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General Education and Reading the Classics

Feng Jun^{*}

Excessive specialization makes university education increasingly and alarmingly pragmatic and utilitarian. General education ensures our students obtain a complete overview of the different branches of knowledge as a whole. A university should not be just a trade school or a job-training center, but should expose students to the greatest breadth of knowledge, through which they can develop themselves into independent thinkers and lifelong learners able to adapt to changing circumstances. Undergraduates should follow a general education based curriculum at least for the first two years in college to become a genuinely educated person. The success of general education relies on designing a sound core curriculum, encouraging students to read original works of classics, changing teaching methods and improving education administration. This paper takes Renmin University of China as an example of general education in China, in order to examine the bibliography of classics that today's Chinese students are studying.

As an approach to education, general education is much more than teaching specific courses or skills. Originating from the liberal arts education (and its trivium and quadrivium of academic disciplines) of ancient Rome and the Middle Ages, it thrived during the first half of the 20th century with universities like Columbia, Chicago and Harvard as its greatest proponents. Hong Kong and Taiwan started to promote general education in their higher learning systems during the 1980s and 1990s. China's education reforms (including the education of character and holistic education) since 1993 share many similar attributes with general education.

1. Why is General Education Necessary?

General education is not professional or vocational training. Since the industrial revolution, the boundaries of academic disciplines have become increasingly differentiated driving education to be increasingly pragmatic and utilitarian. Division of labor and hiring decisions are also based on different areas of specialty, reinforcing the fragmentation of the university education system with schools representing disciplines and departments representing specific areas of specialization. A new arrangement is needed to ensure our students obtain a

^{*} Feng Jun, Professor of philosophy, Ph.D., Vice President of Renmin University of China from Feb. 2001 through August 2008; Dean of the Renmin University School of Philosophy from May 2005 through July 2008. His current position is Deputy President of China Executive Leadership Academy, Pudong. Social positions also include, President of All China Society of History of Foreign Philosophy; Vice President of Philosophy Teaching Guidance Committee, Ministry of Education, China; Vice President of China Society of Natural Dialectics; Vice President of China-EU Association, etc. His teaching and research area is western philosophy, with specialization in modern European philosophy. He has published dozens of books and a hundred of papers in the areas of western philosophy studies, comparative studies of philosophy, and higher education administration.

complete overview of the different branches of knowledge as a whole.

Higher learning in China has always considered specialist education a priority. This was especially the case in the 1950s when China overhauled its higher education system based on the former Soviet Union model and created a large number of universities devoted to just one or a few disciplines, for example, ship-building university and automobile university. Students were confined to very narrowly defined discipline boundaries since their first year. The purpose of this design was to train highly specialized technicians to serve economic growth. This policy intention has left an indelible mark on higher education in China. With today's economic transformation and social transition, the negative consequences of this model are becoming increasingly obvious. Too much specialty emphasis ignores the fact that different bodies of knowledge are interrelated and being integrated. University organization structure based on strict distinction of different schools and departments hinders people exchange, knowledge sharing and interdisciplinary collaboration. Excessive specialization also makes university education increasingly and alarmingly pragmatic and utilitarian.

In the late 1920s, in response to the trend in US whereby universities were virtually becoming trade schools, John Erskine and his colleagues at Columbia insisted that, if the great classics of the Western tradition were no longer to be read in Latin and Greek, they should still be read in English as part of a required Core Curriculum. A syllabus was prepared by a group of leading scholars including Mortimer Adler, Jacques Barzun, Irwin Edman, Moses Hadas, Richard McKeon, Lionel Trilling, Mark Van Doren and Raymond Weaver, among others. By 1934 this syllabus had gained sufficient general currency for the American Library Association to publish it for wide use as "Classics of the Western World". Then Adler promoted the "Hundred Great Books" of all time in Chicago, and Robert Hutchins, the President of the University of Chicago labeled it "General Education" (see *Classics for Emerging world* by W. T. de Bary) and promulgated the notion that higher learning should serve as the "brains" of the society instead slave to the job market. He argued that different schools and departments in a university shared the same philosophical and cultural foundation and needed to embrace common education. The 1945 Harvard "Red Book," or *General Education in a Free Society* pointed out in a highly fragmented modern society, students should receive common education representing their "common past", "common present" and "common future".

Given the rapid pace of innovation, highly specialized knowledge acquired at university risks becoming obsolete within just a few years after graduation. Only 50% or less of university graduates actually later work on positions directly related to their area of specialization and most of them tend to change their jobs in a few years. In this context a university should not be just a trade school or a job-training center but should expose students to greatest breadth of knowledge on which they can develop themselves into independent thinkers and lifelong learners able to adapt to the changing circumstances.

Renmin University of China's teaching goal is to make its students "role models for the citizens and pillars of the society." General education is crucial to the attainment of this goal.

The rise of general education in US in the 1920s aimed to counterbalance the excessive emphasis on specialization and the utilitarian trend. In addition to acquire discipline specific skills or knowledge, students are also supposed to develop worldview, life outlook and values, which are all foundational to their future career and well-being. Undergraduates should follow

a general education based curriculum at least for the first two years in college to become a genuinely educated person.

As an integral component of general education, the humanities teach students compassion and sensitivity to other world cultures. Renmin University of China with its strength in social sciences and humanities is particularly aware of the importance of teaching students about China's traditional culture as reflected by its creation of Institute of Confucius Studies, School of Chinese Classics and Research Institute of Chinese Classics at the campus. But the current teaching of Chinese classics is only for a small group of targeted students. The plan is to incorporate it into the curriculum for all students at the university.

A key feature of general education is that it is conducive to innovation and creativity. General education encourages independent and research-oriented learning and creates opportunities for students to do projects and scientific experiments to develop their organizational, expressive and cross-cultural communication skills.

The higher education reform that was initiated in the 1990s paved the way for the gradual introduction of the general approach. A number of China's most prestigious universities have created schools or programs to implement their version of general education.

General education is for all students, but among Chinese universities it is still a widespread practice to prioritize a small number of selected students in the form of advanced or pilot classes. The introduction of general education will also help to address issues of equitable access as part of the higher learning reform.

2. Implementation of General Education

The success of general education relies on designing a sound core curriculum, encouraging students to read original works of classics, changing teaching methods and improving education administration.

To implement general education, the current curriculum must be redesigned in a fundamental way. General courses should be viewed as the core or foundation of the curriculum instead of appetizers to give students lighthearted diversion or shortcuts for them to earn some easy credits. Renmin University of China plans to offer three levels of general courses, including university wide general courses mandatory for all students such as foreign language and sports; program based general courses mandatory respectively for students in each of the five clusters of studies: humanities, law and political science, economics, management and natural sciences; and disciplinary specific general courses mandatory respectively for students in different schools or departments.

Renmin University of China has given serious thought to the design of the general courses, and the preliminary list includes Chinese language and literature, logic and critical thinking, Chinese and western classics and history of the Chinese and western civilization. Special emphasis is placed on Chinese language and literature. China's Ministry of Education has required all universities to offer this course.

The failure of some Chinese universities with respect to general education is often the result of inadequate attention to curriculum design and quality of learning. In their eagerness to implement general education they often offer too many courses, which only overburden

students and distract them from what is most fundamentally important.

Renmin University of China is very careful with how it designs the general education curriculum. The principle is to prioritize and sequence the courses and apply strict criteria for reading materials selection, use of teaching methods, classroom flow and testing of student performance so as not to sacrifice quality for quantity.

Reading classics as an important aspect of general education is an essential way for students to develop common values and a basic knowledge structure. Classics are found not just in literature, history, philosophy but in all branches of social sciences such as law, political science and economics.

In European and North American universities, the materials selected for deep or intensive reading are mainly classics. This partly explains the success of their general education programs. Despite the differences in cultures and education systems, China also needs to require student to read classics in order to deliver general education.

In Europe and North America teachers of general courses are mostly renowned professors in humanities, social sciences and natural sciences recommended by their respective schools or programs. The class is small in size and there is great interaction between teachers and students on topics of common interest. Diverse and effective teaching methods are employed including group discussion, oral presentation and writing essays. General courses are intensive and academically demanding. Renmin University of China is looking at the successful experiences of its western counterparts, especially classroom organization and teaching techniques to better implement general education.

The methods of academic administration also needs to be readjusted accordingly. A panel composed of expert needs to be established for consultation and decision-making. In addition to the already created general education committee, special working groups must be set up to study and decide on course content, teaching and learning criteria, testing and evaluation methods and list of suggested readings. New quality criteria need to be developed including teaching objectives, teaching hours, credits and corresponding workload such as preparation, discussion, assignment and supplementary reading, formats of testing and evaluation. Graduate students can be chosen to work as teaching assistants to help the professor cope with the heavy workload given the large number of students taking general courses. Teaching assistants can organize classroom discussions and score assignments. Academic administration needs to be service oriented to facilitate the learning process, for example, making online course enrollment possible.

3. Impacts of General Education

Disciplinary boundaries will become more porous as a result of improved general education. Some universities have created school of undergraduates for incoming new students in which there is no traditional disciplinary distinction. Students only move into specialized areas of study after they complete the general education in their first one or two years. As greater portion of the curriculum is now general courses, hours for specialty courses will be reduced. To compensate for this, more hands-on opportunities should be created for students in the study of their area of specialization, especially for those applied disciplines to stimulate

independent and self-initiated learning.

The line separating undergraduate and graduate education will also be blurred. General courses are open to all types of students and they can earn credits for their effort whether they are undergraduate or graduate students. Credits earned in general courses as undergraduate students, should be counted in the calculation of graduate credits if they later undertake graduate studies. The plan to develop basic reading lists for the undergraduate and graduate students, respectively, to ensure the consistence and continuity between the two. The implementation of general education also requires the use of graduate students as teaching assistants.

General education also has implications for staffing, faculty performance evaluation and budgeting. Currently staffing is based on the number of master or doctoral programs the different schools or departments have, and resource allocation is based on their number of teachers and students. With the implementation of general education, staffing and resource allocation will be based on how many general courses are contributed or taught by different schools or departments. The method for calculating workload and evaluating faculty performance will change accordingly. Special subsidy will be given to teachers of general courses.

4. Challenges for General Education

Given China's entrenched specialist tradition, the implementation of general education is bound to encounter many challenges.

The biggest resistance might be the old mindset of people working in the higher education system. A large number of professors or even senior administrators still consider a bachelor's education as a preparation for graduate studies and prefer to retain a high degree of specialized courses in the undergraduate curriculum. Some view general education as a meaningless exercise that only uses a new bottle to package the same old wine. Our questionnaire survey shows a marked difference between students and teachers in their openness towards general education. While the students are enthusiastic about the new arrangement, most professors—especially those who are senior and hold high professional titles—still prefer to teach specialized courses.

As many more young people in China have access to higher education than in the past, job market competition becomes more intense. Some parents and employers expect students to learn things that immediately applicable and think general education is too vague to be really useful.

The conventional manner of delivering education is also a major obstacle. Successful general courses require renowned professors, great classroom interaction and intensive reading of original works of classics. But in reality it is difficult to find senior professors willing to teach general courses and classes are often too big for in-depth discussion and interaction. People teaching general classes are mostly junior instructors who are accustomed to teaching introductory courses and often lack the expertise to effectively guide students in their reading of classics.

Lack of teachers is also a major problem. For example to offer Chinese Language and Literature university wide, we would need more than 20 Chinese teachers—far exceeding

the number of what is available in the School of Language and Literature. Changing relevant aspects of the academic administration system to support and facilitate general education is technically difficult as well. The calculation of credits and corresponding workload for general courses, the methods for testing students' learning and the recruitment of qualified and willing teaching assistants, are all challenges facing the successful implementation of a general education program.

5. Conclusion

In constructing its general education system, Renmin University of China needs to learn from the successful experiences and practices of other institutions of higher learning both in China and overseas, and find a model that works best in its own unique context.

The relationship between reform and tradition should be handled carefully. As part of the university's ongoing reform, general education is not about abandoning all aspects of tradition. Time-tested effective practices should be retained. Critical reflection on the successes and mistakes of the past can provide valuable information that feeds into the design of a new general education system.

The implementation of program of general education is a long-term endeavor and must be conducted in a paced and prudent way to avoid unnecessary disruption in the transitional stage. We anticipate that it will take three to five years, or even perhaps longer, for Renmin University of China to put in place a well-developed general education system.

Appendix:

The bibliography of the classics in the courses of general education for undergraduates at Renmin University of China

1. Marxist Classics

Marx: Economic Philosophy Manuscript, 1844

马克思:《1844年经济学哲学手稿》

Marx: Capital

马克思:《资本论》

Marx and Engels: Manifesto of the Communist Party

马克思、恩格斯:《共产党宣言》

2. Chinese Classics

Classic of Poetry, The Book of Songs or The Book of Odes

《诗经》

Confucius: Analects of Confucius

孔子:《论语》

Mencius: Mencius

孟子:《孟子》

Laozi: Dao De Jing (Tao Te Ching)

老子：《道德经》

Zhuangzi: Zhuangzi or Chuang Tzu

庄子：《庄子》

I Ching or Book of Changes, Classic of Changes

《易经》

Sun Wu: The Art of War

孙武：《孙子兵法》

Liu Shen: The Literary, Mind and the Carving of Dragons

刘勰：《文心雕龙》

Guwen Guanzhi, An Anthology of Chinese Classical Prose

《古文观止》

Sima Guang: Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government

司马光：《资治通鉴》

Wu Jing: Essences of the Governance in the Zhenguan Reign (Zhenguan Zhengyao)

吴兢：《贞观政要》

3. The Classics of Philosophy

3.1 Chinese Philosophy Classics

Book of Documents

《尚书》

Classic of Poetry, The Book of Songs or The Book of Ode conserved by family Mao

《毛诗》

I Ching or Book of Changes, Classic of Changes

《易经》

Ethic and Rite

《仪礼》

Rites of Zhou

《周礼》

Record of Rites

《礼记》

Zuo Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals

《春秋左氏传》

Spring and Autumn Annals with Commentary of Gongyang

《春秋公羊传》

Spring and Autumn Annals with Commentary of Guliang

《春秋谷梁传》

Analects of Confucius

《论语》

Mencius

《孟子》

Classic of Filial Piety

《孝经》

The Erya Dictionary

《尔雅》

Ban Gu: Compendium at Temple of White Tiger

班固：《白虎通义》

Laozi, Tao Te Ching

《老子》

Zhuangzi or Chuang Tzu

《庄子》

3.2 Western Philosophy Classics

Plato: Meno

柏拉图：《美诺篇》

Plato: Phaedo

柏拉图：《斐多篇》

Plato: Symposium

柏拉图：《会饮篇》

Plato: Parmenides

柏拉图：《巴门尼德篇》

Plato: Sophist

柏拉图：《智者篇》

Plato: Laws

柏拉图：《法律篇》

Cicero: On the Republic

西塞罗：《国家篇》

Xenophon: Anabasis

色诺芬：《远征记》

Aristotle: Categories

亚里士多德：《范畴篇》

Aristotle: Metaphysics

亚里士多德：《形而上学》

Aristotle: Politics

亚里士多德：《政治学》

Kant: The Critique of Pure Reason

康德：《纯粹理性批判》

Hegel: Phenomenology of Mind

黑格尔：《精神现象学》

Heidegger: Being and Time

海德格尔：《存在与时间》

Old Testament

《旧约》

New Testament

《新约》

Augustine: The City of God

奥古斯丁：《上帝之城》

4. Buddhist Classics

Prajnaparamita Sutras or Perfection of Wisdom Sutras

《般若》

Saddharma Pundarika Sutra or The Lotus Sutras

《法华》

Avatamsaka Sutra or Flower Garland Sutras

《华严》

The Diamond Sutra

《金刚经》

Sutra of Forty-two Chapters

《四十二章经》

5. Daoist (Taoist) Classics

Dao De Jing (Tao Te Ching) or Laozi

《道德经》

Nanhua Jing (Zhuangzi or Chuang Tzu)

《南华经》

The Classic of Great Peace

《太平经》

Classic of Yellow Court

《黄庭经》

The Classic of Great Profundity

《大洞真经》

Scripture of Salvation

《度人经》

Texts of Three Sovereigns

《三皇文》

Scripture of the Hidden Talisman Scripture for Joining with Obscurity

《阴符经》

Scripture of Purity and Tranquility

《清静经》

Scripture of Jade Emperor

《玉皇经》

Miraculous Scripture of Seal in Mind

《心印妙经》

Tally to the Book of Changes

《参同契》

Essay on Awakening to the Truth

《悟真篇》

Secret Essentials of the Most High

《无上秘要》

Zhang Junfang: Seven Tablets in a Cloudy Satchel

张君房：《云笈七签》

Pivot of the Dao

《道枢》

6. History Classics:

6.1 Chinese History Classics

Book of the Documents

《尚书》

Spring and Autumn Annals

《春秋》

Zuo Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals

《春秋左氏传》

Strategies of the Warring States

《战国策》

Bamboo Annals

《竹书纪年》

Sima Qian: Records of the Grand Historian

司马迁:《史记》

Chen Shou: Records of the Three Kingdoms

陈寿:《三国志》

Sima Guang: Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government

司马光:《资治通鉴》

Book of Han

《汉书》

Book of the Late Han

《后汉书》

Generality of Historiography

《史通》

The Comprehensive Meaning of Literature and History

《文史通义》

Discourses of the States

《国语》

6.2 Western History

Herodotus: The History of Herodotus

希罗多德:《历史》

Thucydides: History of the Peloponnesian War

修昔底德:《伯罗奔尼撒战争史》

Xenophon: Anabasis

色诺芬:《远征记》

Livius: The History of Rome

李维:《罗马史》

Tacitus: The Germania

塔西佗:《日尔曼尼亚志》

Machiavelli: The Prince

马基亚维里：《君主论》

Engels: The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State

恩格斯：《家庭、私有制和国家的起源》

Engels: The Disintegration of the Feudal Society and the Formation of Nation State

恩格斯：《封建社会的解体和民族国家的形成》

Plato: The Republics

柏拉图：《理想国》

Aristotle: Politics

亚里士多德：《政治学》

Max Weber: The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism

马克斯·韦伯：《新教伦理与资本主义精神》

Marx: Comments on James Mill's "Elements Political Economy"

马克思：《政治经济学批判》

Marx: Capital

马克思：《资本论》

Engels: Dialectics of Nature

恩格斯：《自然辩证法》

Engels: Socialism: Utopian and Scientific

恩格斯：《社会主义从空想到科学的发展》

Engels: Anti-Duhring

恩格斯：《反杜林论》

Marx and Engels: Manifesto of the Communist Party

马克思、恩格斯：《共产党宣言》

Marx and Engels: The Holy Family

马克思、恩格斯：《神圣家族》

Locke: Concerning Civil Government

洛克：《政府论》

Rousseau: A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality

卢梭：《论人类不平等的起源和基础》

Montesquieu: The Spirit of the Laws

孟德斯鸠：《论法的精神》

Lenin: Failure of the Second International

列宁：《第二国际的破产》

Lenin: Awakening of Asian

列宁：《亚洲的觉醒》

Lenin: Civilized European and Barbarian Asian

列宁：《文明的欧洲人和野蛮的亚洲人》

Lenin: State and Revolution

列宁：《战争与革命》

Cambridge History of Modern China

《新编剑桥世界近现代史》

7. Literature

7.1 Chinese Literature

Classic of Poetry, The Book of Songs or The Book of Odes

《诗经》

Songs of the South

《楚辞》

Analects of Confucius

《论语》

Dao De Jing (Tao Te Ching)

《道德经》

Mencius

《孟子》

Mozi

《墨子》

Zhuangzi, or Chuang Tzu

《庄子》

Xunzi

《荀子》

Han Fei Zi

《韩非子》

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Romance of the Western Chamber

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Luo Guanzhong: Romance of the Three Kingdoms

罗贯中：《三国演义》

Shi Naian: Water Margin

施耐庵：《水浒传》

Wu Cheng'en: Journey to the West

吴承恩：《西游记》

Cao Xueqin: Dream of the Red Chamber or Story of the Stone

曹雪芹：《红楼梦》

7.2 Western Literature

Homer: The Illiad

荷马：《伊利亚特》

Sophocles: Oedipus the King

索福克勒斯：《俄狄浦斯王》

Aeschylus: Prometheus Bound

埃斯库罗斯：《被缚的普罗米修斯》

Euripides: Medea

欧里庇得斯：《美狄亚》

Old Testament

《旧约》

New Testament

《新约》

Book of Job

《约伯记》

Dante: The Divine Comedy

但丁：《神曲》

Cervantes: Don Quixote

塞万提斯：《唐吉柯德》

Shakespeare: Hamlet

莎士比亚：《哈姆雷特》

Shakespeare: Othello

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Shakespeare: King Lear

莎士比亚：《李尔王》

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雨果：《巴黎圣母院》

Hugo: Les Miserables

雨果：《悲惨世界》

Stendhal: The Red and the Black

司汤达：《红与黑》

Balzac: Eugenie Grandet

巴尔扎克：《欧叶尼·葛朗台》

Balzac: Father Goriot

巴尔扎克：《高老头》

Tolstoy: Anna Karenina

托尔斯泰：《安娜卡列·尼娜》

Tolstoy: War and Peace

托尔斯泰：《战争与和平》

8. Politics

8.1 Western Politics

Xenophon: Memorabilia

色诺芬：《回忆苏格拉底》

Plato: Apology

柏拉图：《苏格拉底的申辩》

Plato: The Republic

柏拉图：《理想国》

Aristotle: Politics

亚里士多德：《政治学》

Aristotle: The Athenian Constitution

亚里士多德：《雅典政治》

Thomas Aquinas: Summa Theologica

托马斯·阿奎那：《神学大全》

Spinoza: Short Essays on God, Man and His Well-Being

斯宾诺莎：《神、人及其幸福简论》

Locke: Concerning Civil Government

约翰·洛克：《政府论》

Rousseau: The Social Contract

卢梭：《社会契约论》

Rousseau: A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality

卢梭：《论人类不平等的起源和基础》

Rousseau: Emile

卢梭：《爱弥尔：论教育》

Montesquieu: The Spirit of the Law

孟德斯鸠：《论法的精神》

Kant: The Critique of Practical Reason

康德：《实践理性批判》

Hegel: Elements of the Practical Reason

黑格尔：《法哲学原理》

Comte: Discourse on Positive Spirit

孔德：《论实证精神》

Mill: On Liberty

密尔：《论自由》

Mill: Representative Government

密尔：《代议制政府》

Marx and Engels: Manifesto of the Communist Party

马克思、恩格斯：《共产党宣言》

Samuel P. Huntington: The Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of World Order

塞缪尔·亨廷顿：《文明的冲突与世界秩序的重建》

Engels: The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State

恩格斯：《家庭、私有制和国家的起源》

8.2 Chinese Politics

Rites of Zhou

《周礼》

Ethics and Rites

《仪礼》

Record of Rites

《礼记》

9. Law

9.1 Chinese Legal History

The Twenty-Four Books of History

《二十四史》

Tongdian or Comprehensive Institutions

《通典》

Tongzhi or Comprehensive Documentation

《通志》

Annotation and Explanation to Code of Tang Dynasty

《唐律疏义》

9.2 Western Legal History

Code of Hammurabi

《汉穆拉比法典》（巴比伦）

Manu's Rule

《摩奴法典》（印度）

The Napoleonic Code or French Civil Code

《法国民法典》

Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen

《人权宣言》

Weimar Constitution

《魏玛宪法》

Civil Code of Germany

《德国民法典》

10. Economics

Marx and Engels: Manifesto of the Communist Party

马克思、恩格斯：《共产党宣言》

Marx: Capital

马克思：《资本论》

Lenin: Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism

列宁：《帝国主义是资本主义的最高阶段》

Samuelson: Economics

萨缪尔森：《经济学》

Adam Smith: An Inquiry into Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations

亚当·斯密：《国民财富的性质和原因的研究》

John Mill: *The Principles of Political Economy*

约翰·穆勒：《政治经济学原理》

Keynes: *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*

凯恩斯：《就业、利息和货币通论》