Revitalized South Asia Program Entices Scholar Back to Columbia

By Mary-Lea Cox

S heldon Pollock was at Columbia University once before—as an undergraduate. He did not receive a Columbia degree, however. A student of the classics, he developed a passion for Sanskrit, the language that played the same role in India that Latin played in Europe. To pursue this new-found interest, he decided to transfer to Harvard, which had, at the time, a venerable Sanskrit program.

What a difference a few decades make! After completing a Ph.D. in Sanskrit and Indian studies at Harvard and spending 16 years as a professor at the University of Chicago, Pollock has now returned to Columbia as its first senior South Asian scholar. He occupies the William B. Ransford chair of Sanskrit and South Asian Studies in the Department of Middle East and Asian Languages (MEALAC). He found the offer of the chair irresistible because, as he puts it, the University is “poised to become the leading center for South Asian studies in the United States and maybe in the world.”

Pollock pays tribute to Lee C. Bollinger and Arts and Sciences dean Nicholas Dirks for rebuilding Columbia’s South Asian studies program. Thanks to their efforts, Columbia now has a “critical mass of scholars in the social sciences and humanities who respect each other and are committed to a new approach to the creation of non-Western knowledge,” Pollock says. A small, yet telling, example of Columbia’s progressiveness is that Ph.D. students are allowed to pursue joint degrees in Sanskrit and comparative literature—which would not be possible at Chicago, Pollock says, adding that “good things can flow out of that, both intellectually and jobwise.”

Curiously, Pollock became fascinated with ancient Sanskrit texts not because he was attracted to India as a country but because he was profoundly interested in classical languages and their afterlife. “India is a particularly rich place to study ancient languages and texts in their historical and cultural context,” he explains. “It’s at once a vast and ancient one with a very present past.”

For Pollock, Sanskrit provides a gateway not only into premodern Indian thought and practice but also into alternative ways of thinking about the world. He specializes in non-religious Sanskrit texts—both classical literature and philosophy. As most Sanskrit specialists focus on religious texts (Sanskrit is, after all, the ‘language of the Gods’), he hopes to “restore the balance.”

Secular Sanskrit texts can shed light, for example, on India’s unique concept of pluralism, which runs counter to European notions of singularity—that ethnic groups, for example, must eventually evolve into a nation with a single national identity. “There is no historical record of nationalism developing in India before the arrival of colonialism and capitalism,” Pollock states.

Likewise, Indians had no concept of a ‘mother tongue.’ People in India would have multiple mother tongues,” he says, and thinking of it differently. “These and other insights are encapsulated in Pollock’s new book, The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India (U. of California Press).”

Pollock took his interest in Sanskrit to India in January (see article on previous page). At that time, he hoped to advance the cause of an international research project he is leading that seeks to capture new light on Indian systematic thought—from aesthetics to astronomy—on the eve of the colonial encounter.

He and several other South Asia scholars have identified manuscript materials they’d like to see stored in an online digital archive as well as mined for a sophisticated interactive database, guaranteeing that scholars everywhere will have access to important texts that might otherwise be preserved as well as a deeper understanding of the social history of India and its contributions.

Upon his return to campus after the research trip, Pollock looks forward to hosting along with other MEALAC faculty, a February conference on the problems of modern-day India. It is notoriously difficult to obtain information on late pre-colonial India, he points out, emphasizing that it is because scholars here are willing to tackle such difficult questions that he is back where he started.

Sheldon Pollock joined the MEALAC faculty in September. For more on his Sanskrit Knowledge Systems project, go to http://dsal.uchicago.edu/sanskrit/index.html

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Community News

Molecular Cardiology Center Launched

On Monday, Dec. 5, President Lee C. Bollinger delivered remarks at the dedication of the Clyde and Helen Wu Center for Molecular Cardiology, Clyde Wu, a member of Columbia’s Board of Trustees, along with his wife, Helen, donated $20 million to permanently endow the Wu Center, which is devoted to innovations in targeting underlying causes of cardiovascular illness. Andy Marks, the Center’s director, was also honored for his exceptional work in molecular cardiology. Pictured (left to right): Herbert Pardes, president and CEO, New York Presbyterian Hospital; Clyde Wu; Andy Marks; and Lee C. Bollinger.

Harlem Hospital Hosts Gala Benefit

The Friends of Harlem Hospital Center (FHHC) hosted their 13th Annual Gala Dinner and Dance on Tuesday, Nov. 29. President Lee C. Bollinger delivered welcoming remarks, and the FHHC honored distinguished professionals and corporations for excellence in medicine and dedication to philanthropic causes. Pictured (left to right): Frank Cornemser, Gala Benefit chair and president and general manager of WNBC; John M. Palmer, non- oree and executive director of Harlem Hospital Center and Renessence Health Care Network; Carol D. Smith, Gala Benefit co-chair and FHHC board member; Gloria Byneie Thomas, chair and president, FHHC; Chuck Jackson, vocalist and advisor board member, Harlem Hospital Center; Dionne Warwick, honoree; and Congressman Charles Rangel (D-NY).

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E-mail System Updated

“Cyrus” Offers More Storage, Faster Speeds

The “migration” to Columbia’s new e-mail servers that began in September is well under way and should be completed by March 2006. Thirteen thousand students and staff are already using the enhanced system, which provides six times more storage for students than before (250 megabytes as compared to the current 40) and quicker performance.

The effort to migrate all 66,000 Columbia users is going smoothly despite last month’s widespread email problems, which Columbia University Information Technology (CUIT) vice president Candace Fleming says were not connected to the migration to Cyrus but rather to a failure of one server in the old e-mail system.

But in general, Fleming says, “as we move people to this much more reliable and higher capacity email system, even those remaining temporarily on the old system should see a better performance.”

Students and staff can continue using the same software, and all old messages are transferred during the migration process. CubeMail requires no adjustment after a switch to the new system, while programs such as Thunderbird, Outlook and Apple Mail will require a simple reconfiguration that takes only a minute or two. Instructions and assistance on how to do this are available both online and through the CUIT help desk.

CUIT based the new system on the Cyrus mail server developed at Carnegie Mellon University and after user feedback highlighted the need for more storage and faster response, Columbia bought nearly 20 new servers to implement the Cyrus system.

For more information on the Cyrus initiative, go to www.columbia.edu/acis/email/cyrus/