



As the global economy shifts from concept to reality, the St. Olaf Asian Studies Department is educating students to better understand & embrace an increasingly dynamic region of the world.

BY MARLA HILL HOLT '88



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# IN THE CITY



YOU CAN HARDLY FOLLOW THE NEWS today without reading something about the Chinese economy or the latest Japanese technological innovation. From our Nintendo Wiis and Sony PlayStations to our Toyotas, sushi bars, and tattoos, Asian influences are everywhere in today's global marketplace.

Asia — its philosophies, religions, scientific and technological advancements, and pop culture — has fascinated us for hundreds of years. As the world continues to shrink in today's digital age, the need for education about the region continues to grow as we become increasingly aware of the importance of comprehending the vast set of experiences, ideas, and challenges Asia presents.

At St. Olaf, the Asian Studies Department has embraced that fascination, attracting more and more students who clamor for a comprehensive, interdisciplinary, and transnational understanding of Asia. They come to St. Olaf with a range of early knowledge of the region, which, like that of the rest of us, is mostly drawn from pop culture. As a little girl living in Pennsylvania, Katharine Bureman '11 fell in love with a pop-up book about Japan. Languages captivated Steven Braun '11 in fifth grade, and he eventually took five years of Japanese prior to college. George Arceneaux '11, a "gigantic" Godzilla fan as a kid, recalls learning a bit about China in his Lafayette, Louisiana, middle school, but says, "I came to St. Olaf not really knowing anything about Asia, and it really intrigued me. It's an entire part of the world that I just hadn't learned about because my education, to that point, had been so focused on the West."

That range in experience is just as it should be: as much as their initial interests in Asia influenced them, it is their St. Olaf education that shapes a deeper understanding and appreciation for the region and what it will mean to them after they graduate.

"Students come to college with a much broader cultural knowledge of Asia than they used to have. The region is no longer seen as 'other' or 'exotic,'" says Barbara Reed, professor of religion and Asian studies and chair of the Asian studies department. "We take that eagerness to learn and pair it with an exemplary program that integrates language study with an interdisciplinary curriculum."



WITH ITS WEALTH OF CULTURAL, historical, religious, and political diversity, Asia is an important geopolitical region that has experienced unprecedented economic change and is home to more than half the world's population.

For St. Olaf students, and particularly those interested in more than just an American perspective, a major in Asian studies rep-

resents what the liberal arts is all about: an integrated program of study in which students choose from courses in languages, linguistics, literature, film, economics, history, religion, art history, political science, anthropology, philosophy, and psychology. Interdisciplinary courses about Asia also are key to the major.

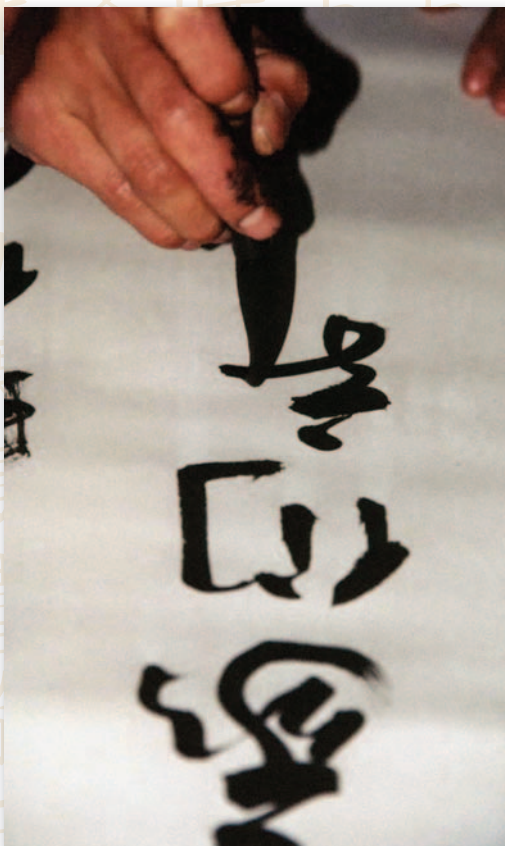
The study of Asia is a significant component in equipping students to be effective global citizens. "A St. Olaf education is about the liberal arts, rooted in the Christian gospel, with a global perspective," Reed says. "It's not about a narrow career path or singular disciplinary path but about what human beings need to understand about the world in order to have meaningful lives of purpose. Asian studies is spread across the curriculum, and each faculty member has different disciplinary interests, but it's an easy field in which to make connections because we share the common interest of a very dynamic region of the world."

Steven Braun, a double major in chemistry and Asian studies, came to St. Olaf with a fairly in-depth background in the Japanese language. He says he was acquainted with Japanese society and culture but "really didn't know much about Japanese history or anything at all about China." After continuing Japanese language instruction and enrolling in Asian Conversations, the sophomore-level sequence of three linked courses, Braun started to see the bigger picture of Asia as a whole. "St. Olaf emphasizes interconnectedness when studying Asian culture and society," Braun says. "I had previously thought of China and Japan as completely separate entities with differing cultures, politics, and histories. Now I see the political, economic, and social connectedness between the two."

Multiple entry points into the major makes it attractive to students by allowing them to follow their passions. "I liked the freedom that Asian studies had, allowing me to take courses from any area that interested me, whether that was sociology, history, or political science," says Rose Keimig '06, an Asian studies major who signed up for her first course in Asian studies on a "whim," and then struggled to name more than three Asian countries on the first day of class. "The professors were so passionate about their fields and so supportive of students, no matter what your level of expertise was about Asia," Keimig recalls. Keimig earned a Fulbright Fellowship to China after graduation, combining her passions for softball — she was a



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LAUREN GLOEDE '04



SONJA TOSTESON '10



ARON SHAND '02



NOLA HUNT '07



ERIN MCKEE-VAN SLOOTEN '04



DEBORAH KESSEL '01

varsity player at St. Olaf — and Chinese by studying the cultural communications between the Chinese national women's softball team and its American coach. She currently is in a Ph.D. program in anthropology at Yale University.

George Arceneaux, a double major in computer science and Asian studies, has a love of technology and was first attracted to Asian studies through film, particularly anime. He hopes the practical skills he's learning in computer science, combined with his Japanese language ability and his major in Asian studies, will lead to a career in the technology sector. An Interim abroad in China and Japan opened his eyes to other possibilities and perspectives, he says. "Studying in Asia helped me to better understand that America is not the only place in the world," he says. "I've gained a better appreciation of Japan and its perspective, and I've gained humility as well."



THE STUDY OF ASIA is hardly a new venture at St. Olaf, which has a rich and lengthy history with the region. The college has had a connection with East Asia since the early 1900s, when students did missionary work in China. Agnes Kittelsby, a member of the Class of 1900, taught history, German, English, and Latin at St. Olaf after graduating. In 1914 she left for China, where she built a preparatory school at Kikungshan near the Peking-Hankow Railway for the children of American missionaries. Kittelsby ran the school until her health deteriorated and Dr. Clemens Granskou '17 took her place. Granskou, president of St. Olaf from 1943 to 1963, was a teacher and missionary in China in the 1920s. Rev. Arne Sovik '39 notes the interesting history that St. Olaf was "a stopping place for the famous Christian warlord Marshal Feng Yu-hsiang when he visited the United States on his fateful round-the-world tour in 1947. He had known Oles in China." Since 1905, numerous alumni, faculty, and college administrators have either been missionaries in China or have had family and missionary ties with the region, and others have pursued academic interests in Asia ranging from art history, religion, literature, sociology, history, music, economics, and politics.

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MICHAEL COLE '86, [RIGHTSITE.ASIA](http://RIGHTSITE.ASIA)

was the religious connection of the college — the missionaries who had gone to China and returned to St. Olaf to teach," says Robert Entenmann, professor of history and Asian studies and keeper of the Asian studies department's history.

The first course on Asia offered at St. Olaf was "History of the Far East" in 1937; at the time, such a course was highly unusual for a liberal arts college. Courses with an Asian focus remained limited to history curriculum until 1964, when the religion department offered a comparative religion course primarily focused on the religions of Asia. The first Asian studies international program began in 1966 as the Term in Thailand. Today, the program is called Term in Asia, with students traveling to Thailand, China, Japan, and Vietnam; numerous other programs give students the opportunity to study in Asia.

Asian studies at St. Olaf began formally in 1968 as a program of course offerings about Asia. Chinese language courses were introduced in 1973, followed by Japanese language in 1988. The curriculum continued to develop throughout the 1970s and 1980s, as St. Olaf hired several faculty members in the early 1980s to strengthen its offerings. Richard Bodman, associate professor emeritus of Chinese and Asian studies, Entenmann, and Reed all came on board between 1980 and 1982. In 1997, the program became the Department of Asian Studies. Grant funding has supported further faculty hiring, and the department now has ten permanent faculty, half of whom are full-time in the department. Between twenty and twenty-five Asian studies majors graduate each year.

St. Olaf's Asian studies curriculum has focused mainly on East Asia, as has been the case historically with Asian studies at colleges across the nation. The breadth of St. Olaf's Asian studies faculty, however, is distinctive, given the size of the college.

"We are envious for the number of faculty we have and for the range of disciplines they represent," says Phyllis Larson, professor of Japanese and Asian studies and associate dean for interdisciplinary and general studies.



AT THE CORE OF ASIAN STUDIES at St. Olaf is a commitment to teach Japanese and Chinese, with the college offering four years of instruction in both languages. Over the past two years, the department averaged ninety students enrolled in first- through fourth-level Chinese and eighty-two students in Japanese.

"Knowing the language, or at least trying to learn the language, is an important window into another culture," says Rika Ito, associate professor of Japanese and Asian studies.

Some students are now arriving at St. Olaf with background in the languages, and demand for higher-level instruction has increased, according to Larson. The department, with the help of grant funding, is working to enrich its curriculum through building a framework of content-based instruction, which provides students the ability to access authentic materials.

"There are Web tools available that allow students to read and pronounce things as well as understand data," Larson says. Because Chinese and Japanese are difficult languages to learn, she believes such content-based instruction will help students to develop a deeper intellectual engagement with the languages without having to wait two, three, or four years to do so.



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“We want to give students tools that allow them to work in the language at the intellectual level that’s interesting to them, rather than staying at the level of learning simple conversational phrases like ‘how are you?’ and ‘my favorite hobbies are x, y, and z,’” Larson says.

A distinct characteristic of the Chinese and Japanese language programs at St. Olaf is that they are folded into the broader department of Asian studies, with the Asian studies major requiring at least two years of either language. While students cannot major in Japanese or Chinese, they can earn a concentration in Japan studies or China studies, which requires four courses of language study above the first level.

“While the languages demand that a student be embedded in Chinese or Japanese, we think it’s important that our students understand the larger regional issues,” Larson says.

Learning the language is a way to interact personally with a nation’s culture, says Brendan Eagan, a 2005 graduate with majors in Asian studies and mathematics and a concentration in Japan studies. He traveled to Asia three times in association with St. Olaf — on an Interim trip to China and Japan, for a semester in Tokyo during his junior year, and to southern Japan on a student research project supervised by Professor Entenmann shortly after he graduated. “Having the opportunity to put my language skills into context was invaluable,” Eagan says. “It was great to build relationships with people and get an understanding of the culture I probably wouldn’t have gotten otherwise.”

As a student, Eagan also helped the Asian studies depart-

ment develop new ways for students to engage in language learning by creating mp3 files for handheld devices (instead of using cassette tapes in the language lab), as well as a Japanese flash card program that helps students “learn the Chinese characters that are used in Japanese,” he says. Today, Eagan is continuing his interest in second-language acquisition in a Ph.D. program in educational psychology learning sciences at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.



THE ASIAN STUDIES DEPARTMENT values overseas study and research as an integral part of a student’s education. “We have moved in the direction of giving our students guided field experiences in Asia through research projects, study abroad programs, and internships,” Larson says. “It’s important that they get the foundational knowledge in the classroom, but for a really balanced understanding of the region, they need that personal experience as well.”

St. Olaf students have many opportunities to study abroad — through the college’s own programs and affiliated consortia — in Japan, China, India, Korea, and other countries. The college has had an exchange relationship with East China Normal University since 1985 — the Term in China, Term in Asia, and Global Semester programs all spend time there, and the university sends a handful of visiting scholars to St. Olaf each year.

A more recent development, Larson says, is an effort to help students intern internationally. “It’s complicated because in Asia there is no tradition of

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