

Global Villager

BY MARK E. DIXON

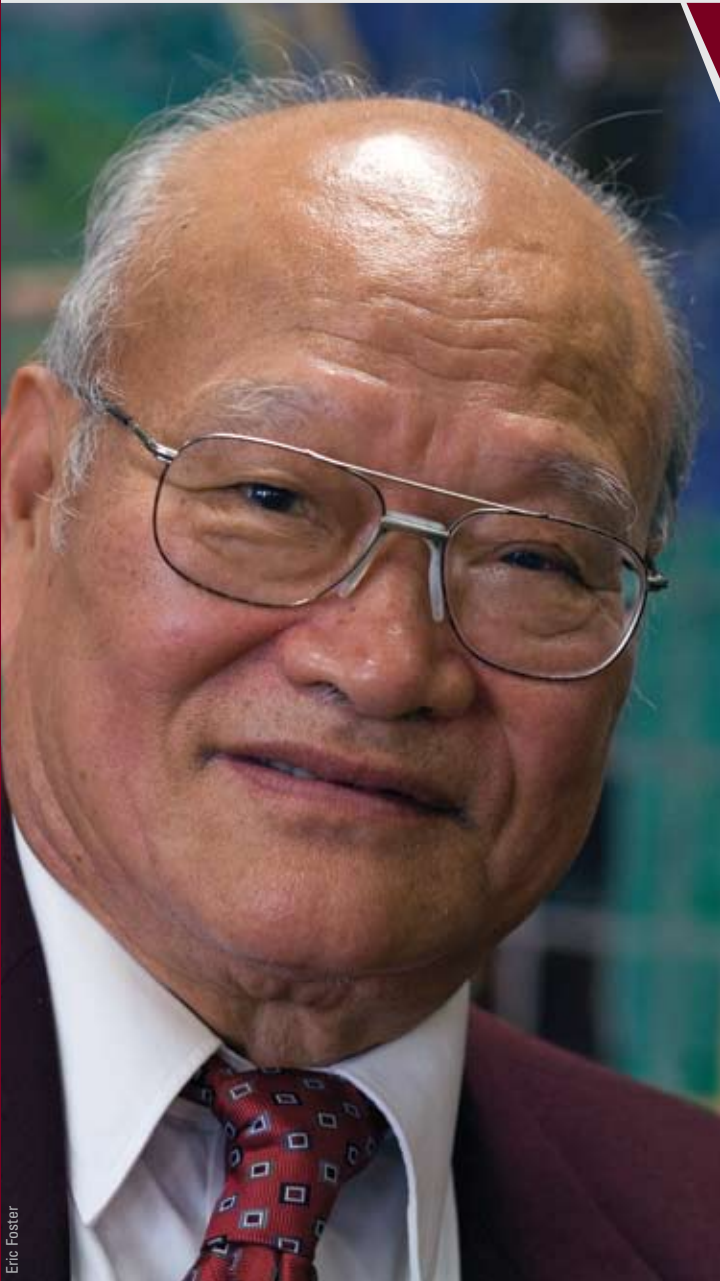
At age 79, faculty emeritus Chang Shub Roh remains a fixture on BU's campus and in the community. His volunteer activities include the Friends of the Bloomsburg University Library Association, the Northeast Pennsylvania Alliance for Homeless and the local Meals on Wheels, but his special joy is the Global Awareness Society International.

The Japanese who occupied Korea from 1915 until the end of World War II placed little value on diversity. And that, in a very basic way, explains why in 1991 sociology professor Chang Roh founded an international organization dedicated to its celebration.

"Always, in the world, we have war and poverty," says Roh, whose Global Awareness Society International (GASI) now has liaisons in five continents, including a student chapter at Bloomsburg University. "Since I experienced two wars, I see prevention as the key. After 'sickness' takes place, it's too late."

Dedicated to promoting "awareness ... understanding ... sensitivity ... (and) support," GASI works primarily through universities where faculty members meet at annual conferences, publish an annual journal and organize activities through student chapters. Members of the Bloomsburg student chapter sponsor speakers, host social opportunities for interaction between domestic and international students and are active with the Model Organization of American States (OAS) and Model European Union.

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'I didn't intend to stay in Bloomsburg so long, but then I became the sociology department chair. And when something like that happens, you can't just take off.'

– Chang Shub Roh



Courtesy of Chang Shub Roh

Chang Shub Roh: in Tokyo in 1944 (top) and in Korea in 1955.

Born in 1929 in Korea's Hamyang Valley near Pusan, Roh was one of six children of a school teacher. Teaching was a high-status profession in Korea so, perhaps for that reason, Japanese authorities focused on his family when they began to implement their "Sōshi-kaimei" name-changing policy in 1939.

The Roh family became the "Toyokawa" family. Chang Roh became Toyokawa Masao. His parents and siblings also changed their names.

"Toyokawa" was Japanese for the Chinese village from which Roh's ancestors had immigrated to Korea a thousand years earlier. Choosing a name with a link to the family history, Roh explained, was a subtle effort to make the name-change palatable. But his family had none of it.

"Nobody used these names at home," says Roh, who even today must search for official records from his youth under his Japanese name.

Forced name-changing was part of a larger effort to suppress Korean culture. There were also penalties for speaking Korean, and many cultural artifacts were either destroyed or removed to Japan during that period. According to Newsweek, for instance, 80 percent of all Korean Buddhist paintings are now in Japan.

In addition, millions of Koreans were conscripted for labor and the Japanese military, including perhaps 200,000 women and girls who were forced into sexual slavery for the occupier's soldiers. In 1919, an estimated 7,000 non-violent demonstrators were killed while demanding independence.

"Overall, the Japanese were very suspicious of Koreans," said Roh, "and Koreans didn't like Japanese, either."

At age 13, Roh's father sent him to Japan to study. The elder Roh intended that all his sons would be physicians and a Japanese education was considered superior. An unexpected bonus was that the Japanese curriculum actually had less propaganda.

"The Japanese 'knew' they were superior, so they didn't need that," laughs Roh, who was nevertheless beaten by other students when he failed to bow to the emperor's palace. He stayed in Japan until 1945—enduring the Doolittle Raid and all those that followed—then returned home and graduated from Seoul's Dong-A University in 1952 with a bachelor's degree in economics.

During the Korean War, Roh served as a front-line interpreter for U.S. troops. (He had learned English from the Japanese, who thought a bilingual population would be useful after they conquered the United States.) Often, Roh helped interrogate North Korean prisoners—a duty which at least once got him in trouble.

"I used respectful language to the prisoners and, for that, two Korean officers reported me as a communist," he says. "But the Americans told them that they observed the Geneva Convention, which required respect even for prisoners. So, I was OK."

When the war ended, two American soldiers sponsored Roh as a student at Louisiana State University. A foundation paid his tuition. Roh earned a master's degree in sociology, and then spent a year at Georgetown University where his tuition was paid by another benefactor. In 1959, he arrived home in Korea with a new doctorate, intending to run for the South Korean congress.

"When I arrived, the government was about to collapse," recalls Roh. "It had been corrupted by bribery." Instead of going into politics, he joined the faculty at Ewha Womans University where, at age 34, he became a full professor. In 1968, Roh left South Korea to teach in the Philippines, from which he later moved on to East Texas Baptist University and, in 1971, to Bloomsburg, from which he retired in 1996.

"I didn't intend to stay so long," says Roh, "but then I became the (sociology) department chair. And when something like that happens, you can't just take off."

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Today, in addition to his ongoing work with GASI, he is a member of the advisory committee for the Columbia-Montour Area Agency on Aging. He's active in his church—where he is known as an expert hoagie-maker—and the Northeast Pennsylvania Alliance Against Homelessness. He picks up trash with a neighborhood group and delivers Meals on Wheels. Locals call him “George.”

Roh is also known for his appetite and his love of spicy food. In GASI circles, there is a story that the organization's early meetings were held in Chinese restaurants, where he ate large portions of entrees from the three-pepper section of the menu. Asked how he stayed so thin, Roh is alleged to have answered that he was “exercising on the inside.”

“I think it's true,” he acknowledges. Roh also exercises on the outside, with daily calisthenics and weights.

Today, he compares his vision of a peaceful world to his childhood village of about 50 families. Unlike even smaller villages in which everyone had the same surname, his neighbors had different names. The community was big enough that there was occasionally conflict, but there were sufficient common principles that problems were resolved.

“The rich did not undermine the poor,” he wrote in a draft of his autobiography. “The poor did not get jealous or hostile toward the well-to-do. Everyone lived harmoniously.” ■

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To Understand Others

Most activities of the Global Awareness Society International (GASI) occur between faculty members at universities around the world. Professors meet with other professors, exchange ideas and then try to import those ideas to their own curricula.

“We're trying to disseminate our ideas to the world,” says founder Chang Roh. “In the future, I think, all education will have a global dimension.” In the long term, however, GASI student chapters may offer the most potential to advance international understanding.

Retired professors James Pomfret and James Huber were founding members of Bloomsburg's GASI chapter. According to Mark Usry, the chapter's faculty adviser, the group now has more than 50 members, most with no particular career motive. And, of course, there is no course credit.

“I think it's a group that just wants to understand other people,” says Usry, a finance and legal studies professor who came to Bloomsburg a year ago from James Madison University. “And there is a nice mix of undergraduates—political science majors, history majors, biology majors.”

Usry had previously considered starting a new group to help business students make international connections, then discovered GASI.

According to Usry, globalization is a hot topic, which presents many opportunities for Bloomsburg students. In November 2008, the chapter had three days of briefings on the perceived impact of the fall election by officials at the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, Department of Commerce, U.S. Customs and Border Protection and other entities. Those meetings were to be followed by a reception of Bloomsburg alumni from the Washington area.

“The chances are really good that D.C.-area alumni will be linked to the government in some way,” says Usry. “So, that networking opportunity might lead students places.”

A bit farther out is a planned spring 2009 series of “games” with the Organization of American States (OAS). Students are assigned to represent a country in mock international negotiations. This past year, Bloomsburg was assigned to represent Antigua, and students were first briefed by the Antiguan ambassador, Deborah-Mae Lovell.

“It's a great opportunity to research and learn about the country we're assigned,” says Usry.

Some events are purely social. “This past Sunday, we sponsored a picnic with Bloomsburg's international students,” said Usry in mid-October. Everyone brought a dish from his or her country. They played volleyball and carved pumpkins, enjoying together what might be considered an “exotic” U.S. custom.



Global Awareness Society International officers are, left to right: Madhav P. Sharma, BU; Geoffrey Palmer, Bowie State University; Chang Shub Roh; Jay Nathan, St. John's University; James C. Pomfret, BU faculty emeritus; Ransford Palmer, Howard University; George Agbango, BU; and Patricia Hopson-Shelton, Millersville University.