Bringing China to the High Schools: A Case Study

By Diana Marston Wood

I am a high school history teacher with an academic background in East Asian Studies. This article will describe the process by which my independent school implemented an interdisciplinary Chinese studies program that began in the Fall of 1987. Eight years later, the school offers students four years of Chinese language and courses in Chinese philosophy and culture as an additional to its existing Chinese history course. This case study of Shady Side Academy’s curriculum change process may be useful to high school and college teachers wishing to effect similar changes in their own institutions.

Shady Side Academy, located in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, is a K-12 independent school. The core educational school division includes approximately 500 students. Prior to the implementation of the international curriculum consisted of annual offerings in Chinese and Japanese history as well as occasional courses in South-east Asian and South-east Asian history.

During the 1980s, most Chinese language and literature courses at high school level were offered by schools with accreditation and certification to each other. I wanted to explore new perspectives on the Chinese language and literature. During the initial years of this program, the Chinese teacher and I consistently designed courses and curricular to each other. I tried to establish firm interdisciplinaries connections. For teaching Chinese language and literature, we adopted the ethnic and cultural perspectives. Chinese language as a unifying force in Chinese history. The Chinese literature course included the analysis of various cultural forms: selections from Sino Qian’s Historical Records; various poems by Du Fu (Tu Fu), Li Bai (Li Po), and other major poets. English language and literature courses on the potential for making cross-disciplinary connections, the teacher must know what is being covered and in each course and encourage students to utilize evidence from these other perspectives.

By bringing a Chinese teacher to the United States, we faced many cross-cultural challenges which relate to daily life and the nature of the teaching environment. Since our Chinese teacher lived with Shady Side families during the initial year, our first objective was to locate families sensitive to key intercultural issues. For example, there is often a lack of familiarity with the common characteristics of American homes, e.g., light switches, functioning of toilets, showers, baths, kitchen appliances. Our families always provided the teacher with a private bedroom. For us, this seems essential, but for a Chinese individual this personal space can result in isolation and loneliness. Food can be an enormous problem since many of the tastes, textures, and methods of eating are strange. Cheese and salad, common mealtime components for us, are initially unknown to many Chinese.

The American secondary school teaching environment also contrasts sharply with that of China. The typical American independent school teacher meets classes about twenty-five to forty-five times per week with additional advisory, coaching, dorm, and extracurricular duties. The Chinese high school teacher has only twelve student contact hours and fewer additional duties. In Chinese schools there is always a two hour rest period within each day. Since American school schedules include no midday rest, working in an American school can be exhausting for a Chinese teacher. Classroom teaching techniques also differ. In China classes are large, totaling fifty to sixty students. The teacher lectures with questions specifically directed toward selected students. Students seldom ask questions. In America, classes are smaller, and teachers expect active student participation with a high value placed on student interpretation and opinion based on evidence. Student culture also differs. Chinese high school students are typically diligent, hard working, and possess excellent powers of concentration. American students are often independent, critical, and willing to argue with the teacher.

Finally, Chinese curriculum materials are typically utilized for twenty-year periods while American schools change teaching materials more frequently. In both daily life and the working environment, there exist innumerable causes for cultural tension. American educators planning to sponsor a teacher from China must address these issues.

Over the past eight years Shady Side Academy has fostered a Chinese studies program where the students who wish to focus on China typically sample at least one of the three areas offered: history, language, and literature. Teaching among the three areas is coordinated. We started this low-

Table 1

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<td>Taking two courses</td>
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Table 1 shows that the greatest overlap occurs between language and history, where, over eight years, thirty-four students have taken both courses. Twenty-seven students have enrolled in both Chinese language and literature courses. Through my experience in the program during the first few years, I can document some instances where students made concrete cross-disciplinary connections. For instance, several students in Chinese history utilized in essays and class discussions the understandings of Confucianism gained from the literature course. Students also examined the similarities between Mao Zedong and the Qin emperor, citing as proof stories from literature and class discussion. Of course, in order to capitalize on the potential for making cross-disciplinary connections, the teacher must know what is being covered in each course and encourage students to utilize evidence from these other perspectives.
budget program by recruiting a teacher from the People’s Republic of China, housing her with host families, and utilizing foundation financial support. When the value of providing an interdisciplinary approach to Chinese studies became clear, Shady Side committed itself to a permanent staff position with a regularized salary.³

For institutions wishing to enhance their Chinese/Asian studies offerings but lacking the possibility of foundation support, I recommend participation in the American Field Service’s Visiting Teachers Program.⁴ Through cooperation with the Chinese government, AFS sponsors a one year visit for approximately twenty teachers. These teachers live with host families, work with mentor teachers, and are expected to contribute generously to their host schools. I have had several successful experiences with AFS visiting teachers at both Shady Side and Phillips Academy. These teachers can be very effective in adding interdisciplinary perspectives to the courses already offered: with, for instance, small units or presentations on aspects of Chinese history, Chinese language, martial arts, medicine, or the importance of understanding China’s environmental pressures.

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The ASIANetwork: A Consortium of Liberal Arts Colleges to Promote Asian Studies

By Marianna Presler McJimsey

n its beginning, the purpose of the ASIANetwork was simple enough. Since the end of the Second World War, contacts with and interest in Asian affairs had burgeoned, and a corresponding expansion of positions in higher education insured that Asian Studies would reach into the domain of private liberal arts colleges. The concurrence of regional associations of liberal arts colleges established the notion that a pooling of resources would expand opportunities for faculty and students to travel and study. The idea of an association of liberal arts colleges to promote the study of Asia on their own campuses followed in line with all of these promising developments.

Along with opportunity went needs. These needs comprise the three E’s of Asian Studies: expansion, enrichment, and extension. Often Asianists at liberal arts colleges were solitary figures. The acquisition of financial resources and personnel—by means of a development campaign, grants to retool faculty, or even the addition of part-time staff—posed a “how to” challenge for Asian Studies. In particular, the provision of language training emerged as a goal for expansion.

Enrichment could take place at many levels, but primarily it meant keeping faculty in touch with a network of professionals concerned with teaching and learning. Teaching techniques employing textual sources, films, videos, and role-playing could be employed. New subjects could be inserted into course syllabi. The Internet, the fax machine, the newsletter, and the annual conference could help to construct and maintain a conversation among historians, linguists, musicologists, sociologists, economists and philosophers.

The experiences of students could be solicited and used to illustrate valuable projects and learning styles. Finally, the extension of learning about Asia could take the form of travel opportunities, foreign study programs, and the availability of visiting scholars, politicians, and business executives from overseas. Here was an agenda displaying variety and complexity.

In 1992, this agenda was clarified in two Asian Studies conferences of liberal arts colleges, one hosted by St. Andrews College and another organized by Colorado College and the Japan Study Program of Earlham College. The two groups merged in 1993 to form the ASIANetwork. A Consortium of Liberal Arts Colleges to Promote Asian Studies, an organization now affiliated with the Association for Asian Studies.

The ASIANetwork Conference

The principal assembly of the organization is the ASIANetwork Conference, held annually in April and attended by faculty from liberal arts colleges and universities throughout North America and Asia. The ASIANetwork focuses its mission on teaching. Keynoters have included Perry Link, Princeton University, whose vision for Chinese language teaching has shaped programs across the country; Ainslie Embree, Columbia University, whose editorial leadership has produced excellent classroom source materials; and Barbara Metcalf, University of California-Davis and past president of the Association for Asian Studies, who described anecdotally her professional journey as a teacher/scholar. Round table discussions, plenary presentations, and audio-visual showings carry forward the organization’s strong push toward excellence in teaching, its encouragement of grant proposal writing, and its debates over curriculum issues. Faculty input generates sessions on teaching the survey course, teaching about Ko-