A letter from China: Joshua Cartwright ’14

Shape-shifting in Shanghai

Joshua graduated as a Class of 2014 Political Science major and Chinese Correlate. He is now in China on a Chinese Government Scholarship, which sponsors his study in Chinese language as well as living expenses in China.

I’ve spent the last semester studying Chinese language at Fudan University in Shanghai on the Chinese Government Scholarship. My major advisor was the one who urged me to apply, and after one relatively quick and painless application I was nominated! Luckily, I ended up in Shanghai, which was a huge relief: I knew that no matter what the program was like, I would still be living in one of the most interesting cities that I’ve ever been to and studied.

The academic program itself isn’t too bad, though it is lacking in certain aspects. I dislike the fact that it’s broken into sections—writing, listening, speaking, extensive reading, and intensive reading—and that the schedules are a bit scattered. Also, the language program does not, surprisingly, provide tutors, so it’s up to you to make friends with the locals (or just ask somebody on the subway for help with homework!). However, the teachers are decent, and I’ve made some great friends out of my classmates.

There are also many opportunities to be had in Shanghai outside of the classroom. In my spare time, I walked into the offices of the Shanghai Daily newspaper and asked if they had any internship opportunities for someone who was looking to gain experience in journalism. They told me to write an email to the editor, and two weeks later I had (Continued)
Meet Our Visiting Professors

Interview with Takai-sensei is reproduced here by Teddy Bronson, our Japanese Department intern for academic year 14/15

Meet Our Visiting Professors

Interviews:

Professor Shiho Takai & Yining Li

Professor Shiho Takai
(高井詩穂先生)

Takai-sensei is from Gifu Japan (about 20 minutes by train from Nagoya), which is on the main island of Honshu. She lived in Japan through college, attending the University of Tokyo. Here she studied British area studies, concentrating on English literature and writing a thesis on Victorian children’s literature. She first came to America as an exchange student at Swarthmore College, and really enjoyed the unique atmosphere of a small, close-knit campus with professors and students living together. Takai-sensei then studied at Washington University in St. Louis, where she taught Japanese for the first time and earned a master’s degree in Japanese literature, writing a thesis on early modern ghost stories called Ugetsu Monogatari (雨月物語). She then went on to graduate school at Columbia University, where she received a PhD in Japanese literature and studied early modern Japanese puppet theater, which is known in Japanese as bunraku (文楽).

For part of her dissertation research, she studied in Japan for a year and a half, and felt a newfound sense of homecoming when returning to America. While naturally identifying as Japanese, she really enjoys living in the US.

My time in China has encouraged me to learn more than just another language and culture. It’s developed me as a writer, as a student, and as a person. I’ve met amazing people who, from being classmates or colleagues, have become great friends, and I am more open to (not to mention more qualified for) whatever opportunities come my way. China is what you make of it and, if you can fill the unforgiving minute with sixty seconds worth of distance run...

(Continued)
appreciating how much individuality is respected here, and how there
seem to be fewer social constraints and expectations (particularly on
college campuses) compared to Japan. One of her favorite things about
America is the sense of freedom to do what you want and be yourself.

Takai-sensei particularly feels this sense of individual freedom, as well as a
close sense of community, at Vassar, where she is an adjunct assistant
professor for the 2014-15 academic year. She says that teaching here is
really fun, and likes to challenge students and see their progress
throughout the semester as they improve their language skills.

Takai-sensei encourages students to study every day and learn the basics
of the language, but really emphasizes the importance of actually using
the language as much as possible in interactions with others. She
encourages students to not be afraid of making mistakes, and says that
attending events like language tables and karaoke nights are great
opportunities to practice speaking Japanese in a non-academic setting.

She also says that it is important to enjoy studying. For example, when
learning English, she found it helpful and fun to learn through listening to
English songs, so doing things like listening to Japanese music, watching
anime, or reading manga could help students learn Japanese in a fun
and memorable way.

Next year, Takai-sensei will move on to the University of Florida, where she
plans to teach Japanese literature and possibly a course on translation.

Takai-sensei has studied bunraku, early modern Japanese puppet
theatre (pictured at left) at Columbia University.
Interview with Li-Laoshi is reproduced here by Ga Hyun Kim, our Chinese Department intern for academic year 14/15.

Professor Yining Li
(李老师)

Q. Where are you from? Can you tell us briefly about your life before coming to Vassar?
A. I was born and raised in Harbin, but got my master’s degree in applied linguistics at Jilin University in Changchun, Jilin. My master’s degree focused mainly on pedagogies of teaching Chinese as a second language. Before coming to Vassar, I was teaching Chinese to international students at Dalian University of Technology. I taught there for about six years.

Q. How did you know about Vassar? What brought you here?
A. I was assigned to Vassar through a program sponsored by Hanban (Confucius Institute Headquarters), which supports Chinese teachers to teach in foreign countries for two years. I applied to come to the United States among other countries because I believed it is the place where I can have most diverse experiences in terms of teaching Chinese. It sounded academically appealing to me to come to the United States among all other places. After all, English is the first foreign language I learned – so that was also a factor. I did not know about Vassar when I first applied, but now that I am here, I am very glad to have been assigned here!

Q. How is teaching at Vassar different from your previous teaching experiences?
A. I think classes have different focus here. In China, classes are focused more on “knowing” the language than “using” the language. In other words, language courses in China have their focus on rather “formal” language, what you would read in books and newspapers rather than on a blog, for example. Thus, reading and writing are taught more intensely than here. Here, the emphasis is more on speaking everyday language. According to that, I also try to give my students as much chances as possible to actually use Chinese in class. I think language courses here are more practical for everyday use.

Q. Do you have any advice for students? To your students now and to those who haven’t yet started learning Chinese yet?
A. I believe learning a foreign language in general is a very smart move. Language is not only a useful skill but also an important experience, in a sense that it is an interaction with the whole history of another culture. Speaking of why learn Chinese in particular, there are two reasons. As everyone would know, China has been growing its global influence around the world in all aspects including economics and politics. Chinese will undoubtedly be a great asset for Vassar students, who are all very intelligent and have ambitious ideals to achieve. Also, as all smart people do, you must enjoy challenges! Learning Chinese language can be your next challenge, a useful and interesting one 😊
I’m in the class of 2015 and double-majoring in Japanese and Computer Science. I’ve always been interested in Japanese culture since I love video games (especially Nintendo). My stepmom is Japanese and she took my stepsister and me on a trip to Tokyo after we graduated high school. This was my first time in a foreign country other than Canada, and it was an amazing experience. Coming to Vassar, I knew that I wanted to be a Computer Science major since I wanted to make video games. What I didn’t know was that I would also end up majoring in a language I had only recently been introduced to.

When I heard about the foreign language requirement, I decided to try Japanese since I had had such a great time in Japan and loved the culture. I had never planned on majoring in Japanese, but when I was discussing my decision to study abroad for a year in Tokyo, my adviser, Peipei Qiu, recommended I major in it because I would be taking enough classes abroad to satisfy the requirements anyway. During my junior year I studied abroad at Waseda University, which is where I really fell in love with Japan. I loved my Japanese classes at Vassar, but they’re no substitute for actually being in Japan. Living with a host family and being part of a club helped my language skills improve exponentially, all while making lasting friendships and memories.

My advice to potential Japanese majors: study abroad! There’s no substitute for real-world experience. And if you are going to study abroad, I highly suggest going for a full year. One semester is great, but you don’t really get the full experience. Once you finally start getting a grasp on the language, it’s already time to go home. Might as well enjoy it and make it last!

For my senior project I’m attempting to combine my two majors by making a game that teaches you Japanese onomatopoeia. I never had much fun with educational games, so I’m trying to make mine an actual “game” that also teaches you something. It’s an RPG that you can play in either English or Japanese, and Qiu-sensei is helping me with the translation.

After graduation I’ll be working at Microsoft as a Programmer Writer, writing tech blogs and helpful documentation to teach developers how to develop for Microsoft’s platforms. My hope is that I’ll somehow get to incorporate Japanese into my work life, either by working with Japanese developers or at the very least making yearly visits during my vacation time. Majoring in Japanese has allowed me to have so many great experiences and will surely continue to unlock opportunities I wouldn’t have otherwise.

“My advice to potential Japanese majors: study abroad!”
JYA Reflection from Jessica Au ’16: A Semester in Hong Kong

Jessica is a junior Chinese and International Studies double major. She spent the last semester in Hong Kong, attending Hong Kong University.

“I can only say that Hong Kong has much to offer culturally and academically.”

During the fall semester of 2014, I studied abroad at the University of Hong Kong as part of my JYA experience. Unfortunately, since Vassar is not partnered with HKU, my application process was completely independent and self-reliant. As a “visiting student” (not an exchange student), I lived in private housing off-campus, which allowed me to interact with locals in my neighborhood and not rely too heavily on hanging out with only international students.

My classes were primarily in the social sciences department. Although HKU did not offer classes as advanced as at Vassar, I liked that it offered many Hong Kong studies and Asian studies classes. I did not take any language courses at HKU (the classes were taught in English), but I was able to improve my Cantonese language skills by exploring Hong Kong and practicing my Canto with locals.

My most memorable experiences in Hong Kong were outside of the classroom, while I explored the city and its many islands. Hong Kong is not only a cosmopolitan shopping paradise with malls on every corner, but it also offers many mountains, beaches, and hiking trails for outdoor activities. (There’s actually a mountain inhabited by monkeys—also called Monkey Mountain). Also, its proximity to Mainland China and many islands in Southeast Asia allows for quick and cheap weekend trips.

Last but not least, I truly believe that Hong Kong is the eating capital of the world. The city’s international palate is incomparable, with prices ranging from dirt-cheap to exorbitant. (Actually, the most delicious burger I have ever eaten was in Hong Kong!) Surely, my friends and family back in the U.S. were more often updated with what I ate (Instagram, of course) than what I actually did in Hong Kong. After coming back to the U.S., I can only say that Hong Kong has much to offer culturally and academically, so I hope that more Vassar students in the future consider this multifaceted city for their JYA experience.
Introducing
Chinese and Japanese Majors Committee Co-chairs:

Saisha Srivastava ’17
Katie Carpenter ’15

Words from Saisha:
Hi, I’m Saisha. Fun fact- my English name and Chinese name are both the same, my Chinese name is 赛莎 (sai sha). I grew up in Calcutta, India and am currently a sophomore at Vassar studying Economics, Political Science and Chinese. I’m hoping to study the Political Economies of India and China, their similarities and differences, in greater depth in the future and I’m very excited about learning Chinese. I also enjoy cooking, dance, and scuba diving (I got my license last summer!) and occasionally binging on protein bars while watching Death Note on Netflix under my blanket. I also drink too much tea.

Words from Katie:
Hi, I’m Katie! I’m a senior double majoring in Japanese and Political Science. I’m from Philadelphia and hope to return there once I graduate, mostly because I have some pretty strong Philly pride. I’m in the Aikido Club and Unitarian Universalist Group on campus, so if you’ve been yearning for martial arts or spirituality let me know. I also work at UpC, and I wear a Vassar baseball hat on my shift, so feel free to order in Japanese if you see me; it’ll make work more interesting. I originally started studying Japanese because I liked anime (so original), but I don’t watch it too much lately.

My interest has shifted more into history and religion, and mostly just like studying Japanese because I think it’s an interesting and beautiful language, and I enjoy language study more generally. I studied abroad at Kansai Gaidai University and this year did a summer Japanese language program called the Critical Language Scholarship Program, which if you get accepted pays for your flight and cost of living, so if either of those are of interest I’m always happy to talk to people about them.

Saisha will be representing Chinese majors, and Katie Japanese majors. The majors committee promotes student interactions within the major and hosts special events.
Activities 2014/2015

Lunar New Year Event: February 22, 2015

Above: Students participating in various Lunar New Year Activities including dumpling making, paper folding, chopstick competition, and various performances.

Culture Day
November 14, 2014

Left: Takai-sensei demonstrating Aikido.
Right: Students watching Chinese Shadow Puppet Theater.

Japanese Cherry Blossom Festival

Coming up on April 10, 2015 in the Aula from 10 am to 2 pm