Less Politics, More Poetry: China’s Colleges Eye the Liberal Arts

Students participate in an international arts fair held on the campus of United International College, China’s first independent liberal-arts college.

By Mara Hvistendahl

Zhuhai, China

A mandarin silk jacket buttoned over his chest, Philip Webb paces theatrically across the classroom and informs his students they will each have 15 seconds to address the class on a topic—any topic.

One by one, the 10 advanced English students at United International College rise and speak, their giggles giving way to excited outbursts. One reminisces about his hometown. Another discusses a favorite pop star.

This is not the traditional Chinese classroom: the laughs, the spontaneity, the professor shrinking into the background.
S.T. Edmund Kwok is executive vice president of United International College. The college was spared government scrutiny because "everyone thought we would fail," he says.

Climbing exercises help instill independence in young people who grew up sheltered under the one-child policy, says a college official.

Students at United International College do obstacle courses and trust exercises once a semester.

For decades, Chinese universities were mammoth, impersonal institutions in which professors lectured and students dutifully took notes. But United International—China’s first independent liberal-arts college—is just one of many recent efforts by universities across China to remake undergraduate education into a more dynamic, interdisciplinary experience.

The college began as the pet project of Hong Kong educators looking to put their stamp on mainland education. Four years into its existence, it isn't quite an intellectual incubator on the level of small American institutions. But its intimate classes, abundant extracurricular activities, and student body of just 4,000 students have thrust it to the forefront of educational reform.

Projects like it are being encouraged at the highest levels. Leaders in Beijing have long bemoaned the country's lack of patents, modern inventions, and Nobel Prizes. After years of soul-searching about what's missing, they have lately begun advocating changes designed to produce more-creative graduates.
In response, China’s elite universities have introduced small residential colleges for undergraduates. Others have unveiled general-education programs or postponed specialization to the sophomore year, a radical move in a country where most students typically select from among majors like e-commerce and mechanical engineering before ever stepping foot on a campus.

"The content of undergraduate education in China is going to be different in five years," says Leslie Stone, executive director of the Lingnan Foundation, a philanthropy that supports higher-education reform in southern China. "Each institution has really been taking the initiative to develop unique programs."

Advisers from the United States and Hong Kong are helping in the transition, sending faculty, sharing curricula, and in a few cases backing new programs and colleges. But the big question for China is whether liberal education can flourish in an illiberal society.

The changes are "sincere and well intentioned" and "a move in the right direction," says Robert Daly, director of the Institute for Global Chinese Affairs at the University of Maryland at College Park. But, he adds, "There is a social precondition for fostering creativity, and that precondition is freedom."

**Creativity, Within Limits**

United International College's story illustrates the challenges in reforming how Chinese students learn. In 2003 administrators at Hong Kong Baptist University cast about for ways to break into mainland China, whose university system is administered separately from Hong Kong's.

The approach they decided on was hardly revolutionary: a program with an international staff and instruction in English, issuing diplomas bearing the seal of the parent university.

But in China, where campuses are frequently grouped together in "university cities" of tens of thousands of students, the new program's small size and focus on the liberal arts was an anomaly.

The Ministry of Education approved it as a trial project, and the institution's idiosyncrasy meant that officials mostly left it alone. "Everyone thought we would fail," says S.T. Edmund Kwok, who became the college's executive vice president. In 2005, the year the college opened in Zhuhai, a short ferry ride from Hong Kong, it was listed on China's all-important university entrance examination, where students rank their preferred choices. Mr. Kwok hoped for 500 students. He got a little over half that number. Few Chinese high-school seniors knew what the term liberal arts meant.

But change was under way. Central government officials recognized that the Soviet-style curriculum adopted in the 1950s, with its highly specialized majors and emphasis on political doctrine, was no longer relevant.

"Beginning in the 1990s, there were many discussions about how to revise or change the situation," says Xu Hui Xuan, an education professor at the Hong Kong Institute of Education who has studied the reforms.

The government initially tried a top-down approach, she says. Then, deciding creativity could not be imposed from above, officials changed course and let universities develop their own strategies to promote critical thinking.
Into that environment stepped United International College, whose architects used the interest in reform to circumvent political controls.

Administrators scrapped the required political curriculum that at other Chinese universities accounts for as much as one-third of a student's education. In place of courses like "Deng Xiaoping Theory" and "Mao Zedong Thought," administrators developed distribution requirements, asking students to fulfill 54 out of 140 credits with courses outside their majors, an unusually high number for China.

Mr. Kwok, meanwhile, decided the college's mission would also include exposing students to the outside world.

In 2007 the college organized a four-week mountaineering and service trip to Tibet. Staff members dubbed the journey the "Long March," but they laughed about the old Communist term. Their trip was designed to broaden students' experience, not indoctrinate them.

The college newspaper is uncensored, Mr. Kwok says. And he makes an effort to govern openly, publicly apologizing when a recent construction project ran behind schedule. A sign tacked to a bulletin board in the hallway of a classroom building says proudly: "UIC Is Different From Other Mainland Colleges."

But fostering free speech and creativity in students who have spent 13 years in an exam-driven, nationalistic education system is far from easy.

Thomas Kuster, a communications professor at Bethany Lutheran College, which exchanges professors and students with United International College under an agreement with the Minnesota Private College Council, learned that when he spent six weeks organizing a campuswide debate competition at the college last spring.

After Mr. Kuster submitted a list of debate subjects he had used in the United States, he says a professor advised him to cross off topics that involved government policy, suggesting they might make students uncomfortable.

In the end, the students debated issues like how best to care for the elderly.

"I always thought there was something subversive about a liberal-arts education," says Mr. Kuster, "because one of the goals is to liberate people from these preconceived notions they arrive at college with. I'm not sure that is being pursued to the same extent in China."

Many students, however, greet the reforms with enthusiasm.

Zhou Tian, a junior from Hunan province, says she enrolled at United International College after earning a low score on China's entrance examination. She had missed the application deadlines for overseas universities, and she hoped a degree issued in Hong Kong would placate her anxious parents.

Once she arrived, however, she found other reasons to stay, she says. She corralled professors during office hours, a feat that is next to impossible at China's larger institutions, and she indulged a curiosity in Japanese culture and psychology.
"In other universities, we'd have to learn about Chairman Mao, things like that," she says. "Here we have lots of choice and can develop our own interests."

"The most impressive thing," she adds, "is the freedom."

Mr. Kwok maintains that his college is part of an evolution, and that to wait to introduce reforms until China changes its political system would be a mistake.

"This is very special time for mainland China," he says. "People are really waiting for opportunities to open up and equip themselves for something more important. We must give them hope for something better."

**Experimenting Everywhere**

In China today, it has become popular to bemoan the quality of the nation's higher-education system, with its ballooning class size and lackluster instruction. Managers say that many college graduates are unemployable, as they leave university with little useful knowledge and an inability to think for themselves. And, in fact, as many as one-third of recent college graduates are unemployed.

"We've had a large-scale expansion, and teaching quality has suffered," says Gan Yang, dean of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Humanities at Sun Yat-sen University. "Right now many Chinese students are just receivers. When you have a classroom of several hundred people, they just listen to the teacher lecture."

Under his university's general-education curriculum, which focuses on Western and Eastern classics, students now break into small discussion sections led by graduate-student teaching assistants, a novelty in China.

Sun Yat-sen is also one of a handful of elite universities to unveil a small residential college. This fall an inaugural 30 humanities majors enrolled in Boya College, a program inspired in part by the intimate atmosphere of Bard College, where Sun Yat-sen University sent faculty members to observe instruction.

The first semester is spent mastering Latin.

Several elite institutions, including Peking, Zhejiang, and Wuhan Universities, operate similar programs. At Fudan University, all first-year students live in small residential colleges, in an arrangement consciously modeled after Yale's undergraduate program.

Other administrators have tried more radical strategies to encourage critical thinking, rearranging academic calendars to allow for one-month block classes, selecting students without consideration for entrance-examination scores, and introducing programs in subjects once considered anathema to socialist planning, like creative writing.
Although these programs have been strongly influenced by the American model of liberal-arts education, critics point out that they're operating in a radically different political and cultural environment.

"Chinese universities have taken the form of general education, but it may be more difficult for them to change the zeitgeist of education," says Kathryn Mohrman, director of the University Design Consortium at Arizona State University, who studied the Chinese reform process while on a Fulbright grant in Asia. "It's going to be very difficult to turn out more creative people just by having them take a few courses outside their major while in college."

**Sacred Cows**

Whether liberal education can flourish in a system where political indoctrination is considered part of the educational process is a thornier question. Few in China take the required political-study courses seriously. Professors openly acknowledge their lack of relevancy, while students routinely skip them.

But they remain untouchable, a sacred cow at universities where Communist Party secretaries still wield considerable power.

"In these calls for innovation, no one is saying, Therefore, let's not have political study; therefore, let's have open discussion about anything and everything," says Mr. Daly, of the University of Maryland. China, he adds, is "doing everything but the central thing."

China's tentative steps toward openness are on display one afternoon in a general-education class here on Sun Yat-sen University's Zhuhai campus, a few miles down the road from United International College.

Dozens of students fill the lecture room, looking eager and engaged. As Chen Xi, a literature professor, lectures on the 1933 Chinese play *Thunderstorm*, they jab their hands up and shout out questions, not bothering to wait until he finishes.

But Mr. Chen doesn't get into the writer Cao Yu's seesawing political history. After writing historical dramas in the early 1960s indirectly criticizing the Great Leap Forward and the famine it ushered in, Cao Yu was singled out for persecution before finally being "rehabilitated" after the Cultural Revolution. The biography appearing on the projector screen at the front of the room merely lists the embattled writer's published works.

United International College, meanwhile, has received increased attention from local officials. That, say administrators, is a mixed blessing. It has been able to avoid party politics so far, but might not be able to do so for much longer. The Zhuhai city government recently asked Mr. Kwok to open an elementary-and-secondary school using the same educational approach. And in November, the college hosted 11 Fulbright scholars for a conference on liberal education in China.

Now that they are in the spotlight, administrators dread a clash with Party officials, which could mean having to introduce political-study courses.

Reminders of government dogma are everywhere.
Mr. Kwok's ideas about exposing students to the outside world include turning them loose on an obstacle course on a nearby island. The route winds through an abandoned military training camp painted with Communist Party slogans.

"Live for Chairman Mao, Die for Chairman Mao," one says.

And yet the paint on that slogan, like the ideological education it inspired, is fading.