

The Amazing Universities of the Third Age in China Today (2002)

Compiled by Jean Thompson from documents issued at the AIUTA Geneva Congress in October 2002 by the CPPCC, (the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference) and the CAUA (the China Association of Universities for the Aged)

NB. U3A is the acronym for Universities of the Third Age based on the British self-help model. The usual international acronym is UTA.

Which country has the largest number of U3As? The answer is clearly China, with 19,300 U3As and 1.81 million members.

The movement began in the 1980s, about the same time as in the UK and ten years later than the founding of AIUTA (International Association of Universities of the Third Age) in France.

The increase in life expectancy and the new social role of older people encouraged the government, the Communist Party of China, to set up a Pensioner Affairs Bureau to look after the interests of older people. In conjunction with the army, big companies and mines, universities and other organisations, a wide variety of U3As have been set up, supported by government help with funding and premises. The government has a long term development plan and is currently drafting guidelines for the management of U3As.

A non-governmental organisation, the China Association of Universities for the Aged, (CAUA) has an important role in developing U3As. It promotes the importance and benefits of U3As to the general public, and to older people themselves, and supports new ventures by gaining government funding. At national and provincial level it has supported local efforts to set up U3As.

.With 200 million older people aged 65 and upwards, this was a challenging task. With wide disparities between rural and city areas and a vast range of educational levels, U3As have to be flexible to meet the needs of the people. The range of provision runs from primary education for those who have missed out on the educational reforms to post-graduate courses.

Great efforts are made to stimulate the special interests of the members. In general, they are not interested in qualifications or vocational training, so the emphasis is on learning, life enrichment, promotion of good health and service to the community.

There are normally seven types of course: health care, physical exercises (including Taiji) study courses, (including literature, history, geography and foreign languages) skills (including computer skills, finance, cookery, and gardening) arts (including calligraphy, painting, music and dancing) and hobbies, (including travel, photography and stamp collecting) and political topics.

Courses may be short-term, or run for one to three years. Teaching is very relaxed and flexible, to suit the students' needs. New methods are constantly being tried, including providing information and setting up discussions on current events,

supplying magazines and newspapers, organising study tours and visits, using modern facilities and running exhibitions and competitions. The CAUA is cooperating with the Central Radio/TV University to set up special courses, while new text books are being prepared in cooperation with national publishers. All these efforts are providing inspiration for older people to learn more and to have a better quality of life. Their health improves, as do their communication skills. The senior students can now participate in the development of both traditional and modern culture.

China is a faithful supporter of AIUTA and sends delegations to all the biennial Congresses. Now it is the turn of China to host the AIUTA International Congress in 2004. They will be welcoming colleagues and friends from all over the world at their modern conference centre in Shanghai. There will be opportunities to meet their U3A members and share ideas, while optional study tours will provide an opportunity to have an insider's view of China's modern and traditional culture.

In their own words: 'We warmly welcome the foreign friends to visit China and our U3As. Let us learn from each other, work hand in hand in order to make all the elderly people of the world to have a colourful and happy life.'