Columbia University recently announced that it is establishing the world’s first chair in modern Tibetan studies. The Leila Hadley Luce Professorship is made possible by a $3 million award from the Henry Luce Foundation. The chair will be based in the University’s interdisciplinary East Asian Languages and Cultures Department, already a leading center for the study of China, Japan and Korea. The chair is named after Leila Hadley Luce, an author and explorer who has long supported Tibetan culture.

Columbia’s new chair in modern Tibetan studies represents a major development in the study of Tibet, viewing it in its contemporaneity as a living civilization. The program will emphasize the study of modern Tibet in relation to its historical roots.

“Through this grant, we are delighted to recognize Columbia’s international leadership in the study of Tibet,” said Terrill E. Lautz, the Luce Foundation’s vice president and program director. “The Leila Hadley Luce Professorship and program funds will open new scholarly vistas on Tibet, in keeping with the foundation’s mandate to increase American understanding of Asia.”

The grant includes a five-year program fund to assist in developing a Center for Integrated Tibetan Studies at Columbia, which will combine both classical and modern Tibetan studies, and to promote exchanges with Tibetan scholars. The center represents a collaboration between the University’s Weatherhead East Asian Institute (WEAI), the Department of Religion and the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures. Madeline Zelin, professor of modern Chinese history, said, “This is one of those wonderful moments when University efforts and a farsighted foundation came together to do something new and important.”

The Luce chair adds another significant component to the already strong Tibetan studies and resources at Columbia. Columbia’s Starr East Asian Library has long had one of the leading Tibetan collections in the United States. The University’s commitment to classical Tibetan studies was strengthened in 1988 by the creation of the Jey Tsong Khapa Professorship of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Studies, held by Robert Thurman, a renowned scholar and leading interpreter of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism in the West. Columbia’s importance as a center of Tibetan studies is further bolstered by the presence of Lozang Jamspal, a well-known lecturer in classical Tibetan and Buddhist Sanskrit, and Tenzin Nocyu, a graduate of Tibet University and instructor in modern Tibetan.

In 2000, professor Madeleine Zelin, then director of WEAI at Columbia, launched an initiative to expand research and teaching on modern Tibet under the coordination of Robert Barnett. With support from the WEAI’s Richard W. Weatherhead Fund and Columbia’s East Asian National Resource Center (Department of Education Title VI), Columbia has now established a program in modern Tibetan language, as well as a number of courses on modern historical and literary subjects offered through the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures.

With grants from WEAI, the Trace Foundation, the Ford Foundation and the Helen C. Frick Foundation, visiting scholars at Columbia since 2000 have included the premier Tibetan linguist, translator and scholar, Tudeng Nima (Alak Zenkar); the most prominent of all early Tibetan progressive leaders, Phuntsok Wangyal; and the first Tibetan sociologist, Tenzin Lhundup. In 2001, Columbia, in partnership with the University of Virginia, set up the only foreign teaching program in Tibet itself. This year 40 students from around the world will travel to Lhasa to study the Tibetan language at Tibet University through this program.