

Liberal Arts in Asia

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Definitions, History, and Evolving Ideas about liberal arts

A Typical liberal arts chronology recites the Medieval seven liberal arts consisting of the trivium - with Grammar, Dialectic, and Rhetoric; and the Quadrivium, with Arithmetic, Geometry, Music and Astronomy. As an astronomer, I am always glad to know that Astronomy has been an official part of liberal arts for over 1000 years! In the past 200 years, the United States developed an interesting fusion of German research university and English college, resulting in the institutions which we in the US would call "liberal arts" institutions. These US liberal arts institutions can vary in size from Soka University, to Williams College, to Yale University but all have in common an emphasis on the student's capacity to think freely and to possess the skills needed for knowing why they think what they think. This in turn empowers them and helps them be "free" - the "liberal" in liberal arts.

Robert Pippin, in his *Aims of Education* address at the U. Of Chicago¹ described liberal arts as "knowledge for its own sake" and emphasized the "liberality of mind" and the ways that liberal arts provide opportunities to expand intellectual processes to know how scientists, poets, sociologists and others interpret the world, and from these explorations to develop one's own interpretation. Pippin also described liberal arts in terms of its opposite - "that liberal arts is not just dogmatism or prejudice, but also any kind of over-specialized technical instruction or vocationalism - as opposed to a devotion to inquiry about the good or best life or to the value of knowledge itself for its own sake." He emphasized that an essential part of liberal arts is to constantly test one's assumptions - through argument and writing - to know why one thinks the way one does - which is an essential underpinning of a truly free will, another definition of "liberal" in liberal arts.

Some may characterize "liberal arts" as an "uniquely American" form of education, as did Steven Koblik, former President of Reed College, in his book of the same name². However, the history of liberal arts includes an even longer chronology with its own independent development over the centuries in Asia. As Bill Kirby and Marijk van Der Wende state in the opening chapter in their book *Experiences in Liberal Arts and Science Education from America, Europe and Asia*:

¹ Pippin, 2000, Address on "Liberation and the Liberal Arts" at U. Chicago, accessed at <https://aims.uchicago.edu/page/2000-robert-pippin>

² Koblik, S., and Graubard, S., 2000, *Distinctively American – The Residential Liberal Arts Colleges*, now reissued as an e-book accessible at <https://www-taylorfrancis-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/books/9781351522076>

“The debate on these issues goes back minimally to those of the nineteenth century between proponents of the Humboldtian ideal of Bildung (the education of the whole person) as distinct from Übung (more practical training), differences that are phrased differently across the world—in China, for example, as the distinction between a broad conception of jiaoyu 教育 and a narrower, repetitive one of xunlian 训练.”³

Pericles Lewis, the founding president of Yale-NUS College in Singapore, noted that the traditions within Buddhist, Confucian, Daoist, Hindu, and other Asian philosophies train students to have “great spirit, compassion, intellectual agility, and virtue.” According to Lewis, “Mencius taught that compassion is the root of all human development and achievement.” He goes on to quote “the mind’s feeling of pity and compassion is the beginning of humaneness (*res*); the mind’s feeling of shame and aversion is the beginning of rightness (*yi*); the mind’s feeling of modesty and compliance is the beginning of propriety; and the mind’s sense of right and wrong is the beginning of wisdom.”⁴ Li Cao, from Tsinghua University in Beijing, recounts the long tradition within Chinese education for cultivating “cultivate virtue,” which we in the West might interpret as Liberal Arts. He recounts that:

“The Book of Changes (yijing 易经) declares in its opening paragraph, “we study astronomy in order to detect time variation; we attend to the humanities in order to enlighten the world.” The Great Learning (daxue 大学) states, “the way of great learning lies in illuminating one’s virtue, loving the people, and abiding by the highest good” and “those who wish to illuminate virtue should cultivate themselves first before putting the family, the state and the whole world in order.” Zhuxi (朱熹), the renowned neo-Confucian scholar in the Southern Song Dynasty, preached five ways of learning: “A gentleman should study extensively, inquire prudently, think carefully, distinguish clearly, and practice earnestly”. Learning to cultivate one’s character and make ethical commitments to society became the central purpose of education in Chinese culture.”⁵

Within India, the great Nalanda University was founded over 1500 years ago as a center of Buddhist scholarship, and was the largest university in the world by the year 670, before any of the major universities in Europe existed. Nalanda housed an enormous library, extensive classroom complexes, and provided housing for as many as 10,000 students and 2,000 faculty and visiting scholars, along with meditation halls. The scholars to Nalanda came from all over the world, including China, Japan, Korea, Tibet, Indonesia, and Turkey, during a period several centuries before the first European universities were founded.

³ Kirby, W.C., and van der Wende, M., 2015, *Experiences in Liberal Arts and Science Education from America, Europe and Asia – A Dialogue Across Continents*, Palgrave:New York, p. 2.

⁴ Lewis, P., and Rupp, K., 2015, “Liberal Education in Asia: Trends, Challenges, and Opportunities,” *New Global Studies*, 9(3), 245-266.

⁵ Cao, L., in Kirby, W.C., and van der Wende, M., 2015, *Experiences in Liberal Arts and Science Education from America, Europe and Asia – A Dialogue Across Continents*, Palgrave:New York, p. 33.

During the late 20th century much of the US chronology of liberal arts centered on controversies regarding curriculum, and the need for more inclusion and awareness of non-Western cultures, as well as an emerging and urgent need for greater involvement from previously marginalised communities of colour and discussions of more diversity. Patti McGill Peterson, from the American Council on Education, has written about the history and evolution of liberal arts in the late 20th century, and how the definitions of liberal arts both in the US and abroad evolved to challenge assumptions from past epochs of higher education. In the US, the late 1980's sparked what might be called a "culture war" in which institutions moved away from core curriculum programs that featured exclusively Western texts. While the compromises in curriculum did not satisfy everyone, they did broaden the notion of core curriculum to be more inclusive of women, authors from non-Western regions, and to also validate the importance of Asian and other non-western classic works as a central part of a shared global intellectual tradition. As Peterson puts it, "the end result was a broader canon of knowledge as the keystone of general education program" which is "encouraging broad cultural engagement and a wide range of educational activities."⁶ Meanwhile, across the world, various countries were emerging from post-colonial educational systems and seeking new models to replace outmoded, overspecialized models.

Emerging from both Asian and US universities was an awareness of the increasing globalisation of economy and culture and a need for universities to provide a more "cosmopolitan" approach to liberal arts. This idea of cosmopolitanism is one that was expressed well by Nussbaum, who in a 1997 piece tied the roots of cosmopolitanism to early Greek and Roman philosophers, where the notion of being a "citizen of the world" can be found in the speeches of Diogenes, Cicero, and Stoic philosophers such as Marcus Aurelius. Nussbaum argues that the project of expanding liberal arts to include global perspectives enables us to discern the "essential features of human personhood that transcend national boundaries" which ultimately will strengthen our sense of identity within a nation as it embodies our national unity through practicing the "moral ideals of justice and equality" and by recognizing the primacy of what we share as "rational and mutually dependent human beings" regardless of our national origins.⁷

Asian liberal arts

With this recognition of the value of more global perspectives from both US and Asian colleges and universities, a number of new programs in general education and liberal arts began to be developed in Singapore, in China and Japan, as well as India. I will highlight just a few of them, which represent programs established (like SUA) in the current century, and also who embody new models for liberal arts that promise to improve the education and development of Asian countries as well as the educational models within US institutions.

⁶ Peterson, P., 2012, *Confronting Challenges to the Liberal Arts Curriculum – Perspectives of Developing and Transitioning Countries*, Routledge:New York, p. 8.

⁷ Nussbaum, 1994, "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism," Boston Review, October/November, accessed at <http://bostonreview.net/martha-nussbaum-patriotism-and-cosmopolitanism>.

China

In China, Yuanpei College at Peking University, the Fudan College at Fudan University, Boya College at Sun Yat-sen University and Xinya College of Tsinghua University formed pioneering efforts for Chinese General Education in the middle and late 20th century. Each of these were what we might call “University Colleges” and featured some models of general education. Hong Kong’s Lingnan University, established in the early 20th century, shared a president (Charles K. Edmunds) and many of the same liberal arts ideals with Pomona College. More recent initiatives include the ambitious HKU general education program (made possible by a 2010 Hong Kong educational reform adding a fourth year to bachelor’s programs HKU) and the Chinese University of Hong Kong curriculum. CUHK features courses such as - “In Dialog with Humanity” (featuring works from Plato, Confucius along with excerpts from the Bible and the Koran and political philosophers from East and West) and “In Dialog with Nature” which includes readings from a history of Western and Chinese science.⁸ Hong Kong also has a number of interesting residential liberal arts programs such as the New Asia College at CUHK, founded in 1949, as an “educational institution which combines the essence of the scholarship of the Song and Ming academies and the tutorial system of Western universities. With humanism as its basis, the College also aimed to facilitate cultural exchanges between East and West and to promote peace and well-being of the human race.”⁹

A new liberal arts college in China, Duke-Kunshan University, is slated to open next fall. This program combines the talents of faculty from China and the US to create a new kind of institution that fosters “rooted globalism.” The notion of rooted globalism is DKU’s contribution to global citizenship, and is “to cultivate informed and engaged citizens who are knowledgeable about each other’s histories, traditions of thought and affiliations; and skilled in navigating among local, national and global identities and commitments.” DKU’s curriculum is formed around seven “animating principles” that include “independence and creativity, collaborative problem-solving, lucid communication, research and practice, wise leadership, and a purposeful life.” The DKU calendar features an interesting 4-term system with two “mini-block” courses taken at a time, which enables for full-day courses within each of the four terms. The university will include 2000 students and 200 faculty and has just opened with 265 students during Fall of 2018.¹⁰

Japan

In Japan, the International Christian University (ICU), founded in 1949, has offered liberal arts curriculum and courses for decades, and additional liberal arts programs at Waseda, Tokyo and Soka universities have since been developed, building on the increasing interest in liberal arts in

⁸ CUHK General Education web site, accessed at <https://www.cuhk.edu.hk/334/english/university-core/general-education.html>

⁹ CUHK New Asia College – History website accessed at: <http://www.na.cuhk.edu.hk/en-us/aboutnewasia/history.aspx>

¹⁰ Pickus, N., during presentation at SUA “Globalizing the Liberal Arts” conference, June 2018, <http://www.soka.edu/GLA>.

Asia. In Japan, Waseda University launched a School of International Liberal Studies in 2004, and the University of Tokyo reorganized its Faculty of Arts and Sciences in 2011 to “promote thinking across disciplinary boundaries.” Additional programs in Japan include a program in Liberal Arts at Sophia University, a new Akita International University dedicated to “well-rounded humanities education,”¹¹ and Soka University of Japan, which has a new Faculty of Liberal Arts. It is important to also note within this 21st century also comes the establishment of our Soka University of America campus here in Aliso Viejo in 2001, and which is dedicated to “developing a steady stream of global citizens committed to living a contributive life” and which is currently ranked number 22 among US liberal arts colleges by USNEWS. Soka University of America, while an American liberal arts university, provides a unique synthesis of interdisciplinary ideas in its Core and GE curriculum, and studies works from philosophy of China, India and Greece in the Core I course, and eastern and western thinkers in its Core II and Modes of Inquiry courses.

Singapore

Singapore took an early interest in liberal arts programs and began with a new GE curriculum in 1998 and a liberal arts residential program known as the University Scholars program in the late 2002. The NUS Core Curriculum was modeled after the Core Curriculum at US institutions such as Harvard University. The development of the Core Curriculum included several visits from US academics during the 1990s and 2000s to provide input into the design of the curriculum such as the visit by Harvard’s Henry Rosovsky in 2001. Within the NUS Core Curriculum are learning goals that include the developing the knowledge and skills in *Human Cultures*, *Asking Questions*, *Quantitative Reasoning*, *Singapore Studies* and *Thinking and Expression*. This GE curriculum was soon followed by an ambitious undergraduate education initiative known as the University Scholars Program (USP), initiated in 2002. Beginning with 20 students, the USP offered unique interdisciplinary courses in the first years, and then integrated these students into their original faculties for years three and four. USP was intended “to nurture a pool of brilliant students by developing their potential for leadership and intellectual excellence,” according to an early report on the program.¹²

Soon after the University Scholars program, NUS and Yale University launched the most ambitious of the liberal arts projects in Singapore, Yale-NUS College, which arose from a growing awareness within Singapore of the power of liberal arts for training students for entrepreneurship and for creating a more dynamic economy. A government report from the Committee on the Expansion of the University Sector in 2008 outlined the need for a liberal arts college in Singapore. Within the report was the finding that: “liberal arts education serves to develop independent thinkers, effective communicators, and potential leaders for the future.” Looking toward the model of education at leading colleges and universities found in the United States and elsewhere, the national government identified liberal arts education as, “broad-based,

¹¹ Akita International University web site accessed at <https://web.aiu.ac.jp/en/about/>

¹² Penprase, B., 2017, “Innovation in Undergraduate Education: The Case of the National University of Singapore,” in J.A. Douglass, ed., *Envisioning the Asian New Flagship University -Its Past and Vital Future*, Berkeley Public Policy Press: Berkeley, Chapter 9.

multi-disciplinary learning, high-quality teaching and intensive interaction among students and with faculty members.” The President of Singapore, Tony Tan, also came out strongly for liberal arts in several speeches. In 2010, while Executive Director of the Singapore Investment Corporation, he noted that the British-based educational system dominant in Singapore had “served Singapore and Singaporeans well” but that the American liberal arts may be why the United States economy is “more dynamic and entrepreneurial” when compared to European ones, and that the American system “fosters a readier acceptance of change and a greater willingness to take risks.”¹³

Established in 2011, the Yale-NUS College is designed to meet the overlap of strategic needs of Singapore, as well as Yale University and NUS. Conceived as a true partnership of these two universities, Yale-NUS was designed to provide long-term stability that other “branch campus” initiatives may find harder to achieve. Yale-NUS College was founded by an agreement between the NUS President, Chor Chuan Tan, and the Yale President, Richard Levin. The vision of Yale-NUS College was, in the words of its mission statement to be “A community of learning, founded by two great universities, In Asia for the world.” Yale-NUS College was designed to have “a focus on articulate communication,” “open, informed, and reflective discourse,” and “conversation” between individuals. The Yale-NUS College curriculum report of 2013 describes the goals of the new curriculum:

“Among the goals of a college curriculum is to help students make sense of that experience together, through a set of conversations about some of the most fundamental questions and problems of human existence. The curriculum should facilitate conversation, as would the campus design, with its carefully engineered common spaces. Fundamental questions would be posed within team-taught common courses that transcended East and West and blended individual academic disciplines in new and innovative ways.”¹⁴

The Yale-NUS Curriculum features an ambitious and interdisciplinary Common Curriculum that includes two semesters of Literature and Humanities, two semesters of Philosophy and Political Thought, a course entitled Comparative Social Inquiry and another Modern Social Thought course. It also includes Quantitative Reasoning, and two semesters of Scientific Inquiry courses.

India

In India a group of philanthropists came together to try to revive a tradition of more liberal arts within universities and several new institutions were founded. These include Ashoka University (the Yale of India), Shiv Nadar University, O.P. Jindal Global University, and Azim Premji University. Additional programs have been founded in the recent years in Chennai (mention new

¹³ Penprase, B., 2017, “Yale-NUS College” in J.A. Douglass, ed., *Envisioning the Asian New Flagship University -Its Past and Vital Future*, Berkeley Public Policy Press: Berkeley, Chapter 10.

¹⁴ Garsten, B., et al, “Yale-NUS College: A New Community of Learning,” Curriculum Report accessed at <http://www.yale-nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Yale-NUS-College-Curriculum-Report.pdf>

one) Interesting new items: Krea University in Chennai¹⁵ and discussions are ongoing to create larger ambitious larger private universities within India, including one group which calls itself the Nalanda2, which aspires to create the “Stanford of India.”¹⁶ I will give some more details from just two of the universities – Ashoka University and Azim Premji University, both of which sent representatives to our Soka University of America Globalized Liberal Arts conference in June 2018.

Ashoka University was founded by a group of US-educated entrepreneurs, such as the Yale alumnus and philanthropist Ashish Dawan, who also created the Central Square Foundation dedicated to providing education to children within slums in India. Ashoka University aspires to be the “Yale of India.” Among the founders of Ashoka University is Pramath Sinha, founding Vice Chancellor of Ashoka. The Ashoka University founders began by establishing the “Young India Fellowship,” a one-year multidisciplinary postgraduate program in Liberal Studies and Leadership. The Young India Fellowship includes a year of study with lectures from a wide variety of disciplines in humanities, sciences, and arts. Fellows complete a project at the end of the year that blends liberal arts with an internship and mentoring from the instructors in the program. The program has grown in its three years to 200 fellows from its initial batch of 58 students, and is now housed at the new Ashoka University campus. The Ashoka University opened in 2014–15 with its first class of 65 men and 68 women, and it is admitting its second batch this year in 2015. The Ashoka curriculum includes 12 Foundation Courses, which offers a diverse mix of sciences and humanities. Students then choose a major, which consists of 12–16 courses in about 12 different fields. Ashoka University has developed its curriculum with academic partnerships with Carleton College, Sciences Po (France), Penn Engineering, the University of Michigan, and King’s College (UK). The Ashoka STEM curriculum includes Principles of Science (focusing on ways of knowing and scientific inquiry), Mind and Behavior, and Introduction to Mathematical Thinking. The plan is for Ashoka to grow beyond 2000 students in the coming years, with both undergraduate and graduate programs.

Azim Premji University is another example of private philanthropy creating a new form of higher education in India. The Azim Premji University is the most recent project for the multi-billion-dollar Azim Premji Foundation (APF), which is dedicated to creating a “just, equitable, humane and sustainable society” within India by “making deep large scale and institutionalized impact on the quality and equity of education in India, along with related development areas” (APF 2015). Azim Premji is one of the world’s wealthiest men, listed as 41st richest in the world, with a personal fortune of \$17.2 billion. He founded APF in 2001, and pledged to contribute \$2 billion to have a major impact on the 1.4 million public schools within India. Azim Premji also has joined Bill Gates “Giving Pledge” program to give most of his wealth to charitable causes along with Warren Buffet and Richard Branson. Azim Premji University programs are designed to create talent, knowledge, and also social change, and are focused in several interdisciplinary programs. Azim Premji University offers Master of Arts in Education or Development, conducts research in

¹⁵ Krea University web site – accessed at <https://krea.edu.in/index.html>.

¹⁶ Nalanda 2.0 web site – accessed at <https://www.nalanda2.org/>.

education and development, and houses a continuing education center for teachers. The Azim Premji curriculum includes interdisciplinary explorations of socially relevant themes. Examples include courses in “Law, Governance and Development,” “Mind and Society,” “People and Ideas,” and “The Philosophy of Education.” The undergraduate program at Azim Premji is similarly interdisciplinary and opened with its first batch of undergraduate students in 2015. It offers major concentrations to undergraduates in four areas—Physics, Biology, Economics, and Combined Humanities—and in each of the majors, the curriculum emphasizes the connections between these disciplines and India’s culture and society.¹⁷

Conclusion

Together, Colleges and Universities in Asia and the US are expanding and refining liberal arts to help this form of education reach its full potential. Liberal Arts is a form of education that builds a more global perspective, to enable students to be adept at collaboration and communication to solve complex problems. And just as a global community of liberal arts programs emerges, it offers the opportunities for institutions, and professors to themselves become more of a “global liberal arts” citizen. In learning about the various models of liberal arts from other countries can test and strengthen the appreciation and knowledge of their own approaches to liberal arts, by testing and refining the assumptions made in each country from the various forms of liberal arts within the US, Asia, and other countries.

Rabindranath Tagore argues in his piece on *The Religion of Man* (1930) that progress can only happen through a form of education that cultivates “inclusive sympathy” through “global learning, the arts and Socratic self-criticism”— all elements within modern liberal arts, and all which enable students to understand complexity and diversity. As the models of liberal arts programs in Asia are further refined, they offer the potential to offer to their societies some of the promise that Tagore hoped for in his own liberal arts colleges, Shantiniketan. Tagore wrote in his 1922 essay “An Eastern University,”

“For our universities we must claim, not labeled packages of truth and authorized agents to distribute them, but truth in its living association with her lovers and seekers and discoverers. Also we must know that the concentration of the mind-forces scattered throughout the country is the most important mission of a University, which, like the nucleus of a living cell, should be the center of the intellectual life of the people.”

From Rabindranath Tagore, “An Eastern University”, 1922

¹⁷ Penprase, B., 2015, “New Liberal Arts and Sciences Institutions in India and Singapore,” in Kirby, W.C., and van der Wende, M., 2015, *Experiences in Liberal Arts and Science Education from America, Europe and Asia – A Dialogue Across Continents*, Palgrave:New York, p. 33.