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The e-Newsletter of the Department of History
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A New Academic Year and its New Possibilities

The 2009–2010 academic year has certainly got off to an interesting start. Enrollments at the University of Missouri, for the second year in a row, were over the 30,000 mark. Signs of this record enrollment are everywhere. Campus spaces are just filled with students; it's not easy to walk around in the 10 minutes between scheduled class times. The classes are crowded, even the ones that meet at 8 a.m. or 4 p.m. There's a constant crush of people on Ninth Street sidewalks.

Fortunately, MU, unlike institutions of higher learning, both public and private, all across the country, has not suffered large funding cutbacks, and so has been able to meet the demands of increased enrollments. The future, though, may not be so bright. There will be small budget cuts for the next fiscal year, and for 2011–12, prospects are uncertain.

The football team, as I'm sure all our friends and alumni know, has had a mixed record this year—excellent games against Illinois, Colorado and Kansas State, less happy encounters with Nebraska, Oklahoma State, Texas, and Baylor. It may well be, though, that by the 2011–12 season, the future of the football team will be brighter.

In the meantime, the history department has been working hard to make the best of the current possibilities. In the fall semester, the department has had 3,456 students enrolled in its classes, 3,348 of them undergraduates. That is about 400 below the record Fall 2007 enrollment in history classes, but more than last year, and well above typical enrollment figures for the first half of this decade. The department is pleased to be able to say that every entering student wanting a place in a

survey course had one, and all of the department's majors—a group 400 strong—can get the advanced classes and senior seminars they need to graduate on time.

Another opportunity for the department this year is the chance to hire a professor of environmental history. Ordinarily, we would say this hire is to replace the person previously holding the position, but there is no one who can replace Susan Flader, who retired two years ago. The university's relatively favorable financial situation, though, has made it possible for us to offer a job to an environmental historian, and the difficult job market for new PhDs has meant that we have had an excellent group of applicants for the position. The search committee is currently looking to find the 10 best of the 60 or so applications we have received. Those 10 will be interviewed at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association this January, and three finalists will be invited back for campus visits at the beginning of February. A future newsletter will contain information about the hire; for more up-to-date reports, readers can always go to the department's Web site.

In addition, this fall, the history department inaugurated a new lecture series: the Lewis Atherton Memorial Lecture in American History. The inaugural lecturer was a prestigious historian, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich of Harvard, the current president of the American Historical Association, and Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Midwife's Tale*.

Professor Ulrich was eminently gracious and charming as well as a powerful scholar and a superb teacher. Her public lecture, held on the evening

Viewed Historically

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of November 9, “Mud and Fire: Mormon Diarists Cross Iowa,” was presented to a packed house in Keller Auditorium in the geology building. It was an intriguing account of the private lies and personal struggles of members of this religious minority as they headed west in 1846. During her stay, Professor Ulrich also taught an undergraduate class and gave a seminar for department faculty and graduate students. It was an unusually successful visit, and we can only hope that the next Atherton Lecture, scheduled for fall 2011, will work out as well.

Our featured news section this issue concerns the department’s newest professor, Soon Keong Ong, who was hired last year to teach East Asian history. That job search was very much a roller-coaster ride, since it began in August 2008, was suspended because of the economic crisis in November, only to be revived in March 2009. It ended very well with the hiring of Professor Ong, who has already demonstrated that he is a very effective teacher, an excellent scholar, and an amiable colleague.

Speaking of economic crises and excellent teachers, many of our alumni have taken classes in 20th- century US history with Professor Robert Collins, now the Byler Chair in the Social and Behavioral Sciences. They will know Collins as a superb, prize-winning teacher but they may be surprised to learn that he is a respected economic historian who has written well-regarded studies of the business community’s response to Keynesian economics and the politics of economic growth in contemporary America.

An appropriate object of Collins expertise is a recent event, with which all of our alumni and friends are all too familiar, namely the global financial crisis of a year ago. Although the worst of the crisis does seem to be over—at least we hope so—its effects are visible all around us. Since opinions about the causes of the crisis, potential measures to take against it, and policies to ensure that it does not re-occur depend on understanding just how unique this crisis was, and just what it has in common with past economic crises, a historical perspective seems very much in order. Robert

Collins is just the person to provide one, as he does in this issue’s “Historical Reflections”.

If readers would like to communicate with us on subscribing to/cancelling the Newsletter, sending alumni information, commenting on a story, or making suggestions about the department Web site, please send e-mails to: history@missouri.edu

In conclusion, we wish our alumni and friends all the best for Thanksgiving, Christmas, and the New Year. We’ll be back with another issue in February.

Jonathan Sperber
Chair, Department of History Department

Considering making a donation to the history department? For information on doing so, click on this [link](#). The department chair and the development office of the College of Arts and Science will be pleased to discuss any plans you may have to help the Department of History.

Viewed Historically

The e-Newsletter of the Department of History

Welcome Soon Keong Ong

I was born and raised in the city-state of Singapore. While attending schools in Singapore, I majored in science until my high school years. However, during a two-year hiatus from study to perform my national service in the army, I realized that I am more of a humanist at heart. I subsequently postponed my undergraduate studies to spend one year in China, where I studied Chinese classics and literature intensively and learned to play the Qin – an ancient Chinese musical instrument – during my leisure time.

I continued my study of Sinology back in Singapore by enrolling in the Chinese Studies Department at the National University of Singapore. My honors thesis on the historical thoughts of a late 19th-century Chinese intellectual consolidated my interest in the discipline of history and opened the door to graduate studies here in the United States. My first stint at graduate studies was at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, but I had to truncate my studies prematurely due to family illness. I returned a year later to earn a Master's degree in Chinese history from the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign before moving on to Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, to focus on Chinese history, Southeast Asian history, and the subtle relations between them.

I graduated from Cornell University in August 2008. My dissertation, titled *Coming Home to a Foreign Country: Xiamen, Overseas Chinese, and the Politics of Identities, 1843–1938*, explores the multi-layered social and cultural interactions between China and Southeast Asia through the activities of overseas Chinese both in Southeast Asia and when back in China. Focusing on the coastal city of Xiamen in Southeast China and the Chinese who migrated out of China via Xiamen to Southeast Asia and returned to it, I inquire into how geographical mobility affected overseas Chinese's relations with China, and how they, after returning to China with the money, knowledge, and vision



acquired abroad, changed the landscape of their homeland and the lives of those who did not move. I pursue this investigation in three directions: the roles played by Xiamen in the creation of a China-Southeast Asia migrant circuit and the activities of aspiring migrants and returned overseas Chinese in Xiamen; the accumulation and manipulation of multiple identities by overseas Chinese as political conditions in China and abroad changed; and the motivations behind the return of overseas Chinese to and continual involvement in affairs in China.

I conclude that overseas Chinese were constantly struggling to resolve conflicting claims on their loyalties: on one hand, an increasingly self-conscious Chinese state required them to stay patriotic and contribute meaningfully to its modernization; on the other hand, the burgeoning economy in Southeast Asia offered them new wealth and even new citizenship, which kept them distant from China. Inspired by recent theoretical re-conceptualizations, this project combined my interests in modern Chinese history, the interactions between China and Southeast Asia, and transnational theory into one project without abandoning any of them in the process. I am currently revising it for publication.

I taught for one year at the University of North Florida before I was offered the position in East Asian history here at the University of Missouri.

Viewed Historically

The e-Newsletter of the Department of History

The history department has allowed me to pursue my broad teaching and research interests. This year, besides teaching the survey of pre-modern and modern Chinese history, I am also offering courses on modern Southeast Asian history and Chinese migration history. In coming semesters, I will also develop courses that bring China and Southeast Asia into meaningful conversation with each other through the lens of trade, migration, identity, and urban development, such as “Business, Trade and Networks in Modern China” and “Comparative Asian Urban Modernities.”

Soon Keong Ong

Historical Reflections

Historians and the Financial Crisis

Some are calling it the Great Recession. Others, with more precision regarding its origins and nature, refer to it prosaically as the Financial Crisis of 2007–2009. By any name, it has been the most serious threat to the world economy since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Understanding what happened is obviously a high priority for policymakers, and explaining what happened promises to keep historians busy for at least a generation. The job won't be easy.

An initial survey by the Congressional Research Service, the federal agency charged with providing scholarly information and expert analysis to the national legislature, earlier this year identified 26 possible causes of the financial crisis. In the same vein, Daniel Yergin, writing in the *Financial Times*, has identified an even dozen potential causal “narratives” or story lines for the episode. The temptation, almost irresistible in its simplicity, common-sense appeal, and relative ease, is to conclude that the Financial Crisis of 2007–2009 was the culmination of a number of different causes coming together to form a “perfect storm” of economic misfortune. Just add individual causes together in a way that somehow does justice to the force and destructiveness of the final product, and voila.

It may be, however, that the analytical task at hand is not to add together a variety of disparate, mutually reinforcing factors in order to achieve a causal complexity commensurate with the grave consequences we see around us, but rather to simplify the causal matrix. In other words, is there some underlying issue, phenomenon, or matter that is somehow implicated in all, or at least very many, of the individual causes put forth by the Congressional Research Service, Daniel Yergin, and the host of knowledgeable commentators who have weighed in on the nature of the “perfect storm” of 2007–2009? The answer I think is, yes—the matter of “risk.” America's quarter-century-long debate over the wisdom of markets, the entire subprime mortgage phenomenon, the emergence of the shadow banking system, the debates over both deregulation (too little government) and perverse government incentives (too much government), the wonders and pitfalls of financial innovation (such as securitization, collateralized debt obligations, and credit default swaps), the role of rating agencies; and mark-to-market accounting rules and the Basil Accords governing world banking—all had considerations of risk—its measurement and management—at their core.

This line of analysis is admittedly less emotionally satisfying than running through *Time* magazine's list of “25 People to Blame for the Financial Crisis.” And it simplifies matters only to make them more complex. “Risk” is both more morally ambiguous and more conceptually dense than “greed.” But any attempt to understand the Financial Crisis of 2007–2009 has got to come to grips with its centrality at virtually every turn both getting into and coming out of the worst economic mess of the postwar era. To be sure, greed and villainy will be in play at the margins, but I predict risk, its mismeasure and mismanagement, will be at the heart of future historians' analyses. Want to bet?

Robert M. Collins

