

Department of

Asian Studies

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Fall 2008

Dear Alumni and Friends:

This is my last “report card,” as I will have completed my five-year appointment as department chair by the end of 2008-09. So it is time to take stock.

When I started, on the same date that Asian Studies became a department, I did not have a “five-year plan,” even though I spent the first thirty-some years of my life in the People’s Republic of China, with Soviet-style economic planning that ran on the arbitrary five-year cycle (presumably of all boom and no bust). I did have a modest wish list, though, which I summed up with three lowercase ‘s’s that added up to a capital ‘S’: namely, space + staff + spending money = Survival. To lift my less ambitious spirit, Professor Miles Fletcher, the previous chair of Asian Studies, added another ‘S’ to my list: “Success.” Well, I can certainly declare that we have survived. As for the question of success: to sound characteristically pedantic in the pretense of the Confucian tradition, only history will judge.

There is no need to rehash the old story about space, left behind since we moved into the classy yet funky New West; the trouble is that we are bursting at the seams in only three years, and will have a new outlying space next year in Hill Hall Annex. This of course has much to do with the growth in our faculty; our full-time permanent positions at professorial and fixed-term ranks have doubled, with six more expected to join the department next year. We have also gone from two part-time staff to two full-time staff. Given the current global economic crisis, I hesitate to bring up the third ‘s,’ but the generous support for Asia-related initiatives has been unprecedented. While most of the funds are earmarked for campus-wide programs administered through Study Abroad, the Carolina Asia Center, and the Honors program, there is no doubt that our students and faculty are the primary beneficiaries. And your gifts made directly to the Department have allowed us to sponsor many curricular and extracurricular activities to enrich student experience and faculty instruction.

OK, let me sound less old-fashioned Chinese and more American: Our department is thriving! In the last academic year we graduated thirty-eight majors, more than twice as many as the five-year mean from 2002-2007. Currently there are over one hundred declared majors. Much of this growth comes in our concentrations in Arab cultures, Chinese, and Japanese, and there will be more in the South Asian studies concentration that was just approved. This heightened interest in our language concentrations seems to signal a sea change in student attitudes; today, more and more students seek the challenge and see the benefits of mastering an Asian language for their future careers.

A related question that I have heard is about the quality of these language concentrations, as if the price of more language learning would be less education in content areas. This reflects a misunderstanding about the nature of language learning at the advanced levels. The fact of the matter is that as a student moves up through the more advanced language courses, they will also learn more content, but through the medium of the target language. It is a more effective approach to developing cultural literacy, communication skills, historical knowledge, and, yes, analytical capacity. And, finally, let’s not forget that the American model of liberal arts education, as embedded in UNC’s General Education curriculum, is very different from Asian and European systems that emphasize specialization for undergraduate education. For all the pros and cons of the U.S. model, graduates from our language concentrations are by nature more “well-rounded” than their Asian and European counterparts.

With more opportunities opening up in Asia, the career options for our majors have significantly broadened. Limited as I am to my firsthand experience with former students in China-related fields, I have seen them employed in a wide array of professions, from more “traditional” fields in academia and government to multinational corporations and nonprofit organizations, as well as their own start-up companies and freelance enterprises. This year’s newsletter features profiles of two Asian Studies graduates whom I met last summer at a Carolina alumni and student gathering in Beijing.

Needless to say, all our success must be attributed to the hard work of our faculty and staff, to the leadership of the administration, and to the generosity of supporters like you. Soon we will have a new chair selected to lead the department to the next level of success. But don’t count me out, since I will still be on the faculty. So please do not hesitate to drop me a note next time you visit Chapel Hill.

With warm regards,



Gang Yue



Hebrew students with their instructor Luceil Friedman at a Hebrew minor graduation party in May 2008



Students and friends of Asian Studies celebrating Iftar with Dr. Nasser Isleem at his home

Elyse Ribbons (Class of 2003) <http://www.iheartbeijing.com>

If you had asked me, as a freshman at Carolina, what I wanted to do with my life, I most certainly would never have said "Theater." And I never would have said anything that had to do with China, either. Yet here I am, a relatively prominent dramaturge in Beijing. After successfully producing two original plays, including the critically acclaimed "I Heart Beijing," I left my cushy job at the U.S. Embassy to create a theater company, and have since produced my first Chinese play (while it did get banned, we still performed at an underground punk club). People often ask me why I live here, and it's not just the thriving arts scene, the fabulous (and cheap!) food, nor the 5,000 years of history. It's their juxtaposition with a frenetically booming economy and shifting cultural paradigms that provides the inspiration for my plays (which are all comedies, of course).

I've also managed to make my fame as the Official Beach Volleyball Model for the Beijing 2008 Olympics. While having a 50-foot version of myself plastered on the side of the Bank of China headquarters has done great things for my issues with hubris, none of this compares to the sense of accomplishment I felt sitting at the Bird's Nest for the opening ceremony on August 8th and reflecting on how amazing it's been to be a part of this dynamic city during the past seven years—and how much I'm looking forward to seeing what happens from here.

Daniel Thompson Paine (Class of 2005)
(Mr. Paine recently left Beijing to enroll in law school at Stanford University.)

"North Korean diplomats lie like rugs," our professor mused in 2004 while describing the challenging ins and outs of the Six-Party Talks, the diplomatic mechanism set up to denuclearize North Korea. The question "What is 'Chinese'?" led me and my classmates through one intellectual maze after another during a semester-long struggle to understand the complexities of Chinese identity. "Did anyone watch the China-Japan game last night?" inquired one beloved Chinese politics professor the day after angry Chinese nationalism reared its ugly face following a seemingly insignificant international soccer match in 2005.

My work in the political section of the U.S. Embassy over the past two years has allowed me to take notes in Six-Party Talks negotiations and to observe North Korean diplomats in person. On my travels through almost every province of China, I've witnessed firsthand just how complex a concept is "China," ethnically, culturally, socially, economically, geographically, and historically. The nationalistic/patriotic explosions of 2008 unfolded before my eyes in the wake of Tibetan riots, international protests against the Olympic torch relay, and the unspeakably tragic Sichuan earthquake. The education I received in Asian Studies prepared me well to observe, digest, and analyze these important events.

Like many students in Asian Studies at Carolina, I chose the major because of my interest in and love for the course material; I wanted to learn more about an area of the world to which American students get little exposure. What I did not realize at the time is that the program was offering me and my classmates infinitely more than just useful background knowledge on Asia. In focusing students on the right questions--the most difficult questions-- to seek answers for, the professors at UNC provide students with the skills to tackle the hard, nuanced issues in this mind-bogglingly complex and rapidly changing region, skills which will serve students well in business, academia, law, government, or any other field they may choose with a connection to Asia. Without these skills, not only would I have brought no value whatsoever to the Embassy, but I would never have been able to enjoy such a fun, fascinating, and enriching experience.

Announcements

New Faculty

Dr. Pamela Lothspeich
Assistant Professor in Hindi-Urdu
and South Asian Cultures
Ph.D. Columbia University,
via Michigan University,
January 1, 2008

Dr. Yaron Shemer
Assistant Professor in Modern Hebrew
and Israeli Culture,
Levine-Sklut Fellow in Jewish Studies
Ph.D. University of Texas—Austin,
via UT—Austin, July 1, 2008

Ms. Fumi Iwashita
Lecturer in Japanese Language
M.A. University of Iowa
July 1, 2008

Promotions

Dr. Sahar Amer,
to Professor,
July 1, 2008

Dr. Li-ling Hsiao,
to Associate Professor,
July 1, 2008

Major Publications

Sahar Amer
*Crossing Borders: Love Between Women
in Medieval French and Arabic Literatures*
University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008.

Jan Bardsley
*The Bluestockings of Japan:
New Woman Essays and Fiction from Seitō*
University of Michigan,
Center for Japanese Studies, 2007.

Make a Gift to Asian Studies

Your gift to Asian Studies supports a number of important initiatives by faculty and students, including outside speakers, cultural events, projects by student groups, and faculty travel to pedagogical workshops and professional conferences.

Please send your contribution to **The UNC-Chapel Hill Development Office, P.O. Box 309, Chapel Hill, NC, 27514-0309**

All contributions are tax-deductible. Thank you for your support.

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