

On the Stages Recognition of Humboldt's Education Thoughts

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Abstract

William von Humboldt extends a wide range of researches, while all of them eventually are centered on humans and human education service. Based on his lifetime and parts of his works, this article discusses his education thoughts in different stages, the research on the theory of state, the research on humans and the research on linguistics.

Key words: The research on the theory of state; The research on humans; The research on linguistics

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INTRODUCTION

In China, the centralized researches on the education history of German and the education thoughts of Humboldt dates back to the 1980s. Through the comparison among the existing domestic researches, this article argues that Humboldt's educational thought has been the focus of domestic scholars, and the research trend develops from macro to micro, from the abstract concept to the specific school operation mode. For scholars, it is generally that Humboldt's education thoughts have a profound influence over the school system in Germany. Particularly, his notion of university produces fundamental impacts on modern universities in the world, including the universities in China. The deficiency of existing researches

lies in the lack of the translations of his works. The related literature of his education thoughts and his researches in education reforms are mainly found in foreign education history and brief introductions to Humboldt and his reforms from foreign educators. Moreover, journal articles are more involved with his education thoughts in terms of backgrounds, the main content, the influence and the level of acceptability. It is necessary to know Chen Hongjie, who writes *The View of German Classical University and Its Influence on Chinese Universities*. This book presents the Charisma character the German classic university bears. It even takes the Peking University as an example to illustrate the acceptance level of it worldwide. However, it fails to have a deeper research in Humboldt's education thought. In addition, it makes comparison between the education ideology of Humboldt and the education notion of Cai Yuanpei. Most of the content is too general, lacking in substantial content. It is also deficient in breadth and depth. Moreover, there are some errors in German references.

1. THE RESEARCH ON THE THEORY OF STATE

Humboldt was born on July 22nd, 1767, five year after the publication of *Emile* and *The Social Contract* of Rousseau. Undoubtedly, these two books influenced Humboldt's education connotations. He died in April, 1835, 14 months after the death of Schleiermacher, with whom Humboldt had worked out the plan of Prussian school reform, especially in the teaching aspect. Like most aristocrats of his time, Humboldt had never been to public schools. He spent his Childhood mostly in Tegel Manor near Potsdam and Berlin. He and his younger brother had no childhood friends to share joy and pain, only adults around. His father was open-minded and amiable, but died long ago. His mother was silent, elegant and introverted. Humboldt considered himself more like his mother. Humboldt and

his brother were taught by tutors. At first, Carmenpu (the pioneer in German Enlightenment Movement) taught them basic courses, such as read and write, history and geography. Later, Quint accompanied the brothers until 1789. Quint mainly taught them languages. Humboldt learns hard. For him, “nothing can bring me happiness except learning” (Geier, 2009). Although, Humboldt believes his childhood and youth time are boring and depressed the learning during this time lays a solid foundation for his research in future.

Humboldt mastered Greek, Latin, and French. He also had a good knowledge of French, German and ancient Greek Roman culture, which contributed to his contact with the cultural circles of the Enlightenment, led by Marcus Herz and his wife Henriette and his participation in 1785. If he was lonely and solitary previously, he felt warmth, comfort and freedom from life in Berlin. He joined in the reading circle, and continued to accept courses of philosophy, politics, economics and law from the philosopher Engel, Berlin High Court member Klein and Foreign Ministry Cabinet minister Professor Dom. These courses made Humboldt concentrate more on strength and mental power, sensations and feelings. In Berlin, he was acquainted with Schiller and developed close friendship with him. He also knows Carolyn von Dahl Orton, who later became his wife. Most importantly, his experience in Berlin makes him aware of the possible freedom as a scholar, and cultivates his ability of rational thinking.

Humboldt started his university life in Frankfurt a der Oder, but he only stayed for a semester. Then, he transferred to Göttingen and continued to study law for three semesters, which was the basis for his future career. During his study in Göttingen, he researched the ideology of Kant, the State theory of Montesquieu. He also made acquaintance with the Heine’s lively daughter Teresa, as well as her experienced husband August William Schregel. He also knew people outstanding in religions study, like Friedrich Heinrich Jacobs. The communications and contacts with these people changed Humboldt’s thoughts formed in Berlin.

In 1789, Humboldt started his learning journey with Carmenpu, as Rousseau’s description in *Emile*. The French Revolution was the cause and effect of this journey, which had the most powerful and profound impact over ideology in Germany, including the perception of Humboldt. He refused to totally accept the notion in the revolution as Carmenpu. He urged the critical thinking. It is from this point that he worked on the study on the politics concerned with revolutions. His writing drew more and more attention. After his learning journey, he assumed the office in the High Court in Berlin. However, he could not satisfy himself and hardly attain happiness from his job. As a result, he abandoned his position. He completely resigned in 1791 and got married in Erfurt in 1791, he

settled in his father-in-law’s home. After marriage, he continued his thinking and argumentation over the issues of states, religions, education and so on. He wrote several articles, like *On Religions* and *on the Reflection of State Constitution*. Then, over his letter communication with Gentz, the masterpiece *On Boundaries of State Functions* (also translated as *The Role of State*, 1792) came into being. In this book, Humboldt expresses his impression of the French Revolution and his view of German thought in 1791/1792, mixed with mixture of personal ideas about education

As Humboldt wrote at the end of *On Boundaries of State Functions*, the purpose of his writing is to

try to find out the coexistence of the most superior position for people in the nation ... the most diverse personality, the most authentic independence, the most various ways of life and the most genuine combination, which can only be realized through the highest freedom... It has long been my reflection subject that how to establish the national institutions and reduce the possibility of obstacles for the ultimate goal. (von Humboldt, 1998, p.173).

The ultimate goal is to “fully and evenly cultivate an integral”. Humboldt lists freedom as the foremost and essential condition for the ultimate issue. Humboldt compares the recent states with the ancient sates in the book. He deems that

in the ancient times, the attraction is the greatness of life dedication, the vitality of imagination, the profoundness of spirit, the perseverance of will, the consistency of words and deeds, and merely the latter endows humans the true value. Humans, particularly his strength and education, can inspire all the activities. However, in the recent times, people seem to forget the variety of individual, or neglect the essence of the personality. Instead, more importance is attached to the peace, well-being and happiness. (Ibid., p.28)

Through the observation of the French revolution Humboldt learns that only the deliberative reforms can assure the durable improvements. The strict control cannot produce even a single improvement, but the revolution of thinking mode. Under the possible situation, education changes the way of thinking, and the changes in humans enable the improvement of society (Ibid., p.14). Education plays the role to perfect humans so that humans can update states as they wish. Meanwhile, the foundation of education is the inner power of individual and education does not serve utilitarian but the growth of human strength. For Humboldt, any requirement of states may hinder the freedom of citizens. “State cannot avoid restricting individual freedom and oppress peoples’ motivation, while the abundance of motivation is the source of virtue and the indispensable factors for higher and more education.” (Ibid., p.27) “When it is expected that individual completely recognizes the state missions and shows no concerns about individual ultimate value, individual will turn machine, a torso without any human traits or independent awareness, endlessly serve as an

instrument.” (Ibid., p.3) This expectation will inevitably cause damages to education. Therefore, Humboldt argues that state should not hamper the performance of individual strength. The only mission of state is the guarantee of security and the most significant wealth, freedom, to the fullest.

Under the condition of freedom, all industries embrace opportunities, all arts are in bloom, all science is more prosperous and all the free people are in a closer family relationship. Parents are devoted to children, and satisfy their wishes by more affluent and cozy life. Free people create an optimistic atmosphere and produce educators with higher learning, whose destinies rely on the success of careers rather than the supports of state. (Freetner, 2013, p.5)

In addition, state shall renounce to operate citizens out of special purpose. State shall not attempt to require people. The main mission for the state is prevention instead of reinforce. It can perform its function only when the freedom of citizen is under threat.

Education tends more to cultivate citizens, and it shall not become the tool of state to transform people. Fundamentally speaking, education can only accomplish people, but cannot provide the specific mode for citizens. Hence, state is not necessary for education. (Ibid., p.4)

Humboldt explicitly demonstrates the function of state in national education in *On Boundaries of State Functions*, which is not only the achievement as his masterpiece on theory of state, the reflection over the state and education, but also the theoretical basis for his future education reforms.

2. THE RESEARCH ON HUMAN

As for Humboldt, only by learning the ancient Greek and Roman culture and the knowledge of the Greeks can human strength achieve the fullest and most even cultivation. At the age of 12, he showed interest in literature and academy through reading histories. First, the grand and noble characters in history and myths of Greek and Roman occupied his head, and they are living in his imagination. Neither his introverted mother nor his tutor and father Quint can enrich his inner world. Those characters can do. For the progress in moral and intelligence, he continuously reading and studying, from languages, history and literature. His younger brother Alexander believed that “He is outstanding and amazing in his childhood because of his profound knowledge of ancient history and ancient literature” (Geier, 2009). Then, during his university life in Frankfurt, Humboldt expands his knowledge in ancient culture in the seminars of the archaeologist Heine (1729-1812, working at the University of Göttingen since 1763). Later he made acquaintance with Heine's student Friedrich August Wolf, who is the mogul of the German classical Linguistics literature and the leader of the New Humanism Education Movement. Since 1794, he

lived in Jena owing to his friendship with Goethe and Schiller, and he devoted himself more to the research on ancient Greek and Roman culture. In the programmatic and speculative education work, *On the Ancient Culture, Especially the Ancient Greek Culture* (1793), Humboldt argues the reasons and methods to learn the ancient culture. He expresses his appreciation and recognition of the ancient Greek and ancient Greeks. He raises that all imperfections can be traced back to the imbalance of power and the ancient Greeks are nourished by the beauty of modes. They are enthusiastic about the beauty, particularly the emotional. They are exquisite in emotion and oppose the imbalance of morality, so the Greek educates people diversity and unity as far as possible. The education of the Greek fosters perfect and harmonious humanity. The ancient Greek is rich in imagination, capable of rational analysis and logical judgment. As Schiller described in the sixth letter in *Aesthetic Education Letters*,

the nature of the Greek is the combination of all the dignity, the result of all the beauty and wisdom of art ... They are flush in form and affluent in content. They can engage themselves in philosophical thinking and creating art. They are tender but powerful. We can see the combination of imagined youth and the rational adult from the Greek. (Schiller, 1984, pp.48-49)

Humboldt persists that education is to develop people in comprehensive and harmonious way. He pursues the natural harmony as the ancient Greeks possess. Although it is difficult for modern people to achieve the harmony, the perfect humanity can be approached via the guide of spirit.

At the same period, Humboldt wrote *The Theory of Human Education* (1793). In the book, he expounds the knowledge of human, the system of education functions and the related disciplines at the premise of educational theories. Since then, the interest of Humboldt shifted from the Greek and Roman linguistics and practical science to the researchers and writers themselves, which are the knowledge of the ancient and the humanity of the ancient. Obviously, in terms of goals, Humboldt is different from the other scholars specialized in the research of the Greek and the Roman culture at his time. His research in the ancient culture is targeted at the ultimate aim, the research in humans. As for him,

the knowledge of human, in short ... is the knowledge of essential principles and possible changes principle in the external environment ... It is human-centered. The purpose of humans is to strengthen and enhance the inner power, so they can present the value and eternity of human essence. (Freetner, 2013, p.24)

As the Greek writers describe humans consist of the simplest, the greatest and the most beautiful properties, Humboldt takes the typical Greek nation as the study object and extends to other nations. Therefore, the researches in the property definitely contribute to human education under any social situations and in any times.

The property is the basis of human personalities. In the researches of the Greek, the spirit of the Greek can be conveyed to the researchers, which can integrate with the researchers, creating images of beauty. Thus, the researches in the Greek can ensure the benefit in intelligence and education to the most. (Ibid., p.19)

In 1797, he finished *The Comparative Anthropology*. He points out that “there are always chances to enrich and apply comparative anthropology wherever you are on the travel, at home, busy or leisure. Among all the fields of researches, only the researches in humans accompany us for a lifetime.” (Ibid., p.30) In Humboldt’s view, comparative anthropology concentrates on the individual difference besides the universal human characteristics. It distinguishes the occasional and temporary features from the essential and enduring characters. Then, it explores the essential and enduring as well as the factors of formation. In the end, it assesses the value and predicts its future development. Henceforth, comparative anthropology enables researchers to identify the personalities and offers philosophical guidance. It can judge the value, forecast their future development, and estimate the common effect as a whole to function with others. As a result, in the area of comparative anthropology, it is particularly beneficial to improve and module human education that researchers acquire human intelligence in the field of comparative anthropology. Humboldt expects that

by deepening the meditation and exploration, persistent in the researches in the diversity of people, nations and customs, he can eventually figure out the secrets of the eminent. He dedicates to work out the secret law so each individual can be judged, and each individual can be directed. (Ibid., p.11)

He also proposes that the uniqueness of individual inner strength should be preserved, as it accomplishes the individual as a biological, intellectual and moral creature, distinguished from others. Apart from freedom, human inner strength demands a material that can embody itself and sustains within. The colorful external world plays that role. “Because even the most free and independent human will achieve little from education if he were isolated in a monotonous environment.” (von Humboldt, 1998, p.30). The process of education is the interaction result between the individual inner strength and the various external environments. During this process, the inner strength assimilates and grows. It absorbs the homogeneous, so it is not wise to refuse own uniqueness and accept the alien. “People are content and cozy only when they act out of the personality resulting from nature and surroundings.” (Freetner, 2013, p.32) Therefore, human should embrace freedom, probe the fascinating external world and absorb the coessential strength, which conduces to the inner power to the most harmonious and perfect humanity.

Humboldt defends that the research in the ancient nation, especially the Greek nation, can assure benefits from intelligence and education to the most. The best way to cultivate the brilliant humanity is to study the ancient

Greek. As a result, Humboldt endeavors to promote Greek and Greek culture during the later education reforms. He also strives to extend his achievements in ancient culture and human researches to the culture and education in Germany, winning him the fame as one of the most representative of German classical culture.

3. THE RESEARCH ON LINGUISTICS

In the book, *On the Ancient Culture, Especially the Ancient Greek Culture*, Humboldt discourses the Greek and compares it with modern European languages. He reckons that compared with modern languages, the Greek is an educational asset and its value is manifested by the form and language. People can have a more precise perception of Greek poetry and culture. It is the earliest language of language in Humboldt’s study.

In 1801 Humboldt left Paris. He returned to Tegel Manor and began to write the monograph on the Basque. Since 1802, he was devoted to study Roman culture and language as he was employed in the Holy See. “Each day, I dive into language research until the middle night. I found more and more Greek in Basque.” “I believe I have found the method to take language as the tool to probe the diversity, depth and breadth of the world.” (Ibid., p.14) In 1819, Humboldt completely resigned from the political circle and went back to Tegel Manor. He attends to the constant language and linguistic researches. In 1820, he finished *On the Study of Comparative Linguistics*, which is the initial outcome of his linguistic philosophy reflections. Later, it consists of the introduction to the Javanese research literature, *On the Diversity of Human Language Structures and Their Influence on the Progress of Human Intelligence*. It is regarded as the masterpiece of Humboldt’s linguistic outputs. Humboldt insists that language has an immeasurable effect on perceiving the characteristics of a nation. On the one hand, language reflects the common features of the nation; on the other hand, apart from the individual of the ethnic origin, languages also edify the national property as the most universal approaches. Languages bridge the actions and reactions between the world and humans. Humans can keep each ideal mode as they accept the dual essence of man and the world. Thus, “language is the way of expression, the carrier of human diversity, the stepping stone to connect intelligence and education opportunities.” (Ibid.) It plays prominent role in the development of human spirits.

During this stage, *Humboldt completed on the Mission of the Historian* (1827), the classics worth reading. It involves a fundamental educational principle, which is the relation between learners and culture is similar to the interpretation of history. The inner world and the ideological values of the learners shall be consistent with the intrinsic value of the learnt content. It demands the emotional approaching for each of them.

CONCLUSION

William von Humboldt's field of academic research is extremely extensive. It not only covers not only the areas of the theory of state, human intelligence and linguistics, but also includes folklore, history, aesthetics and literatures. It can be concluded from the analysis above that Humboldt experiences a wide range of researches, shifts his priorities during his lifetime, and his each of his research is distinctive and outstanding. However, all of his researches share the same characteristics. All of them closely link with exploring how to facilitate human development, probing into the purpose, essence, method and access of education. His researches manifest human-oriented education system and theory. It is because of his researches in theory of state and humans that makes him the most suitable candidate for the Prussian education reform led by Stein. In spite of the fact that Humboldt does not create a monograph to illustrate his educational ideas, the various reports on education policies written during his tenure reveal his education methods and policies. They are all in line with his early researches in theory of state. One of the representative reports is *Report on the Departmental Financial Principles to Altenstein*, wrote in May 1810. This report generally adopts the views and claims in *On Boundaries of State Functions*. Other ideas, such as the unity of education and the center position of academy, take a full consideration of human significance. There is indispensable connection

between his education reforms to popularize Greek and Greek culture and his research outcomes in humans and linguistics. His research achievements are more or less linked with the studies of his predecessors and successors. It cannot deny that Humboldt draws the quality of ideologies of his own and ponder over education issues. His research findings contribute to the integrality and unity of education practice. His theories and practice exert a far-reaching influence over German education. He carried out a series of education reforms and exquisite reports establish his reign, which becomes one of the most critical stages of German education. In this sense, Humboldt research achievements in state politics, history, pedagogy and linguistics build on each other as a series. Deservedly, he wins the reputation as one of the founders of modern German education and educational theories.

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