



HUFFING AND PUFFING OVER COPPER FISH TOWER

Netizens have raised a stinking row over a tower shaped like a puffer fish on an island in Yangzhong county in Jiangsu province, China, amid unhappiness about extravagant constructions involving state funds. The 15 storey-tall building is encased in 8,920 copper plates and cost around 70 million yuan

(\$14 million) to build. Yangzhong aims to promote it as the world's biggest metal construction in terms of volume. An eight-storey sculpture of Madam Song Qingling, wife of modern China's founding father Sun Yat Sen, had earlier caused a similar uproar.

PHOTO: CHINA NEWS SERVICE

So many varsities, so few students

Hundreds of teachers in Taiwan may lose jobs

By **LEE SEOK HWAI**
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IN TAIPEI

MANY of Taiwan's 120 universities are struggling to survive as enrolment numbers fall in tandem with declining birth rates.

Experts worry that scores of tertiary institutions, most of them private, may be forced to close and leave hundreds, if not thousands, of teachers jobless.

"It will become a very big social problem if such highly educated, mostly middle-aged teachers lose their jobs," said Professor Chou Chu-ing, an education expert at National Chengchi University.

Earlier this month, two dozen teachers and students from the Yung-Ta Institute of Technology

and Commerce in southern Pingtung county protested outside the Education Ministry in Taipei.

The teachers said they had not been paid for eight months, while the students complained that class schedules were still up in the air just one week before the start of the new school year. They all wanted the ministry to take over the running of the private school.

At least eight universities have been shortlisted for closure since last year, ministry officials told lawmakers this week. They were found to have poor enrolment of under 100 students and not to have paid teaching staff.

The problem, officials and analysts agree, lies in Taiwan's declining birth rate. The number of newborns fell below 300,000 for the first time in 1998 and has since slipped to 234,000 by last year. The Education Ministry expects only 170,000 new undergraduates in 2024 compared with 270,000 in 2015.

Some critics blame the glut of universities for exacerbating the problem and the government for not resolving it much earlier.

The oversupply has its roots in an education reform in the 1990s that grew out of a civic movement calling for university education to be made accessible to all Taiwanese. This led the government to relax regulations so that the private sector can set up colleges and to allow polytechnics to be upgraded to university status. Meanwhile, the number of vocational training schools fell from 72 to 14.

The result is that more than 90 per cent of high school graduates qualify to go to university now compared to 30 per cent 20 years ago. The starting salary of graduates is about NT\$25,000 (\$\$1,060), just NT\$2,000 more than that of vocational school graduates, who are now in short supply.

Said Prof Chou: "As an ideal, the aspiration for everyone to have a degree is good. But it becomes a problem when we factor in the realities of the job market."

Associate Professor Chen Cheng-liang, a sociologist at the private Shih Hsin University and secretary-general of a union with 700 tertiary members, reckons that up to 40 universities are in serious trouble.

To make it easy for struggling institutions to drop out, Education Minister Chiang Wei-ling and Interior Minister Lee Hong-yuan suggested this week that the government allow university boards to sell school land to commercial developers and to keep 60 to 80 per cent of the proceeds. Institutions in trouble would also be required to set aside funds to pay all their teaching staff should they be forced to close.

The government has few options, according to Mr Lee. "The problems created by low birth rates and a proliferation of universities have become a political problem with no legal recourse," he said.

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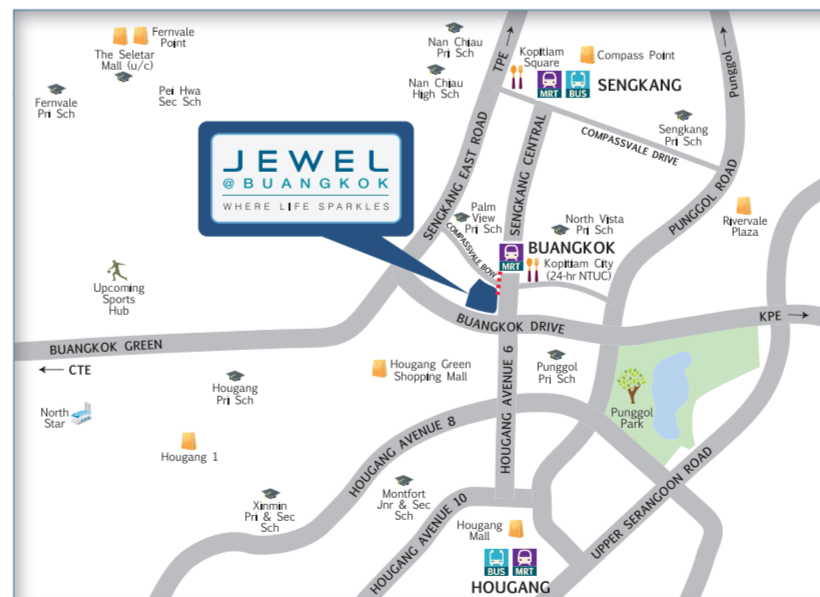


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ASIABRIEFS

Pakistan bomb blast kills 19

PESHAWAR - A powerful bomb tore through a bus carrying government workers in north-west Pakistan yesterday, killing at least 19 people in a region often rocked by attacks by Taliban insurgents, officials said.

More than 40 others were wounded in the attack on the bus hired by the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provincial government to take staff home from work.

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

3 cleared over rail crash

TOKYO - Three former presidents of West Japan Railway, one of the country's biggest rail operators, were cleared yesterday of responsibility for a 2005 train crash that killed more than 100 people in the nation's worst rail disaster in half a century.

The three were all found not guilty of professional negligence over the disaster in the western city of Amagasaki, near Kobe, the Kobe District Court ruled.

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