

# On the Road in Asia

Looking eastward at the Middlebury network—past, present, and future.

BY PRESIDENT RONALD D. LIEBOWITZ



**I**N NOVEMBER I spent a week traveling in Asia with Middlebury colleagues Mike Schoenfeld '73, senior vice president and chief philanthropic adviser, and Dina Wolkoff '88, senior development officer for Asia. Our trip took us to four cities—Tokyo, Beijing, Hong Kong, and Singapore—where we met with more than 250 parents and alumni of Middlebury College, the Language Schools, the Schools Abroad, and the Monterey Institute of

International Studies. We held receptions in all of these cities, each attended by 60 to 80 guests, making these by far the largest gatherings the College has ever hosted in Asia.

For me, this trip provided an ideal opportunity to reflect on what it means to be leading an institution that aspires to be the global liberal arts college for the 21st century. While Middlebury is certainly not alone in its efforts to think globally—Yale and Duke have been in the news recently for launching campuses in Singapore and China—our position in American higher education is distinct because we are a liberal arts college that's been thinking internationally for almost a century. It's clear from our broad array of international programs that Middlebury has an impressive global footprint: the undergraduate language and international studies programs; the 10 summer Language Schools; our Schools Abroad sites in 38 cities and 16 countries; and the graduate programs at the Monterey Institute. But institutional reach alone does not make Middlebury a global liberal arts college. What matters most is how we educate

students to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

Being a global liberal arts college means that our students, irrespective of their majors and whether they travel or study abroad, gain an international perspective through their experiences on our campus, both in and out of the classroom. International students, who constitute about 10 percent of the undergraduate student body, offer alternative perspectives in class, in the residence halls, and in the dining rooms. Then there is the academic program. During the past 15 years, we have been purposeful in recruiting and hiring faculty across the curriculum who have an international focus in their work. Consequently, a large percentage of our courses are informed by the realization that we are living in a globalized, interconnected world. This generation of students has no choice but to engage this world while at Middlebury and after graduating.

Finally, it's worth emphasizing the most powerful way in which our students develop a global outlook: they study abroad. Middlebury students can choose to study a number

of languages and cultures in departments recognized for their excellence, and approximately 60 percent of them study abroad for a semester or a year. For these students, that means six months to a year immersed in the culture and language of another country.

Middlebury's global orientation developed fortuitously in 1915 when the College established the intensive summer German Language School, the first of our 10 Language Schools. In retrospect, this move appears to be one of the most important educational—and entrepreneurial—decisions that the College has ever made. Over the years, our strengths in language education have been the leading feature in Middlebury's reputation. In the past two decades, we have deliberately sought to build upon these strengths and enhance the international dimensions of a Middlebury education across disciplines. And that is why we went to Asia.

Our trip had several specific purposes. First, to show the College's support for the alumni and parent network in Asia and all that it does on our behalf. Second, to seek

increased support for the College, in the form of both funding and developing greater opportunities for students through mentoring, internships, and jobs. And, finally, to strengthen the College's network by bringing alumni of the undergraduate college together with alumni of the Language Schools, the Schools Abroad, and the Monterey Institute.

The Middlebury network in Asia has been developing for decades. The first students from the region to attend Middlebury were introduced to the College in the late '50s by C.V. Starr, the founder of American International Group (AIG) and a source of continuous, generous financial support to the College through the Starr Foundation. He convinced some of his Chinese colleagues in Hong Kong that Middlebury would be a suitable place for their sons and daughters to get a liberal arts education. One of the first Chinese students to make the journey to Vermont was Tom Kan '64, who introduced me when I spoke at a dinner in Hong Kong. His daughter, Andrea '96, later followed him to Middlebury, becoming our first legacy student from Asia.

Most of the people at the gatherings in each of the four cities were alumni, who represented an interesting mix of experience and perspective.

Almost all of the older alumni were American expatriates, some of whom have lived and worked in Asia for 40 years or more. Many of the younger alumni were international students who returned to their native countries after graduation. The number of alumni in Asia reflects the dramatic increase in the number of

international students attending Middlebury in recent decades. In 1980, international students made up less than one percent of the student population; now they represent about 10 percent. Today, there are 91 students from Asian countries enrolled at Middlebury and 129 at the Monterey Institute.

In Tokyo, I met one of the first students to come to Middlebury from Japan, Koichi Ishiyama '69. His story is extraordinary. After receiving a scholarship to attend Middlebury, he traveled to North America by boat and then made his way across Canada to Montreal, and eventually to the College. He still remembers the day he realized that he could understand English beyond the bookish knowledge he brought with him to the States. It was December 14, 1966, halfway through his sophomore year. He was watching Walter Cronkite on the evening news and was startled to discover that he understood every word. After graduating, he returned to Japan to teach English and journalism, and to write what has become one of the world's most popular Japanese-English dictionaries. He served on the Alumni Association Board and has been an active volunteer for the College for more than 40 years.

We next visited Beijing, where our reception featured a fascinating panel discussion that included two alumni from the College and two from the Chinese School. The College alumni who served on the panel were Tao Zhou '98, a native of Shanghai, and Dado Derviskadic '08, who grew up in Brooklyn; the Chinese School alumni were Kim

Woodard LS'66 and Frances Fremont-Smith LS'77, P'10. Kim attended the first year of Middlebury's summer Chinese School in 1966, when the United States was fighting a proxy war with China in Vietnam. He was one of the first Americans to enter China during Nixon's ping-pong-diplomacy effort in the early 1970s and has been there ever since. In those early days, he said, he knew just about every American doing business in China. Now, Americans number greater than 100,000, and they work in a variety of fields, including banking, finance, education, publishing, technology, and green energy.

During the panel discussion, Tao Zhou reflected on his journey back to China after his time at Middlebury. A math and computer science major with a minor in physics, he credits his liberal arts background for his willingness to take chances and to test himself and his passion for "living a life of uncertainty." After graduating from Middlebury, he earned two master's degrees from Dartmouth before returning to China. Because he feels that he was born to be an entrepreneur, he has started a data-storage company that now employs 30 people and continues to grow. He mentioned how his next pursuit is unclear, but suggested he might go back to university to earn an advanced degree in philosophy.

In each of the cities we visited, I met people from different generations, with extensive experience and far-reaching connections, who are eager to help recent graduates and current students who want to work or study in Asia. We discussed participat-

ing in admissions recruiting, creating internship opportunities, supporting financial aid, and assisting with career networking. We succeeded in obtaining commitments from a number of parents, alumni, and friends of the College to create new internships for students; such internships are becoming more and more important for those who seek longer-term opportunities in Asia. We also received immediate and unexpected financial support, as people attending meetings or receptions made gifts and pledges to the College on the spot, which was very welcome and gratifying.

Overall, this trip demonstrated the value of reaching out to everyone who has a connection to Middlebury's rich array of programs with an international focus. By engaging alumni of the College, the Language Schools, the Schools Abroad, and the Monterey Institute, we are attempting to nearly triple the number of people who can serve as resources for our students and other alumni. Including alumni from all of these programs increases our alumni body from slightly fewer than 30,000 graduates of the undergraduate college to about 80,000. No other liberal arts college can boast an alumni network as large, distinguished, and global as ours.

Clearly, this fact was not overlooked by the students, alumni, and parents at our four receptions. Many of the people attending had never met before, and I could see them feverishly thumbing the keys of their smartphones as they exchanged contact information. The Middlebury network was expanding before my eyes. 🌸