

# *Book Review:* *Asia in the* *Undergraduate Curriculum*

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Suzanne Wilson Barnett and Van Jay Symons, editors, *Asia in the Undergraduate Curriculum: A Case for Asian Studies in Liberal Arts Education*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2000, 170 pp.

Rarely does a book embrace in such short compass both the theoretical and practical sides of its topic with such success. Barnett and Symons have polished to 150 pages six excellent essays on the history, current operation, and future of Asian studies as part of liberal arts education at small colleges in the United States. Readers of these essays will gain not only an articulate defense of the importance of Asian studies in liberal education, but also real challenges to our assumptions about our work as Asianists in liberal arts colleges and a succinct account of the practical measures in curriculum, languages programs, and overseas studies which successful Asian studies programs use. In all, this is an excellent book to press upon your college president or Dean or to use at the heart of a retreat for Asian Studies faculty.

The six chapter authors represent historical studies, religious studies, anthropology, and language study, as well as specialists on China, Japan, Southeast Asia, and India. All, save Ainslie T. Embree (Emeritus, Columbia University), are long-time liberal arts college teachers. Thomas B. Coburn lays out the case for Asian studies in the liberal arts curriculum nicely in the first chapter. Samuel Hideo Yamashita recounts succinctly what we have achieved in liberal arts Asian studies programs over the century. Stanley L. Mickel both makes the case for and provides wonderful practical information on serious language instruction at the college level. Stephen P. Nussbaum similarly lays down the best 20 pages I've ever read on the why and how-to's of study abroad in Asia. Rita Smith Kipp challenges us to "re-map" our approach to Asian studies in order to meet future pressures. Finally, Ainslie T. Embree provides an eloquent overview from his considerable experience of these issues.

Throughout the book the constant impression is one of a missionary endeavor re-creating itself. Indeed, Yamashita's and Embree's chapters recount the literal influence of Protestant missions in Asian studies in many

American colleges. The intelligence and energy of our predecessors is matched by the clear, insightful, and efficient writing of the six chapter authors showing how that mission has evolved. I often found myself feeling "proud to be on this team"—not the usual status of liberal arts teachers in research-driven publication-documented US academia. Readers will likely find felicitous phrasing of deeply held convictions in these pages, as well as some unsettling challenges worth considering. I will cite just a few, but want to give pride of space to Tom Coburn's call to arms:

What is at stake, then, in making a place today for Asian studies in American colleges and universities is not just redressing the balance between "West" and "East," a conceptualization of vanishing validity. The core issue is not simply how best to prepare our students to live with the broadest horizons to their imaginations and understandings of citizenship, with a global understanding of the sphere of humane literacy. What is also at stake is redeeming the academy itself from some of the long-unresolved tensions in its own history, from some of its own recent and introverted preoccupation with theory—and thereby from the scorn it has earned, often justifiably, in the eyes of a skeptical public that yearns for help in living amid the complexities of our increasingly American-and-Asian world. (15)

The heart of the matter in doing this, and the most expensive components in liberal arts Asian studies education, is language study and study abroad. Mickel convincingly maintains that language study "is a key that opens another door to the liberal arts for students" (52) and Nussbaum shows us how and why study abroad is the quintessential, and often most extreme, form of liberal learning as a "total" educational experience. (76) Kipp's essay is a prime example of the

theoretical and practical contributions of this book as she challenges our assumptions of metageography and “culture,” while reviewing the adjustments a newly Ph.D.-ed scholar must make to work in the liberal arts environment and making a sound case for critically reintroducing geography into our teaching. Yamashita’s balanced history of Asian studies programs at liberal arts colleges reminds us not only of the efforts of our forebearers but that our current form of Asian Studies (not to mention colleges) is contingent and constructed—we can change almost any part of what we do, since we have in the past. He also demonstrates the importance of administrative and intellectual leadership on the most successful campuses (45)—something ASIANetwork’s Luce Consultancies have worked to support in recent years. Embree leaves us with a post-modern challenge that reminds us that our task is not new: “Asian studies should do something analogous to what an art critic argues that contemporary art does through a continuous stressing of the value of discovers—to sort out those aging ideas that get encrusted around past creative achievements and clog the proper working of the imagination in changing times.” (134)

In the Prologue Barnett and Symons invite the reader “to reflect upon the meaning of the liberal arts and the appeal of Asian studies in the liberal arts context.” (xiii) For me, I was challenged by nearly every chapter to consider what I want Asian studies learning to achieve during my classes, at my campus, and in my community. The “Asian” heritage of Confucius or the Arthashastra is as much a part of my (Anglo-Austro-American) heritage as is the “Western” heritage of Socrates or Locke a part of the Chinese or Indian heritages. To make this truth more than a bromide is surely one of the tasks of Asian Studies in American education. In the academy, Liberal Arts colleges and teachers are uniquely placed to pursue this challenge through interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary teaching (often supported by co-teaching to small classes where active learning is increasingly the norm). We are set to explore: what next? if not “Asian studies,” then what? This book provides an excellent base line of our achievements and current goals, as well as some challenges to move us forward. ASIANetwork provides a perfect forum in our annual meetings devoted to teaching practices and curricular developments to help us do this path-breaking work.

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# ASIA

in the  
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A Case for Asian Studies in  
Liberal Arts Education



Suzanne Wilson Barnett  
and Van Jay Symons  
Editors

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A CONSORTIUM OF LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES  
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