Yoshiko Yokochi Samuel Oral History Interview, Mar. 31, 2014

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Professor Yoshiko Samuel: Second Interview  
31 March 2014  
Recorded in the Wasch Center

Smith: I understand, Professor Samuel, that in this second interview, you would like to talk about your department, and many aspects of it.

Samuel: Thank you. I understand that at the beginning there were two: Mr. Carl Ceasar, from Columbia, teaching Japanese literature, and Frances Sheng, who was a Chinese language teacher. And that was around 1971. Then a year later, Tony Chambers came, and the program officially became the Department of Asian Languages and Literatures.

So there were Tony and Frances Sheng, and soon Tony added Yoshiko McCullough to teach Japanese language, and James Lu, to add to the Chinese language program.

It was called The Department of Asian Languages and Literatures, but it had only Japanese and Chinese languages and literatures. I asked Tony about this, and he explained to me that it was called the Department of Asian Languages and Literatures because if any Wesleyan students went to other parts of Asia and studied the language or culture in those places, then our department was responsible for evaluating what those students had learned, and to make recommendations on whether they should be credited or not. And this was important because by then we had already both Indonesian music and Indian music, and dance too, so some students did go to South East Asia and South Asia and study languages.

Personally, I don’t recall any occasions when we did have to evaluate them, or had to find somebody who could evaluate them, but that was the reason for the name of our Department.

Smith: And that satisfied you?

Samuel: Yes. It was fine, because I was hoping that it would give us a possibility for expansion, too, in the future. But my immediate hope was that at least we could make it
East Asian Languages and Literatures by adding Korean language and literature. But that had to wait for many years into the future.

When I came in 1979, Yoshiko McCullough had left for Vanderbilt University. So there were Tony Chambers and me teaching Japanese literature and language, and we taught first- and second-year language courses, and two literature courses a semester. Frances Sheng and James Lu taught Chinese languages, just the first two years of it.

I understood that before we had any Chinese language courses at Wesleyan, our students who wanted to study Chinese had to commute to Yale to study the language. It didn’t seem that there had been students who had wanted to study Japanese language then; I have no idea when that interest came in. So--just two years and the languages, and two literature courses a semester in Japanese only. We were only a very small Department, and enrollments were very small, too. I remember having maybe 10 to 12 students in first-year Japanese language, and we all sat around a round table in our seminar room to study the language.

Literature classes were a little larger but never larger than 15 or 16 students. And we were of course a part of the East Asian Studies Program, and that program’s faculty was made up of all of us belonging to other departments, and cross-listing our courses under East Asian Studies. But Tony and I looked at our language and literature courses as the core component of the East Asian Studies program.

And then, gradually, our department expanded. We added Hsu Hsiaoching, to teach Chinese literature, and Ellen Widmer also to each Chinese literature. I think that was in the early 1980s. Shortly after that, we had students from China come to Wesleyan. It was still during the Cultural Revolution. Soon after that, Xiaomiao Zhu came from Beijing to pursue graduate studies here at Wesleyan. She assisted Frances Sheng and eventually became a full-time instructor of Chinese in our Department. She has been with us ever since, running a very strong Chinese language program.

In Language and Literature, we felt a little bit isolated at Wesleyan, so we tried to bring in speakers from outside to give talks, and of course the East Asian Studies Program had a very good lecture series. In addition, once a year we had a very important lecture we named the Freeman Lecture. We had experts in all sorts of fields related to Asia come and give talks.
For research, I was in Japanese Literature and pedagogy, but there was hardly any book in the Japanese language at Olin. So practically every weekend I drove down to Yale and used their Japanese books to do my research.

Wesleyan was very good about supporting me. I would get a letter, written by a librarian from Olin, introducing me, stating my research topic, and asking for their cooperation. I would take it to Yale and be issued a special visitors pass. And for that Wesleyan had to pay over $500 a semester. I think Wesleyan paid the same amount of fee for any faculty member using Yale library. I could go anytime, I could get into the stacks and take out books. That was a great help.

Yale did not have a separate area collection for East Asian materials; the books on East Asia are all over the library--some in literature, some in history, and so forth--but they did have an Asian reading room for rare books and reference materials, and also there were Asian librarians, area specialists, who were just wonderful. Very helpful. They even let me go into the cataloging room if the books had not been catalogued yet. They let me read there, or in the periodical rooms. I loved that library.

Also the Beineke, with old books. And then there was yet another library for very old books, so I was all over that campus with my research, and enjoying being there.

At the same time, we worked with Asian American students. There were very few students from Asia, but there were some American students whose parents and grandparents were from Asia. They formed their own group. First they called themselves WAIG, Wesleyan Asian Interest Group. It wasn’t necessarily limited to Asian students, anybody who was interested in Asia could join. It was a small group, but they had a meeting every Thursday night, and Tony Chambers and David Titus, in Japanese government, and I attended those meetings regularly. The only problem was that they met at 10 o’clock at night. The students were fine, but faculty members were very tired. At one point, three of us proposed that they move the meeting time up to at least 8 p.m. But we were voted down, and the meetings remained at 10 p.m.

We talked about things like having courses related to Asian American studies. By then I think we had Ujama, from the African American Studies Program, and we had Ahua Campos, a Latino and Hispanic group. There was nothing for Asian American Studies. We pushed for it, but we were told it was too divisive, and we could be a part of American Studies.
But still, there was nothing for Asian Americans in American Studies, so we continued to work for it, students gathered petitions, and finally we had one part time faculty member from Yale who came over and taught one course in Asian-American literature in the English Department, once a year. It didn’t last long because the enrollment was small, simply because the number of Asian American students was small, and other students were not really interested in Asian American literature. Most of them didn’t know there was such a thing.

So this regimen continued for two years, which meant two semesters. Then it just disappeared, which was frustrating for our Asian American students because the teacher would understandably come just once a week, and arrive here ten minutes before the class, and leave ten minutes after, to get back to New Haven. That didn’t work out well.

We also worked for the consortium program named Associated Kyoto Program. It was a consortium made up of about 13 member schools, it went up to 15 in the future, but mostly at small liberal arts colleges like Wesleyan, Williams, Amherst, Mt. Holyoke. In the West, Pomona, Whitman College, and so forth. This was a program that sent students to Japan to study for one year. Not just one semester, but one year.

We used the facilities of the Doshisha University in Kyoto, but it was a totally separate administration. Each year we had many students, sometimes up to ten students, going in this program. It was a home-stay program, students found it very helpful and exciting. Tony Chambers, David Titus, Jonathan Best, Keiji Shinohara, Terry Kawashima and I all spent some semesters with the AKP in Kyoto and tried to keep the program going. By this time, we had some students come from Connecticut College to study Japanese here. They didn’t have their own Japanese language program yet.

Our East Asian Studies Program did not have a home. We had faculty meetings in various places, the departmental lounge in the History Department and so forth. We all worked hard, and Vera Schwartz worked especially hard to persuade Mr. Mansfield Freeman to help us establish our home, the Center for East Asian Studies program. In 1987, our dream came true, and on the corner of Mt. Vernon Street and Washington Terrace, we secured a wood-frame house and converted that into the Center.

Inside, we took one small room on the first floor and made it into a Japanese room. We had Japanese carpenters come from New York and sleep here in that house
and create a Japanese room. It’s not a tea ceremony room, but it has a nice tatami floor with a nice alcove, and it opens up to a beautiful Japanese garden.

I remember when we had the opening ceremony. We were all there, as were our students, and Mr. Mansfield Freeman came. I think he was already in his late 90s, 95 or 96. And we felt really grateful for this beautiful gift.

Around the same time, 1987, we had a Japanese-American student by the name of Shu Tokita, a graduate from Wesleyan, go straight to Tokyo to pursue graduate study in Japanese literature. He had been in this country for more than 16 years, he went to Tsukuba University graduate school, and they had a rule that if you had been outside Japan for less than 16 years, you must take an entrance exam to the graduate school in Japanese, along with Japanese students taking the exam. So Shu did, and passed it! We were so proud, and he studied Japanese literature there.

When I was in Japan doing research, I visited him, and he was fine except I remember commenting that he had lost a lot of weight. He was accompanied by his professor, whom I had known, and they did not mention any problems. But we soon found out that Shu had come down with leukemia, and a year or so later he passed away. He completed his Master’s thesis on Kawabata, which was an excellent one, and then passed away.

So the Asian American group and the Asian Languages and Literatures Departments got together and said: “Why don’t we gather some money to create a scholarship in Shu Tokita’s honor?” This would be for Wesleyan students of color, studying literature.

We went out to gather donations for that program. Our goal was $10,000, and we ended up with $50,000. The donations came from people at Shu’s Japanese-American church in New York, and at the Japanese-American church in Hawaii, Shu’s graduate school in Japan, people in Hong Kong—froj just all over the place.

That program has been going steadily, and now each year we select one or two students to award what is now called the Tokita Prize. It requires no transcript and just an essay on what Literature means to them, why they wish to study it. I am still involved in it.

Our Department continued to expand. We added Terry Kawashima in Japanese Literature and Shengqing Wu in Chinese Literature. Of course, in the Japanese language, too, a succession of excellent linguists, namely Yuri Ito, Seiji Naito, and
Etsuko Takahashi, made great contributions to our program and our students. Etsuko Takahashi is still with us and, like Xiaomiao Zhu in Chinese, is doing an excellent job of teaching, research, and colleagueship.

In the 1990s, Mr. and Mrs. Houghton (Buck) Freeman started the Freeman Asian Scholars Program, to bring two top-notch students from each of ten Asian countries, and soon it became eleven Asian countries. So Wesleyan began to have 80 to 82 students every year, constantly. And that was a huge help. I think their presence, just their being on campus, helped other students, non-Asian students, learn so much about Asia.

Of course for these students from Asia it was such a fantastic experience, and it had an impact on our language programs, too. Those Asian students wanted to study other Asian languages, so we had many students from China studying Japanese, and vice-versa.

At the same time, we began to have Korean language. Just first-year Korean language. It was always just a one-year appointment, renewable, but never continued more than three years. And until a few years ago, we had Hyejoo Back from Korea teaching first-year Korean. She is such a fantastic teacher. Before that, we had Xiaomiao Zhu, added to our program, first as Frances Shen’s assistant, and then as our regular faculty member. She has been a very successful, very effective teacher. And now we have Heijo Buck teaching first-year Korean, and she is such a fantastic teacher.

Of course after taking first-year Korean, students wanted to continue, but there was no second- or third-year Korean. So Hyejoo Back was very generous with her time, and taught them in group tutorials, she just donated her time and effort to teach them.

The Korean language was offered under a “Less Commonly Taught Languages” program a Wesleyan, but I just heard that it has finally moved into Asian Languages and Literatures, starting this year, and next year Hyejoo can teach both first-year and second-year Korean. This is just a one year appointment, but we hope we will be able to expand and continue to teach the Korean language. Because Korea has become such an important country. And it has such a rich culture and literature to offer.

That’s where we are now. Terry Kawashima has left us, but we have gained another strong colleague, Ao Wang, in Chinese literature and language. Shengqing Wu, as well as Miri Nakamura in Japanese literature and language, are tenured now. The department is not only expanding but it has become stronger, thanks also to the
indispensable work of the Administrative Assistant, such as Ann Gertz. And it will become, I like to think, the core component of the new East Asian Studies program. Even though the name Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures will disappear starting this July, I suppose.

I think that is about it. I believe Wesleyan has been very supportive of East Asian Languages and Literatures. We have been very fortunate to have the support of the Freeman Family. And it is wonderful to have that Center for East Asian Studies. The art gallery and the lecture room have had fantastic lectures and events, and wonderful attendance. The beautiful garden, and the Tea Ceremony. A wonderful gift.

Smith: The Freeman family was so active while I worked at Wesleyan, its is sad to think that both Mansfield and Buck Freeman are no longer here--and Buck's wife Doreen.

Samuel: Mrs. Freeman was just wonderful: most supportive and warm.

Smith: I know they had a son who attended Wesleyan. Does he take an interest at all?

Samuel: I'm not quite sure. His interest is primarily in Japan, I believe. And of course we miss Tony Chambers who left for Arizona State in 1995. He has done an awful lot for our program.

Smith: Well, you two were fighting alone there on the ramparts for such a long time. Now you are retired, are you still involved? Do you still teach courses?

Samuel: Since I retired, I taught one semester, third-year Japanese. Also, I am unofficially--I couldn't do it officially--adviser to senior theses on Japanese Literature. I'm still doing that. I serve as a mentor to new faculty members in the Department. And there is a course on post-war Japanese Literature taught by Takeshi Watanabe, our temporary person, and each year he invites me to come in and talk about my wartime experience and other things. So I feel I am nicely connected to the Department.

Smith: Wesleyan is not a small place, but it seems to me that it has managed to establish a family feeling, and that is since you arrived. I don't believe it was always so.
Samuel: I think that the entire East Asian Studies Program has a very strong family feeling, and also our Japanese and Chinese language and literature programs have been very well known among other schools and high schools.

We ask our students why they came to Wesleyan, and many say, "Well, our counselors told us that Wesleyan has very good programs in Japanese and Chinese." Also, I used to take our language students to the New England Japanese Language Contest in Boston, and there was also a Connecticut Japanese Language Contest at Connecticut College. I drove them there, and we used to do very well. We are one of two of the favorite programs among the Boston counsellors; the other one is Brown.

Another thing: The Japanese government has established a program called JET, the Japan English Teaching program. It’s a very competitive program, but it selects young native-speakers of English who have just graduated, to go to Japan to teach English or to work in prefectural offices as a liaison between the prefecture and this country. For example, when we had the Olympics in Japan, that office really worked very closely with the Prefecture where the Olympics were held.

We have had some graduates who went to both the Boston Consulate and the New York consulate to take interviews for this Program. We have a very good name.

Smith: Your tentacles have spread far and wide.

Samuel: Yes. They go to Japan and teach in junior high school, or high school. They have really good experiences and are highly appreciated, too. So we have been very successful.

After graduating, our majors do not necessarily go into East Asian fields in either professional work or graduate school. Many of them go into international law or East Asian business---some of our graduates who are working in Japan are hired by industry. Literature--once in a while they keep that interest up. On the whole, we feel very good about our students.

Smith: I am floored by how much you have accomplished since you started with essentially two people and half a semester.
Samuel: Yes, but from the very beginning we had an excellent teacher in Frances Sheng, in Chinese. Her program expanded and people who worked under her, like her assistant, Xiaomiao Zhu, inherited so much from Frances and have been so successful.

I learned so much from Tony Chambers. I remember that when I came for an interview, he said, “Around here I have no chance to speak Japanese, so I forget it.” So I decided right there and then, “if I receive an offer to come here, I’m going to talk to this guy in nothing but Japanese.” And that’s what we did. We talked in Japanese almost totally exclusively, and that was a very stimulating thing for our students. Also, Tony used to take me to the Faculty Club for lunch, in the basement of Downey House. There was a round table in the middle, and it was a big treat for me to listen to other faculty members. I was very quiet because I would talk to Tony in Japanese, and I didn’t want to do that in front of others. So I was a listener. He also encouraged me to go to faculty meetings with him. I was so impressed by it—and had so much fun. I enjoyed very much the sense of humor as well, especially from people like Willy Kerr. I think I have been very fortunate. Our Department has been very, very fortunate. And we worked hard, but Wesleyan was very responsive to our needs and requests. And of course, there was so much bounty from the Freemans.

Our task for the future is perhaps to deal with the question of literature vs. language teaching. These are two separate academic disciplines; literature specialists are often not trained in language pedagogy and are not even interested in teaching language. Some of them even resent the fact that they must teach language. Language teachers, on the other hand, quite often feel that they are “looked down upon” by literature specialists for the reason that language acquisition is a matter of gaining a “skill” and is therefore not academic enough. This is all wrong. The recent national trend has been to acknowledge it and to have literature and language taught by those trained specifically in each of the fields. More and more language teachers, consequently, are linguists and/or specialists in education with a focus on second-language acquisition. I think this is a very positive trend. Wesleyan has linguists teaching the Japanese language but still requires literature teachers to be just effective in teaching language, as well. That, I believe, leaves us with a question with a serious consideration in order to improve our program further.

Smith: What a wonderful thought-provoking challenge you pose as an ending!