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feature article

Harmonious World: The Confucius Institute and Asian Studies at the University of New Hampshire

—Laura Roach, *Inquiry* student editor (Edited by Clia Goodwin, assistant editor)

In a harmonious world (*hexie shijie*), peoples everywhere work together to create peace and prosperity. In today's global climate of economic and political crises, harmony seems like an impossible aspiration; but the United States and China are working through tensions toward cooperation. One method of furthering international understanding is cultural exchange, and the University of New Hampshire has sent many students to study and conduct research in China while many Chinese students have come to campus. Recently UNH established a Confucius Institute, an international Chinese initiative that pairs Chinese institutions with foreign schools to promote Chinese language and culture.

UNH celebrated the opening of its Confucius Institute (CI) in partnership with Chengdu University in Sichuan Province on October 26, 2010. The opening ceremony in the Memorial Union Building drew an overflow crowd. When UNH President Huddleston shook hands during the ceremonies with President Zhou of Chengdu University, the act represented a milestone in the expansion of instruction and knowledge of Chinese language and culture at UNH. Dr. Lisa MacFarlane, the senior vice provost for academic affairs, believes the relationship with the CI and Chengdu University will also offer students "outstanding opportunities" to study, work and do research in China.

Invitation and Research

When in October 2007, Chengdu University invited UNH to become part of the CI's international network, MacFarlane called on Asian specialist Dr. Chris Reardon of the political science department and coordinator of the Asian studies minor for advice. Reardon researched the Institute, speaking with professors at other universities around the world about their experiences with the CI. Sponsored by the Chinese government, the first Confucius Institute was opened in 2004 as an instrument of culture and language promotion. The Confucius Institute is answering a previously unmet global demand for Chinese language and culture courses. At the end of 2010 there were 322 Confucius Institutes in 96 countries all over the world. There are more than sixty Institutes in the US.

Reardon had to address criticism of the Confucius Institute during his research of the program. Some American officials grumbled about the CI being used by the Communist Party of China (CPC) as a tool to manipulate public opinion. Li Changchun, a leading member of the CPC, described the Confucius Institutes as "an important part of China's overseas propaganda set-up" ("A Message from Confucius").

The co-director of the UNH-CI, Mr. Wang Yige, is a native of China, holds two Masters degrees from UNH and has taught Chinese courses here for ten years. He shares responsibilities with his co-director, Mr. Xu Yuexing, from Chengdu University. Wang disputes Western suspicions: "We are trying to build a bridge of understanding. People have concerns and doubts, but there is no agenda. We are just



Dancers, musicians and other artists from Chengdu mesmerized crowds at the opening ceremony, October 26, 2010 (Perry Smith, Photo Services.)

trying to offer an alternative way to learn a language.” MacFarlane points out that many other governments support study of their language and culture in host countries. These governments include France, Germany and the US. Reardon remains cautiously optimistic about the CI, citing the many internal problems that China faces but noting that the Confucius Institute is meant to benefit all parties involved. After all, China and the US have mutual interests.

Mutual Benefits

As a result of Reardon’s research, the benefits of becoming a member of its international network became apparent to UNH. Perhaps the most alluring feature of the CI was its ability to obtain funds. The Institute raised about \$150,000 from China and \$150,000 from UNH. The relationship has greatly expanded the possibilities for UNH’s Asian studies minor, which, approved in 1995, is separate from the CI. Student demand for more Chinese courses has been growing exponentially at UNH over the past several years, even though the College of Liberal Arts could not finance courses beyond the second year. Since establishing the partnership with Chengdu University, UNH has gained two visiting language teachers from its faculty. There are now eleven courses in Chinese language and culture as opposed to only a previous few. In the fall there will be a fourth year of Chinese language offered and additional Chinese faculty. This will greatly expand the Chinese language component of Asian studies.

Like UNH, Chengdu University has also benefitted from the partnership. During the summer of 2010, twelve of Chengdu University’s deans traveled to UNH to receive training on administrative techniques and procedures. The cooperative partnership holds a measure of prestige and opens doors to Chengdu University for future projects with American schools. The Confucius Institute plans in the near future to establish a student exchange program between the two universities.

The relationship between UNH and Chengdu University seems appropriate for both schools and for New Hampshire as well. UNH students who travel to Chengdu in the future will be exposed to a major inland center for Chinese industrial innovation. MacFarlane calls Chengdu “a microcosm of the challenges China is facing.” The city has become a wealthy manufacturing center since the government’s initiative in the 1990s to develop the interior of the nation.

For China, the conflicts of interests between industry and the preservation of land, water and endangered species (such as the giant pandas near Chengdu) are growing and pressing problems. The country is beginning to invest in environmental research in order to preserve its resources and could make good use of knowledge from UNH’s highly regarded science departments as well as from students conducting research there. For New Hampshire, MacFarlane described the UNH-CI plans to offer resources for instruction and training to selected school districts and to assist New Hampshire travelers and businesses. “Outreach is an important part of what we do,” she said.

UNH Undergraduate Research and Study in China

UNH undergraduates have already been doing research in China. During the past ten years alone, undergraduates have received grants from the University to study such subjects in China as prenatal care, the Chinese Communist takeover of Hong Kong, perceptions of nature and religious identity and mental illness.

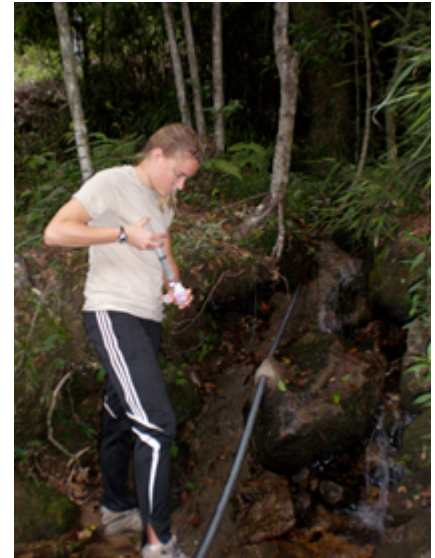


New supported by the old: in Shanghai, bamboo scaffolding is used for construction of modern high-rises (Susannah Pratt.)

One of these researchers, Susannah Pratt ('07) a dual major in political science and international affairs, received a 2006 Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF) to research both the growing number of rural-to-urban migrants and government initiatives to alleviate their poverty. While living with a host family in Shanghai, she interviewed migrants, government and urban planning officials and administrators of non-governmental organizations and migrant schools that provided welfare programs for rural workers in the cities. At first, her four months of intensive language study at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London did not provide her with much conversational ability, but she was encouraged by small victories, such as getting the food she meant to order or boarding the right train. Pratt found a symbol for her experience of Shanghai in the construction of a shopping mall across from where she lived. Migrant workers labored around the clock to complete the modern building, which was framed in

scaffolding made of bamboo. When the scaffolding came down, she saw that the mall housed several American chains, including Pizza Hut and KFC. “The juxtaposition of the urgency to build, modernize and showcase the purest example of capitalism with support from the remnants of communist ideology and government control truly exemplified the complexities of what is modern-day China,” she observed.

Althea Marks ('11) was another SURF recipient who, during the summer of 2010, researched the concentration of dissolved organic carbon (DOC) in streams in the Wuyi Mountains to determine the health of the aquatic ecosystems there. She traveled to China to complete a very technical project, with one year of Mandarin plus some personal tutoring. Her research was significant because of water quality issues that China has just begun to confront. She reported that “China continues to gain international economic and scientific prowess, along with an increased interest in protecting the environment. To accomplish this, they will need to expand their knowledge of DOC levels in streams and the relationship between watershed characteristics and stream chemistry.”



Althea Marks taking samples in Nanjing, Summer 2010 (Althea Marks).

Students like Susannah Pratt and Althea Marks went to great lengths to prepare themselves to conduct research in China, for them a largely unknown country. Other students are doing the same in order to experience a very different culture, often surrounded by mystery and Western distrust. Matt Jones ('13), a dual major in political science and international affairs studying Chinese, is looking forward to studying in Beijing. After intensive Mandarin study in China, he plans to apply for an International Research Opportunities Project (IROP) grant to research “rock music and the fall of tyranny in modern China.” His Chinese professors have told him what to expect in China: formal customs and hospitality. They also told him that “Chinese students are more hard-working, but they love Americans, who are an alien race to them.”

Exchange between Two Different Cultures

Chinese students coming to UNH often arrive with strange ideas about this “alien race,” gained through TV and movies. Two students from China recalled their feelings of apprehension before arrival. “Media in China portrays the US as violent,” agreed students Michelle Liu and Kate Li. They associated the US with violence such as school and street shootings, yet came anyway. Michelle, from Qingdao in Shandong Province, is a senior chemical engineering major. She came to school in the US to assert her independence and see the opposite side of the world. Now that she is here, she thinks of Americans as generous. “The change in cultures made me realize how important diversity is,” she said.” Kate, a junior theatre major from Xibo also in Shandong Province, came to the US for school because she liked “the space they give American students to develop themselves.”

UNH students, American and Chinese, have gone to great lengths to satisfy their curiosity about foreign cultures. MacFarlane believes that study abroad and student research are essential to the alliance between the two nations. With the institution of education programs, “people will grow up with an understanding of China,” she affirms. The Confucius Institute will be a springboard for the opportunities to come.



President Huddleston, CI dignitaries and artists at the opening celebration, October 26, 2010 (Perry Smith, Photo Services).

Similarly, Reardon and other members of the Asian studies faculty have high hopes for the Confucius Institute and Asian studies at UNH. They have spent their professional lives studying Asia and are committed to promoting understanding of Asian customs and policies among their students. For them, the opening of the CI is an opportunity to broaden Asian studies at UNH, which they hope will inspire UNH to promote more global studies. The university has been historically focused on western cultures, but to be competitive on an international scale, UNH must strengthen its foreign studies, especially by beginning or increasing the offerings in critical languages, such as Hindi, Arabic and Japanese.

“Internationalization should be the goal of the university,” says Reardon, who stresses the importance of cooperation and understanding. “You can’t be the Ugly American. Appreciate the way things work there and work within that system. Understanding is the outcome of humility and hard work.”

Diplomats and educators agree that education is instrumental in forging understandings among nations. Undergraduate researcher Susannah Pratt said, “China is a very difficult place to understand in a lifetime . . . Tolerance, understanding and the need to further your understanding to reach solutions were prominent tools I discovered during my time abroad, and those I continue to use on a daily basis.” The UNH Confucius Institute will have the ability to develop global citizens with knowledge and understanding of both countries. Perhaps it will also create a small “harmonious world” on campus in Durham, New Hampshire.

References

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To read more in this issue about Dr. Reardon and China, go to his profile in Mentor Highlights.

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Author Bio

*Feeling the pull of the White Mountains, **Laura Roach** came to the University of New Hampshire as an economics major. The sophomore from Kingstown, Rhode Island, joined Inquiry to get involved in research and possibly to prepare for a project of her own in the years to come. A member of the Honors program, Laura is also intrigued by Islamic studies and is learning Arabic. In addition to these aspirations, Laura enjoys running and attending concerts in her spare time.*