The Story of the Faculty of Arts

The Faculty of Arts is arguably the heart and soul of HKU. It has produced some of Hong Kong's most famous graduates, from political leaders to business people to movie directors to favourite teachers who have educated generations of Hong Kong youth. And it has provoked and promoted critical reflection on culture and the humanities from the crossroads of China and the West. There is much to be proud of, but step back to its beginnings and the Faculty's outlook was not so auspicious.

The University's founders initially hesitated to establish an Arts Faculty; concerned it could forestall dissent. The Faculty of Arts was approved only in September 1912, a few weeks before classes started, but it did not have enough full-time staff to form a Faculty Board until September 1913. It struggled in its early years and at one point was dismissed as the “unwanted stepbrother” of the Medicine and Engineering faculties. However, after World War II, when Hong Kong rebuilt, expanded and developed into an international finance centre, the value of an Arts education came to the forefront and the Faculty of Arts became the springboard for a corps of home-grown leaders who would spearhead Hong Kong's transformation.

Today's Faculty may seem a world away from that of 1912, with top scholars and students coming here from around the world. But even a century ago, there were signs of the Faculty's enduring strengths in its China-West focus and its determination to promote the value of an Arts education.
Mr. Tung Chi Noon desires to inform his guests that refreshments will be served immediately after the ceremony of the opening of the School of Chinese Studies by His Excellency the Governor, on the 28th September, 1931.
The Learning Experience

The joy of learning is a hard-earned pleasure. Who gets to that point of enlightenment without also experiencing the embarrassment of ignorance or the agony of failure? Or even the sheer fun to be had from tricking the system? Throughout the decades, learning in the Faculty of Arts has emphasized different things at different times—self-learning, free thinking, crossing disciplines, stepping outside the classroom to gain real-world experience. But the students’ goals have remained constant: they seek inspiration, new experiences and new perspectives.

And, for some, the opportunity to see what they can get away with.

Is it not a pleasure, having learned something, to try it out at an internships? Is it not a joy to have friends come from afar?

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Students and Campus Life

If the teachers are the soul of a faculty, then the students are its life. From that young man who became HKU’s first student when he enrolled in the Arts Faculty on October 15, 1922, to freshers joining this year, the students are the lifeblood and the future of the Faculty. While the learning experience has changed beyond recognition over those 100 years—from inkpens and paper to laptop and Internet—some things remain the same. One of these is that university life is not just about learning; it is about living too.

Cambridge Arts graduate and raconteur Stephen Fry described his campus days thus: “Exams broke into one’s day and were clearly a terrible waste of time, necessary no doubt if you were reading Law or Medicine or some other vocational subject, but in the case of English, the natural thing to do was talk a lot, listen to music, drink coffee and wine, read books, and go to plays, perhaps be in plays.”

HKU Arts undergrads may be less reckless, but they do know how to have a good time, and life on campus provides lasting memories of the best kind—whether they are socialising, sharing ideas or fighting for a cause.

Undergraduates here are deplorably well behaved. The academic authorities have too easy a time and lateness are never agreed with or contradicted.... Controversy of the time is the beginning of wisdom.

Mary Wick quoted in the 1954-55 issue of the HKU Alumni magazine. Wick, who added no comment on “The Comparison between Local Undergraduates and Those in England.”
Our Impact in the Community

Students come to university to learn, but it’s what they do with their learning that is the ultimate measure of each student and the education they receive. The faculty of arts can proudly lay claim to many accomplished alumni in all areas of Hong Kong society, from politics and business to education and culture, who have shaped and transformed our city. Some have ventured even further and become world-accomplished in their fields.

Making an impact in the wider community has also become a measure of our academic work. “Knowledge exchange” is now a core activity at HKU, where scholars and students are taking their research and ideas beyond academia to share with others. From preserving cultural heritage to promoting the fun in philosophy, their projects are helping to excite others about the value of Arts and the Humanities.

If you have knowledge, let others light their candles in it.
Margaret Fuller
Insights and Discovery

The Faculty of Arts today is internationally regarded for its research, particularly in China-West studies and language and culture studies. But through most of its history — until this century, really — it would have been difficult to make the same claim. Research at HKU and in Hong Kong received little support until the early 1990s, when the government stepped up funding. The subsequent sea change in priorities has enabled the faculty to pursue insightful and ground-breaking research at the interface of China and the rest of the world.

The moment one gives close attention to anything, even a blade of grass, it becomes a mysterious, awesome, indescribably magnificent world in itself.

Henry Miller
Reflections

For the many students and staff who have studied or taught Arts at HKU over the past 100 years, the Faculty has been both a home and an inspiration.