

Shien-min Jen

TWO THINGS YOU CAN expect from Shien-min Jen, a.k.a. James Jen: He loves to travel — “that’s number one.” Number two — he enjoys preparing food. “I cook. I am a very good cook,” says Jen, who delightfully adds that his course, Food and Culture of East Asia, has to be taught in the evenings because the aroma would draw too many curiosity seekers during the day.

“In this course, I teach students that there is no sense to just sit in classroom and listen to instructor talk,” Jen says. “They have to cook, so I teach them how.”

Besides learning how to prepare various foods from other cultures, Jen teaches his scholars why people like certain foods, why some people don’t drink milk and others are not allowed to eat pork. In other words, he relates people’s eating habits to their cultural backgrounds.

“Anthropologists want to understand human beings,” Jen says. “It seems to me understanding will help us to reveal why we have conflicts and so many misunderstandings. Then we’ll reach a final goal, which we’ll call ‘peace.’”

Jen is a peaceful man. He likes to have quiet, and he values such things as family and friends. It was Jen’s own curiosity that got him involved in anthropology.

“When I graduated from high school in Taiwan, I could choose a number of other subjects,” Jen explains. “I don’t like math, so it could only be political science or history or sociology. Political science — too many people. I’m not interested in political complications. When I think of politics, there is always competition. History — I can study history by myself. So I choose anthropology.”

Before coming to the United States, Jen worked for the most prestigious national research institute in Taiwan, Academia

BORN: March 13, 1936, Hunan, China.

TEACHING AND RESEARCH: Cultural, behavioral and medical anthropology; history and theory of anthropology.

AREAS OF CONCENTRATION: East Asia, Southeast Asia, Oceania, Arctic Regions and Southwestern American Indians.



“I encourage students to travel, to leave their hometowns and live with other people.”

Professor, Chair, Anthropology

Sinica. During his two-and-a-half years at the institute, he published a number of articles and books about Southeast Asian cultures. In 1960, Harvard University recruited him, not to come to the United States, but to stay in Taiwan. His assignment was to collect and write as much information as possible about the Taiwan Aborigines. Jen’s research was so impressive that he received a one-year fellowship from Harvard Graduate School and Harvard-Yenching Institute.

“I studied about a year as an exchange scholar from Taiwan to Harvard,” Jen says. “Then, several people talked to me and said, ‘Since you are in the United States, you should stay. One year is not enough

time for you to understand or learn about America.’ By that time I was also interested in American Indians; there was a lot to learn.”

From Harvard, Jen went to New York University, where he received his master’s degree in educational anthropology. He worked part time for the university and for the United Nations as a temporary assistant, a job he thoroughly enjoyed because he was able to meet and talk with people from every part of the world.

After graduation, Jen received a call from a friend at the University of Hawaii. The university was looking for a person who knew the cultural customs and social

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