

Scholars at Risk and Asian Studies

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For the past five years, an international initiative called Scholars at Risk (SAR) has provided opportunities for overseas academics and intellectuals to teach in American colleges and universities. For institutions attempting to diversify their faculty and broaden their Asian Studies offerings, Scholars at Risk might provide short-term assistance—while simultaneously providing help to a refugee in need.

As stated on its website, “Scholars at Risk is an international network of universities and colleges working to promote academic freedom and to defend the human rights of scholars worldwide. The network arranges short-term academic positions for scholars of any discipline and from any country who suffer violence or other threats because of their work, prominence, or exercise of basic rights. Since 2000, SAR has worked on more than 700 requests for assistance from scholars from more than 90 countries around the world, intervening in more than 100 cases and arranging positions for dozens of scholars.”¹ This year, there are 30-40

scholars who have been placed in academic institutions in the U.S. and internationally, 34% of whom are from Asia.

Last year, Illinois Wesleyan University, as a founding member of SAR, sought to strengthen its African Studies Program by extending a year-long faculty appointment to Dr. Tatah Mentan, of Cameroon. We believe that our experience in hosting Dr. Mentan might be of interest to ASIANetwork members who may wish to become directly involved with SAR and sponsor an Asian scholar or take advantage of the other activities promoted by the network.

Upon deciding to become a member of SAR and agreeing to potentially host a scholar at risk, the Illinois Wesleyan faculty and administration believed that as a small, liberal arts institution, it was important to seek scholars who were interested in undergraduate teaching as well as in

pursuing their own research agendas. It was critical to select a scholar whose English was adequate for pedagogical purposes, and it was important to make sure that our scholar would be willing to take advantage of our college environment, participate in a year long orientation for new faculty, serve as a guest speaker in a number of classroom settings, give public lectures, and participate in co-curricular events while teaching selected courses. At the same time, we understood that offering an appointment to a scholar at risk was quite different from simply hiring an adjunct or temporary faculty member. This individual needed to be given the time to complete her/his research projects and seek more permanent employment once the academic year was completed.

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With these considerations in mind, we canvassed the members of our International Studies faculty, the Acting Dean of the Faculty, and the Acting Provost, and decided to offer support for Dr. Mentan if he agreed to come to our institution and teach at a reduced load for the academic year. Our interest in his case helped Dr. Mentan secure matching financial support from the International Institute of Education’s Scholars Rescue Fund. The fund awards fellowships to institutions for support of scholars at risk and to other individuals in similar circumstances, on a matching basis, up to \$20,000. As a result, we were able to host Dr. Mentan for the 2004-2005 academic year.

While there certainly are challenges in hosting a scholar at risk, we were able to address such challenges successfully and we believe that our entire campus benefited tremendously from Dr. Mentan’s presence. Aware that the mission, purpose, and organization of the small liberal arts college need to be articulated clearly to those unfamiliar with its history and ethos, we invited Dr. Mentan to come to campus in the late spring of 2004. He gave a public lecture and was introduced to the university

and local communities with enough time so as to be able to manage a smooth

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relocation months before the beginning of the new academic year in the fall. Once he arrived, faculty colleagues held social gatherings in his honor, donated a bed and television to help him furnish his apartment, and made a concerted effort to make him feel accepted into the university community. These efforts continued throughout the academic year.

Separation from family and relatives, feelings of displacement, and uncertainty regarding one’s future career opportunities are natural concerns often facing scholars at risk, even after securing a temporary university placement. Thus, the inclusive atmosphere that a small liberal arts environment can offer to these scholars is extremely important. At the same time, it is essential that a scholar at risk not be exoticized because of the difficult, even horrendous experiences she/he may have previously encountered. One must be sensitive to the needs of the scholar, understanding that the decision to share the details of past personal experiences that may include tragic and horrific details must be voluntary and can never be pressured or coerced. In Dr. Mentan’s case, the different constituencies with whom he interacted were sensitive to these concerns.

At the same time, his stay was well publicized throughout the local community, and as a result, Dr. Mentan was interviewed by the local newspaper, appeared on the local NPR affiliate, and gave public

(continued on page 29)

When we walked into the large and modern kitchen area where Mr. Yamaguchi makes his sweets, we found an interesting *wagashi* called *Sawabe no hotaru*, literally, “the fireflies by the marsh.” Mr. Yamaguchi first made red azuki bean paste that was shaped into small balls and tinted them the green of early summer leaves. He then made several small bean-shaped azuki and placed them on top of the green dough. Then he covered the entire sweet with a clear arrowroot starch to give it a shiny summery look. But what made this *okashi* more than just another summer treat was the name that Mr. Yamaguchi decided to use. “*Sawabe no hotaru* sounds so very smooth” we thought, and we asked him: “How did you come up with this name?” He smiled and began reciting a poem by Izumi Shikibu which is included in a collection of poetry called *Goshūishū Wakashū Later Collection of Gleanings of Japanese Poetry*, 1086 CE). This collection was celebrated for the number of poems by women poets who had dominated the poetry world for several decades. With no oblique or elegant logic separating the poet from the reader, the poems by Izumi Shikibu presented directly her raw emotions; and Mr. Yamaguchi reminded us that fireflies are often linked in classical poetry with the transcendence of human life. Izumi

Shikibu, then, mourns her dead love, Prince Atsumichi with the following:

mono omoeba

My mind is filled with
thoughts of him,

sawa no hotaru mo

So, I see the firefly of the
marsh

waga mi yori

as my life-spirit,

akugareizuru

Leaving my body behind,

tama ka to zo miru

Flickering off into the
darkness.

Mr. Yamaguchi wraps his azuki-bean “fireflies” in a cool layer of arrowroot gelatin; but the passion in Izumi Shikibu’s poem makes the “fireflies in the marsh” an image of love that cannot be quenched. What a truly enchanting way to enjoy one of the *wagashi* of early summer! Eating the poem, we had entered into a privileged Kyōto world that faces both back to the Heian Period and forward into a very contemporary 2004. We had put ourselves in a delectable “present” but we felt ripe with inheritance. It was just at this point, however, that Mr. Yamaguchi brought us back to reality, helping us to avoid a languid aestheticism and placed us carefully back into the kitchen. Mr. Yamaguchi showed us how to make a hydrangea. “Leave the fireflies and make an *ajisai*, a hydrangea,” he said.

During the rainy season in June we had to agree that there was little that could compare with the beauty of hydrangea laden with drops of rain. Hidden away in Japanese gardens until the 18th century, hydrangeas represent the perfect symbol for the Heian period ideal of *mono-no aware*, that sense of awe and surprise when a person encounters the beauty of change. Deftly and with a practiced hand, Mr. Yamaguchi places a small ball of red azuki beans in the palm of his left hand and proceeds to cover it with small filaments [*nerikiri*] of light purple and white azuki bean paste. Then he drops small squares of clear gelatin [*kanten*] that shine like cool raindrops. In minutes, he produces five hydrangeas, seven hydrangeas.

Our attempts failed miserably, but as Mr. Yamaguchi pointed out, “yours may not look like the ones I made, but they’ll taste just as good.” We had come to eat the “season,” and we left with a more profound understanding that each day brings its own season, and with each day, Mr. Yamaguchi regales the world with different kind of *kyōgashi*. In three hours on a humid and rainy June in 2004, we savored three different kinds of *kyōgashi* and returned from our gilded journey with a better sense of what it means to serve and to present a bowl of tea and a taste of the season.

Scholars at Risk (continued from page 26)

lectures at other universities in the area. A feature article that appeared in the university alumni magazine was posted on Illinois Wesleyan and SAR websites, soliciting more interest in his visit and in the operations of the network.

Ultimately, Illinois Wesleyan University was successful in sponsoring its scholar at risk because the fit between the individual, his departmental affiliation, and the institution was a good one. Even more importantly, many individuals worked diligently to make our scholar’s experience as positive as possible. In this case, students came in contact with a teacher whose variety and depth of experience was moving and significant. Professor Mentan, for example, led and participated in intense discussions and lectures involving the genocide in Darfur, the impact of colonialism upon the African state, and the nature of transnational identities while also teaching foundational courses in comparative and international politics. Our African Studies Program was energized as a result of Dr. Mentan’s presence, and we believe that he appreciated being treated with collegial respect and support.

Although hosting a scholar at risk is the key function of SAR, the organization provides other activities as well. Many institutions that are not in a position to sponsor scholars for an entire academic year still utilize the Scholars at Risk Speaker Series or attend regional and national network conferences and events so as to demonstrate support for the protection of academic freedom on a global basis. At the same time, they have found that participating in SAR activities can strengthen efforts to internationalize the undergraduate curriculum in numerous ways. Illinois Wesleyan, for example, has tapped into the SAR Speaker Series to bring experts to campus whose work has focused upon the treatment of women in Pakistan and in Chechnya. For those of us with specific interests in Asia, participation in SAR is an option that offers a number of exciting possibilities. To obtain additional information about Scholars at Risk, please contact Carla Stuart, Program Officer, at <Carla.Stuart@nyu.edu>. The SAR webpage is footnoted below.

Endnotes

¹ Scholars at Risk Network, <http://www.scholarsatrisk.nyu.edu>