

Pericles Lewis* and Katherine Rupp

Liberal Education in Asia: Trends, Challenges, and Opportunities

DOI 10.1515/ngs-2015-0028

Abstract: In this article, we seek to establish what liberal education means in the Asia of today by examining different institutions in India, Japan, South Korea, and China. In particular, we have analyzed fourteen such programs and identified certain commonalities, as well as important differences, particularly involving governance structure. We then offer some insights gleaned from the first three years of one of the largest such undertakings, Yale-NUS College in Singapore. We conclude that partnerships with U.S. institutions offer expertise and prestige, but the spread of liberal education in Asia will also depend on change within the relatively rigid but prestigious public systems that dominate most education in the region. The curriculum should embrace the local culture but put it in conversation with broader trends both in Asia and the West. In order for these institutions to thrive, faculty and students must be free to teach, study, and conduct research on controversial subjects without political interference.

Keywords: East-Asia, liberal education, universities, South Asia

One of the most distinctive features of American higher learning, liberal arts education, has, in the past decade or so, inspired new programs and schools throughout Asia. While the international media has to some extent tracked this remarkable growth, what the terms “liberal education,” “liberal arts education,” “liberal arts and sciences education,” and “general education” mean varies widely from one context to the next.¹ Although liberal education is often understood as an exclusively Western or even American approach, it in fact draws on ideals recognized in many parts of Asia. Throughout history, Buddhist, Confucian, Daoist, Hindu, Legalist, and Mohist scholars have debated how best to educate and train students of great spirit, compassion, intellectual

¹ In this regard, see: Fischer 2013; Hanstedt 2012; Lau 2013; Lindsay 2012; Sen 2015.

*Corresponding author: Pericles Lewis, Yale-NUS, Singapore, E-mail:

pericles.lewis@yale-nus.edu.sg

Katherine Rupp, Yale University, New Haven, CT 06520, USA

agility, and virtue. Centuries before people anywhere in the world thought about the notion of rights, Mencius taught that compassion is the root of all human development and achievement, that it is everyone's due to be treated with compassion. He reminded King Xuan of Qi that all human beings have the capacity for compassion and the ministers have a duty to remonstrate with a ruler who is not humane, stating: "Here is why I say that all human beings have a mind that commiserates with others. Now, if anyone were suddenly to see a child about to fall into a well, his mind would always be filled with alarm, distress, pity, and compassion ... the mind's feeling of pity and compassion is the beginning of humaneness (*ren*); 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" (DeBary 1999, 129).

Asian students have for thousands of years lived in residential communities of learning and engaged in conversations with many different religious, linguistic, cultural, and intellectual traditions. Processes of globalization in Asian education today have their historical roots in ancient and dynamic patterns of exchange. In this article we seek to establish what liberal education means in the Asia of today by examining different institutions in India, Japan, South Korea, and China. This article draws on conversations with leaders of liberal arts institutions throughout Asia.² In particular, we have analyzed 14 such programs (for most of which we have met with academic or institutional leaders) and found certain commonalities, as well as important differences involving governance structure.³ We analyze these developments in each of the four nations under study and then offer some insights gleaned from the first three years of one of the largest such undertakings, Yale-NUS College in Singapore.

Most Asian programs referring to themselves as specializing in "liberal arts" share a number of characteristics. English is usually the primary language of instruction, and international students enroll in considerable numbers or there

² We have generally left quotations from these interlocutors anonymous in order to encourage frank comment. We would especially like to acknowledge the assistance of Leslie Stone of the Yale China Association and Megan Eckerle of Yale NUS College.

³ The institutions are: Ashoka University, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Duke Kunshan University, International Christian University, Kyung Hee Humanitas College, Lingnan University, Nalanda University, New York University Shanghai, Presidency University, Seoul National University, Tokyo University, Waseda University. A more expansive database of liberal arts institutions worldwide, the Global Liberal Education Inventory, is maintained by Kara Godwin as part of the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College.

is at least an attempt to attract young men and women from abroad. Interdisciplinary education receives emphasis to some degree, especially in first-year general education classes. These institutions generally allow students to wait to select their majors (usually in their second year), whereas many other Asian institutions admit students for a specific major which they begin upon matriculation. Engagement with both Western and Asian cultural traditions is a cornerstone to many of these programs. Many, but not all, are residential, and a few encourage experiential education outside the classroom, while others offer more traditional study abroad opportunities.

Most of these institutions require all students to study both the arts and sciences, but a substantial minority focus only on humanities and social sciences and ignore or downplay science. While some liberal arts programs continue to rely on national exam results for admissions, most embrace some form of holistic assessment, which takes into account performance in school as well as on tests and often extracurricular demonstrations of leadership. Almost all have tenure-track systems, although in some cases the emphasis on teaching broad courses, especially in the general education portion of the curriculum, may create some tension with the research mission of the universities in which many of these colleges are embedded. From a governance point of view, they tend to depend on a rather complex mix of private and public funding and therefore have a variety of relationships to the Ministries of Education and other government authorities in their home countries. Many of the more established programs originated as Christian institutions; those in South Korea have often maintained this character whereas others have become more secular. The nature of these funding models, we will suggest, plays an important role in shaping what the institutions can achieve. Since the variation in governance structure is most notable on a national basis, the following analysis starts with the national context for each of the institutions discussed.

Liberal Education in India: The Challenges of Founding Independent New Institutions

“Can India’s major universities be revived and renewed from within?” This challenge was the focus of animated discussion in early 2014 at a conference on “The Future of Liberal Arts and Sciences in India,” held in Bengaluru (Bangalore), and co-sponsored by Yale University, Pomona College, and Claremont-McKenna College, along with two Indian institutions. On the leafy grounds of the C.V. Raman Research Institute (RRI), and in the gleaming city

campus of the Indian Institute for Human Settlements (IIHS), founders and vice-chancellors of five Indian universities offering liberal arts degrees met with counterparts from the United States. While India has achieved impressive results at the elite Indian Institutes of Technology, none of its comprehensive universities is rated in the top 200 in most world rankings. This is partly a result of a decision soon after independence to locate much cutting-edge research in directly funded institutes like the Raman Research Institute, founded by India's first Nobel laureate in Physics. But speakers lamented that the major universities, though once the "crucibles of modernity" in India, have become too large, too specialized, and too poorly governed.

As in much of Asia, students specialize early in India – sometimes as early as the age of twelve. Many schools remain dependent on rote learning methods and focused on examination results. For the somewhat less than one-fifth of the population that makes it to tertiary education, almost all courses are in the major, and the curriculum within the majors tends to be highly specialized and quite traditional. One speaker lamented "a decline in creativity among students as the number of years in the classroom grows longer."

Four new private universities represented at the conference have adopted four-year liberal arts programs modeled in part on American undergraduate education. O. P. Jindal Global University began in 2009 with schools of law and business but is now opening a school of Liberal Arts and Humanities. Shiv Nadar University, opened in 2011, models itself on American R1 universities but takes a liberal-arts approach to undergraduate education. Ashoka University, after its reorganization in 2011, now offers a four-year liberal arts education with a core curriculum and experiential learning known as the Young India Fellowship Program. In a somewhat different vein, Azim Premji University, in operation since 2011, aims to reach rural populations and to have its graduates "contribute immediately to a better India" through practical work in education and environmental management. IIHS also intends to open a university in coming years. Each of these universities is quite small, and between them they reach fewer than 10,000 students, but their collective ambition is to transform Indian university education.

The greatest obstacle to the new universities' success seems to be India's excessive bureaucracy and government regulation, which often impede innovation. New universities sometimes wait for years for legislation permitting them to operate, and even minor program changes require government approval. Government interference can negatively impact tertiary education, as Nobel laureate Amartya Sen argued in a recent article in the *New York Review of Books*, explaining the circumstances of his non-renewal as the founding chancellor of Nalanda University (Sen 2015).

The original Nalanda University was once India's most ancient educational institution. In the same way that the first universities in the United States were founded to train Protestant ministers, Nalanda's primary mission was to promulgate Buddhism. Students learned mathematics, music and astronomy in addition to their religious subjects. There was an enormous library, as well as many classrooms, dormitories for the 10,000 students and 2,000 faculty, and meditation halls. Students came from China, Japan, Korea, Sumatra, and even from Turkey. The method of teaching emphasized conversation and discussion in all subjects that were taught: debates between students and teachers and among students themselves. When Europe's oldest university, the University of Bologna, was founded in 1088, Nalanda University was more than six hundred years old. Nalanda flourished for more than seven hundred years, after which West Asian invaders destroyed it in 1193 (Dutt 2008). Efforts to revive this venerable institution are underway, although the process has been fraught with difficulty. The funds for Nalanda's rebuilding stem primarily from the government of India, although Australia, China, Laos, Singapore, and Thailand have also given financial support. Progress in developing Nalanda has faced challenges that include political conflict over the future of the institution. Despite considerable international backing, including that of the highly regarded former Minister for Foreign Affairs of Singapore, George Yeo, who is the new Chancellor of Nalanda, the university has been slow to start. Five years after passage of the Nalanda University bill, the University has enrolled only a handful of students.

Given these complicated political pressures, it is no surprise that Indian liberal education often originates in new private non-profit universities, often named after a founding benefactor who remains quite active in the planning for the new institution. (Perhaps they will someday be known as India's Stanfords and Rockefellers.) Indian democracy has traditionally taken strength from its pluralism, and the founders of these universities see the addition of private options as a way to encourage pluralism, particularly in states where the public universities are dominated by party politics.

For example, Ashoka University is an initiative of the International Foundation for Research and Education (IFRE), a group of successful Indian businessmen in their forties and fifties who skillfully navigated the complex educational bureaucracy to open this sector 25 non-profit organization. This institution they founded, named for the Mauryan dynasty emperor who ruled the Indian subcontinent from 269 to 232 BCE, aims to offer "an Ivy League Education in India." Emperor Ashoka, famous for his edicts on the pursuit of justice and tolerance through education, envisioned teaching students how to behave ethically in a diverse world. Two thousand years later, leaders in industry and academics seek to make this dream a reality. They initially created the Young India Fellowship Program as a template for a much larger center for

learning, one that would eventually emerge as Ashoka University. Ashoka currently enrolls a few hundred students and has attracted a strong faculty, consisting mostly of Indian citizens with international degrees.

As India aims to have 30% of its college-age students enroll in tertiary education, it has been estimated that 1,000 new universities are needed to educate the next generation. According to the OECD, the United States spends a higher percentage of its GDP (2.7%) on tertiary education than any other country, with South Korea and Canada close behind. India spends about half that percentage of its GDP, which in any case is of course much smaller on a per-capita basis (OECD 2012). The infusion of private philanthropy may help to create a small number of centers of excellence but cannot solve the problems of a tertiary education system that hopes to educate India's vast, youthful population.

In this regard, one of the most fascinating examples of Indian liberal education is Presidency University in Kolkata, which is at once India's oldest modern institution of higher education and among its newest universities. Founded as Hindoo College in 1817, Presidency was for many years the most prestigious college within the University of Calcutta. It broke away from the larger university as part of a reorganization in 2011. Aiming to become a modern public research university, Presidency has developed an innovative undergraduate curriculum on a liberal arts model. All students must take classes both in the arts and in the sciences, and the curriculum emphasizes both secular, liberal instruction in English and Asian themes and subjects. Presidency College has hired an entirely new faculty, about half of whom are returning "overseas Indians." With 2,500 students and over 150 faculty, Presidency is small, but its fame may help it to overcome some of the recruiting challenges faced by newer universities. While part of the University of Calcutta, Presidency College was the home institution of the great Indian physicist Satyendra Nath Bose and *alma mater* of many leading scholars and political leaders. Today, Presidency University may have the combination of vision and prestige to revive India's public university system from within, even as the new private universities offer competition from without.

Liberal Education in East Asia

East Asian higher education, like its Indian counterpart, is well known for favoring early specialization, rote learning, and a rigid hierarchy of examinations. While these qualities and values negatively impact efforts to promote liberal education in East Asia, it is at the same time important to note that in some historical contexts, strict examination systems in theory and sometimes

even in practice allowed young men born at the bottom of traditional hierarchies to rise to the top, and made sure civil servants won their positions on the basis of merit rather than political or family relationships. Societies which ultimately declined to adopt traditional Chinese examination systems (Nara, Heian, and Tokugawa Japan, for example, which favored family genealogy and connections over merit) stood in contrast to those that embraced exams (Han through Qing dynasties in China, Korea from the Kōryo through Chosŏn dynasties) (Schirokauer 2013). Chinese reformers in the Sung dynasty worried that exams overemphasized memorization and did not focus enough on practical applications. Korean Chosŏn rulers unified and strengthened exams to help them weed out inept civil servants (Holcombe 2011).

Perhaps one of the greatest dangers posed by an excessive emphasis on examinations in the middle school and high school years is that students from East Asian societies who succeed in entering elite universities are so exhausted physically and mentally from the aptly labelled “examination hell” that they lack energy and curiosity for further study. It is a sad irony that a system developed to encourage access to opportunity on the basis of effort and ability has resulted in burned-out students uninterested in rigorous engagement with a curriculum of any kind (Ichisada 1976). In Japan in particular, graduation is assumed, and only a minority of students actually attend classes. Many employers know this and therefore pay little attention to undergraduate grades or courses. Colleges and universities are ranked in rigid hierarchies, and networks of graduates from elite institutions control access to highly sought-after jobs. This may be why, for example, the founders of India’s private Ashoka University have promised to use their personal companies and networks to help graduates in their careers. It is also the reason why many East Asian liberal studies programs function as honors colleges inside larger, prestigious universities: it is very risky to attend a school that is not located within a clearly defined hierarchy. The American model of many excellent colleges and universities does not hold true in most Asian countries. University entrance examination results directly determine career prospects based on the ranking of the university to which one is accepted, and how much one learns or does not learn as an undergraduate is not as closely tied to future employment opportunities as it is in the United States.

Liberal Education in Japan: Experiments within a Conservative System

Foreign influence on Japanese education continues until the present day. Indian and Chinese teachings spread to Japan, often through Korea, from the sixth

through ninth centuries; by then the city we now call Kyoto had five institutions of higher learning. The imperial court established other schools as well, and Zen monasteries and convents became important educational centers. In the Heian period, it was aristocratic women who made the most significant literary contributions, including Murasaki Shikibu's *Tale of Genji*, widely considered to be the world's first novel. This is because women wrote in phonetic script derived from Chinese characters called *hiragana*; men considered women who actually wrote in Chinese characters unfeminine. Women wrote in their own language. Men wrote almost exclusively in a foreign language, Chinese, which was not at all suited for rendering the highly inflected grammar of Japanese. During Japan's long period of peace in the Edo period (1600–1867), warriors became bureaucrats and education levels soared in all the different sectors of society. Jesuit missionaries entered Japan from Portugal and Spain, bringing Latin, mathematics, and scientific knowledge along with Christianity. Even after their expulsion and edicts forbidding Christianity, a Christian rebellion occurred. The shogunate closed Japan off from the rest of the world, permitting only Dutch (who did not proselytize) and Chinese traders to remain on a man-made island. Learning during the Tokugawa period was Neo-Confucian, and emphasized meritocracy, discipline, and competency. *Rangaku*, or “Dutch studies” explored Western medicine and science. In 1868, the Tokugawa shogunate fell and the Meiji era began (Schirokauer 2013). Young Meiji leaders toured the world by ship in the Iwakura mission, in order to study Northern American and European systems of education and government. From France these men took the idea of a highly centralized primary and secondary educational system, including the ideal that at any minute of any day, each student of the same grade would be examining the same page of the same textbook. From Germany came the model of the “Gymnasium”: specialized schools from 5th to 13th grade to prepare select students for the university (Kunitake 2009).

Germany also provided the model for tertiary education. The classic chair system, in which only full professors have a specific chair with secure funding, and assistant and associate professors work under them, still continues in some Japanese universities today. The public University of Tokyo, founded in 1877 and Japan's top ranked university, is interesting to consider from the perspective of liberal education. It is one of the only Japanese institutions of higher education in which students do not declare their majors until their third year. For the first two years, all students study general education in the Komaba campus. Although they may not select their major until their third year, they must specialize in either the humanities and social sciences or the natural sciences from matriculation. All students must enroll in an English academic writing course for first year students in which they learn analytical thinking, logical

structure, and convincing expression. These classes, led by native English speakers, shift English language learning from passively translating written documents to actively developing one's own arguments. A dean responsible for the general education program at Tokyo has spoken of the need for students to unlearn the rote learning typical of Japanese high schools. Her goal, she said, was to "help students learn how to learn at the university level." This novel approach to teaching English is an example of Tokyo University's efforts in encouraging critical thinking. The curriculum for the sophomores and juniors is an embarrassment of riches: it consists of over three thousand courses.

The more recent development of liberal education in Japan has been led by a number of private universities that offer distinctive programs. For example, the high-ranking private Waseda University, founded (like the University of Tokyo) in the Meiji era (1868–1912), introduced the School of International Liberal Studies (SILS) in 2004. This program admits both Japanese-speaking and non-Japanese-speaking students: bilingualism is its goal. Students with no knowledge of Japanese are taught in Japanese, and the reverse is true for Japanese-only students. Japanese students must study abroad; this requirement is optional for non-native speakers of Japanese. The approach is multidisciplinary, although the emphasis is on the social sciences and humanities. Study of the sciences is not obligatory, but proficiency in statistics is a graduation requirement. The graduates of SILS, who gathered for a tenth-anniversary reunion in October 2014, speak English with great fluency and seem to have an interest in less traditional career paths relative to other Japanese of their age.

International Christian University, an interdenominational Christian institution founded in 1949, could arguably be seen as the first liberal arts university in Japan. It stands in stark contrast to the pattern of liberal arts programs operating as less esteemed colleges within prestigious universities. The initial founders of ICU's liberal arts curriculum borrowed heavily from Columbia University's core curriculum as well as the liberal arts model articulated by Harvard's James Conant. ICU has been fraught with tensions since its very inception. It is a Christian university in a country where Christians are less than 1% of the population, an American-influenced institution in a country where the most prestigious universities modelled themselves after German academic structures, especially the chair system. As Chris Hale, an ICU English Language Program instructor wrote in 2010: "ICU is a collection of contradictions: A Christian university in a non-Christian, some might even argue agnostic country; a liberal arts curriculum in a country with a tradition of practical, specialized education; a professorate and student body (originally called for, though not fully a reality even today) consisting of half Japanese, half foreign born; an institution

dedicated to instilling in students a desire to seek truth and independent thought, yet forcing all entering freshmen to sign the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights” (Hale 2012, 2–3).

In April 2012, after grueling internal debate, the English Language Program was changed to the English for Liberal Arts Program, which embraces a multi-disciplinary approach, fluency in English and Japanese, education in both arts and sciences, and a balance of Asian and Western learning. Admission requirements are similar to United States liberal arts colleges. ICU does not have the prestige of Tokyo University, Kyoto University, or Waseda. It is at the same time an important and influential institution in Japan, especially in this age of *kokusaika*, internationalization. In general, Japanese educators are concerned about the insularity of the current generation of Japanese students, whose participation in study abroad programs has declined. This decline may be partly due to the feeling on the part of Japanese students, unlike others in Asia, that the education available in their home country is just as good as what they could find abroad, but more likely it results from the relatively low level of English-language education in Japan and the structures of the university admissions and employment systems which favor the most prestigious Japanese universities even over more highly-ranked colleges and universities abroad (Oi 2015).

After the Pacific War, the United States occupation of Japan sought to democratize and liberalize the educational system. Junior high school education was made mandatory for everyone, and the German style “Gymnasium” changed into an institution closely resembling an American high school. There was tremendous growth in colleges and universities, and the imperial university system was reorganized (Dower 2000). Two elite feeder schools for Tokyo University became what is now the Komamba campus for first and second year undergraduates. Despite these changes, the rigid hierarchy of what were once imperial universities, and the emphasis on entrance exams, remains (Mathews and White 2004).

The Prestige of English and the West: Liberal Arts Education in South Korea

Japan never suffered an invasion until the end of the Pacific War in 1945. (The Mongols tried on several occasions, but were swept away by the *kamikaze* “divine winds.”) In contrast, domination by China, Japan, and the United States has been a constant throughout the history of South Korea. The Neo-Confucian Chosŏn kingdom (1392–1910) harshly suppressed Korean Buddhism and shamanism

(John 2015). As it declined in the late nineteenth century, Protestant missionaries exerted tremendous influence. During the Japanese colonial period (1910–1945), Christians and Korean nationalists united to resist the Japanese oppressors. Many of the missionaries were Protestants (primarily Presbyterians) from the United States, and today roughly 30% of the Korean population is Christian (Henry 2014). The embrace of American-style liberal arts education is therefore completely different in Korea than it is in Japan. Whereas English-speaking liberal arts programs are less esteemed than their regular education counterparts at the most prestigious Japanese universities, English liberal arts colleges at Korean universities tend to occupy more central and important positions.

The College of Liberal Studies at Seoul National University, with some 600 students and a handful of full-time faculty, was founded in 2009. “The younger the better,” said SNU’s President Yeon-Cheon Oh, at a symposium hosted by the College in 2012 on “The Renaissance of Liberal Studies in Asian Universities.” For a young program, “there are no obstacles, no established interests.” This is one of four liberal studies programs started in the past decade at South Korea’s top universities, a result both of student interest in having a more wide-ranging education and of demand from many returning Korean students who have studied abroad and do not want to, or are unable to, participate in South Korea’s traditional exam-based system for university admission. Courses include interdisciplinary seminars taught both in Korean and English, as well as interdisciplinary learning programs. Seoul National University shares similarities with Tokyo University. King Gojong of the Joseon dynasty founded SNU in 1895, in the same way that Tokyo University was founded by the Meiji emperor. The Japanese occupiers changed SNU’s name and incorporated it into Japan’s Imperial University system (in which Tokyo University occupied the top rank). SNU, like Tokyo University, was re-established in 1946, with the word “imperial” removed from its name (Henry 2014). Both universities have very difficult entrance exams.

Yonsei University, a prestigious private university in Seoul, was founded in 1915 by H.G. Underwood, an American missionary. It was a center of resistance during the Japanese occupation, and three generations of Underwoods took Korean names and dedicated their lives in service to Yonsei University. Underwood International College, founded in 2006, is a highly selective liberal arts school and holds a prominent place within Yonsei University. Underwood College operates in English, offers small classes and a multi-disciplinary approach, and makes a conscious effort to balance Asian and Western curricular approaches. The fact that Korean students enter Underwood College through the regular Korean examination system both reflects and reinforces the seriousness and significance of Underwood College’s position within Yonsei University.

Kyung Hee Humanitas College, a Korean private institution founded in 2011, offers all instruction in English. It is multidisciplinary in its approach and emphasizes both the arts and the sciences, although it is possible for students in large part to avoid math and sciences because of the distribution requirements. Students have free choice of major after their first year, the Global Service Corps organizes required community service linked to academic programs, and the tenured and tenure-track staff engages in an intriguing balance of Asian and Western teaching and research. On the website, the school motto appears in English, Latin, and Chinese, but not Korean! Administrators at Kyung Hee Humanities College, like those at all these Korean liberal studies programs, emphasize students' preference for holistic admissions and a delayed choice of major in South Korea's traditionally rigid and exam-based educational system. As one liberal arts administrator put it, they are trying to break the Korean habit of "associating students' admissions scores with their lifetime intelligence."

Expansion of General Education in China and Hong Kong

The long, rich, and complicated history of Chinese universities began over three thousand years ago with the invention of writing in the Shang Dynasty. Chinese learning profoundly influenced all other civilizations in East and Southeast Asia. Philosophers of the Warring States period argued with one another over what it means to be human and how individuals should relate to one another and the larger world (DeBary 1999). The idea of civil service exams emerged during this period, was implemented in the Han, and broadly executed starting in the Tang. Until the self-strengthening movement (emphasizing European languages, mathematics, and sciences) began in 1861, most Chinese students and teachers devoted themselves to philosophy, literature, and methods of governance. As part of the Qing reaction to the Opium War, Peking University was founded in 1898, as Imperial Capital University (京師大學堂), replacing Guozijian (國子監), the national central institute of learning, thousands of years old at that time. In 1905, Qing rulers abolished imperial examinations (Ichisada 1976). In the Republican era, intellectuals reacted sharply to their government's exclusive emphasis on scientific and technical knowledge, and focused on Western philosophy (Wei 1846). Despite tumultuous times in which warlords and foreign imperialists vied for control over China, a handful of universities flourished (Hu 1981). China's educational systems have even in the last century undergone

far-reaching changes, including the adaptation of Soviet educational models, the Great Leap Forward (the number of tertiary education institutions increased dramatically), the Cultural Revolution (higher education decreased dramatically), new policies implemented in the 1990's, and the "Tenth Five Year Plan 2001–2005" (which aimed to expand higher education and establish world class universities) (Schirokauer 2013). Admittance to Chinese universities and a student's majors still to this day depend on their scores on the nationwide university entrance exam (*Gaokao* "high exam"). This strict system and especially lack of individual choice in major is one reason why many Chinese students seek to study abroad (Jacka, Kipnis and Argeson 2013).

Hong Kong's universities have had their share of changes and upheavals as well. For well over a century, the British model of education was standard in Hong Kong. Some institutions developed in Hong Kong because they were prohibited in mainland China. For example, three colleges joined in 1963 to form the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK): New Asia College, founded in 1949 by anti-communist Confucian scholars from mainland China; Chun Chi College, started by Protestant colleges in 1951 in response to the closing of Christian colleges and universities on the mainland; and United College, which was a merger of five private Guangdong colleges. Students' *Gaokao* (高考 "high exam": *Gohao* in Cantonese) results influence what they will study and where they will study. Most students choose their majors based on which of their *Gaokao* subject scores was highest. In Hong Kong, intense efforts have been made to reform the *Gaokao* so there is more emphasis on critical analysis and public speaking. Students who are admitted even to a middle-ranking institution have been able to navigate this system successfully (Camoy 2013).

Higher education in Hong Kong has grown significantly in recent years. In 2012, Hong Kong universities switched from offering three-year degrees, such as they had offered under British rule, to offering four-year degrees, in keeping with both Chinese and US practice. As a result, the student bodies of most Hong Kong universities grew by a third, and two sets of entering classes entered at once, so that half of the undergraduates that year were "first-years." In preparation for this transition, a number of Hong Kong universities developed new systems of general education. In addition, schools which originally were technical schools are now classified as universities; nonetheless, the rankings of institutions of higher learning remain fixed. The percentage of students admitted to prestigious universities (Hong Kong University is ranked number one, and Chinese University of Hong Kong number two) determines high school rankings. Technical schools and teacher education schools form a class of higher education institutions below universities. At the very bottom are vocational schools. Lingnan University is an example of a school that belongs to the middle group.

It was a business college and has now become a university; its ranking and reputation remains roughly the same, but it has made strides in developing liberal education.

Lingnan itself was the forerunner of new directions in Hong Kong's tertiary education. Edward Chen, an economist from the first-ranked Hong Kong University, became president in 1998. He positioned Lingnan as an institution providing students with a liberal arts education. There was no other university in Hong Kong specializing in the liberal arts at this time. Chen fought very hard to make his vision a reality, even though the University Grants Commission at first wanted to keep business education Lingnan's specialty. Lingnan, like all Hong Kong universities, began offering a four-year undergraduate curriculum in 2012, and requires students to take advantage of its newly inaugurated four-year program to live in a "hostel" for at least two years. Lingnan's emphasis is on a well-rounded, whole person education, and all Hong Kong universities now at least pay lip service to this idea. English is the primary language of instruction, and students choose their own major in their second term of study. The curriculum is paternalistic in the sense that self-actualization is not even part of the university's rhetoric, and at the same time students do learn to make connections beyond their own limited sphere of experience.

The very Confucian motto of the Chinese University of Hong Kong is 博文約禮 (through learning and temperance to virtue), and one of CUHK's ordinances stipulates Chinese as the principal language of instruction. Despite this fact, most courses are actually taught in English; students and faculty consider this a point of pride. Since 2012 there has been a completely new undergraduate curriculum. There are two major required courses for all students, one in the sciences and one in the humanities. The new four-year curriculum includes a capstone project, and there are excellent opportunities for experiential learning, including mentorship programs, leadership development, internship and service programs, and overseas student exchanges. There are nine residential colleges, five of them built during the last decade. Colleges compete with one another for prestige in the sense that students may state their preferences before the university assigns them to a college.

The Chinese University of Hong Kong has made tremendous progress in increasing student diversity, implementing the college system, service opportunities, and required course sequences in the humanities and sciences. There is a large difference between the kind of education students receive at The Chinese University of Hong Kong and a liberal arts education in which students take foundational courses, experiment with different interests, engage in close interactions with faculty and students, and then choose their major in their second year. No universities in Hong Kong follow this kind of liberal arts model in its

entirety; rather, they borrow pieces of it. At The Chinese University of Hong Kong, students often see the required sequences of courses in the humanities and sciences as gut courses they must take in order to graduate. These courses do not receive the same number of credits as the courses that count for their majors. Students feel intense pressure to find secure, well-paying jobs. The top two majors are law and medicine. The expansion of the Hong Kong universities since 2012 has allowed some interesting experiments with curriculum and experiential education, but the pressure of resources and some tensions over the presence of many mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong, along with the political unrest surrounding the Umbrella movement, have created a great deal of anxiety for the leaders of Hong Kong's universities.

In mainland China, the renewal of interest in the liberal arts is often presented as “training in humanities sensibility” (a less politically loaded term than “liberal education”), notably Peking University’s “education on common knowledge” and Sun Yat-sen University’s Boya College (“Bo” means “wide” and ya “elegant, wise” or “elite”). While some administrators (and their government sponsors) defend liberal arts in relation to making more creative workers – the next Steve Jobs, for example – one Chinese colleague from a liberal arts college within a major university spoke of liberal education as part of self-betterment in a broader (possibly Confucian) sense. His goal, he said, was to “train people to be noble or better persons” (Lewis 2012). For the most part, the liberal studies programs function like honors colleges inside larger universities. As Karin Fischer has noted in her reporting in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Fischer 2013), most such programs share certain features, such as an emphasis on small classrooms, active learning, broad-based interdisciplinary courses, study abroad, and individual academic advising (which is unusual at most of the universities represented). In 2012, 9.15 million students, or 44% of the young people born in 1994, took the national university entrance exam. There were places for 6.86 million students, roughly 33% of the age cohort (Jacka, Kipnis and Argeson 2013). Prestigious universities such as Peking University or Tsinghua University accept a tiny fraction of these students. A very small percentage of the Chinese population has access to an elite university education, let alone education in the liberal arts.

Boya College, considered a pioneer in liberal arts education and classical studies in China, emphasizes intensive training in Latin, classical Greek, and classical Chinese. The dean of Boya College, Gan Yang, studied philosophy for ten years at the University of Chicago. The basis for the curriculum is that a well-rounded person who can understand the world must be fully grounded in Eastern and Western classics, including Aristotle, Plato, Confucius, Mencius, Laozi, and Xunzi. An academic who recently attended the graduation of the first class of students from Boya found the experience unforgettable. The students

spoke passionately about the subject matter and what they had learned about themselves. One of them explained that he attended *Boya* against the wishes of his father, who was concerned about problems with finding work after graduation. *Boya* is a fascinating and also somewhat controversial experiment: many commentators consider it archaic and elitist; others praise the depth of the learning, the careful analysis of primary texts, and the experimental thinking about what it means to study liberal arts in China.

Other small liberal arts colleges within elite universities include Yuanpei College at Peking University. Students in this college don't declare their majors until the end of their first year, or sometimes even the end of their second year. This is a very big anomaly in China. Most Chinese students enter universities with designated majors, including subfields. For example, it is not enough to choose "economics;" one must specify "international trade and finance." It is not enough to choose "chemistry;" one must specify "organic chemistry." Students often graduate from universities with a very narrow base of knowledge. One reason small liberal arts colleges exist within larger Chinese institutions is that there has been an incredible degree of growth in the number of universities and the number of university students in China. There have been mergers between universities in order to accommodate the increase of students, and teachers have been added, sometimes without regard to quality. Chinese academics who care deeply about quality of teaching established these small, elite colleges within larger universities in order to counter the risk of simply churning out students (Xu 2005).

Fudan, Zhejiang, and Renmin universities have, like Peking and Sun Yat Sen Universities, tried to reform traditional Chinese university education. Mixed residence – students with different majors living together – is one reform that all of these institutions have put into place. Renmin started a program of classical studies in 2010. The Ministry of Education does not acknowledge classics as an independent major, however, so students can only graduate if they have courses in other areas. At Fudan, since 2005, all first-year students live in dormitories and take general education courses. After this experience, they study their pre-determined majors. Zhejiang University requires students to live in residential college settings and take two years of general education courses. There are nine categories of majors, and these categories are very broad for Chinese standards: "Science," "Engineering," "Biology and Medicine," "Humanities," etc. Students may select any major within their category over the first two years. In an unpublished essay on tertiary education in China, Wangshu Tai writes "ZJU made serious efforts to break the barrier of major. [...] Compared with FDU, ZJU has innovated in both form and content [...] where would one put ZJU on the spectrum then? One thing is certain, it is not a liberal arts institution because of the strong presence of vocational elements

(five out of nine undergraduate schools are vocational in nature) [...] one may call this a ‘liberal’ professional education – liberal in the sense that students have considerable liberty” (Tai 2012).

There are two prominent examples in China of a different method of introducing liberal arts education, that is, by partnering with an American institution. Quite a number of British universities, notably the University of Nottingham, have previously set up branch campuses in the region. American universities have arrived more recently. NYU-Shanghai, which opened (like Yale-NUS College in Singapore) in 2013, and Duke Kunshan University, which for now offers only graduate programs and an undergraduate exchange program, are major partnerships between leading American universities and Chinese counterparts. Both occupy beautiful campuses provided by Chinese municipalities (Shanghai and Kunshan, about an hour outside Shanghai). NYU-Shanghai is one of three portal campuses (meaning comprehensive research universities that offer degrees), along with NYU-Abu Dhabi and the original NYU in Washington Square in Manhattan. A portal campus offers access to New York University’s “Global Networked University,” which also has smaller campuses (more like study abroad sites) in ten other cities around the world. Shanghai City and Pudong District governments paid for the construction costs of the campus. They also, together with the Chinese Ministry of Education, provide funding for the school and partial scholarships to Chinese students. NYU-Shanghai encourages students to learn about both the arts and sciences, Asian and Western philosophy, history, and literature, achieve fluency in both Chinese and English, and embrace experiential learning through volunteer work and internships. Fifty-one percent of NYU-Shanghai’s three hundred students are from China, with the rest from other countries. They also field quite an impressive basketball team.

Duke-Kunshan University, a collaboration between Duke and Wuhan University, aims to offer a range of programs similar to that currently available at NYU-Shanghai. For now, however, the university has taken a different strategy and begun with master’s degree programs in Global Health and Medical Physics and short exchange programs for undergraduates from abroad and from China’s top public universities. The undergraduate exchange programs, which have been highly praised by Duke faculty who have taught in them, offer instruction in English, a multidisciplinary approach, emphasis on both Asian and Western learning, and study abroad. Both NYU-Shanghai and Duke Kunshan University seem to have successfully navigated the recent pressures of campaigns against Western values in Chinese universities. They maintain an atmosphere of academic freedom for students and faculty, helped no doubt by the international prominence of their home universities in the United States.

One of the challenges liberal arts colleges face in Asia is distrust of the value of liberal arts for careers. Many Asian students and parents are pragmatic in orientation. As a result, in programs that allow students to choose their own majors, a large majority go on after the general education of the liberal studies program to focus on such subjects as economics, business, political science, or pre-medical studies. While it is expected that a high proportion of liberal arts graduates may go on to graduate study, it is also often hoped that many will go on to work for multinational corporations or other demanding and lucrative careers. In the current, relatively difficult environment for recent graduates in China, the employment results for liberal arts graduates have not yet proven that employers will choose these students over others with more traditional training.

Asian liberal arts programs face a variety of difficulties, including the expense of educating students in small seminars, the cost of adding residential programs, cultural attitudes toward examinations, and government interference in academic institutions. Few liberal arts programs in Asia have large numbers of faculty dedicated to them, so they must rely on professors from other units within the university or visiting faculty from abroad. Many colleges would like to add residential programs, but only a small minority of institutions can afford to do so. Sensitivity to the long history of examination systems in Asia and the way exams determine rankings of individuals and institutions must be balanced with the values and needs of liberal arts education. Finally, students must be able to learn and teachers must be able to teach without fearing political reprisals.

For example, in March of 2015, the Chinese education minister announced restrictions on Western textbooks. Professors in many universities had to submit their syllabi for review by the Party apparatus, and eventually a compromise was reached. Even though many of the textbooks had Western ideas, if they had been published in China, they were generally allowed. It is clear that there is concern in China at the national level that there has been ideological drift, and that university students could become difficult to control. Amartya Sen's plea for the independence of universities and colleges and the importance of academic freedom is crucial for us to keep in mind as we examine the experiences and challenges of liberal education in Asia.

The tremendous expansion of knowledge in the nineteenth century, especially in the sciences, broke up the traditional common curriculum and contributed to the rise of the university department, driven more by research than by undergraduate education. Today, liberal arts education means, above all, giving students the breadth of knowledge to expand their minds and to be able to ask important questions in any field of endeavor, as well as the rigorous

training in one area that teaches them how to pursue a subject in depth. It means encouraging their imagination and their ability to think critically about the world. Unfortunately, in the context of pressures to make undergraduate education more “relevant,” sometimes a code word for pre-professional or vocational, some U.S. institutions seem to be ignoring liberal education, which is in fact the source of American pre-eminence. Our experience in the founding of Yale-NUS College suggests that Asia has a great hunger for pedagogy that truly encourages critical thinking and a model of liberal arts and science education adapted for the twenty-first century. Asian educators are eager to draw on the experiences of American institutions, and we believe that it is in the interests of both American and Asian institutions for us to contribute what we have learned from the history of American liberal arts education to the renaissance of liberal studies in Asian universities.

Like some of the leading liberal arts programs in China and Korea, Yale-NUS College is an autonomous college within the National University of Singapore (NUS). Unlike the colleges in the major universities, and more like the joint ventures NYU-Shanghai and Duke-Kunshan University, Yale-NUS is governed by a board consisting of both Yale and NUS appointees, and faculty from both universities have been active in designing the curriculum and hiring the inaugural Yale-NUS faculty. This rather unique governance structure confers certain advantages. Yale is fortunate to have a very strong partner in NUS, recognized as one of the best universities in Asia and on an upward trajectory. NUS has achieved great distinction in scientific and medical research while educating a very large fraction of its country’s best students (enrollment at NUS tops 37,000). It has maintained a focus on offering high-quality education to all its students, and has recently experimented with more intimate ways of delivering education, for example in its residential colleges and University Scholars Programme. As an autonomous college within NUS, Yale-NUS is able to draw on the resources of a large and well-regarded research university while also pursuing educational and other policies appropriate to a smaller “community of learning,” projected to include 1,000 students who live on campus for their full four years (except when studying abroad in New Haven or elsewhere) and 120 faculty who may hold tenure at NUS and who are drawn from scholars who have excellent records in both teaching and research.

Liberal arts education in most of Asia consists of choosing from various parts of a traditional liberal arts education. Best teaching practices is one area in which all liberal arts programs would benefit. Research shows students learn best when they actively engage in learning, and there is a long history in Asia of great numbers of students sitting passively in lecture classes as the professor drones on and on. In some cases, students vote with their feet, and

simply don't bother to attend university classes, as is the case in some departments at many Japanese universities. Relatively few Asian tertiary educational institutions have taken advantage of the opportunities for experiential learning and student exchange provided by the diversity of Asian culture; the focus often remains primarily on the classroom. Partnerships with US institutions, including Public-Private partnerships, offer expertise and prestige, but in the long run the spread of liberal education in Asia will also depend on local experiments and on reforms within the relatively rigid but prestigious public systems that dominate most education in the region. The curriculum should embrace the local culture but put it in conversation with broader trends both in Asia and the West. Ideally, these institutions should cultivate students who are global citizens and who understand and appreciate local particularities, including languages and cultures. Liberal arts education is founded on the premise of the celebration of differences as well as understanding many of the values and practices human beings share in common. The tension between comprehending individual particularities in depth and seeing broader trends and relationships at a more general, global level is one that all scholars strive to maintain.

We must give students the foundation they need to learn deeply and broadly. Faculty must receive the support they need to teach with vigor and to engage students in active and experiential learning. It is paramount to find better ways of modelling, measuring, guiding, and rewarding good teaching. Research is crucial to the advancement of knowledge and breathes life into the classroom. It is important that faculty at such colleges participate in the world of research, but since research drives many extrinsic rewards, administrators need to balance these with incentives for focusing on teaching. Not all brilliant scholars are natural born teachers: teaching is a skill that must be nurtured and developed with practice over time. We need to provide a supportive environment to encourage teaching of the highest calibre.

Finally, the essential precondition for a successful liberal education is academic freedom. Asia has many different political systems, and many of its universities are funded by governments that recognize the importance of having a well-educated citizenry. In order for these institutions to thrive, they must be given considerable autonomy and their faculty and students must be free to teach, study, and conduct research on controversial subjects without political interference. In order to give students the opportunity to understand multiple traditions on their own terms, to engage in rigorous study of core academic disciplines, and to develop a commitment to serving both local and global communities, teachers must be free to teach and students must be free to learn.

References

- Camoy, Martin. 2013. *University Expansion in a Changing Global Economy*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- DeBary, William Theodore, and Bloom, Irene. 1999. *Sources of Chinese Tradition, Volume One*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Dower, John. 2000. *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company.
- Dutt, Sukumar. 2008. *Buddhist Monks and Monasteries of India*. Delhi: George Allen and Unwin.
- Fischer, Karin. 2013. "Blurring Disciplines, Crossing Borders: Yale Helps Reimagining the Liberal Arts, with Asian Influences." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 9.
- Hale, Chris. 2012. "Change, Conflict, and Conant: ELP Reform and ICU's Liberal Arts Heritage." *ICU Language Research Bulletin* 25:1–13.
- Handstet, Paul. 2012. "When Introducing the Liberal Arts to Asia, Don't Forget the Students." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 5.
- Henry, Todd. 2014. *Assimilating Seoul: Japanese Rule and the Politics of Public Space in Colonial Korea, 1910–1945*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Holcombe, Charles. 2011. *A History of East Asia: From the Origins of Civilization to the 21st Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hu, Sheng. 1981. *From the Opium War to the May 4 Movement, Volume I*. Beijing: People's Publishing House.
- Ichisada, Miyazaki. 1976. *China's Examination Hell*. Translated by Conrad Schirokauer. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Jacka, Tamara, Andrew Kipnis, and Sally Argeson. 2013. *Contemporary China: Society and Social Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- John, Duncan. 2015. *The Origins of the Choson Dynasty*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Kunitake, Kume. 2009. *Japan Rising: The Iwakura Mission to the USA and Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lau, Joyce. 2013. "Two Views on Liberal Arts." *The New York Times*, January 22.
- Lewis, Pericles. 2012. "In Asia, Future Appears Bright for Liberal-Arts Education." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Accessed October 25. <http://chronicle.com/blogs/worldwise/in-asia-future-appears-bright-for-liberal-arts-education/30840>
- Lindsay, Michael D. 2012. "Fueling the Fire: The Liberal Arts Have Come to Asia, and It's a Big Deal." *The Huffington Post*, November 16.
- Mathews, Gordon, and Bruce White. 2004. *Japan's Changing Generations: Are Young People Creating a New Society?* London: RoutledgeCurzon.
- OECD. 2012. *What Share of National Wealth is Spent on Education?* Accessed August 22, 2015. http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/eag_highlights-2012-18-en
- Oi, Mariko. 2015. *Can Education Change Japan's 'Depressed' Generation?* BBC News. Tokyo.
- Schirokauer, Conrad. 2013. *A Brief History of Chinese and Japanese Civilizations, 4th Edition*. Boston: Wadsworth.
- Sen, Amartya. 2015. "India: The Stormy Revival of an International University." *The New York Review of Books* 62 (13):1–12.
- SILS. graduates of, interview by Pericles Lewis. 2014. (October).
- Tai, Wangshu. 2012. *The Present of Non-professional Education in People's Republic of China and Taiwan: A Comparative Study*. A Project Sponsored by the Colgate University Institute for

Philosophy, Politics, and Economics, Lampert endowment, Hamilton, New York: unpublished essay, 1–27. Accessed August 24, 2015. http://www.colgate.edu/docs/d_centers-and-institutes_institute-for-philosophy-politics-and-economics_fellowships/taiwangshuliberalarts-11-02-12.pdf?sfvrsn=2.

Wei, Yuan. 1846. *Sheng Wu Ji*. Beijing.

Xu, Zeyu. 2005. “Issues in the Expansion of Higher Education in the People’s Republic of China.” *China Review* 5 (1):33–59.