

Can liberal arts thrive in China? One college suggests they can

Despite holding its own at Peking University, Yuanpei College still encounters resistance to its approach, professor says

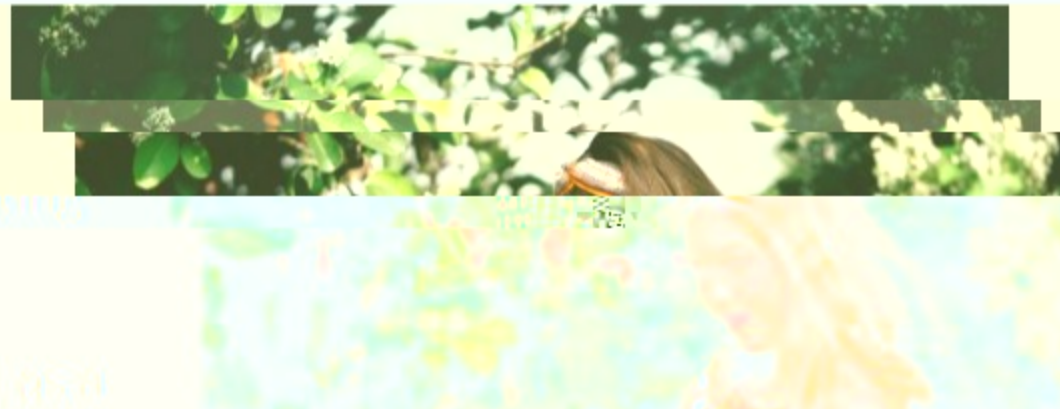
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By Pola Lem

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As a new president takes the helm at Peking University (PKU), its liberal arts college is arguably on the firmest footing in any established university.

Under its founder's planning, in 2001, PKU's liberal arts college was the first in China, experimental programme within China's leading institution, Yuanpei College today is, by many measures, a resounding success: it has grown into a



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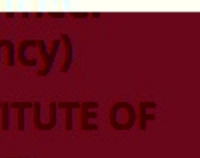
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the best of the best," said Feiyu Sun, its associate dean.

But as the university enters a new era of leadership under Gong Qihuan, Yuanpei will again need to show its worth: With competition among Chinese graduates higher than ever before, convincing many people – even academics – of the value of its liberal arts education is an uphill battle.

"In the past 20 years, most of the presidents of PKU were from the background of science and technology, so we needed to 'earn' our support from the administration. Some

professors don't think that liberal arts is important, but many do not, even today, even

after 20 years," said Professor Sun.

In the past, when pupils spent a year or two in rigorous exam preparation in order to place

them in top universities to study narrowly defined professional subjects, a liberal arts

approach still seems radical.

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By design, the college doesn't have its own professors, a decision that still sometimes puts it in tension with the broader faculty at PKU, some of whom see Yuanpei students as lacking in commitment to a discipline and competing for limited resources with the students inside their own departments.

"This gave us a lot of challenges in the beginning because students and professors from other departments didn't want students from Yuanpei," Professor Sun said.

Since then, the students' performance in their classes has helped shift the dial, convincing reluctant professors "that a student not picking any major in beginning and who could change major without any restriction could perform even better than those students who study professional knowledge from the beginning", said Professor Sun.

He credited Yuanpei's students' drive, which stems from a true interest in the subjects they eventually settle on.

"In China many students come to university to study economics or business because it was their parents' decision. Students study that major but don't like it," he said. "If Yuanpei students choose a major, they choose it by their own will...In Yuanpei, you truly love that major."

Getting to this lecture, though, isn't always easy. Unlike most university students, who pick a department and simply follow the curriculum, Yuanpei students must select their own courses – something most struggle to do.

"Students in Yuanpei are really good, passionate, ambitious [and] know what they're doing, but some come to Yuanpei just because their studies were good in high school, not because they know what they want to pursue in university," Professor Sun said.

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Like its students, the college itself is still finding its way.

When Yuanpei began as a programme in 2001, there was no blueprint for what a Chinese liberal arts college would look like. The programme's directors could not "just borrow the Harvard model" or the ancient Chinese model, noted Professor Sun.

"We needed to find a new Chinese model, combine China's tradition, culture, history [with] modern education...we needed to use our imagination."

This remains Yuanpei's biggest challenge even today, Professor Sun said.

Yuanpei's success has also led to a growing number of Chinese liberal arts colleges, but the quality of these new institutions varies. Some are simply replicating the Yuanpei model, while others are trying to create their own unique identity.

As the Chinese government continues to push for higher education reform, the future of liberal arts colleges in China remains uncertain. Will they continue to struggle for recognition, or will they find a way to thrive?

If you're a liberal arts student in China, you've probably heard professors talk about this question. Professor Sun