Freedom and Struggle

工蜂：大学青年教师生存实录 [*Worker bees: The survival records of young university teachers*]. 廉思 [Lian, Si] (Ed.). 北京，中国：中信出版社 [Beijing, China: CITIC Press], 2012, 349 pp., ¥38, ISBN: 9787508634661.

Different from more abstract and meticulous theoretical research or logical and rigorous empirical research, *Worker Bees: The Survival Records of Young University Teachers* is unique in that it vividly describes work and life fragments of several young Chinese university teachers on the basis of fieldwork carried out by Professor Lian Si and his research team. This investigation also includes numerous questionnaire surveys and thin statistical analysis. Together the book gives insight into the survival mechanisms of a group of young faculty that has not been given adequate attention in the literature. Actually, rather than saying that the group's material living conditions should arouse society's attention, I would say that their mental states should be of more concern. After perusing this book, readers are likely to have the impression that this group is characterized by spiritual dynamism yet is poor in material possessions, living a somewhat unrealistic utopian or even bourgeois life. The images the book conjured in my mind and thoughts can be summed up in five key words: freedom, individuality, difference, restraint, and struggle. It is from these words that I derived the title of this essay: *Freedom and Struggle*. This may also be an accurate summary of the book's theme, since the author highlighted "freedom and constraint" in the appendix (Lian, 2012, appendix). Scholars in every country in the world live with paradoxes and tensions; one might even say it is a characteristic of this group. There are many different ways of expressing this in the English language literature. For example, this group may be referred to as an "organized anarchy," suggesting that scholars often possess a split or dual loyalty to their organization and their discipline. Ancient Chinese scholars were also distinct from the mainstream. Mencius made the following comment on them: "only scholars can be virtuous without permanent property." In addition to these common characteristics of scholars through the ages and across civilizations, young university scholars in contemporary China are under considerable pressure

and stress from real life issues in the current period, which is sometimes described metaphorically in the following way: “they are flying, but their wings are heavy.”

This essay will now use the following five words — freedom, individuality, difference, constraint, and struggle — to elaborate on the images of young university scholars developed in this book.

Freedom

Freedom is a common pursuit of scholars as well as one of the cornerstones of the Western university system. University teachers engage in forms of knowledge production and dissemination which require basic freedom. University teachers are free to decide what to teach and how to teach, free to choose the direction of their own academic development, and they can even turn a whim into a long-term research direction. Having freedom and leisure, scholars can easily follow their curiosity and explore as yet unknown laws of nature and social development, as discussed by Plato. Therefore, in academic work, mandatory rules externally imposed are inconsistent with the requirements of scholarly work; nor do universal principles, such as “democratic centralism,” apply to the academic field, because academic truth is likely to be found outside mainstream thought. A contemporary young university scholar in China is almost certain to pursue this freedom, but is likely to be subject to considerable restrictions. These include mandatory rules, social pressures, and assessment constraints. There is the requirement to assist senior professors in carrying out their work and the need to cater for students’ interests. There are also utilitarian constraints, such as bars to be passed in order to gain professional titles, publish or perish demands, and the temptations of consultancy work that has financial lure but no academic benefit. Due to such pressures, there is an almost automatic and unconscious loss of freedom. This predicament faces most contemporary scholars in China, and it is one of the concerns this book seeks to address.

Individuality

Individuality is what distinguishes each individual from all others in a collectivity. When free to do so, university teachers who carry out academic work independently tend to show their distinct personalities. At the same time,

individuality is also the essential quality of a scholar. Innovative behavior arises when a scholar's individuality and knowledge interact. Around two thousand years ago, Confucius made the following critical comment: "in the old days people studied for the sake of self-improvement; nowadays they study in order to impress other people." Confucius was not talking about individuality so much as the idea that "self-improvement" and "individuality" may have different emphases but are equally valuable in terms of outcomes. It is, in fact, difficult for us to imagine a scholar without individuality being able to put forward unique views in the current situation of explosive growth in knowledge, and likewise hard to imagine such a scholar possessing the ability to be critical or to innovate. The university can be viewed as a magical place, where scholars with individual personalities and strong academic qualities may generate refreshingly new academic ideas, methods, theories, and technologies at any time. Scholars' individuality and ability to regulate themselves require an environment and system characterized by tolerance; university administrators should allow for the nurturing of people of insight even if someone tends to indulge in self-admiration. Due to their psychological characteristics, young scholars are seldom blinded by prejudice, nor do they adhere to traditional habits; they should be seen as valuable individuals that deserve to be protected. However, a lack of individuality development is probably one of the most worrying phenomena among young university teachers in China today. It is very difficult for them to experience what Zhao Xiaoli, an interviewee in this book, hoped for: "as long as one can be acknowledged for being oneself" (Lian, 2012, p. 138).

Difference

In a group where individuality is encouraged, difference or diversity is a natural result. *The Academic Life: Small Worlds, Different Worlds*, written by American scholar Burton Clark in 1987 about the academic career, illustrates how the academic world is composed of many different disciplines, and how scholars behave quite differently in these diverse communities. Another British scholar, C. P. Snow (1959), expressed the difference between sciences and humanities in terms of "two cultures," suggesting that isolation between them would hinder the development of each. Of course, the concept of difference when applied to young university teachers in China in this book has even richer connotations, some

positive and some negative. From our observation, in China's contemporary higher education system, differences among young scholars not only refer different disciplines, but also disparities across different regions and institutions, both metaphysically and materially. In material terms, there are differences among disciplines resulting from factors such as the market response to different types of degrees and the availability of research funds, individual incomes, achievements, the evaluation system, and development opportunities. While more than 2,000 colleges and universities in China can be classified according to various categories, the differences lie most significantly in the invisible cultural atmosphere, the mentality and the values, in addition to the visible campus construction and facilities.

Constraint

The university is an academic place that advocates freedom, individuality and diversity, but it does not mean that the university can be disorderly. Nothing can be accomplished successfully without norms or standards. In terms of an academic community of "loosely coupled systems" (Weick, 1976), there should still be a certain institutional order or academic pattern despite it being different from that of other social groups such as business firms, governmental bureaus etc. W. Richard Scott (2001) delineated institutions in terms of three forms: rule, norm, and cultural cognition. Rule is formulated by the external authority of the university (usually government) from the top, norm is formed spontaneously by participants from the bottom, and cultural cognition is the effect of the principle of what is "taken for granted" at a subconscious level. Inspecting the historical development of Western universities, it is not difficult to recognize that Western academic institutions typically employ more norms and cultural cognition than rules, as is evident in the American case. For example, the institutional forms of "peer review," "tenure," "senate," "shared governance," and "accreditation" have all taken shape spontaneously within the academic system. These norms were formulated a long time ago, but their effects are still lasting today. By contrast, the contemporary Chinese university has little more than one hundred years of history, and developed in an era of Western cultural transmission to China as well as strong governmental involvement. As a result, Chinese academic institutions are often described accurately as being "top down."

A good example of this would be the government policy implemented in 1999 to massify higher education enrollment in 2010, a goal set as part of an 11-year plan which was achieved in just four years. Chinese universities' objections to the evaluation system imposed to ensure quality in face of this reform result from a sense that governmental involvement is too strong; they are not opposed to the system itself. Since the 1990s, China has implemented a series of action plans for higher education, such as "Project 211," "Key Disciplines," "Changjiang Scholars," "Project 985," "The Thousand Talent Program," and "The 2011 Collaborative Innovation Plan." None of these projects for higher education enhancement were initiated by non-governmental bodies.

There are also administrative problems within universities. For example, quantitative assessments (student numbers, numbers of published papers, research funding levels, and level and number of award-winning research outputs) are over-emphasized in the evaluation of academic titles, while assessments of real level and quality are relatively neglected or difficult to be implemented. The mingling of academic standards and non-academic standards deprives academia of the ideals and purity of motive that should characterize them. In short, there exists an obvious trend towards "managerialism" within the university system. Driven by the policy of "developmentalism," management is guiding academia instead of serving it. Professor Xu Jilin, a scholar who was interviewed by Professor Lian Si and his team, said that in Chinese universities, it is the interaction of elitism and bureaucracy that has led to so many complaints (Lian, 2012, p. 185). How are we to solve those problems? Another interviewee, Professor Shi Yigong from Tsinghua University, made the point that we should not simply copy Western practices; instead, we need to create a culture that favors academic development ourselves (Lian, 2012, p. 218).

Struggle

Tension is produced by the freedom and constraint dynamic, especially when the individuality of the scholar is constrained by rules, and self-discipline is replaced by external control, or the scholar is at a loss to go out in the world or beyond the dimensions of the known world. The scholar who is immersed in tension will spontaneously struggle, trying to get rid of those fetters, and fighting for freedom. From a young scholar's point of view, with the growth of seniority and promotion in status, problems such as title and status can all be solved, and

eventually the scholar will have the chance to operate freely without any risk of going off the rails. However, academic problems in China are not limited to young scholars, so we need to consider the overall ecological situation, beyond them and their specific conditions of life and work. In a situation where some of our current practices conflict with academic ethics and justice, scholars sometimes have to “practice currently what they opposed previously” (Lian, 2012, p. 180). This is an unacceptable pressure on young university scholars, and also the most urgent problem needing to be addressed for all in academia.

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