

Building a bridge across the Pacific

By Susan Bell
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A dramatic view of Singapore's Marina Bay at night as seen by students in USC Dornsife's first Maymester trip to that part of Southeast Asia; the ArtScience Museum, which is frequently compared to a lotus flower, is on the left. (Photo/Vivian Wu)

As political and economic focus shifts from Europe and the West toward the emerging powers of the East, the 21st century is being dubbed "America's Pacific Century."

However, the United States' position on the dynamic region of Southeast Asia is anything but clear and questions abound. How is U.S. foreign policy shaping up after the 2012 presidential election? How does China's new leadership see its role in Southeast Asia? And how do Southeast Asian leaders and analysts view prospects for regional stability.

A new Maymester course taught during the spring took 14 USC Dornsife College of

Letters, Arts and Sciences undergraduates to Singapore to find the answers to these and other questions by talking to two dozen of the region's leading policymakers, analysts and scholars. Titled "America's Pacific Century: Dialogues Between the United States and Asia," the month-long course was led by Saori Katada, associate professor and graduate director of international relations at USC Dornsife.

"Overseas trips like this are so important because they provide an opportunity to make students' academic learning real," Katada said. "They allow students to connect with the people, the place and the project being studied, and allow students to take ownership of what they are learning in a way that is tangible and personal."

Jennifer Mo, a junior majoring in business administration with a minor in international relations, agreed.

"It's one thing to read textbooks and articles in a classroom, but it's a completely different experience interacting with scholars and diplomats face-to-face," she said, describing the trip as "a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

Katada devised the course with James Tang, professor of political science and dean of the School of Social Sciences at Singapore Management University (SMU).

"He got interested in Maymester when he visited us two years ago and suggested it might be a good idea to do an exchange," she said.

"We agreed on the importance of basing the course around an interesting and unique teaching and learning experience, including exchange, peer-to-peer and active learning and the student creation of an original policy recommendation."

Students attended four preparation classes in which they wrote analyses of the political policies of the various countries involved and learned about the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

The course kicked off on May 20 when seven SMU students arrived at USC to spend a week conducting interviews and participating in workshops where they presented their findings to USC counterparts.

On May 30, the USC Dornsife undergraduates left LA for Singapore.

Divided into groups that would create a 50-page task force report, the students examined political/diplomatic themes, including military security and nontraditional security (which included issues such as environment, drugs, human trafficking and disaster relief) and social/cultural issues.



USC Dornsife undergrads visit Singapore's iconic Merlion with Saori Katada, professor of international relations. In the background is the Marina Bay Sands, a shopping center, hotel and casino. (Photo/Vivian Wu)

On an academic level, Katada said the students learned how to conduct independent research by developing highly focused and targeted interviews with analysts, policymakers and scholars. They were also honored with a visit from S.R. Nathan, the former president of Singapore, who spoke about Southeast Asian relations with the United States.

The highlight of the course came when the students presented their policy recommendations on how to improve Southeast Asia relations to the Obama administration before a full house at the American Chamber of Commerce in Singapore.

"James and I were very proud to see the students articulately outline their analyses and recommendations, and to successfully field questions from the audience and expert panelists," Katada said. "It was an intense experience for the students, but I think they were also pretty proud of being able to pull that off."

An edited and bound final version of the students' findings will be sent to all those interviewed for the project as well as SMU participants and faculty. Katada is also planning to send a copy to the White House.

"We may have some policy impact," said Katada, who praised the students' efforts.

"They all worked very hard and very well together," she said. "The group dynamics among the students was wonderful and created this tremendous commitment to the project. They were really engaged because of the way the course was structured and the fact that they had ownership of their work."

Katada also credited the importance of peer-to-peer learning in the students' steep learning curve and had kind words for SMU students.



“The Singaporean students were magnificent. Not only are they smart, articulate and very knowledgeable about the region, they were also very generous with their time both in showing our students around in Singapore and in sharing their ideas and knowledge.”

Jingwen Zhou, a senior majoring in international relations (global business), agreed.

“We formed very close bonds with the local students and were able to communicate with them on various topics,” she said. “The course gave us a wonderful opportunity to make friends while enabling us to do more efficient research.”

The trip wasn’t all work and no play, however. Exploring Singapore in their free time, students visited the city’s Night Safari, the world’s first nocturnal zoo. Set in a humid tropical forest, it allows more than 1,000 animals, including many rare and endangered species, to be seen in their nighttime habitat.

At Gardens by the Bay, which features a tropical garden with a 115-foot-high waterfall, the group toured two giant conservatories, the Flower Dome and the Cloud Forest.

“From any part of the country you can enjoy amazing views of landmarks like the Marina Bay Sands Hotel, the Flower Dome and Cloud Forest, the Merlions and the Espionage,” Mo said.

Students sampled exotic Singaporean cuisine with its many international influences at dozens of tiny food stands selling Malay, Thai, Chinese, Indian and Middle Eastern dishes.

“I’m a foodie, so having internationally famous chili crab at Jumbo Seafood at Clarke Quay was a personal highlight,” said Alexis Montgomery, a junior majoring in international relations (global business).

Montgomery also tried one of Singapore’s celebrated fish pedicures in which dozens of tiny toothless carp known as garra rufa, or doctor fish, nibbled the dead skin from her toes and feet to leave them baby soft.

The USC Dornsife students, who were surprised by the extent of Singapore’s multiculturalism, were also impressed with the city’s low crime rates and advanced infrastructure and technology, including its dramatic modern architecture and clean, efficient transport system.

“It’s a beautiful city, a city of the future,” Mo said.

Katada added: “Singapore is a very exciting place to visit. Our students were able to get a sense of the rising Asia and experience firsthand why Asians are so proud of their progress and achievement.”

Each student benefited from a \$1,000 grant provided by USC Dornsife's Student Opportunities for Academic Research.

"It helped our students significantly to have this financial support and enabled some of them who otherwise might not have been able to participate to do so," Katada said.

"This was such a unique and rewarding experience for the students — the trip really exceeded our expectations," she said. "They learned the substance of U.S. presence in and its foreign policy toward Southeast Asia from two dozen premier experts on the subject. And they deepened their understanding through peer-to-peer learning. This was active learning at its finest.

"I believe that the strong bonds created between the USC and SMU students during their shared experience from the course will last a lifetime and will contribute to a genuine bridge across the Pacific."



Alexis Montgomery, Jennifer Mo, Jason Tse, Kimberly Hernandez and Dhwani Thapar pose on Singapore's popular island resort of Sentosa.