



Zhi-Yong (John) Yin (1958-Present)

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"There are lots of opportunities for minority students and if their backgrounds are good (in either science or policy) then they should have a good chance to succeed." Zhi-Yong Yin, 2005.

Early Life

Zhi-Yong Yin was born in 1958 as the first of two children. His father was a surgeon and his mother a physician at the time. Yin grew up in Beijing during China's Cultural Revolution. The social turmoil of that period made his upbringing "chaotic", and its impact on life has been profound. He was often unable to attend school during his first two years of elementary school and as a result spent a great deal of time reading with his grandmother. She encouraged his interest in the natural sciences, and together they read many books on popular scientific subjects, as well as traditional Chinese literature. Yin remembers these experiences with his grandmother as being personally and educationally informative, and says they played an important role in shaping his career path.

Education

Yin began his academic career at Peking University, graduating with a bachelor of science in physical geography in 1982, and a master of science in physical geography in 1984. He then left China to pursue a doctorate in geography at the University of Georgia, which he completed in 1990. Shortly thereafter, he was hired by Georgia State University as an assistant professor of geography. He was promoted to associate professor in 1996 and remained there until 2003, while also serving as the acting chair of the Department of Anthropology and Geography from 1999-2002. Since 2003, Yin has been an associate professor at the University of San Diego's (USD) Department of Marine Science and Environmental Studies, where he teaches courses in hydrology, remote sensing/GIS, and physical geography.

Mentors have played a crucial role in Yin's intellectual development. As an undergraduate student in China, Yin remembers one professor who pushed him to look beyond strictly scientific issues, and examine the social implications of environmental problems, such as the effect of economic development and urbanization on land use and global climate change. This mentor also encouraged him to pursue his doctorate in the United States. Yin also recalls a professor at the

University of Georgia who supported him during the difficult transition into American university life. This professor was also from another country and was able to provide Yin understanding and support as he adjusted to a foreign lifestyle. Since then, Yin has taken it upon himself to help guide young international students. One notable example: while at Georgia State, he mentored a promising young African student, who for her research project on environmental justice used geographic information systems (GIS) technology to examine demographic and social characteristics surrounding hazardous waste sites in Atlanta. Yin applies part of her work to a course he is currently teaching for the master's program in Peace and Justice, where many of the students are from African countries: drawing inspiration from his former mentee, he uses the course to show applications of GIS technology to conflict resolution and environmental management all over the world.

Highlights

In an academic career filled with notable accomplishments, Yin says two stand out as highlights. The first came when he was interviewed for a newspaper article regarding the potential impact of drought on the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta; the resulting article highlighted Yin's expertise, and affirmed his status as an expert in the field. The second is his current research project, a National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)-sponsored study that looks at precipitation patterns across the Tibetan Plateau. Though not yet complete, Yin already notes it as very promising. Yin has spent the past several years doing field work in Tibet, and the project has become personally as well as professionally important to him. As for career low points or obstacles, Yin says he cannot cite any specific ones, though he notes that "When you're an untenured faculty, it's a worry."

Yin remains committed to participating in diversity efforts. As chair of the college curriculum committee at Georgia State University, Yin helped create the social science core curriculum, which included an institutional emphasis on diversity issues. More recently, he has witnessed USD's implementation of a requirement that students' take at least one course covering the topic of diversity in the United States. He is also pushing his students to get involved in the community service learning program, which, if successful, he plans on incorporating into one of his classes. Yin believes all of his diversity-related activities are essential to creating good students—and good human beings. "I believe it is necessary for our students to know the existing social issues and problems in the society, to prepare them as good citizens," he says. "So it is really good that the university is making these classes part of the core curriculum."

USD also has a Trans-Border Institute, which promotes border-related scholarship and activities; a number of Yin's students are working on institute-supported projects examining environmental, social and demographic issues along the United States.-Mexico border. "We had students looking at the flow of people across the border through both legal and illegal channels. They [the students] are also looking at the socio-economic conditions of the Hispanic Diaspora in the United States," Yin says.

Noting how important diversity is to the environmental field, Yin offers the following advice to students of color who are interested in careers in the environmental field: "There are lots of

opportunities for minority students, and if their backgrounds are good (in either science or policy) then they should have a good chance to succeed.”

This interview was conducted in 2015.