

RANDOM RECOLLECTIONS OF THE HISTORY OF ASIAN
LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Richard B. Mather

Professor Emeritus of Chinese Language and Literature

The story of the beginning of instruction in Asian Languages and Literatures at the University of Minnesota is similar in its general aspects to that of many other colleges and universities in the mid-western United States. Paralleling a growing interest in Asia following the Second World War, the need for courses in the languages and literatures of the area also became evident.

At Minnesota the first move came in the late forties, when Professor Harold Quigley of the Department of Political Science, who had himself spent some time in China, urged the administration to set up courses in Chinese and Japanese. At about the same time a member of the German Department who happened to know Russian, began offering Russian. Along with Gana Syro-Boyarsky, a Norwegian-Japanese lady married to a Russian, they formed a separate department, which might have been named “Non-standard Languages”, but to which they gave the more respectable name, “Linguistics and Comparative Philology”. Chinese was added to their repertory of Russian and Japanese in 1949, when Richard Mather, who had just completed a degree in Oriental Languages at the University of California at Berkeley, arrived on the scene. The first class in Chinese had only three students, only one of them was officially registered, so Mather was kept busy teaching Chinese History in the History Department, and Chinese Art in the Art Department. In that year the original professor of Russian from the German Department had been replaced by Pearl Niemi and Marthe Blinoff – the latter a native-speaker of French married to a Russian who played violin in the Minneapolis Symphony, and herself a member of the Department of Romance Languages. In 1950 Professor Syro-Boyarsky was replaced by Robert Brower, who was completing his degree in Japanese Literature at the University of Michigan, with concentration on early Japanese Court Poetry. The dean assigned Donald Swanson of the Classics Department to be our acting chairman. Swanson taught Greek and Sanskrit in his own department, but in addition was deeply into Linguistics, and had had some training in Japanese as a language officer during the War.

A third professor of Russian joined us in 1951 in the person of Thoms Magner, who had completed his B.A. at Fordham University in New York, and his doctorate at Yale in Linguistics, and who could teach both Russian and Serbo-Croatian. By 1957 the department, now five-persons strong, changed its name to “Slavic and Oriental Languages”. Soon after this we added Arabic to the mix, taught by another loan from the Romance Language Department, Thomas Irving, a professor of Spanish with a strong interest in Hispano-Arabic relations. Magner was chairman from 1951 to 1958, eventually moving on to Penn State University, where he later became a dean.

In 1955 Professor Brower was called to Stanford University and was temporarily replaced by Owen Loveless, and then by George Shay, also of Michigan, who, in 1957 was permanently replaced by Edward Copeland, who at that time was completing a degree at Berkley, concentrating on the Meiji novelist, Natsume Soseki, but with a strong side-interest in the poets of an earlier anthology, the *Man yoshu*. Loveless returned in 1966 on a permanent basis to handle the linguistics courses in Japanese, but was obliged by illness to retire in 1981. His replacement, Wesley Jacobsen, had just completed his degree in Linguistics at the University of Chicago, and before that had taught Japanese for the Navy.

By 1963 the department had added South Asian languages, especially Hindi-Urdu, taught by a Professor Prakash, and later, by Paul Staneslow and others. Accordingly, in 1966 we underwent a further metamorphosis and became “East and South Asian Languages” (in that order, to avoid any misunderstanding that we were teaching “South-east Asian Languages” during the Vietnam War years).

Slavic Languages, meanwhile, continued to expand with the addition of Adele Donchenko, Wassili Alexeev, Philip Nice, and others, and by 1963 they felt secure enough to declare independence as “Slavic Languages”. In 1968 South Asian Languages, also, encouraged by a Federal grant for a Center and the donation of the Ames Library, did the same and became “South Asian Languages”.

At this point the remaining body assumed the name, “East Asian Languages”, which included Chinese and Japanese language, Literature and Linguistics. Earlier, in 1963, Professor C.J. Liu replaced Richard Mather, who was on sabbatical in Japan, whither he had gone in lieu of Mainland China, which was at that time still off-limits for Americans. She was able to add a new dimension by teaching courses in Drama and Vernacular Fiction. Professor Liu’s undergraduate degree had been completed during the most harrowing years of the Sino-Japanese conflict, at the National Southwest Associated University in Kunming. Her M.A., in English Literature, was achieved at Occidental College in California, and her Ph. D., in Comparative Literature, at the University of Wisconsin, in 1952. After brief terms of teaching at Vassar and the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, she joined the department and remained until her retirement in 1993. In 1965 Professor Stephen Wang, with an M.A. in Chinese Literature from Berkeley and a Ph. D. in Sino-Tibetan Linguistics from the University of Washington in Seattle, further enriched our offerings with courses in the History of the Chinese Language, and, for those so inclined, courses in Tibetan and Thai. He served as chair between 1972 and 1975, and again from 1977 to 1979.

On the Japanese side, we gained the services of Professor Amy Matsumoto in 1961. After completing her undergraduate work at Tsuda College, she went on for advanced degrees in Education from Tokyo University, and in Higher Education and Library Science from the University of Minnesota. Beside the beginning sequences in Japanese Language, she taught advanced courses in Literature, and, after 1975, added an extremely popular course in Chinese Calligraphy, retiring during the nineties.

It was also during the sixties that the Japanese program was further enriched by the addition of Reiko Tsukimura, which brought the faculty up to full “critical mass”, with four full-time tenured, or tenure-track professors in each language, which enabled us to offer graduated degrees in both languages, in either literature or Linguistics.

This happy result was substantially aided in 1965-1966 by the invitation, through the mediation of Professor Liu, of the then-retiring Director of the prestigious Harvard-Yenching Library in Cambridge, MA, Kai-ming Chiu, to be resident consultant in building our East Asian Library. On his recommendation, we also brought in Dr. Paul Cheng, with a library degree from Leeds University in England, to be the East Asian Library’s first Director. It was through the ebullient persuasiveness of Dr. Chiu that the library’s acquisitions budget was doubled by the normally parsimonious University Librarian. Under successive directors, including Richard Wang, Yuan Zhou, and, most recently, Su Chen, all of them whom have been intent upon building a substantive research library. Minnesota’s East Asian Collection can take its place among the best in the nation.

Throughout the seventies, under the title, “East Asian languages”, the department remained essentially at eight full-time tenured faculty – four in Chinese and four in Japanese, with at least one specialist in Linguistics for each language, and with Literature courses available in each for every period and all genres.

In the fall of 1979 Professor Victoria Cass replaced Professor Liu while the latter was on sabbatical leave in China. Her M.A. thesis at Yale was based on a study of the early semi-fictional work, Accounts of the States (Kuo-yu), and her Ph. D. dissertation, written under the supervision of Professor Cyril Birch, at Berkeley, was a creative and insightful interpretation of the late Ming novel of manners, Chin P’ing Mei. During her stay she added several new courses, widening the possibilities for graduate students, and greatly strengthening the existing requirement in Bibliography and Methods. It was a genuine loss when she left for the University of Colorado in Boulder in 1988.

During the sixties, seventies, eighties, we had the unusual blessing of an unexpected addition to the Japanese staff in the person of Professor Hide Shohara, who had recently retired from the University of Michigan, where she had been the teacher of both Bob Brower and Owen Loveless, and who held the distinction of having been the first female in the United States to get a degree in General Linguistics. After a year as Visiting Professor at the University of Wisconsin, she joined our faculty as “Adjunct Professor”, with purely nominal financial compensation. Her presence brought not only the advantage of her mature wisdom and cheerful disposition, but, in addition, after her death in 1992 (which, tragically, was followed within a week by that of Professor Copeland), it turned out she had left a generous bequest to the department, formally set up in 1994 as the “Hide Shohara Fellowship Fund”, to be used for graduate students in East Asian Languages (some of which has also been used for the subsequent “Richard B. Mather Lectureship” series and for annual spring “mini-conferences”.)

In the year 1973 the College's Committee on the Organization of Language Departments (COLD) decided to add generalized courses at the Lower Division level, offered in English, such as "Surveys of Literature", "Religions", and "Heritage". Without additional staff, this entailed an inevitable reduction in more specialized Upper Division courses requiring the reading of texts in the original. Adding to this problem, in 1981 a critical decision was made by the dean in a well-meaning effort to bring greater integration between our department and the East Asian specialists in other departments, to reorganize all of us within a "Department of East Asian Studies". As a "Program" this would have been a positive move. But what resulted was that East Asianists in History, Geography, Political Science, Sociology, Anthropology, Art History and Music all became members with us in this new department while retaining membership in their several departments, while for us, it was our only department. To make matters worse, the first three chairmen, appointed by the dean, were from History and Music. The resulting loss of departmental integrity, coupled with heavy fiscal cut-backs in the College itself at the time, began to take its toll on the graduate students in particular, some of whom felt obliged to change their major or transfer to other institutions. At the same time, the Beginning Language sequences continued their steady growth, with nearly one-hundred registering each fall or the first year in each language, but, as one might expect, with significant attrition the following quarter as students began to realize the true difficulties.

Many names and personalities, each with his/her own personal gifts and special contributions came and went in the seventies and eighties. Earlier there had been Terry Na, Jake Chang and Theodore Hutters in Chinese, and later Kimberly Besio and Margaret Decker in Chinese and Livia Monnet in Japanese. Kimberly moved to Bates College in Maine, and Livia to McGill in Montreal. Of special note was Nanxiu Qian, who had been teaching Chinese Literature at Yale. She was here for the academic year 1992-1993 on a temporary appointment, and was obliged for bureaucratic reasons to move on to Rice University in Houston. She was followed by Jue Chen, and later by Terry Kleeman, Pauline Chen, David Branner and Mark Asselin in Chinese. ON the Japanese side were Polly Szatrowske in Japanese Linguistics, Terry Kawashima, and others. (See addendum)

By 1991 it had become clear, even to the administration, that still another reorganization of the Asian Language department was in order, to preserve and build upon what had been so painstakingly developed before the 1981 amalgamation. Accordingly, in 1992, East Asian Languages and Literatures joined the newly established "Institute of Linguistics and Asian and Slavic Languages and Literatures" (ILASLL). It seemed almost like an atavistic reversion to the old "Slavic and Oriental Languages" of the early fifties, with the notable exception that each of the three – East Asian, South Asian and Slavic – was a separate and autonomous "sub-unit" within the Institute, with its own chair, or "co-ordinator". Professor Liu was co-ordinator of Chinese, Wesley Jacobsen for Japanese, and Indira Junghare for South Asian Languages. By a fortuitous accident, the Institute was housed just "off-campus" in Klaeber Court, raising in some minds the subliminal specter of marginalization.

It was, therefore, a positive and hopeful move in 1993, when the dean authorized a national search for a chairman for a renewed “East Asian Language and Literature Department”. The candidate finally selected was a person who had temporarily taught in the department during the eighties—Professor Yu-shih Chen, of the University of Alberta in Edmonton, a mature scholar with an international reputation, whose specializations embraced both medieval and modern Chinese Literature. She also brought considerably improved discipline to the Beginning Language sequences, which won the strong approval of the External Review Committee which was brought in during 1997. At the same time, the very qualities of strong leadership and high standards brought with them unavoidably strained relations both within the department and with the dean and other Asian specialists within the College.

All of this finally brought us to our latest reincarnation in the fall of 1999, after another national search, with the appointment of Professor Joseph Allen, former Professor of Chinese Language and Literature at Washington University in St. Louis, as chairman. It was understood that the new department would be starting from ground-zero, and would include instruction in Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Hindi-Urdu and other Indian languages along with the literature of these languages in every genre and through all periods. Faculty members from the former departments making up the new alignment were free to join the new department or maintain their old status within ILASLL. The goal was to add several new positions, some at the associate professorial level. Encouraged by the visible achievements of the year 2000-2001, we now look forward to the fall of 2001 with hope and not a little excitement.

Addendum to page 4, paragraph 2 of Mather “recollections”.

In Chinese, Nanxiu Qian was followed by:

Xiaoshan Yang	temporary assistant professor	1994-1995
Yuet-Keung Lo	Visiting assistant professor from Grinnell College	1994-1995
Pauline Chen	temporary teaching specialist	1995-1996
Terry Kleeman	tenure-track assistant professor Resignation	1995-1996 1996
Mingfei Shi	temporary teaching specialist	1996-1997
Jue Chen	temporary teaching specialist/lecturer Temporary assistant professor Tenure-track assistant professor Resignation	1996-1997 1997-1998 1998-2000 2000
David Branner	temporary assistant professor	1997-1998
Mark Asselin	temporary assistant professor	1998-2000
Nick Kaldis	temporary assistant professor	1999-2001

In Japanese:

Polly Sztatrowski	Japanese linguistics Linguistics program in ILES	1989-2000 2000-
Terry Kawashima	tenure-track assistant professor LOA Resignation	1997-2000 1999-2000 2000
Sarah Pradt	tenure-track assistant professor LOA Resignation	1994-2000 1998-2000 2000