

State of the Discipline:

# Asian and Near Eastern Languages

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From top left counterclockwise: Seoul, South Korea; Petra, Jordan; Great Wall of China; BYU Jerusalem Center; Chureito Pagoda, Fujiyoshida, Japan



The Department of Asian & Near Eastern Languages teaches some of the most common yet challenging, as well as some of the most unusual, languages in the world.

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his article represents the fourth in our State of the Discipline series of articles featuring departments in the College. The first three (Comparative Arts & Letters, Fall 2021; English, Spring 2022; and Linguistics, Fall 2022) dealt primarily with the discipline itself.

Now we turn to our language departments, all of which focus on two or more specific languages and cultures but contain faculty whose specialties span many disciplines. In this issue we cover the Department of Asian & Near Eastern Languages (A&NEL). As its name suggests, the department includes major cultures and languages found in the Middle East and East Asia: Arabic and Hebrew from the former and Chinese, Korean, and Japanese from the latter. All but Hebrew offer majors, and all five have minors.

### A Diverse Department

Faculty in the department specialize in language pedagogy, linguistics, philology, culture, and literature. In addition, the department offers classes in ancient languages such as Ugaritic, Akkadian, and Egyptian. Put succinctly, the department is not just interesting and unusual but also one of the most diverse departments at BYU. The cultural diaspora of the five major languages, particularly Arabic and Chinese, has led to them being spoken in practically every major city in the world.

All the languages taught in the department—both ancient and modern—are extremely challenging to learn, and that creates its own level of complexity. For example, according to the Defense Language Institute, which ranks languages based on the time and effort required for native English speakers to gain high levels of proficiency, all languages in A&NEL are classified among the most difficult.

The very nature of that difficulty, both in terms of mastery and scholarship, unifies faculty despite the great differences between the cultures. Dean J. Scott Miller, who teaches Japanese literature

in the department, says, “Faculty in the department get along surprisingly well, considering how the cultures we teach have sometimes had periods of enmity between one another. We’re all studying very challenging, difficult fields and are deeply committed to very complex languages and cultures. Maybe that gives us respect for each other, because, since we all recognize the difficulty of one another’s languages and the challenges of mastering them, we can empathize, having gone through the difficult training to get to where we are.”

Part of that complexity stems from the nonalphabetic scripts used in all languages taught in the department. As Department Chair Richard McBride (Korean Studies, East Asian Buddhism) says, “Our department has been called the ‘Department of Inscrutable Scripts.’ Almost every other department of languages, except for Russian, uses Roman letters, but we teach over eight ‘funny’ scripts.” Such variety creates interesting challenges and adds flavor both to the department makeup and to the range of scholarship and teaching.

### Quiet Evolution

From the perspective of structural organization and language focus, the department may seem relatively unchanged from its founding in 1982 (see sidebar for an organizational history of the department). A&NEL still offers the five main languages and still provides courses for several area studies programs sponsored by the David M. Kennedy Center for International Studies. And, like in the past, faculty are qualified to teach across a broad spectrum, not just in their primary disciplines. For example, Associate Professor Rachel Yu Liu (Chinese Linguistics, Second Language Acquisition) emphasizes modern pedagogy in her research, but she has taught almost every class offered in Chinese, from classical to modern.

The department is organized into four sections, each with its own faculty section head: Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Near Eastern (incorporating Arabic, Hebrew, and the ancient Near Eastern languages). These sections help with administrative work as well as providing support to faculty and students.

In some ways, however, there have been remarkable changes. One of those is a dramatic increase and variation in student interest and enrollment in the languages offered by the department as well as a dynamic demographic evolution over the last two decades. Professor Matthew Christensen (Chinese), director of the Chinese Flagship Center, says that several factors influence the rising numbers, specifically

#### History of the Department

**1968:** The Department of Classical and Asian Languages created.

**1972:** The department was split into the Department of Classical, Biblical, and Middle Eastern Languages and the Department of Asian and Slavic Languages.

**1982:** The department was again reorganized and renamed as the Department of Asian & Near Eastern Languages.

“The study abroad programs . . . all help the students use languages in real life and acquire cultural literacy in the target language countries.”

#### 4 Majors:

- Arabic language
- Chinese
- Japanese
- Korean

#### 8 Minors:

- Arabic
- Chinese
- Chinese teaching
- Japanese
- Japanese teaching
- Korean
- Biblical Hebrew
- Modern Hebrew

#### FACULTY-SUPPORTED PROGRAMS IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES

- Comparative literature
- Linguistics
- Second Language Teaching (SLaT) MA
- International Cinema minor

#### FACULTY-SUPPORTED PROGRAMS IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE KENNEDY CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

#### Majors

- Ancient Near Eastern studies:
- Hebrew Bible
- Asian studies:
- China studies,
- Japan studies,
- Korea studies
- Middle East studies/Arabic

#### Minors

- Ancient Near Eastern studies
- Middle East studies

economics, politics, increased online connections, and even the number of returned missionaries.

In the 1980s, Japan rose as an economic powerhouse, and enrollments in Japanese language courses rose. Then China began adopting and adapting some democratic economic principles and opening up to tourism. China quickly grew to match Japan as a world-economic player, and Chinese language enrollments increased. Japanese enrollments plateaued with its recession but have remained strong.

Prior to the last decade, most Chinese-speaking missionaries went to Hong Kong and Taiwan, learning traditional Chinese characters and language from a Cantonese or Taiwanese perspective. More recently, missionaries began learning Chinese in other locations, such as Singapore, California, New York, England, Australia, and Canada. Many of them do not have the same level of language reading and writing proficiency as those who serve in Hong Kong and Taiwan, so entry levels for a returned missionary represent a broader spectrum.

#### Political and Social Impact on Arabic and Hebrew

BYU has had a Middle Eastern studies area of emphasis since 1989, in part to support the educational experience at the BYU Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies. Faculty from several different colleges and departments helped teach there, and BYU began investing in developing Arabic and Hebrew faculty and coursework. “Most Arabic programs around the country had one faculty member; we had three,” says Professor Kirk Belnap (Arabic), director of the Arabic Flagship Center at BYU. Still, enrollments were not high.

Then came the tragic events of September 11, 2001, and “everything changed,” says Belnap. “Arabic became the flavor of the decade. There was enormous interest in Arabic studies. On the study abroad right before 9/11, we took 20 students to Damascus.” The study abroad programs paused for a few years after 9/11, but in 2004 they resumed with fervor, with 50 students attending to learn Arabic in Egypt.

“It’s unheard of,” Belnap says, for that many students studying to commit to “a full semester of study abroad who have already taken four classes.”

Numbers in Arabic have dropped a little over the last decade, but compared to other universities, they are still atypically high. During the fall 2022 semester, 41 students went to Morocco from 23 different majors, including Arabic, of course, but also biology, engineering, and music composition.

Although Hebrew maintains a strong teaching and student pool, enrollments have dropped somewhat over the last decade, following national trends and the closing of the Jerusalem Center due to COVID-19.

#### K-pop and Korea

Over the past decade or so, Korean student numbers have risen dramatically, mostly due to the rise in the popularity of Korean culture, particularly K-pop and other media. For example, between 2006 and 2016, the percentage of college students studying Korean nationally “rose by 95 percent,” says Associate Professor Julie Damron (Korean Linguistics and Pedagogy). “That is because of Korea’s online culture: their music, their social media, their dramas, things like that. Korean is getting a really large following among junior high and high school students who take it in college because they had no access to Korean in their high schools. Our classes follow that national trend; they’ve grown by about 90 percent.”

#### COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has also had a profound effect on enrollment. For several years no missionaries were sent to Japan, Korea, or Taiwan, and fewer missionaries learned these languages in other countries. Study abroad programs halted, and professors could not provide students with the same higher-level learning experiences. This has decreased both the number of returned missionaries currently enrolled and the number of students who achieved higher proficiency from those study abroad programs.

Even though the pandemic decreased enrollments nationally and at BYU, enrollments at BYU are higher relative to the rest of the country. Christensen says, “Usually by the fourth year, other universities have around 6 students. We have closer to 20 or 30 students in a fourth-year literature or language class. That’s completely unheard of at most universities.”

Now that travel restrictions have been removed or reduced, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Arabic enrollments have begun to rise, including among students who did not learn the languages on their missions.



Professor of Arabic Kirk Belnap and students in Morocco.



## Dual Enrollment Classes

Another significant influence on Chinese students began in 2008, explains Liu, “when the Utah Dual Language Immersion program was created.” In 2020, twelve years later, students who had graduated from those classes began attending BYU. “These students are very good at speaking and listening,” Liu says, but their grammar skills do not match their speaking skills “because they learned the language in a more natural way, without much attention to grammar rules. With this more diverse student body, our program is facing a lot of new challenges. We have meetings every semester to talk about these challenges, and I think we need to adjust our curriculum design so that we can better help these students.”

## Pedagogical Approaches

Some students study A&NEL languages out of pure interest. For example, a student may take one or two courses in Hebrew to gain a better understanding of the Bible but not want to go any further. Other students come for more advanced training, such as majoring or minoring in the language or its affiliated area studies program. Still others want to achieve the highest levels of proficiency for business or academic pursuits.

Having students come from a variety of language training experiences—heritage learners (spoke the language in their home), true beginners, and returned missionaries—influences how teachers approach language pedagogy. Faculty are currently evaluating how to help newer students achieve the same level of speaking proficiency as returned missionaries, while at the same time helping returned missionaries strengthen grammar skills and diversify vocabulary. Department programs emphasize language proficiency *and* cultural content and literacy, often taught in English. Liu explains, “The study abroad programs in Japan, Korea, Jordan, China, Taiwan, and Morocco all help the students use languages in real life and acquire cultural literacy in the target language countries.”

Faculty are committed to students achieving high levels of proficiency associated with the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) program. ACTFL is the governing body that deals with all foreign language teaching, from kindergarten all the way up to university levels. Christensen says, “They have a proficiency scale that goes from novice to superior, and we tie all our outcomes to these proficiency levels. A lot of traditional language programs treat foreign language study as an academic exercise, and we treat our languages as practical, functional skills that you could do something with when you graduate.”

Some faculty members have been participating in a special workshop run by the College of Humanities to help students articulate competencies they accrue in language classes. Damron says, “We are widening our view of what we want our students to be able to do when they leave with a humanities degree. They need to be able to verbalize the additional skills they’ve learned.” Liu says she wants her students to “think clearly, communicate effectively, and understand important ideas in their own cultural traditions and those of others. This is what we do to help them not just learn the language but also help them develop some lifelong skills that they can apply into their lives.”

The wide diversity of student experience coming into the classroom can create its own challenges. In the Korean courses, there can be up to 100 students in a class with no Korean background. Rather than let that be an impediment, Damron says, “We’re starting them on a path of lifelong learning, because to learn such a difficult language you have to be on that path. We have created opportunities for immersive experiences, and we strongly recommend our students, who’ve never been to Korea, to have some sort of immersive experience in the language by doing a direct enrollment, internship, study abroad program, or the foreign language house.”



Giza, Egypt.

Damron has also been experimenting in her Korean linguistics classes with creating exams that more closely resemble what graduates would encounter in real work environments. Instead of having students take lengthy exams on their own, students participate in “a four-day project. They work together in pairs to write their own exam. They spend two days writing an exam with access to all the books, the internet, everything. On the third day they take the test together. They have shared memory. They’re collaborating. They’re negotiating. They’re working together toward the end product.

“On the fourth day they get together with the other groups who wrote their test, and they give feedback on the test and their negotiated grade. And then we talk about how this group project prepared them for job interviews, working with teams, and graduate school.”

Professor Donald W. Parry (Hebrew Bible and Dead Sea Scrolls) explains that, over the last two decades, he and his colleagues in Hebrew have implemented a number of feedback-based changes, including nine new “digital tools and several hard copy resources to enhance learning of Biblical Hebrew, first year to advanced.” Further, they have made major changes to their Biblical and Modern Hebrew programs—including the way they teach classes and the resources they provide students—creating enhanced learning outcomes and improved exams. Parry shares an example: “For years we parsed Hebrew verbs by writing them on the whiteboard. This was very time consuming, and we perhaps parsed ten verbs in about ten minutes. But the Biblical Hebrew Learning Tool presents 3,000 verbs (electronically). We use that tool in class and can cover about 30 verbs in 10 minutes—three times more. That is an extraordinary improvement over using the whiteboard.”



## The Cambodian Oral History Project

The Khmer Rouge policy of genocide left a huge hole in family histories in Cambodia. Formally launched in January 2016, the Cambodian Oral History Project at BYU seeks to capture family stories in Cambodia by engaging local youth in the process. Youth and young adults in Cambodia interview family members to learn about their lives and stories. The project represents a broad partnership between BYU faculty, staff, and students and family history specialists, with the cooperation of local Cambodian leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

## Research

Earlier we noted that most faculty in the department do not specialize in the same way that faculty might in other departments. That does not mean the faculty do not engage in intriguing research and impassioned projects. Miller says, “Perhaps because of the peripheral nature of our areas in the American academy, the department contains world specialists in a variety of disciplines who are softly camouflaged behind the façade of a normal language department. It is a very humbling place to work.”

BYU is well placed to offer scholars groundbreaking opportunities to do unique studies, especially on advanced language learning, because of the large number of bilingual students here. For example, the Language Immersion Student Residence (LISR) has provided a way for faculty members to evaluate very closely the way language is being used by non-heritage learners. Students who live in LISR housing pledge to speak their immersion language, greatly accelerating their language adoption. Associate Professor Steve Moody (Japanese Linguistics) and Assistant Professor Shin Tsuchiya (Japanese Language Acquisition) have observed some very interesting characteristics in the ways LISR students were using Japanese in ways that native speakers would not. These findings inspired a research project that identifies the strengths and weaknesses of language immersion programs. Tsuchiya and Moody use the term “abominable fluency” to describe missionaries and LISR students who are proficient enough to communicate but then create unnatural phrases in their target language. The results of this ongoing research help faculty improve language learning experiences for students.

## Chinese and Arabic Flagships

Two other major developments with national and international significance have occurred within the department: the establishment of the Chinese Flagship Program (2002) and the Arabic Flagship Program (2018).

Flagship programs are a partnership between the United States federal government, under the direction of its National Security Education Program, and institutions of higher education. Their goal is to help individuals attain exceptional professional language proficiency and cultural competency so they can be a benefit to the country, regardless of their chosen major. These programs go beyond informal or even academic training and prepare students at a professional level with superior proficiency. As with all flagship programs, students at BYU who participate may come from any major but must complete an intensive language program at BYU over four semesters of study, then participate in a year-long immersive study abroad program either in Morocco (Arabic) or Taiwan (Chinese).

Students have many options now as they study Arabic or Chinese, including majoring in the languages or becoming flagship certified. More students from BYU participate in and graduate from these advanced programs than any other university in the world. In the fall 2022 semester, for example, BYU sent 7 of the 21 students to the Arabic program in Morocco, a much higher percentage than any of the other five universities involved.

## The Historic Languages

A&NEL also teaches Aramaic, Ugaritic, Akkadian, Egyptian, and Coptic—some of the most historically valuable languages taught anywhere in the world. These ancient languages, along with a few others taught on demand, provide students with unique insights into the ancient world. The courses are limited to one semester each, with faculty members focusing on texts and skills.

Professor John Gee (Ancient Near Eastern Languages) teaches Ugaritic, Akkadian, Egyptian, and Coptic on a rotating basis so that each course is taught once every two years. Class sizes tend to be small—anywhere from 1 student to 10. Gee hopes that students will learn enough of the language that they can continue studying it on their own. Thus, he focuses first on vocabulary and grammar for a few weeks then quickly gets the students into real texts. But, he says, “I’m really teaching them how to survive being a disciple and scholar. We have a heavy emphasis on methodology, issues that the texts raise as well as teaching them the language and how scholars think, why they do some of the things they do, why that can create problems, and how the gospel fits into their work and their life.”



Mount Fuji, Japan.





Temple in Kaohsiung City, Taiwan.

### A Spiritually Strengthening Program

A unique feature of any program at BYU is the opportunity to learn by study *and* by faith—in other words, to invite the Spirit into the classroom and into the lives of the students.

The Korean section hosts an exchange program that brings together students from BYU and Kyung Hee University in Seoul. These students spend a semester at each university, and they often do the same in graduate school. Many of the students in the program become lifelong friends.

Damron says that the foreign students “see our students going to church every Sunday, participating in church activities on the weeknights, and going to the temple. Our students often bring some of their South Korean friends with them to church.” It has been a great way to promote the gospel and give spiritual insights as they attend church together and talk about religion.

This sort of spiritual connection can happen in any A&NEL class as the students learn a language and about other cultures simultaneously. Many of the courses facilitate discussions on topics such as morality, devotional practice, and other ideas about faith. In fact, faculty are encouraged to bring up the gospel, how it relates to their studies, and why it matters. Students often mention these positive experiences directly to faculty and in course surveys. As A&NEL students and faculty engage in their language studies and create space for spiritually confirming experiences, the work they do enhances both education and scholarship.

“The department contains world specialists in a variety of disciplines who are softly camouflaged behind the façade of a normal language department.”

AS ONE OF THE MOST UNUSUAL AND DIVERSE DEPARTMENTS AT BYU, the Department of Asian & Near Eastern Languages continues to thrive in the face of disparate challenges. Even as world economic and social trends cause fluctuations in student enrollments, the department has adapted in terms of organization, research, and pedagogical approaches. The result is a department unified by intellectually rigorous and challenging languages in an environment conducive to spiritual growth. It is as remarkable as its languages and research emphases are varied. ■