NEWSLETTER: FALL 2020

Dear friends of the Department of South and Southeast Asian Studies,

Greetings from UC Berkeley! For some of you, it has been quite some time since you walked the halls of Dwinelle’s G Floor, while others of you have only just taken your leave. We hope that this letter finds all of you well and even thriving, and that you will enjoy hearing about just some of the recent activities and events taking place these last couple of years here at DSSEAS.

It is perhaps fitting to be writing the inaugural Chair’s Newsletter now, when opportunities for us to gather are necessarily postponed — hopefully for not too much longer — by our shared determination to keep ourselves and each other safe and healthy. With this first letter (perhaps a bit longer than those you will receive in the future), I would like not only to bring you up to date regarding some of the recent endeavors and activities that continue to energize us all, while keeping our sights trained on all that lies in store for us as we move forward, putting the challenges of the moment behind us. Over the last two years (which is all I can cover in a short newsletter), we have continued to grow, explore, teach, and create, just as our students and faculty grow in their roles as leaders, researchers, educators and even artists, making meaningful contributions both within the walls of this campus and well beyond.

COMINGS AND GOINGS

The first and perhaps most momentous news is that three new faculty members have joined our community since the fall of 2019. Dr. Vasugi Kailasam, Assistant Professor of Tamil Literature and Culture, brings her expertise in both Tamil fiction and visual culture, and we are particularly excited about her first book project, which will provide insight into the complex interactions of “realism” with the multi-faceted and evolving nature of Tamil national identity, not only as it is experienced in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, but also among Tamil-speaking people in Singapore, Sri Lanka, and Malaysia. Dr. Lisandro Claudio, Assistant Professor of Southeast Asian Studies, just joined us in January 2020, having already published three books on Philippine culture and political history (one of which received two prestigious awards in 2019: the European Association for
Southeast Asian Studies Book Prize in the Humanities, and the George McT. Kahin Prize of the Association for Asian Studies).

Finally, we are looking forward to welcoming our newest faculty member, Dr. Rahul Parson, as our Assistant Professor of Hindi Literature, beginning in January 2021. Dr. Parson’s particular interest in modern literary movements in Bengal has inspired his endeavor to redefine “literature” to include the voices of the marginalized and the migrant, the critic and the satirist.

Just as we are welcoming these young scholars into our community, in the spring we will also be fêting two colleagues who have chosen, after long and distinguished careers, to retire. Robert Goldman, Catherine and William L. Magistretti Distinguished Professor of Sanskrit, will retire at the end of this academic year after 50 years of influential and passionate research, mentorship, and teaching. We are grateful that Professor Goldman will continue to make himself available for some teaching and mentoring for a little while after his official departure! In addition, we will be saying goodbye to Supatra Chowchuvech, our Lecturer in Thai language after 11 years of exemplary teaching and mentoring of our students. We look forward to the day when we can gather together and mark this moment — hopefully some time this fall.

FACULTY AWARDS AND HONORS

Besides Professor Claudio, three other members of our community have also been recognized with prestigious book awards in their respective fields. Professor Robert Goldman and Dr. Sally Sutherland Goldman were awarded the A.K Ramanujan Prize for Translation by the Association for Asian Studies for the 7th and final volume of their monumental translation of the Rāmāyana of Vālmiki, the culmination of forty years of work. One of Professor Sugata Ray’s two recently published books, Climate Change and the Art of Devotion, garnered the American Academy of Religion’s Religion and the Arts Book Award. In addition, Professor Penny Edwards was awarded both a Townsend Fellowship in Humanities to support the completion of her current book project, The Peacocks are All Gone: An Anti-History of a Burmese Anti-Hero; and a Critical Refugee Studies Grant Award for her multi-media production, artographies: in other words/worlds.

As many of you know, Virginia Shih, Curator for the Southeast Asia Collections, and Adnan Malik, Curator for the South Asia Collections are essential to the work of all of our faculty members and students. In spring 2020, they were gearing up to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the South and Southeast Asian Library. Festivities were planned, and an exhibit was mounted; but it had to be postponed. We are hopeful that we can reopen the library and celebrate as planned in Fall 2021. Virginia Shih also engages in research, and was duly awarded a research grant from the Librarians Association of the University of California to conduct an archival research project on CORMOSEA (Committee on Research Materials on Southeast Asia): Reflections, Challenges, and Opportunities.
Perhaps the one silver lining of our current circumstances is the ease with which we can convene with those who are far away. Both before and since the shift to remote teaching and learning, our faculty regularly accept invitations to share their research and expertise beyond our department, and beyond the boundaries of the Berkeley campus. Under the auspices of the new Center for Silk Road Studies, Professor Jacob Dalton, along with students from SSEAS, Art History, and Buddhist Studies, traveled to London and Paris to visited the British Museum, British Library, and Musée Guimet, where they examined art works and manuscripts for both research purposes and in preparation for a future exhibition. Also before the pandemic, Professor Penny Edwards produced and directed the Critical Refugee Studies Project Performance, *No Place Like Home: Inflight Stories Designed to Move* at the Berkeley Arts Museum and Pacific Film Archive, featuring SSEAS major Ryan Boun, Lecturer in Filipino, Dr. Joi Barrios-Leblanc, Lecturer in Burmese, Kenneth Wong, and other members of Berkeley community and campus. This spring, she also remotely conducted a writing workshop titled “Womanizing Indochina” at Beijing University as part of the inauguration of their Cambodia Studies Center. Besides her participation in Professor Edwards’ performance work, Dr. Barrios-Leblanc has also continued to pursue her own work as a poet, lyricist, and performer. Among her most notable compositions is the recent five-song work, “A Divergent War: Songs for the Pandemic,” for which she composed the lyrics, and which was recorded and performed by a number of other artists, including our own Lecturer in Filipino, Chat Aban, with translations by our Lecturer in Filipino, Karen Llagas. Dr. Rebekah Linh Collins, a graduate of our department and current lecturer in Southeast Asian Studies, was the keynote speaker at the 2019 graduation ceremony organized by Berkeley’s Southeast Asian Student Coalition (SASC) for Southeast Asian American students.

Professor Munis Faruqui, in addition to furthering his ongoing research and lecturing widely on the Mughal Empire in the late 17th century, continues to serve as Director of UC Berkeley’s Institute for South Asia Studies, one of the country’s most dynamic centers of its kind, providing support and a vibrant and wide-ranging intellectual forum for scholars, students, and members of the community (near and far) interested in all aspects of the region. Professor Sugata Ray taught a traveling seminar on Indian Ocean Art Histories, which took the class to Goa, Mumbai, and Kochi. A number of SSEAS students participated in the seminar, and it culminated in a one-day public symposium. And Professor Alexander von Rospatt was invited to serve as Directeur d’études at the École pratique des hautes études in Paris and, more recently, as Visiting Professor for Indology at the Ludwig-Maximilians University in Munich.
NEW BOOKS AND A TRANSLATION

In addition to the award-winning publications I mentioned earlier, other books and articles by our faculty have engaged with and expanded the boundaries of knowledge in their fields, diffusing groundbreaking research, expanding the readership of great literary works through translation, and creating essential sourcebooks. Among these, I would simply like to mention: Sugata Ray’s co-edited volume, Water Histories of South Asia: The Materiality of Liquescence, which appeared with Routledge in 2019, as well as a special issue of Ars Orientalis that he guest-edited on the language of art history; Lecturer in Vietnamese Cam Nguyen’s translation, with Alec Holcombe of Ohio University, of Nguyen Viet Ha’s short story, “Rain on My Wedding Day,” about to be reprinted in the 60th anniversary issue of Michigan Quarterly Review; Lecturer in Burmese Kenneth Wong’s two books: Easy Burmese: A Complete Language Course and Pocket Dictionary in One, and Survival Burmese: Survival Burmese Phrasebook and Dictionary; and Lecturer in Filipino, Dr. Joi Barrios-Leblanc’s Pocket Tagalog Dictionary, a condensed version of her earlier Concise Tagalog Dictionary. She has also authored the forthcoming book, Tagalog Stories for Language Learners: Folktales and Short Stories, coming out soon from Tuttle.

GRADUATE STUDENT NEWS

It is fair to say that the hardships imposed by the pandemic have presented particular challenges to our graduate students, whose teaching and research activities were, in some cases, delayed or abruptly reshaped by circumstances beyond their control. Some had been awarded critical travel grants that they could no longer use—or that would need to be deferred; some were first-time instructors who had spent weeks preparing, learning how to apply the best possible classroom practices, only to find themselves jettisoned into a completely unfamiliar and untried teaching environment; and some, far from home, who counted on the camaraderie of their cohort to keep themselves going when the demands of graduate work seemed almost too heavy to bear, had to learn to cope with solitude. And those among the students who are also teaching have found themselves to be indispensable in supporting the learning and well-being of our undergraduates.

And yet. The graduate students of SSEAS have met—and continue to meet — these challenges with uncommon imagination, generosity and drive. Over the summer, three of our students—Katie Bruhn, Kashi Gomez, and Lisa Brooks — enrolled in and attended Berkeley’s intensive Graduate Remote Instruction Innovation Fellows Program, and then organized and conducted their own teaching sessions to share their newly acquired techniques and ideas with others in the department, graduate students and faculty alike. Sophia Warshall and Katie Bruhn have continued to run the South and Southeast Asian Graduate Student Roundtable, a monthly forum sponsored by the Townsend Center for the Humanities, at which SSEAS students, as well as invited students from History, and Performance and Theater Studies, have the opportunity to share their work in progress and benefit from constructive feedback from their peers. Lisa Brooks also co-organized and facilitated two conferences in two years: Science, Technology, and Medicine in South Asia: Medicine and Memory (2018) and Science, Technology, and Medicine in South Asia: Body Horizons (2019). Lisa Brooks, Kashi Gomez, Priya Kothari and Janet Um organized a two-day Sanskrit Reading Workshop, during which participants took up Sanskrit Reading Workshop.
the issues of scriptural interpretation, philology and methodological recuperation. These activities have not just helped the department fulfill its mission under adverse circumstances, but have managed to sustain that feeling of belonging, so essential to everything we do. Through it all, they continue to make room for just plain socializing, setting aside time to gather online...just because.

Of course, our students look forward to the time when they can resume their field work and research travel. Memories of pre-pandemic trips are, of course, still fresh. Over the last two years, Sophia Warshall and Nir Feinberg (Buddhist Studies) organized two investigative trips: first, to Maharashtra (2019) and then to Sri Lanka (2020), led by the Sri Lanka historian, Adjunct Professor Osmund Bopearachchi, and funded by the Ruby Lord Fund.

Besides these activities, both before the pandemic and since, our students have been engaged and productive, and have seen their projects recognized through the granting of fellowships and awards, invitations to present their work, as well as through peer-reviewed publication. Katie Bruhn, who focuses on Southeast Asian Art, received both a Townsend Fellowship and a Phi Beta Kappa Dissertation fellowship, and presented papers at Brown University and ICAS Leiden. Sohini Pillai, whose dissertation studies the transformations of the narrative and transmission of the Mahābhārata in premodern South Asia, was not only awarded a Fulbright-Hayes Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad Fellowship, but also co-edited with Nell Hawley (Preceptor in Sanskrit at Harvard University) a volume titled Many Mahābhāratas, to be published by SUNY Press in April 2021. (The 18 essays in the volume include two pieces by our own Bob and Sally Goldman!). Anurag Advani, who studies changing notions of madness and mental illness in the Mughal Empire was awarded a research grant from the Taraknath Das Foundation of the South Asia Institute at Columbia University, and presented his work at the AIIIS Mughal Persian Archival Workshop, held in Lucknow, India. Melissa Carlson, who examines the development of contemporary Burmese modern art and national identity, was awarded a Fulbright-DDRA and a CAORC - Inya Institute Short-Term Fellowship for research travel to Myanmar, and is looking forward to being able to use them soon. In the meantime, Melissa has an essay forthcoming in the March 2021 edition of the Sharjah Art Museum’s March Meeting 2020: Unravelling the Present, a compilation of art practitioners responding to the role of the Biennial as a catalyst for critical dialogue and transnational exchange. Lisa Brooks has produced three peer-reviewed articles, one of which, “Whose Life is Water, Whose Food is Blood,” is available in a new digital volume from Australian National University Press, titled Fluid Matter(s): Flow and Transformation in the History of the Body.

We have some prize-winners as well: Lisa Brooks and Janet Um won the 2018 Sanskrit Prize; Kashi Gomez and Priya Kothari won that same prize in 2019. Priya was also awarded the Townsend Humanities Center

Researchers study unfinished cave at Pandavleni, Nasik (Maharashtra)
Dissertation Fellowship. Sophia Warshall earned an Outstanding Graduate Student Instructor Teaching Award, a campus-wide honor.

Since 2018, our department has graduated no fewer than seven PhDs: Kankan Xie, Joseph Scalice, Thibodi Buakamsri, Hannah Lord Archambault, Rebecca Whittington, Yusmarni Djalius, and Kat Gutierrez. Kat Gutierrez, our most recent graduate, has just been hired as an Assistant Professor in the History Department of the University of California, Santa Cruz, after she completed her time as a Dibner Fellow in the History of Science and Technology at the Huntington Library in Los Angeles and a stint as Visiting Professor of International Studies at De La Salle University, Manila, where she taught, among other courses, “History of Science and Technology in Southeast Asia.” She is looking forward to taking up her position as a Mellon Fellow at the Humanities Institute of the New York Botanical Gardens in 2021, where she will work on transforming her dissertation (The Region of Imperial Strategy: Regino Garcia, Sebastián Vidal, Mary Clemens and the Consolidation International Botany in the Philippines, 1858-1936) into a book.

...AND OUR UNDERGRADUATES

The undergraduates who attend our courses and major in our department continue to impress as well. Before the pandemic, students who are enrolled in courses in any of our fourteen languages would regularly cap off their year with a performance of a play in the original language. And even in zoom classes, they brought their energy and passion for learning to their work. In 2018, Manish Singh was awarded the Sanskrit Prize. Our Departmental Citation, which is presented in recognition of distinguished undergraduate achievement in the SSEAS major, was awarded in 2018 Prathyush Parasurman, and in 2019 to Nadia Budiman.

Thank you for reading, and please be in touch if you would like more information about — or if you would like to lend your encouragement to — the department and its activities. I look forward to writing you again soon — perhaps with a shorter letter!

All best wishes,

Paula Varsano
Professor and Chair