



Asian Studies

BY CAROLYN MILLER

GAINING GROUND

Asia is the world's largest, most diverse, and most populous continent. It contains the world's fastest growing economies and possesses an abundant pool of academic talent and research opportunities. It seems only fitting, then, that Vanderbilt is seeing an increased interest—both in faculty talent and student demand—in the study of an area of the world so increasingly intertwined with global life in the twenty-first century.

“Our students are not only interested in Asian studies, but they realize the importance Asia plays in their futures and are seeking out experiences that equip them with in-depth knowledge about the region,” says Asian Studies Acting Director, Tracy Miller.

The Asian Studies Program is Vanderbilt's home for the study of the languages and cultures of China, Japan, Korea, India, Vietnam, and other regions of Asia. The program currently offers instruction in Chinese and Japanese language, and hopes in the future to offer courses in Hindi and Korean. Students are strongly encouraged to study abroad, and VU annually sends students to Seoul National University (Korea), Rikkyo University (Japan), as well as CET programs in Harbin, Beijing, and Shanghai (China).

Interest in Asian studies at the undergraduate level, particularly Chinese language study, has increased dramatically: the number of program majors has grown from a handful to between thirty and forty each year.

Asian studies major Cole Garrett, '12, thought he wanted to take Japanese in college after studying abroad in Japan during



Surviving mosque from the fifteenth-century capital of Gujarat, Champaner, India. (opposite page) Takoro Gorge, east of Taiwan.

high school, but Vanderbilt led him in a new direction.

“I became interested in Mandarin Chinese once I started studying here,” he admits.

“The semester I spent studying in Beijing learning Mandarin was one of my best semesters. Thanks to the Asian studies

faculty encouraging me to go, I was able to go out and experience a new culture and history while learning a new language.”

Studying in China was an obvious choice for him—to really improve in a language meant living in a place where he would be required to speak the language on a daily basis.

Garrett intends to apply to the U.S. State Department and other agencies to work as an Asian specialist. “I feel that the background in Asian languages, history, and culture I gained through the Asian studies major has equipped me with the tools to be successful in a field that is in serious need of area specialists,” says Garrett.

Vanderbilt senior Chrystel Marincich



Vanderbilt students at the Mutianyu, Great Wall, People's Republic of China.



Dazheng Hall, imperial palace at Shenyang, seventeenth century, Liaoning Province, People's Republic of China.

dropped her pre-med status in favor of an Asian studies degree in Japanese language and culture.

“I took Japanese during the second semester of my freshman year, and I just loved it. Japan’s culture fascinated me; it was different

from any I had studied before.”

Marincich, who comes from an Italian community in Chile (her mother is American), was taken first by the language and then drawn into Japanese culture.

“The way the Japanese language is

structured and sounds is absolutely beautiful,” she says.

Marincich will soon travel overseas to study Japanese for a year at the Inter-University Center for Japanese Language Studies in Yokohama, Japan. “After that, I will go to Harvard Law School to study international law,” she says.

The increased student demand and desire for a greater breadth of expertise has led to several changes in the program. The first was the change in name from East Asian studies to Asian studies. The shift has simultaneously led to new faculty hires in the last several years. In 2009, the History department hired Samira Sheikh, a South Asian historian whose emphasis is in western India. The Department of Religious Studies will have a new chair this fall—Dr. Tony Stewart from North Carolina State University—who specializes in South Asian religions.

“With strong leadership from its faculty, the program in East Asian studies has transformed itself into a robust, interdisciplinary program in Asian studies in just a few short years,” says Carolyn Dever, dean of the College of Arts and Science.

Asian studies has also added stellar young scholars in Chinese literature (Ling

Shanghai skyline at night. Vanderbilt students have the option to study in Shanghai, China, among other programs in Asia.





Eastern facade of the al-Kazaruni mosque, built by an Iranian merchant, Ibrahim al-Kazaruni, who lived in Gujarat, India, in the fourteenth century.

Hon Lam, Univ. Chicago Ph.D.) and Vietnamese literature (Ben Tran, Berkeley Ph.D.). Last year, one of the nation's top scholars of Chinese religions, Robert Ford Campany, joined the program from the University of Southern California, where he was director of the School of Religion.

The addition of new faculty appointed directly to Asian studies, especially the hire of Campany, is a significant step for the program. Most faculty who teach interdisciplinary content courses for Asian studies are Asia experts whose primary appointment is in seven other programs and departments across campus, including history, history of art, human and organizational development, medicine, health & society, political science, religious studies, and the Vanderbilt Institute for Public Policy Studies.

"We are thrilled to have Professor Campany join the Vanderbilt community. His research looks at the broader picture of

religious studies—an area of growing interest on campus—and also dovetails nicely with existing strengths in the program, such as history of art," says Miller.



Tracy Miller with the Calendrical Animal (horse), Tomb of King Wonseong (r. 785-798), 38th King of the Silla dynasty, Gyeongju, South Korea.

For Campany, the motivation to move to Vanderbilt was threefold.

"When Ruth Rogaski (chair of Asian studies) contacted me I was particularly excited by three things: First was the excellence of the Asian studies faculty at Vanderbilt; second was Vanderbilt's overall quality and its ambition to become even better; and the third reason had to do with Vanderbilt's relative paucity of attention to Asia when compared to peer institutions. I wanted to be a part of that effort," says Campany.

Campany's courses focus on Chinese religious history (ca. 300 B.C.E. to 600 C.E.) and the comparative, cross-cultural study of religion. This includes the history of Chinese religions, Daoism (Taoism), and East Asian Buddhism, but also thematic comparative courses (e.g. religion and food, holy persons in comparative perspective, the living and the dead) which touch on many religious traditions, cultures, and periods.

“My healthy class enrollments in courses on South Asian history suggest that students welcome the option of studying that region in addition to the regions formerly covered under East Asian studies.” —*Samira Sheikh.*

Miller believes the recent hires, along with the continued strengths in the departments of history and art history, has helped raised the national profile of the Asian Studies Program at Vanderbilt.

Dever agrees that Vanderbilt’s renewed focus in Asian studies will continue to earn a national and international reputation for academic excellence in the field.

“With this record of impressive growth across the curriculum, we are poised for

research leadership in Asian studies for years to come,” she explains.

Under the umbrella of Asian studies, students can choose from a broad array of courses in subjects as diverse as Daoism, Southeast Asian literature, modern South Asia, Himalayan art, Japanese popular culture, and Chinese political systems, to name a few.

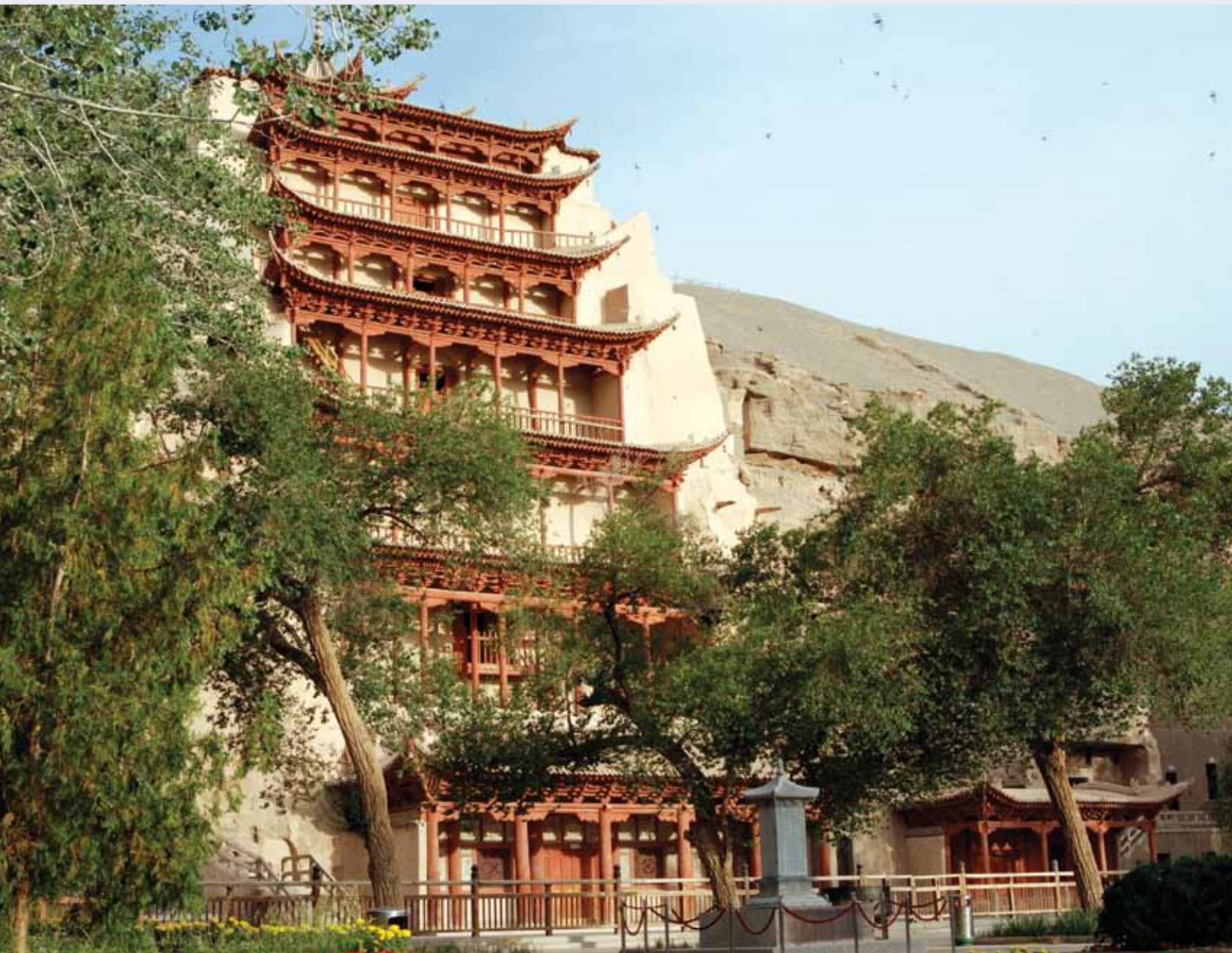
“I especially liked a class called ‘Crisis Simulation in East Asia,’” says Rebecca

Keng, ’12, who enjoyed simulations of the decision-making process during critical East Asian historical moments through roleplay and specialized games.

But while Miller is grateful for the recent growth in faculty, she still sees significant opportunities to expand and diversify Asian studies.

Among them is a continued expansion of content on South Asia as well as new options for Korean studies.

Exterior of the Buddhist Cave Temples at the Magao Grottoes, first excavated in the 4th century, Dunhaung, Gansu Province, People’s Republic of China.





Gyeongju Tower in North Gyeongsang province, South Korea.

“My healthy class enrollments in courses on South Asian history suggest that students welcome the option of studying that region in addition to the regions formerly covered under East Asian studies,” says Samira Sheikh.

Sheikh adds that the Director of Asian Studies, Professor Ruth Rogaski, received a petition from the South Asian student’s organization to offer language instruction in Hindi and Urdu—the main languages of India and Pakistan.

In response to student demand, the program has asked the administration to hire language instructors in these areas. Students have also expressed a desire for Korean language instruction.

“I wish they would add a Korean program,” says Marincich. I feel that Korea is a very important part of East Asia and is worth studying.”

Garrett agrees, “I would have loved to have had the opportunity to learn Korean while I was here.”

The two Asian languages offered through Asian studies—Chinese and Japanese—are the only languages not housed within a regular department. Other languages, such as Spanish, French and German, are housed in the Departments of

Spanish and Portuguese, French and Italian, German and Slavic, respectively.

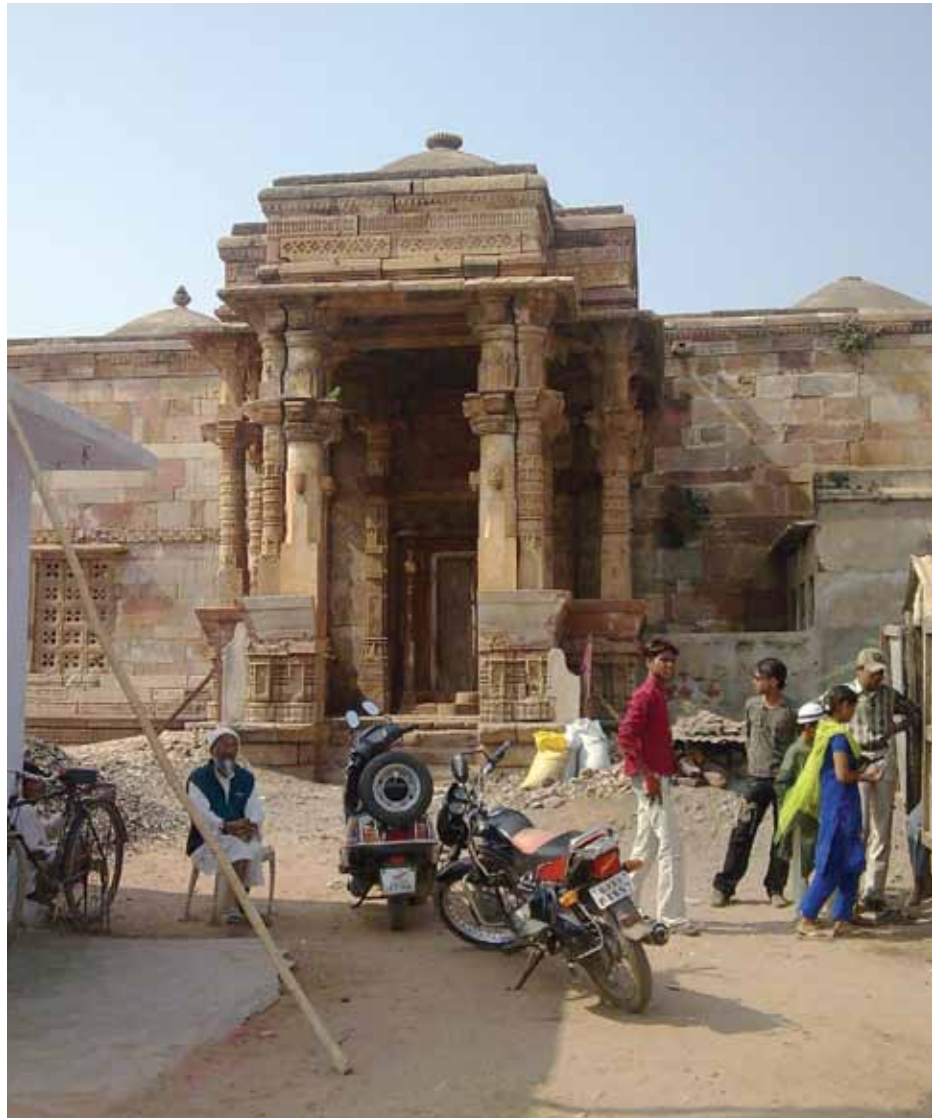
“Our program is in very strong shape,” says Miller. “Ideally, we would harness our strengths and eventually move Asian studies from a program into a department. As a global university, it would be appropriate to eventually include Asian languages among its departments of languages and literature.”

Yet, Miller is pleased with the progress Asian studies has made in the last few years.

“Five years ago, we didn’t have enough faculty members to even consider growth to this extent,” she admits. “We now have expertise in history, religious studies, political science, and language among others.” The rapid

economic growth and increasing cultural influence of Asian countries has accelerated Asian studies as an area of increasing interest for students and scholars around the world. Asian studies is poised to expand on, and strengthen, what is an already impressive core of faculty and student talent.

“We must become stronger, I think, by becoming bigger, adding faculty and classes and majors, increasing our enrollments, and tirelessly reminding the larger Vanderbilt community that Asia is and has always been an enormous and key area of the world, by any measure. Of course, in our lifetimes its importance will only continue to grow immeasurably,” says Campany.



East entrance of the al-Kazaruni mosque.