

Hartford via Shanghai

An interview with Dr. Xiangming Chen, dean and director of the new Center for Urban and Global Studies

Dr. Xiangming Chen has been named as Trinity's first dean and director of the Center for Urban and Global Studies and as the Paul E. Raether Distinguished Professor in Sociology and International Studies. Before coming to Trinity, Dr. Chen was a professor of sociology at the University of Illinois at Chicago, with adjunct appointments there in political science and urban planning and policy and at Fudan University in Shanghai.

Author, educator, and international scholar, Dr. Chen has extensive experience in the study of local-global relations. He is a guest professor at the School of Social Development and Public Policy at Fudan University and a research fellow at the Institute of Economics, Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences. He won an American Council of Learned Societies fellowship and a Great Cities Institute Faculty Fellowship at the University of Illinois at Chicago. In 2005, he wrote *As Borders Bend: Transnational Spaces in the Pacific Rim*; in 2003, he co-authored, with Anthony M. Orum, *The World of Cities: Places in Comparative and Historical Perspective*. A graduate of Beijing Foreign Languages Institute, Dr. Chen received his master's and Ph.D., both in sociology, from Duke University.

The Center for Urban and Global Studies (CUGS) works to foster relationships between Trinity's programs in Hartford and overseas, providing an integrated network of internships, research projects, and other experiential learning opportunities that complement the curriculum across a broad range of disciplines. Last year, more than 700 Trinity students either took courses that focused on Hartford issues or worked in the city on assignments involving community agencies, neighborhood organizations, local schools, businesses, and hospitals. In addition, Trinity students also participated in 160 internships throughout Hartford, while another 50 or so were engaged in grant-funded projects involving the city. Trinity students also have a strong interest in study abroad. More than 50 percent study overseas at one of nine Trinity Global Learning Sites or other international study programs.

Dr. Chen was interviewed by Drew Sanborn, editor of the *Reporter*.

How did you become interested in the subject of cities and globalization?

My interest goes back a long time, to when I was a graduate student at Duke University. I was intrigued by the miraculous growth of the Chinese city of Shenzhen, which borders Hong Kong. It was a city about the size of Hartford today, so it was relatively small. It was a largely agricultural and fishing town that was very marginal and peripheral to the massive area of China, but it began to take off after it was created as a special economic zone. I was fascinated by this city-building phenomenon and decided to write my dissertation on it and went there to carry out field work in the 1980s. Today, it has 8,000,000 people, a huge industrial metropolis with hundreds of factories—some employing 30,000 people—making inexpensive consumer goods of all kinds that you find on the shelves of Walmart.

Toward the end of the 1990s, I began to broaden my interest and look at cities along China's coast and inland border areas and their connections—economic, social, and cultural—to cities of neighboring countries along the western part of the Pacific Rim. That research led to the publication of my second book, *As Borders Bend: Transnational*



Spaces on the Pacific Rim, which has received a number of favorable reviews.

Around 2000, I also shifted my research attention

Urbanization and globalization are the two most powerful and challenging master processes of transformation

and base to Shanghai and the Yangtze River delta region in Central Coastal China, because that was

the beginning of another explosive growth. Unlike Shenzhen, which started from a very small base, Shanghai was an already-

established international metropolis. It was known as “the Paris of the East” back in the 1920s and

30s, but for a long time was suppressed by the government, which favored the growth of southern cities near Hong Kong and Taiwan. From the early-90s on, Shanghai has been another dramatic example of the city-(re)building process, and I am examining the external and internal sources that influenced its growth into a global city.

I am working currently with a scholar in Shanghai and a scholar in Hamburg, Germany. We’re planning

an international conference in June 2008 on Shanghai and the Yangtze River delta region as a way of looking at not just city-building itself, but also at the extent to which it is becoming a globally driven regionalizing process. This is a follow-up project to a book I put together called *Shanghai Rising*, which will be published by the University of Minnesota Press next year, and I will also take the lead in producing another book based on the conference. This also

potentially has lessons for understanding Hartford in relation to the New England region in a global economy.

For the next couple of years I will also be the guest editor of a planned special issue of the journal *City & Community*, which will focus on comparing the process of building global cities in China and India. As of yet, very little research has been devoted to the scale and the level of the cities in China and India. There are a lot of economists looking at macroeconomic models of China's development versus India's, but I would like to contribute to the literature by looking at the differences and similarities between the major cities in these two countries.

What experiences in your career do you see as being of particular value in your position at Trinity?

My understanding of cities both within China and comparatively is a rich source of knowledge that I can draw from and adapt to this new position, especially with regard to the location of Trinity in Hartford. This is a very interesting city-region that has gone through a lot in terms of deindustrialization, international migration, city-suburban divide, and other forms of social and spatial inequalities in its diverse neighborhoods. The other helpful piece of my background is that I have worked in, and taught about, the city of Chicago. Chicago is the intellectual

breeding ground of classical American urban and community sociology, and I have learned a lot from the Chicago School. There is a lot I can draw from by combining my China-specific, Asian-comparative experience of cities with my understanding of Chicago.

The Center for Urban and Global Studies combines the College's pre-existing programs here in Hartford and abroad. Why is it important to join these efforts into a single unit?

Our Hartford-based programs that are already established through community learning and research initiatives and other kinds of activities are very strong in their urban focus and content. They are very engaged with the community, both in the broader scope of Hartford, but also in the neighborhoods surrounding the campus. But I would like to promote more links to publishable research that involves faculty-student collaboration.

Our Global Learning Sites, on the other hand, could be more urban-focused. I want to see how we can build a stronger urban component into them so we can find synergies between our urban and global efforts and have them reinforce and benefit each other. Trinity's study-away programs are located in the world's great cities. Why not take advantage of these locations to develop more urban-focused courses with a contemporary social

and economic emphasis that can be integrated with the historical and cultural studies offered there already?

These programs can, in turn, allow students to bring back experiences from study-away programs in these great cities and begin to see that there are similarities—maybe unexpected similarities and parallels—between what is happening in Hartford and in the international context. For example, you can look at the phenomenon of international immigration and neighborhood transformation in Hartford

Trinity's study-away programs are located in the world's great cities. Why not take advantage of these locations to develop more urban-focused courses with a contemporary social and economic emphasis that can be integrated with the historical and cultural studies offered there already?

and find some similar dynamics in a few European cities where we have learning sites. These cities face the same common challenges—ethnic tension, labor market competition, residential segregation—that we see here. These are the kinds of similarities that, when studied from a comparative perspective, will allow our Hartford based-programs and the global sites to become more integrated.

Why is it important for Trinity students to be exposed to both urban and international studies at this time?

That is a very timely

question. The world we live in is highly urbanized and globalized, and will continue to move along these two increasingly intertwined paths. One simple but significant indicator is that 2007 marks the historical demographic watershed when more than half the world's population now lives in urban areas rather than rural areas. At the same time, globalization began to accelerate toward the end of the 20th century and into the present. These are the two most powerful and challenging master processes of transformation of the 21st century.

It is very important for students at Trinity to see that we have entered a new world and to learn how to navigate it. They have to understand how those two processes are interconnected. That is why I applaud Trinity's decision to create this center and feel excited about leading it to help integrate the College's urban and global programs. This integration will create new opportunities for students to understand what the urban world on a truly global scale and to ground their understanding in local communities in terms of curriculum, research, faculty involvement, and community outreach activities.