From the Army to the Classroom: An Interview with Al Roberts

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In 2017, Al Roberts graduated from USU with three bachelor's degrees—in history, philosophy, and Asian studies. After earning his MA in history at USU in 2019, he started the PhD program in Chinese history at UC-Davis.

You earned both your BA and your MA in history at USU. Can you talk a little about that path? Why did you decide to study history as an undergraduate? What made you want to continue as a graduate student?

In high school I was the Thespian Club president, so when I first came to USU I was originally a theatre major. I did not decide to study history until I was serving an LDS mission in Houston. At that time, I read official church histories independently and I became fascinated with “Texian” history by visiting the San Jacinto battlefield and the baptismal location of Sam Houston. Upon my return to Logan, my attention was captivated by the American Civil War. However, for the two years after my mission I was still fumbling in the dark without any real direction, so in 2010 I decided to enlist in the US Army National Guard. Surprisingly, my test scores were good enough that I had the freedom to choose any military occupational specialty that I wanted, so I elected—apropos of nothing—to become a Chinese linguist in Army Intelligence.

I spent the next two years from 2011 to 2013 at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, CA, learning Mandarin. My native instructors taught me the language, but they also taught me stories from China’s long past, like the military genius Zhuge Liang, the voyages of Zheng He, and the reign of Empress Wu Zetian (perhaps the most Machiavellian person who ever lived). I was also selected as the only student in my class to spend a summer in Beijing and Xi’an participating in a language immersion program. This helped my language acquisition, but it also gave me the chance to see the Terracotta Warriors, the Forbidden City, and the Great Wall. When my contract allowed me to go from full-time soldiering to part-time, I had made up my mind that I wanted to study Chinese history for the rest of my life, and nothing was going to stop me!

You also participated in the study abroad in Vietnam while you were here. What was that experience like? In what ways did it shape you as a scholar or influence your research?

In some ways my time in Vietnam was similar to my time in China since both locations are full of ancient buildings and legends that whetted my curiosity to keep learning more. But in another way, Vietnam taught me something more profound about remaining objective while conducting historical research. In other words, Vietnam helped me to see that I can love my country, be proud of my military service, and still recognize that we were simply not the “good guys” in that war. But neither does that mean that the Vietcong were saints. I frequently find myself studying history or watching the news with the temptation to divide the entire world into “cops and robbers,” but Vietnam taught me that the truth is always much more complicated than that.

Were there any other experiences you had at USU that stand out as particularly important to your academic success or research interests?

There were two experiences that occurred during my MA program that exerted a powerful and surprising influence upon my scholastic development. The first happened when I took Professor Gossard’s seminar on Gender and Sexuality. I had been so focused on the nebulous idea of “China” that I never considered any kind of theoretical approach. I loved that course so much that I decided to rewrite my script and become a historian of gender and sexuality in Chinese history, including changing my thesis.
I suppose the moral there is not to let ourselves become too fixated on any one thing; sometimes we find our greatest insights by looking in an entirely different place.

The second experience I had came so gradually that I never realized it until it was long over: as an undergraduate I remember sitting down to write 10-page papers and thinking “how am I ever going to fill up 10 whole pages!?”. However, by the time I sat down to start writing the various chapters of my thesis I found myself thinking “how on Earth am I supposed to cram all of this information into thirty measly pages!?”. I suppose that’s just part of the skill set that all scholars gradually gain as they become comfortable with their craft, but realizing that my page-length-problem had reversed itself was an encouraging sign that I was on my way.

You begin in the PhD program at UC-Davis this fall. What are you most looking forward to about the program? Any idea yet what project you’ll be working on?

There is much that I am looking forward to about Davis (and much that I already miss about USU). The thing I am most looking forward to is probably that Davis’s history department is bigger, has more resources, and is geographically close to other universities and archives that are full of materials that may prove useful in my research. Bear in mind, I’m not trying to diminish USU in any way by saying that. In 2017, Davis would not have even given my application a second glance. It was only because of the grad program at USU that I was able to come to Davis in the first place. But I am looking forward to working with a new set of professors who can help me approach my field with fresh perspective.

I have a few ideas about what I would like to study. One of them is the history of suicide in Modern China. I think that this bears promise since “self-murder” has undergone a dramatic shift during the past century—from the Cult of Widow Chastity in the Qing dynasty when widows were expected to kill themselves as a way of protecting their virtue, to the politicization and criminalization of suicide during the Maoist era, to the post-socialist years when economic factors comingle with ideas about filial piety and the stresses of the one-child policy. But this is all just speculative for now. I haven’t had a chance to talk to my new professors about any of this yet!

Any advice or wisdom for students who might be thinking of pursuing an undergraduate or graduate degree in history?

Hmmm...join the army? Okay, maybe that’s not for everybody, but it was certainly the trailhead for my own ascent. My advice for undergrads: talk to your professors. They are not scary...well...mostly, but above all they want to see you succeed and they are so full of good advice! Also, delete your Facebook account and read a book, even a novel. I promise that you’ll feel happier and be more productive if you can kick that addiction ASAP. For grad students: if you plan to go on to a PhD program, start preparing yesterday. It takes a lot of time and money to research good schools, find out what their finicky application rules are, prepare your application packet, and then turn it in on time (usually a year before you start).
Al Roberts earns his master’s degree in 2019