

THE CHALLENGES AND REWARDS OF ASIAN STUDIES AND SOME PERSONAL PERSPECTIVES

Rhoads Murphey

History, University of Michigan

Rhoads Murphey gave the ASIANetwork Conference opening keynote address on Friday, April 26, 1996 at the Hickory Ridge Conference Center. He kindly gave permission to print his talk. For reasons of space, this is an edited version. If you wish to have a copy of Murphey's full address, please contact the Editor.

Professor Murphey has been active in the Association for Asian Studies as editor of the *Journal*, monograph editor, executive secretary, member of the board of directors, and as president. The second edition of his *History of Asia* was published in May 1996 by Talman (512 p., illustrated; ISBN 1886746567; \$36.50 paper).

I am delighted to make this direct acquaintance with your network, the newest member of the extended family of the Association for Asian Studies, and I thank you for inviting me. Although I come from a big university, the University of Michigan, I assure you that we care about the liberal arts too, and have within the larger university a College of Liberal Arts, where I have my being as Professor of History and Director of our program in Asian Studies.

Liberal arts colleges are the keystone of our education system. They keep alive the commitment to learning, to literature, science, history, philosophy, and the arts-and to area studies-for their own sakes, for the enrichment of life, rather than merely job training. Jobs will take up the rest of our students' lives after they graduate. The four years of wider horizons which we offer make it possible to give their lives richer meaning. These years will not come again, so they need to be used well, similar to putting money into the bank for the long future, something on which students can draw as long as they live.

Liberal education

The word, "liberal" has lost its proper meaning in the dust of the political arena. What it has always meant, and still means, is *free*, and in the context of the liberal arts college that means free of the constraints imposed by job training, free to explore the whole world of learning, and free to cultivate one's self as the Confucian scholars sought to do.

After the turbulent 1960s, there began movement toward setting requirements, in effect paradoxically, to oblige students to pursue the freedom which the liberal arts ideal institutionalized, to explore at least some segments of the world of learning in the sciences, literature, the arts, and humanities. Some colleges pushed students in the direction of sampling the world as it really is, by studying cultures other than their own.

This country is dangerously ignorant of the world beyond the end of its own nose. We constitute about four per cent of world population, and although we have disproportionate wealth and consume a disproportionate share of the world's resources, we are necessarily involved with the rest of the world which so outnumbers us. With the best of intentions, we have tried to play the roles of policeman and peacemaker to the world, but our efforts have been hampered or frustrated, as in Vietnam, by our ignorance of what the world in its various parts is like.

The biggest and most important part of that world is Asia where over half of the world's people live among the world's oldest living civilizations. Asian cultures are incomparably rich in their vast historical depth, and their societies and values, formed over many centuries, are different from ours. Asia includes the world's fastest growing economies, with which we are eager to trade and establish some stake through investment. These are powerful reasons to support a major effort to educate our young people about Asia.

Wars in Asia

If any further evidence were needed, one can point out that we have been engaged in four major wars in Asia in this century, beginning with our conquest of Philippines, 1898-1900, our life-and-death struggle with Japan, 1941-1945, our dominant role in the Korean War, 1950-1953, and our tragic misadventure in Vietnam, 1964-1972. In Vietnam, as had been true earlier in China, we pitted our massive "fire power" against what proved to be the even more powerful force of peasant nationalism and its guerrilla strategy. Those of us who saw that struggle in China, and its outcome, feared the worst when the United States took up the bankrupt French cause in Vietnam and then mounted its own ill-fated effort.

We have learned the hard way that ignorance of Asia has resulted in casualties and defeats. It should have been enough to consider the compelling reasons for learning about Asia stated above: its size, numbers, ancient traditions, distinctive societies, and booming economies, or at the very least to have drawn the obvious conclusions from our mistaken judgments over China, without having to pay another measure of American blood, and at the same time to devastate Vietnam, in pursuit of an un-reachable objective. Throughout the Vietnam War, there were a handful of scholars in this country who knew Vietnam's language and history, but none of them were consulted in the shaping of American policy. When will we learn?

The Quiet American

When congressional hearings were held on Vietnam in the early 1970s, then CIA director, William Colby, was asked if he had read Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*, which brilliantly anticipates the quagmire in which we became involved. Colby replied that he hadn't read it, and that "professional intelligence agents"-like the hopeless fool Alden Pyle in Greene's novel-were far better able to understand what was happening. How blind can you get? Pyle was typical of American "intelligence" in those tragic years, not even knowing French let alone Vietnamese and knowing zilch about the country's history or its contemporary forces, his head stuffed instead with pat formulae about the fight against communism and the Red Menace.

If a healthy democracy depends on an informed citizenry, as clearly it does, we have a long way to go, and our colleges have clear roles to play. The interest of this gathering is education about Asia, and all of you in the ASIANetwork are engaged in that

vital task. I wish you well. You are helping to assemble a new generation which, as Asia's dominance of the world increases, will steer toward a fruitful relationship with the Asian countries.

Universal human problems

Equally important, I would argue, is that our graduates understand the richness of Asian civilizations, both for themselves and as invaluable perspectives on our own civilization and society. Asia has generated different solutions to universal human problems; we need to examine them, and to see our own successes and failures in the light of that wider human experience.

In their long history of sophisticated cultures, Asians have cumulatively built up experiences which offer endless rewards for study and enjoyment in poetry, fiction, the writing of history, a variety of religious traditions, music, folklore, dance and dance-dramas, opera, ritual, philosophies, the art of the essay, several forms of encyclopedias and gazetteers, intriguing reflections on the human condition, great epics, story tellers, painting, sculpture, architecture, magnificent ceramics, beautiful minor arts, and lots more.

I hope your institutions require students to take courses on Asia. Requirements are often considered a drag, dampening student and faculty interest. But in a case like this, requirements which involve students in the study of cultures other than their own, are fully justified. Students should be offered some choice of courses to meet the requirement. With a rich smorgasbord from anthropology and art to religion and women's studies from which to select, students do not need to feel restricted in their options.

Thomas Jefferson

Despite our alienation of the rising and immense power of Communist China, our siding with Pakistan as a cold war ally against neutralist India, the bitter legacy of our actions in Vietnam, the brutality of our conquest of Philippines, the insult to all Asians of our Oriental Exclusion Acts, and our full share in the treaty-port world of privilege and discrimination, there remains a reservoir of good will and admiration of the American way among Asians. Much of that admiration is based on our example of wealth and power, which all nations would like to have, and on our technology as a means to such ends. But we are also esteemed for the ideals of our founding fathers and the example of democracy set from the time of Thomas Jefferson.

Our motives in Asia were mixed from the beginning with the search for commercial profits and Christian converts, but also with a genuine desire on the part of Americans, including the missionaries, to help Asians improve their material lot and to "modernize" their countries, American-style. American missionaries were in the forefront of medicine, education, and famine relief in Asia. Later we regarded Asian countries as players in the Cold War, on our side (Japan, Thailand, Pakistan, South Korea) or against us.

The Sand Pebbles

Despite the positive missionary work, Asians had difficulty interpreting our behavior in Asia as consistent with our traditions of freedom and democracy. An example was the presence of our gunboats on China's rivers. This episode was portrayed in Richard McKenna's novel *The Sand Pebbles* (and film with Steve McQueen and Candice Bergen), a thought-provoking picture of China in the 1920s when Americans misunderstood the rise of Chinese nationalism.

Similarly, Indian nationalists hoped that Americans, who won their independence from Britain, would support India in its struggle. But we would not challenge the British, who were our wartime allies against Japan and Germany. Our behavior in Asia, and even at home, where hundreds of Asians were killed in race riots in California and elsewhere, did not conform to Emma Lazarus's moving poem on the base of the Statue of Liberty: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. I lift my lamp beside the golden door."

Nevertheless, the Indian and Vietnamese declarations of independence, in the words of Nehru and Ho Chih Minh respectively, were pattered directly on those of Thomas Jefferson, and these and other American ideals are still looked up to in Asia. We can also take satisfaction from our role in building a genuine parliamentary democracy in Japan, and although most of the credit for this must go to the Japanese and their free choice of such a system, the imprint of the American model is clear.

Surely, our job is to educate a new generation of Americans who will represent the best of this country and its ideals, and who understand Asia. Teaching Asian Studies to undergraduates is a challenge as well as a joy. Most are eager to learn about something outside their own immediate experience. Those of us in Asian Studies have it relatively easy, in the sense that no one is required to take our courses, and there are fewer "practical" pressures on them.

The students who take our courses do so because they are interested for themselves, and that makes it easier and more fun to teach them. Another advantage for us as teachers is that increasing numbers of our students are Asian-Americans, eager to learn more about their heritage-and here they often have the support of their parents.

But Asian-Americans of college age have often grown up in this country and its culture, and they tend to have the same problems as other American teenagers. Perhaps the greatest of these problems is the failure to realize that nothing worth having, including learning, can be won without hard work. Most Asian-Americans are aware that their ancestral cultures, all without exception, emphasize this basic truth, and at the same time put a high priority on learning. Hard work and respect for education account for the brilliant success of Asian cultures in the past and in the contemporary world, records of achievement which put this country in the shade.

The familiar story of the consistently high performance of Asian students in all fields is basically a matter of attitude and priorities. I do not suggest that we should become like, for example, the Japanese, where too little scope has been allowed for young people outside the pressure and grind of school and examinations. We in this country have a different culture, which most of us are used to and generally content with. It would not work to push Americans into a different style.

Hard work

At the same time, we can learn from the Asian example about the importance of hard work as an essential condition for obtaining what we want in life. As teachers, it just doesn't work to give the students what they want, without effort on their part. Many expect that we will amuse or entertain them, show them movies or videos, and that in the process they will learn. While entertainment and films certainly do have a valid place, there is no substitute for individual hard work on the part of the student. Although one must try to reach students where they are, sound learning can not be achieved only through visual aids and without serious attention to the printed word as the major path to learning.

Reading and writing

The decline in reading in the television age was not inevitable-the Japanese, for example, read ten times the number of books Americans do, and yet television is also a major part of Japanese culture. Those who don't read lose the ability to write, or

never acquire it in the first place. An essential part of learning is the discipline of writing about what one has learned. You don't remember well, or you don't *internalize* what you have learned until you are obliged to write about it, to involve yourself with it in an active rather than a merely passive way.

Essay writing

Most students can learn to write not only correct but effective English, sometimes even graceful and imaginative English, which has greatly improved from their earlier efforts on "My Somer at Kamp." I don't assign paper topics, but instead I ask my students to pick an essay topic from material in the course which excites or intrigues them. They are not to spend hours in the library doing "research" since this is not a research paper but an essay. Research comes later when they have acquired deeper knowledge of the field. I want a sample of their thinking and reactions to what we have been reading together. I may have to probe a student's mind, looking for something which will ignite interest as the basis for a paper, but patient discussion usually hits pay dirt.

I find these essays are superior to blue book examinations, especially the so-called "objective" exams-true or false and multiple choice-which are a travesty of learning. It is as time consuming to write "objective" tests, and far less interesting, as it is to read and grade essays. The essays give the teacher a better reading on students, i.e. what they are learning (or failing to learn), what grabs them, and whether they are learning to write effective English. Ideas, perspectives, and new information which students include in their essays enrich the teacher's own store. Furthermore, the essays require writing skills, among the most important skills to acquire. We learn to write by writing under the guidance of a good teacher. There is no other way. "Objective" tests won't do it.

Asian cooking

Holding pot luck dinners at my home helps to build rapport with and among my students for they soon begin to function as a group with a common interest in Asia. Preparing Asian food, anything from India to Indonesia and Japan, is an important part of learning about Asia. Each student cooks something to put on the table, and my wife and I make a big bowl of rice, a large supply of tea, and a dish of Chinese food. Together the class enjoys a great meal.

Sometimes I play a tape I have compiled called "Asia through Music" (a musical version of my course, "Asia through Fiction"). The selections in-

clude examples of Asian music and of Western musical efforts to capture something of Asia. In addition to the music of India, China, Japan, or Korea, the students hear Ravel's beautiful song called simply *Asie*, bits from *The King and I*, *The Mikado*, and *Madame Butterfly*, as well as Ravi Shankar's exciting *Concerto for Sitar and Western Orchestra* and some contemporary Japanese pop music.

The students find all of this a turn-on, and my wife and I enjoy those evenings usually three or four times a term. The dinners help to build a group identity among people in the course, and have led to lasting friendships. I still hear from students who graduated many years ago, especially if they have ended up working in Asia.

Living in Asia

In order to build a personal identification in Asia, I urge my students to travel there. I keep abreast of costs and conditions in each Asian country, on cheapo flights, places to stay, and possibilities for earning one's way by teaching English. Lengthy, personal experience on the ground offers a different dimension of learning than can be had from books or courses, and it usually sticks with you for longer. Further, one develops a deeper and more valid understanding of any culture by living and working in it as a participant than by simply traveling through it as a tourist.

The Peace Corps offers a wonderful opportunity to get to know Thailand, Nepal, China, Philippines, or Indonesia, and soon Cambodia. Non-governmental organizations offer the chance to be of service in areas of need in Asia. Those who have had some Asian working experience are among the most successful graduate students, and later, professionals. In addition, their language proficiency is acquired more easily and deeply than is possible in any classroom. It is worth saying again that while you can make a start on learning language in a classroom, you must spend a year or more, where it is spoken all around you, and ideally separated from others to whom you would speak in English, if you are to acquire real mastery. Living and working in Asia are appealing ideas to students in our field, and they need little urging to pursue that option.

I wish we could be more encouraging to undergraduates, especially seniors, about job opportunities for students in Asian Studies. Although currently almost no undergraduate degrees lead to a job, there is no doubt that as Asia becomes more important to this country, jobs will be generated for people who know something about Asia.

Trade in Asia

American trade across the Pacific has been our major commercial flow for well over fifteen years, far greater than our trade with Europe. American companies and banks are busily setting up offices in Asia, and in many cases manufacturing plants. China has begun to edge into the automobile age, and it is not surprising that General Motors has recently contracted to build a huge car factory in Shanghai. American companies have long farmed out much of their production to lower wage labor in Asia. These are just examples of widening American involvement in Asia's mounting economic boom, with more to come in Vietnam, Burma, and Philip-pines. It is likely that our Asian Studies graduates will find a market for their skills.

In the area of the university, although academic jobs are scarce, there remains a need for new recruits as professorial retirements continue and as Asian Studies programs expand. Asia is now taught in almost every college. We have grown as professionals from a handful in the early days of the Far Eastern Association, when we all knew each other, to the more than 8000 AAS members of today. Most of us who have been teaching in this field for a while entered academe at a good time, when facilities and programs were expanding and when fellowship and grant money was plentiful. Those halcyon days are not likely to come again.

This country grossly undervalues education at all levels. We invest far less in education than comparable countries, and less than many developing ones. This short sighted view has a negative effect on all aspects of American life, including that sacred cow, our economic growth rate. Our schools turn out uneducated 18-year olds, and our colleges and universities have to make up what in other countries students learn in the school systems. Computeriza-tion of everything, the current "solution" to our edu-cational problems, will do little or nothing to resolve this, despite President Clinton's apparent faith in it as a panacea for our ills. There will remain a place, however, in our colleges and universities, and hope-fully in many of our high schools, for programs in Asian Studies, and our graduates will have to staff them.

The Burma Road

I came into our field almost by accident, or as a result of the fortunes of war. I originally aimed at high school teaching of European and American history, but World War II intervened, and I joined an international medical relief organization, founded in

England, called the Friends Ambulance Unit. They sent me to China, by way of six weeks in India awaiting passage over the Hump. The Japanese had closed the Burma Road in May 1942 while I was still at sea and thus I was diverted to India instead of going to Rangoon. I was fascinated by everything I saw and experienced in India, and spent four years in China, with time in Burma during the closing months of the war and another six weeks in India on the way home.

These experiences left me with a lifelong addic-tion to Asia. I returned late in 1946 to graduate study under John Fairbank and Ed Reischauer, learned to read more adequately, and was obliged to watch while the new Communist government closed China, especially to Americans. I seized the chance to spend two years in India and Sri Lanka, organiz-ing conferences, financed by the Ford Foundation, for junior development officials of Asian and West-ern governments. I traveled to nearly all of the countries in Asia, including my first visits to Japan, Korea, and the countries of Southeast Asia beyond Burma. I then returned to the University of Wash-ington, from which I moved in 1964 to my present position at the University of Michigan. Before I left Seattle, I had become the editor of the *Journal of Asian Studies*, and have worked within the AAS in various roles ever since, including seven and a half years as Secretary-Treasurer.

Teaching about Asia has fascinated me and has been my major occupation and satisfaction. Like most teachers, I arrange for time to spend in my area of study, and try to finance it through sabbati-cal leaves, grants, fellowships, or by teaching abroad. Through combinations of such means, I have been fortunate to return to Asia repeatedly.

China

China first won my heart-and now concerns me as the country pursues Mammon at any cost, trashes its delightful traditional past (as in the universal destruction of the city walls and gates which once beautified the cities, now merely second-class copies of the worst in Western urbanism), and as the gov-ernment is set on a collision course with the United States over its export of weapons to Pakistan, Iran and Iraq and over its flouting of what we regard as fair trade practices.

Marco Polo

It is not generally known that our trade deficit with China is a close second to that with Japan, a realization that is likely to become a sore issue. What has prevented this so far is American eager-

ness to cash in on selling to the huge China market, a dream as old as Marco Polo. But China has always been capable of meeting most of its own needs. The pot of gold at the end of the rainbow has stayed there, just over the horizon, and seems likely to remain so, especially when so many countries, including highly competitive ones, are equally eager to make money by selling to China. Of course China will buy industrial and other technology when foreigners have something attractive to offer-but which foreigners will get the business? Despite the immensity of the China market, how will any given foreign country benefit as a whole as compared with the lucky individual firms?

Despite these and other misgivings, I return to China whenever I can, and in fact am about to go again for a reunion of some of my buddies with whom I drove medical supply trucks along the Burma Road and its connections. We will travel by bus and revisit the cities and towns, large and small, we once knew so well. I know from visiting most of them in recent years that the cities will be unrecognizable to those who have not seen them since 1946. But for all the changes, the Chinese people remain basically the same; it is they who won our hearts in the 1940s, together with the magnificent mountain landscapes through which our roads ran in Yunnan, Kweichow (Guizhou), and Szechuan (Sichuan). It will be a sentimental journey for all of us, but China and India and the rest of Asia have never been far beyond my personal horizons, and never will be.

I suppose my own experiences of living or traveling in every Asian country (even briefly in southwest Asia, Iran, and Afghanistan) lead me to urge my students to acquire familiarity with all of them. Undergraduates tend to stick to the study of one country and its language, as do their teachers, most of whom are single-country specialists, and specialize further by discipline and period. It is true that it takes the better part of a lifetime to acquire mastery of even one of these country-specific specialties.

Comparative studies

On the other hand, such single-mindedness sacrifices the immense benefits of comparative study, and the personal enrichment of knowledge of the rest of the Asian scene. East Asia-China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam-is commonly studied as a unit for obvious reasons. One cannot understand Japan, at any period, without a knowledge of China, the origin of so much of Japanese civilization. China is also central to the study of Korea and Vietnam, each of which has been even more intimately involved with China throughout its history.

Dealing with East Asia as an interdependent unit generates comparative study of enormous value. Two examples include 1) the contrasts between and the reasons for Japan's astonishing success in confronting the Western challenge while China floundered, and 2) the nature and reasons for Japan's departure from Chinese norms in every field despite its massive adoption of Chinese civilization. Examination of either question, and a host of others, can shed light on each country which would not be obtained by studying them separately.

Such a perspective is an equally valuable product of comparative study of Asia as a whole. What makes India different from China, despite the strong similarities between them, as peasant societies within continental states supporting immense bureaucracies with imperial pretensions? Such questions shed new light on each country being compared. What distinguishes Southeast Asia from its huge continental neighbors, from which most of its people and much of its literate culture originally came? If you don't compare, based necessarily on some knowledge of each of the cultures being compared, you acquire only a limited understanding of the country of your specialization.

A degree in Asian Studies *should* mean at least some acquaintance with all of its major cultures, both for comparative purposes and for personal enrichment. The students of East Asia should take survey courses on India and/or Southeast Asia, and of course vice versa for the Indianists and Southeast Asianists. In my smaller courses for upper-class students, I make a point of treating all of Asia, however briefly, mainly in the context of modern history where developments in each country converge. The varied richness of Asian civilization as a whole cries out to be at least sampled. And finally, speaking of perspective, one cannot do better than to make friends in each country, and to learn to see the world at least in part through their eyes.

We share a truly wonderful field, and we need to be more involved in active sharing, across the conventional specialist lines. I congratulate you on having chosen such a richly rewarding profession!

Contact: Rhoads Murphey, History, University of Michigan, 3601 Haven Hall, Ann Arbor, MI 48109; Tel: 313/764-6305; Fax: 313/747-4881