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Team to Discuss Groundbreaking Studies at Asian Studies Colloquium

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— Three Illinois Wesleyan University students and a professor who traveled to China this summer will speak about the groundbreaking work of their team at the Asian Studies Colloquium Series on Tuesday, Nov. 13, from 12:10 p.m. to 1 p.m. in Room E 103 of the Center for Natural Sciences (201 Beecher Street). The event is part of International Week on campus, and the public is invited to attend.

The Series is an opportunity for faculty and students to share findings from their specialized research on Asia. The presenting research team, led by Thomas Lutze, associate professor and chair of the history department at Illinois Wesleyan, journeyed to the Chinese cities, Beijing, Shanghai, Peking and Hangzhou, to explore urban planning in post-Revolutionary China. It is an area relatively untouched in the field of Chinese history, according to Lutze.

“This is a significant research topic in modern Chinese history that has been overlooked in Western literature, and not very widely researched in China,” said Lutze, whose team investigated how the Communist government of 1949 addressed the chaos of post-war China. “After eight years of World War II and three years of Civil War, the infrastructure of urban China had been pretty much destroyed. There were a lot of people who were in desperate need of housing, of health care, of schooling.”

In order to explore the issue, the team received an ASIANetwork Freeman Student Faculty Fellows Grant that allowed them to travel for nearly three and a half weeks in June and July to universities, archives and sites in the three cities. The five IWU students on the team were each assigned a topic to research: pollution, education, housing, sanitation and health care. “We were able to go into the stacks and look up articles, with the help of translators of course,” said Christy Ivie, a junior sociology major who studied efforts of the government to provide housing. “We walked through the housing built by the government. It was incredible to actually see what we were researching right in front of us.”

Students also had the opportunity to interview residents of the housing complex. “We stumbled across a woman whose mother had lived in the complex since it was built,” said Lutze.

“Having the chance to speak with someone who had lived through these changes a half century ago was a remarkable research and personal experience for the students.”

Illinois Wesleyan has built strong relationships in China, said Lutze, including one with the history department at Peking University. It was through this friendship that Lutze and the students were able to interview former government officials who worked during the modernization efforts. “We sat down and spoke with former directors of city planning, who had been in charge during our period of study,” said Melisa Maisel, a junior political science major who is researching sanitation efforts. “I was able to ask about creating a sewage system, and overall efforts to stop public health threats.”

Though the students knew little Chinese, Lutze said he taught them some characters to help identify articles and dates, and students worked with Chinese dictionaries on their own to expand their language skills. “We were able to go back in the stacks at one of the libraries, which is very rare,” said Lutze. “And I would hear a squeal of joy, ‘I found something!’ from a student who discovered an article that pertained to our research subject. They found it on their own, which was exciting.”

The team used translators to assist with work, some from Peking University, and some who were from a little closer to home. “Two Illinois Wesleyan students were in China and helped with research,” said Lutze of Anna File, a junior who was studying abroad in China, and Adam Guo, sophomore international student from China, who met the team to help with research. They also connected with three Chinese students who now attend IWU as first-year students. “Ren Chao, Zhu Taole and Wu Xiangyu all came from different parts of China to help us out,” said Ivie. “Now we’re all at Illinois Wesleyan together.”

The team is working to compile the great amount of data they collected while in China. Ivie, Maisel, File and Lutze will discuss their research at the Colloquium, as well as at several conferences across the United States over the next year. As they travel, the four hope to be joined by team members Liz Chandler and Eric Fatla, who graduated in May from IWU, and Sneh Rajbhandari, a junior business administration and political science major who is currently an IWU Pembroke Scholar, studying at Oxford University.

“This has been an extraordinary experience. I never thought I would be able to write a grant, let alone receive it, and then be able to travel to a foreign country to do research few have ever done,” Ivie said.