

The Balance Between Academic Freedom and Social Responsibility

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Abstract

How to deal with the relationship between academic freedom and social responsibility is an important issue that China's higher education has to face. We should handle the relationship between academic freedom and social responsibility as follows: clarify the relationship between academic freedom and social responsibility from the understanding of “necessity”; seek academic freedom in harmony with socialist core values; realize the two-way adaptation of academic freedom and social responsibility based on “practicality”; grasp the multi-dimension of academic freedom and the hierarchy of social responsibility; protect academic freedom and social responsibility with contract spirit. Only in this way, can we construct a harmonious balance between academic freedom and social responsibility.

Key words: Academic freedom; Social responsibility; The balance of the both

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How to deal with the relationship between academic freedom and social responsibility is an important issue

that China's higher education has to face. Universities are “born free” but restrained in “chains”. The relationship between academic freedom and social responsibility not only has the characteristics of freedom and control, fact and value, individual standard and social standard, but also has the characteristics of identity and inclusiveness.

We should realize that any relationship itself is evolving and changing and the imbalance in the relationship is absolute. We should not only recognize the one-sidedness of “either/or” and “take-it-or-leave”, but also avoid “eclecticism” without a standpoint. In the context of Chinese culture, we should seek the best fusion point of contradiction transformation in specific time and space, and coordinate the relationship between academic freedom and social responsibility in a Chinese way.

1. CLARIFY THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY FROM THE UNDERSTANDING OF “NECESSITY”

Marx believed that “freedom is the understanding of necessity and the transformation of the world”.¹ The essence of freedom is the recognition and utilization of objective laws. The process of seeking the tension between freedom and responsibility is also the one of clarifying the order of the relationship based on the understanding of inevitability.

1.1 Relationship Order: Freedom Comes Before Responsibility

According to Kant, freedom comes before responsibility. (Kant, 1949) Freedom is a kind of value order and system order, which is restricted by morality, justice and system.

¹ ... (1995). *Selected Works of Marx and Engels* (Vol. III) (p.153). Beijing: People's Publishing House.

Responsibility limits freedom and taking responsibility means there is no absolute freedom. First of all, academic freedom is the freedom of rational choice in academic activities. Freedom is the basis of responsibility. To give up freedom is to give up qualifications, rights and responsibilities.

According to Marx, freedom is based on necessity (the law of adaptation). “Freedom + knowledge = creation”. The exploration of advanced knowledge in universities must be carried out in a free environment, otherwise there can be no real creation. Only with academic freedom can universities have the ability and conditions to take social responsibilities. This “necessity” feature of academic organization is not only the intersection point of the contradiction between freedom and responsibility, but also the logical premise to clarify the relationship between them. The state should fully respect this characteristic of academic organizations and protect academic freedom in legislation.

1.2 Relationship Limit: Freedom is Bounded by Responsibility

Fulfilling social responsibility is the intrinsic requirement of academic freedom, and responsibility is the inevitable extension of the logic of freedom. First, freedom implies responsibility. The university is essentially an antithetical unity of freedom and responsibility. Universities are free in terms of their academic attributes and limited in terms of their social attributes. Second, freedom is concrete and realistic and the value of freedom is also conditional and limited. The generalization of responsibility means not to assume responsibility. Thirdly, academic freedom is a limited freedom under the mission of carrying the responsibility of education, knowledge, social service and morality. When the freedom exceeds a certain limit, it will destroy the academic itself and lead to social anomie.

1.3 Relationship Purpose: Responsibility Should Be Conducive to the Play of Freedom

The extension of responsibility is freedom. Social responsibility can help universities to gain social trust and gain greater freedom. Social responsibility must be academic, applicable only within the scope of academic research activities, and conducive to the protection of academic freedom.

In history, the game between academic freedom and social responsibility has formed three evolutionary mechanisms. The first is the mechanism of a single responsibility in the premise of subjective freedom. In the middle Ages, the university not only gained the freedom of teaching, learning and speech, but also assumed the responsibility of “universal teaching and spreading truth”. Under such mechanisms, universities have a single responsibility for the development of morality and intelligence, mainly internally. The second is the mutualism mechanism of “rationality first”. Germany

first defined academic freedom as the basic principle of academic activities. Academic freedom and national goals gained legitimacy in the mutualism of mutual benefit. The third is the mechanism of “limited freedom in diversified responsibilities”. Modern universities are required to bear multiple social responsibilities in the course of multiple changes: education and moral responsibility, intellectual service and technological service responsibility, leading the society to create the future responsibility, etc. Under this evolutionary mechanism, universities not only disseminate and create knowledge, but also take on the diversified responsibilities of rejuvenating and strengthening the country through education.

The three evolutionary mechanisms all adapt to the social needs in a specific environment, indicating that both freedom and responsibility have their limits, and they transform into each other under certain conditions: when the reform of social institutions is conducive to the play of academic freedom, social responsibility can become a force conducive to the play of freedom.

2. SEEK ACADEMIC FREEDOM IN HARMONY WITH SOCIALIST CORE VALUES

2.1 Academic Freedom in China Is A Freedom Oriented by Socialist Core Values

The spirit of freedom and social responsibility is a legal unity, so the university should be consciously consistent with the country and the society in values.

I think that China’s academic freedom is to realize people’s free all-round development as the goal under the correct guidance of the socialist core value system. Academic organization and its members in academic activities within the scope of improper intervention from the outside world enjoy the freedom of thought, freedom of knowledge (learning), teaching and scientific research to explore the freedom of inquiry academic activities. In terms of the relationship between academic freedom and political responsibility, academic freedom has the function of developing and maintaining democratic politics, providing the ideological impetus and rational understanding for the reform and innovation of political system. The socialist core values provide a correct goal and direction for academic freedom. Academic freedom is not only the intrinsic requirement of social responsibility, but also the symbol and existence foundation of social democracy and freedom.

2.2 China’s Academic Freedom Is Based on the Freedom of the Social Community

Academic freedom is not, in essence, “for intellectual freedom”. It is “freedom for all”. (Nixon, 2001) Academic freedom is not the “professional privilege” of scholars.

The basic reason for academic freedom is in the public interest.

Individual freedom and collective freedom are synchronized. Individual freedom cannot be separated from the freedom of the community. Only in the social community can individual freedom exist. From the perspective of human free development, Marx put forward the view that “human nature is the unity of natural attribute, social attribute and spiritual attribute”. While emphasizing that individual freedom depends on the collective, he paid more attention to the realization of the value of individual freedom. He took the increase of individual free time and the development of individual free will as the sign of social progress and freedom. Collective freedom ensures that everyone is free and equal, while individual freedom is based on the freedom of the community. And the two complement each other. The realization of “the free and all-round development of everyone” through academic freedom is the highest value expression of Marx’s human nature.

3. REALIZE THE TWO-WAY ADAPTATION OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY BASED ON “PRACTICALITY”

China’s academic freedom should not be a passive “freedom from interference”, but a proactive “practical freedom”. Academic freedom and social responsibility achieve two-way adaptation and a new balance in practice.

Firstly, according to Marx’s concept of freedom, it must originate from practice, which is not only the limit of “freedom”, but also the basis of freedom.² Social responsibility entrusts academic freedom with the logic of practice. The more conscious and active a university is in the practice of serving the society, the freer it will be. The realization of academic freedom requires universities to have high independence and get out of the high dependence on government and social resources through the creative transformation of their own resources.

Secondly, practice is the foundation of the relationship between freedom and responsibility. Freedom is generated and developed in social practice, and academic freedom is an adaptation to the law of human development with the purpose of obtaining practical freedom through serving the society. Man is the subject of freedom and responsibility.

Thirdly, academic freedom is fundamentally based on a moral principle. The knowledge of academic freedom depends on the university’s active practice and moral self-discipline, so we should seek to adapt to the objective

necessity in moral practice and social practice. “Academic freedom is never an isolated phenomenon. It is based on the same principle as the fundamental freedom on which the whole society is based.” (Bolani, 2002) The purpose of academic freedom is for the public interest and social responsibility.

4. GRASP THE MULTI-DIMENSION OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND THE HIERARCHY OF SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

There are two different understandings of the relationship between academic freedom and social responsibility: One advocates the “theory of will” and regards academic freedom as a belief established within the scholars’ community; the other advocates “realism” which blames universities for various social responsibilities and problems. Modern higher education has become a complex organic system and the social responsibility undertaken by universities is multi-dimensional and transcends time and space. For each university, its social responsibility should be determined by its own development orientation.

On the one hand, academic freedom is the freedom to intervene in the academic process in various ways. Academic freedom includes individual freedom, group freedom, spirit freedom and action freedom. The real freedom does not exist in the general perceptual ideas but should be manifested as the ability to intervene in the academic process in a variety of ways. On the other hand, social responsibility is hierarchical and different types of colleges and universities have different ways to fulfill their responsibilities. Social responsibility is a dual structure system consisting of obligatory responsibility (basic responsibility) and indirect responsibility (delegated responsibility). Each university has its own way of participating in society and assumes different social responsibilities. The scope and boundary of freedom and responsibility vary in each university, which in essence is the action choice made by different universities according to their own positioning and the development of social structure.

5. PROTECT ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY WITH CONTRACT SPIRIT

At present, there are no clear legal norms for academic freedom and social responsibility of universities in China. The society enlarges the social responsibility of the university indefinitely leading to the fact that the responsibility is finally generalized and diluted. Universities cannot act freely and choose to be

² ... (1995). *Selected Works of Marx and Engels* (Vol. III) (p.153). Beijing: People’s Publishing House.

“responsible” according to academic logic in running a school and thus fall into the dilemma of “irresponsible”. In order to avoid the abuse of autonomy and academic corruption caused by freedom, it is necessary to restrict it and establish the spirit of contract between academic freedom and social responsibility.

Firstly, the right and boundary of academic freedom and social responsibility should be defined in legislation. Universities should be legally endowed with freedom of teaching and learning, freedom of press and freedom of thought to legalize academic freedom. The responsibility and obligation of university should be made clear to serve the society, making the social service systematic and institutionalized. (Liu, 2014)

Secondly, to achieve common governance and form a mechanism of balance between freedom and responsibility, we should establish social accountability, check and balance administrative and academic powers, improve the power structure in which universities, governments and markets participate in governance, and jointly enhance governance capacity. Universities should establish the basic pattern of principal being in charge of management and professors being in charge of academic activities. The management power of colleges and universities should be given the necessary functional division, putting the scope of academic affairs in the hands of the professor. The strength of democratic participation should be intensified and the system of teaching staff congress, student congress should be improved, making the stakeholders involved in university governance process equally.

Thirdly, to safeguard academic freedom through the formulation and implementation of university statutes, the university should not only have the freedom of teaching and research, but also have the freedom of selecting students, the freedom of self-management and the freedom of governing the university. And the academic order is consolidated through the construction of modern university system and statutes.

In short, of all the creations of man, nothing stands the test of history without being swallowed up by time better than university. It can be seen that the real value of a university lies in the fact that under the eternal traction of “academic freedom” and “social responsibility”, it has continued and developed human civilization and wisdom, and provided the source of thoughts for the sustainable development of the real society.

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