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# Faculty Travel: Tom Knudson's Travel Notes from Asia

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## FACULTY TRAVEL

### Tom Knudson's Travel Notes from Asia

According to United States Bureau of the Census population projections, by the turn of the century 20 percent of the humans on the planet will be Chinese, and 28 percent of the world's population will be Asian. Less than 5 percent will be American. As the economies of the Asian nations emerge from the shadow of Communism, the impact of such population distributions will make it imperative that Western nations develop useful links with Asian peoples. To do that we must first understand them, a task made much more difficult by the strained relationships we have had. China has been all but closed to us by distance, cultural differences and the enmities of the Cold War. Since World War II our relationship with Japan as both an economic ally and competitor has been awkward and difficult. In the wake of the war we fought against communist North Vietnam the American view of unified Vietnam is still hostile and suspicious. And American knowledge of the remaining cultures of Asia is, as it has always been, vague at best.

Tom Knudson, a Professor of Physical Education and Recreation at Bridgewater, has spent a great deal of time in the last few years developing the knowledge and associations that will help in the establishment of international programs with a

focus on Asia at Bridgewater State College and in our region.

Dr. Knudson's travel to the region began in 1986 with his year as a visiting lecturer at Shanxi Teacher's University in the Peoples Republic of China. Three years later Dr. Knudson was a Fulbright Fellow for the study of Chinese language, history and culture in China's Beijing Foreign Languages Normal School. In the summer of 1993 he was in South Korea visiting universities and sports facilities in Seoul, Sokcho and Kyongju and in the Peoples Republic of China as a program consultant and observer at Shanxi Provincial University. Most recently Dr. Knudson was again in Asia as a 1995 Fulbright Fellow to the Peoples Republic of China where, in association with the East-West Center of the University of Hawaii he visited a number of China's east coast cities. On the same trip he took the opportunity to travel in Vietnam including visits to Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Dalat, Nha Trang and Hue. The following are excerpts from some of his travel writing from recent trips he took to the Peoples Republic of China and Vietnam.

*China Travel from Datong to Xian in China would be expensive by air, assuming I could get a ticket. So train is preferable, though a Chinese railway station is a real test of resolve. It's chaotic! Ten to 15 roughly formed lines of milling travelers fight for a spot at the right tiny hole serving as ticket counter for a specific destination. You bend and put your face in the small opening to deal with a seller who speaks no English. The destinations served at the window are identified only in Chinese, and getting what you want is like hoping to win the Massachusetts Lottery. On my third try I get a ticket to Kunning, but I can't get a sleeper ticket. I settle for the dreaded hard seat ticket, really a vinyl-covered bench. The seats facing one another are so close that people can't even sit knee-to-knee, and we have to lace our knees. There are no seat backs so my back is to rest against*

*the back of a stranger for the entire trip. I try to bribe the attendant on the train to find a vacant sleeper, but had no luck. Maybe I didn't offer the bribe properly. At least I have a reserved seat. When the gates open to board the train there is a dash to claim remaining seats. Travelers climb through windows, packing the aisles, pushing shoving, scrambling.*

*Most Chinese travel lightly. Their gear for a long trip might consist of a lunch-box sized package. But rural folks going or coming from the city have huge packages of belongings, even livestock-chickens and the like. It seems there won't be space for everyone and their possessions, but after the steam train jerks and puffs from the station, everyone settles into a space, though some are standing and others are on the floor in the aisle. This is a long trip-fifteen hours. My companions (mostly rural people) are red-cheeked, dirty and shabby beyond American standards for poverty. And they are curious. Most have never been this close to a foreigner. This is not like the east coast of the country, where the big-eyed, big-nosed westerners seem to be everywhere. These people want to know about me. A crowd grows around me-questions, jokes and laughing. They reach out to touch my hairy arms and inspect the book I'm trying to read. They try to read it both right side up and upside down. They make no sense either way. Many drink tea from mason jars or similar ware, but others drink a Chinese liquor (they call it wine, though it is 70 or 80 percent alcohol - that's about 150 proof), and bits of food. The foursome across from me drink too much and get noisy and obnoxious. As is the Chinese way, they are tolerated, though one gets sick and makes a mess that even the attendant won't clean. As night comes the arms, heads, bodies and legs of strangers overlap, and fall against one another in sleep. By the end of the trip in the morning, we are comrades of the ordeal, even including the drinkers from the night before. It is probably an experience of China that shouldn't be missed. I'll be damned if I do it again.*

*Vietnam The sun comes up early in Hanoi, and by 5:30 A.M. my room is bright with sunlight. The concierge of my \$15 a night hotel has to unlock and roll up the wire mesh screen to let me out where the streets are already alive with people. In this, the "old quarter" of Hanoi, where street markets and vendors provide the "new capitalism" of Vietnam, bread, flower and fruit and vegetable stalls are crowded in the narrow streets.*

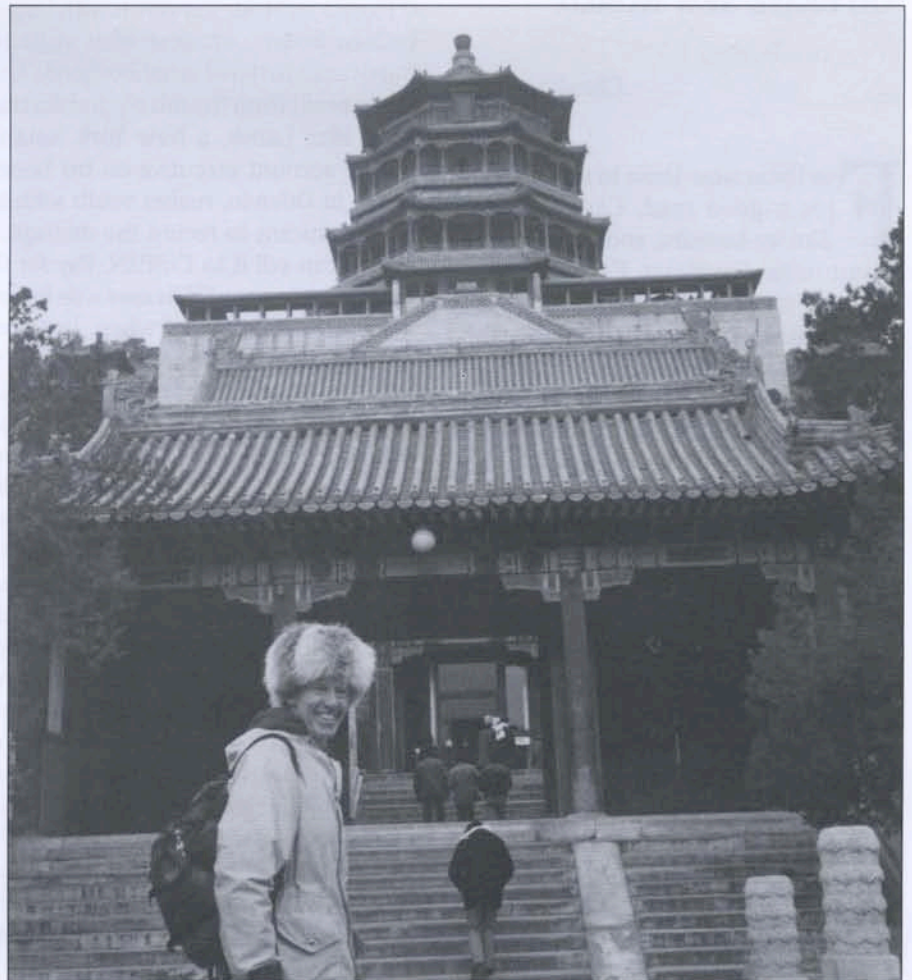
*Just around the corner, on the wider streets and boulevards encircling the Hoan Kiem (the "Lake of the Returned Sword") men, women and children are running, stretching, playing badminton or soccer. This is the cool and relatively uncrowded time. The streets are not yet congested with peda-cabs and motor bikes. None of the scars of war, save for a few shrapnel-marked French Provincial civic buildings are apparent. The people too seem to have put the war behind them. Optimism prevails and the American is the model for a better life. I am treated well.*

*This early morning I pause to watch a badminton game on an unmarked, makeshift court in a small garden at a juncture of two busy streets. Beneath the watchful eyes of a war memorial statue of a woman and two children, a vigorous doubles game goes on. By 8 A.M. there would be no evidence of this daily match among older men. I had watched before, but this morning they ask me to join. I am not a bad player, but I am no match for my opponent this time. In typical Asian style he "keeps me in the game", making sure not to embarrass me. This is no significant political breakthrough, but it shows the friendliness and openness of the Vietnamese people.*

Dr. Knudson's travel to Asia has been an important part of the process of establishing the knowledge necessary to develop an Asian Studies program.

Since returning from his trip, Dr. Knudson has been working with a number of faculty members at Bridgewater State in an Asian Studies Group whose aim is to develop a multidisciplinary Asian Studies Minor on the campus. Courses in Asian languages, culture, geography, music philosophy, religion, history, government, social organization, personality and sport are already offered at the college, and in combination with a range of other, more general non-western courses, the core of an Asian Studies Minor have been delineated by the study group. Members of the group have also been developing connections with other Asian studies programs by attending a number of con-

ferences on the subject, especially at Middlesex Community College and the University of Massachusetts at Lowell, both of which are affiliated with the East-West Center in Hawaii. The Bridgewater Asian Studies group also intends to propose a multi-school Asian area studies program in cooperation with Middlesex and Massasoit Community Colleges and, perhaps, one of the Boston colleges such as the University of Massachusetts in Boston or Roxbury Community College. Dr. Knudson and others of the group have also attended national conferences on Asian Studies in Boston and Washington. Once in place the Asian studies program is certain to enhance the opportunities for students and faculty to increase their understanding of an important region.



Dr. Knudson at the Temple of Heaven, Beijing, China