Wider perspective
the aim at Yale-NUS

Plato and Aristotle can wait, classes start with Chinese philosophers

By AMELIA TENG

MOST liberal arts students are schooled in the works of Western thinkers like Plato and Aristotle, but at Yale-NUS College, students will grapple first with ancient Chinese philosophy.

Classes at Singapore’s first liberal arts college have begun and last Tuesday, a class of 16 found themselves comparing the teachings of Chinese philosophers Confucius and Mencius.

In later weeks, they will learn about the Roman Cicero, Hindu scripts like The Bhagavad Gita, and Buddhist texts like The Questions of King Milinda.

In their literature classes, they will read Homer’s epic poem The Odyssey, alongside ancient Indian texts like the Mahabharata and the Ramayana.

They will also study how Asian cultures in Japanese Noh drama, Chinese opera and South-east Asian puppet theatre have influenced modern theatre.

Yale-NUS, a tie-up between Yale and the National University of Singapore, has promised a broad-based education merging East and West.

This “broader training” is a “good challenge” to students to widen their perspectives, said the university’s president, Professor Pericles Lewis.

Yale-NUS professors have been working on the curriculum since July last year.

Unlike in the United States, where there is no prescribed course of study, students at the NUS University Town campus will take common courses in the first two years and focus on a major in the third. They can choose from 14, like urban studies, life sciences and economics.

Aspiring journalist Dennis Chia, 23, said he chose Yale-NUS over the Nanyang Technological University as he wanted “something different”.

“To be a good writer, I need to have a perspective on a lot of things,” said the Singapore Polytechnic graduate, whose father is a taxi driver and mother a housing and insurance agent.

Into his second week of school, he is excited by the environment. “In secondary school and polytechnic, teachers needed to prompt classroom discussions, but here they can’t get students to shut up. Instead they step back and listen to us.”

Some 62 per cent of the university’s first students are Singaporean. The rest are from countries like the US, India, China, Malaysia and Canada. More than half, 55 per cent, are girls.

Students pay an annual tuition fee of $15,000, almost double what their peers pay for general degrees in NUS.

The university took in 155 students this year, and will raise the number next year to 170. It has the capacity for 1,000 students. The college received 11,400 applications for its first intake.

The school has more than 50 full-time teaching faculty, five of whom are Singaporean. The college will have a total of 100 faculty members in time.

Prof Lewis said a committee is looking into different modes of assessment. Currently students have no final exam in the first semester but will be evaluated on projects and assignments, as well as oral and written presentations.

To ease them into school life, each will have an academic advisor, who is also a faculty member, and a mentor on things out of the classroom, like careers, internships, programmes abroad and leadership training.

Like other liberal arts colleges, Yale-NUS aims to teach skills that are relevant across disciplines and professions.

“We’re trying to prepare students for jobs of the future that we don’t even know exist yet,” said dean of international and professional experience Anastasia Vrachnos.

Executive vice-president of academic affairs, Professor Lai Choy Heng from NUS, said that the school’s mission is towards the “more idealistic end of education” in an increasingly sophisticated Singapore.

Students at Yale-NUS can also draw on existing overseas partnerships of both parent institutions. These include Yale’s programmes in European locations and NUS’ programmes in over 80 countries.