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CHINESE BRIDGE PROJECT SPANS DISCIPLINES, CULTURES AND HISTORY

Lehigh University has received a \$300,000 grant from the Henry Luce Foundation for an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural project designed to enhance the university's Asian Studies program while strengthening Lehigh's historical ties with China.

"The Chinese Bridge Project will construct a series of interrelated, multifaceted, and enduring bridges between Lehigh and China—spans that are symbolic, virtual, and physical, as well as being both inspiring and practical," Lehigh's proposal states.

At the center of the project will be an interdisciplinary team of students drawn from all three undergraduate colleges who will study ancient Chinese wooden bridge technology, history, and culture and produce designs for the actual construction of a bridge on Lehigh's campus.

"There are several interesting and compelling inspirations for this project," says Norman Girardot, University Distinguished Professor of Religion Studies and one of seven principal investigators on the project. "Among them is the famous 'Rainbow Bridge' depicted in the scroll painting 'Along the River During the Qingming Festival.'"

The 17-foot-long panorama, which has been dubbed China's "Mona Lisa," was painted during the Song dynasty in the early 12th century. In it, one can get a vivid and detailed look into 12th century culture and social life, Girardot says. The Rainbow Bridge stands at the center of this scene, and scientists and historians have been fascinated and puzzled by the unique wooden structure that integrates both beam and arch—principles that are separate in today's simplified Western models of bridge design, he says.

Connie Cook, professor of Chinese, director of Asian Studies and another principal investigator, says that the Chinese Bridge Project is "an exciting way to expand the study of Chinese language and culture at Lehigh through an innovative sequence of courses, studios, and workshops on campus and in China. The project also involves research and documentation of Lehigh's 130-year history of educational exchange with China."

A natural for Lehigh

The Luce Foundation grant is for the first phase of the project, which will take place over the next two years. Starting with the fall semester 2009, the grant will enable Lehigh to expand its 25-year-old Asian Studies program and lay the foundation for offering a Chinese language major, pending faculty approval. The project also will enhance Lehigh's Study Abroad program in China and allow more students to gain intensive international experience.

The Chinese Rainbow Bridge, depicted here as it appears in the scroll Along the River During the Qingming Festival.

Starting next year, two cohorts of 10-15 students will spend a summer semester with the Lehigh in Shanghai Internship Program, where they will receive intensive language and cultural training before studying bridge building and aspects of the history of Chinese science and technology at Chinese universities, including Tongji University in Shanghai and the University of Science and Technology in Beijing.

During the academic year, the cohort—as well as students from across the university—will be able to take advantage of new course offerings being developed under the project, including a redesigned Chinese Civilization course, the History of Science and Technology in China, and Chinese-American issues.

In addition, a range of new upper-level language courses will be developed in such areas as fiction, business, and intensive conversation, among others. These components of the project, as well as other enhancements of Chinese studies at Lehigh, will be supervised by Cook.

At Lehigh, the cohort and other interested students also will participate in a special East/West Design Studio course in which they will produce the basic design plans and a large-scale model for a Chinese-style pedestrian bridge, landscaped Chinese garden, scholar's pavilion, and learning lab. The Design Studio will take place under the supervision of Anthony Viscardi, professor and chair of the art and architecture department and a project principal investigator. Guest workshops will be given by visiting professor Zhao Chen of Nanjing University in China, a leading scholar and authority on ancient Chinese wooden bridges; Tom Peters, professor emeritus of the history of architecture and bridge technology; and master craftsman Marcus Brandt.

While the project recognizes the increasingly prominent role China plays in world affairs today, it also draws attention to Lehigh's special historical relationship with China—a relationship that dates back to 1879. Over the past 130 years, more than 2,000 Chinese undergraduate and graduate students have made the long journey to Lehigh, and many who returned to their native land have made significant and lasting contributions to modern China's industry and education.

A special research component of the project—led by Dong-Ning Wang '98 Ph.D., a project principal investigator, visiting scientist and post-doctoral fellow in the department of materials science engineering—will document Lehigh's long history of educational exchange with China through creation of a permanent Lehigh-China Heritage Web site.

The Luce Foundation grant funds the expansion of Asian Studies, the enhancements for study abroad in China, the special heritage research component, and the design of the bridge. It includes funding to hire a full-time professor of practice in Chinese language instruction.

Successful completion of the initial phase of the project will give Lehigh the opportunity to embark on the second phase: the actual construction of a pedestrian bridge, Chinese garden, scholar's pavilion, and learning lab at a location on the main campus. Phase two, which will draw heavily on Lehigh's engineering expertise in bridge construction, is contingent upon a successful fundraising effort.

Having students design—and, hopefully, build—the Chinese bridge in an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural context dramatically represents “beauty and utility, imagination and material reality coming together,” Girardot says.

The Rainbow Bridge Project is a natural for Lehigh.

“At its core, Lehigh’s proposal is about bridge-building—bridging disciplines, cultures, and history, as well as physical space,” Lehigh President Alice P. Gast wrote in her letter presenting the proposal to the Luce Foundation. “This is very much in keeping with Lehigh’s founding vision of graduates equally adept in technical disciplines and the liberal arts, equally effective at home and abroad.”

In addition to Girardot, Cook, Viscardi, and Wang, other faculty members serving as principal investigators on the project are Dan Frangopol, the Fazlur R. Khan Chair of Structural Engineering and Architecture; and Le-wu Lu and Ben Yen, both professors emeritus of the department of civil and environmental engineering.

The Luce Foundation is a not-for-profit corporation established in 1936 by Henry R. Luce, the co-founder and editor-in-chief of Time Inc., to honor his parents, who were missionary educators in China. The foundation’s mission statement says it seeks to “build upon the vision and values of four generations of the Luce family: broadening knowledge and encouraging the highest standards of service and leadership.”

The foundation today includes grant-making that supports higher education, American art, public policy and the environment, theology, women in science and engineering, and increased understanding between the United States and Asia. In 2005, the foundation announced two new multi-year commitments: the Henry R. Luce Initiative in Religion and International Affairs, and the Luce Initiative on East and Southeast Asian Archaeology and Early History.

By:

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