

Newsweek

Opting for Creativity

Thanks to developing economies, liberal-arts courses are blooming in the developing world.

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NEWSWEEK

From the magazine issue dated Sep 22, 2008

China's academies are obsessed with engineering and the hard sciences, so the photojournalism master's program that Dalian Medical University introduced three years ago seemed surprising. Run in cooperation with Britain's University of Bolton, the program exposes foreign and Chinese students to fresh ideas in composition and ethics. "Chinese photographers are pretty good, technically," says course leader D.J. Clark, "but this is about getting them to think more critically."

Not long ago, such esoteric pursuits were almost unheard of. It's no coincidence that 17 of 25 Chinese Politburo members are engineers by training. But the boom they've created is granting a growing number of students the luxury to explore arts and design courses long taught in the West but relatively neglected in Asia. Many of these programs still have a pragmatic bent, turning out the industrial designers and advertising illustrators China needs as its industries move from copying foreign products to creating their own. The China Academy of Art now offers courses in arcane specialties like video art. Zhongshan University in Guangzhou has started classes in feminist studies.

This academic evolution is already well underway in Asia's richer states. Singapore's government exhorts students to "have fun" and is expanding academic programs in soft sciences and the media. And the campaign to inspire creativity is expanding into poorer states. In India, for example, students can now study subjects ranging from desktop publishing to fashion technology (designing, manufacturing and marketing clothes). And almost every major Indian city has a few drama schools for aspiring Bollywood performers.

Still, a creative focus remains largely alien to educational bureaucracies. In China the environment has typically been studied as an engineering discipline, ignoring any social, philosophical, even esthetic dimensions. And innovative approaches to education are also hampered by ingrained Confucian attitudes to teaching—respect for authority, hierarchy and rote learning. Zhao Zhongjian, director of the Center for Global Education at East China Normal University, says teachers need to "foster 21st-century talents." That means understanding that creative arts are no longer a frivolous luxury, but essential to achieving a competitive edge.

With Melinda Liu in Beijing and Sudip Mazumdar in New Delhi

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