With some 4,000 members and more than 300 events a year, the American Chamber of Commerce in Shanghai is the largest and fastest growing American Chamber in the Asia Pacific region. Under the leadership of Brenda Lei Foster, its first woman president, AmCham Shanghai — as the locals know the organization — is on pace to become the largest international business association in China.

As the head of the chamber known as the “Voice of Business in China,” Foster finds herself interacting with government officials and business executives from all over the world, including China and the United States. She travels regularly to cities throughout China where chambers are eager for American businesses to invest in their areas. “We’re big on building partnerships that have global reach and can support U.S. competition in China,” she explains. In 2009, for example, the Chamber released a Green Cap report — a multi-national, multi-corporation endeavor to chart a roadmap of China’s “green tech” or “clean tech” industry opportunities in nine different sectors.

As her fifth year in Shanghai approached, Foster was especially proud of AmCham’s work in collaboration with the Soong Ching Ling Foundation. The Chamber partnered with the foundation to build clinics in rural China, in some of the poorest areas in Guizhou province, where people have never had health care — and many have never seen a foreigner. The program has been nationally recognized as a model in China.

Foster has logged thousands of miles as an active member of the Asia Pacific Council for American Chambers, frequently speaking or leading training sessions and strategic planning workshops in the region.

In June 2009, she received the Athena International Award for leadership, the first to an expatriate American. Foster was honored for her AmCham work, recognition more than 30 years ago of the importance of China, as well as her leadership in business, international and women’s affairs. During a career dedicated to international relations, Foster was an adviser to two of Hawai‘i’s governors on national and international issues.

From a school girl’s interest in China, Foster went on to earn a B.A. and M.A. in Chinese studies from the University of Washington before coming to the East-West Center in 1976 on a fellowship, beginning a career path that eventually led to Shanghai.

“When I talk to students I tell them you have to have a passion for what you do,” Foster says, with characteristic enthusiasm. “I knew I wanted to work in international affairs and I have a love for China. I followed my passion and my love.”

“Being an East-West Center grantee was truly a turning point in my life. It gave me an opportunity to acquire the much needed knowledge and skills not available at home. It’s arguably a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for me as a student from a developing country.”
Tum May
Boosting Public Health and Opportunities in Cambodia

Tum May witnessed the starvation, suffering and death of Cambodia’s Killing Fields. “I still remember vividly as I was escaping from the Khmer Rouge in March 1979, I had a burning desire to go back to school and get as much of an education as I can,” he says.

That was the beginning of May’s “insatiable thirst for knowledge and skills to help put Cambodia back on track after years of havoc and destruction wreaked by the Khmer Rouge regime.”

In the early 1980s, basic social services were non-existent. May began work as a public health worker, having acquired enough practical knowledge to be hired by a district health center. He traveled from village to village in an ox cart with his itinerant health team, promoting awareness about public health, vaccination and prevention of communicable diseases. After each day’s work, leading health education sessions to help villagers understand the importance of prevention and basic medical care, he felt an immense sense of accomplishment.

Through his acquaintance with East-West Center Research Fellow Judy Ledgerwood, who was doing field work in Cambodia, May learned of the opportunities to further his public health education at the East-West Center. From 1994 to 1996, he pursued studies at the School of Public Health at the University of Hawai‘i.

Upon his return to Phnom Penh, May found himself charged with solving public health problems on a national level. He joined the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in 1998 and now manages the organization’s Cambodia office. While he misses the one-on-one contact with villagers he found so fulfilling, he’s involved in shaping policies to improve the health of families throughout his country.

May and his team assist the Cambodian government in forming guidelines and strategies to reduce poverty and support sustainable development, by addressing population, reproductive health and gender concerns. His office provides support to improve maternal and child health, collection of population data, and gender equality with a focus on promoting reproductive rights and addressing sexual and gender-based violence. And they’ve begun to chart signs of success.

“The ancient Chinese sage, Confucius, once said, ‘Get the families right, and all the rest of society will take care of itself.’ If individuals take care of their family, the whole society will be taken care of,” says May. “By this analogy, I believe that everyone can make a difference by way of their contribution to society and community, be they farmers, office workers or academics — each can make a difference in their own way.”
During his years as executive director of the Philippine Rice Research Institute (PhilRice), Santiago Obien witnessed a gray-to-green revolution that extended from his home province of Ilocos Norte to the south, in a nation dependent on rice as a staple food.

Under his guidance, PhilRice partnered with the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), which developed the miracle rice that made possible what was once just a dream of self-sufficiency. Obien anticipates the Philippines will soon be self-sufficient in the growing of rice.

A scientist, who received a master’s degree in agronomy and weed science and then a Ph.D. in soil science as an East-West Center grantee, Obien built PhilRice into a model research institution. He was tapped to be PhilRice executive director after serving concurrently as president of the Mariano Marcos State University and director of the Philippine Tobacco Research and Training Center. There he created an award-winning research center on the campus, recruiting some 240 researchers who were dispatched to branch stations and on-farm research sites.

That success brought him to the attention of the Philippine government, which wanted a first-class national research institute. “To build world-class institutions, we had to mobilize resources, harness talents and skills of many people, link with several institutions,” he recalls. He utilized his extensive administrative and technical knowledge, combined with social and cultural skills, to establish strong collaborations with universities and research organizations in China, Japan, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia and India.

“My experiences at the East-West Center came in handy,” he says. “People are all happy when they are treated nicely, when we understand their specific needs, respecting their habits and even religious inclinations. We did all this at the EWC, respecting differences but building bridges using our similarities.”

In 2000, Obien was honored as a “guiding father” of the Philippine rice industry by IRRI upon his retirement from PhilRice. Over the decades he trained hundreds of men and women, highly regarded scientists and researchers in academic and research institutions in the Philippines and the region, producing new technologies and guiding a new generation of students.

And the green revolution in the Philippines continues. In Mindanao, a woman farmer harvested 600 kilograms of rice from 1 kilogram of seeds she had planted after a three-day training workshop attended by 3,500 small-scale farmers. “In just a short time, farming became more profitable and the household had more rice to eat than they ever had before,” says Obien. “Yes, there is hope for every farmer with new technology.”
Sung Chul Yang
An Ambassador for Reconciliation and Peaceful Reunification

Sung Chul Yang experienced the nightmare of war as a child. Born in the southwestern region of South Korea, he was 10 years old when the Korean War erupted.

“The destruction was a terrible thing to witness,” he recalled in an interview with the University of Hawai‘i in 2003. “I saw dead bodies in the ditches of my hometown. Empty shells were my toys; my friends and I collected them and played soldier. We lived in a world where death and destruction were simply routine.”

At a young age, Yang perceived war as “a tragic merry-go-round.” So it is no surprise that his professional career has been devoted to efforts toward reconciliation and peace between North and South Korea.

Arriving at the East-West Center in 1965 to pursue a master’s degree, he encountered students from other countries and at first was startled by how little other students knew about Korea. But with typical self-reflection, he quickly realized he needed to raise his awareness of the world around him, too, and sought to understand different points of view and the cultures of his fellow grantees.

Yang proceeded to earn a Ph.D. from the University of Kentucky. He spent 30 years as a university professor in Kentucky and Indiana, then South Korea, before his election to the Korean National Assembly, where he championed reconciliation and reunification between the two Koreas. An internationally renowned expert on Korean politics and diplomacy, he served as the Republic of Korea’s ambassador to the U.S. from 2000 to 2003.

Today Ambassador Yang resides just outside Seoul, and chairs the advisory committee of the Kim Dae-Jung Peace Foundation. He continues to advocate for reconciliation and reunification. Years ago, he learned war “is not ‘the continuation of foreign policy by other means,’ but a policy failure. War-mongering is easy … but peace-making, that’s a huge challenge.”

He is fond of the Korean saying: “In 10 years, even mountains and rivers change.” For this engaging man, that expresses the hope he harbors that North and South Korea will be unified in his lifetime.

“I am by nature an optimist,” the ambassador says. “There is no better alternative to reconciliation and peace on the Korean peninsula. Ultimately, there will be no lasting peace in East Asia without a peaceful reunification of Korea.”

“I not only owe a lifelong gratitude to the East-West Center, but to the U.S. government and American people as well.”
As the new millennium dawned, Riley Lee performed on the shakuhachi from the top of the Sydney Opera House on an internationally televised program. That appearance was symbolic of his success in elevating recognition of the traditional Japanese flute to audiences worldwide.

In 1980 he became the first non-Japanese to attain the rank of *dai shihan* or Grand Master. Quite a distinction for a kid born in Texas, who at one time played bass for a rock band. Lee first heard the shakuhachi on an LP record in high school, after his family had moved to Hawai‘i. “I was totally taken by it,” he remembers. “The sound was coming from some living sentient being that was speaking to me. I thought, ‘Wow, this is really neat.’ ”

But it was in Japan in 1970 that Lee bought his first shakuhachi and took his first lesson. For seven years he lived in Japan, surviving rigorous instruction from traditional teachers. He trained barefoot in the snow. Blew into his flute under waterfalls. Practiced in blizzards until icicles formed at the end of the instrument. He’d already toured internationally with a Japanese troupe as a full-time performer on the shakuhachi and taiko drum when he returned to Hawai‘i.
In Honolulu, ethnomusicologists Ricardo Trimillos and Barbara Smith persuaded him to pursue graduate studies at the University of Hawai‘i through the East-West Center. Lee’s teacher in Japan also encouraged him. “My teacher thought that by getting more academic credentials,” Lee recalls, “I’d be able to bring the shakuhachi to the West better than if I was just a performer.”

After completing his master’s, Lee went on to complete a Ph.D. in ethnomusicology from the University of Sydney, where he is on the faculty. And for more than 24 years, Australia has been the staging ground in his endeavor to make the shakuhachi as universal as the piano or the guitar.

Along the way Lee has established himself as an innovator, performing as soloist on the shakuhachi with musicians on the harp, cello, saxophone, tabla, guitar, didjeridu (native Australian flute) and even symphony orchestras. He’s taught at Princeton, published widely and performed extensively. More than 50 of his commercial recordings are sold worldwide. He co-founded TaikOz, one of Australia’s premier performance groups.

In 2008 he was artistic director of the 5th World Shakuhachi Festival in Sydney. More than 450 participants and performers from every continent except Antarctica gathered to showcase the versatility of the shakuhachi. “It was tremendous,” marvels Lee. “It was like the Shakuhachi Olympics.”

“‘We in South Asia take pride in our culture, values, respect for life, but all of these are reversed in the case of women,’” Arfa Zehra told an audience at a United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) regional conference in 2008. Zehra was speaking as the head of the delegation from Pakistan, and chairperson of the country’s National Commission on the Status of Women. “The world has to make it up to women,” she encouraged, “and make it up rapidly.”

A longtime advocate of gender equality and ending violence against women, Zehra spoke of UNIFEM as “not only the conscience of the U.N. but also of governments and civil society.

“We have the greatest challenge on our hands,” she said. “We have to change history — let us share that burden equally.”

In her role on the national commission, as she has throughout a distinguished career, Zehra served as a conscience for Pakistan. That same year she led a delegation to the U.N.’s Commission on the Status of Women in New York. As a history professor and then leader of Lahore College for Women, she pushed for equality beyond the campus. “I observed my mother going through life in a stereotypical male-dominated society,” she says. “The early impressions of such life conditions made me think about the inequities and injustices so common to the underprivileged sections of society, especially women across the board.”

Her achievements have brought her national and international awards, but Zehra considers her most important accomplishment her role in the government’s passage of the Women Protection Act in 2006. The legislation ensures protection to women from “faulty and prejudiced laws.” Last year, several bills were introduced into the Parliament to extend protection of women domestically and in the workplace.

Zehra sees more possibilities for positive change. She continues to teach history, now at Forman Christian College University, promote interfaith dialogue, literacy programs and basic health awareness — as well as lead the EWCA Lahore Chapter. At the EWC, she earned a master’s degree and then a Ph.D. and returned with much more, she says, including “an enhanced confidence in human potential and capacities.”

“I learned to accept and examine issues, challenges and problems without getting angry or threatened,” she says. “My optimism was reassured of possibilities, no matter how grim or discouraging the situation might be.”
Elizabeth “Betty” Bullard
Born to Teach (1930–2008)

Elizabeth “Betty” Bullard was born to teach. Former students will tell you Miss Bullard was the teacher “who inspired you more than anyone else.” She didn’t pigeon-hole students. At a time when the South was resisting civil rights, she was color-blind. In the ’60s in North Carolina, where she was born and raised, her American History class was the class you didn’t want to miss.

Then she came to the East-West Center for a Teacher Interchange Program, a one-year non-degree program for social studies teachers from Asia and the United States. And there she found a new passion: Asia. As longtime friends noted, you could always hear North Carolina when Bullard spoke, but her heart forever after her EWC experience was in the Far East.

Like many of the TIP teachers, after her year at the EWC, Bullard went on to earn advanced degrees — first, a master’s in education from the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, followed by a doctorate in education from Duke University. She then dedicated herself to think globally through her work in the classroom, on television and public programs, always with great energy, enthusiasm and intellect.

Bullard became a curriculum specialist, then director of international education for the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. In Raleigh, she hosted her own public television program on world cultures. She spent five years as director of education for the Asia Society in New York before joining the University of South Carolina as a graduate professor of education.

In 1978, President Jimmy Carter appointed Bullard to the President’s Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies. Later she served as chief consultant to Walter Cronkite’s television series, “Why in the World?” By the time she retired from the University of South Carolina, her honors included North Carolina’s Outstanding Educator Award, national awards for excellence in writing, and the University of North Carolina Outstanding Alumna of the Year award in 1995.

A firm believer in the mission of the East-West Center, Bullard took on the responsibility of chairing the ’60s Alumni Endowment Fund Committee, inspiring its members to think big and set high goals. More than $300,000 has been raised by the ’60s alumni, followed by $200,000 by the ’70s alumni, enabling the Center to strengthen its student program — Betty Bullard’s lasting contribution toward the education of students from Asia, the Pacific and the United States.

“I would definitely say that there has been some EWC influence in how I plan and execute programs in the monasteries, in terms of creating goal-oriented projects and becoming a more effective leader. I think my experience with the EWC leadership program has enhanced my ability to approach projects with a larger world view and incorporate new ideas and methods that have been effective in other regions.”
From the main monastery in Thimpu, Rinchen Wangyel can see the eastern Himalayas, like snow-capped guardians watching over the kingdom of Bhutan. In December 2005, Rinchen returned to Taschichho Dzong Temple after completing his master’s degree in religious studies at the East-West Center, expecting to resume the solitude of monastic life.

Instead he found himself immersed in preparations for “The Dragon’s Gift: The Sacred Arts of Bhutan,” an extraordinary exhibition of works of art that had never been seen outside the kingdom. The landmark show opened at the Honolulu Academy of Arts in February 2008 before embarking on a worldwide tour. Rinchen accompanied Bhutanese delegations to Honolulu and other destinations in connection with the tour.

This work was in addition to his position as director of planning for all state-supported monasteries in the country, as part of the Council for Religious Affairs. Fluent in English, Rinchen worked alongside Western curators researching art pieces specific to Bhutanese tradition for the exhibition. He assisted with the translations so that they authentically reflected Buddhist heritage.

For the gentle-spoken monk, his role in the bridging of East and West through art was a logical next step after two years at the East-West Center, first in the Asia Pacific Leadership Program, then as a degree fellow.

In Hawai‘i, dressed in informal monk’s robes — “aloha style” robes, he called them — Rinchen learned about other cultures, religious traditions and made many friends. “In Bhutan,” he explains, “I’m exposed only to Buddhism, to the local traditions. I don’t have access to a whole lot of information.” He was interested in the social aspect of the study of religions and “what religion can contribute to building a more peaceful and tolerant global community.”

During his 20 years in the monastery, Rinchen has distinguished himself. He was involved in the education of young monks in the country and worked with United Nations agencies to improve sanitation in the monasteries. Prior to coming to the Center as an APLP fellow, he managed the Scriptural Preservation Project of Bhutan’s Central Monastic Body, an effort to preserve his nation’s religious and cultural heritage by documenting and disseminating its arts, history, rituals and practices so they could be more accessible to laypeople.

“The monasteries in Bhutan are noted for their seclusion and isolation and for centuries have kept outside influences at a minimum,” he says. “This is slowly beginning to change.” He believes his appointment to a significant position in the monastic establishment testifies to the importance being attached to change and sustainable development.