

NEW AND NOTEWORTHY

Growing a Program: Asian Studies at Furman College

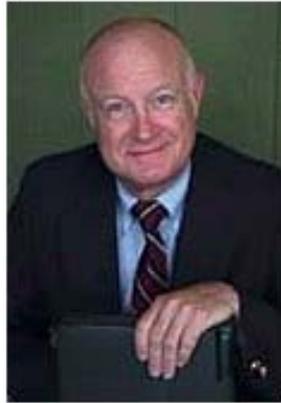
James Leavell

Herring Professor of Asian Studies

*Editors' note: As a means of introducing our **New and Noteworthy** section, we asked Professor Jim Leavell to write the following piece summarizing Furman University's remarkable support and development of its Asian Studies Department and program. In reading about the growth of Asian Studies at Furman, one cannot help but be impressed with the dedication of involved university faculty, the support of selected members of the administration and alumni, and the creative ways in which all constituencies have been able to conceptualize and frame salient curricular issues to enhance the presence of Asian Studies on the Furman campus. There is obviously much that many of us can learn from the "Furman story," as is summarized below.*

The request for an update on Furman University's Asian Studies Department and its program could hardly have come to me at a more pivotal moment. During this 2005-2006 academic year our efforts are moving to a new, higher level of visibility, teaching strength, and range of activity. The present and immediate future look exciting rather than "challenging" as I have so often characterized our situation when conversing with colleagues.

Forgive me, but as a historian I feel the need to provide a bit of background. In 1968 the Furman faculty voted to require that all students take a course about Asia or Africa as a graduation requirement. This decision was the foundation for our current program. Since there were no Asian or African specialists on the faculty at the time and courses were needed to service this requirement, a vigorous retooling effort was launched. India was the initial focus. Eventually, in 1973 Furman hired its first faculty member with a doctorate in an Asian specialty. This first generation of specialists was often asked to teach



courses in several national traditions. As this group retires, we are replacing them with scholars who are more specialized to a single Asian nation.

By 1988 the number of Asian course offerings in the humanities, social sciences, and languages (Chinese and Japanese) had grown to the point that the general faculty approved an Asian Studies major. The dean followed quickly with the creation of an Asian Studies Department, the appointment of a chair of Asian Studies, and the establishment of a small operating budget including funds for library purchases.

But there was ambiguity from the start. What would the role of Asian Studies, be in the hiring of future Asianists? When an Asianist from the Department of History came up for tenure and promotion, what voice would the Department of Asian Studies have in that decision? Were Asianists really under joint contract? The dean never ruled on these basic issues, nor would the next dean clarify the situation. This situation left the chair of Asian Studies with a daunting diplomatic task. Our chair had to negotiate with other chairs regarding class schedules, perusal of teaching evaluations, and availability of Asianists for any number of university-wide activities in which faculty participation was administered through departments. All of this negotiation had to

be managed without clear support from the administration. Asian Studies had no agreed-upon "rights." It was up to the Asian Studies chair to forge firm collegial relations with other chairs.

Making a Success of Failure

A new chapter in Asian Studies development at Furman coincided with our multiple failed attempts to secure either Luce or Freeman grants. Despite these disappointments, but as a result of grant writing discussions, several departments began recognizing the importance of Asia to their own disciplinary programs. Faculty members with South Asian interests were hired in Economics, Religion, and English. The Hindu scholar hired by the Department of Religion came with an energetic spouse qualified to teach Hindi and South Asian music. These hires were accompanied by the addition of two historians—a China scholar and a South Asian specialist.

Pursuit of a Luce grant inspired us to begin a separate fund-raising drive among our graduates. The Ed and Beth Evans Jones Endowed Fund now yields a steadily growing sum of undesignated revenue available for special Asian-related projects each academic year.

Furman's Asianists won a small Mellon faculty enrichment grant to take the entire department on a study tour of Japan in the summer of 2004. The objective was to make all Furman Asianists familiar with the Japanese aspects of our departmental program. We are asking our majors to take courses in India, China, and Japan, but our individual faculty members are becoming increasingly narrow with regard to both training and in-country experience. In addition to visiting museums, historical sites, and sessions with Japanese scholars, the trip included visits to the two campuses where our students participate in foreign study programs. Ultimately, we hope to

duplicate this experience in both India and China.

Following our Japanese sojourn, but completely unrelated to it, a local Japanese-American businessman offered Furman a Buddhist temple building. Relocating the structure from Nagoya took several months and its reassembling has not yet begun, but the Japanese style garden on campus is being completely renovated in preparation to provide a new view from the temple's veranda. Our Japanese philosopher, David Shaner, has turned fund-raiser in an effort to finance the construction of a companion building that will be more suited for multi-use education about Asia. These are not easy times to raise money for such buildings. This endeavor is on-going.

Unexpected Funding

Two years ago a Furman alum quite suddenly and unexpectedly donated one million dollars for strengthening the Chinese aspects of Furman's program. The appointment of a new dean from outside the Furman faculty also added to the new possibilities. At this point we recognized our need for "prophets from afar" who could give us advice and added perspective. We invited two consultants—former ASIANetwork executive director Van Symons, and Neil Kubler. Neil looked specifically at our Chinese language program. Van helped us look more broadly at a variety of possibilities. This consultancy proved to be exactly what we needed. With our new dean taking an active part in the discussions, the entire experience helped us effectively refocus with the administration's enthusiastic support.

In the wake of this consultation, we agreed that the financial gift would be used to secure two new faculty positions—one in Chinese language, the other in economics with an emphasis on China. To hire a much-needed Asian Studies administrative assistant, we augmented resources from the China gift with university operating funds and money from the National Consortium for Teaching about Asia. (Furman has served as the South Carolina NCTA headquarters for three years, but until this arrangement, had never had any staff support.)

We earmarked a portion of the China gift to fund a series of international conferences, but in my view Kate Kaup, our Chinese political scientist, and Jan

Kiely, our Chinese historian, proposed the most creative project. They conceived of offering a heavily subsidized two-week China study trip to a group of fifteen incoming freshmen (fall, 2005). The key requirement of the participants was an agreement to take Chinese language during their freshman year. This has turned out to be pure genius. All incoming freshmen and their parents were made aware of opportunities Furman provides to study about China. This initiative provided our new Chinese language teacher with a highly motivated core of students just back from experience in China. Further, the plan included inviting a tenured faculty member with a non-Asian specialization to team-teach on the study trip along side one of our China scholars. An American historian

worked with this first group, and he is now an enthusiastic promoter of Asian Studies. Next summer's program will include a faculty member from our Department of Communication Studies.

As the request for this piece came to me, our Asian Studies chair was settling into his new office suite that includes a work area for the new administrative assistant as well as a lovely lounge and reading room devoted to Asian Studies. These new amenities have given Asian Studies a highly visible physical space in the very center of the Furman's newly refurbished humanities classroom building. During the past few weeks we have been playing host to candidates for four tenure-track faculty positions we hope will significantly broaden our Asian offerings. Three are completely new—business, economics, and philosophy. The fourth will be my replacement in Japanese history.

Becoming an Equal Partner

The fruition of my hopes for Furman's Asian Studies program came to pass just last week when our dean ruled that the Department of Asian Studies must be treated as an equal partner in future hiring activities as well as decisions of tenure and promotion involving Asianists. All of us will henceforth hold recognized dual appointments. We will now have a

recognized seat at the table. Negotiating skills will remain a necessity for any chair of Asian Studies, but now there will be institutional recognition of our partner role with other departments.

Most of the progress I have outlined above has come from internal efforts. A key catalyst appears to have been our various outreach initiatives that have served to gain recognition for the Asian Studies program. I am tempted to offer the following phrase as the underlying secret for this success story—"Rarely, if ever, say

I am tempted to offer the following phrase as the underlying secret for this success story—"Rarely, if ever, say 'No.'"... In our experience outreach yields significant dividends.

'No.'" Several of my colleagues have shown a spirited willingness to stretch themselves in ways that have increased our visibility. Few words are more pleasing to the

ears of our administrative leaders than praise flowing back to the campus from the community be it local, regional or national. In our experience outreach yields significant dividends.

Much remains to be done at Furman, particularly in the area of language study. Eventually, we hope to offer four solid years of Chinese and Japanese. We are in the planning stage for a foreign study program in South Asia to match our current programs in China and Japan. There are still various academic disciplines at Furman that have no Asian specialist. We need to enrich opportunities for our students by offering more upper-level courses in all the disciplines we Asianists represent. With our department's administrative infrastructure firmly in place and a strong critical mass of Asian specialists on our faculty, we hope to attract additional financial support to meet these goals.

ASIANetwork has provided a community of like-minded undergraduate teacher-scholars for Furman Asianists since the creation of the organization. Many of you joined us for the ASIANetwork annual conference here in South Carolina. It gives me particular pleasure to share with you the current excitement we feel about recent developments here and the potential for further progress. We are both grateful and hopeful.