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The Early Development of East Asian Studies in Southern California

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Europe and Asia give answers. In each case the ship has made the peoples of the opposite continents commercially one. Their interests tie them together . . . [The] Chinese mind is in closer touch with my own than it possibly could be with a man of Boston, or New York. It is the Pacific Ocean and the ships that have done it. And it is the Atlantic, not the Pacific waters upon which the Boston man looks out. He knows England and France better than I do . . . I know the Chinaman better.

–Joseph Pomeroy Widney

_The Three Americas_, 1935

Joseph P. Widney was the second president of the University of Southern California (USC). When he wrote this early tribute to what is now termed "the Pacific Rim", it was towards the end of a long life in Los Angeles. He and his brother, Robert Maclay Widney, were two of a group of farseeing men who, early on, appreciated that, by bringing in a railroad connection and dredging a deep port, the small pueblo could be transformed into a city and then into a metropolis. Among the many institutions the Widneys helped to launch was Southern California's first university.

Higher education in Southern California began with the founding of the University of Southern California in 1880. The university was designed, from the very beginning, to serve the immediate and growing practical needs of the city. Teachers, lawyers, doctors, engineers, ministers were all needed in increasing numbers. And, already at this early point, there was a consciousness of the proximity of East Asia.

USC was founded as a Methodist university. Robert Widney had tried for at least nine years to build interest in such an institution and was one of the first members of the board of directors. His brother, Joseph, was the founding dean of the College of Medicine, and was to become the second university president. The first University President, Marion M. Bovard, came to Los Angeles as a minister only after being prevented, by his wife's ill health, from volunteering as a missionary to China.

Joseph and Robert Widney were nephews of two other prominent Methodist missionaries. One of these, Charles Maclay, had been an early California State Senator before investing in real estate in the San Fernando Valley. When the various schools of USC were being
formed, Charles Maclay offered some of his land in the Valley to house the Maclay College of Theology, which soon became USC's School of Religion (and which, since the mid-1950s, has become the Claremont School of Theology).

One of the first Deans of the School of Religion (1888-1893) was Charles Maclay's brother (and Joseph P. and Robert M. Widney's uncle), Robert Samuel Maclay. He is probably USC's earliest substantial link to East Asia, having been a pioneering missionary for the Methodist Church in all three East Asian countries. He was one of the earliest Methodist missionaries to be sent to China, helping to found the mission in Foochow, where he was stationed from 1848 to 1873. While there, he coauthored the *Foochow Dictionary* (1870), the first Chinese-English dictionary for that dialect. He also helped to found there the Anglo-Chinese College. Once access to Japan had been made easier, following the Meiji Restoration (1868), Robert Maclay was asked to found the mission in Japan, and he spent the years 1873 to 1888 in that country. While there, he helped to found the Anglo-Japanese College (of which he was President 1883-1887). While he was Superintendent of the Japan Mission, Robert Maclay was asked to travel to Korea in 1884 in order to survey the possibilities of opening a Methodist mission there. His subsequent report, which stressed the need to not only evangelize but also to provide school and medical work, led, in fact, to the founding of the first Protestant mission in Korea the following year.

When Robert S. Maclay took over the deanship of the School of Religion soon thereafter (1888), it was only natural that one of the functions of the School should become the production of missionaries for Asia. Very soon, a reservoir of local information about Asian cultures and societies began to build up in Southern California from the veterans of these various missions.

Two of particular note were Harry C. and Florence M. Sherman. Harry Sherman had been a medical student at USC and, in 1898, he and his wife, Florence, were sent to Seoul. He ran the mission hospital and she helped with Sunday school and women's meetings. While there, the two befriended many Koreans, including Syngman Rhee (Yi Sing-Man) and Hugh Cynn (Sin Hung-u), both of whom refer to them in their autobiographies. Following Harry's early death, Florence Sherman returned to Los Angeles, where she founded a mission for Koreans in the city, and opened her house to Korean students at USC.

The formal study of East Asia at USC began with the opening of a department of Oriental Studies and Comparative Literature in 1911. Earlier that same year, among the very first group of masters theses accepted by the new Graduate Department was one written by a Japanese student in the Philosophy Department on the influence of Christianity on Japanese civilization. Another Japanese student received his masters degree in 1913 with an economics thesis on the Meiji economy. Oriental studies itself was not authorized to offer a graduate program until 1917.

The founder of Oriental Studies at USC was James Main Dixon (1856-1933), son of a Methodist minister. Dixon had lectured on English literature at the Imperial University in
Tokyo for thirteen years and at USC from 1905 to 1911. While in Japan, he had been a senior member of the Asiatic Society of Japan and a regular contributor to its Transactions.

Between 1919 and 1922, the Oriental Studies department awarded a rush of seven masters degrees – five of them to Japanese. Then, however, coincident with Rufus Von KleinSmid's arrival as President of USC, there was a complete halt in graduate activity in the department. Considerable numbers of masters were awarded on topics dealing with East Asia during the 1920s and 1930s – in economics, political science, philosophy, and religion – but Oriental Studies as a program in itself had stalled.

In 1929, "Oriental Studies" was succeeded by the Department of Asiatic Studies, one component of the emphasis put on world affairs by President Von KleinSmid. Hans Nordewin Von Koerber, an accomplished linguist familiar with Chinese, Japanese, Tibetan, Sanskrit, and Arabic, had come to USC the year before, and was to serve, as well, as Curator of Asian Arts at the Los Angeles Museum of Science, History, and Art, 1930-1947. When James Dixon died in 1933, Von Koerber headed the department.

By this time, of course, other colleges had been established in Southern California, each of them at least initially church-affiliated. Pomona College was founded by Congregationalists in 1887, Occidental College by Presbyterians also in 1887, Loma Linda University by Seventh Day Adventists in 1905, Redlands University by Baptists in 1909, and Loyola University by Jesuits in 1914. These colleges also were sources of teachers for the developing Christian involvement in education in China, etc. One such teacher was Harley Farnsworth MacNair, who was among the first class at Redlands University. During his three years there, MacNair served as the University librarian (!) and had gained a commitment to advancing Christian education in China. After graduating in 1912, he went to teach at St. John's University in Shanghai. This became the foundation upon which he built his career as one of the early generation of American scholars who built academic programs for the study of East Asian subjects in the United States.

The 1920s saw the beginning of a secularization of higher education in Southern California. With Rufus Von KleinSmid's appointment as University President in 1921, USC ended its status as a Methodist university and became, instead, a secular private institution. Then, in 1927, a second campus of the University of California was founded in Los Angeles. As Southern California's first public university, UCLA quickly gained importance, in the pre-war years.

The missionary connection to Chinese and Japanese studies remained a major factor until the end of the 1920s. The assertion, then, of nationalist prerogatives in both China and Japan limited the receptivity of the involvement of foreigners in educational institutions. (The situation in Korea was different, since under Japanese rule, western churches represented potential centers of resistance to colonial rule.) The depression then also undercut the ability of churches to finance such efforts. The College of Chinese Studies in Peking, for example, which offered perhaps the best course for foreigners to learn Chinese,
had been funded by missionary money since 1916. In 1930 the California College in China was founded by a group of California educators — including USC's President Von KleinSmid — to replace the missionary backing. William B. Pettus, president of both colleges, was a frequent lecturer at various universities and colleges, thereafter, in both Northern and Southern California. (His collection of Chinese books can be found as part of Claremont’s Asian Studies Collection.)

Most colleges in Southern California in the 1930s offered courses, in various departments, relating to the study of East Asia. Pomona College, in Claremont, in 1928 had recruited as its president Charles Keyser Edmunds, who had built Lingnan University in Canton into a major Christian academic institution during his sixteen years as president there (1908-1924). In 1936, he established a full program for the study of East Asia, and brought in Japanologist, Charles Burton Fahs, the son of Christian missionaries, and Ch’en Shou-yi, former Lingnan student and teacher, and chairman of the department of history at National Peking University.

Similarly, in 1936, the University of Redlands made Elam J. Anderson their president. Anderson had had fourteen years' experience in Christian education in Shanghai, and made it a condition of his acceptance at Redlands that he be allowed to develop contacts with China.

Under the direction of Charles Burton Fahs, Claremont became an organizing center for East Asian studies across the nation. He served as editor, beginning in 1937, for the semi-annual *Notes on Far Eastern Studies in America*, an informational journal for plotting the status and progress of the broad emerging field of study. In the same year, he hosted the first meeting of the Teachers of Far Eastern Affairs in Southern California, attended by fourteen teachers from five institutions, to pool information on local involvement in East Asian studies.

In the years just before the Second World War, the Claremont colleges and USC had the largest coverage of courses related to East Asia, followed by UCLA, Occidental, and Redlands. Many courses related to East Asia were offered at USC during the 1930s, but the Department of Asiatic Studies awarded no graduate degrees. Among the several in various departments who offered courses related to East Asia during this period were Claude A. Buss in international relations, Samuel H. Leger in sociology, and William F. Hummel in history.

As early as March 1937, an organization of Southern Californian specialists in East Asia discussed the possibilities for coordinating the library holdings of local universities. Before World War II, only Claremont and USC had any holdings in East Asian languages, and these were very modest collections.

War provided the stimulus for advancing the study of East Asia nationwide far beyond the initial steps of the 1930s. The military need for capability in Chinese and Japanese provided
the backing for language study at both UCLA and USC, and literature, history, and social science studies followed closely.

The coming of war in the Pacific led President Von KleinSmid, in 1941, to ask Theodore Hsi-en Chen (of the Education Department) to take over the Department of Asiatic Studies, where he remained as chairman until 1968. An influx of Navy students during the war greatly boosted enrollments in the Chinese and Japanese language courses. The first masters degree in twenty-one years was awarded in 1943, and others followed the end of the war.

The postwar period brought no diminution of interest in East Asia. Rather, the combination of a continued focus of attention on China and Japan and accelerated college enrollments brought a great expansion of such programs. At the urging of Peter A. Boodberg, of Berkeley, Richard Rudolph was brought to UCLA in 1947 to found an Oriental Languages Department and an Oriental Library. The Asian Studies Department at USC grew quickly into one of the nation's premier centers for the study of Communist China during the Korean War.

The Teachers of Far Eastern Affairs in Southern California was reincarnated in the spring of 1949 as the Far Eastern Teachers of Southern California. This was a group of scholars from USC, UCLA, Pomona, Occidental, Redlands, Whittier, and Pepperdine which met informally in restaurants. This early stage of professional organization served to lessen the isolation of East Asian scholars in Southern California by providing a way of meeting others with like interests on a semi-regular basis.

East Asian studies entered a much more expansive period in the 1950s which has carried the field far beyond its prewar status. Still, the consciousness of the missionaries, and of the sons and daughters of missionaries, that East Asia lay at Southern California's doorstep was vital in laying the foundations for the region's ongoing interest in China, Japan and Korea.