ruled decently" (Aristotle, 2013, p.80) but the two points were not essentially equal. Since the *arête* of the ruler and that of the citizen could not be the same, the education they received respectively should be different. The citizens who would become the future rulers of the state were supposed to receive some special cultivation, not the technological kind, but the broad and unconstrained liberal art education. Aristotle and Plato both believed that people were different in talent: the polis rulers were the kind whose souls were injected with gold, while farmers and artisans were the kind injected with copper and iron, and the god always did so. Therefore, farmers and artisans, who were the indispensable part of the state, could not form ruling *arête* even through education, as their souls only had the *arête* of obedience. Educational objects of Athens at that time were mainly the minority who had both money and time, not the whole population. Although in philosophers' view that the ultimate objective of education at that time was to realize the highest virtue for the state and its citizens, there were different classes among them: farmers and craftsmen were the ruled class, while protectors and officers formed the ruling class. The philosophical academy as higher education institutions had, besides the function of producing knowledge, an important function of providing the state with military talents and administering talents. Talents meeting the needs were required not to be an expert of certain field but a person of encyclopedic knowledge base. Thus, the education objective of higher education institutions of ancient Greece was the origin of liberal arts education.

3. THE FREEDOM VIEW IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION IDEAS IN ANCIENT GREECE

The spirit of free scientific exploration and the conception of democratic politics which are the most significant parts of modern western world, originated in Greece. And the development of human beings depends on the degree of implementation of these two. The philosophical schools and the rhetoric ones of ancient Greek presented the following features: production of knowledge and social hierarchy, cultural heritage and service to society. Academies played a crucial role in the inheritance and development of human civilization, and they were also the source of liberal thought. J.B Bury, the British historian, had the following statement in his book *History of Free Thought*,

when we are asked to specify the debt the western civilization owes to the Greeks, their achievements in literature and art naturally come to first. But when we think of the most unforgettable point the Greeks left to us, the free thought and free discussion they discovered first are the answer and may be a more specific answer to the first question. (Bury, 1988, p.23)

The freedom of thought is the greatest boon the ancient Greeks left to the west. Therefore it is very meaningful to

study the education ideas producing it. To understand this spirit, it is necessary to place it in the background of the Greek polis culture.

For Werner Jaeger, "The most classical form of Greek culture is the city-state system." (Paideia, 1945, p.77) Sparta and Athens were the two most representative ancient Greek polis, which were "the firm and complete type of citizens' community expressing the Greek ideal more fully than any other type."² (Paideia, 1945, p.77) Aristotle had studied the 158 polis, expecting to find the most ideal form of government. According to the research results of "the polis research center" of the Copenhagen University led by Hansen, a contemporary Danish scholar, there was "more than 1500 polis in Greece." (Huang & Yan, 2009, p.140) When Aristotle defined men as political animals, he had emphasized the distinction between Greek culture of reason and modern culture of reason. In his opinion, the "wise people" (*sapiens HOMO*) were the "political people" (*Politicus HOMO*), because reason itself was politics. "The emergence of the city state and the birth of philosophy are so closely connected that the origin of rational thought is inevitable to involve the unique social structure and spiritual structure of Greek city-state." (Jean-Pierre, 2012, p.120)

Since the beginning of the eighth century BC, when the slave society was developing,

the Athenians, still in clan society, had already had private property distinguished from the public property. The possession and the pursuit of wealth had become the new impetus to urge the Athenians to break away from the original community, which made it possible for them to have access to multi-aspects of development on their own. (Shi, 1987, p.66)

Then in the world filled with hatred, the polis was their protector, their guarantee of security, and their pride. So Plato once said,

The people can only develop their own morality in serving the society. The reason for the Athenians being praised by the world is that they took their own life as more than private affairs. The word "idiot" in our vocabulary is originated from a Greek word, which was used to name the people who sat out the public affairs. (Hamilton, 1993, p.170)

The free view in the Greek education ideas was the one under the Greek polis. Only under the protection and security of the citizen community the individual's free development could be realized. Whether the state existed in the form of the citizen community, or the education was under the management of the state, their ultimate goal was to realize the freedom of the people.

4. THE MODERN VALUES OF HIGHER EDUCATION IDEAS IN ANCIENT GREECE

The cultivation idea and the practice idea of liberal arts education in ancient Greek education ideas are the

² Even when it was a firmer and more complete type of community, which expressed the Greek ideal more fully than any other type.

significant foundations for the Greek ideas, they are under continual development. It is more important than others that the scientific attitude of academy toward science and the quest for the truth was the source of western rationalism. Hegel once said, “once mention of the word of Greek, the cultivated European will naturally have the feeling of home.” (Hegel, 1959, p.157) The Greek rational thought is amazing enough to stir up people’s desire to research it. According to Jean Pierre Vernant, a French scholar,

the Greek rational thought was not formed in the relationship between people and objects, but in the interpersonal relationship; its progress did not rely on the technology affecting the world, but on affecting the people; the common means of these techniques is language, which is the art of politicians, rhetoricians and teachers. (Jean-Pierre, 2012, p.120)

In classical Greece, for example, both politicians and rhetoricians came from different philosophy schools, which at that time were equal to the university except without granting the graduation certificate and the degree. Although the basic ideas, the system and the function of university were bred mature in the higher education institutions, the Greek philosophy schools were forced to shut down due to the limitation of historical conditions. As it may, the rise of those philosophy schools was inevitable at the right time.

The first university came into being in 1088 by inheriting the education ideas established by the ancient Greek philosophy schools and they took them as the core and basis in the university development at the same time. Since its birth, the university had been playing an unparalleled role in inheriting and expanding human civilization. On the premise of the relative constancy of the fundamental education ideas, the system and the structure function of university have been continuously evolving. Bologna University in mediaeval times distinguished from the Universities of Ancient Greece, namely the Academy and other philosophy schools, among them the former was the combination of profession qualification authentication and diploma granting system. Humboldt, the German educationalist, founded Berlin University in 1810. From then on, scientific research moved into university, which marked the rise of the modern university. Then, with the rise of Kerr’s multi - University, the function of social service of the university was further improved. Under the premise that the fundamental ideas of university are in line with those of the ancient Greek philosophy schools, the university has kept evolving. In spite of being through millennium, it charms as before, ancient and often new; it goes beyond any other form of organization in the world, having nationality and transcending it, and sails forward in the waves of history, showing a strong and vigorous vitality.

CONCLUSION

The philosophy schools of ancient Greece, the higher education institutions of the ancient Greece, existed from the 387th BC to the 529th AD. Virtue education, liberal arts education and free view among its education ideas are the origins of the education spirit of modern universities. The features of the ancient higher education institution, including the world spirit surpassing the bond of nations and peoples, the free pursuit of truth, the cultural heritage, the scientific research and the social service, ultimately developed into the functions of modern universities. The system and function of true university have been evolving since it was founded in 1088 AD. Meanwhile, it is necessary to review and reflect those education ideas of ancient Greece represented by the academy to remind us that no matter how the system changes and develops the university should not stray from the goal of shaping the individual of ideal virtue and pursuing truth freely. The modern university, while producing the knowledge, it must also carry forward the responsibility of fostering an individual of independent personality and ideal virtue.

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