

Exploring Multiple Pathways for Cultivating Interdisciplinary Talents in Foreign-language Majors Under the New Liberal Arts Initiative

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ABSTRACT

The New Liberal Arts initiative is driving a profound transformation in foreign language education, shifting its focus from language skills alone to fostering interdisciplinary talents. This paper constructs a four-dimensional theoretical framework of “Concepts–Knowledge–Competence–Goals” for developing composite talent in foreign-language programs. Based on case studies of institutions like Peking University, Zhejiang University, and Shanghai International Studies University, we distill four distinctive development pathways: “Foreign Languages + Area Studies” serving national strategies, “Foreign Languages + Digital-Intelligence Technologies” responding to technological change, “Foreign Languages + Industry Sectors” aligning with industry needs, and “Foreign Languages + Major Scientific Issues” targeting scientific frontiers. Collectively, these pathways advance the foreign-language discipline from a supporting role to core problem-solving, and help the educational landscape evolve from a one-size-fits-all model to differentiated excellence. The findings offer valuable guidance for building a foreign-language education system with Chinese characteristics.

Keywords: New Liberal Arts, Interdisciplinary talent, Foreign-language majors, Cultivation pathways.

1. INTRODUCTION

Entering the 21st century, the global landscape has undergone profound shifts amid a new wave of technological and industrial transformation, placing higher demands on the knowledge base, competence profile, and global competence of China’s high-caliber talent. To respond proactively to these imperatives, the CPC Central Committee proposed developing the “New Liberal Arts” in August 2018; together with New Engineering, New Medicine and New Agriculture, it constitutes the “Four New”, which are leading reform in Chinese higher education. In November 2020, the National Conference on New Liberal Arts issued the Declaration on Building the New Liberal Arts. In April 2021, during a visit to Tsinghua University, General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized leveraging disciplinary integration as a “catalyst”, strengthening fundamental disciplines, breaking down disciplinary barriers, advancing the “Four New” initiative toward the scientific frontier and key areas, accelerating the cultivation of urgently

needed talent, and enhancing the capacity for original innovation. The Outline of the Plan for the Construction of China into an Education Powerhouse (2024-2035) further calls for deepening the development of new Engineering, New Medicine, New Agriculture, and the New Liberal Arts.

At its core, the New Liberal Arts initiative seeks to transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries by fostering science–humanities integration and humanities–technology convergence, thereby recasting educational philosophy, research paradigms, and talent-development models. This repositioning allows the humanities and social sciences to engage national strategies and complex global issues more effectively and to offer China’s approaches and insights. Against this backdrop, foreign-language and literature studies—a major field within the humanities and social sciences and a bridge for civilizational exchange—requires especially urgent reform.

For a long time, despite notable progress in training foreign-language talent in China, the limitations of the traditional model have become increasingly apparent in light of the New Liberal Arts agenda. First, training has long over-privileged language skills—placing skills over substance—leaving students with a single-track knowledge base, insufficient humanistic grounding, and a limited interdisciplinary perspective. Second, a persistent mismatch with rapidly changing societal and industry needs means that graduates often struggle to apply what they have learned in practice across domains such as economics, science and technology, and law. Such single-track, homogenized training is ill-suited to the era of globalization and digital transformation, which demands high-caliber, interdisciplinary foreign-language talent. It is therefore urgent to break down disciplinary barriers, foster cross-field integration in foreign-language studies, and develop talent capable of participating in global governance, advancing science and technology, and promoting civilizational exchange and mutual learning.

Against this backdrop, and within the strategic agenda of the New Liberal Arts initiative, this study systematically examines the diverse practices of cultivating interdisciplinary foreign-language talent across Chinese universities, maps the current practice landscape of foreign-language education reform in China, and identifies the salient models and their contexts of applicability. By presenting a portfolio of approaches, the study offers actionable guidance for differentiated reform across institution types, enabling universities to leverage their missions and resource endowments to chart distinctive pathways of development.

2. POSITIONING AND ORIENTATION OF NEW LIBERAL ARTS CONSTRUCTION

The New Liberal Arts initiative is not a cosmetic patch to the traditional liberal arts but a profound paradigm shift. At its core is a problem-driven orientation that requires the foreign-language discipline to address real issues at the intersections of national strategy, societal development, and disciplinary frontiers, achieving innovation through interdisciplinary perspectives and methods. This reorientation compels a thorough renewal of the discipline's ecosystem, extending reform to such key facets as “disciplinary classification, establishment of interdisciplinary degree programs, student cultivation models,

curriculum design, curriculum implementation, teaching methods, and assessment methods” (Huang, 2003: 15). Within this framework, the New Liberal Arts initiative advances the strategic transformation of foreign-language education along four dimensions:

Conceptual innovation is reflected in a shift from narrow instrumentalism to a deep integration of humanistic orientation and practical functionality. Traditional foreign-language teaching has long over-privileged language skills; by contrast, the New Liberal Arts initiative calls for a return to a humanistic focus that unifies humanistic literacy with real-world application. Foreign-language education is not only language instruction but also the cultivation of students' cross-cultural understanding, critical thinking, and international perspective. By integrating core values and competencies—including patriotic commitment, cultural confidence, and international vision—the initiative aims to develop high-caliber, interdisciplinary talent who not only *know foreign languages* but also *understand China and the wider world*, thereby meeting national strategic needs.

Knowledge reconstruction takes the form of a mapped transition from single-discipline silos to interdisciplinary integration. A standalone disciplinary system can no longer address complex real-world problems; the New Liberal Arts initiative breaks down disciplinary barriers and promotes deep integration between foreign languages and the humanities, sciences, engineering, and medicine. This is not a simple stacking of courses, but a search for coupling points across fields to catalyze a “chemical reaction” in knowledge systems—for example, combining language with history and political science yields Area Studies, while integration with computer science and statistics gives rise to Digital Humanities and Language Intelligence. A three-dimensional, networked knowledge architecture thus enables students to approach and solve complex problems from multiple disciplinary perspectives, addressing system-level challenges such as language services for the Belt and Road Initiative and international communication in global governance.

Competency restructuring establishes a matrix that evolves from singular “language proficiency” to composite competencies. Under the New Liberal Arts framework, the capability model for foreign-language talent expands from a one-dimensional focus on language skills to a matrix encompassing

intercultural communication, critical thinking, digital literacy, and innovation and entrepreneurship. Intercultural communication is the core, requiring not only linguistic mastery but also deep understanding of target cultures and the ability to conduct effective cross-cultural dialogue. Critical thinking is the key enabler, empowering students to analyze, evaluate, and discern information from diverse sources rather than passively accept it. Digital literacy provides the foundational support demanded by the digital era—for example, proficiency with corpus tools, computer-assisted translation, and data visualization. Innovation and entrepreneurship function as an extension, encouraging students to combine linguistic strengths with cross-disciplinary knowledge and pursue new initiatives in foreign-language education, cultural creativity, and international consulting. This competency matrix directly targets graduates' capability gaps in real-world settings, ensuring they can effectively participate in—and deliver on—practical tasks in international business, scientific collaboration, and cultural exchange.

A goal-oriented approach is driving a shift from generalist training to differentiated excellence. The New Liberal Arts initiative steers talent-development objectives away from convergence toward differentiation, encouraging universities to leverage their institutional strengths to cultivate specialized talent and build a healthy ecosystem marked by distinctive profiles. For foreign-language programs, this implies dislocated (complementary) development in which each institution excels on its own terms: comprehensive universities can draw on their humanities heritage to develop academic and think-tank elites; science and engineering institutions should align with their strong disciplines to build distinctive tracks; and industry-focused colleges should deepen the “Foreign Languages + Industry Sectors” model. This goal-oriented diversification is pivotal to the New Liberal Arts and a necessary path to enhancing the overall competitiveness of China’s foreign-language education. Such differentiated development both precisely responds to society’s varied talent needs and provides a fundamental remedy for the homogenization of talent training.

3. DIVERSE UNIVERSITY PRACTICES UNDER THE NEW LIBERAL ARTS INITIATIVE

Guided by the New Liberal Arts initiative, Chinese universities are leveraging their distinctive missions and resource endowments to explore multiple pathways for cultivating interdisciplinary foreign-language talent, thereby shaping a portfolio of distinctive practice models.

3.1 “*Foreign Languages + Area Studies*”: a Deep-integration Pathway Anchored in National Strategy

This pathway aims to serve national strategy by fostering deep integration between the foreign-language discipline and Area Studies. Leveraging strong humanities and social sciences foundations, comprehensive universities have built systematic, interdisciplinary training systems. Peking University has independently established *Country and Region Studies* as a secondary discipline under the first-level discipline of *Foreign Language and Literature*, put in place an integrated B–M–D (bachelor–master–doctoral) training mechanism, and enhanced talent development through an internationalized curriculum and overseas practice platforms.(Ning, 2020) Nankai University has implemented the *Fusion Program of Less Commonly Taught Languages and Humanities & Social Sciences (FAS)*: via a staged training model that pairs LCTL majors (tracks) with HSS coursework, students graduate with both a B.A. and a second degree in a humanities/social-science field, achieving deep knowledge integration. Zhejiang University has launched the *Asian Civilizations Disciplinary Convergence Research Initiative*, which builds a holistic Asian Studies system by organizing a series of frontier research themes. (He, 2021: 9)

Foreign-language universities are leveraging their multilingual strengths to graft language proficiency onto area-studies knowledge systems. Beijing Foreign Studies University, drawing on platforms such as the Beijing Center for Japanese Studies and the Institute of Global Governance, is piloting a “Japanese/English + Area Studies” training model. Shanghai International Studies University, pursuing the goal of “mastering languages, understanding nations, and excelling in fields”, has launched a Eurasian Civilizations Studies Program that integrates linguistics, anthropology, history, and other disciplines;

through close reading of classics, academic training, and fieldwork, the program builds a systematic knowledge architecture—its first graduates have joined organizations such as the International Organization for Migration. Beijing Language and Culture University is advancing Country and Area Studies by pooling strengths in foreign languages, international politics, and management; policy briefs authored by its Arabic program have repeatedly received written remarks from Party and state leaders, and the university is establishing an Experimental Program for Talent Development for the United Nations and International Organizations. Guangdong University of Foreign Studies focuses on talent for international organizations, building an end-to-end “Foreign Languages + International Governance” pipeline; its Innovation Program for International Organizations combines cross-disciplinary coursework with overseas practice, sending graduate students on visiting-study placements and internships at institutions including United Nations Headquarters. Graduates have taken up positions at major international bodies such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

3.2 “Foreign Languages + Digital-Intelligence Technologies”: a Cross-disciplinary Innovation Pathway for the AI era

Facing the opportunities and challenges of the AI era, universities are advancing deep integration between foreign-language studies and digital-intelligence technologies. “The integration of artificial intelligence technology and foreign language teaching is an important approach to New Foreign Languages development.”(He & Wang, 2025: 13) Leveraging their multidisciplinary strengths, comprehensive universities are taking a leading role in combining language competence with technological applications. Zhejiang University has established a “Big Data + Linguistics” innovation team that employs quantitative methods and behavioral/neuroscientific paradigms to investigate the cognitive mechanisms of language; the team has built an international collaborative research platform and produced multiple research outputs. (He, 2021: 9) The School of Foreign Languages at Hunan University has proposed an “intelligence-driven, discipline-integrated, collaboratively co-educational” training philosophy, adding 17 cutting-edge courses such as Natural Language Processing, Language Big-Data Analytics, and R Programming. Drawing on

resources from leading universities and enterprises at home and abroad, it has co-founded a Virtual Teaching & Research Lab for Language Intelligence and built a “language science + artificial intelligence + neuroscience” curriculum, optimizing the credit structure to 40% language core courses, 30% AI-enabled courses, and 30% practice-and-innovation courses. It has also created a five-pronged collaborative practice platform spanning university–industry, international, inter-university, university–research, and social-service dimensions. Fudan University’s School of Foreign Languages and Literatures has spearheaded a dual bachelor’s-degree program in “Foreign Languages + Computer Science”, further promoting cross-disciplinary integration between language studies and information technology.

Foreign-language universities are building systematic, technology-enabled frameworks. Shanghai International Studies University, with a digital-intelligence–driven focus, has integrated corpus resources and linguistics units to establish an Institute of Language Science; it now offers 27 AI-related courses, four of which have been recognized as Shanghai “AI+ Undergraduate Key Courses” and has independently developed the MEAIITLR intelligent teaching platform. Beijing Language and Culture University has created a “Language Intelligence” major under the first-level discipline of Chinese Language and Literature, building a knowledge system that spans computer science and language science. Guangdong University of Foreign Studies has added undergraduate programs in Artificial Intelligence and Big Data Management and Application; leveraging strengths in foreign languages, economics, management, and law, it cultivates “Foreign Languages + Technology” composite talent and has developed the AI Yunfan Interpreting platform to provide targeted, data-driven support for interpreter training.

For universities with strong science-and-engineering profiles, the breakthrough lies in integrating foreign-language studies with their STEM strengths. University of Science and Technology Beijing offers a dual bachelor’s-degree program in “English + Artificial Intelligence” deeply integrating English language and literature with AI technologies; the curriculum spans Digital Humanities, Language Intelligence, and related areas. Southwest Jiaotong University has launched a “Language Intelligence” track featuring courses such as Natural Language Processing and Python

Text Analytics, highlighting a distinctly engineering-enabled approach.

3.3 “Foreign Languages + Industry Sectors”: a Targeted Pathway Aligned with Market Demands

This pathway tightly aligns foreign-language training with sector-specific knowledge to cultivate professionals who can step directly into frontline roles. Industry-focused institutions are deepening integration between foreign languages and their flagship disciplines. University of International Business and Economics has built a dual-degree curriculum in Japanese + Economics and Trade and launched a trilingual innovation cohort in English + International Trade + Less Commonly Taught Languages, developing multilingual talent for commerce and trade. Southwest Jiaotong University offers a track in International Engineering Translation and Language Services, with core courses such as Introduction to International Engineering Management and International Engineering Language Services; by engaging industry experts, establishing internship bases, and undertaking real projects, the program is closely aligned with Belt and Road Initiative infrastructure needs. Leveraging strengths in navigation and shipping, Dalian Maritime University has established the Center for the Foreign-Language Translation of China’s Maritime Heritage to advance research on the international communication and translation of China’s maritime culture; through shared offerings, maritime and shipping-business courses are incorporated into the English major. Dalian Maritime University has also developed specialized textbooks—Fundamentals of Maritime English and Maritime Interpreting—and created five maritime-themed MOOCs, one of which has been recognized as a national first-class course. (Meng, Luo & Zeng, 2022)

In interdisciplinary mechanism innovation, the Russian program at the Communication University of China leverages its top-tier strength in journalism and communication. Using a major-minor model, it encourages students to take a minor in journalism and communication while adding specialized Russian courses and cross-disciplinary offerings, thus delivering an integrated “Russian + Journalism & Communication” pathway. (Xu, 2024)

Guangxi University has launched the “Belt and Road” Dual-Track 1+1+1 International Talent Program, which draws on institutional strengths in civil engineering, agriculture, forestry, and

oceanography. Selected students from the English, Japanese, Vietnamese, and Thai programs join cohort classes that include discipline courses such as *Introduction to Civil Engineering* and *Crop Breeding*, upgrading from a single-track language curriculum to an interdisciplinary knowledge framework. Students also provide language services at platforms such as the China-ASEAN Expo, strengthening professional language proficiency and translation competencies.

3.4 “Foreign Languages + Major Scientific Issues”: a Frontier-oriented, Cross-disciplinary Research Pathway

As the New Liberal Arts initiative deepens, some universities are moving beyond traditional training frameworks by forming interdisciplinary innovation teams that address major national strategies and scientific frontiers, shifting the foreign-language discipline from a supporting role to core problem-solving. At Zhejiang University, the School of Foreign Languages, the College of Computer Science, and an affiliated hospital have jointly launched the “Dual-Brain Initiative”, which investigates communicative behaviors in children with autism. The team integrates linguistic discourse analysis, intelligent analytics from computer science, and clinical diagnostic knowledge from medicine, producing a series of high-level outcomes and convening China’s first high-level forum on discourse studies for special populations, thereby pioneering this emerging interdisciplinary field. (He, 2021: 9) At Nanjing University of Science and Technology, the Key Laboratory of Intelligent Processing and Application of Language Information, housed in the School of Foreign Studies and spanning humanities, science, and engineering, has achieved notable breakthroughs in language-rehabilitation technologies at the interface of linguistics and medicine, providing effective technical support for children with autism and cleft lip and palate.

A common thread across these efforts is that foreign-language scholars are no longer confined to ancillary language services; instead, they serve as core investigators in research design, theory building, and methods innovation, catalyzing the emergence of new cross-disciplinary research areas. While this model is currently concentrated mainly in top-tier research teams and graduate training, it signals an important trend of embedding the foreign-language discipline at the scientific frontier

and offers a forward-looking model for advancing the New Liberal Arts.

4. CONCLUSION

Under the New Liberal Arts initiative, China's foreign-language education is undergoing a profound paradigm shift. By systematically mapping diverse practices in cultivating interdisciplinary foreign-language talent, this study distills four distinctive pathways: "Foreign Languages + Area Studies" oriented to national strategy; "Foreign Languages + Digital-Intelligence Technologies" geared to technological transformation; "Foreign Languages + Industry Sectors" aligned with market demand; and "Foreign Languages + Major Scientific Issues" engaging the scientific frontier. Taken together, these explorations demonstrate universities' differentiated innovation grounded in institutional missions and resource endowments, and they underscore the initiative's vitality in breaking down disciplinary barriers and advancing interdisciplinary integration.

However, the reform of foreign-language education still faces significant challenges. Interdisciplinary integration must avoid becoming a mere hodgepodge, while the development and evaluation mechanisms for multidisciplinary faculty urgently require refinement. Furthermore, the alignment between talent cultivation and societal demands needs to be enhanced. These issues demand focused attention and systematic solutions in subsequent reforms. Moving forward, efforts should concentrate on establishing more open and flexible disciplinary mechanisms, advancing curriculum development from superficial crossovers to substantive integration, and improving evaluation systems that effectively support the cultivation of multidisciplinary talents.

Looking ahead, foreign-language programs should uphold the fundamental task of fostering virtue through education, deeply integrating value formation, knowledge transmission, and competence development. They should assume new responsibilities in serving national strategies, advancing scientific progress, and promoting civilizational exchange and mutual learning. By continually deepening the New Liberal Arts initiative, foreign-language education will make greater contributions to cultivating high-caliber, interdisciplinary, globally oriented talent and to enhancing China's cultural soft power.

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