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Wu Penghong

Director of the Shanghai Mass Arts Center



In the city of Liaocheng in Shandong Province, a gourd-carving master imparts knowledge at a night school. These schools have become platforms for promoting traditional culture. — IC

“Half of our students were born after the 1990s, and 80 percent are women interested in lifestyle courses,” Wu Penghong, director of the center, told Shanghai Daily. “I’m glad that young people now are keen to keep learning new skills after graduation. Many of the teachers are true masters of their disciplines.”

Zhang said she signed up for night school on a friend’s recommendation.

“I felt that I was gaining weight and my health was suffering from sitting at a desk all day,” she said.

“But gym work was not for me. A friend suggested I learn dancing, which is more fun than jogging or weightlifting.”

Zhang said that the class has a friendly setting with an experienced

dance teacher. After three months, the class was able to dance together to a full piece of music.

“The movements were gentle and uncomplicated, yet they invigorated me with better body coordination,” she said.

Apart from traditionally popular subjects like music and arts, niche classes were added to the school’s autumn curriculum last year and will return for the upcoming spring session. They include lessons in sign language and Traditional Chinese Medicine courses.

In many places across China, night schools are venues that promote cultural awareness. In Inner Mongolia, for example, a class in the traditional Thangka paintings of Xizang is offered,

while African drum lessons are held in a karaoke bar in the city of Chongqing. Subjects like Shaoxing Opera, cross-talk, and diverse dialects are also included in the curriculum.

With government-funded night schools reaching capacity, private institutions are all too eager to take up the slack. However, the lack of supervision over their activities is becoming a challenge.

While recruitment information floods social media, most private night schools don’t reveal who is funding them, and potential students are often told to join online chat groups to sign up for courses.

“If you search the ‘night school’ tag on Xiaohongshu, most posts you find are in accounts under screen names

such as Shanghai Night School or Beijing Night School,” said marketing manager Eva Liang, who was looking for an evening handicrafts course. “First, they asked me to join a chat group on Red, and then on WeChat. When I joined the group, the organizer asked me to add her personal WeChat to pay the deposit.”

Liang said the organizer offered more than 10 types of classes, but none of them was a go until enough people, usually 10 to 20, signed up.

“The chat group had only 72 people, and they all wanted different courses,” she said. “I waited for three days and no handicrafts class was formed.

“When I asked the organizer who was behind the night school, she just said, ‘an institution.’ That smelled fishy.”

Liang also said that descriptions of the courses at the night school often seemed thin on relevance and content information.

She finally concluded, “It might be a good platform to meet people, but not a good way to actually learn anything.”

Wu from the Shanghai Mass Arts Center said it’s not surprising that dubious entities spring up when a popular, trendy business takes off. The result can be confusing and even chaotic.

“We are trying to open classes in companies, suburbs and industrial zones to make it more convenient for people to attend,” he said. “Our goal is for our night school to be available in all towns and subdistricts of Shanghai in three years.”



Last year the Shanghai Citizen Night School targeted expats in a new class on making Chinese snacks. It was so popular that it is likely to be continued this year. — Dong Jun



According to the Shanghai Citizen Night School, 80 percent of the night school attendees are young women, and lifestyle-related courses are especially popular. — IC