

Asianists in the Midwest

Nancy Abelmann (1959-2016)

As a leading American anthropologist of Korea, Nancy Abelmann produced eight books and numerous articles which examined South Korean social movements, education, family, youth, women, media, as well as the lives of Korean Americans (See the attached list of her selected work including her books currently in press). An exemplary teacher, mentor, and inspiration for many of her colleagues, Abelmann nurtured countless students and the younger generation of scholars in Korean Studies, Korean American Studies, Anthropology, and Women's Studies. Her academic training as an Asianist began on the east coast (B.A., Harvard) before she moved to the west coast for her doctoral training in Social Cultural Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley. Upon completing her field work in Korea during the 1980s and her doctoral dissertation in 1990, Professor Abelmann settled in the Midwest where she held positions in East Asian Languages and Cultures, Anthropology, Asian American Studies, and Women and Gender Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign until her untimely death on January 6, 2016. Dr. Ablemann's academic leadership as a pioneering Koreanist is demonstrated by not only her robust scholarship but also her programming initiatives and administrative service as Director of the Center for East Asian and Pacific Studies and as University Associate Vice Chancellor for Research in Humanities, Arts, and Related Fields, the fruits of which can be seen well beyond the Midwestern region across the globe.

According to Theodore Hughes, Abelmann's former colleague at the University of Illinois and now at Columbia University, Abelmann's academic work influenced an entire generation of scholars through her selfless mentoring of her students and other younger scholars across many

disciplines and fields. Abelman, Hughes recalls, was “unique in the way she gave academic advice; she was somehow able to open up the best possibilities latent in a project and in the same setting set one to thinking about how to make the world a better place to live....[H]er work was embedded in the world and could not be separated out from people’s lives. She was filled with positivity, energy, imagination, visions for the future, thoughts about making connections among ideas and people.... And she generously passed all of it on to so many people.” Hughes said that she taught him “how to approach life in academia, but above all how to teach.” Abelman was an “amazing person—to sit down with her was to come away feeling better about oneself, one’s work, and life itself.”

Echoing Hughes, Theodore Jun Yoo (Ph.D., University of Chicago; Associate Professor at Yonsei University in Seoul), who worked with Abelman for over a decade developing the Korean Foundation-Social Science Research Council Dissertation Workshop and Book Monograph Workshop for rising scholars in Korean Studies, called her “the brilliant mastermind behind these programs.” Yoo observed that “whether it was pulling all-nighters with her mentees, offering one-on-one sessions, or reading drafts of their writings in the small airport lounge, her ‘brand’ of mentoring (which, to many, might seem like a thankless task), has had a profound impact on over one hundred workshop participants and mentors, many of whom are now ensconced as professors or first-time authors.” Yoo believes that Abelman’s “boundless energy and commitment to young scholars in the profession, and continued dedication and drive to stay involved, has made a profound difference in making Korean studies much more interdisciplinary and a collegial place.” Nan Kim (Associate Professor at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee), one of the presenters at the Korea Workshop—which Abelman co-founded with her first generation students at the University of Illinois seventeen years ago and grew into one of the first focal venues for consistent academic exchanges among young Koreanists later—recalled how Abelman “fostered a remarkable sense of community by helping to create strong ties of friendship and collaboration through her mentoring and compassionate engagement as a colleague” within the field.

Henry Em (Ph.D., University of Chicago; formerly at the University of Michigan and now at Yonsei University) believes that Abelman was “a model and inspiration through her engaged scholarship and effective pedagogy.” Abelman’s recent scholarship, Em says, provides “the current generation of college students, not just in South Korea and the United States, a way to think critically about individual choice and structural constraint.” Charles Kim at the University of Wisconsin, Madison also commented on Abelman’s ability to “seamlessly integrate her wonderful ideas and ideals with her research, teaching, program building, and field building,” which made a long-lasting impact on him to this day.

“As good a scholar as she was,” Taylor Atkins (Ph.D., University of Illinois; Presidential Teaching Professor at Northern Illinois University) recalls, Abelman was “an even better human being” who had “such a light inside her that no one could miss.” David W. Plath, Abelman’s senior colleague and fellow anthropologist of East Asia at the University of Illinois, recalls how her light brightened lives far beyond her intimate circles of friends, kin, students, and colleagues. In his words, “the reader never meets the biographee face to face but instead comes to know her or him by reflected light: the power to have touched and shaped other lives and to be living in them. Such a narrative would capture the greatest of her portfolio of talents. Many people will offer witness to her stature as a scholar, to her gift for nurturing students, to her enthusiasm as project leader.”

Indeed, until her last days of battling cancer, Abelman was still advising students, penning *haiku*, and having her emails dictated at her place in Urbana, including the following:

The doctors have added an oral chemotherapy. I DO FEEL LUCKY THAT THERE ARE STILL THINGS THAT CAN BE DONE. My situation is such that I have no choice but to be the recipient of so much physical AND SPIRITUAL CARE. How I wish I could do something, anything for someone else (November 22, 2015).

Such was one of her last words after having done so much so well for a generation of scholars in Asian Studies across the globe. Now it is time to remember, celebrate, and multiply the legacies of Nancy Abelmann, an extraordinary Asian Studies scholar, teacher, and mentor in the Midwest.

Jinhee J. Lee, Editor

Co-founder of the Korea Workshop (1999) and the first Ph.D. in East Asian Languages & Cultures at the University of Illinois (2004) under Nancy Abelmann's mentorship



Publications by Nancy Abelmann (selected)

Making Family Work: How Korean American Teens and Parents Navigate Immigrant America (with Sumie Okazaki). Forthcoming.

South Korea's Education Exodus: The Life and Times of Study Abroad (co-edited with Adrienne Lo, Soo Ah Kwon, and Sumie Okazaki). University of Washington Press, 2015.

No Alternative? Experiments in South Korean Education (co-edited with Jung-ah Choi and So Jin Park). University of California Press, 2013.

The Intimate University: Korean American Students and the Problems of Segregation. Duke University Press, 2009.

South Korean Golden Age Melodrama: Gender, Genre, and National Cinema (co-edited with Kathleen McHugh). Wayne State University Press, 2005.

The Melodrama of Mobility: Women, Class, and Talk in Contemporary South Korea. University of Hawai'i Press, 2003 (Korean edition in 2014).

Echoes of the Past, Epics of Dissent: A South Korean Social Movement. University of California Press, 1996.

Blue Dreams: Korean Americans and the Los Angeles Riots (with John Lie). Harvard University Press, 1995.

Special Issue on Korean Ethnography, *Journal of Korean Studies* 17, no. 2 (Co-edited with Jesook Song), 2012.

“East Asia’s Astronaut and Geese Families: Hong Kong and South Korean Cosmopolitanisms.” (with Nicole Newendorp and Sangsook Lee-Chung). *Critical Asian Studies* 46, no. 2 (2014): 259-286.

“A Fraught Exchange? U.S. Media on Chinese International Undergraduates and the American University” (with Jiyeon Kang). *Journal of Studies in International Education* (2013):1-16.

“Christian Universalism and U.S. Multiculturalism: An ‘Asian American’ Campus Church” (with Shanshan Lan). *Amerasia* 34, no. 1 (2008): 65-84.

“Anthropology, Asian Studies, Asian American Studies: Open Systems, Closed Minds.” In *Displacements and Diasporas: Asians in the Americas*, edited by Wann W. Anderson and Robert G. Lee, 256-269. Rutgers University Press, 2005.