
Empowerment through the arts



By Karen Cho

Hua Dan, a non-profit organisation based in China, is taking a novel approach to helping workers hone their skills. Founded by Briton Caroline Watson, Hua Dan aims to harness the arts to improve people's lives in emerging countries.

“We have a very innovative training model whereby we use applied arts, particularly the art of theatre as a way to do participatory training with populations within China.”

Its uniqueness makes Hua Dan the first of its kind in China and, according to Watson, her interactive theatre-based approach to development is gaining traction in other parts of the world as well.

Bottom-up approach

Watson started first with China because she was “particularly struck by the energy in Beijing,” calling it a very exciting and dynamic city. Yet, she noticed a distinct underclass brought about by the “unprecedented” mass migration of the rural population into the cities.

The new face of charity

Even as Hua Dan is rewriting the book on how to develop the skills of China's blue collar workforce, it too is re-defining how it is being managed as a not-for-profit organisation.

"I believe what's really exciting is that we're creating more opportunities, with more and more convergence between charity in the old sense and even business in the old sense, as well with growing needs to be able to match the social, environmental, economic bottom line. If you stick to a more traditional idea of charity you continue to be very dependent, if you like, on hand-outs," Watson says.

"And whilst you're forming collaborative relationships with foundations and corporations, continuing to do that and finding ways where what your organisation does is creating value in the marketplace. I see no reason why those two parts cannot exist side by side."

But not-for-profit does not mean no profit, and Hua Dan's social enterprise model incorporates training for the corporate sector

“I was interested in the issues of urban development, of rural to urban poverty alleviation, the issues to do with urban poverty as opposed to rural poverty, and different challenges within that dynamic,” she says.

“What we have found is that this bottom of the pyramid within society has incredible dynamism and energy and a great deal of entrepreneurial verve. How can you start looking at it more as like creating leadership at that bottom of the pyramid? Because that's where we need to have leadership - from the top and bottom as well.”

That is where Hua Dan comes in – to help the less educated secure opportunities they would otherwise not have.

“I think that if you're really going to engage people in society, you have to give them skills to really understand what they're capable of within themselves, rather than continuing to believe that education, knowledge and opportunities are purely held within the top echelons of society.”

Soft skills development

Watson says that while Hua Dan's initial projects focused on empowering women, the company has since diversified to soft skills and human potential development. “We're talking about the development of confidence, teamwork, leadership, the ability to think in more creative, innovative ways and to take initiative.”

Because she feels that China's traditional top-down education system is not adequately equipping people for the challenges of the new economy, Watson says Hua Dan teaches the kinds of skills that a truly successful economy needs.

“I think that's going to be particularly obvious in the coming years, as we know with the economic crisis the manufacturing sector is starting to create problems. There are mass job losses starting to happen in China. There needs to be a way to upskill this huge, huge sector of Chinese population to be able to take a greater, more significant part in the knowledge economy we have.”

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