

Viewing the Construction of China's First-class Universities from the Decline of National Central University

Yu Wang

Jiangsu University of Science and Technology
Zhenjiang, China

Abstract—Once a legend in the history of higher learning in China, National Central University was even top-ranked in Asia as a first-class university. However, its strength was greatly undermined during the adjustment of its faculties after the founding of the People's Republic of China. To separate out the reasons of its decline, it is not difficult to find out that the division of disciplines, the decline of talent quality, and the lack of free and autonomous atmosphere are the most important three aspects. The division of disciplines deprived the National Central University of the necessary foundation of a first-class university; the radicalization of and the decline of the talent- training quality deprived the Central University of the key elements of being first-class; the lack of freedom and autonomy deprived the "soil" for the growth of a first-class university and deprived it of the "nutrients" for its development. These three aspects are the important factors in the construction of first-class universities, pointing out the direction in the construction of contemporary first-class universities in China. Therefore, discipline construction, talent training, and free and independent campus atmosphere are the foundation and necessary conditions for building a first-class university.

Keywords—National Central University; First-class University; Discipline; Quality of Talents Training; Atmosphere of Freedom and Autonomy

I. INTRODUCTION

Once the largest and influential institution of higher learning in China, National Central University ranked first in Asia in Princeton University's world rankings in 1948 and ranked among the world's leading universities. Central University had obvious advantages in this period of development, followed by Peking University, Tsinghua University and Fudan University. During the period of relocation to Chongqing, two-thirds of the candidates in the unified enrollment with Southwest United University, Zhejiang University and Wuhan University took the National Central University as their first choice. [1] In <Tenth Anniversary of National Central University>, the faculties and departments of National Central University are introduced as follows: "Vertically, the university has a complete range of educational resources at all levels, from academies to kindergartens. Horizontally, there are seven colleges and one technical college. It is indeed the most comprehensive and extensive educational institution in China." [2] During the period of National Central

University, there were a number of "great masters" such as Li Siguang and Wu Youxun who taught here. As for talent training, nearly 9000 students had been successively trained. According to statistics, more than 60 members of the Academy of Sciences had worked or studied in the National Central University. [3] In particular, during Luo Jialun's tenure, the Central University entered a period of steady development and put forward the plan of "Universities of Ten Thousand People". After taking over, the National Central University was renamed Nanjing University. With the development of department adjustment, Nanjing University gradually faded after its division into colleges of arts and sciences. However, the decline of the National Central University provides a glimpse of the necessary foundation and conditions for the construction of first-class universities.

II. DISCIPLINE IS THE FOUNDATION OF FIRST-CLASS UNIVERSITY CONSTRUCTION

During the College-Department adjustment in the 1950s, colleges and universities all over the country abolished the college-level system. The departments of Nanjing University (formerly the Central University) were split up and 13 departments and 2 specialized disciplines were retained. They were: Chinese Language, Foreign Language, Russian Language, History, Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Geography, Psychology, Astronomy, Meteorology, Geology, Meteorology and Geology. [2] Except for the liberal arts and science colleges, all other colleges had moved out, and the departments of the arts and science colleges had been retained except the philosophy department. At that point, it had become a comprehensive university with liberal arts nature in essence.

Other departments of Nanjing University were separated and moved out, making Nanjing University become the common source of many universities in China. In the 1950s, many universities had origin with Nanjing University. Six of them were located in Nanjing, and the rest were outside the province. Therefore, in 2002, there was a grand occasion for Nanjing University to celebrate its centenary with nine universities; they were Southeast University, Nanjing Normal University, Hohai University, Nanjing Tech University, Nanjing Agricultural University, Nanjing Forestry University, Jiangsu University and Jiangnan University. In the early days of the founding of the People's Republic of China, for Nanjing University, the major adjustments were as follows: A. The five

Departments of Electricity, Machinery, Civil Engineering, Architecture and Chemical Engineering of Nanjing University Institute of Technology were integrated into the Department of Agriculture and Chemistry of Agricultural College, as well as related disciplines of other colleges and universities to form the Nanjing Institute of Technology, the predecessor of today's Southeast University. The Department of Post-Radio Engineering moved westward to Chengdu in 1955, and jointly established the Chengdu Telecommunication Engineering College with other related departments, the predecessor of University of Electronic Science and Technology. The Department of Chemical Engineering of the Institute of Technology came out independently to prepare for the construction of Nanjing University of chemical technology. B. Nanjing University Agricultural College and Jinling University Agricultural College were merged to establish Nanjing Agricultural College, the predecessor of Nanjing Agricultural University. C. Nanjing University and Jinling University were merged into Nanjing Forestry College, the predecessor of Nanjing Forestry University. D. Nanjing Normal University and the Department of Education, Child Welfare and Specialized Child Care of Jinling University were merged to form the Nanjing Normal University, the predecessor of Nanjing Normal University. E. The Department of Water Conservancy Engineering of Nanjing University and other related departments of other universities were merged into the East China Water Conservancy College, the predecessor of Hohai University. F. The Department of Aeronautics of Nanjing University, Zhejiang University and Jiaotong University were merged to form the East China Aeronautical College, and then moved to Xi'an Northwest Polytechnic University. G. The Medical College of Nanjing University became the Fifth Military Medical University of the People's Liberation Army, and subsequently moved to Xi'an to merge with the Fourth Military Medical University. H. the Department of Philosophy of Nanjing University moved to Peking University. I. the Department of Politics and Law of Nanjing University moved to East China University of Politics and Law, the predecessor of East China University of Politics and Law. J. the Department of Economics of Nanjing University was consolidated with Fudan University.

It can be seen that, at that time, apart from the Colleges of Arts and Sciences, all the other colleges moved out. Originally the largest and most comprehensive university in China, Nanjing University turned into a liberal arts college. The academic roots of its first-class university were dismantled, and the status of its first-class university was inevitably affected. History has proved this. In December 1954, the Ministry of Education identified six universities as national key universities: People's University of China, Peking University, Tsinghua University, Beijing Agricultural University, Beijing Medical College and Harbin University of Technology. On March 22, 1959, the Central Committee issued <Decision on the designation of a number of key schools in Institutions of higher learning>, designated Sixteen colleges, including Peking University, People's University, Tsinghua University, China University of Science and Technology, Beijing Institute of Technology, Beijing Aviation College, Beijing Agricultural University, Beijing Medical College, Beijing Normal University, Tianjin University, Harbin University of

Technology, Fudan University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, East China Normal University, Shanghai First Medical College and Xi'an Jiao Tong University. Four colleges including Union Medical University, Harbin Military Engineering College, Fourth Military Medical University and Military Communication Engineering College were added in August. Until two years after the end of the department adjustment, Nanjing University was not included in the list. It could be seen that its status was much worse than before, and it had fallen out of the ranks of first-class universities in just a few years. Although Nanjing University entered the ranks of the first batch of high-level universities in the national "985 Project" in 1999, and also among the list of first-class universities announced in 2017, its strength and status were rather inferior to those in the Central University period. Data from the 2019 University rankings also illustrated this point. In the domestic rankings, such as Wu Shulian's University ranking, Nanjing University ranked sixth; China's best universities ranked seventh. Nanjing university ranked 18th in The Times higher education Asia university rankings 2019. There is no doubt that the division of disciplines in the adjustment of faculties and departments in the 1950s had a far-reaching impact on the foundation of its disciplines. Many universities based on the disciplines of National Central University, nevertheless, rank as "985" and "211", reflecting that solid, cross-cutting and comprehensive disciplines foundation is the prerequisite of the existence and development of first-class universities. On October 24, 2015, the State Council issued a circular on "Overall Plan for Promoting the Construction of World-class Universities and Top-Class Disciplines", which required that by 2020, certain universities would be among the leading universities worldwide, and some disciplines would be among the top universities in the world; by 2030, some universities would be among the top universities in the world; and by 2050, China as a whole will become a powerful country in higher education. "Double first-class" broke the identity barriers of the previous "985" and "211" universities, so that local colleges and universities also joined the ranks of competition. In April 2019, the Ministry of Education issued the Circular on the Implementation of the "20,000 Plan" for the Construction of First-class Undergraduate Specialty. It aimed to build about 10,000 first-class national undergraduate specialty points and 10,000 provincial first-class undergraduate specialty points in 2019-2021 to strengthen first-class undergraduate education and revitalize undergraduate education in an all-round way. Adopting differentiated construction should be divided into Central Universities and local universities, and the places should be allocated to local universities. From the aspect of national policy, it is obvious that discipline construction itself is still the most important factor in the process of building first-class universities today, this is especially for local universities, the main body of Chinese universities, where only through one or few first-class disciplines, and they have the qualifications to enter the ranks of first-class universities. Hence, first-class disciplines are the foundation of building first-class universities.

III. THE QUALITY OF TALENTS TRAINING IS THE KEY TO THE CONSTRUCTION OF FIRST-CLASS UNIVERSITIES

The quality of talent training determines the development level of universities and is a key factor in the construction of

first-class universities. Throughout the decline of the Central University, it is also closely related to the decline in the quality of talent training in the early days of the founding of the People's Republic of China. In the adjustment of colleges and departments, the comprehensive effect of multiple factors led to the decline of the quality of talent training.

A. The impact of national talent training initiatives. In order to realize the central task of serving the workers and peasants, as well as meeting the demand of production and construction in the early days of the People's Republic of China, the government issued a series of policies and measures to lower the admission threshold and increase the talent output. During this period, there was also a pragmatic tendency of talent cultivation. Overemphasis on the service function of talents led to the decline of the quality of talent cultivation. Although in the short term it met the needs of national construction quantitatively, it undoubtedly reduced the quality of talents training in the long term. a. Reformed enrollment policy. Since 1950, colleges and universities had made it clear that the regulations on the admission of new students should be relaxed to allow examinees with backgrounds of workers and peasants, leading the number of worker and peasant students recruited by colleges and universities increased yearly. Such recruitment strategy achieved the purpose of opening the door to the general workers and peasants, and also reduced the entrance threshold of colleges and universities, resulting in the decline of the quality of students. B. Compress the length of study. The central government had decided to graduate one year ahead of schedule from 1953 and 1954 in some departments of science and technology institutes to meet the needs of a large number of construction talents for social production and construction. Although this was a special need in a specific historical period, it inevitably affected the quality and integrity of student training via reducing the length of their study. c. Opened a fast-track middle school for workers and peasants to transfer students to colleges and universities. The purpose of the fast-track middle school for workers and peasants was to recruit outstanding cadres, workers, and peasants in the period of revolution or social development, and to concentrate on teaching basic knowledge of science and culture in a short period of time, so that they could basically have the ability to continue their education in higher level institutions. At the same time, through the start-up of a fast-track middle school for workers and peasants, a channel had been set up for the students with poor learning foundation to enter the university. But the fast-track middle school for workers and peasants "is a failure experience. It is difficult to consolidate the high school curriculum within three years of study for an advanced - elementary-level student. Moreover, the control of enrollment is not strict. Some organs are not prudent enough in selecting and transferring students. They have been suspended since 1955" [5]. The poor learning foundation of students and the high dropout rate after they enter colleges and universities also affected the quality of talent training to a certain extent.

B. Adjustment of faculties. During the period of adjustment, the enrollment of colleges and universities nationwide increased significantly, with the total number of students enrolled in 15 colleges and universities in Jiangsu Province in 1952-1953 academic year being 10007. By the 1956-1957

academic years, it grew to 28213 with an increase rate of 81.8%. Especially in 1956-1957 academic years, the number of students enrolled in one year increased by 9488, more than the total number of 8718 students enrolled in the past four years. [4] The increase in the number of students in Institutions of higher learning directly led to the shortage of teachers. The central government has taken a series of measures in response to this situation, such as relaxing the requirements of university teachers, promoting lecturers, retaining a considerable number of university graduates as assistants, and even assigning some junior middle school graduates to universities as teaching assistants. These measures had alleviated the shortage of University teachers, while changing the structure of University teachers, increased the proportion of assistants and lecturers, and decreased the overall level of teachers. In 1941, the Ministry of Education employed 30 professors in the first batch of ministries. There were 5 professors in Central University; they were Liang Xi, Sun Benwen, Ai Wei, Hu Huanyong and Cai Qiao. Sun Benwen was the only person who had been teaching in this university after the adjustment of the department. It can be seen that the adjustment of teachers involved in the reform and adjustment of higher education in the early days of the founding of the People's Republic of China still undermined the faculty strength of the Central University to a certain extent, and the decline in the faculty directly affected the decline of talent training.

C. Liberal arts literacy can be regarded as the foundation and source of all knowledge. Central University paid attention to the construction of practical technology disciplines for the purpose of national construction. The construction of basic theoretical disciplines had been paid attention as well. At the same time, it also paid attention to the connection between different disciplines. [6] The overarching aim of higher education reform in the early days of the People's Republic of China was to train a large number of industrial talents to cooperate with the economic recovery and the social construction development at that time. The emphasis and development of engineering colleges and departments were much higher than that of liberal arts and sciences. Liberal arts were in a subordinate position, and this is undoubtedly another blow to Nanjing University, which had been adjusted to a literary nature at this time. The central university can cultivate a large number of high-quality talents before adjustment, which has a great relationship with its literary compatibility and cross-disciplinary penetration. After adjustment, it was obviously unable to meet this point, which inevitably led to a decline in the quality of talents training. From another aspect, the emphasis on the development of engineering and the neglect of liberal arts education reflected the eagerness for quick success and instant benefit in higher education at that time. Overemphasizing the relationship between talent cultivation and social needs, emphasizing the practicability and utility of education, while gradually ignoring the cultivation of human resources, undoubtedly reduced the comprehensive quality of talent.

In addition, the expansion of student enrollment led to the shortage of teaching resources. Teaching resources such as books, instruments and equipment could not keep up with the growth rate of student expansion. In addition, books, teaching

aids and other equipment were also depreciating in the adjustment of colleges and departments, resulting in a waste of resources. To a certain extent, teaching resources also restrained the level of students training.

In view of the early days of the People's Republic of China, the repositioning of the state for the training of college talents also had a great influence on the training of talents in Nanjing University at that time. With the increase of enrollment, the decrease of entrance threshold, the neglect of liberal arts talents and the policy direction of talent cultivation for quick success and instant benefit, the quality of talent cultivation in Nanjing University were much worse than before under the influence of the environment. The popularity of talent from the National Central University no longer existed. The duty of a university is always to cultivate talents. Teaching and educating students are always the eternal theme of a university. The competition of "double first-class" also makes universities form the development goal of University ranking, and the orientation of ranking index is becoming increasingly prominent. Some factors of talent cultivation have been emphasized or even magnified because they are in the index system, while the contents that are not in the index system have been ignored. While pursuing rapid development, colleges and universities will inevitably sacrifice something, which is an inevitable contradiction in development and an important issue facing Chinese universities in the process of first-class construction. For today's colleges and universities, they are also faced with a large number of students with a variety of academic qualifications and backgrounds. How to always focus on teaching according to talent, and improving the quality of personnel training are the key to the construction of first-class universities.

IV. THE ATMOSPHERE OF FREEDOM AND AUTONOMY IS THE SOIL FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF FIRST-CLASS UNIVERSITIES

During the period of the Republic of China, with more and more people studying in the West, the advanced educational concepts and experience of the West were brought back to China. In educational practice, for example, when Cai Yuanpei was president of Peking University, established a series of imitations of the German Humboldt model. For example, Guo Bingwen's "four balances" policy of balance between generalists and specialists, balance between humanities and science, balance between teachers and equipment, and balance between domestic and international universities and his academic management, academic freedom, student autonomy, drawn lessons from the experience of American universities. The idea of free and independent higher education rooted and sprouted in the suitable soil, coupled with the constant war, and the national government of that day was too busy to take care of itself, so that higher education in the Republic of China was able to develop independently in the chaotic environment. National Central University also developed into the first-class university in Asia during that period. It can be said that academic freedom and the atmosphere of school autonomy for the formation and development of first-class universities to provide the necessary "nutrients". However, with the change of political regime, the new government had strengthened its control over higher education and emphasized its service

functions to the country's politics and economy. The atmosphere of autonomy and freedom of universities gradually disappeared.

Ideological unity. In order to smoothly advance the reform of higher education in the early days of the People's Republic of China, the state launched the intellectual ideological transformation movement, which laid a solid ideological foundation for the reform of education. At the same time, it affected the intellectuals' ideas, unified their understanding and value judgment of the development of higher education in a short time, and made the majority of their thoughts change to a unified and standardized direction. This effect also led to the ideological rigidity of the intellectual groups, which continued into the subsequent teaching and education of colleges and universities. The atmosphere of academic freedom was gradually lost in the campus, and the generation of "master" scholars also lost their growth conditions.

Unification of management. The unified management made universities lose their "temperament" of independence and freedom in an instant. The loss of university autonomy was reflected not only in the leadership and management of universities, but also in the development goals, talents training, and teaching and scientific research of universities. In addition, the complete replication of Soviet experience in the early days of People's Republic of China also led to the loss of autonomy and initiative in the development of universities. In the period of College-Department adjustment, the adjustment strategy of "one chess game in the whole country" was faced with the overall interests of the whole country. The individual interests of colleges and universities in Jiangsu area naturally had to choose to obey, let alone the autonomy of colleges and universities. As a result, the strength of Nanjing University declined significantly.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the lack of academic freedom and autonomy of universities suppressed the independent and independent development ability of universities, as well as the free development of academics and talents, indirectly weakened the strength of Nanjing University and deprived it of the conditions for continuing to rank as a first-class university. The reason why universities become universities lies in the inheritance of culture and spirit. The spirit of universities is inclusive, pluralistic, not utilitarian, and single. Like academic development, universities are moving forward in criticism and debate. They must have free and independent development soil. The progress of the times and the development of the country also make us more aware of the importance of freedom and autonomy for the development of universities. First-class universities in the modern sense must also be built on the atmosphere of freedom and autonomy.

V. SUMMARY

Although National Central University experienced the great impact of the westward migration during the war, its real decline was after changing to Nanjing University in the course of faculty readjustment in the 1950s. The separation of disciplines deprived the National Central University of the necessary foundation of a first-class university; radical talent

training and the decline in the quality of talent training also deprived the National Central University of the key elements for continuing a first-class university; the lack of freedom and autonomy deprived the "soil" for the growth of a first-class university and deprived it of the "nutrients" for its development. From the decline of the National Central University, it is not difficult to conclude that the significance of discipline construction, talent training, academic freedom and university autonomy are keys for the construction of first-class universities. This paper also points out the direction for the construction of today's first-class universities using Central University's lesson. Today's first-class universities have more perfect index system and richer connotation than half a century ago, but discipline construction, talent training, academic freedom and university autonomy are still the basic prerequisites for building and maintaining first-class universities.

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