

Introduction: Humanities versus Sciences?

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Most of the articles included in this special issue were first delivered at the International Conference on Science and Humanities: Conflicts and Dialogues, held from 12–15 May 2016 in Shanghai, co-organized by Shanghai Jiao Tong University (SJTU) and Academia Europæa, and celebrating the 120th anniversary of the founding of Shanghai Jiao Tong University, one of the oldest and most prestigious universities in China. Under the general theme ‘conflict and dialogue between science and humanities in the age of globalization’, the conference addressed the following sub-themes: (1) the new role played by modern universities; (2) the dimensions of science and culture in higher education and the tension between the two; (3) the interaction between world-class universities and their colleges; (4) the important role played by advanced studies in world-class universities; (5) the role of humanities in science-oriented universities and the function of liberal arts education; (6) the advent of post-human society and the rise of post-humanism.

In the essays that follow, all authors touch upon the issue of whether science should be opposed to the humanities or whether the two could complement each other. All participants emphasized the importance of interdisciplinary studies in science and humanities. As most of the participants came from prestigious Chinese and European universities, the first sub-theme almost naturally engendered the most heated discussion. Zhang Jie, the then President of SJTU and current Vice President of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, submitted the essay he co-authored with two colleagues after the conference as he was, due to a visit abroad, prevented from participating in the event itself. Zhang Jie not only deals with the function of a research university, as seen from his own experience of having served as university president for over ten years, but also addresses issues hotly debated today. In modernizing a country, it is vital that universities train the most excellent talents in science and technology, and therefore that these disciplines flourish. In comparison, we find that the humanities are shrinking with entire faculties and departments being incorporated and funds cut. This even happens in European universities, which were once regarded as models for modern universities elsewhere, especially in China. Yet, Zhang Jie *et al.* argue, research universities should ‘realize that neither the capacity of acquiring nor consolidating high quality resources can be achieved by an individual university or universities in a single region’, but that innovation happens through

networks, and that this involves researchers from different disciplines or fields, in the humanities as well as the sciences. Under the leadership of President Zhang, SJTU, like its Beijing partner Tsinghua University, has successfully changed its traditional role from a poly-technological engineering university into a comprehensive university with strong faculties of science and humanities.

Theo D'haen calls for investing more in the humanities, for 'it is a grave mistake to sacrifice the humanities in favour of the sciences, whether pure or applied. Obviously, this is not a plea against the sciences, but for the preservation of the humanities'. Liu Kang, Yifeng Sun and Qiao Guo Qiang highlight the function of the humanities in modern universities in China and elsewhere. Sun describes the function of a liberal arts education in modern universities as he himself has long been teaching and working as the dean of the faculty of humanities at Lingnan University, a prestigious small liberal arts college in Hong Kong. These authors all want to prove that in a world-class university there should not only be a strong science faculty, but that importance should also be attached to the humanities.

Larsen thinks that 'researchers are challenged by increasingly complex problems in culture, nature and society beyond disciplinary boundaries', and thus it is absolutely necessary to adopt an interdisciplinary approach. Chengzhou He argues that science alone cannot solve all ecological problems caused by modernity. He proposes a New Confucian ecological humanism as a response to the global environmental crisis. For Zhang Jiang, to interpret or over-interpret the meaning of a literary work in a random way is not a scientific attitude; the correct attitude, he argues, is to recognize the authorial intention present in the text. Tianhu Hao emphasizes that the union of science and arts in science fiction (films) can be very productive.

Like D'haen and Larsen, all other European authors, Blockmans, De Corte, Engwall, and Žic Fuchs, no matter what disciplines they are affiliated with – humanities or science – think the humanities are indispensable for a university striving to be world-class. Thus, they try to reply to the question: what is the function of humanities in the contemporary era? In my own essay, I discuss the relation of humanism to post-humanism and the challenge raised by the latter to human beings in the contemporary era. Consequently, I will here not say anything more about this issue. What I do want to elaborate on a bit more here is my experience in China, a country that at present is redoubling its efforts to build several world-class universities and world-class disciplines, and to this end invests huge amounts of money to develop science and technology as well as the humanities.

To my mind, we should first of all realize that in current world-class universities, the humanities are indispensable. This is true not only with Harvard, Yale, Oxford and Cambridge, but also in Chinese universities such as Tsinghua, Peking University and SJTU. People may well say that students of philosophy, history, literature, or the arts find it difficult to find a good job upon graduation, but to me this just depends on how to view the jobs that are suited to their special training. Obviously, one's professional training comprises both more general and more strictly disciplinary-bound subjects. It is up to the student to find whatever the more general part of her or his professional training has equipped her or him for. Or, putting it differently, a student

should learn how to apply the knowledge and skills she or he has acquired to the job in hand. From this perspective, finding a suitable job should not be difficult. Those writing their doctoral theses on Shakespeare's tragedies or stream of consciousness novels may have difficulty finding a suitable teaching position in a regular university, but they may put the research methodology they have acquired to good use elsewhere. The humanities not only teach students professional knowledge. They also cultivate a more comprehensive attitude that allows one to quickly adapt to changing work environments. In other words, students trained in the humanities can use their professional knowledge to do their job well.

Second, the humanities, in addition to furthering their own disciplines, can also actively contribute to fostering a good humanistic environment and academic atmosphere on campus, and promote the communication and exchange of academic thinking. It is in this communication and exchange that new ideas may sprout and results obtained, and those schooled in new combinations of different disciplines may stand out from the crowd.

Furthermore, the humanities in the universities can serve society as a whole, not only to furnish advanced thoughts and new values, but also to improve people's moral accomplishments, and strengthen people's established beliefs, so that people can give full play to the subjective element in their own work. Thus, a philosophy student with a good mastery of her or his discipline, and good foreign language skills, will stand a very good chance to find a job suited to his or her talent even in the most fiercely competitive job market.

Admittedly, there are some unfavourable factors to the humanities at the moment. For instance, I often hear arguments such as: is it useless to study the humanities in general? Or, is it useful to study the humanities in particular? These arguments are very popular among today's young students and their parents, especially in China where many parents want their children to become future VIPs, and where, when a student has obtained the excellent marks in the national entrance exams that allows one to choose which university one goes to, and which discipline one studies, parents will always help her or him make the right choice. My answer is that it is neither useful nor useless to study the humanities: their so-called 'uselessness' is relative, because it only holds in the sense that the humanities do not bring immediate economic benefits and thereby cannot fundamentally change people's living conditions. On the other hand, the 'usefulness' of the humanities is absolute when one considers the importance of the humanities in themselves, and even more so when one takes into account the effect they have on how people look upon themselves, how they affect one's view of the world, and how they subtly influence all kinds of successful people. How the ideas of those in positions of leadership are formed or changed brings great changes in politics, economy and culture. From this perspective, the effects of the humanities are useful and even 'helpful', and the value of the humanities cannot be measured simply by direct economic benefits, but rather, will produce indirect economic benefits. Therefore, regardless of the direction in which our society develops, the humanities will always remain essential. If we overlook this, and just blindly pursue short-term effects, the humanistic spirit will be lost. In the process of establishing China's own

world-class universities, then, humanities and social science scholars should both make a big difference. A world-class university should not only have first-class natural science teachers; it should also house first-class thinkers and humanities scholars. This is the consensus of all the world's leading university presidents.

Unlike a social science discipline such as economics, the humanities cannot directly boost a country's financial and political power, nor, unlike the natural sciences, can they foster a nation's science and technology. Thus, it is not surprising that some European countries are reluctant to invest more money to develop the humanities. However, such short-sighted views are severely criticized by all European contributors to the current issue of the *European Review*. The humanities were of value not only in ancient agricultural civilizations; they remain so in modern and post-modern society. Unfortunately, many people fail to see this. As a consequence, when the country's economy is in crisis, it is the humanities and research in them that are the first to be cut. This is at least partially the case in today's Euro-American universities. In sharp contrast, in China, an Asian country with a splendid cultural heritage, humanities research has not been stalled, and research funds increase every year. In this sense, I want to emphasize that when our economy prospers, we should never forget to invest some money in the construction of the humanities; and when the economy faces temporary difficulties, we should not necessarily first cut the humanities disciplines and research funds. Otherwise, we will regret it after a few years, because the outcome of the humanities and their influence are only manifest the years to come. Thus, I think that in order to create an atmosphere conducive to the development of the humanities, we should make joint efforts in two areas: One is to persuade our governments to increase investment in this field, and ensure the continued existence and development of the humanities. Second, humanities scholars should also be able to justify their own disciplines. I always believe that whatever work we do, as long as we do our best, we will be able to deliver something of value. In this sense, in celebrating the 120th anniversary of the founding of Shanghai Jiao Tong University, which has long been best known for its science and engineering disciplines, to hold a high-level conference on the dialogue between the sciences and the humanities, such as that from which you have the results before you, is all the more significant.