Fulbright Specialist Scholar’s Story (Project #5580)

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“Upstart U”

New universities are not created every day; nor, as with Rome, in a single day. In the US these days we expend much of our time and effort just trying to keep our universities afloat. Yet stakeholders in Mongolia are building a new American University of Mongolia here in Ulaanbaatar from scratch. To their immense credit, the Board of Trustees and the academic staff on the ground are committed to making AUM a fully-fledged liberal arts university that is responsive to Mongolia’s educational needs and economic priorities. This means, in large part, dismantling the old Soviet style of top-down rote learning and replacing it with a more dynamic, free exchange of ideas in the classroom.

It came as a pleasant surprise to me to learn that the time-honored liberal arts virtues of critical/creative thinking and effective communication are highly prized by employers here in Mongolia’s growing economy (which is based largely on the discovery of substantial reserves of coal, oil, and ore in the Gobi region and elsewhere). My Fulbright Specialist assignment was to design a multi-disciplinary first-year seminar that would help foster the competencies afforded by an “American-style” liberal education for a University whose larger curriculum will ultimately emphasize engineering and business studies. So what’s on the syllabus? For good reasons whose detailed justification is beyond my scope here: The Iliad, the Bhagavad-Gita, Rousseau’s Origins of Inequality, a unit on the invention and practice of democracy, Thoreau’s “Walking,” Veblen’s Theory of the Leisure Class, and classic American poems by Dickinson, Whitman, Wallace Stevens, and others.

Mongolia is a young democracy, still finding its feet politically and adjusting to a full-blown market economy. It faces emergent environmental challenges. But it is also a country full of potential, on the cusp of greatness. To be an integral part of the founding of a new institution of higher learning in a place like this is a rare opportunity. It is a chance to shape a whole generation’s values and style of thinking. Nobel laureate Amartya Sen and an international team of educators are engaged in doing just this at
another upstart in Asia—Nalanda International University, in Bihar, India—where one of the world’s most ancient, but long defunct, centers of learning is being resurrected and brought into the 21st century. AUM’s goal is no less ambitious, and its impact on Mongolian society will be no less great.

I had visited Ulaanbaatar before (in 2011) to give lectures on oral tradition studies at the Mongolian Academy of Sciences. The Fulbright invitation to invent the first-year curriculum at AUM emerged serendipitously from contacts made during that visit. Serendipitous encounters punctuated this Mongolian sojourn, too, a function perhaps of the country’s nomadic traditions. My arrival coincided with Naadam, the nation’s ceremonious festival of horse racing, archery, and wrestling. I caught the Mongolian premiere of Mongolian Bling, an inspiring documentary film about the hip-hop scene in UB. It is part of the charm of a sparsely populated country that one could run into the filmmaker on the street the next day and have a 20-minute impromptu conversation about his artistic choices. Indeed, UB is such a small place, relatively speaking (though half the country’s population of 2.8 million lives here), that I managed to attend the Mongolian Presidential inauguration as a “VIP.” But what made this working visit most memorable was the generosity and intelligence of my AUM hosts and colleagues, which could not have been more splendid.

In terms of results, my brief stay at AUM as a Specialist seems to be blossoming into a more long-term relationship with Mongolia: Upon return home, I will be helping AUM with the recruitment of faculty. And there are plans for me to come back to Ulaanbaatar prior to AUM’s inaugural year—Fall 2015—to hold a faculty development seminar on the course I designed.

Photos (© M. D. Usher): 1) Blue Sky Tower and Choijin Lama Temple; 2) Central Tower with Mongolian flag draped for Naadam; 3) Mongolian buskers at Naadam; 4) left: Naadam wrestlers; 5) right: Naadam boys on horses.