Education
A mind for business

Some people in Guangzhou argue that the city didn’t always place a great emphasis on higher education. Families traditionally would encourage their children to leave education relatively young and join the family business.

But as Guangzhou has grown in wealth and become more cosmopolitan, parents have come to value the education of their children more. Yet its tradition of favouring practical knowledge and perpetuating family business continues. For example, Guangzhou’s current Five-Year Plan aims to see the city emerge as a national champion for vocational education by 2020.

Also notable: a pilot programme launched in 2015, in which 36 primary and secondary schools implemented classes for students on financial management. Pan Xuzhao, who authored the scheme’s textbook, determined that “investment, financial management and trading shares are part of the family now”, and argued it was better to educate children early on in these matters. (The new curriculum no doubt also has something to do with Guangzhou’s push to become the financial centre of south China.)

In other ways Guangzhou is following the trend apparent across the rest of China in seeking to attract those with international experience into its education sector. The city government has allocated Rmb3.5 billion to developing ‘industry leadership and talent’ over the next five years, a portion of which will be used to support foreign students who decide to stay in Guangzhou and start businesses after graduating, creating what are being dubbed “talent green cards”.

Besides attempting to attract foreigners to stay the local government is also hoping to lure back its residents who have gone to study abroad – the highly coveted group known to the Chinese as “sea turtles”. As a primer for this Guangzhou launched its “Elite Plan”

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Students attend an outdoor joint lesson outside a school building in Guangzhou.
Higher Education Mega Centre

The Higher Education Mega Centre was opened in 2004 on Xiaoguwei Island in Panyu district, although it’s separated only by the river from Haizhu district. Initially 10 universities opened campuses on the island, and were later joined by another three. With the exception of Guangzhou University, which relocated to the Mega Centre, all of the universities have maintained their former campuses elsewhere in Guangzhou.

The island is a fairly self-maintained entity: every university has its own sports facilities in addition to communal recreation grounds; each provides dormitories as well (with separate free-of-charge accommodation for lecturers); and there are a number of on-campus shops and eateries. For a visitor – and perhaps even a resident – the island lacks much to do (aside from studying). However, it isn’t far from the city centre, connected by two expressways and a metro line (23 minutes to the CBD).
programme five years ago, which sponsors a few individuals to study abroad. The scheme covers the living and travel expenses of the successful candidates for five years, with a typical living allowance of up to Rmb13,000 per month. Candidates must have already completed a BA or an MA (but can’t be over 35), with the emphasis on generating PhD students. In its five years of operation the scheme has sent 157 people abroad, 70 of whom have already returned.

International schools

There are a number of highly esteemed international schools in Guangzhou, catering for children from nursery levels through to high school graduation and providing a range of curricula. Naturally The British School of Guangzhou (pictured above) offers a British curriculum, the American International School of Guangzhou an American education, and the Clifford School International follows a Canadian curriculum. But there are also some schools which don’t focus on emulating the teachings of any particular nation, such as the Utahloy International School.

By Chinese law, it is a requirement for all students attending an international school to possess a non-Chinese passport. Unsurprisingly, as Guangzhou and its residents have become richer, the international schools have seen an influx of local enrolments – with offspring of the wealthy having obtained the prerequisite foreign passport.
Sun Yat-Sen University

Sun Yat-Sen University was founded in 1924 by the eponymous revolutionary leader, whom many consider to be the father of modern China. When Sun founded the university he named it the National Canton University. It wasn’t until a year after his death that the university was renamed in his honour, in testament to the respect both the Nationalist and Communist parties shared for him. (At the time – 1926 – the two parties were engaged in a tenuous alliance, which would eventually collapse into civil war, resulting in victory for the Communists. Yet Sun, who founded the Nationalist party, is still much revered in China today.)

Although most commonly known to the outside world as Sun Yat-sen University, the institute also goes by the name of Zhongshan University. This duality is partially due to the discrepancy between Cantonese and Mandarin, but also as a result of the different names Sun Yat-sen acquired for himself during his lifetime. It was while studying in Hong Kong that Sun Yat-sen came to be known by this name, the English spelling of which is based on the Cantonese pronunciation. But Sun was also known as Sun Zhongshan, which is the pinyin spelling of the Mandarin pronunciation of a Japanese name given to him when studying in the country.

Perhaps as confusing as Sun Yat-sen’s name changes are the origins of the university. Like many other educational institutions, the Sun Yat-Sen University (SYSU) that stands today is the result of a myriad of mergers and secessions. Its main campus in Haizhu District took over the grounds from Lingnan University in 1953 – a school established by missionary workers in 1888. Besides this primary campus, SYSU has three others all but one of which are in Guangzhou (the outlier is in Zhuhai). Its most recent campus is located in the Guangzhou Higher Education Mega Centre.

The north campus is the university’s centre for medical studies. It formally joined SYSU in 2001 but its heritage can be traced back to 1866, when the Pok Tsai Medical School was founded. This college was the first in China to teach Western medicine. Besides medicine, SYSU has a multi-disciplinary focus on natural sciences, engineering, social sciences and humanities. Today it frequently ranks in the top 10 of China’s universities and is the most prestigious in Guangzhou.

“Study Extensively, Enquire Accurately, Reflect Carefully, Discriminate Clearly, Practice Earnestly.”

- The university’s motto, originally inscribed by Sun Yat-sen when he founded the National Canton University in 1924