Brief Discussion of Cultivation and Advancement of Soft Power in Disciplinary and Specialty Construction of China Universities

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Abstract. The soft power of disciplines/specialties means that the discipline/specialty organizations are characterized by the non-materialized and functioning ability in a flexible manner. It is basically recognized that the soft power is composed of discipline/specialty culture and organizational institutions. The factors-driven module of discipline/specialty construction in China in the last several decades unilaterally paid close attention to the discipline/specialty hard power indexes and ignored the cultivation of discipline/specialty soft power, thus not resulting in the radical advancement of knowledge production capacity of discipline/specialty organizations. To build first-class disciplines/specialties is to emphatically hoist discipline/specialty organizational level and foster discipline/specialty soft power to offer the inside motivation for the comprehensive reform of disciplines/specialties.

Introduction

At the beginning of “The 13th Five-Year”, the Chinese and Shaanxi Provincial governments put forward the construction plans of “The Double First-Class” (First-class Universities, First-class Disciplines) and “The Four First-Class” (First-class Universities, First-class Disciplines, First-class Colleges and First-class Specialties) respectively, so as to elevate the comprehensive strength and international competitiveness of China higher education. This has become the strategic objective and the significant measure of China higher education to quicken its pace to catch up and be greatly developed. It is well known that the level of disciplines/specialties determine that of a university and the keys to constructing a first-class university is to build up the first-class disciplines and first-class specialties whose constructions must be of the new concepts and ideas. For a long time, the explicit output indexes such as projects, articles and talent cultivation, etc., have been prone to be regarded as the basis for evaluation in the construction process of disciplines/specialties and the increase of discipline/specialty knowledge outputs is brought along merely through the factor inputs in the construction. Can such module be adaptable to the new goal of first-class discipline/specialty construction? At the start of first-class discipline/specialty construction, it is essential to pay close attention to the problems above, which are able to be inspired with soft power theories developed by Joseph Nye.

What is Soft Power in Disciplines/Specialties?

In the late 1980s, Professor Joseph Nye of Harvard University firstly presented the concepts of soft power which stated the soft power was essentially a power, featured by “an ability to make anybody else act on one’s own will through the attraction rather than forcing”. “Hard Power” primarily relies upon enticement and threat whereas “Soft Power” is principally the thought attraction or the flexible power of system in terms of the force utilization. Since the concepts agree
with the ideology of “hardness with softness, conquering the unyielding with the yielding” of the Chinese traditional culture, it is widely recognized from the folks to officials in China and endowed more rich connotation. For instance, Joseph Nye initially referred to the soft power of national level, nevertheless the related domestic researches have further derived into the enterprises’ soft power, municipal soft power and universities’ soft power[1,2]. In the meanwhile, the connotation of soft power originally dealt with the foreign influential force of a nation, but the domestic studies have extended it to the cohesive force and centripetal force inside an organization[3]. To sum up, the generalized soft power is mainly characterized by the ability to function in the non-materialized and flexible manner by the organization.

The soft power of disciplines/specialties is derived from the concept of soft power in broad sense[4,5]. The discipline/specialty organizations are thought to be as the very basic academic and teaching organizations which directly assume such profession as the talent cultivation of universities. The explicit strength and level manifested by disciplines/specialties in knowledge production reflect their hard power, characterized by the team structure and scale, the quantity and level, construction achievements, the platform conditions and level of disciplines/specialties. Accordingly, the soft power of disciplines/specialties consists of the non-materialized factors deciding the strength of disciplines/specialties, which are rarely invisible and quantifying. Joseph Nye pointed out in discussing the source of national soft power: “The soft power of a country is chiefly dependent on three essential resources: its culture playing a role in which they are of attraction to others, its political values paying a role in which they abide by these values at home and abroad and its foreign policies paying a role in which they are known as the legitimate and moral authority[6]. Hence one can see that the basis of soft power constitution lies in the ideology and culture as the soft power of disciplines/specialties does. On the basis of characteristics of disciplines/specialties themselves, the soft power of disciplines/specialties is made up of culture and institutions where the culture of disciplines/specialties refers to the fundamental concepts and value outlook shared by the members inside teaching & research teams. In reality, for such disciplines/specialties with a clear organizational culture, the team members often possess a stronger sense of belonging and closer connections. That is, the culture of disciplines/specialties is a conceptual foundation promoting the degree of discipline/specialty organizations. In other words, if the discipline/specialty culture exists in form, the teaching & scientific research system presents as the concrete individual behavior rule and organizational operation model. As an academic and teaching organization, the relations among team members of disciplines/specialties embody the stronger democracy, thus the organizational institutions mostly perform the established informal rule among the team members. On the other hand, the organizational institutions of disciplines/specialties clearly define the internal operational style, the relational model, and rules & methods among the members. Whether the organizational system of disciplines/specialties is complete or not directly reflects the level of teaching & scientific research, and then affecting the knowledge output capability of discipline/specialty organizations, which is an embodiment of discipline/specialty’s soft power. The soft power of teaching and scientific research based upon the organizational culture and system is internally represented as a cohesive force, being conducive to the centripetal force and sense of belonging among the members, and integrating the scholar group who should have been loose into the high efficient knowledge labor organization; simultaneously it is externally presented as the influential force, i.e., the core competence which is difficult to be coped and imitated in the inter-disciplinary and specialty competition, and guaranteeing a long-time and sustainable knowledge output capacity for organizations of disciplines/specialties.

Why is Soft Power Attached Importance to First-Class Discipline/Specialty Construction?

Prior to the strategic aim of “Four First-Class” launched by Shaanxi, the discipline/specialty construction has been referred to be as one of the central tasks to the colleges and universities’ management and development. For this reason, all the universities claim to take the disciplinary construction for “head”, “main line” or “gripper” in order to push up specialty construction and talent cultivation level. Therefore, a number of policies on discipline/specialty construction were
formulated from the central government to local one. When the past discipline/specialty construction practice is looked back, it is found out that whether it is the authorities at all levels or the university itself, such general phenomena exist as the hard power of discipline/specialty is emphasized and the discipline/specialty soft power is underestimated. This one-sidedness leads to more investment in discipline/specialty construction, but less construction of culture and system. It is well accepted that condensing the areas of disciplines/specialties, constructing teaching team and improving infrastructure conditions all center on human, finance and material. In the light of it, the basic thoughts of the key disciplines and characteristic specialty construction at all levels would focus on the investment in the components of discipline/specialty construction areas, teaching team and infrastructure condition construction to boost the improvement of discipline/specialty construction level. Correspondingly, such explicit factors as talent team, platform condition, academic output and exchange are focused on. There is no denying that the discipline/specialty construction over the years has greatly advanced the rapid development of disciplines/specialties of China universities, thus promoting the level of China universities as a whole. However, this module of discipline/specialty construction, which is too much reliance on factors-driven does have occurred some problems. In other words, the development model that the factors-driven is concentrated can indeed play an immediate effect over a period, but not sustainable. The shortcomings of factors-driven in discipline/specialty construction are lower resource utilization efficiency and insufficient internal motive force of self-development. At present, some other problems resulted from the previous module have emerged. For instance, the experts and leading personnel introduced for discipline/specialty construction merely become a “symbol” to obtain the resources at universities and are not really integrated into knowledge production activities; the excessive investment and redundant construction in disciplines/specialties practically abate the true utilization efficiency of discipline/specialty construction resources; the productive articles and projects in discipline/specialty construction seem to be presented a prosperity in number, in fact, are rarely the major achievements with creativity and breakthrough. These phenomena reveal that should the hard power of disciplines/specialties be unilaterally over-estimated and construction module of discipline/specialty soft power be neglected, the promotion of knowledge production capacity of discipline/specialty organization cannot be basically enhanced. In view of the aforementioned problems, the keys to constructing the first-class disciplines and the first-class specialties are to shift the module from extensive expansion to intensive development and promote the extensive development with connotative improvement, and furnish an internal motive force for discipline/specialty development with the cultivation of discipline/specialty soft power in the context of first-class discipline/specialty.

How to Foster Discipline/Specialty Soft Power?

In view of the connotation of discipline/specialty soft power, fostering discipline/specialty soft power is virtually to hoist the internal cohesive force of discipline/specialty organizations. As a result, the team members intend to move towards a close collaboration from a loose connection, hence pushing up the foreign competitiveness and influential impact. In the background to first-class disciplines/specialties, the following aspects need stressing, combined with the present status of development of discipline/specialty organization at China universities:

First, Define a Common and Clear Mission on Disciplines/Specialties. It is a common phenomenon that there is the ambiguous or even deficient discipline/specialty mission in the construction of disciplines/specialties of China universities. The temporary relationship among the members of disciplines/specialties is established every time the projects are applied or the resources need to be acquired for many times. In construction period, the main body of constructing disciplines/specialties at all levels simply raises the medium and short-term goals of discipline/specialty construction which often concentrate on “use” level and are usually discrete. Moreover, generally speaking, the mission of disciplines/specialties is vague while the consciousness on the mission of discipline/specialty members is not strong enough, therefore, the cohesion of discipline/specialty organizations is weak. The mission of disciplines/specialties should
elucidate the objective of disciplines/specialties, define the boundaries of academic and teaching activities and reflect the position of discipline/specialty characteristics. The mission is the evidence and border of all the academic and teaching activities inside disciplines/specialties and is the goal a discipline and a specialty bears and pursues as well[7]. The mission of disciplines/specialties unifies direction for academic and teaching activities, is able to effectively intensify the components of other disciplines/specialties and plays a cohesive part in the discipline/specialty members. In addition, discipline/specialty mission embodies the vision of discipline/specialty organizational development and gives an impetus to the members inside discipline/specialty organizations. Meanwhile it also provides an evidence for the HR configuration of academic and teaching activities and milestone development plans of discipline/specialty organizations. Besides, from the perspective of strategy to construct the first-class disciplines/specialties, the infiniteness of scientific development reckons that any discipline/specialty has many directions in development; any discipline/specialty organizations fail to strive for the world-class in all the discipline/specialty areas. The distinction of discipline/specialty mission will be helpful to discipline/specialty organizations to be ranked into the top class list with the breakthrough of points.

Second, Condense and Inherit Positive Discipline/Specialty Spirits. Discipline/specialty soft power undoubtedly appears in the spiritual outlook of discipline/specialty members. The mature discipline/specialty organizations at large form the spiritual tradition with discipline/specialty characteristics, some of which appear in discipline/specialty spirit with explicit discipline/specialty identity & marks. The mature discipline/specialty spirit & culture are generally of such common features as health, unity & justice and truth-upholding, which surely strengthens the cohesive force of disciplinary & teachers’ team, improves the human relations among the organizational members and refrains these behaviors to violate academic morality and scientific spirit. In such academic and teaching organizations as disciplines/specialties, the flexible systems inclusive of organizational culture are the primary means to adjust the relations among the discipline/specialty members. In the construction of first-class disciplines and first-class specialties, it is very necessary to primarily steer the leaders of disciplines/specialties to pay much attention to the condensing of discipline/specialty essences in that the leaders of disciplines/specialties are often the advocators and practitioners and would choose those who are compatible with discipline/specialty spirit as their discipline/specialty members in addition that they can infect the teaching/research members through earnestly practising what one advocates in the daily routine.

Third, Perfect Internal System inside Disciplines/Specialties. In line with the organizational principle, the extent to which the organizational members are subjected and conducted reflects the organizational standardization; setting up the internal systems is even deemed as the leading marks of organizational generation. The soft power theories stated that two factors, i.e., system and culture, are thought as the critical elements of the inter-organizational competitiveness. Similarly, the internal system construction of disciplines/specialties is the vital links to achieve the materialization of discipline/specialty and guarantee the team’s knowledge production activities of discipline/specialty organizations. In constituting the components of discipline/specialty soft power, discipline/specialty institutions, a concrete embodiment of discipline/specialty spirit, provides a guarantee of discipline/specialty mission. The contents of discipline/specialty institutions have a wide coverage, such as the collaboration of scientific research, academic activity, bonus-penalty, distribution, public service, which are all the important aspects of discipline/specialty system’s construction. The sound internal system of disciplines/specialties is the foundation of steady operation for discipline/specialty organizations. The mature internal system of disciplines/specialties possesses higher normalization. It is also proved that the style of leadership for discipline/specialty leaders will play an important part in the construction and perfection of discipline/specialty system. For this reason, in the construction of first-class disciplines/specialties, the discipline/specialty leaders should be firstly piloted to attention the discipline/specialty organizations and corresponding institutions to cut down the organizational cost of disciplines/specialties and the dependence on people in discipline/specialty development.
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