

Asian Studies—from Behind the Administrator's Desk

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The journey to becoming Provost and Dean of the Faculty at Mills has been an interesting one, an unexpected one, when I consider my early steps in studying Sanskrit and Asian art as an undergraduate, with no thoughts of what my future career would be. I did not train to be an administrator. I was a researcher and scholar first, motivated by my interest in Asian Art. When I arrived at Mills as a junior faculty member I thought that the college had a strong commitment to studying Asia due to its reputation in the San Francisco Bay Area, this was not the case at all, so one of the first things that I did was to organize an Asian Studies Program.

Mills from its inception has had strong ties to Asia due to our location in the San Francisco Bay Area and our founding by Cyrus and Susan Mills who had been missionaries in Ceylon, now Sri Lanka in the early 19th century. The first exhibitions of Asian Art on the West Coast were held at Mills: Chinese Art was shown in 1934 in the new Art Gallery in which appeared many objects that are now in the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco. This was followed by an exhibition of Japanese Art in 1936. Both exhibitions were curated by the eminent East Asian scholar, Alfred Salmony. The first course on Chinese and Japanese Art on the West Coast were also taught at Mills by Dr. Salmony, to be followed by courses in Asian history.

Early Efforts

Despite these early beginnings, however, Asian Studies were not given any particular attention. Besides teaching all the Asian Art History courses at Mills, which included covering the arts of India, China, Japan, Southeast Asia and the Himalayas, I became Chair of the Art Department, a rotating assignment, and then I was appointed Dean of the Division of Fine Arts, which meant that I oversaw the Art Studio, Art History, Dance, Drama, Music and Intermedia Arts departments and programs. It was during this period as Dean that I discovered ASIANetwork. It seemed like an answer to my prayers—at last I had

found an organization that recognized the plight of small liberal arts colleges that try to maintain their Asian Studies programs, let alone promote and grow them in the face of mildly interested administrations and stiff competition from other disciplines all competing for attention and a limited number of dollars.

Contending Interests

In my position as Provost and Dean of the Faculty I recognize the pressures of contending interests: that of the academic programs and their needs, and that of the administration with its responsibility for providing the resources for the entire institution to operate, survive and grow. In the balancing act that I play out daily I am aware of the necessity to maintain an equilibrium and often find myself thinking along the Taoist precepts of needing to seek harmony amongst competing disciplines. With the emphasis on Western languages in our curriculum, I am now able to work with my Associate Provost to introduce a program in Chinese (Mandarin) language studies. This is an important step for us as at last we as an institution are recognizing the fact that the largest Chinese population outside of China/Taiwan resides in California. Mandarin is now offered in many public and private grade schools, and there is the expectation on the part of our students, both Asian and non-Asian, that Asian languages be offered.

I am also in a position to support our junior faculty whose area of research is Asia, both in the courses that they teach and in their areas of research and performance. I am also encouraging faculty in other disciplines to explore and incorporate Asian perspectives such as in Philosophy, Literature, Dance and Music. In fact some of our new faculty, whose disciplines are other than Asia, are pursuing areas of research into Japanese Pop culture and Neo-Confucian ethics as reflections of cultural modernities.

The study of Asia in its great breadth, from art to history, from literature to

politics, and from religion to languages, is uppermost in my mind. I continue to teach a seminar in Asian Art each semester, to curate exhibitions of Asian Art, and to maintain an active role as a member of the Advisory Committee of the Society for Asian Art of the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco. This latter involvement provides me with contacts with people who have a vested interest in Asia. It enables me to set up programs and invite speakers to Mills such as Vishakha Desai, director of the Asia Society, Wu Hung, noted Art Historian and Art Critic at the University of Chicago, Maxine Hong Kingston, well-known writer, and Orville Schell, Dean of the School of Journalism at the University of California, Berkeley.

Although we have the prize-winning author Yiyun Li from Beijing, and the internationally acclaimed artist Hung Liu, also from Beijing, amongst other outstanding Asian faculty members, this advantage has not translated into a curriculum that focuses on Asia. Since being at Mills, I have taken small steps in first developing an Asian Studies Program, and then instituting a minor in Asian Studies; now in my role as a senior college officer I have found that I am in a position to negotiate the corridors of the administration in a far more effective way than I could before.

At last an Asian language will be taught at Mills, a South Asian specialist is teaching courses in Women's Studies, an Asian-Americanist is teaching Asian American studies in the Ethnic Studies Department, and we are planning to offer courses in Chinese literature next year. This past Spring Hung Liu, funded by the Li and Lin Shen Endowment, took ten art students to China, and Wah Cheng took five students to China over the summer as the recipient of a generous grant from the Freeman Foundation and ASIANetwork. With active encouragement for my faculty and with access to resources, I am now able to promote Asian Studies far more effectively and persuasively than previously.