The University’s links with Asia are far reaching and among the most extensive of any university in the West. Major research collaborations include the China Kadoorie Biobank, a massive study of chronic diseases run by Oxford’s Clinical Trial Service Unit in collaboration with Chinese partners, and the India-Oxford Cancer Research Network, a partnership between Oxford and six leading cancer research centres in India. In Burma, we have responded to Aung San Suu Kyi’s challenge to support the redevelopment of Burmese education by creating a range of projects which we believe are the most diverse and productive of any foreign university working in the country. And it is a measure of the importance of the region to Oxford that two of the University’s three international administrative offices are based in Asia – in Hong Kong and Japan.

Our links with Asia are not only wide ranging, but also very long established: Oxford’s connections with India date back to 1579 when Father Thomas Stephens, from New College, was the first recorded Englishman to visit the country; the first book in the Bodleian’s Chinese collections was acquired by Sir Thomas Bodley in 1604; the first University lecturerships in Malay Language and Literature were proposed in 1682 by the directors of the English East India Company; while the Ashmolean acquired its first major Indian sculpture in 1686.

Over the centuries philanthropy has served as a cornerstone supporting these links. Thanks to the bequests of Laud (1635), Selden (1659), Thurston (1661) and Marsh (1771), the Bodleian was able to add significantly to its Chinese collections, including such treasures as the Selden Map (pictured above), which shows shipping routes between China and Southeast Asia dating back to the late Ming dynasty.

Today, our research and teaching continues to benefit from the generosity of individuals and organisations in Asia. The University of Oxford China Centre, which opened in September 2014, is named after Hong Kong philanthropist, Sir Dickson Poon, who contributed £10m towards the new building. The Li Ka Shing Centre for Health Information and Discovery, which is dedicated to big data in medicine, honours the Hong Kong entrepreneur and philanthropist Sir Ka-shing Li, who donated £20m in 2013. And just last month the University signed an agreement with China Construction Bank International, which will see £1.5m invested in a new technology centre in a partnership between the University’s Institute of Biomedical Engineering and biotech firm China Regenerative Medicine International.

In this term’s issue of the newsletter, we examine some of the ways in which the External Affairs Portfolio is working to support the many links that exist between Oxford and Asia, from increasing the number of scholarships for Chinese students to helping Oxford fulfil its mission of making the University of Yangon an international-standard university. I hope you find the contents both interesting and informative.

With all good wishes for a very Merry Christmas and a happy and fulfilling 2016,

Nick Rawlins
Means-tested scholarships for Hong Kong and China

Students from mainland China and Hong Kong represent the second largest body of overseas students at Oxford after the US, but only a small proportion of applicants currently benefit from fully funded scholarships. However, thanks to the support of benefactors, Oxford is establishing its first means-tested undergraduate scholarships. The DH Chen Foundation, a Hong Kong-based private philanthropic organisation, has established two new undergraduate scholarships for students from Hong Kong, to be awarded annually from 2016/17. And in a separate development, the Bright Oceans Corporate Scholarships, established by high-tech industrial group Bright Oceans Corporation, will provide funding for undergraduates from mainland China, who are commencing a course of study in the MPLS Division, with one scholarship awarded for 2016/17. For graduates, the Rhodes Scholarships have been extended to include four students per year from China, while the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust - one of Hong Kong’s premier philanthropic institutions - has partnered with Oxford to establish scholarships enabling three students per year over four years from Hong Kong to pursue postgraduate studies and leadership programmes at Oxford.

Following the Silk Roads

What would a history of the world look like, told from an eastern perspective? The question has elicited a remarkable response from Dr Peter Frankopan, Director of the Oxford Centre for Byzantine Research and Senior Research Fellow at Worcester College, who recently published The Silk Roads: A New History of the World (Bloomsbury, 2015). The story behind this ambitious work is available on the Oxford Today website, which features an interview with Dr Frankopan (www.oxfordtoday.ox.ac.uk/interviews).

Drawing on his deep knowledge of the empire of Byzantium and the crusades, he re-inscribes the centre of gravity for world history around Persia, not Europe. The resulting book uses the Silk Roads - trading routes between China and Europe - as the ever-shifting focal point of a narrative that re-writes history just at the moment when western fear of migrants and terrorism has risen steeply. Some of the underlying causes of this direction in world affairs emerge from Dr Frankopan’s treatment of recently de-classified Cold War and Iraq War sources, making the book essential reading if you are puzzled by the rise of ISIL.

Looking for a perfect match

Oxford is twinned with a number of European cities - Leiden in the Netherlands, Bonn in Germany, Grenoble in France, and Perm in Russia – as well as León in Nicaragua. But the city is now exploring the possibility of twinning with a city in China, and representatives from the city council have been meeting with members of the Oxford Chinese Economy Programme (OXCEP), based at St Edmund Hall, for early exploratory talks. The process is still at a very early stage as twinnings of this kind require a great deal of consideration to make sure that there is a meaningful match between the cities and that an active working partnership is established. If you would like to contribute your thoughts, please email comments@oxcep.com.
At the heart of change in Burma

Burma’s general election, which took place in November, is a milestone in the country’s development since the end of the military junta in 2011. Oxford has been present throughout Burma’s democratic revival, aiding in the development of higher education standards and working to improve constitutional and economic growth together with sustainability.

The past 12 months have been important for Oxford’s programmes in Burma (which is also known as Myanmar). International Strategy Director Loren Griffith was seconded to the University of Yangon at the end of 2014, developing a strategy for Yangon to make best use of the international help it is being offered. This secondment, combined with an expanded English language summer school at Yangon in July and August, and continued advice on the future shape of education in the country offered by Professor Nick Rawlins and other Oxonians over the past year, is helping Oxford fulfil its mission of making Yangon an international-standard university, from which institutions throughout Burma can learn.

At the same time Oxford has deepened its substantive academic programmes in the country: the Oxford-Burma Law Programme completed the first-ever text on Private International Law in Burma and secured funding to continue teaching visits to Yangon for at least two more years; and colleagues in Earth Sciences, who have a history of teaching and research in Burma, recently joined a new consortium that will provide training in geosciences in the country.

Alumni voices

Alumni Voices (www.alumni.ox.ac.uk/alumnivoices) is a series of interviews with Oxonians, who share their career highlights and memories of their student days in a podcast. Episode 6 features Dr Maria Misra, an Associate Professor of Modern History and Fellow of Keble College. In the 15-minute podcast, she explains how her intellectual interests have evolved from English and PPE to specialising in the history of 20th-century India and the British Empire, and she contextualises contemporary Indian politics and India’s role in the world by discussing India’s diversity, Hindu nationalism, changing global power dynamics, and the growing importance of China. She also describes a forthcoming trip to Sri Lanka that she will lead for alumni in June 2016, highlights of which include the UNESCO World Heritage Site at Anuradhapura and an opportunity to see leopards and elephants.

Alumni in Asia

The inaugural Alumni Weekend in Asia, which took place in March 2014, saw over 500 alumni and friends gather in Hong Kong for a three-day programme of academic and social events. Planning is now underway for the second Asia Alumni Weekend in 2017. The aim of the event - which forms part of the global ‘Meeting Minds’ series of alumni weekends - is to draw together alumni from across Asia and provide them with an opportunity to hear about the impact of Oxford’s research, celebrate their links to the University and meet fellow Oxonians based in the region. The date and location of the Asia Alumni Weekend are still to be confirmed, but details will be circulated in due course to the Advancing Oxford and the Development Directors mailing lists and posted online.

Full stream ahead

YouTube is one of the University’s most successful social media platforms, with over 4.8 million views and 50,000 subscribers. However, as YouTube is blocked in China, a large number of our website users have until now been unable to view the embedded videos on research and on undergraduate and postgraduate courses. The Digital Communications team in Public Affairs has recently implemented a solution by serving videos via China’s local video streaming platform, Youku.