Oral History with Joseph Allen

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Interview with Joseph Allen

SESSION 1 (12/9/2021)

Yao Chen (00:04):

Today is Thursday, December 9th, 2021. This is the Yao Chen interviewing professor Joseph Allen through zoom. This interview is for the Chinese Studies Scholar Oral history project, sponsored by UCLA's East Asian Library and Center for Oral History Research. Here is our first session. Good morning, professor Allen.

Joseph Allen (00:25):

Good morning. How are you?

Yao Chen (00:26):

Good. How are you? We'll get started. I will start with my first question. When and where were you born?

Joseph Allen (00:35):
I was born in April of 1949 in a small New England town, really a village, called Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts. I was born there, while I was born in a hospital near there, and I grew up in that little town. Right now it's a very quaint town where tourists come, but when I was growing up, it was sort of a rough and tumble old village. It was a mill village, so it was on a river, on an important river in New England, called the Deerfield river. It was an old new England town, dating back to the colonial times. My family, the Allens, had lived there for, I don't know, maybe four or five generations, and had lived in the area even longer.

(01:46):

I'm technically, I'm a third Joseph Allen. My great-grandfather was a second and it was his farm. My great-grandfather's farm, that my grandfather had inherited that we grew up on. In my family, in my immediate family, I was a third of four children, an older sister, an older brother, and then later a younger brother. My parents' background was my father, I think he was the first generation to go to college. And my mother went to college as an adult later. My father went to University of North Carolina, State University of North Carolina. And I've never really figured out how he got from little town in New England to North Carolina, but, he did. And, he returned and he became a foreman in a textile factory.

(03:12):

My mother, at that point, early on was just raising the children. So we grew up in sort of a modest, very modest conditions, but we always had, because we lived on the farm. We basically lived on my grandfather's firm, so we always the boys, well, actually all the children worked from very early on by five years old, we were helping with what was called the morning chores. This was a dairy farm, there was a lot of maintenance. We grew up on this farm, as sort of rough and tumble country kids. It was very physical life. I think about it now, how physical it was, particularly for the boys who were always working, doing physical labor from very early on until my grandfather, until they sold the farm when we were teenagers.

(04:26):

It was a very physical outdoor, sort of slightly wild boy life. We were known as the Allen boys. It was sort of how we were referred to, oh, it's the Allen boys. So that was sort of our. And my grandfather. I

mean, I try to think about this question in terms of the long term narrative. I think the work, the idea of working as a sort of a, something you just did day after day after day became part of, sort of, when I finally became disciplined, it was partly going back to that, that daily work in this town. I mean, it was the whitest town. I don't believe, well, there was no person of color, no people of color living in town.

(05:28):

It was all white, mostly Anglo-Saxon, old New England families, mostly. The most foreign kind of families were like Italians, it was a lot of talk about the Italians. That was ethnicity back then. By the first time I had extensive contact with non-white peoples was when we were in our early teens, we all worked in picking tobacco. This was our first paid labor. My grandfather didn't pay us. We worked, well actually he did pay us for one job. I'll talk about that in a second. So the first contact we had, or I had, I think was with non-white, were Jamaicans and Puerto Ricans, immigrants, immigrant worker, labor in the tobacco fields of New England.

(06:42):

We started this work when we were around 13. It was somewhat formative in the sense that suddenly I was just surrounded by Spanish being, Puerto Rican men, mostly, and then Jamaican men who spoke English that I didn't understand. I mean, it was really a foreign language. It was very interesting experience, but the one job my grandfather paid us for this very weird thing. Before the morning chores in the summertime, the boys would get up before dawn, and we would go to what was called a drive-in theater. I don't think they have them anymore, but this was an outdoor movie theater where you'd drive your car and you'd park and listen on a speaker.

(07:47):

Anyway, our job every morning from the time, we were probably about five, I think, was to pick up trash, because everyone just threw it out the window. There was no ecology. I mean, it was just throw it out the window. So the job for the boys was to pick up the trash, and it would take us somewhere between an hour and two hours to do that. And he would pay us for that. I remember that. And when I was probably about five, I earned a quarter, 25 cents, a day for this. So it was my first paid work, and I saved it up and stuff like that, but anyway, so it was a very limited in some way, culturally very limited.

(08:38):

I mean, it was rich and it's all away, but very narrowly rich. Religion was not part of our lives. I mean, my mother would drag us to church. The boys would go to church and it would be, just torture for an hour. And then, and when we go home and it was not a central part of our lives. It was a central part of some of our friends and family's lives. So there was a Catholic church, which was very strong for certain, for the Italian community, for example. But religion was not in part of anything important for us. I'm trying to think of the, sort of, so the boys, the Allen boys, the Allen boys were, were all mostly, they were very project physically oriented and almost all of my, I think actually all of my siblings and my cousin, all my first cousins, the boys and men all became engineers.

(09:52):

Every one of them, my father was an engineer, and everyone became an engineer. So it was a trajectory towards that sort of life. I didn't quite fit in, I was seen as sort of, not quite boy manly enough or other kind of thing. I think I had sort of a reputation. It was sort of an artsy kind of kid, although I didn't do much about it. I mean, but one thing I do remember, and this has stuck with me forever, is that in the wintertime, it was New England. It was cold and snowy and, and the farm tours were over at six o'clock. Then we had the evenings and the boys were, bouncing off the walls, and in the wintertime and in the summertime, we would go out and play until it got dark and after dark.

(10:52):

And, but in the wintertime, we would often, my father would often gather us, the boys in the back room, what we call the back room near the fireplaces or near the stove, the fire stove. And he would read to us. And we weren't tiny. We could read ourselves, but this was like, we didn't have a TV. And I know we may have had a radio, but we didn't have a TV or anything like that. It became the evening entertainment and he read, the boy books, he read Jack London, Mark Twain, we read all of, huge portion of Mark Twain and stuff like that. And I still love to have people read to me. It's just basic thing. And I think it goes back to that time.

(11:47):

My father spoke a little German. My mother spoke a little French. My mother was actually came from a French Canadian family. So she was not, I mean, she was colonial, but her family moved down from Canada to New England, sometime in the late colonial period. But I had zero, absolutely zero connections with Asia. What I mean? I mean, there was nothing, there's no trajectory at all. It was zero. I mean, it's not, I think I mean, we heard that children were starving in China and we should eat our vegetables. And I mean, it was these sort of very uninteresting cliches, but there was no, nothing that happened at that time. So I grew up like that. We went to the local high, and there was, it was sort of a slightly regional high school, but there was only 300 students in the whole high school.

(13:05):

I was a mediocre student. Mostly because I didn't do anything, I never prepared anything. I can remember that we had a spelling test every day. And at that point, I had a nearly photographic memory probably should have done something with it. But the only thing I did with my photographic memory, I would memorize just before she gave us the test. I'd look at the words and just memorize them. I did really well on the test, but then, I had no follow up. So I was sort of a mediocre student. My sister was a very good student and my brother was a better, he was a more disciplined student than I was. By the time I, but there was a big event. It happened at a critical time. I was 12 years old.

(14:03):

I would be just entering junior high. I think I was in sixth grade. So just entering junior high, summer of 1961, is that right? That's right. My younger brother, Jimmy, who was four years younger, and we were very close, we were sort of a pair, because I was 12 and he was eight. My brother was 16. The difference between 12 and 16 is the long ways, but eight to 12. We were very close together. And that summer in July of 1961, he was killed in a car accident. He was struck by a truck crossing the road, almost in front of me. I was there. I came upon the scene 30 seconds after it happened. I was at 12 years old and I was changing.

(15:03):

My life was changing, things were changing of course. And then suddenly my younger brother was no longer there. It must have been, I assume, it was a big shock. That threw me into a trajectory into high school, junior high school in which I became somewhat unruly. Maybe it would've happened anyways. I was a disciplinary problem as the teachers would say. I didn't behave. I was always getting in trouble. I went through high school in that sort of rebellious phase. I was by high school standards. I was relatively successful. I was a varsity athlete and that kind of thing. During it was, I don't know if it was before this, it might be been slightly before this, but during this time I became very interested in writing, writing stories, writing poems, terrible poems, that kind of thing.

(16:27):

I mean maybe it would've just happened anyways, but anyways, it was somewhat of reaction. And it sort of was the first manifestation of this idea that I might have an academic interest, and it was creative, it's all creative. Well, some of it was essays, but mostly creative writing. And that writing bug might you say, just stuck. And it was always with me, and it's still with me. I don't know what to do, if I get bored, I just write something. It's just something that drives me. I sort of bumbled through high school doing the normal things. I liked Latin very much, for some reason Latin appeared appealed to me a lot. It was one of the subjects I was very good at. I studied French, high school French and was on, was called then the college prep track. So it was assumed that I would follow in, my sister's footsteps and my brother's footsteps and become a college prep and go to college and stuff like that. That's where I made it through high school, not very well. But the writing bug has had really sort of taken hold at that point.

(18:15):

One thing about this writing was that, as I mentioned, my mother went to college as an adult, and she went to college to become a librarian. She first worked some small jobs in town and then she became just because she was smart and read a lot, she became the town librarian, but didn't have a degree for, or any training and just sort of taught herself. When I was young, I grew up in the library. I was this was when I was in my preteens and early teens and I would get out of school and I would go to the library. And my mother would be just being a librarian and I would be just a nosy, noisy client. So there was this, I was sort of immersed in this sort of book world very early.

(19:19):

And my mother was, even though she didn't go to college, she should have gone to college. It was one of those cultural things. I think at that point that women didn't go to college very much, when she was graduating with high school. But she was in many ways sort of the superior intellect in the house. My father was very smart and, and my mother was more intuitively. My father was smart, like an engineer and my mother was more intuitively smart. I suspect that I know that she studied painting when she was in her twenties. I don't know if she wrote or not, but I suspect she did. So there was, I think that one of the things that was different about me was this mother. I mean, I don't know if it was DNA or culture or whatever, but my mother's influence is sort of creativity and this sort of, slightly un-practical, non-practical, sort of bent.

(20:30):

But we were expected to go to college. All the Allen children were expected to go to college and my first cousins and the whole sort of extended family of my generation were, was expected to go to college. I think, I believe everybody did, more or less success successfully. As I said, most of the men became engineers or all of them became engineers. My sister became an educator, and was a teacher all her life. There was that model. When I finally barely graduated from high school, then I went to the local university, University of Massachusetts Amherst. I was an English major as I remember. So it was that writing thing that I thought, but I didn't know how to be, become a writer. I had no direction.

(21:36):

These days there's so much maybe too much sort of directing and mentoring, having children follow certain path and stuff like that we were, or at least I was completely undirected. But anyways, I ended up at University of Massachusetts Amherst in the late sixties. This was Rolling Stone, Beatles, I mean, it was that counterculture time, the beginning of Vietnam war. And I was sort of swept up into that counterculture. was an English and I started doing a normal track, but I actually only lasted two semesters. I didn't even last two semesters. I had to drop out after halfway, halfway through my second semester in college. And I mean, basically I flunk, I failed, I didn't go to class, I didn't have discipline at that point.

(22:53):

I was sort of in this wild mode. My college experience, even though I graduated from university, I ended up graduating from the University of Massachusetts. There was this completely two completely different moments of my college education. The first try was just a disaster. And then I went into two years. I sort of lost two years, of being parts of different, other types of activities that, hitchhiking across the country, getting drafted into the Marines. Every 20 minutes there was another sort of chaos. And then slowly, I don't know why, I guess maybe just maturity or something slowly I became more and more disciplined. I mean, some of it was forced, but I became disciplined and I became sort of interested in the intellectual world in a very, very vague sort of way.

(24:14):

Still, I was sort of interested in the arts, but, didn't have any real focus. And I ended up, after a couple years, I ended up going back to the University of Massachusetts Amherst. They took me back. It was gonna be a struggle, but they, some Assistant Dean somewhere, just decided that he would, I can still remember the interview. He decided to just give it a try. I went back to the University of Massachusetts after a couple of years in, and already had a sense of some discipline, academic discipline, and sort of could apply the idea of work to school work or to preparations. And in that first semester, I can't remember this would've been 1970, I think fall semester 1970. I took a course with Lucian Miller and I don't know why I took this course.

(25:29):

It was called East West Mysticism, and it was the sixties. We were interested in that sort of brain thing. So I took this class and Lucian Miller, his expertise was *Hongloumeng* (紅樓夢), *Dream of the Red Chamber*, but he was also a very devout Catholic, almost a priest kind of, but he had a family and stuff. He taught us this course about meditation and the other side, and all this, that's very interesting things and we read some Chinese stuff, and, just so we read some Chinese stuff, Gary Snyder, *Hanshan* (寒山) poems and things like that. And *Zhuangzi* (莊子). So right at the beginning of the class, this very, very young professor came to the class and introduced himself and said that he was also teaching a class about Chinese literature.

(26:48):

And if someone was interested, they could come. This is now a very famous person. Wang Ching-hsien (王靖獻), Yang Mu (楊牧) is his name's. I didn't do that well in Lucian's class, although we became good friends, for a lifetime. But the next semester I went to this other guy's class, I needed a class, it was not planned very well. I needed a class at a certain time, and I was looking through the book and it turned out that CH Wang was teaching a class called Chinese Literature I or something like that. It was like really uninteresting sound class. I went to this class, I've written about this, and I have an essay about Yang Mu, our relationship.

(27:46):

I've written about this class in some detail, but anyways, it was a mesmerizing hour. I mean, it was just mesmerizing to me. That began, I mean, Lucian a little bit, but then really it's CH Wang or Yang Mu, we call them now, who came out of the blue. There was no preparation for this. I mean, right up to that point, I was still living in a world of Chinese cliches. Chinese children are all starving. Actually what we were living in was the sort of mythology of Maoism. Everybody in China was extremely happy with the Cultural Revolution, things were going well, and we should all become socialist. I mean, it was a sort of a

different sort of myth making, but it clearly was myth making and China was on our radar as an actual place, but it was so removed from our daily lives.

(29:00):

It was entirely myth. Some people, I mean, some of my contemporaries in the field became very devout Maoist, scholars and believers. I never did. I mean, I knew about it, but because of Yang Mu, I became to think of China as an ancient place. So the real China to me in the early years of study was that it was an ancient place. It was a place of antiquity. Everyone was a poet, and it was another sort of myth making of China. That was a very strong myth. It was something that Yang Mu promoted, I mean, not in a negative way, but this is what he celebrated.

(30:09):

This is what he worked on, very early poetry and mostly poetry. Several things happened that semester. This would've been in spring of 71. I discovered China in a person, I didn't understand Yang Mu was very complex ethnicity. He was Taiwanese, I think technically he was one of the very first Taiwanese men to get a PhD in the United States. But it would be years before I understood that complexity of that relationship, but he was teaching, he was teaching classical literature. We began with the book of Songs *Shijing* (詩經), and we've in the first semester we read up to Li Bai (李白), I think, or something like that, almost entirely poetry, with some non-poetry stuff, but mostly in poetry. I discovered China, I discovered Yang Mu. At this point, Yang Mu enters my life and becomes a constant until last year. I discovered poetry, or I rediscovered poetry because it was the genre that I thought I wanted to write. It was sort of a rediscovery. That was in the spring.

Yao Chen (31:57):

Would you mind if I ask a few questions? At this time, did you know that his pen name was Yang Mu or you learned that later on?

Joseph Allen (32:08):

Well, actually at that time, his pen name was Ye Shan (葉珊), and this was his first pen name. I think I knew that because his poems had been translated in a volume that I became exposed to. I knew it, he would change to young mu in a few years after this. But Ye Shan was his first pen name. And he became famous as a teenager in Taiwan. He won major prizes as a college student in Taiwan under this pen name. I knew that I knew he was a poet. I read some of the stuff in translation and I think that was another sort of fascination for me because we were talking about classical poetry, but he was writing very, very modern, obscure, difficult poems.

(33:08):

He was very much a modernist himself. I knew that, that's about all I knew. I would get to know a lot about him over the years. And one of the things I knew about him, well, I'd become to know about him was that, at that point I was an education major, just because I didn't know what else to do, I didn't have a real plan, but education with my sister, I could become a teacher. I mean, I knew teachers. I knew what a teacher did. I didn't know what a writer did, but I did know what a teacher did. One of the things that the education department required was a year, or two years of foreign language.

(34:09):

I had been planning to continue French or maybe Spanish or something like that. But I went to Lucian Miller who I sort of admire for someone I could talk to more than I could talk to Yang Mu actually. I went to Lucian and I said, do you teach Chinese here? Can I take Chinese as a language? Yeah, yeah. He

was very enthusiastic. Oh yeah, it's really easy. So I just said, okay, I'll just study Chinese and didn't know anything about it. In the fall, the next fall, fall of 71, I began first year Chinese with Yang Mu's first wife Nora Chan, Chan Shao Cong (陳少聰).

(35:05):

I also became very close with Nora over for a number of years. Nora was, I mean, it was just this classic, school boy thing. Nora was this gorgeous Northern Chinese was this sort of elegant lady. It was partly language learning and partly, love infatuation. I mean, it's typical. It's very typical. Nora sort of becomes the second person who sort of embodied Chinese to me, and I guess it was elegant. I didn't at the time, but her father was a general in the national army from Shandong, I think, or some place. Nora represented towards the other half of Taiwan.

(36:14):

I didn't know it at the time. I thought they were just two Chinese people. I didn't know about the issues involved here. Nora became my first Chinese teacher. And she was also big influence. I wasn't particularly good at oral languages, so I wasn't very good at speaking. And my *tingli* (聽力), my listening comprehension was terrible, is still terrible. But, I was of course fascinated with the writing system and I had this nearly photographic memory. So I could just memorized characters like mad. I excelled in that part of that part of the learning. And that was the only thing I was really interested. I wasn't that interested in speaking Chinese at that time, I mean, I was sort of interested in reading and writing and stuff like that.

(37:16):

I began as a study of Chinese with Nora and I took another class with Yang Mu (Wang Ching-hsien) in the next fall. And then the big event, the sort of life changing event happened when Yang Mu and Nora, well, Yang Mu got offered a very good job at the university. He already had a tenure track job at Massachusetts, but he got offered a tenure track job at the University of Washington, Seattle, one of the greatest places for Chinese studies. I mean, it had been there forever. He left in the middle, they left in the middle of that year. That second year that I was studying with them. And, so it was in December, sometime we had finished class, I had finished classes. I remember. And I went by, maybe asked me to come by or went by, by to see Yang Mu to see Wang Ching-hsien, because I called him Ching-hsien, I actually called him, well, I always called him Wang Ching-hsien.

(38:36):

But I went by to see him and he had a book for me and I still haven't, since one of my treasured things, it was a book of his poems, in Chinese. And he had an already inscribed it for me and said, thank me for being a student or something like that. And this was when he was still Ye Shan. And then he said, I can, I, it was like, I steward this. I said, well, thank you, thank you. And blah, blah, blah. It was sort of awkward, but we managed. And he said at that time, if you ever want to go into Chinese studies, you should just let me know.

(39:33):

I was completely dumbfounded. For one thing I didn't even really know that you could go into Chinese studies, it didn't sound like a job to me. And least of all, whether that I could do it. They left, I continued on my work. I continued to study Chinese. And then I think by the end of the next semester, I have all the letters. I think it was during the next semester.

(40:14):

I told them, I thought I would like to try this, to become a Chinese scholar, a Chinese studies person, whatever that meant. I didn't really know what it meant. This began a long correspondence with him, and this is what the essay is about, is about the letters for him. He just shepherded me, just almost dragged me through the process, applying to graduate school and told me what to write and how to write it. And he was very, very, he was a young professor and I was his first student. I was gonna be his first student. He was very, very attentive. I've read these letters in the last year or so, and I'm just astounded. I never treated a student that well, I mean, he just really, really devoted himself for this and told me what to take in classes and how to prepare.

(41:19):

So I applied in the fall of the next year after he left. I applied to the University of Washington, Seattle, Department of Asian Languages and Literature. I think it was called at that point. I can't remember how I prepared, but it looks like, I mean, if you read Yang Mu's letters, if I did what he did told me to do. Then I wrote essays. I took exams and all this stuff. I didn't apply to any place else. There was some talk about going to California, it's in his letters, but I don't know what I was talking about going to California. I have no idea what this was. This is 1972. So this is right at the time that Nixon opened the gates, Kissinger Nixon opened the gates to China and suddenly, I mean, I couldn't remember thinking this in the spring of 72.

(42:26):

Maybe I can go to China. I mean, it wouldn't happen for years, but suddenly that one event started to change everything. And China became a much more something that we, of a real entity, not a myth of so much as an entity, a political entity, Kissinger goes there, I mean, it's becomes a play where people can go to, or we think that people can go to. All of that is happening at the same time, and this is all mixed up. And maybe my thought of going to California was something to try to get to China or something. I can't remember what it was, but in the end I only applied to University of Washington, Seattle, and I can still remember this. I got a postcard, just a little postcard, a printed postcard with my name filled in the blank and the name of my department. It said welcome to the University of Washington graduate school. That was the official notice.

(43:38):

I wish I still had it. I mean, I lost it somewhere in the ways, but anyways, I suppose by January of 1973, I had decided my parents thought I was crazy. My mother and father thought I was completely nuts. And no one thought this was a good plan, except for Yang Mu. I mean, they just didn't understand. I mean, I didn't understand, and they really didn't understand what this would entail. I continued through the spring of 1973. One of the things that Yang Mu wanted me to do was to make sure I had at least two years of Chinese before I entered graduate school. So I continued the language study, modern language study.

(44:41):

I also took my first course in classical language with Alvin P Cohen, the University of Massachusetts. So these three people, Lucian Miller, Alvin Cohen, and CH Wang, Wang Ching-hsien, they were three Berkeley *tongxue* (同學), classmates. They had come out of Berkeley together. So I studied with Al Cohen for a semester, just a little bit of classical Chinese, but it was very intriguing to look at the classical language, which I was, that's what I was really interested in at that point. By June of 1973, Lauren, I, we were married in 72, so we'd just been married a year, Lauren and I packed up everything we owned in a 1967 Volkswagen bug. The old classic bug, said goodbye to our startled parents, our bewildered parents, I guess, and, and started driving across the United States, and sort of did this journey across the United States going towards graduate school.

Yao Chen (46:17):

That is really interesting. I have a few questions. So the first question is when you first took that Chinese literature class with Yang Mu, was it translated. Was it in English that class?

Joseph Allen (46:30):

Yes, it was. Everything was in English. We worked with Birch's (Cyril Birch) anthology one and a few other things. Everything was translated. Yang Mu would write stuff on the board, just, and explain like characters and words sometimes. And I mean, that was part of the fascination, it was a very exotic theme. I mean, these days studying Chinese is not that exotic. I mean, hundreds, thousands of people do it. Back then, it's not unheard of, but it was very, very rare. So it had this exotic to it. In fact, this sort of rebelliousness that I had sort of developed, this sort of anti-authoritarian thing, I think Chinese sort of fed into that. I'm gonna do something special. I'm gonna do something against the norm or something like that. The course was all in English, and everything was in translation and he would sort of explain things sometimes in care, but it was basically in English. Yeah.

Yao Chen (47:51):

So how large was the class, do you recall?

Joseph Allen (47:54):

I think that class was about maybe 15 students. I took two classes with him and they were both about that size. They were reasonable size, I mean, most of people sort of fascinated with China. And there was very little to study if you weren't. And then when we went into the language class, it was also about 15 students, in the beginning of language class, maybe, I think it was about 15.

Yao Chen (48:27):

Okay. So at that time there were not a lot of people were interested in learning the Chinese language.

Joseph Allen (48:33):

There were people, but there were always really odd people. I mean, it was not a mainstream thing. And, since the political situation in China was rapidly changing, I think there's started a new interest. I mean, before 72, almost everybody that I knew were studying Chinese were studying it because of classical Chinese, because of classical culture. And then after 72, when Maoism, sort of the height of Maoism, and everyone became sort of interested in the politics of it. I think the motivations might have changed, began to change somewhat then.

Yao Chen (49:23):

You mentioned that at that time you were education major and, uh, the college required every student to study foreign language for one or two years. So do you remember, as you said, a Chinese wasn't popular, so what were the popular foreign languages at the time?

Joseph Allen (49:41):

I'm assuming it was gonna be still be French and German. Spanish would be coming along at this point. But French and German would be the standard languages. And clearly I would've taken French. I'd studied some French and some because of my mother probably, I would've done French. And I'm, in fact, when I, in order to in graduate school, I had to pass a French exam. Because in order to get a degree in Chinese, you either had to pass a French exam or a German exam because of the French sinology and German sinology. I continued. So I think it would still be French and German, Spanish would have been

coming along. Western Massachusetts, where there was a, because of the agricultural work, there was a fairly large Spanish speaking community.

Yao Chen (50:47):

So for the Chinese language and also literature class you took, was there like a Asian Language and Literature Department at the university at the time?

Joseph Allen (50:57):

Yes, there was either a program or a department. I think it was called Asian Studies actually. I think it was called Asian Studies. And it was almost entirely, not entirely, almost entirely classical languages and literatures. Yeah. I have a, my transcript right in front of me. It happens and it's the major is called Asian, just called Asian. So probably Asian studies.

Yao Chen (51:35):

Do you remember any other languages or courses they were providing teaching at the time in addition to Chinese because it's called Asians, right?

Joseph Allen (51:44):

Oh, I see. Japanese was the other one. It was a fairly evenly divided department between Chinese and Japanese. And again, there may be a more interest in, in sort of modern Japanese literature with the very famous novels and stuff like that. But as far as I remember in Chinese, it was all classical literature, Lucian Miller, but, well, *Hongloumeng* would, I guess be called classical literature. Al Cohen was a very much classical. He was more of a language person actually. And then Yang Mu was, although he wrote contemporary stuff, he taught only classical stuff.

Yao Chen (52:31):

You mentioned when you approach the faculty member, asking about learning Chinese and the faculty member said like was very easy, so what's your experience learning Chinese at college.

Joseph Allen (52:44):

Yeah, but it was not easy. I think I went to Lucian saying could one possibly learn this language. I mean, it just seems so foreign, so other. And he's oh no, no, no. Yeah. You can learn this. No problem. I mean he had learned it. I mean he spoke fairly good Chinese and he was a well published scholar. So I think he said basically I learned it, you can learn it. I remember other people said, it's impossible, don't do it. I don't think I ever saw, I mean, to me it became part of my recovery from sort of emotional problems. Because it became more work, it became the chores.

(53:47):

Go home and write your characters. It's like go home and milk the cows, go do something, physically do something, practical, something that, I think it became, it became almost therapeutic for me, because these are very, very trouble times. I mean, we think we live in trouble times now. There was a different sort of trouble. I mean, these are trouble times. And I think that, yeah, it was exotic, but it was also work. It was sort of, and it was something very physical about the characters. You wrote 'em, it's always, it's writing it's physical. I mean, it all comes together and it really, I mean, it became a lifetime, but in the early stages, I think it was almost therapeutic.

Yao Chen (54:44):

I know many teachers, when they teach a foreign language, they love to give their students a foreign names. I know your Chinese name. Did you get your Chinese name at this stage?

Joseph Allen (54:58):

No, I got another Chinese name at this stage. Ai, Xing Ai, Ai Lunjiu (艾崙久). I think it was Nora and maybe gave it to me or maybe it was the other teacher, the next teacher, I can't remember, but it was a name that I used for first a couple years. Then when I went to graduate school, that's the name I used in class. I think Lun was *Kunlunshan de lun* (昆崙山的崙). Jiu *jiushi henjiu de jiu* (久就是很久的久). But when I was in graduate school, there many stories by graduate school, but one of 'em was the story of Yang Mu picking my name, my new name, and it's a name that has been it alone, has a long sort of legacy and story. It's a name it's very Chinese. It's a name is too Chinese, *tai zhongguo hua le* (太中國化了). Some people say you shouldn't have that Chinese of a name because they're, you can look it online or in a telephone book and there'll be 15 Zhou Wenlong (周文龍). But anyways, they gave me a name, but Yang Mu changed it before I went to Taiwan. He said, you can't go to Taiwan with this name, you need a new name.

Yao Chen (56:45):

Okay, wonderful. I think it is a natural stop. This will be the finish of our first session. We're going to keep going, talking about your Chinese name in the next session.

Joseph Allen (56:55):

Okay. I've got a good story for you. Thank you. It was great fun. Thank you.

Interview with Joseph Allen

SESSION 2 (12/10/2021)

Yao Chen (00:08):

My name is Yao Chen and this interview is for the Chinese Studies Scholars Oral History project sponsored by UCLA's East Asian Library and Center for Oral History Research. Today is December 10th, 2021. I'm interviewing professor Joseph Allen through zoom. This is our second interview. So it's really nice to see you again professor Allen. Yesterday we stopped at you drove across the country to attend the Washington, Seattle. So we just start with here.

Joseph Allen (00:49):
This would've been in May of in 1973, and we arrived in Seattle in late May I think, and we stayed for the first week or two weeks, maybe we stayed with my professor, at his house, Wang Ching-hsien or Yang Mu. It actually was the first time we ever spent a lot of time sort of socially together. And then I immediately entered an intensive language program at the university, third-year Chinese. It was a typical intensive, it was 10 weeks long, five hours a day in class. The whole summer, all I did was to study third-year Chinese. It was an interesting experience. It was a whole new classroom, a whole new students, this for the first time, a lot of graduate students, I was studying with a lot of graduate students for the first time.

(02:08):
Lauren my wife quite quickly got a job working downtown in the business world. We settled in and were very comfortable. All I did was study all summer, and then entered sort of the regular track the fall of 1973. I would be there for nine years. It would take nine years to finished the degree. And it seems odd at this point, but that nine years was considered quite fast for UW Seattle. I mean, I had fellow students who had been there for decades. So it was a very different type of atmosphere than you would have now where there's pressure for graduate student to finish. Five years, maybe six, there was no pressure to finish.

(03:22):

I mean, you could just stay there forever. Certain people did. It was a very different sort of atmosphere than you would have in a PhD program. At least the ones that I have had experience with. The program then in Seattle, and I think it's was part of its tradition, was a very strongly language philology oriented program. The faculty was very young. It didn't seem very young to me at that time, but I actually entered in with a quite young faculty, at least in the China field. Along with Wang Ching-hsien, who was maybe 30 years old at that time. There was David Knechtges, who was about the same age, and Jerry Norman. David Knechtges taught classical literature, literary history type of style. A Jerry Norman, the famous linguist, famous in Asian studies for his Manchu work.

(04:54):
But I studied with him on Chinese linguistics and Chinese phonology, classical phonology. And Jerry Norman and oh, Father L. M. Serruys, Father Serruys, he was older actually, but he was a new PhD. Father Serruys had been in the PRC as a priest and left, I think was forced to leave in 1953 or something, and went to graduate school, and then became a professor. Frederick Brandauer was the only person who taught modern literature. So everyone else was in classical studies of different types, except for Brandauer. He also taught fourth-year Chinese. I had it that fall, but it was a program that was strongly in philology language, that type of things. I didn't know it didn't have it at this point because I had didn't have a great deal of experience in academic world.

(06:22):

So, whatever they gave me I assume was the normal, whatever thought this is what Chinese studies mean. But the things that they didn't have was, they didn't have at that point, and it wasn't unusual at that point, I didn't have a very vibrant modern language, modern literature studies. Almost everybody was in classical literature. No one that I know of in the PhD program was interested in modern literature. And it had, and this was, we clearly, we didn't know I didn't have, didn't have any theory, literary theory, or I should say that's not true. The literary theory was literary history. Literature was read as a historical product, and this again, very conventional, almost 19th century, in some ways, Seattle represented an older model of learning.

(07:36):

But it's what we had, and I enjoyed it very much. I thrived in this environment. By this time I really had come to terms with reading and research and things like that. The department was young and quite cohesive, I mean, at least the China side. I had very little exposure beyond that. I did say towards the end I took Japanese language, a couple years of Japanese, and I took comparative literature courses. I may not every, not a lot of us did, but I took comparative literature courses as I could, but I really stuck. We stayed at home in the, in the department and took whatever Yang Mu taught. I took it. I didn't have a lot of choices and same for David Knechtges.

(08:51):

Same for all of these people. We just stayed in that group.

Yao Chen (08:57):

Was that department called East Asian?

Joseph Allen (08:59):

Yeah, it was called Asian Languages and Literature. It was Asian Languages and Literature. It was very interesting. It was called languages, but it was called literature, not literatures. I mean, later these departments were called Asian Languages and Literatures, but that's just a political thing. So, I began the process of going through a fairly rigorous, fairly conservative Chinese studies program. And I would, my most sort of, I mean, I took history courses and things like that. The most interesting stuff was. For me, the most interesting stuff was whatever Wang Ching-hsien Yang Mu was teaching. Although I profited immensely from on from these other. It sticks with you even though now I'm in a much more cultural studies phase, this learning, this very classical sort of language and philology learning sort of sticks for a long time.

(10:19):

I continue to use what I learned. Some of it was, for example, David Knechtges' class. He would walk in and he would open his notes. And then, this is a two or three semester or a three unit session. And he started with the earliest Chinese literature, classical literature. And he just told you everything he knew for an hour, no one ever asked a question. There was no discussion. He was, he told you what he knew. So it was very, very much passing on knowledge. And very, very sort of, I'm not saying it wasn't thoughtful knowledge, but it didn't require a lot of thinking. It just required a lot of memory. We knew when we were taking this class that when we went to take our exams, with these, we have a series of exams over time that one of the exam was just going to be, who is *Feng Menglong* (馮夢龍) and when did he die.

(11:51):

It was a really, really straightforward, but it was a type of knowledge, it was sort of an encyclopedic sort of knowledge. We dealt in depth in other classes, but this was a sort of the beginning of our training. We needed to know all of this stuff before we could possibly investigate something deeply. That went on for a couple of years. I studied with these, this small group of people mostly. I also had to take French classes, because I needed to get my French backup to so I could pass the test. I took Japanese classes, and also for an exam. I mean it was very exam. It was very, maybe very Chinese. Very exam driven.

(12:53):

That went on for several years actually. And then I opted to get a master's degree, you could skip it and go directly, go on to the PhD, but I decided that I was gonna pause sort of and get an MA. I think that was partly because I looked around me and there were people, no one was finishing anything. I mean, everyone was just in the mode of taking classes and, and people have been working on a dissertation for decades. So I was just afraid that I would never finish. I thought I'd get the MA and go on from there. I mean, and hopefully go on from there. I sat for my MA exams, which I remember to this day it was about two and a half hours.

(14:04):

The MA exam was two and a half hour oral exam with three people and myself in the room. And it was when did one do or die and I mean, just question after question, what are the four parts of the *Shijing* (詩經), tell us the story of Qu Yuan (屈原) and I mean, it just on and on and on. So I finished that and got the ma and this must have been, I guess, in the spring of 77, because I know that because in fall of 1977, I went to Taiwan for language study. And this was the next sort of career changing moment. We were there, Lauren and I were there for 13 months. And we both went, it was both the most cultural shocking experience we had ever had.

(15:19):

And for me, career wise, it was transformational. This is what it was the time. I mean, because I know you've asked this before, when did I become sort of immersed or come familiar with Chinese people? And this was the time, this was the great immersion. And it all revolved around Yang Mu's family Wang Ching-hsien's family because when we first arrived in Taiwan for a year or so, Yang Mu, Wang Ching-hsien's younger brother Yang Weizhong (楊維中) was taking class classes at an art school. Yang Weizhong became a quite famous painter, modern painter oil paints in Taiwan. We didn't become close friends, but it was the only time. I mean, Yang Weizhong didn't speak English. It was a time when I had conversations in Chinese, natural conversations in Chinese, I mean necessary conversations in Chinese.

(16:48):

Yang Weizhong and I became quite close. I mean, and shortly after Yang Weizhong arrived in Taiwan, Wang Ching-hsien's younger sister Yang Yingmei (楊瑛美) came in to study in comparative literature and then I became friends with Yang Yingmei, but it was Yang Weizhong was sort of my language buddy. And we did things together, worked and, and talked and stuff like that. And he always called me Lao Zhou. He was a few years younger than I was. And, he took my name, Joe Allen, J O E. and he turned it into Zhou, Zhougong de zhou (周公的周). So he always called me Lao Zhou. When you asked about this yesterday, but when Yang Mu went to choose a name for me, at that point, everyone was calling me Lao Zhou.

(18:02):

He used Zhou as my family name. Which is an odd way to do it. Usually Joe Allen becomes Zhou Wenlong. This is odd, but it's very creative and interesting. And I remember that Yang Mu sat in my front yard with my copy of the *Shiji* (史记), looked through the first and the Zhou Benji (周本纪). The history of the Zhou Dynasty looking for a name. And I think I still have his notes in there. He's tried out several things, but ended up being Wenlong. So, anyway, we arrived in Taiwan. We had two important contacts. One was another one of my, one of my classmates, early classmates at UW, his name is Lo Ch'ing (Luo Qing) and he was a friend and a classmate.

(19:19):

But our relationship was in English. He was there studying English, or studying comparative literature. When he left, he visited my parents and stuff like that. So, Lo Ch'ing and Yang Weizhong became our support system. When we arrived in Taiwan to study at this, it was called IUP at that point, the Inter-University Program. Inter-University Program originally was called the Stanford Center. And it was, we didn't have a choice. Well, we had a little bit of a choice, but we couldn't go to China. So if you wanted to study language, Chinese language, you could go either to Taiwan or Hong Kong, and to study Mandarin, Taiwan was the place and for graduate students, almost everybody, all the PhD students that I know of, couple not, went to IUP.

(20:27):

So it was a very prestigious, very rigorous program. So Yang Weizhong, so what happened was, so the program was in Taipei. I, and then we were offered jobs teaching in the afternoon. My wife and I were offered jobs teaching at Danjiang Zhongxue (淡江中學), Danjiang Daxue (淡江大學), which was called Danjiang Xueyuan (淡江學院) at that point, Danjiang college. We had to, we either live in Taipei and travel to Danshui, which is out on the coast, a little tiny, at that point, a little tiny fishing town out on the coast, but with a sort of an interesting, this was the old British settlement area and stuff. What we did was we chose to live in Danshui and I traveled to Taipei. So I would travel every morning.

(21:35):

I had classes from 8 AM to noon or to one, four hours of classes every morning. And I would get up very it very early in the morning to get there, because there was no public transportation was, it was an old bus or an old train. It was the only way to get there. I would go in and study for my four hours and then come back and teach in the afternoon, teaching at the college, teach English, English conversation. I was terrible. My wife was quite good. I was terrible. Those classes, it was complete immersion. I mean, I now realize that some of my teachers could speak English, but we never heard an English word from them ever. The only time you would speak English is if you went to see the director or something into the main office.

(22:39):

We didn't have a language pledge back then. So the students spoke English together, mostly English, but the classes were all [Chinese]. Three hours were one-on-one. The fourth class was one-on-two. It was an extremely intense training. As I said, it was transformational. When I arrived, I really couldn't speak any Chinese or I could only speak really, really, not very well at all. I mean, I could read anything, because that's what we were doing. We were spent all the time reading difficult texts, so I could read Tang poetry, but I couldn't find the bathroom. It was that bad. But it worked, it sort of transformed not so my much my research interest, I still stayed interested in literature and particularly classical literature, but it certainly gave me a set of tools that was critical for the rest of my career. So it was a very, very important time.

Yao Chen (24:09):

So can I ask a few questions about this IUP program? Yeah. So how was the application process? Was it competitive for like a, who applied for those, as you mentioned, most of the students studying in the Chinese program, they were in this and when you study in Taiwan in 1977, who were your cohorts?

Joseph Allen (24:32):

It was competitive, there were exams. But also there was a preference. There were, I don't know, there were a group of universities because it was called Inter-University Program and the inter- universities were universities in the United States. So UW, UC Berkeley, Yale, Harvard, you could maybe a half a dozen or so. Students from those universities had preference, were treated with preference. So most of the fellow students came from those big Chinese language programs. Sort of the established, not all of them, but most of them. It was open to anybody. We had, I remember this distinctly, there was a young man from Scotland was there, the IUP, but it was really a US run the United States university run program in Taiwan.

(25:41):

And the teachers were almost primarily *waishengren* (外省人) at that point. I think they were all *waishengren*. They were all recent immigrants to Taiwan, or their parents were. I wasn't very real clear about this distinction back then, except Yang Weizhong, Yang Mu's family was clearly Taiwanese, and I learned a lot about Taiwan through that connection, that family connection. My cohorts, my students, there was one other student from UW that went when I was there, Michael Broschat. Because there was a cohort in Seattle, that formed during these years. And these many of these people became sort of leaders in the field, Joe Cutter (Robert Joe Cutter), Madeline Spring, David and other people didn't, one of my good friends, became a lawyer. Several people entered the intelligence world, that kind of thing.

(27:00):

So that the cohorts at IUP, the student cohort, I formed as sort of a little diplomatic, community. They party together. They drank together, they did all those things, young people do together. But because Lauren and I were living in Danshui, which was out, we weren't part of that at all. And I mean, we were very, very much immersed in the sort of social world of Danshui as it was. And our family was Yang Weizhong's family. And he had a little boy Changlin, and Yang Changlin when I arrived was just two and just learning to speak. And he and I became little boys. He and I became language buddies. I mean, it was this. We would go up there almost every evening, and sometimes have dinner together.

(28:11):

We'd always watch TV together. So they really became Chinese family. And then when new year's came, we were invited to go down to Hualian (花蓮), down on the east coast, to be part of his big family, Yang family's, new year's celebration, which was really quite spectacular thing to do. So even though there was a strong cohort of people and some of 'em, Stephen Field, he's now in Texas. Stephen Field and I became quite close. And I met some people, but I would just see them during the day. They didn't become part of our social life. Our social life was just almost completely immersion.

Yao Chen (29:03):

Would you say this IUP program is more like a everyday Chinese? It's not like a focusing on subject areas.

Joseph Allen (29:12):

No, it was, and we were told this very clearly, this is about speaking Chinese. It was very, I mean, this was what was transformational about it. It was very much about, I mean, it was a relatively conservative program, but it was very much about speaking Chinese and they would drill you. I think I can remember what I was I studied with who became everyone's favorite. And she was very scary, but, Ma Yihao, which was one of the new young generation teachers. So she was the daughter of an immigrant family. And my, how later in her life ran the UC Berkeley language program. Everyone knows her as Li Laoshi, but I know her as Ma Laoshi. And I saw her a few years ago, was this wonderful experience, it was really quite, quite amazing, but, yeah, so it was very, very in touch.

(30:20):

It was very, very *tingli* (听力) and *shuoli* (说力) oriented, speaking and listening. And I became, this is where I became fluent. I mean, not perfect, but I was very *liuli* (流利). I was very fast and natural. I mean, it made bazillion mistakes, but just plowing on what I mean? And it was because of that, although they were rigorous about pronunciation, it was sort of old style. I can remember with how I had to say train station for like 20 minutes over and over again *huochezhan* (火車站). I got that was the job. So it was rigorous and selective and rigorous. And for a lot of people, I think there was this building of an intellectual community. For me, it was less so. Just because of this isolation. I became close with Ma Yihao, and we stayed friends forever and, a few people Stephen Field. But even Michael Broschat, who was my classmate from Seattle, I think I saw a couple of times outside of classroom.

Yao Chen (31:49):

More questions because you mentioned you were quite immersed with the Taiwan culture at the time. Living in Danshui. So, how did you feel about the conflicts between *benshengren* and the *waisehngren*? Because many of your teachers are *waisehngren*. You mentioned.

Joseph Allen (32:06):

Yeah. You knew they didn't talk about it like they do now. I mean Yang Weizhong was very clear that they were *benshengren*, they were *Taiwanren.* They didn't talk about it very much. I was, very interesting. I was because of his family and I don't know what Yang Weizhong spoke out when we weren't there, but his family spoke Mandarin almost all the time because both of them were teaching in high schools. Mandarin was the language of was the lingo franca high schools. I mean, it was not just a lingo franca, it was the official language of high schools or of education. Yang Changlin he always spoke Mandarin, even though he learned he was learning Taiwanese, I think as he grew up, he always spoke Mandarin to me.

(33:06):

So it was less talk about it. I'm not saying it wasn't a problem, but it wasn't really secret, but it was just, there wasn't a lot of public discourse about it. And I remember, I just learned about 228, the famous massacre incident in 1947. I learned about it from a friend. I mean, another classmate told me about it or something. I can't remember. I mean, there was nothing about it in Taiwan. And I mention, I was sitting on the couch with Yang Weizhong and, we had been watching Donny & Marie on TV or something. And I said, oh, what about our 228? He got very upset. He said, we do not, don't talk, don't say that word. Don't say that word. That discourse about the, the tension was there, the conflict was there, but at least in my social network, they didn't, it wasn't talked about very much.

(34:13):

Now I think if you were with the fishermen in Danshui, if you hung out with the fisherman in Danshui, well, first you'd have to speak Taiwanese because they didn't speak any and they probably talked about it a lot. But in the world that I was in and partly because we were not fully part of that world, it was very, very low, key, very low key. We were much more aware of the police state. That was talked about a lot, sort of the KMT police state at that time. And it had manifestations for us that were relatively benign. I mean, they weren't gonna put us on green island, but I had friends who were taken and off the street and had their haircut. Because it was too long, so I mean, it was, we were more aware of that than we were aware of, excuse me, the basic social tension between the two.

Yao Chen (35:24):

It was a program. You said you and you wife were teaching. And also were you on a scholarship?

Joseph Allen (35:31):

I should mention this and this goes back to Yang Mu. So there was a scholarship back then called the NDFL, the National Defense Foreign Language Fellowship, which was sponsored by the US military basically. And it was established in order to keep people trained in Chinese language, part of the Cold War policy. And when I arrived in Seattle, this, this was a big break for us. When we got to the first semester, the fall semester of 73, I got one of those for the year. It was a to support us. Lauren was working. We weren't very well off, but we were comfortable, comfortable enough. And I was able to get that because of Wang Ching-hsien. I mean, he basically made them give it to me. I mean, it was back then when things were done, not as sort of trans with such transparency as now.

(36:45):

Yang Mu, I know worked very hard to get that for me. He said he couldn't pro when I came to Seattle, he said he couldn't promise it, but he was hoping to get it. And then over time, I got that several times. Not every year, but I got it several times and I got it the year that it went, I got it again. The year I went to Taiwan in 77. So we had that scholarship, which paid for the tuition and a small stipend and Lauren and I were both working. So we were fairly comfortable in fact, all the way through graduate school. I worked almost all the time. I was mostly again, mostly physical labor. I worked on the university grounds crew. I became a gardener. I became people's gardener.

(37:43):

I take care of the yards. In fact, the first thing I did, I became Yang Mu's gardener. But he didn't pay me, but I would mow his lawn and take care of his trees and, because I just knew how to do that stuff. And he had have no idea. So I became his gardener and then I became some other people, neighbor, his neighbors paid us, , paid me, so I worked and then I became, I towards the middle of part of this. I became a construction worker. I worked building tennis courts for a construction company. So we were working all the time and we were not borrowing money. This is a big difference. We never borrowed money to go to school.

(38:36):

I don't think I would've done it if I had to borrow money, but we were working and I mean, the tuition was like $600 or something, I mean, you could make enough money in the summer, even in construction or especially in construction to pay for your education. It's a very different world then, than people are experiencing now. So that was, yeah, that was part of what was going on. So we had, we were comfortable enough through the whole 10 years we were there. So the Taiwan was, yeah, I was on a scholarship for the Taiwan thing.

(39:25):

After a year, 13 months, I think it was, I came back home. I came back to Seattle back to our friends and I mean, I could speak Chinese and it was, everyone was sort of shocked that there was this transformation. And then Jerry Norman, who ran the language program at that point. Jerry Norman was this fantastic linguist and not just a, he was a fantastic language learner and he spoke perfect Russian and his Mandarin was so flawless that people were shocked when they saw him. I mean, because it was no accent at all. So Jerry Norman ran the, language program and he put me in the classroom. I started, I mean it was a huge thing. I, mostly, I worked with translation classes and stuff like that.

(40:41):

But I was in put in the classroom and went through that whole training. When I finished, this was a big transition point in Chinese studies right about my generation. People before me, like David Knechtges, not that old, but the generation before that, the people in literature didn't speak Chinese generally, unless they had some sort of special reason, like Richard Mather spoke excellent Chinese, but he, Richard Mather grew up in China. Chinese was his first language and stuff like that. But most people in classical literature, if they spoke Chinese, it was really bad and he didn't do very much of it. When I sort of started it wasn't really expected that I would be teaching language, it was completely not expected.

(41:48):

I would be teaching language. And at that point, and maybe still certain language programs, they won't, they don't encourage foreigners to teach language, that's reserved for native speakers, but Seattle was much more sort of liberal about that. After I came back, that became part much more part of my life. I spoke Chinese all the time. I would speak Chinese in any situation where it was appropriate andcomfortable. And, and then, so it just changed a lot of things. Didn't change my research much. I wanted to do, at that point I told Wang Ching-hsien that I wanted to do a field in modern Chinese poetry and he is a modern Chinese poet.

(42:58):

I mean, he's a contemporary Chinese poet. And he said, no, you can't, it's not worth your time. He says, there's too much real poetry, classical poetry, there's too much classical poetry. You need to focus on that. We don't wanna be distracted by this modern poetry stuff. And he insisted that I focus on any, everything Dufu *yiqian*, everything including Dufu and before. That was the limit. That was real. That was the real poetry. When I was, as I approached my dissertation, when I came back, the idea was that I would focus on some sort of classical poetry, and we had many conversations about that. And this is when there there's a long personal story about my relationship with Yang Mu and how it changed, not for the better, how it got more and more strained over time.

(44:24):

And that's all laid out in the article called *As Always Yang Mu*, which is based on the letters that he wrote to me. I'm not going rehash that, it was a, I just briefly, it happened right before I went to Taiwan where Yang Mu and Nora, remember his wife, we became, I became their gardener. I mean, I was over there all the time and I became quite close to them, both. And, suddenly there was this very ugly divorce, and I was caught completely in the middle of this. I mean, literally in the middle of this divorce, and that started to change things. As we went into the, then, I was very close to Yang Mu, doing this whole thing, and I tried to stay close to Nora, but there was so much tension.

(45:38):

And then Yang Mu remarried and started a new life. I sort of got swept up in that, but as we moved towards choosing a dissertation topic, there was quite a bit of attention around that. And I ended up doing something. I don't think he really, he finally approved it, but it wasn't what he wanted me to do. No. It

was about narrative poetry, which is a sort of a minor genre in China. So narrative poems are, are not typically very central to the literary tradition. But I chose it and I chose it partly because one of the things he did allow me to do a field on was on the *Shiji*, the classical history, the first big classical history.

(46:44):

I wrote a paper for him. Because your fields were papers, you wrote long research papers for them. I wrote on the narrative structure of the *Shiji*, I decided I would like to take that work and he liked that work. And that was actually one of my first major publication when I was in graduate school, was that paper got published in a Chinese journal, a Chinese literature journal. I wanted to take that narrative work and to look at poetry. That's what I did. He actually wanted me to work on the *Chuci* (楚辭), but the *Chuci* was scary. It was so difficult. Yeah. So I came back, within a year or two, I started working towards my dissertation.

Yao Chen (47:47):

So you mentioned at first you had this idea to write about the modern poetry. And he disagreed. Did you struggle?

Joseph Allen (47:57):

No, he said no. And I said, okay,

Yao Chen (48:00):

Okay. And you agree like a pre Dufu poetry?

Joseph Allen (48:03):

Yes. I said, okay. Do Fu yiqian (杜甫以前). And later I mean after I graduated and stuff, I did do that work, but, and he approved of it. And, but at that point, no, it was a sort of a conservative statement. Don't get distracted, focused. The only modern thing I did for my dissertation was I did a field on modern linguistics with Jerry Norman, Chinese linguistics. And all of that was very, very helpful when it turned out that I actually might get a job, because I must say that going back to the, sort of what was good and what was missing from UW Asian Languages and Literature Department, the graduate students had no professional training. We weren't taught how to become professors. It was like, you're supposed to pick it up on the side or something.

(49:18):

There was no seminars about how to present a paper at a conference. I never presented a paper at a conference as a graduate student. I mean, we wouldn't think of it doing it, that just wasn't our, we weren't ready for that. You knew to memorize all of that stuff before you could give a paper. And there was no career planning. I mean, it was, I mean zero career planning. What we went through, I went through like almost a whole nine years, assuming that I wouldn't get a job. It turns out we, Madeline and Joe Cutter, Madeline Spring, Joe cutter and I, we came up, we sort of finished it almost the same time and we all got fabulous jobs. But we were not prepared to get 'em. I mean, we got 'em just by hook or by crook.

(50:12):

It was just worked out. I got my job at Washington University in St. Louis, as opposed to University of Washington, Seattle Huada Huada (华大). And I got my job at St. Louis because, I mean, because I could do two things. One is I could teach classical literature and I could teach language. Madeline Spring got

her job because of that. Joe Cutter never, he was a little bit older than us, and never was sort of part of that transitional period. Yeah, so it was as we approached the end of my graduate career, the relationship between Yang Mu and I about my dissertation became very, very fraught. But it didn't have, it was about a very stupid thing that I didn't understand at the time. It worked out in the end, it came, it worked out in the end and I finished and I left almost the next day to drive back to St. Louis, where I began my sort of postgraduate career.

Yao Chen (51:44):

So you mentioned about the UW model of the Chinese studies. Not focusing on professional training. And have you had interaction with the Chinese graduate students from other universities? What were the models at their university, how they were trained?

Joseph Allen (52:02):

Yeah, I haven't really had a lot of talk about that, but I think that the Ivy League programs probably were much more, so Princeton, Harvard, Yale, I think they were probably much more oriented towards career planning. I'm not sure about Berkeley and UCLA and stuff like that, but Seattle that just, there just was no, no training at all. It wasn't like, we were felt like we were denied. We just didn't know that was. When it came time to apply for jobs, I just did it by myself. I mean, I just, there were jobs out there and I applied for them and I even, I financed it. We paid for a trip in which I just went to schools on the East Coast and talked to people about working there.

(53:07):

It was very, very sort of made up the time. And then it was right at the last minute that this job at Washington opened up. And I met Robert Hegel who was the important Chinese person there. I was flying back from the East Coast. I was changing planes in Chicago. I went, and it was happened to be the weekend of the AAS in Chicago. I met him in a coffee shop. We talked for a half hour and I got on an airplane and left. And then a couple weeks later, they invited me for the interview to go and see. So it was very, very made up. I was very, very, it was just a fluke and lucky that I got that job or any job actually.

Yao Chen (54:01):

Since you mentioned AAS, so you started attending AAS as a graduate?

Joseph Allen (54:06):

Actually that was the first AAS I ever went to. I didn't even go to a panel. I just walked into the hotel, I went to the coffee shop, met Hegel, had a talk with him and then got back on the subway to go to the airport. So it was my first AAS, but I didn't do anything. I mean, it wasn't really AAS. It just was this coincidence of my travel and stuff like that.

Yao Chen (00:00:03):

Today is Monday, December 13th, 2021. This is Yao Chen interviewing professor Joseph Allen through Zoom. This interview is for the Chinese Studies Scholars Oral History Project sponsored by UCLA's East Asian Library and Center for Oral History Research. This is our third session. Good morning, professor Allen.

Joseph Allen (00:00:25):

Good morning. How are you?

Yao Chen (00:00:27):

Good. Great. Except for the power outage.

Joseph Allen (00:00:30):

Yeah, that's too bad.

Yao Chen (00:00:31):

So last time you shared your graduate school experiences. So I had a few follow-up questions. Back in the seventies, did you learn the traditional Chinese only? Or you learned both a traditional and a simplified Chinese?

Joseph Allen (00:00:45):

As an undergraduate in Massachusetts, we learned only traditional characters, but when I came to UW in 73 we switched to simplified characters. I can't remember if, and I think we went back and forth. I can remember that not being a big problem. I remember the first I remember I had to get used to simplify characters, but it was relatively easy and I can't remember as we went along, whether they, I think it was just sort of a mix, depending on what the teacher was using and the materials and stuff like that. But I always stayed very, probably more confident or comfortable writing full form traditional characters. Although I actually, I don't even remember when I'm reading Chinese, it doesn't make any difference to me reading.

(00:02:02):

That was also when I think this is true. The Romanization systems, we switched at that point too. So I, in the first two years, we used Yale Romanization system, which is actually the best Romanization system. There it is, but for American speakers, for English speakers of America. But we switched to *Pinyin* when I went to Seattle and I think we've, again, it was from then on, it was a mixture of *Pinyin* and mostly Wade-Giles. For our academic work, we didn't use *Pinyin*. So if we were writing an academic paper for a class or something, we used Wade-Giles, almost up until I wrote my dissertation. When I wrote my dissertation, and this was one of the problems I had with Yang Mu. When I wrote my dissertation, I switched to *Pinyin* just because it was easier to type, I didn't like it, but it was just easier to type. And from then on, I think everything I've written has been in *Pinyin*.

Yao Chen (00:03:24):

Back in the seventies in UW, what was a faculty gender ratio in the department?

Joseph Allen (00:03:32):

Well, I had all white male, well, except for Yang Mu, of course. I had all white male main professors. And I mean, it's very typical, so that's true. And, but the language program was almost in not entirely, but largely female Chinese, native speakers. Maybe a mix, but something like that. Yeah. So it was skewed. And as it, as it still is skewed to some extent, but although it's, comparatively it's much better now than in the past.

Yao Chen (00:04:27):

So how about the students, your peer graduate students?

Joseph Allen (00:04:33):

I'd have to go through and count, but primarily they were men, not entire though. The ratio was better, I think, for the graduate students. This sort of is the wave of change. So of my three or four most closest colleagues Madeline Spring was the female colleague. And then became well known in the field after she graduated. There were other people, other we had two programs of the MA program and the PhD program. In the MA program, it had to be more women. Lorri Hagman was there when I was there. Lorri Hagman is now the Executive Editor of University of Washington Press. And also my editor for some of my books. And Kate, I can't remember Kathleen Tomlonovic, I think her last name was. It was a better, it was probably, I would guess it's 60/40, maybe 70/30, or something like that, but it was a better ratio. And then there was also in that group, there were more Chinese, mostly from Taiwan at that point. But there were more.

Yao Chen (00:06:08):

You mean the MA program?

Joseph Allen (00:06:09):

In the MA program. The Chinese tend to be either in the MA program or in the comparative literature program, so they, I think, I don't know if there was a rule or something, but they didn't tended not to be getting a PhD in ALL (Asian Languages and Literatures). So there actually may have been sort of a policy about that. I'm not sure.

Yao Chen (00:06:37):

So you would say for ALL is primarily American students.

Joseph Allen (00:06:42):

I would say it was yes, definitely primary, if not, almost entirely the PhD program.

Yao Chen (00:06:50):

And also something happened towards the end of your graduate school. Deng Xiaoping had a state visit to the US in 1979. So how did it impact you personally and in the field of Chinese studies?

Joseph Allen (00:07:05):

I don't even remember. He wore a cowboy hat in Texas or something like that. And I think it’s a picture I'd seen afterwards after. I mean, we were just sort of going through our graduate school stuff. What didn't make a big difference personally for me, I mean, what I remember about that was really the year before 78, when United States withdrew recognition of Taiwan for the PRC. And I was either in Taiwan or just left Taiwan, but it was a big topic when I was in Taiwan. They, everyone knew it was coming. And that

actually had quite a bit of personal impact because people would come up to me on the street and say, are you an American?

(00:07:59):

And I say, yes. And they well tell Mr. President, whoever it was. Carter? President Carter, I guess that he shouldn't recognize PRC. Okay. I'll tell him next time I see him. But it was a, so that was like, that was actually a very personal thing. And my friends lobbied me, it was not really too pleasant, actually. It was the one time that I felt like there was political pressure when I was in Taiwan. So when Deng Xiaoping came in 79 didn't make a big impact on me. Although the opening of China had a huge impact. I mean in that sense that what he represented that, that thing represented was so for, so the first time I went to China was in 1981, just a couple years after that visit. And it was very, very, very transformational visit at that time. I mean, China was still basically, and it throws the Culture Revolution. It's just coming out of the Cultural Revolution type of thing. So yes, that's not personally, but over time, of course it made a huge difference.

Yao Chen (00:09:27):

Okay. So now I'm ready to hear your stories will you'll start your first full time tenure-track job.

Joseph Allen (00:09:34):

Before you go, you asked me a question once and I didn't answer it very well or at all. And that was about the library. And I just should say, I mean, it was one of, I mean, Seattle was one of the best libraries in the country at that time, particularly in classical literature. But also in some specialties, like Tibetan and was, had the best Tibetan collection at that time. It was in this, it was a gorgeous building and a great place to work. And I wasn't, I mean, we studied there all the time. I mean, we just lived in the library because at that point, graduate students didn't have their own space, they didn't have offices or something like that. We used the library, the library was a community center.

(00:10:22):

In fact, sometime it got sort of rowdy. And the librarian would come. Chen Fang-ming (陳芳明), who became very famous Taiwan scholar, came and yelled at us several times. We were just very, because it was not the study space, it was sort of the social space. There was a lounge, but it was like one bed, a cup of coffee, and no windows. This was gorgeous building with big stain glass windows and classical building. So it was a very, very, it was a very important resource of course. And I mean, you would go and take Ming Dynasty books off the shelf. I mean, literally, in the, I didn't use the special collections much, but special collections were huge. So it was an extremely important resource us for studies, but it was also a very important space.

(00:11:21):

I think it made us feel like graduate students, I mean, it made you feel like you were really at a great university. It was such a great building. And then a great, great resources. We spent a lot of time there, all of us. I've been very lucky about libraries and librarians and although I wasn't very close to the librarians there. I think that relationship sort of changes over time, but they were very supportive of, because I was trying to get all kinds of, but back then it was just to get a Xerox copy of something, took a lot of work. Particularly as I was working on my dissertation, they helped a lot, getting these resources and stuff. So yeah. So my first but real first research library was a great place.

Yao Chen (00:12:17):

Nice to hear about the wonderful services UW library provided it at that time. So now we'll move to 1982. When you started your first tenure-track position at the University of Washington in St. Louis.

Joseph Allen (00:12:33):

That's right. 1982. I was thinking it was 1983. It's 1982. So just to pick up where we were with that story. So I finished my dissertation in the summer, early summer of 82, a very, very close call. It was a hectic to get it done on in time. It was 557 pages long. So it was huge, which was not particularly big for dissertations back then, but it was a lot of work. But anyways, successfully defended it. And then we basically got in another Volkswagen and drove back, halfway back across the country to St. Louis, which I didn't know any much about, anything at all in the beginning about Washington University. And I didn't know St. Louis. I mean, it was a foreign place to us.

(00:13:31):

But we got settled in over the summer, Bob Hegel, who was my mentor or my senior colleague then put us, we lived with them for a while until we found an apartment and things. Then I began teaching my first full teaching responsibilities began in the fall of 1983. And for most of my tenure, which was almost 20 years at Washington University, I had a two-two teaching load. And my load was split between language and literature language, modern language and literature 50-50. So every semester I taught one course, one class in language, one class in literature or later more cultural studies kind of things. And that continued almost to the end, right at the end. I think I was asked to leave the classroom, the language classroom, because the language teaching was transformed during this time.

(00:14:36):

I think they felt that other people were better trained to do languages. Although I really liked, I taught second-year Mandarin and I liked it a lot. It was every day and seven hours a week with the lab. So it was very time consuming, but it was something I enjoyed. I started teaching then. I started at the beginning. I taught mostly classical literature. I think I taught all classical literature, just sort of classical literature one. And then Bob Hegel taught classical literature two, or something like that. Wasn't very creative. Early on, I participated in NEH workshop and I remember this is where I met Pauline Yu, who becomes an extremely important person in the field. And from that workshop, I invented a course called some Chinese civilization or something.

(00:15:39):

It sounds really boring and dumb at this point, but it was a, quite of an innovative idea. And I taught that off and on throughout the time I was there. And then, and in fact, Washington University is still teaching Chinese civilization. I'm sure it's different and probably better. But that was actually what was interesting about that course was it was a place where I would try out new ideas because it was a, what they call a magazine course. There were four topics two and four topics over the semester. I started with things I already knew and then experimented with things. This is where I got interested in Chinese cities. For example, I taught, I sort of, it was sort of a lecture class basically, and this is where I first taught about Taiwan.

(00:16:42):

So there were probably other, excuse me, other ones, other magazines, but those are the ones that I remember. So that sort of went along in a normal sort of way to teaching. I think it was relatively successful. Of course there was a pressure to publish. And Washington University was a very high pressure to publish. I was quite successful in publishing articles. I got an early one in the Harvard Journal of Asian Studies. I got one in Asia Major, and these are two articles that were somewhat related to my dissertation. They weren't entirely. Then of course the book, that's the big thing. So the question that

Washington U was what, beside the book, so I felt confident and then I got an NEH grant this early eighties.

(00:17:50):

It's on my CV somewhere, but must have been about 85, I think. And this was a grant to write a book about classical poetry called *Yuefu* (樂府) poetry. I spent that year 80 to 86, I think it was writing this book. Again, it was somewhat derivative of the dissertation, but it was actually all new thinking. And it was actually the first time I really sort of applied. So not the new critical thinking sort of what would be called literary theory. It was a sort of old theory, but so structuralist, it's called structuralism or structuralist theory. And finished the book in a couple years or something like that. And as I was going along ,and then by a series of events that I'm not entirely sure of, because someone else is sort of handling most of this at that point, the book got tied up at a press for a long time, for maybe a year and a half or something.

(00:19:12):

It was stuck in a press, but the press was being very positive. And then in the end it didn't accept the book. I988, 89, something like that. I went into my tenure review without a book. I had a book manuscript and I had readers' comments, but I didn't have a book. I was denied tenure in 1988. I think it was, which is a huge blow for anybody in my field. But, but it was, I understood. I mean, I knew the rules, it's a book, and my colleagues tried to say, oh, it doesn't really matter. We'll make it work, but, it didn't work. I'll finish this part of the story anyways.

(00:20:25):

Because this there's a trip to Taiwan that happens along this time. I don't know if I knew what I was doing or I just happened to apply, but I applied for a big Mellon fellowship at Harvard for mid-career professors. And I was denied tenure, but I got the Harvard fellowship. There was this sort of weird disconnect between these two decisions. One decision saying you're not good enough. And the next decision saying you're good enough to come to Harvard and teach and do research. I went off to Harvard and was there for a year. And during that year, two things happened. One was the book was accepted by University of Michigan (Press). And also I finished the second book in Washington University.

(00:21:36):

They're always talking about the second book and I finished the second book, because of friends of mine, I had an endorsement from Helen Vendler. And Helen Vendler is at that time, and maybe still is the most important critic on modern poetry in the United States, not Chinese poetry, modern poetry. She was then the critic for the New Yorker. I came, so those two things, the acceptance of the book and a second completed manuscript with Helen Vendler's letter. They reversed the decision. I came back to Washington University and picked up where I was. So that was sort of up to 1990, that was the first big phase of my time at Washington University. It's not, I think it was quite typical of that time and maybe still of early career work, so publish, publish, publish. I should be very clear about this.

(00:22:51):

I love to publish, I love to write. So it wasn't like I have to go write something. I can't teach my children and my students. It wasn't like that at all. I loved to write. I sort of believed in the rules. So there wasn't a, even though I was denied tenure and I was upset and stuff, there was not a bitterness with. These were quite close friends or at least good colleagues with the Dean who made the decision. We talked during that year about the decision and about what I was doing and stuff. So that phase was typical and ended in a sort of complex, but nice way.

(00:23:41):

Just backtrack a little bit. I went to Taiwan a couple times. I went to Taiwan to work on the *Yuefu* book. I read with a professor at Shida, National Taiwan Normal University, really wonderful guy. So we just read poetry every day for about three or four months. And that was around 85. And then in 87, 88, I got a Fulbright fellowship to go. And this is when I, even though Yang Mu wouldn't let me study modern poetry as a graduate student. I had, he supported this move. I went and read in Taiwan as a Fulbright scholar and focusing on his poetry and the poetry of my other colleague Lo Ch'ing (羅青). And that was the second book, Helen Vendler supported. That was published. Those two books were published shortly in 1992 or 1993, very quickly afterwards.

(00:24:57):

And once the second book was published, I mean, I wasn't set, but I was sort of established in field. And then at that point things, I had already veered off from classical literature to modern literature and I kept veering off more and more. In the second phase of being at Washington University was when I started developing other interests. Some of 'em quite unrelated, but usually as I said earlier, a lot of times the new interests came out of teaching undergraduates. When I taught graduate students. Well, towards the end, it was a little bit different when I taught graduate students. I usually just taught classical literature when I taught undergraduates, I felt comfortable experimenting and looking in different ways. That was when I started looking towards other fields. And in some ways I think I felt not that I had done classical literature, but I was sort of looking for something else, something I've been doing classical literature for, since like undergraduate. So sort of time to move on.

(00:26:31):

Do you have any questions?

Yao Chen (00:26:33):

How did you feel about the founding for Chinese studies at the time, like over time, like it has increased or decreased?

Joseph Allen (00:26:41):

It just goes back to Deng Xiaoping and well back to 72, but definitely 79. So everything's changing at this point. Suddenly people are studying, students are undergraduates are studying Chinese because they wanna go to China. Or they want, or they wanna be involved in China and stuff like, and not in Tang dynasty China. Deng Xiaping China. That was a really a beginning of the great change. And then you all the way through the nineties, you get a surging interest in Chinese studies, away from the Chinese studies of my generation, which was almost entirely pre-modern, unless if you were political science or sociology or something, but in language and literature my generation was mostly a premodern and that change that starts changing fairly rapidly in the nineties.

(00:28:00):

In fact, before I left Washington University, I was teaching a modern literature course, Lu Xun (魯迅) and after kind of literature course. I don't think I ever developed it very well, but I mean, this was undergraduates, I felt comfortable enough to teach at that point. That definitely is the big change. The language teaching goes through some revolution, but evolves very quick way until it becomes very immersive-centered student-centered. I was very fortunate when I arrived at Washington University, they had very vibrant foreign languages programs. I actually took French and Japanese as a new professor. I

took it because I was, I mean, I just sort of like French and I took Japanese because it was useful, but I also took it because I felt like I needed to be in a different type of classroom.

(00:29:20):

I needed the experience in learning that way. I adapted the old style that I had, which was sort of translation studies, kind of translation workshopping. I adapted it quite quickly to a much more immersive, much more performance-based sort of language teaching. Again, we were very successful with our undergraduates. They did very well when they went to China and stuff, so it was quite successful. So that, and that keeps evolving too during the nineties. The emergence of, of this is just the very beginnings of film, for example, suddenly, I mean, this was revolutionary. When I was in graduate school, the revolutionary stuff was, *xiaoshuo* (小說), *Qingming xiaoshuo* (清明小說) *Mingqing xiaoshuo* (明清小說)， I mean, people who were at the cutting edge were doing *hongloumeng* (紅樓夢) and *Xiyouji* (西遊記) and stuff like that.

(00:30:33):

These were the modernists, the Vanguard, the next generation, not only moves into modern literature as a field, but also starts to look at, in the nineties, particularly with the fifth generation PRC filmmakers remember the names, Zhang Yimou (張藝謀) and people like that. We start to think about, I mean, I think it begins by you start including film within modern literature classes. So you read a novel, you watch a movie or something like that. And then over time, then film emerges as a field. And it's, all of that is happening. And in my second phase, this post 1990 phase in at WashU was when I became an administrator. So I became the director of East Asian Studies.

(00:31:50):

I never became sure of the department when I became a director of East Asian Studies. And that was a very exciting moment when my colleague actually who left in 90, I think, 91 had begun to develop these joint degree programs. This is at the MA level. So East Asian Studies was an MA level program. These joint degree programs were very exciting, seemed, we had the most successful one was the JD MA, so a law degree and an MA in East Asian Studies. And we had a really fabulous cohort of graduate students coming in through the nineties while I was there. At one point I think we had 45 MA students in the JD program. And we're a small university, Washington University is a small private university, I mean it has 10,000 students total.

(00:33:01):

We were doing, and then we developed an MBA, MA. So that was the one that I initiated. And that turned out to be a very good one too, and some very excellent students in it. And these were the best of the best, cause they would come in with already high levels of Chinese language ability. And they were in law school, and particularly the law students were very interested in reading. They took classical Chinese literature so they could read legal documents and stuff like that. That was a big thing through the nineties that I was involved in and it was, I think it opened doors for me too.

(00:34:00):

This is where I developed the Taiwan class. I had two versions of the Taiwan class. I don't think it, I don't think anybody at that point was teaching a course on just Taiwan. I mean, people were teaching China Taiwan courses, but I develop developed this course sort of a history geography, ethnic studies kind of course on Taiwan that first had an undergraduate version. Again, it merged out of that Chinese in class. And then there was an undergraduate version I must have started teaching in the mid- nineties or early

nineties. It's a standalone Taiwan. From 1600 to now. And sort of fall. It was more or less a history based course looking at sort of ethnicities and colonialities, and things like that.

(00:35:13):

Again, I would get better at it at, at the time went on. I mean, at first it was just sort of knowledge, but it was a good course. I remember this is so I don't think it might have been the first time I taught the course. It was certainly early on. So I walked into the class and there was maybe 30 students or something like that, which was pretty good size for WashU. For WashU with 30 students was a nice size class. And it was a reading based discussion class. I started by this time I had become less of a lecturer and more of a facilitator in the classroom kind of. And I walked into the classroom and there were 30 students in there. In the back of the room was Mrs.

(00:36:05):

Elizabeth Danforth. And we knew her as Ibby Danforth, who was the wife of Chancellor Danforth. And I knew she did this occasionally. She would just, it was her. She would just take a class. And, she just, I knew her a little bit at that point. It was a time when I was doing a lot of China travel and I knew her from that a little bit, but I was, I mean, I wasn't expecting her, she didn't warn me. She was just there. I remember the icebreaking question was sort of what do you know about Taiwan? I learned to ask questions that were complete, quite open ended and someone could say, I know nothing about Taiwan, and that was as a good answer.

(00:37:14):

And she raised her hand, participated. She was in the class, a very early version of the Taiwan class for most of the semester. I mean, she had to travel and stuff like that. So that was one thing that happened then. And also the Taiwan stuff kept, I mean, I started going to Taiwan almost every year and I had been, it had a very different relationship with Taiwan traveling in Taiwan and traveling to the PRC. So all my travel beginning in 81, up through the mid-nineties to the PRC was. I was a lecturer for tour groups. So started as a graduate student, one of the last years of my graduate, last year, I guess in my graduate career, I became a lecturer for, it was one of these educational travel company, like Lindblad Expeditions or National Geographic.

(00:38:24):

It was called society expeditions, and they were in Seattle and they needed someone to lecture. I was terrible, but I got better. But all through the, all through the nineties, I was doing those lecture trips for, I saw, I mean, this is where I got all the slides like this one here. I saw all kinds of parts. I saw everywhere in China. Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Tibet. I mean, I went everywhere and then of course the normal ones, Beijing, Shanghai, Xi’an. But I never stayed more than two days. While in Taiwan I had all these sort of personal connections and social connections and educational connections. My trips to Taiwan became more and more substantial. And my trips to the PRC never became as substantial until actually after WashU, until I went after I went to Minnesota.

(00:39:30):

That was going on all the time. It was also a time when Washington University was very progressive, very forward thinking. They established what's called the Asia Advisory Council. Asia Advisory Council was a council of people in Asia, in East Asia, primarily, maybe South Asia too. But people in Asia who held important positions in Asia and had a relationship with Washington University, alumni, former teachers, and what they transferred Danforth and his team did was organize these, these leaders, these local leaders into an advisory council, which then became sort of a board, the international board for

WashU. It was really I mean, I was there in the early meetings and I, it was very interesting and, I became not, I think I sort of became part of it officially a part of it.

(00:40:47):

I would travel with them, it was not immersion, it was more of visiting. We went to Beijing and Shanghai a couple of times and we went to Japan and they went to Taiwan. I was, became deeply involved in sort of the, not sort of the Asian studies, but the Asian initiatives, East Asian initiatives, really the East Asian initiative at Washington University. And that was what was really consuming me from 1990 to 1999, when I was working I was still teaching, I was still, I mean, I was still, I didn't, I had a, I was the director, but I, it was, I was still teaching a lot and doing normal things. But yeah, so there was a big phase difference about my sort of position at the Washington. Washington University is small university. So I mean, I knew everyone pretty much knew who I was.

Yao Chen (00:42:05):

Starting from the eighties and the nineties, while you were at WashU. Did you see, there were more international students coming from Taiwan, China,

Joseph Allen (00:42:16):

China. We started seeing these and then it became, it actually became a very important part of my life. So I would say, I can't remember when, but fairly early on, we started to get applications from students in the PRC. And they were directed towards, or we made them go into comparative literature. There was a program, it was called Chinese studies and comparative literature or something like that, and was sort of like a joint program, PhD program with comparative literature. And the department I was in the department, I was in, was originally called Chinese and Japanese. And then it changed to Asian Near Eastern languages and literature, but there was a strong China component all that time. And this was really led by Bob Hegel, Robert Hegel, the most students came, particularly the PRC students,

(00:43:23):

most of them came to study fiction, *xiaoshuo*. Hegel is one of the national leaders in that field. I would teach, I would have them in my class, but their primary mentor, almost always with Bob Hegel, but this, I mean, Qiu Xiaolong. I mean, people were now well known in the field. Martin Huang, who's in Santa Barbara, maybe? Hegel trained a whole generation of these young, very, these were child children of the Culture Revolution really, they basically, a lot of 'em were self-taught, I mean, it was a very interesting time, and they were very interesting students, and Hegel produced a really excellent group of students who now are prominent in the field, they're in their mid-career now. So that was a huge change in the East Asian Studies program.

(00:44:40):

But we didn't take native speakers in the East Asian Studies. So, all the East Asian Studies students, they may have been Asian, but or if they wanted to. We did have some who wanted, they were Chinese or, and they wanted to study Japanese. But we didn't take someone who grew up in China to come and get at a degree in Chinese studies. That core of MA students was primarily Americans, Asian Americans and Americans of different ethnicities, but they were primary. We had a few international students from like Thailand and places like that. So there was a different cohort, but it clearly was a time when the field changed with all the arrival of these, the first wave where students who were sort of self-taught, but then, the students started coming from the big universities. They'd have a BA or an MA from Beijing University and Chinese literature, and they would come to the States and they transformed.

(00:46:01):

I mean you look around and the world is transformed by that and continues to be transformed by that group of people. So that wasn't special to WashU. All the private, at least all the private universities were affected by that.

Yao Chen (00:46:21):

Your CV indicated you were the director of the Nankai Study Abroad program in 2001 and 2002. Could you talk about that experience a bit? So this is study abroad is in China. PRC.

Joseph Allen (00:46:36):

Yeah. That's actually after I go to Minnesota.

Yao Chen (00:46:40):

Oh, that is after you went to Minnesota. Okay.

Joseph Allen (00:46:42):

Yeah, I could, I can talk about it. I wanna talk about it.

Yao Chen (00:46:52):

How about we leave it for the Minnesota part. So they're all cohesively together. And then for WashU because I ask the UW questions, like the ratio of the faculty and also graduate students. How did that change the in WashU in the eighties and the nineties, or still the same?

Joseph Allen (00:47:14):

No. It begins to transform. So when I arrived, I remember this very clearly. Everyone was named either Bill or Bob. Bill Matheson, Bill Jones, Bill Kirby, Bob Hegel, Bob Morrill. I mean, I literally went to a lunch and it was all white guys named either Bill or Bob, and then Joe. That began to change. And we begin, so after the person hired after me, I should say that one of the reasons I was hired was because at that point, all the Chinese language program was all native speakers, older native speaker, sort of the old generation of native speakers, sort of my teacher's generation. I know that I was part of the reason I was hired is because I least I said I could, I could teach language and I was a non-native speaker.

(00:48:31):

I think that was a positive at that point, it becomes a negative later perhaps, but it was certainly a positive at that point. The next person hired in Chinese studies was Beata Grant who was sort of my colleague. We were at the Stanford Center together. We were actually at the IUP in Taiwan. We were students together and we actually shared a classroom with, I can't remember what we studied, but she was someone I knew quite well from. So got Grant was hired. Ginger Marcus joined as a Japanese language teacher. Although the first hire was her husband Marvin. Then Rebecca Copeland was hired in Japanese. Again, it's certainly not representational, it's still biased, but there becomes a group of young, younger, young female teachers. And I think that's true across the university generally.

(00:49:40):

Again, it wasn't perfect by any means, but certainly, and Beata and Rebecca became very important people in their fields. So that it was obviously positive hires. So as students, the MA program was about 50-50. It may there actually been, well, I think it was probably 50-50, I'm just guessing women sort represented in ratios, proper ratio, so to speak. The PhD program, most of the early people who came to study with Bob Hegel were men from China. And I mean, I'm sure that has something to do with the

trajectory in China. I know, but then that changes too over time. So the latest, their latest PhD is Wang Wei, who is a, she's actually a mid-career sort of person, but so yeah, those balances start to play out right now. I'm not involved in it enough and I'm sort to know, but I wouldn't be surprised if it's pretty well balanced by now.

Yao Chen (00:51:07):

You mentioned that you've been to Taiwan multiple times in eighties and the nineties. So how did you feel Taiwan has changed over the time?

Joseph Allen (00:51:20):

I don't wanna sound like an advertisement for Taiwan, but it was phenomenal, what happened. I mean from 80s, so I was there in 77 up through, and I kept going, I started going back in the eighties and it wasn't, I mean, things were changing a lot, but of course, for the lifting of Martial Law in 1988, it just, I was there. I thought it was a joke, not a joke, I thought it was a trick, I thought the KMT said, oh, we're gonna lift the Martial Law. And then they're gonna impose some special law. And that, I really thought it was a rhetorical trick, because it was done by Chiang Ching-kuo (蔣經國). So Chiang Ching-kuo was the one who, you know, I mean the Chiang dynasty.

(00:52:13):

Within a year, after 88, Taiwan had been, I mean, it was pretty raucous, but it was completely on a new trajectory of openness train parents, the protest. There were protests in the street all the time. It's still a lot, I mean, all of 'em I'm sure had good reason to be in the streets. But there was also a sense of pent-up frustration for the repress, even though the repression was being lifted all the way through the eighties, with *dangwai* (黨外) candidates and all that. But there was certainly a, and this is when the, you asked originally of this discourse about the tension between *benshengren* (本省人) the *waishengren* (外省人). This is when that discourse merged everything was open, you could talk about anything.

(00:53:15):

228 became a huge, a huge public debate about what to do about 228. There was a transformation. I mean, I should say that before 88, I loved Taiwan. It was a very civil place. And I had good friends and great food. I mean, it was all those things. But there was a transformation and in which the civic life, the civil life emerged. So and people became, had a chance to become much more open about just not their ideas, but the way they lived. So in the early nineties, the emergence in the eighties, there was a very strong pre-lifting Martial Law. There was a strong sort of feminist movement in Taiwan. It was one of the movements that was allowed. It didn't seem to be a political threat so much.

(00:54:25):

And it was a movement that wasn't based on *waisheng bensheng ren* (外省本省人), it was a gender movement. And then in the nineties, there was the gay rights movement, which transformed Taiwan tremendously, not just for gay people, but for families with gay, members and then for society at large. And I had a graduate, I had a undergraduate student, and this was been early, very early nineties, I think, who at WashU. Well, I didn't know at the time, but turned out that he was gay. He went to Taiwan and I was there at the time. And he took me to all these bars and things. I mean it was a very open thing. So Taiwan was, I mean, it was a soft revolution. It was a revolution, I mean, and a bloodless level.

(00:55:24):

To call it bloodless, it sounded even, it was really soft. I mean, people threw bananas at each other and yelled at each other and stuff like that. I mean, it was a, but that was the working out of that frustration. So it was a huge transformation. And then there was along with became, it may have happened anyways, but the improvement of infrastructures in particularly in Taipei city. So there was, so in the late seventies, it was called the dark ages of traffic. *Jiaotong hei qi* (交通黑期) or something like that in which they were putting in the subway system. Then in the nineties, the subway system was put in, finished and expanded, and everything became very I mean, everything became just a better place.

(00:56:20):

I mean, things were cleaner. People were more polite or less impolite. So queuing at the train station, I mean, it became a very orderly a fashion. I mean little things, but things that make a difference to just make things easier to live. And at the same, it was at the same time that my interest in Taiwan as a place to study, not where to study, but a place to study, as an object of study emerged quite rapidly, I was, became interested in Taipei city as a space urban space. It was in 99 while I was still at WashU that I got the second Fulbright to go to Taiwan and began the work that would take me 10 years. It was a time when I was really changing my research interest and I was interested in semiotics and urban space.

(00:57:36):

People kept saying, I thought you did classical literature. Well, yeah, sort of. It was a, so the, it was an interesting, there was a social change in Taiwan. There was a personal change in my life, I became more, I mean, I literally was going every year. It was not separate from this, but involved in that was a transformation of the research to a more cultural studies orientation towards time, towards the subject. It would, cultural studies would become, I mean, I would use it more in all of all my research.

Yao Chen (00:58:23):

That explains the question I have, why you actually wrote a Taiwan book and then started teaching Taiwan. While you were in Taiwan you probably have conversations with Taiwanese about PRC. How did you feel people's attitudes changed over the time?

Joseph Allen (00:58:45):

Well, depends on who you talk to. So over time Taiwan becomes much more interested in its own sovereignty, its own independence. I know that Taiwan, people really get upset, and it was a part of, this was what was happening in the eighties, the nineties, that transformed me too, was that people started talking about Taiwan. It became dozens and dozens of new history books and new photo books. Taiwan as a point of conversation, as a topic of conversation, who are we, what are we, the emergence of indigenous cultures, I mean, this along with gay cultures is this emergence of indigenous rights.

(00:59:54):

Taiwan starts to think about itself, much more as a place of its own. Not that it belongs to something. It doesn't belong to the Qing dynasty. It doesn't belong to Japan, doesn't belong to the United States. It doesn't belong to the PRC. It there's an overall consensus that there, I mean, there's not a complete consensus, but there's an overall feeling that Taiwan has its own identity. This was different than the seventies. It wasn't much of a conversation. We'll join the PRC, we won’t join the PRC. We'll take over the name of it. I mean, it was a political and then, people who didn't support that were just more or less apathetic, but this became apathy goes away.

(01:00:57):

Because no one really believed it, I often wonder this sort of ironic, what do people really believe? And even though people were all saying the right things in the seventies and early eighties, *fangong dalu* (反攻大陸) or something, who believed it really, I mean, who really believed that they could take over? I think they probably would've at the points. If the United States would've let them, they probably could've invaded the PRC during the Great Leap Forward. PRC was on its knees, but the United States wouldn't allow that, they didn't want to get in a war with China. Everyone was saying the right things, but I always wonder who believes what they said. But there is clearly emergence of this idea that we are our own, we don't know what we are sort of thing.

(01:01:55):
They really don't know what they are, but they know that they don't just have to belong to something else. They don't have to be part of something else. They have a very rich and interesting history, as rich and as interesting as many parts of Asia. I think that's the huge difference. Early on, like when I was going to China in the eighties, they would ask me, taxi cab drivers would say, have you been to China? And I said, yeah. And they said, oh, where'd you go? What'd you see? So it was just was sort of curious kind of thing, there wasn't much. They would always ask me, is it really dirty? And I mean, Taiwan's still pretty dirty.

(01:02:54):
Is it true that they don't have refrigerators? I mean, it would be those because they had information, but they didn't go. But then they did *tanqin* (探親), whatever it was called, they started letting people go in the eighties. Then sudden, then Taiwan people had their own information. They didn't have to rely on me. So yeah, there was in the eighties, there was some sort of asking me about different things. And, but very early on they started to get their own info, not the government information. Government information was always unreliable. So they would go see their relatives, that was the first group of people.

Yao Chen (01:03:49):
You felt at the time there were more about younger generation who didn't really have a strong tie. I mean, they have family ties, but they haven't visited the China. So they kind of curious, want to know what China was like.

Joseph Allen (01:04:02):
They were curious. There wouldn't be just young people, I mean, *benshengren* (本省人), they were older taxi drivers would ask me and stuff like that. It was always society where except for a few things. They would never ask me what I thought about 228, they wouldn't mention 228, and they would make snide remarks about Chiang Ching-kuo and stuff like that. But in the eighties it became a very open, it's a very open, transparent, I mean, their president is a single woman, 50-year-old woman. I mean we can't do that in the United States, I mean, it's a very, very progressive interest in place where it was just repressed. It was repressed during the Qing, it was repressed during the Japanese period, United States, and KMT were part of the cold war stuff.

Yao Chen (01:05:23):
I will ask my last question for today. Because you mentioned you visited PRC several times very briefly, with those companies. So what was your first impression of China when you visit to the PRC for the first time?

Joseph Allen (01:05:38):

Very first time I remember this, it was November and we were flying into Beijing. I remember looking down and it was just brown, and it was just, and it was really cold when we got there. We should never go to Beijing in November. I mean back then anyways. We traveled all around. My impression was a sense of wonder, because I had never thought that I was going to be going to China for most of my, it wasn't like something I was trying to do. It was the company called me or someone knew me and the company called me and said, could you do a lecture. I guess so, I don't know. So I was in as much of a tourist, maybe more of a tourist in particular those first couple of trips than the people that were there.

(01:06:50):

It was sort of a wonder and I didn't have, we had some bad experiences, but they weren't bad experiences because of something the Chinese or the Chinese government did. It was just because the infrastructure was so bad. We stayed in *renmin daxia* (人民大廈), these Soviet guest houses and stuff like, China is talking about transformation. What China's gone through since then is amazing. So there was a lot of frustration and hardship, not hardship, but things weren't really pleasant. I remember thinking they're trying to make up for all these. Everyone knew this. They were disappointed sometimes, but nobody in my group complained and said, oh, China is so backward or something like that.

(01:07:55):

These were very, very well-traveled people. The people on these trips had been all over the world, Africa and other parts of Asia. So, they were frustrated when we couldn't do something because of the weather or because of hotel or something, but there was never that ugly American kind of complaint, oh, why don't they have McDonald's or something, what I really would like is Starbucks. There was my people never complained like that. I think that that came later when tourism became much more democratic. So my own impression was it was all this wonder, walking in Xi'an and then I had my own sort of history of, play stage and stuff like that. So and then of course realizing it was, I think we had already started to realize this, but it wasn't the utopia of Mao China.

(01:09:01):

People were poor and things were not great. But I think we had already begun to know that that myth had already been exploded. I think it was a mixture, but I remember being just sort of like a tourist, seeing it, I remember going out my first morning, and we were living, we were in downtown Beijing somewhere in some I hotel and there comes down the street, an ox cart and a farmer and pile of stuff on the cart, right down *Chang'anjie* (長安街) or someplace like that. So it was over time. I became more sophisticated about the politics of it all. And then I became concerned about certain things, but I think my first impression was, wow, I'm in China. Just like that.

Yao Chen (01:10:07):

Thank you. And I think we'll stopped here today and continue with you University of Minnesota experience for our next session.

Joseph Allen (01:10:16):

Okay. Sounds good. Thanks a lot.

Yao Chen (00:00:03):

Today is Wednesday, December 15th, 2021. This is the Yao Chen interviewing professor Joseph Allen through zoom. This interview is for the Chinese Studies Scholars Oral History project sponsored by UCLA's East Asian Library and Center for Oral History Research. This is session four. So professor Allen, last time you shared your two phases at the University of Washington in St. Louis. You were established there and had been doing some innovative work. So how did you make the decision to leave and became the founding chair of ALL at Minnesota in 2000?

Joseph Allen (00:00:43):

By mistake. That's actually a very odd story. So I was at WashU, and I was preparing to go to Taiwan for the second Fulbright to begin the, I've had written a little bit, but to begin the research of Taipei city, that urban space kind of question. I can remember this distinct, oh, well, I only remember this afterwards, but so the afternoon before I was going to leave, I was cleaning up my desk because I was going for six or eight months. I was cleaning up things and taking care everything's on my desk. I found this thing, that someone in the department had given me, advertising a job at University of Minnesota. I didn't have anything else to do. I was all done. I was all packed, ready to go.

(00:01:36):

For no good reason, I sat down and wrote a very simple cover letter and a CV, the current CV, and then names of three people. And I mailed it, I put it in the mail, the next morning, I guess, actually, I'm not sure how it got to the mail. But anyway so then I left for Taiwan, and by the time I got to Taiwan, I had forgotten completely about this application. I hadn't told anybody either, not even the people I asked for recommendations, I didn't. Anyway. I was in Taiwan, beginning my work, I was working in the archives, several archives in Taiwan, to digging up old material about Taipei city. There wasn't much, at that point it would change very rapidly in the next 10 years.

(00:02:37):

But I was going through materials and stuff like that. And having spending, having luxurious life as a researcher I'd get up in the morning, I'd go to the library and I come home at night and go to the library in the morning. It was sort of a very pleasant and I was working in a new field and I was reading a lot, and it was very exciting. And then a few months into this, it must have been an email. This is just when we started to use email. So I must have been an email from my wife because we'd never, we seldom talked to the phone, and she, in the email, she said, I don't understand someone called for the University of Minnesota and they want a writing sample. I said, oh yeah.

(00:03:33):

I forgot I applied this job. I said, don't worry about it. It's not gonna happen. But I sent him a writing sample. I can't remember what it was, then I guess it was, well, then I got a notice that there was gonna be an interview online, a telephone interview. Okay. Before Zoom. I mean, they used to call a conference call. So conference call, that's how old things were, how fast things changed. I got this, they said it would be 10 o'clock at night, which is okay. But usually I go to bed pretty early, but it's alright. 10 o'clock came, 10:15 came 10:30 came, 11 o'clock came, 11:30. I said, I don't know what's going on. So I decided to have a glass of wine, maybe more than one.

(00:04:30):

One o'clock in the morning, I get this phone call and it's now going to be this interview, and I've been asleep. The interview seemed to be a terrible interview to me. But so we had this interview with, and all this is great. So the reason that they couldn't do it at 10 o'clock, because it's been a blizzard in Minnesota. This is perfect. They've been a blizzard in Minnesota and no one could get to the university. So they finally, they all got there and there were three of them. Ann Waltner is one. I'll think a woman, a professor in cultural studies. Anyways, they did this interview and I thought it was pretty terrible. I went back to bed and I went, then I began my other life and then went back to the research stuff and I didn't think much about it.

(00:05:30):

And then I got called to come to fly in for an interview from Taiwan to Minnesota. It was in April. So in Taiwan is about 85 degrees. I fly in for this interview and it was so cold. I remember this. So there was one tulip, flower, one tulip on campus was up, and everyone I met said, did you see the tulip, as if spring was. So I went through this, I went through three days of [interview], and I won't go into the details, but I actually had a really nice, it was a series of, it was a battery of talks and interviews and meetings with students. It was pretty exhausting and it was, everything went wrong.

(00:06:43):

But I had a really nice dinner at the end with the Chinese community, which I thought was a really nice thing. And Lu Weiming (盧偉明) was the host, and they asked me how it went. Sorry, it's not gonna, it's just not gonna work. I mean, just won't work out. Lu Weiming asked me sort of off the side, some of the issues were, we talked a little bit. So I left and I went, so since I was back, since I was in Minnesota, I went down to St. Louis to see Lauren. We hadn't planned it, but I went down there for a few days and I said, don't worry.

(00:07:36):

You're never gonna have to move to Minnesota. So I went back to my life again in Taiwan. And then this phone call came again in the middle of the night, like one o'clock in the morning. And it was a bad connection, and it was a cell phone, an old cell phone. So I said, who are you? I mean, I thought it turned out to be Dean Rosenstone from the University of Minnesota. And he said, I said, oh, what's going on? He said, well, we like to offer you this position. And, and I literally said, you've gotta be kidding. I mean, I was just shocked, and he said why? I said well that was the worst interviewing process I've ever gone through.

(00:08:35):

And he said, you should have seen the other two. The other candidates. Even worse, I guess. So anyways I flew back, had long talks with Lauren, and then Lauren and I went up in July and met with everybody. We talked and talked and talked. And finally I decided, although a lot of people were telling me not to take the job. It was known as a very difficult job. But one of my best friends, a dear friend and smart guy, Bill Kirby, William Kirby, he's a Chinese historian, also Dean of Arts and Sciences at Harvard. I've known him for years. He said I should take the job. And I think he, and I mean, even though, as I will talk about it in a minute, it was really, really difficult job with lots of challenges.

(00:09:43):

It was probably, well, it certainly was one of the most important things, if not the most important, certainly the most important thing I did mid-career. I was very happy at WashU. I had established sort of a position and I was flying to Asia with the chancellor. The only time I ever flew first class was when I flew with chancellor Danforth to Asia, everything was going on very, very well. I think, and if I had

stayed, I think it would've continued to go very well, but I also think there would've been a plateau or flat in my career and in my research, particularly in my research, I think. I mean, I probably would've been off. I had been on for the deanship at WashU not a very important deanship, but I probably would end up in some sort of administrative position at WashU which would've been fine.

(00:10:50):

I think I wouldn't mind that, but I think my research would've been just sort of would've plateaued. And going to Minnesota. I mean, it had many positive. I mean, there were many difficulties, as I said, but it had many positive effects. I think that in some ways it was really research and even teaching. It was a strong impact on that. So anyway, I was driving across the country. So in January, so I went back to Taiwan. So I took the job, but I didn't go to, I went back to finish my Fulbright. So I didn't go to Minnesota until January, January 4th, 2000. I drove up through a blizzard. Yeah. I mean another blizzard. Driving through Wisconsin in the, I mean, wind and snow. At least I had a new car at that point. I landed sort of there in January and without going into lots of detail, but things were a real mess.

(00:12:04):

The departments, well, there really weren't department. There weren't departments at that time, they were programs. Okay. There had been a Department of East Asian Studies in the eighties. It was quite strong, well known strong program. But by 2000, everything had sort of fallen apart and the programs were fighting with each other. There was lots and lots of discontent in both sides of the, in all the acts, things. The idea was, this was their idea to establish a new department and the new department was going be to, they just called Asian Languages and Literatures. And it would, what was interesting about this is when I arrived, there was no one in the department. I was the only person in the department. So it was a department of one.

(00:13:09):

And the idea is that the new department would get to choose who could join, which is a really revolutionary idea, or even scandalous idea that you would bring in some cowboy, Missouri. And he would then proceed to decide who could into the department, when the many of these people have been there for decades, or several of 'em been there for decades. And there were, although it wasn't very well organized. There was quite a bit of activity going on in different aspects of Asian studies. So it was literally myself and one of the things that Minnesota has is the departments have constitutions. I don't know if this is normal or not. So I had to write the constitution. I mean WashU and Minnesota, very, very different institutions.

(00:14:14):

WashU, 10,000 students, 5,000 undergraduates and 5,000 graduate students. At Minnesota, there were 50,000 students, so everything was big and burly and very bureaucratic. But I had this wonderful administrator. So I had an administrator, and they knew what they were doing. They gave me the best administrator in the college of Liberal Arts, Ramona French. And I mean, I wouldn't have lasted two weeks without Ramona French. Sort of pointing me in the right direction saying, no, no, don't do that. You, you have to do it this way. I spent the spring sort of getting, finding out about people and some of the issues, meeting with lots of, met with lots and lots of people. And I mean, I guess by the time the summer game, I realized how difficult this was going to be.

(00:15:21):

One of the first things I did. I don't know where I got this idea. Maybe I got it from reading other people's constitutions, but I formed what was called the executive faculty, and the executive faculty was a group of people all from College of Liberal Arts, I believe, but they weren't sort of the core Asian Studies people.

But some of 'em had Asian experience. And some of 'em had a lot of Asia experience, but I had the chairman of French, very important person in German studies. The people that either they had some sense of the disciplinary world, or they had some sense of Asia. I think there were about 12 of these people. These were the, I mean it was my idea, but it was a fabulous idea because it gave me this sort of group of it.

(00:16:22):

There were more than advisors. They were really directors for me to make sure that I did things not just correctly, but in smart ways. I worked in smart ways. That group, when I got up there one of the things the department had was a lot of new lines. And by the fall of some people retired, some people just left when I arrived. And some people retired. And by the fall of the first year, fall of 2000, I think, we began what was called the mega search. And the mega search was unheard of, a search for six positions. Wow. One time at the same time. At the same time. I barely could do it with all the help I had. Ann Waltner, the great Ming Qing historian was not only important for the executive committee.

(00:17:28):

I mean, she'd been involved in hiring me and all of that. The way it works at Minnesota is that the chair is the so-called appointing authority cannot run the search. The search has to be run. This is a very Minnesota idea, so the search happens not completely the outside of the chair or the pointing authority, but the pointing authority doesn't control it. They decide that the committee decides who to invite and then I, the pointing authority, comes in later on and sort of participates. So we had six positions and over the fall of 2000 into 2001, we interviewed 18 people. I didn't eat a meal at home for months. I was either at lunch or at dinner over these people. And we successfully, and it was a very, very exciting time because it was whole cloth.

(00:18:38):

There was a brand new department, there was only one person. I mean, whoever we hired would define what the department was going to be like. And that's why this executive committee was so strong in hiring the right people or interviewing the right people, even though I chose in the end. I think we were able to fill five of the six positions, I think one position. I can't remember which one but we didn't, we didn't hire for it. And this was a great group of young, all, very young faculty, many of 'em just finishing their PhDs. And from a variety of schools, Chicago was important, Penn, a variety of places. And then we, with that group, we formed the first sort of real department. And I think I'm getting the years correct.

(00:19:46):

I think it would be 2000. That first group joined us in 2001, I believe that's true. And then we started the very difficult process about who's gonna join and who, who was gonna be part of the department as a whole and sort of a philosophy department and stuff like that. That would take years to coalesce. But it was it was quite a time. I mean, I don't know if anyone ever did anything exactly like that. But out of this group we really, the department changed or the department changed drastically. When I had gotten up there, when I arrived, what was there was very old school. Some of it going back to sort of the stuff that I studied phonology and philology, and I studied in Seattle some of it more literary history, but it was all really, there was nothing wrong with it.

(00:21:13):

It was just sort of the eighties, it's really the eighties. But the people we brought in that they were feminist scholars, film people, people working in really interesting new areas. I mean, most of 'em, I mean, everyone was revolving around literatures, very broadly defined, but they were looking at 'em very, very different terms, Marxist criticism and things like that. So it was a, within 24 months, what Asian studies

meant University of Minnesota went to almost 180 degrees to something else. And this caused all kinds of problems. The old faculty of course felt left out and there was a lot of litigation, a lot of grievances. I spent a lot of the time in grievance committees and litigations and even national, even national level stuff.

(00:22:29):

But also there was a very strong resistance by students for change. For the change. I can remember, they say, but Chinese studies means the history of Chinese language. That's what Chinese studies means. And I said, well that is one type of Chinese studies, but Chinese film could be another, oh no, no, no. There was, there was a very, it was a very conservative group. And that was partly because, well, the programs were conservative, and the, the programs were very strict with students. Only the most sort of dedicated conservative students stayed. Mm. There were very, very few majors. I mean, I I'm thinking there were less than 20 majors in these in these programs when I arrived. And the requirements, they were sort of graduate level requirements.

(00:23:38):

At one point, the senior thesis had to be a 50 page translation of classical Chinese literature, 50 pages of classical. I mean, this is difficult at any stage. So anyways, so there was, took a long time. I mean, there were many steps in the process. We had very strong Dean support in the beginning then was this falling out and the Dean and I sort of had these spiting matches, I always thought Dean Rosenstone was a really great Dean. And fact, one of the reasons I went to Minnesota was because I recognized that deanship was so strong and so smart. And even though we disagreed that's okay. We still worked and we worked pretty hard.

(00:24:44):

For those years of building, the real took us, I mean, more than five years to build and, and to start to feel good about ourselves. And one of the things that also I inherited, or we all inherited, was that the programs, Asian studies programs were very, very isolated at the university. No one knew who they were or if they knew who they were then there was this very negative impression. The Asian studies group, as a group were isolated from the College of Liberal Arts in many ways. There had been some young people who had come in and most of 'em had left by the time I got there who had started to move this, move this change. It wasn't like it was completely happening. They were isolated from the College of Liberal Arts and the university, but they were fighting with each other.

(00:26:01):

So it wasn't like a small store own group. Tey were very fragmented. So over time, and I have to say, this is only because of the faculty we hired in the executive faculty. Over time. ALL, Asian Languages and Literatures, became to be seen not only as part the College of Liberal Arts, but really a leader in thinking, sort of cultural studies and thinking, and very close relationships with Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies. And Cultural Studies at University of Minnesota is one of the strongest in the nation and our people, our young people, our young faculty started to get in, be invited to be on committees and become very integrated with the College of Liberal Arts over a long period of time.

(00:27:08):

So that brought us up to about, I would say, well, anyway. In 2008, I stepped down. I had been doing it for eight years. And I felt that it was time for the institution for the younger people, because we were able to hire not just the youngest, we also hired some mid-career people, and I felt it was time for those mid-career people to step up. And, but unfortunately of course, the person who took over in 2008, which was the beginning of the great recession, which devastated funding for the university and College of Liberal Arts and ALL. It was a very, very tough time. People were, had not tenured faculty, but people were let

go. We lost, by that time we had added several languages and we lost Vietnamese at that time, which was too unfortunate.

(00:28:40):

And it was just a struggle. People left almost all for good reasons. They got other offerings or wanted to live abroad, so people left and then were not replaced. What was supposed to be a nice transition to a new leadership just didn't work. It didn't work out very well. I think it was probably four years later, 2012 or so, I came back and was asked to be, it was a difficult thing for a lot of people, I was asked to be chair again and I did it. I agreed to be chair. And I was then chair until I retired in 2016. So that was what was going, that's sort of the large institutional things, many good, many, many good things happened along the way to make us make the department stronger.

(00:29:56):

And by the time I retired in 2016 it was really ready to move on. And Christine Marran became chair and Christine has done a fabulous job, unbelievable job. I mean she's done all the things that I just couldn't do. There just weren't things I was going to do, but there were the things that needed to be done. Institutional building fundraising, new faculty. I mean, she's been very, very successful. I'm she's been for three years and unfortunately she's gonna step down, I think. I really wish she would stay for another three years. She's done such a good job, but that's not my call. But what's really interesting is so I retired in 2016 and I stayed on for one year to run the Chinese flagship, which we can talk about.

(00:30:57):

But I made a transition and came to St. Louis, where Lauren had stayed for this whole time. So it was 18 years of, I was living in Minnesota. Lauren was living in St. Louis. And it's nice, been nice because I'm not there, so I'm not in the way. Oh, there he is. Again, you old guy. So they don't have to listen to my ideas, so if they don't want to, but Christine also, when she has a question or wants opinion about something, usually something that has a history to it, she's more than willing to call me and talk about the thing. So I've stayed involved even though I'm not there, although I hope not too involved, just hopefully helpfully involved. That's sort of the, that's the ending of that institutional building of the new department.

(00:32:01):

And I have to say it won't last forever, but it feels like a real accomplishment, sort of professional, personal accomplishment. I continued to teach and I continued to do research all this time, even though I was working most of the time, it was seven days a week, 12, 15 hours a day particularly in the beginning. But I was able to teach and I was able to do research. And that was good. It was good to be a, it allowed me to stay in touch with students and particularly as the students changed, I could see them changing thought that was very important. And it also allowed me to pursue new research sort of different directions.

Yao Chen (00:33:07):

Professor Allen, before you talk about your research and the teaching at UMN I want to ask about the student body change over the years starting in 2000.

Joseph Allen (00:33:19):

Yeah. So one of them was numbers. Okay. So as I said, the programs were very small at that point in the eighties, they had been quite big, but by that time, the programs had become very small and the students body was, the students were relatively few for university that size I'm talking about. I can't remember exactly. I do remember looking through the number of majors when I first got there. And as I said, it was

maybe in the teens or something like that. Each program had its own major in, so, but none of them were very strong. Primarily at that time when I arrived, it was Chinese and Japanese. There was a South Asia major that had been strong in the past was very weak at that point. But they all came, they were all sort of part of the new Asian L (Language) and L (Literature). So numbers there was a phenomenal growth in numbers, particularly after the first couple of years, once these young faculty, sort of settled in and established themselves as great teachers and doing really interesting things.

(00:34:39):

So there was a huge, I don't know what I think by the end, I'm thinking there were 500 majors in ALL, studying different languages and stuff. But so there was a huge growth in interest, and that was also just part of ALL becoming more integrated into the universe and people taking our courses. We had huge numbers, well, I mean, relatively huge numbers in our courses after, as we went along and they were not necessarily majors. We were attracting students from all over the university. And as the population of students changed and with the coming of international students, this was a sort of a demographic change that happened primarily at the sort of general level. We didn't, I mean, people, students weren't coming from the PRC to study Chinese, I mean, they were coming to study medicine or biology, mostly science, stem stuff, but they would end up, this is one of the great changes across the nation, was that the student body changed dramatically in the number of undergraduate students from China.

(00:36:16):

I mean, also from Japan and also from Korea South Asia, to some extent, but China was sort of leading. And there's a way you could measure this by going getting a class roster from, let's say, 1980, and then looking at 2010, seeing how many Zs, Qs, and Ws there are in that new list. That was a really a phenomenal change. And some, one of the places that we saw it was sort of interesting is I don't know if it's still going on in that, but students from the PRC or from China somewhere are Taiwan. They would come and study maybe not major in, but they'd study Japanese. They would have an international student, but they would be studying not their language, but, and some other language.

(00:37:21):

This happened to all the languages. There was a very important decision that we made Hangtae Cho, who leads the Korean program. This is the Korean program I could talk about for days. It was one of the great, phenomenal changes. So when I arrived Hangtae was a graduate student in Linguistics and Hangtae taught one night class in Korean or something like that, maybe two classes in Korean, they weren't even part of the College of Liberal Arts at that point. And one of the things I did immediately was to, as weak as it was, I made Korean part of Asian L and L and Hangtae, he's a brilliant, he's a brilliant teacher, brilliant leader, is really quite phenomenal. We had a long talk in the beginning about what the Korean program was going to look like.

(00:38:31):

And large Korean programs in the United States are almost all geared to second generation, third generation Koreans. They may not, they usually speaks a little bit at home or maybe a lot. And we had a few like that. But Hangtae decided that he was going to teach, he was gonna specialize in teaching to true beginners. Not the heritage, was called the heritage speakers. And this was a, this put Hangtae on the map because he decided to do something that was. UCLA had 5,000 students, but they were all heritage speakers. I mean, 5,000, they had a lot of students. So Hangtae built one of the most important, over the years, built one of the most important Korean language programs in the United States. I mean, he's the president of the professional organization now. He did a really interesting thing and by focusing on true beginners, and then of course it was a big Korean wave where Korean pop became so popular.

(00:39:53):
We had these Kpop groups, they were Kpop but done by non-native speakers. So that was one place where there was an actual choice made. What Hangtae did was, for the Korean students, for the students, from Korea or with the Korean background, he started offering a Sino-Korean course. So a course, so because the regular language course was almost all taught in the syllable, in Hangul. But he taught a special class for Sino-Korean. So in which Korean students would learn the Chinese characters for the words, and he was quite, he was, this was, we would have to close the class because there would be so many students who wanted to do this because it's not something that they do anymore much in career here. So he was able to reach that audience, but he didn't sacrifice his language classes for it. His language classes and he ended up with four years of Korean for almost entirely true beginners going through the seeds season.

Yao Chen (00:41:26):
It's really impressive, Minnesota has the largest and non-heritage Korean students population. And do you want to talk about the Chinese flagship program?

Joseph Allen (00:41:33):
The Chinese program at Minnesota began, I think in 1949. So it had a long, long life and it had gone through different phases of strength in that it had the earliest foreign studies program at Nankai university in 1979, a very, very short student, the same year Deng Xiaoping came, they sent students to Nankai. But it was, it was very small. I mean, relatively very small when I got there, it was very, very tough, very rigorous, very strong, very much oriented towards reading. Again, that old style sort of my style. That was still stuck in that old style of training very rigorous. Only the toughest stuck with it, not very big.

(00:42:47):
In all the language programs we brought in new leadership. We brought in Wang Ling from University of Indiana. And she began to build the program. She was trained in second language acquisition. She was very much in a new thinking of how to teach and how to learn, maybe how to learn is more important than how to teach. She started building a program. She came very early. She came like in 2002 or something like that. And she was sort of center to building this program. And it was a program that ran on a very interesting model sort of team teaching model called all students, all teachers. A student who was taking first-year Chinese, so say there were five sections of first-year Chinese, later there'd be more, but say there were five sections of the, it wasn't like one teacher got a section.

(00:44:06):
It was, the teachers moved. The section stayed with, the cohorts stayed together and the teachers moved. So every day there was a new two teacher and they rotated through. The students were seeing five different, at the beginning level five different teachers, every week. And they were male female, Taiwan, PRC, nice mix of voices and stuff like that. And she was able to build, it's a very hard program to run. It's very hard to coordinate. Everyone has to know what everyone else is doing. You walk in on Tuesday, you have to know what happened on Monday and you weren't there. So it's very, very hard to run and you sort of based on the Japanese model actually. That program grew and grew and grew. And then in I guess it was 2012 or 2013, the federal government advertised for new flagship programs.

(00:45:17):
So there were at that point about 10 programs in the United States that were Chinese flagship. And they were going to add one or two. They said to that because the things are really growing at this point, up through the 2010, Chinese was growing everywhere. It was growing in the classroom. It was growing in the business world, growing diplomatically. I mean, everything was China, China, China. So there was a

great deal of interest. We entered a competition. I don't know how many other people, but we entered a competition, very rigorous competition. It took us months to put the documents together. The federal government, you gotta have something for everybody. We put this together. I worked with, and I mean, we put together, I didn't put this together.

(00:46:15):

I worked with a lot of people all the way across campus, China Center, Global Studies, History they put together a proposal, but it was all this other stuff was based on Wang Ling's strong language program, without story language program, you could have whatever, and you couldn't have a flagship. In 2014, we, and my colleague, I know that she was actually at ASU at the time. University of Minnesota and University of Hawaii won the competition. Madeline Spring. Madeline then went to Hawaii. At that point, Madeline was at ASU. ASU was already a Chinese flagship. When Hawaii got their flagship, they went after to get Madeline Spring. Yeah. Stole her from ASU. But I always said it was because of the weather, Hawaii and Minnesota. We then entered, and they still it's scoring very strong.

(00:47:31):

Chinese flagship has been very innovative in language teaching. And as now seen as one of the leading flagship groups, it was a, and I had to go a million meetings in Washington DC, but it was a very big thing for not just for ALL, but for College Liberal Arts. The flagship is not an ALL program and it's not a College Liberal Arts program. It's a university program. So it answers the, the flagship answers to the provost. And it doesn't go from flagship to the Dean because directly from flagship to the provost. The provost was very, very supportive of it. One of the reasons I got it, we got it, I think is because the provost had been willing to commit resources towards it.

(00:48:45):

And that's been a very big success. I was hoping that that would happen to Korean because they did advertise for a Korean new Korean flagship, but Hangtae decided he didn't want to do it. So I wasn't there at the time, so I'm not exactly sure. But I think if Hangtae had, everyone knew in the flagship community knew about Hangtae, because the flagship is not just a Chinese flagships, Russian flagships, and I mean, it's a broad group of critical languages. Everyone knew about Hangtae. So I sort of, if he had, if he wanted to, he could have had a flagship, I'm pretty sure. I'm not sure why it didn't. So there was a phenomenal change. I think in Japan, there was a, some less interest in Japan.

(00:49:47):

Japan was really hot in the nineties, led by the Japanese business model. But the Japan program also went under a phenomenal change. It became a much more effective not necessarily rigorous but effective program. So all the languages. And I think they, because we talk to each other, so because they were run by the directors and the directors would have directors meetings. They may have been some tension and some envy and stuff like that, but they were talking to each other all the time and that helped build this much more cohesive not just the faculty, but also student body that everyone sort of felt like they belonged.

Yao Chen (00:50:42):

You mentioned the China Center where we were talking about the flagship program. So what was your involvement with the China Center and how ALL and China Center collaborated in any way?

Joseph Allen (00:50:55):

That's an interesting question. Unlike China Centers at most places like Michigan's China Center is perfect. The China Center at Minnesota was primarily interested in sort of business and other sorts of relationships. It was not a place for one study. I mean, it wasn't about studying China. It was about building relationships with China. I'm not saying, I mean, not just business, agricultural school. So it was actually the professional schools were more involved in the China Center than the Chinese studies people. In fact, some of my colleagues said, what are they doing? They didn't, they're not doing anything about China. But they were just doing something quite different, but China Centers, these most people would've thought that they were the centered for Chinese studies. Usually for example, if you had a national resource center, it was called the China Center or the East Asia Center or something like that.

(00:52:09):

The relationship was not particularly strong. I was on the board. I mean, just sort of the token liberal arts guy. I was on the board for most of the time or for part of the time I worked very closely with Joan Brezinski. She was not the director at the beginning, but sort of associate director and then became the director. And we've sort of had a falling out, I mean, not Joan and I, but sort of the Center and I, or the center and ALL had a falling out around the Confucius Institute. So this was happening towards the end. And most of us in the Chinese studies or Asian studies did not support the university inviting the Confucius Center. My personal take was if the Confucius Center wanted to come to Minnesota, that was fine.

(00:53:18):

It was up to them, but that the Confucius Center should not be associated with the flagship research university. That's not what they were doing. They were very much interested and I'm not saying it wasn't important. They were very much interested in primary and secondary education. And Joan did a good job with that effort. So Joan and remain good friends and good colleagues, I think through all of this. We worked very closely with the immersion schools. This is one of the questions flagship with having nationally the, what are we gonna do? Because the immersion schools in Minnesota, the Chinese immersion schools or big or are big. The one of the questions was what will the relationship between a, of something like the flagship and the immersion schools because the immersion schools of producing students are very, very, very different than either heritage speakers or true beginners.

(00:54:25):

They've learned their language in a very different sort of way. I went and talked to lots of people, lot of family, parent groups at these schools talking about the flagship, obviously flagship gone and went with Joan and stuff. One of the most things that happened with the flagship in the immersion schools is, I was, I can remember this Yinghua school and I was there giving my spiel, and I said we're looking forward to, in the future, having some sort of programming that joins the flagship with the immersion school students. And my former student, this wonderful guy. John Munson, he is actually a quite well known own musician, rock and roll kind of musician. And John had come back is, is a long story.

(00:55:38):

But John had come back he had been in the program in the eighties and quit and then after a year, after 10 years or so in music industry, he wanted to finish his degree. He came back to, he was one of the first students I talked to and anyways, he finished his degree and went off to his world. But he had adopted two Chinese girls into his family. John and they were just, they were just graduating from Yinghua at that point. John stood up and said, Joe, that's great. You have plans for the future, but what about, I can't remember their names, Yingying weiwei or whatever. What about my daughters? I mean, they're graduating this year, what can we do about them?

(00:56:33):

It kept me awake one night thinking about what we could do. What we did, and it was led by another great person in the program Zou Zhen. There was a great deal of interest from the international students, Chinese international students at the university to do language exchange. There was a language program, a language exchange program called Tandem or Tandem Plus it was run by the run out of the language center. The case was is that there were many more Chinese students who wanted to share languages than we had, who wanted to share, so what we'd did was, so John organized it, I mean, it was my idea, but it was so John organized. So what we did was we paired the high school immersion students with the international students from China and they came to campus and they had these discussion sessions and debates and all this stuff going on all the time. And it was, it's become, it was on the NPR news. It's become such a model. Zou Zhen on top of these two programs.

Yao Chen (00:58:01):

So fascinating. You mentioned about you started doing new research and teaching at UMN. Can you talk about that a bit?

Joseph Allen (00:58:11):

So first thing that happened when I first got there, I went through a training program. It was called mid midlife reteaching program retraining or something like that for teachers. It was a year-long seminar run by, I don't know, Education or something about other ways to teach in the classroom. And this really transformed how I behaved in the classroom run. I was sort of going in that direction, but this changed everything about instead of, I mean, this is the classic example instead of these students being empty vessels. And I'm being the, all the knowledge and I'm going to fill the vessels with the knowledge that, that the was reversed, that the students had the knowledge and they would produce the knowledge in the class. You had to facilitate, you had to give 'em resources and tools, but so it became a much more student productive classroom where they produced.

(00:59:26):

I learned to ask different types of questions and learned to keep my mouth shut. I learned to when to intervene and stuff like that and that became the model that model of teaching was transformed all my classes. Of course, it's very close to language teaching. If you, if you stand up in front of a class and tell 'em all about Chinese language, they're not gonna learn a thing. You have to student, the students have to produce the language. So it, it was very, very similar to a good, a strong language program that the students produce the knowledge and that was very transformative for me. And then at the same time, I was looking for different things to teach. I did teach some classical literature, but I changed it.

(01:00:26):

So it wasn't like Tang dynasty or beginning to the end or so it was one of the courses I talked was called Chinese cool poetry. So it was like, so it was about this, the poetry, which, it's sort of these hermits and sort of exotic sort of Hanshan (寒山) and Tao Yuanming (陶淵明) and those kind of deal Su Shi (蘇軾). It wasn't like a period of a time, but it was a type of thinking that we were looking at. And I continued to teach the Taiwan class. I brought that with me, it grew to be a big class. I became interested in translation, teaching about translation. I was teaching a course on translation theory for graduates and undergrad graduate students and undergraduate students. And then the last thing I started doing teaching was a course on writing.

(01:01:30):

And it was not writing in terms of linguistics or writing in terms of composition, but writing in terms of material culture. It was called from Oracle Bones to Tattoos. It was about East Asian writing mostly about characters, but not entirely about characters. And it was about writing as a cultural product with calligraphy of course, but tattooing and wall art in China and stuff like that. And that, so I developed those, in each one of those classes. I tried to keep classes to 60 students. Because I figured out, I didn't realize this at the time, but I learned that I could memorize 50 or 60 names in about 10 days, about four or five classes. And then, but over 60 I really had trouble and then I would use their names, so I call on them by name in all of these classes.

(01:02:45):

There was new materials again, I kept moving on to different materials adopting more and more of this idea of the cultural studies looking at cultural products in terms of context and power and ideology and stuff like that. Of course the classes were much bigger at Minnesota. We actually had to close most of our classes as the department became more well-known classes had to be closed fairly early. So those are the things, and I taught those. I was on a reduced teaching mode but I wasn't teaching any language. So I was usually teaching two classes a year and one each semester. I would have some graduate classes and some undergraduate classes mix 'em up.

Yao Chen (01:03:50):

So you have authored several books at this point. So which one is your favorite book?

Joseph Allen (01:03:56):

I guess up to now Taipei book (Taipei: city of Displacements) is my favorite book. That was the book that I had begun. So I had done sort of two literary studies books before I left WashU and this was the book I brought to Minnesota. And it was interesting. When I went, came from my interviews, they didn't want me to talk about the Taipei book. They wanted me to talk about the literature books because they felt the Taipei book didn't sound like it belonged to Lang languages and literatures. And that would change that, after a few years, it felt like Taipei book was right within, one of the things that happened to me was because we were hiring all these young people and I was having to do all this interviewing and had to read all their research.

(01:05:04):

It began to change the way I thought about writing and the Taipei book, if I had stayed at Washington University, not only would my teaching and everything else plateaued, the Taipei book would've plateaued, it would've probably been a just simple history of type. And because of this interaction with cultural studies that dramatically changed how I was thinking about the Taipei book. So I think the Taipei book is still my favorite book from that period, you only, I worked on a translation of Gu Cheng (顧城) which was something that I had actually started at WashU and I got an agreement with new directions books for selected works of Gu Cheng. So that was the other thing I was worried, but the Taipei book took me 10 years, I guess, too. I had to work in pieces because I was doing so much administrative stuff.

Yao Chen (01:06:18):

And that is also the book when the Joseph Levenson Post-1900 book award.

Joseph Allen (01:06:23):

That was quite unexpected. I was very surprised. It was the first book about, I think it maybe the only one still, but certainly was the first book about Taiwan won the Levenson prize. So it was pretty remarkable. 2014. So it came out in 2012 and 2014.

Yao Chen (01:06:48):

I remember I was at AAS and I sent you congratulations email, and you replied like in one minute.

Joseph Allen (01:06:55):

Really great. I don't remember. That's good. I'm glad I did.

Yao Chen (01:07:01):

So those were for the books. And also you mentioned that your research took a different turn at Minnesota. So which was your most favorite research project?

Joseph Allen (01:07:13):

I think, so when I was working on a Taipei a book it has a lot of illustrations and stuff in it, maps and photographs and stuff, because it's all about space and transformation of space under power and stuff like that. One of the things I discovered was the archive, the Japanese archive in Taiwan. So there was a Imperial colonial archive or library in the colonial period and almost all of it stayed intact. I mean, some of it was lost and stayed intact in Taiwan all the way through the seventies and eighties, sixties, seventies, and eighties, although up till the eighties, very few people used it or had much access to it. But by the time I started the book, research in the book, the archive had moved out of the, was as I started, I think in the first couple years it was in the old building, but it went into a new library, new library facility with a very different attitude, like the librarians were there to help you instead of get in your way, the old, the old attitude was, why do you want that?

(01:08:35):

I'm not sure what do you wanna do with that? The library became much more, the new library it's called, it's now called the Taiwan Library, the National Taiwan Library. They have the sixth floors, all Japanese collection. One of the things I discovered were all these collections of photographs, mostly in books and stuff, not free, and so I used quite a number of those photographs in this thing. And then I started to think about photography generally. I'd always been sort of well amateur photographer. I was sort of interested in it, but I never studied it, talked about it or wrote about it. So I decided that, I just decided that I was gonna learn about photography. So here I was approaching the end of my career.

(01:09:41):

I decided to just start reading about photography, generally photography in general. So it was first photography in general, the history of photography and techniques and things like that. And then colonial photography. Because it's quite a bit about colonial photography in Africa and India. And then more I knew at that point I had a good sense of Taiwan's history and stuff. So I knew that if I turned to photography in Taiwan, I could link it to historical stuff. I started working on photography as a topic and I've now published two things. I'm working on a third thing. I don't think it'll ever be a book, but it's really the fascinating sort of change in research ideas and talk.

Yao Chen (01:10:40):

I will ask my last question for today. So you just mentioned actually at leads to my next question, you mentioned about your archival experience. Experience with the libraries in Taiwan. And how was your archival experience, the research trip changed in China PRC change over the time?

Joseph Allen (01:11:01):

Well, actually I never, until 2011, I never did archival research in China. All my work was done in Taiwan. I listened to a lot of people complain about their archival work in China. And it was the I from up through, well, I mean maybe, I'm sure it's better much better now, but for most of this early period, it was like the early archival research in Taiwan where the library was there to protect the materials rather than to share them. You had to, I mean, I know this is true in early type one and if you didn't have a PhD, you couldn't get stuff. I mean, that was, I mean, if you were graduate students, I know had trouble getting materials if they didn't literally have a PhD at the time.

(01:12:12):

So my experience archival research was actually quite limited and almost all of it was in Taiwan. The only time I ever did archival research in China itself was that the Shanghai library in 2010, 2011, something like that when I was doing another, another research project that I fell onto was textbooks. I was high school textbooks *guowen* (國文) textbooks, Chinese literature, language textbooks I was working on an article about classical poetry in popular culture, in Taiwan. I discovered someone told me about it, that there was a library of textbooks. And the textbooks went back until I think the earliest one was 1908. I became fascinated. I was there to find out what I was there to read about actually one poem. I was just interested in one poem.

(01:13:30):

I was sifting through all this stuff, and this was quite late on. This was a library, it was a small, like professional library associated with the department of education publications. But it was one of these wonderful libraries where they really wanted to help you. They had all kinds of, they had digitalized materials and stuff like that. So right at the beginning with digital access. As I was looking for this one poem, I saw all these textbooks, and I started getting fascinated to see what kids were reading like in the 1930s, twenties and thirties and forties, what kids were reading in high school, in junior high school. What was Chinese literature according to these, high school books. I became very interested in this and did research in Taiwan and a couple of phases.

Joseph Allen (01:14:28):

And then couldn't decide where to go in the PRC. The librarian Chen Su (陳肅), Su Chen at Minnesota suggested the Shanghai library because she had heard that it was an easier library to work with. I went to the Shanghai library for a couple weeks, I guess it was to look for materials on textbooks. And I did have a good experience there. They were very bureaucratic and it was very, I mean, to me it seemed very complicated, but the key was Su Chen introduced me to, I can't remember her name, a librarian in Shanghai. They were friends or colleagues or something. And then she took me and introduced me to everybody. So when I went up to the desk, asked materials, they already knew who I was and I had this connection. My two weeks in Shanghai was very productive, actually produced the most important finding in my research career in Shanghai. So very limited. But the one experience I had in the PRC was a good one in Shanghai library.

Yao Chen (01:15:54):

I think the Shanghai library still probably is one of the best libraries regarding providing services and *guanxi* is still important.

Joseph Allen (01:16:03):

You had to fill out all these forms and then I'd get 'em wrong and you, they would change 'em for me and stuff like that. So it was much more of a proactive, circulation desk and research desk.

Yao Chen (01:16:22):
Okay. I guess this is the end of our today's interview. Thank you so much. I'll see you tomorrow.

Joseph Allen (01:16:28):
Okay. See you tomorrow.

Interview with Joseph Allen

SESSION 5 (12/16/2021)

Yao Chen (00:00:02):

Today is Thursday, December 16th, 2021. This is Yao Chen interviewing professor Joseph Allen through zoom. This interview is for the Chinese Study Scholars Oral History project sponsored by UCLA's East Asian Library and Center for Oral History Research. This is the fifth session. Professor Allen at the end of last interview, you said you had a two very productive week in Shanghai and produced the most important finding in your research career. Do you want to talk about this research project?

Joseph Allen (00:00:37):

I would love to talk about this. In fact, I could talk about this for hours, but I won't. When I was looking for materials and showing how I was looking for textbook materials, materials related to high school textbooks, Chinese high school textbooks, and I discovered this, it wasn't an unusual thing. It was just an volume of a Chinese textbook from the 1930s, 1940s. But what was unusual about this volume? Very like I'd seen many of these but what was unusual about this one volume was that it was actually a student had used it, because most of the materials in the libraries in the archives are relatively clean materials, but this, a student had used this book and had written all over it, both sort of schoolwork related notes and stuff, but also lots and lots of doodling sort of teenage doodling and it had her name.

(00:01:48):

In fact it also had, in the book was still an exam she took and I figured out this was probably the fall of 1947 and had her name and lots and lots of other things. I didn't think too much about it at the time. But then later when I was back in Taiwan doing more research, I realized that this was sort of a real prize. It was a special sort of material culture, this mundane material culture. I started working with it and it's, it's a very long story. The young girl's name was Nana Hsu or Xu Gesheng (徐格晟) was her Chinese name.

Because of the help of the East Asian librarian, that would be Chen Yao (陳垚) at Minnesota. We actually figured out who she was. She was related to a quite important family in Hong Kong and then a very or very important family in Shanghai, a publishing family in Shanghai.

(00:03:13):

And then over a couple of years of looking through and around I finally actually met her. I actually got an email from her. I can remember this. So it came to me early in the morning on February 28th, must have been about 2014 or something 2013. And this email said, yes, I'm the girl who wrote this, doodled this in this textbook. And over those years, even before I had before I got this message from her, I'd been working it up as a sort of a part of a project and using the book as a way to sort of make an entryway into this sort of, not the politics so much, but sort of the cultural politics of what literature and language meant. It was so startling, I actually invented a life for her or actually two lives.

(00:04:24):

I had sort of fictionalized this, her textbook into a story, a life story. I had been using that in giving talks and stuff. That work actually produced two pieces. One was a sort of a very long standard essay about textbooks. What was in textbooks, what was sort of the politics ideology of textbooks in the third, starting in the twenties, 20s, 30s, 40s and really, and then a little bit even after the PRC and Taiwan split. That was one article. That day that I got the email from her, I was gonna give a talk about the findings. And until I gave it, it was only a 15 minute talk. So it was for our conference and it was a little story about finding this book and then finding out who she was and stuff.

(00:05:34):

And then at the end of it, I, as of that morning. I said, and yesterday at two o'clock in the morning, I got this email and then I read the email and said, yes, I'm the girl who doodled in her, and only got 87 on my exam or something like that. So, David Wang from Harvard, Wang Der-wei (王德威) was in the audience at that time. There was, everyone was sort of struck by this. There was one young woman, she probably in her thirties. So this would've been her grandmother. Like she started crying towards the end of the story when, that we found her and, then she wrote to me. And then Wang Der-wei stood up and said I want that story.

(00:06:41):

So he published a story, the sort of the fictionalized story in his new history of Chinese literature, *New History of Modern Chinese Literature*, which came out a couple years ago. And since that time, then we stayed in contact and I actually, in 2015, I went to Nankai, I went to Tianjin (天津) and I met her and we spent the afternoon talking and it was just something, I mean, no one could believe this story as a piece of fiction as even. And but as a real thing. We took some pictures together. And we stayed in contact for a while. She was at that point, she was 86. We stayed in contact and she was quite good at emailing and contacted me over the next couple of years. I was planning to go back to see her again, and I haven't been able to, wasn't able to, and then I know that only through a sort of a third source, I know that she passed away in, I think it now, I think it's 2018 when she passed away. The last message I have from her it's she says, she's not, she hasn't been feeling well. In that interim, after the two pieces that, so the academic pieces, I started to write the story of it's called the story of Nana and Joe or something like that.

(00:08:28):

I wrote everything up. I mean, all the fiction and all the facts and all the little, many of the details, it's sort of a very, very long story. It of an essay story, personal essay kind of story. I sent that to her and she, in the last message I had from her was in response to that. It said that, I think I can actually read what she says if you don't mind. This is my translation. She says, under your pen, there's certain this yet inevitable process by which we came to know each other springs to life. It is as if we had, all that had happened in the past come flooding back. After reading this, the sobs and sides would not stop. Once again, I came to feel that fate unseen and mysterious controls all that is our lives. Thank you for this essay, which brought back to me, the laughter and the tears that have been scattered to by gone days. Thank you.

(00:09:52):

So that was the last I heard from her. And not in that message, but in another message, she said, she didn't want to publish. I was gonna send this to a magazine, sort of a popular, not a popular magazine, but literary magazine, and publish it. She said, this was fairly early on, she said she didn't want that story to be public. And I think she was worried about her family, the effect that it might have on her family. This all came to a head because somewhere towards the end the newspaper Tianjin shibao (天津時報) contacted me out of the blue. I didn't know anybody at Tianjin shibao, contacted me and said that they had heard from a colleague about this story and that they wanted to interview Nana, Xu Gesheng, and make it sort of a feature in the newspaper.

(00:11:10):

has sort of a human interest story. I naively contacted Xu Gesheng and said do you minding talking to this newspaper. She got quite upset and said that she didn't want this to be public. And that's when it was very clear. So I have this along with those two essays, I have this long personal sort of memoir of our, and I think maybe should I, could I publish it? Should I publish it? This is such a great story. It's too bad to lose

it, but I haven't decided that's sort of. All that whole Nana saga brought me into retirement. I finished the essay after I retired in 2016. It wasn't one of the most, and I gave many talks. I must have given 10 talks about that, including one just last year on online, talk of about the story.

(00:12:21):
It was a piece that sort of ended that part of my research, but then after I retired, I discovered that one thing I could still do COVID or not, I could write and I could translate. I stayed active. I'm continuing to be active. I have a position at Washington University, visiting position. Until recently I've been able to their library. But now I can't do that. So I'm not sure what's gonna happen. I got one more essay on photography. I was very fortunate to get a grant to go to Taiwan in January, 2019. I went to Taiwan and worked at the national library with some archival material about high school yearbooks, the photography and high school yearbooks.

(00:13:31):
And now I was there when COVID started, I was in Taiwan during that spring when COVID first came into our lives. I haven't published that yet. I was supposed to give that to the conference and the conference never happened. COVID again. So the conference never happened. Maybe it's gonna happen. But anyways, I've sort of went back to work on that a little bit just recently. I also just finished an essay. I mentioned that when at the University of Minnesota, I developed this course about writing, the materiality of writing. And a couple years ago, Lauren and I went to a very large retrospective of contemporary art, Chinese contemporary art at the Guggenheim Museum in New York city. This was can't remember which maybe must have been 2018, I guess.

(00:14:38):
I'm just doing the proofread for an article about materiality of writing in contemporary art, contemporary Chinese art, and that's gonna be published in an art magazine, in an art journal. And that talks just begins with a general discussion, but then focuses on Xu Bing (徐冰), the artist from China and Lo Ch'ing, the artists from Taiwan and sort of compares their work in the way they use written language as part of their art. And then the big project that I began just before I retired, and I'm working on a new translation of the Book of Songs, this Shijing, the classic of poetry and that's a, it's a very, very it's a very heavily annotated translation. So and it's gonna be published if I ever finish it, it'll be published in Seattle University of Washington Press.

(00:15:51):
Lorri Hagman, I'm working with Lorri Hagman on that. I've been working on it a couple years. I think it'll take another eight years. I think so it's a nice thing to do because it's relatively self-contained. I don't have to go anywhere. I all the materials you're either I either own them or they're online. I can, and the great thing about translation, if you've got 15 minutes, you can do a little bit of translation or you can translate all day long. So this is going to be an addition of the Shijing. So on the right-hand page will, will be the poems and quotations from the major commentaries like Kong Yingda (孔穎達), Zhu Xi (朱熹), and Zheng Xuan (鄭玄), that will be on the right-hand page. And then on the left-hand page will be my notes, my annotations.

(00:16:51):
It should be a sort of a different format that I'm using. I've been working on that. I've just finished. I've been working from the back of the book towards the front of the book. So I just finished the Daya (大雅) section and we're hoping this is something we haven't, this is something new to me. Anyways, we're

hoping to put up online, to post online sort of beta versions of some of the poems, so that people first, so people can see that I'm working on 'em and what I'm doing. And also for me to get feedback from, I'm particularly interested in feedback from younger people in the field and also just general readers, I would just kinda like, because it should be that, won't be popular, but should be accessible to the general reader.

(00:17:52):

At the end I've taught a couple courses at Washington University, one related to photography and again, one related to writing. So all of that is sort of come together, but sort of interesting is my interest in classical literature where I started. So in the first semester of studying with Yang Mu, the first thing we read was *Shijing*. And then in the nineties, I did a new edition of the Waley text in the nineties, and now I'm going back to the very beginnings, and I also, there was, last year I published a book on the Chinese lyric sequence, which again is going back to the sort of beginnings, but what I think this, I hope this is true anyways, I think that I'm not going only going back as a much older person, but I'm going back with a much different set of tools, especially the tools of cultural studies and thinking about techs as cultural products that are not just interesting and beautiful or not just aesthetically interesting, but also politically ideologically sociologically interesting.

(00:19:21):

I'm hoping that is gonna come through in this new work. So that sort of ties up the research and this, it's not over, but that's where we are now.

Yao Chen (00:19:34):

It is so impressive. You've been very productive after your retirement and thank you for sharing the Nana stories. It's very touching and I feel honored to be a part of it, a small part of that.

Joseph Allen (00:19:46):

Thank you for being part of it.

Yao Chen (00:19:50):

And then I have some general questions want to ask about. I remember in our second session, you mentioned about the roles library play in your graduate studies. Since then you became a tenure track professor established and been teaching. So what's your thoughts on the roles of libraries and libraries have changed over the time? There are roles in research, teaching and learning.

Joseph Allen (00:20:24):

If you go back far enough, we remember that my mother was a librarian. My mother made a transition. She was a local librarian, town librarian, and then she was a regional librarian and then in her final career, she was a university librarian at the University of Massachusetts. So libraries and I go way back. And but in terms of my studies, the change in the library, well, I think there's been the attitude in the libraries. I think maybe this has been most dramatic in Taiwan and I believe it's probably happening now in China too, at least that's my experience at Shanghai. Where in the past, it seemed to me that the librarian or the library institution was sort of like a museum.

(00:21:29):

They were preserving things. Access was considered a privilege. You had to be of a privileged class to have access to the library. And of course that's until the great public libraries, that was always true. That sense of protection and control has been replaced by much more of a public outreach and proactive work. Instead of in the past, I would have the research project and I'd go to the library or I'd go to the librarian

and say, I need this book, or I need this material. We would get it usually. I mean, there was a phenomenal change in the nineties with interlibrary loan. Suddenly you didn't have to go to Harvard or Beijing or Taiwan to get some materials.

(00:22:39):

You could get them delivered to you physically. And then the next transformation of that was the digital contents becoming available. So all of that meant, and the change in the attitude within the library systems all that meant that the librarians in the library, at least in my experience, became much more like colleagues or even collaborators. Maybe that's a better word, the collaborators. we're Lauren and I are very involved in the St. Louis public library here. It's something we support and they have, there's a book fund there in my brother's name and stuff like that. So it's something we see elsewhere, but so that the library is really, the walls are coming down right.

(00:23:50):

And coming down in multiple sorts of ways, and it's becoming a much more accessible institution. That's true for university libraries. It's also true for at least in St. Louis for the public libraries too. They're changing their role. They're becoming much more proactive, much more collaborative. And your finding of Nana Hsu, which I didn't ask you to do. We were just talking about my research. But you decided to sort of collaborate. That's sort of just an emblem of that change.

Yao Chen (00:24:35):

Indeed library field has changed quite a bit over the past years. So my next question. In the previous sessions, we talked about a several major event in US-China relations, such as the Nixon Kissinger visited China, Deng Xiaoping's state visit, and also the one China policy and Taiwan Relations Act. So how do you think about the Tiananmen incident in 1989?

Joseph Allen (00:25:07):

That's an interesting question. Actually. I think we talked a couple of times ago, we talked about the change in Taiwan in 1988 when they lifted Martial law. And I said something like, I didn't believe it. I thought it was gonna be a trick, a KMT Kuomintang trick. That they were gonna lift Martial law, but they were gonna have some other special law. In other words, they were gonna maintain their control and power. And within a year I realized that or within a year or so, I realized that was a mistake. Things really were going to change. And then they dramatically changed in the nineties. I misread that pretty completely. In 1989, in the spring of 89, my reaction, my feelings was just the opposite. I thought we are on the cusp of huge change.

(00:26:10):

I had been working interested in working in literature, particularly poetry in the 1980s and the *menglong shiren* (朦胧诗人), that kind of poetry. And I thought that the 1989 student demonstrations was going to be a watershed moment. I thought it was going to be May 4th, 1919 type of change in which structures would open up. I mean, it had been open. I mean, I think we were all so optimistic through the eighties as China sort of became part of the world again and was opening up and young people were come beginning to come to the United States, as students mostly graduate students. But, but there was this great optimism. And then of course, that just did not happen. I mean it turned worse.

(00:27:19):

There was a U-turn, but that famous, no U-turn, well, there was a U-turn and we went back to a very well, repressive in a different sort way, but a very repressive style of social control and creating sort of a exile

community. The so I was deeply disappointed. I mean, I wasn't personally, I wasn't demonstrating, and I was just out 89. Where was I at 89? I may have been at Harvard, I guess, in 89. I mean, I thought it was gonna be a big change and I kept thinking, because I had learned about the May 4th movement and what big difference that had made, that sort of bringing China into the full force into the 20th century. I thought that was gonna happen again.

(00:28:25):

And we would go, we meaning the United States, China, Taiwan would enter the 21st century in this sort of open partnership. Then I thought the Taiwan problem, at that point, the Taiwan wasn't much of a problem that's been something that's been really a thing in the 21st century where Taiwan's become such a hot button issue. But, but anyways, I thought, well, they'll work something out if, if everyone's open and running a democratic, and then maybe not a totally democratic, open responsible societies. And I thought that yeah, we would go into the 21st century sort of in a partner international partnership and that just did not happen.

Yao Chen (00:29:22):

So I would just move on to the next question. In 1997, IUP program, actually, they moved from Taiwan to Tsinghua, China. You mentioned that when the first time you attended the IUP in Taiwan, that was the only option in addition to Hong Kong. And now there is an option to go to mainland China, and you attended IUP 1999. So why did you still choose to go to Taiwan this time?

Joseph Allen (00:29:53):

Well, this, I wouldn't have gone to Beijing, but anyways, but the reason I was there, because the Fulbright, to begin to work on Taipei city. What I did was in order to sort of, I brought some of my, so at that point, I was called a special student between, I was a graduate of IUP and I'd actually, I study there, no, I guess this was the first time I studied there, but after being a graduate student. I used IUP in two ways, one to try to get my spoken Chinese up, sort of do a rehab of that. And also I read with, I know some very IUP, the great thing about IUP or great thing about ICLP, that's what it was called.

(00:30:56):

So the IUP technically went to Beijing and then the institution in Taiwan was renamed ICLP. But the teachers were still the same. And the great thing about Taiwan IUP and ICLP is that they had extremely they had extremely good teachers. They'd been there a long time. They had their specialty, I could read with people that were interested in urban studies and stuff like that, cultural studies. So I used that, I would bring materials in that I was encountering in the libraries in the archives, and I went there a couple times a week, I guess, and worked on those two skills. There wasn't really a choice for me, but I had actually visited the new IUP in Beijing. And they were struggling.

(00:32:02):

It was not nearly as successful as they had hoped or they hoped to bring the IUP model to Beijing. And it just didn't work very well. So I didn't, I actually, I mean, I didn't, I never prevented, never said a student shouldn't go to the PRC to study, but if it were a study, someone who was studying at a very advanced level I would urge them to, graduate student, urge them to go to ICLP in Taiwan. It was just, it still is the best. It is the best Chinese language program abroad, particularly for training academics. They just got a very, very good model and excellent sort of group of professor teachers.

Yao Chen (00:32:58):

I think many graduate students will find this recommendation very helpful. So we just move a little bit to the 2000. Soon after you joined the University of Minnesota and you served as the director of the Nankai Study Abroad program. Could you talk about that experience a bit?

Joseph Allen (00:33:16):

That was a really wonderful thing. So this goes back to, I said that Asian Studies at Minnesota, the 1970s and 1980s were very strong, and one of the first things, I think it was the first study abroad program in the PRC since United States study abroad program in the PRC since 1945 or something like that, 49. And it was a very innovative and it was everyone wanted to go in the eighties to this program. It was at Nankai, which is a wonderful sort of private, if it's actually private, but sort of that feeling of private school university, important university in Tianjin, so close to Beijing, but not really in Beijing. That had had a long life. And when I came to Minnesota to take over the chairmanship, that was part of it.

(00:34:31):

There was a young man there named Charles Sanft, and Charles is now a professor. He's a professor of Chinese literature at University of Tennessee. And Charles was a graduate student there he'd been there. For a number of years, I think he was an undergraduate. And then he was a graduate student. So he was an MA student and he had experience with the Nankai program. So he actually did most of the work, but we went to Nachi for the summer with a group of students, mostly Minnesota students, but not all. We lived on Nankai campus and ran this program, this study abroad program. I was just sort of there to learn about it. And Charles was, he knew everything. He was really good at this. It was my experience, my first experience sort of being on the ground, although I wasn't really doing my own research.

(00:35:39):

I was just sort of overseeing this program, but on the ground in the PRC for several months, did that for a couple of summers. And then and I enjoyed it very much. And, and when I both summers, I did it with Charles and that established a nice relationship that's gone on for many years. Charles went off to Seattle and then to Germany, and he got his PhD in Germany and now is back in the States. Then I made a decision. It was a very controversial decision, but I think it was the right decision. I canceled the Nankai program after20 years or whatever it was. And I canceled it, not because it wasn't good, but because it had been outstripped, outpaced by so many other language programs in those 20 years.

(00:36:49):

Princeton in Beijing, and IUP and CET and all of these, there were language program in the eighties and even the early nineties, I mean, there were only a few language programs in China. Nankai did very well. But by that time we just didn't have the resources and the energy, we weren't making a big difference to, we were spending a lot of time doing it. I had to make this administrative decision, which really upset the old China crowd that I just said, we weren't gonna do it. So after the two years that Charles and I did it, and we had plenty of options for our students. Our students had better options in lots of ways. So it was a yeah, but it was a really, it was a great experience to be there in Tianjin for the summer, a group of teenagers, basically young, very young students, all kind, we had all kinds of typical student issues, but it was great for me.

(00:38:04):

And I got to know Charles too.

Yao Chen (00:38:08):

So could you also talk about the founding sources for Chinese studies and Asian studies in general since 2000? And how does it impact Chinese studies and Asian studies in general?

Joseph Allen (00:38:25):

Well, I think, it's 2000, but there's, there's been a radical change in what China has meant both, sort of large social issues, but also for students. Up until at least the nineties, China was always sort of a cultural object something you study as, it might have been modern. It might have been classical, but it was for we study as a cultural object, changed somewhat in the nineties when sociologists and anthropologists were able to go, but they were, the sociologists and anthropologists were restricted in what they really could do. So the big change, and I've mentioned this before, is that China becomes part of professional training, not just diplomats, which of course are very important limits, but lawyers, business people, NGOs and that sort of thing.

(00:40:05):

The study of China becomes less a cultural object than sort of an engagement of other people's and a social system. And this engagement of the social system, whether you enter it from law, you enter it from business becomes a very, very different way to think about China. In the past, China was never thought of, well, often not thought of as contemporaneous with us. It was May 4th movement or, late Qing or, Mao, but it was always removed from our daily lives, by a wall, usually a little, sometimes a big wall, but a wall of time. But suddenly China becomes very contemporaneous. We, the people who study China and China are not separated by this time lag anymore. And it's a time to engage socially not just intellectually. That was the, I think the largest change in this period.

Yao Chen (00:41:35):

And you have very successful experience teaching and researching at a verity of private, smaller private universities and big public universities. So in general, what are similarities, the differences teaching and researching at a private and public universities?

Joseph Allen (00:41:59):

Well, I think you'd have to actually say if you couldn’t, each private university and each public university has its sort of a different sort of stance, but the places I taught long. So I taught at Washington University, which is a private, small private, at that point was sort of second tier. And then I taught at Minnesota, which is a huge public. My training was all in public universities. So I was publicly trained. So University of Massachusetts, University Washington, Seattle, those institutions and University of Minnesota are very similar in some ways. On the ground, the biggest difference probably is in this undergraduate student population. And this was brought back to me in vividly when I came back here and taught at WashU okay.

(00:43:18):

So I've taught undergraduate classes at WashU last couple years. I got to meet those students who I first knew. And in a difference there is similarly, I mean at Washington University, I think maybe certainly now, there is a very, it's a very diverse ethnically and racially, very diverse student population. Walking across campus, you would think maybe you were in China half the time. I mean, there was so many international students. But in terms of economics background, and sort of preparation for college, they're very Washington University student students are very uniform. They mostly well off. I mean, not all of them, but most of them are well off. Most of them have been, went to very good schools, probably a large percentage of them in private schools. When they come to the university, they're sort of ready for the university and they're ready in the same sort of way.

(00:44:42):

I had a colleague say one time that not very interesting because they're smart in the same sort of way, there's this intellectual uniformity, and they're wonderful students. I mean, they prepare well, they respond well in class. They, I mean, it's a really great productive place to teach. At Minnesota. And I had sort of forgotten this when, although it was my own experience. At Minnesota, you get a much, most of the, it's changing a lot of course, but most of the racially and ethnically it's pretty uniform. I don't know what the percentages are now, but it's clearly mostly white Americans, many of Northern European descent and German, not all, but, a good number. But underneath that uniformity, there's this huge disparity in preparations and backgrounds and stuff.

(00:46:03):

You have to be much more flexible and attuned to the class to make sure to be successful. But for them to be successful, you have to be much more attuned to that. And you have to be attuned when someone's struggling. Maybe because there's a lot of students who are not completely prepared for the college classroom, but you also have to be attuned to the geniuses who are sort of hidden in this mass of white faces. They'll be real geniuses. I mean the best of the best, smarter than anybody at WashU or Harvard, or smarter than anybody at WashU or Harvard. And you have to be very attuned to, to that. And then you have to be able to teach to that range.

(00:47:06):

You have to, both of those students have to be, if you're successful, they're successful, or if they're successful, you're successful. And to have a class where that can happen requires a very different, a very different operating system. And very challenging, but extremely rewarding when it does work. So I think that's one of the, at least on the ground, one of the big differences. The other one of course is funding. Although not every private university, even, I won't name names, but even private universities that have lots and lots of money often are very conservative in how they use that money. And where you would think that, there would be a lot of support for research, faculty research. They sometimes they really, you, it's just not considered important.

(00:48:23):

It's not where we're gonna put our money. We're gonna take, I mean, our billions of dollars, and we're gonna build science buildings and different kinds of things. So the funding is always a problem. I think once you establish a baseline at a private university, it pretty much stays the same. I mean, when and private universities encountered the great recession of 2008 to 2012 their funding, their baseline funding didn't change much. But when University of Minnesota encounters the great recession, then there's a huge fall off in funding to the university, to the college, to the department and then to the faculty and then to the students. So in a state university or a big public university that tends to be a lot of variation in where the funding is.

(00:49:35):

And also the state universities depend a lot on federal funding and, and things like that. When the recession hits, it hits the federal government too. It has a double impact. So those two, sort of one at the very high level of funding and one at the very low level, I would say those are the differences. What is common is sort of what you would think is common? I mean, it's sort of is always a, just every university has sort of a political system that you need to understand in order to operate well. And every university has a group of elite sort of, I mean, there's a certain amount of elitism in any university and things like that. At Washington University the elite part of the university is the medical school. I mean, it's often considered the best medical school in the United States. There's only 10,000 students altogether, and that includes all the medical students. The medical school at Minnesota is very important. It's a very good

medical school, too. It is very important medical school, but doesn't control the discourse so much. There are these sort of systematic things that you have to learn no matter where you go.

Yao Chen (00:51:19):

It's a really interesting, so now the next question will be across national boundaries. So what do you think are the similarities and differences of Chinese studies in the US, Europe, and China?

Joseph Allen (00:51:37):

Wow. I'm not sure. I know that question very well. I think Charles Sanft could answer this question because he was trained the United States and in Europe and is deeply involved in China, too. I think that currently I'm guessing this is that the United States has sort of the most innovative, maybe this is my prejudice, but seems to have the most innovative ideas about Chinese studies, I mean. Sort of leading in film studies and film, day studies and all those sort of new sorts of areas of consideration. That seems to be where the United States is leading. There're many conservative groups. But I mean, if you, the American Oriental Society is still very, very conservative sort of place. Europe, I suspect is somewhat more conservative and in a sort of an older model of literature and philology and stuff like that.

(00:53:00):

I'm not absolutely sure of that, but just my little experience of being there and talking to people and stuff like that. What is going on in China, I haven't really followed, I mean, it's changing so fast. And of course it's a, it's a very, very different object to study. It's a very much more self object of self-study. And I suspect that you're going to get some, there'll be some areas of very conservative, old work. I mean, I know that there are many institutes or centers for the study of *Shijing*, that's as old as it gets. One area that is certainly changing the face of Chinese studies in China and actually in the world is contemporary archeology, the discovery of not just physical objects.

(00:54:20):

They've got so many archeological digs going in China. They can't even keep up with the research. I mean, people are just listing what they found and they're not doing any studies of it just listing the stuff they found. But one of the things that they've been finding more and more are manuscripts, early manuscripts, and this, these are usually on silk or bamboo particularly bamboo. These new bamboo manuscripts are really sort of rattling early Chinese studies. This is not affecting film studies or anything like that, but it is really changing the world of early Chinese studies. Just like in the early, in the twenties and thirties, the discovery of the Oracle bones changed early Chinese studies, they haven't, as far as I know, I can't keep up with this, but they haven't found anything that sort of have changed the world.

(00:55:26):

But they've find more and more stuff. And it's usually variations on things we already know there's some new things, but a lot of variations on things we already know. I think that, I'm sure in China that that's, it's certainly affecting the study here or China, and it must be huge there. And I don't know how that plays, I don't know how any of this plays out in sort of the question of nationalism inn China. I mean, there has been a great deal of talk in the 21st century about this sort of Neo nationalist ideology that has emerged under the leadership, particularly under the leadership of Xi Jinping and I'm not sure just because I haven't been there. Since I saw Nana, last time I was there. So, I would be very interested to hear what other people have to say about the interrelationship between this so-called new nationalism and Chinese studies. I'm sure some of it is deeply involved. Some people are just staying away from it, but it would be an interesting question to look at it.

Yao Chen (00:56:49):

Okay. So you are a Chinese literature, culture scholar, and for people who are outside of the Chinese study field, they view you as a China expert. So how do you balance those two roles? Because in your CV, I found out you are a discussant of the 2015 national monetary forum. So how do you balance those two roles?

Joseph Allen (00:57:12):

That was a fake role. Okay. So they just, I was at Nankai, I think there was, somewhere was at Nankai and our students were going to participate in a debate. I think it was the early one road. What is that called? One belt, one road. I think it was about that. It was early on. Our students were going to participate in it. This is just a matter of politeness, we better give the professor some role. There was no role at all, actually. So I just sort of sat there and I think I asked one question or something. Yeah. This idea of being the experts, my grandfather, who was an old farmer. So dairy farmer. My grandfather said he had all these sayings, he is an old New England.

(00:58:18):

All these sayings and he was not, I think he could read he went through some primary school, but he was a very smart guy. And he used to say, well, what's an expert. He said an expert, anyone that's a hundred miles from home. It's like only people who don't know you can think of you as an expert. So and now a hundred miles from home would be 10,000 miles from home or something like that. I never, obviously from the story, I never thought of, I was going to be an expert or even know anything about China that's for sure. And now I feel like at this point, I know a lot of things but of course the cliche is the more that you don't know.

(00:59:25):

What I think that I have a very eclectic background. I mean, I can't talk about monetary policy, but I mean, I can join a conversation with early China people and talk about excavated texts and *Shijing*, phonology and stuff like that. And I feel quite comfortable talking to people in film and cultural studies sort ofthe left leaning, cultural studies people. I not saying that I'm an expert, but I'm comfortable in those discussions. And, and I think that's sort of, that's somewhat unusual, I think and that has to do a lot with having moved around and also not ever being sort of completely settled in any field. I mean, I was never, I was never unsettled, but I just always was sort of waiting for something else to happen.

(01:00:40):

And then as soon as thing else happened, I would tend to just say, well, I might teach a little bit about it. I might, and then see where it goes. There was things that didn't go anywhere. And there was a period when I was very interested in archeology until I was sort of up and reading, and I taught archeology as part of the Chinese class. It just didn't, it didn't play out, but I mean, and then I was interested in the silk road. I spent a lot of time studying aspects of, different aspects of the silk road, but in the Han and Tang period. I think that I'm sort of eclectic. I don't know if I'm an expert at anything, actually. I mean, if you put me in a field that I feel comfortable in and then found the expert that, you know, it wouldn't be me. It would be someone else except things like Nana, Nana Hsu. I feel like I am the expert in that issue.

Yao Chen (01:01:52):

Okay, wonderful. So how do you feel the current US China relationship will impact Chinese studies?

Joseph Allen (01:02:02):

Well, I wish I knew I'm just, I'm concerned, not in the long run. I mean, China and the United States, as long as there's a China, they'll always be a China, I think long as there's a United States. I mean, there'll

be a working relationship, I think in the long run. In the next 10 years, I'm worried we seem to be going down a dark road where it looks like, I mean, people have said another cold war. Well, I don't think it's quite that because in the cold war, we were so separated from each other, so it's a different type of war. And, but I'm worried that it is going to end up in conflicts, maybe not military conflicts, but different types of conflicts that are going to drive us away from each other. And if China studies continues to be, I mean, China studies itself is an invented field.

(01:03:21):

I mean so if China studies continues to be a viable force, I hope it will be a force that helps us negotiate those conflicts so that people, I mean, real people don't get hurt. I think there'll be a continual change, but I think that language work will be increasingly important or maintain its important. I mean, even if we go into a deep, cold war or particularly if we go in a deep cold war language training is going to be important. I think that that will stay at the basis of China studies, particularly for undergraduates and what has happened is that the undergraduates are getting better and better. I mean, it just, the kids quote unquote in the China flagship, they were just so phenomenal. Their Chinese was so much better than my Chinese even now.

(01:04:34):

I mean, not reading, but spoken and listening. So there's no comparison between graduate language training when I was a student and now, and I imagine that's just going to keep growing importance. Where graduate studies goes is really, and what happens with sort of the profession, the academic China studies profession, that's really something that is, I think, up in the air, there was a big push in the nineties for sort of modern contemporary studies, so up until about maybe the eighties most people were working in classical literature. Now, most people, there are very few people working in classical literature or not in comparative terms. Most people are studying if they're studying literature at all, which is all is a question. They're starting literature, then they're studying modern contemporary forms, not just film, but blogging and flash fiction and all that. So I sense that there might be a resurgence in sort of classical studies, but I think it would be very hard for a non-native speaker to compete in that world now. I suspect that that's going early China studies is going to be certainly led if not completely dominated by native China speakers who may be trained in the United States or in Europe. But they arrive with the tools, because early Chinese studies just gets, seems to just get harder and harder.

(01:06:33):

So I think the immediate problem for Chinese, of my studies anyway, is what happens to Taiwan. I mean, people have every right to be worried about, and I'm not just talking about the politics of it all I'm talking about, you know, people, my friends, what happens to my friends there, it's not very encouraging right now as opposed to the 1990s or going into nineties where I thought we had a solution. The Taiwan problem, the Taiwan issue seems to become worse and worse. They are definitely moving apart. Definitely.

Yao Chen (01:07:21):

And you talking about the opportunities and the challenges, and I share the same similar concern. I definitely hope the field will be going strong for the next how many years, my last question. So how does the pandemic impact Chinese studies?

Joseph Allen (01:07:44):

I was lucky. I retired before the beginning of the pandemic. I haven't been in the classroom or even on campus. I mean, all the campuses were closed and stuff like that. I think the pandemic has affected education, the delivery of education from kindergarten to graduate school and it's affected China and I

mean, Chinese studies in the same way. And those are relatively well known. The delivery. I think one of, I'm not sure of this, but I suspect this is not just for Chinese studies, but for humanities, maybe other fields, I suspect that the annual conference is dead. I don't think that, I mean, 10,000 people are not gonna fly to Boston and go to the MLA anymore. I know the MLA is trying to keep it going, but I think it's, I personally in fact thought that academic conferences had outlived their purpose by a hundred years before the pandemic. In the academic conference, I don't know the history of the academic conference.

(01:09:15):

It would be very interesting to read, but it goes back into sort of empire colonialism in which the 20 experts on China would get together once a year in London and share their research which was extremely valuable. And that may still be valuable in some fields. But generally in the humanities, we don't have to get together to share our research. We have to get together to drink beers, but we don't have to get together to share our research anymore. I mean, I think that I felt for a long time that the conference was not a very useful, I used to, I kept going. But it was always thinking this is a waste of time and money.

(01:10:15):

And now I think that the pandemic has probably changed that all together. So just last week I had a conference, a conference with 25 people all across Germany to talk about. I wrote this article about why writing Chinese is a waste of time. It's about teaching the writing of Chinese. Someone in Germany thought this was an interesting thing to talk about. We got 25 people together, and it was really interesting, , and I didn't go anywhere. It took me two hours and the cost of a electric light bulb to do this. I think that I'm sure people will continue to get together physically, but I don't think these big annual conferences are gonna happen. I think they're gonna go away.

(01:11:20):

That's just not just for Chinese studies. And I think that all of the digitalization that's happened, this is just gonna make it more important for access to materials. I can't go to, I mean, I've been invited to Taiwan twice in the last two years to do research. I just can't go, I mean, I just physically can't go. And then if I go, what last May they said they would let me in, but I would have to spend 14 days in a hotel by myself. I'm only gonna be there two months, 14 days in a hotel by yourself is not a great idea. So I think that, I think it depends on whether we get out of the pandemic or we perpetually in a pandemic.

(01:12:20):

If we're perpetually in a pandemic, then travel will be severely. This type of meeting you and I meeting will become much more important. And that's certainly how happened just in the 18 months, two years that we've had. So I personally have I've been very lucky. I haven't had any real, the pandemic hasn't slowed down my work because I wasn't in the classroom. So I didn't have to learn and to teach on Zoom. God help me. And the work I've been doing is sort of it's immune to the pandemic. The only thing I can't, the only thing I haven't been able to do is personally is to go to Taiwan. And I mean, it will be two years in March that I have, and that's the longest I've been away from Taiwan in 40 years.

(01:13:28):

I mean, 30 years. For my colleagues, my younger colleagues, I think they will be, even if the pandemic goes away they'll be teaching in a different sort of way. I think it's a teaching that is gonna be most greatly affected. Language teaching in a pandemic. I mean, remote language teaching is almost impossible and people are spending enormous amount of time preparing for these right. These sort of courses. Yeah. So the question, I guess, is, will we ever get out of the pandemic. We would think we will.

Yao Chen (01:14:22):

But who knows when?

Joseph Allen (01:14:23):

Who knows when? I mean, some people think this is just entering a new, it will. I mean, maybe not this pandemic, but they'll always be this type of problem going forward.

Yao Chen (01:14:40):

So is there anything you want to add before we finish recording?

Joseph Allen (01:14:47):

I would just like to thank you for putting up with this for so many hours. I don't how many hours it's been, but 6, 5, 6 hours. It's been very interesting. And I can't imagine that anyone will want to listen to this or watch it or whatever they read it, but it is sort of an interesting thing to do. I first started this recollection. I'm not a nostalgic person, so I don't like to think too much about the old days. So but when I started writing the essay, which is now called, right now, it's called *As Always Yang Mu: A Relationship of Letters*, in which Yang Mu had died and I was contacted, he passed away in March of 2030 yeah, it's March of 2020. I just, he was in Taiwan and I had just seen him the 10 days before he passed.

(01:16:06):

In fact, I think I was the last person of my generation to see him. Anyway, when I was contacted to do that to write an essay about Yang Mu, I remember it, I had all these letters that I had sort of inadvertently saved, I think about 45 letters over from 1971, my very first entry into, until about 2000 when we stopped corresponding. I was thought, well, maybe I could do something with this. And I went back and started reading those letters and realized, I mean, I've forgotten so much. Memory is a memory is a dangerous thing, but I've forgotten so much about our relationship over time. And particularly how much he did for me in those early years. Writing the essay was sort of my first sort of retrospective of my career or my Chinese studies but only, but just through that one lens, right through that lens of my relationship to Yang Mu, very important lens of that relationship. But this has sort of been a major expansion of that thing, of that experience. And I'm glad to do it, but I'm so happy that it's over. It was been sort of a very interesting and thoughtful experience if anyone ever listens to it. Good luck.

Yao Chen (01:18:11):

This is a great opportunity for me to understand the field of Chinese studies, and I hope it will also help people who are interested in the field and to add to your legacy, and the legacy of this particular field. So thank you very much for taking your time to do this.

Joseph Allen (01:18:26):

Thank you for your time.