



Ralph Samuelson

Ralph Samuelson is Senior Advisor to the Asian Cultural Council (ACC). After graduating from Cornell University he received a Master's Degree in Music from Wesleyan University. After working as an instructor in ethnomusicology and a festival researcher, he joined the staff of the JDR 3rd Fund (predecessor of the ACC) in 1976 and was appointed ACC Director in 1991. He assumed his present post of ACC Senior Advisor in July 2008. In addition to his activities at ACC, Samuelson has made a career for himself as a top-level *shakuhachi* flute performer of both the traditional repertoire and contemporary works.

Asian Cultural Council  
<http://www.asianculturalcouncil.org/>



## Presenter Interview プレゼンターインタビュー Looking into the heart of the Asian Cultural Council, an organization that has helped support over 5,000 artists

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The Asian Cultural Council (ACC) is an organization that has been promoting exchange in the arts between America and the countries of Asia for four decades by providing Asian artists with grants to stay and study in the U.S. and American artists with grants for stay in Asia. In its 45 years of activities the ACC has given grants to over 5,000 artists and researchers. Many ACC grant recipients (fellows) have gone on to become world-renowned artists, and the Asian network that has been created in the process is invaluable. We spoke with Ralph Samuelson, who has worked at the ACC for 32 years, 17 as director, and who this July advanced to the post of Senior Advisor. Samuelson, who has been an understanding friend and supporter to so many artists and the backbone of the Asian network, is interviewed by Yoko Shioya, who has served a similar role in US-Japan cultural exchange in her position as Artistic Director at the Japan Society. She asks him about the spirit behind the organization's grant program.

(Interview: Yoko Shioya, Artistic Director, Japan Society)

The Asian Cultural Council (ACC) is one of the most generous grant-making organizations in the U.S. in terms of giving financial support to artists.

Well, not in terms of amount of money, because the amount of money we give is small. But in a way, yes. The grant includes not simply money but a range of support services that help grantees achieve their goals and objectives. Many grantees have a big impact in their home communities and home institutions. We select our grantees—whom we call fellows—with care, and support each of them with care. That is the hallmark of the program.

I very much respect the way you support artists, as you said, “with care.” ACC takes care of not just the practical side for your fellows from other countries, such as arranging a place to live for the several months of residency of each fellow. Also I know—from conversations I have had with many ACC fellows—that, when Asian artists are here in New York, ACC staff members meet them and ask what they are interested in, what they want to do and where they want to go. And what ACC does is not just listen to and help them to do what they want to do, but also gives additional information and makes recommendations concerning people they should meet in the light of their career, field, and interest. Then making calls to those people and making appointments for them. Sometimes ACC even arranges a translator for those meetings in cases where the fellow's English is not enough for meaningful communication. How did this “with care” policy begin?

It was Mr. John D. Rockefeller 3rd's idea. In 1963, he established a small private foundation, called the JDR 3rd Fund, funded by himself. It was a small organization and very carefully focused. Its objective was to support cultural exchange in the arts, within the United States and countries in Asia.

He asked a gentleman named Porter McCrary for advice, a man who had already

## Presenter Interview

Looking into the heart of the Asian Cultural Council, an organization that has helped support over 5,000 artists

5000人以上のアーティスト等を支援  
アジアン・カルチュラル・カウンシルの精神

created the International Exhibitions Program at the Museum of Modern Art, the first effort of MoMA to send American art abroad: to Europe and to Latin America primarily.

What they decided was, “Let’s target funds directly to talented individuals” – a program which could be much more effective than, for example, making small grants to large institutions. They thought, “If we carefully select the best people, and then we carefully work with them to help them achieve their goals and objectives, even modest funding can have a very big impact.”

This also reflected a belief in the power of the individual to affect change. How can you maximize the chances for that happening by setting up a program where you really focus on individuals? This concept is very labor intensive and expensive to maintain but was very reflective of John D. Rockefeller’s thinking at that time. And it remains the core of what we do today.

The year the Asian Cultural Council was established as a not-for-profit organization was 1980. But when ACC held a big fundraising gala several years ago, it announced that it was “celebrating its 40th anniversary.” That means you consider the birth of the JDR 3rd Fund to be the start of ACC?

Yes. John D. Rockefeller 3rd actually set up three separate programs initially. The primary one was this engagement with Asian cultural exchange, called the Asian Cultural Program. Asia was defined as the range of countries from Afghanistan, eastward through Japan. Geographically we still define it that way. He was also interested in the role of arts in education, so he had another program called the Arts in Education Program, which was smaller but very significant – only in America. And then he had another effort – just for a few years – called the Youth Program. But the primary activity was the Asian Cultural Program, and we have been basically doing the same model of grant making since 1963 – a fellowship program to support individuals who work in the arts: artists, scholars, and arts professionals. We like to say that consistency is our greatest strength. Let me give you some clear details of the historical thread.

John D. Rockefeller 3rd was one of the 3rd-generation Rockefellers. He was a professional philanthropist: he was a quiet, behind-the-scenes person. He went to Asia for the first time in 1929, after graduating from Princeton University. He fell in love with Asia, and then later, he returned to Japan with John Foster Dulles’s group after WWII, after the San Francisco Peace Treaty (1951). He was asked to work specifically in cultural relations. He also began to travel outside of Japan with his wife Blanchette; they became engaged with Asian art. So they began a series of efforts to develop closer relationships between these two parts of the world. Still in that post-Pacific War era, he felt very strongly that Asians and Americans needed to understand each other better. Among his many efforts were, as you know, re-vitalization of the Japan Society (became president of JS in 1952); founding of the Asia Society in 1956, and then creating the JDR 3rd Fund in 1963.

But in 1978 Mr. Rockefeller died unexpectedly in an automobile accident. In his will there was no provision for the JDR 3rd Fund, and there had never been an endowment. By that time, the Arts in Education was finished, so basically only the Asian Cultural Program remained.

To make a long story short, the Trustees of his estate and his wife had a great commitment to the value of this program; they felt that it should be continued. So they provided a small endowment fund to help set up an independent 501(c)(3), a publicly-supported foundation to continue the work of the JDR Fund’s Asian Cultural Program.

## Presenter Interview

Looking into the heart of the Asian Cultural Council, an organization that has helped support over 5,000 artists

5000人以上のアーティスト等を支援  
アジアン・カルチュラル・カウンシルの精神

So that was in 1980...

Yes. The idea would be, "Go out and seek to raise money, to keep this program going." We decided to call it the Asian Cultural Council, to continue this work. New name, new administrative structure, and then going out to raise funds publicly – that's how we started the ACC in 1980.

In our early years, we received very important endowment support from the Ford Foundation, the Starr Foundation and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, etc. And then, from Mr. Seiji Tsutsumi and the Seibu Saison Group (in Japan), paid to the ACC thru the Japan Foundation. We also started raising annual money from other donors. And then we started to raise annual funds in Asia.

Yes, ACC now has several offices in Asia.

First we set up an office in Japan for our Japan Program with Mr. Tsutsumi's help. In 1985 we went to Hong Kong. In 1995, Taiwan; and in 2000, the Philippines. Tokyo, Hong Kong, Taiwan and the Philippines – these are the places where we have local groups that raise funds with us, and we use the funds to make grants for that region. Therefore, we can do more in those places than in other parts of Asia.

So is the money raised in each of those regions restricted to use only for the people of that specific region?

Each case is a little bit different from others, but basically, that's right. In the case of Hong Kong, the money we raise is used to make grants to individuals as well as institutions in Hong Kong and mainland China. In Taiwan, it's specifically for Taiwan. In the Philippines, it's only for the Philippines.

ACC also gives money to American individuals and institutions to send artists to Asia.

First of all, our program has always had an emphasis on grants for Asians coming to America. Our Japan Program is, by definition, a bilateral program so for many years, our Japan Program was the only program in which we could support American artists going to Asia. But now we have special funding from The Henry Luce Foundation that enables us to do more in sending American artists to any country in Asia.

Any other new thing today?

Starting from 2000, we also make grants for regional exchange within the Asia: not just US-Asian. That is, somebody from China who might want to go to Japan; or somebody in Japan who might want to get a grant to go to Indonesia. This change began with our applicants in Japan who wanted to understand more about other parts of Asia. Also, we have a lot of grantees from China, especially in the performing arts field, especially those who are trained in traditional art forms, who are interested in Japan. For example, somebody here right now is a wonderful qin player, who is very interested in contemporary music and experimental music. For China, a traditionally trained performing artist trying to do something new is a recent phenomenon. But in Japan, this has happened for a longer time.

Let's talk about the application, evaluation, and review processes.

People who want ACC grants may apply to the office here in New York, or they might apply to one of our Asian offices. And we begin reviewing applications at the application form stage. As the next step we might look at work samples. From there we start to look more carefully and we will have our staff actually meet the most competitive applicants. So we have a lot of staff traveling in Asia.

## Presenter Interview

Looking into the heart of the Asian Cultural Council, an organization that has helped support over 5,000 artists

5000人以上のアーティスト等を支援  
アジアン・カルチュラル・カウンシルの精神

### Is that an interview process?

We have tried to avoid the word “interview.” “Meeting applicants” is more like visiting the applicants in their home environment, to understand better who they are, what their work is like in their own context – and what kind of context that is. We’d like to grasp those things – and that becomes a part of the evaluation process. Every now and then we might ask our colleagues who work closely with applicants to meet them for us. But generally speaking, we try to meet the applicants directly before we are ready to recommend grants.

### What are the numbers of applications ACC receives, and how many of applicants will actually meet with ACC staff?

It’s hard to say but this year, for example, maybe we had a thousand people who said, “I’d like to apply for grant.” Maybe 700 of them qualified to receive an application form from us. This year 450 people actually returned completed application forms. Out of that group, we probably actually met about 80 individual applicants. In total, we make over 100 grants including Americans going to Asia, and grants to institutions.

### What kinds of people are involved in the evaluation process? Do you have a selection committee?

We do have advisory committees in different places and in different fields. Our office in each country has a local advisory committee. Committee members meet, and they make recommendations. We carefully call them “advisory,” not “selection” committees, because their recommendations are part of a larger process. Depending on what kinds of applications we receive, we form different advisory committees.

Naturally I have many chances to meet Japanese artists who are interested in coming to New York, and American artists who are interested in going to Japan. I quite often tell those artists about ACC and, if their purposes are not for specific projects such as having an exhibition or giving performances but rather simple interest in what-is-going-on on the other side, I always encourage them to apply. Some of them have actually contacted ACC and submitted a brief description of what they want to do, and some have received the application forms from ACC.

That’s good. In terms of how people apply, sometimes they just hear about us, or they found us through the Internet or whatever. The second way is that people who know the program, or who had a grant from us, tell young artists and researchers about ACC – like you do. We have over 5,000 former fellows all over Asia and America. They are a wonderful resource for encouraging new applicants. Then, the third way is, sometimes in the course of staff travel, the staff encounter an artist who they think is particularly fascinating, important, and interesting – and who would benefit from international experience. We might encourage such artists to apply.

### When your staff encourages an artist to apply that way, it does not mean that the artist’s application process is waived...?

No, of course not. Everybody has to submit applications. I often explain to people who are applying for grants: In any competitive granting process, the first step begins by separating the strong from the weak. You can cut out half of the applicants pretty quickly. Then maybe you can cut half of those and you keep working your way up. But at the very last step, no matter what, there will be 10 equally qualified people for only one slot. Then, how do you make that decision?

## Presenter Interview

Looking into the heart of the Asian Cultural Council, an organization that has helped support over 5,000 artists

5000人以上のアーティスト等を支援  
アジアン・カルチュラル・カウンシルの精神

They are equally deserving. How to make that final decision is really, really hard.

The understanding is that sometimes you get good results, sometimes you don't. And I think Americans in the arts accept this concept because we have a 50-year history of applying for grants. But this process is new in many countries in Asia, and when you hand a person the application form, or start the application process, they might think they are getting the grant.

Is that so? – but not in Japan...

In Japan, not any more – but it used to be like that in Japan, too. I think ACC played a part in educating the arts and scholarly communities in various Asian countries about the concept of open application process for grants and awards.

Since this interview is for a performing arts website, I would like you to tell us a few stories that are examples of fantastic things that happened because of a grant.

It would be a nice to have some other people talk about us – but I myself think of a number of composers. For example, Kondo Jo, who came here on a grant in, I think, 1979 or 1980, and spent a year in New York. He was a young composer who had interest in contemporary American music – John Cage and that school of thought. The experience here was very important for him, not simply in developing relationships with that world of composers, but also in better understanding his own place in the world as a composer in Japan. I believe he can speak about it more articulately. Three or four years later, Somei Satoh came on an ACC grant. He is a composer and thinker who is very Japan-focused, I think, in terms of his background, education and esthetic. Coming outside of Japan and spending time in the international environment in New York was, in a sense, even dramatic.

Do you mean that, in New York he re-discovered, or re-identified himself as a Japanese?

I think that for Somei Satoh to come abroad and be in America was challenging to his mind. In terms of growth and development, that was a very powerful experience. What happened to him in America was that people heard his music and liked it. Then people in America started to play his music when nobody in Japan did. After his music was played internationally, people in Japan started to play his music. I think that was the more practical outcome – in a career sense.

Other examples in other fields?

Let's talk about a more recent case: Kimura Manami, aka Kiritake Masaya, from Otome Bunraku. The first part of her ACC grant was for her to go to Indonesia. And she experienced both rod puppet and shadow puppet, which were just incredible for her because she had little experience. She spent one month there and then came to the States for five months or so. Her time here was a wonderful experience. She interacted with contemporary puppet artists in this country, such as Basil Twist and Dan Hurlin in New York.

Yes, both are influence by Japanese traditional puppetry but each of them has created their own original puppet theater. And Basil is also one of the ACC fellows.

Besides New York artists, Kimura Manami has also met artists like Larry Reed in California. A lot of things grew out of that. She has maintained some of those contacts and people invited her to go to Europe. She is also an example of the issue of language barrier. It was interesting – she did not speak English but she was not shy about trying to communicate, and she was able to communicate so well with people without speaking English but through her puppetry art.

## Presenter Interview

Looking into the heart of the Asian Cultural Council, an organization that has helped support over 5,000 artists

5000人以上のアーティスト等を支援  
アジアン・カルチュラル・カウンシルの精神

How about the other side: American fellows going to Asian countries? Have there been any significant results there – in performing arts?

Oh, a lot. Take Karen Kandel – the actress of Mabu Mines who works with many experimental theater directors. With our grant, she went to Japan for the first time. Part of that was to prepare for her work in Ong Keng Sen's theater piece called "Geisha." She was meeting and interviewing geisha, which we were eventually able to help her to do. It was very hard to do that because our official contacts in the arts world weren't able to help us. While she was there she became very engaged with Noh theater. She started to study and since then she has been going back to Japan frequently. She became very close to a number of Japanese artists.

I understand that. I have seen how many ACC fellows, both American and Japanese, quite often go back to the countries where they spent time on grants. And there are also many international stars in the art world who are former ACC fellows.

In the star status category, we can talk about Murakami Takashi. He had one of our grants in 1992 when he was a young artist. He was beginning to get some attention in a kind of controversial way, but he wasn't a star. He spent a year in New York at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center. P.S.1 had run an International Studio Program since 1977. Beginning in mid-80s P.S.1 started a Japan studio within that program, and every year ACC provided funds for artists from Japan to participate in the program. Murakami was in that program. Kawamata Tadashi was another one. Cai Guo-Qiang was in that program because he was living in Japan in those days. Unfortunately, P.S.1 has ended their International Studio Program recently...

People in the arts often point out that ACC's fellows are everywhere. When there is an artist who has become financially successful or had a career success, or is becoming an international big name – we often find, "Oh, again, this is another ACC grantee." We constantly see new star artists who are ACC fellows. Then we say, "ACC dominates the world!" How do you feel about comments like that?

I would say, it's great if there are so many fellows who are doing important work and being known in the field. But what people who make that comment don't recognize is how many grantees you have never heard of, which are most of them. So it's a relatively small number of people who have become known. More is better I think, but most of our grantees are those you may not know about: the director of the small theater company in Chiangmai, an artist in Ho Chi Minh City, or a choreographer in Solo. So saying that "ACC dominates the world" is incorrect. There are a few stories like that but our program is basically a very small one.

I know that every fellow has to make a report when their grant period is over. Is it OK if it turns out that what they said they wanted to do in their application turns out to be totally different from what they have actually done?

Of course that's fine. One would expect that once you begin to experience something new, your idea is going to be changed. So I think it's quite natural that, as you are engaged with a new place and new experiences your goals and objectives will be changed from what you thought before you were engaged with the experience.

Then, how about one case that I actually know. An Asian fellow came to New York and ACC staff were trying to set appointments to have him meet with some interesting people who would probably be wonderful contacts for his future career. But the grantee treated such services as annoying and preferred to cocoon himself

## Presenter Interview

Looking into the heart of the Asian Cultural Council, an organization that has helped support over 5,000 artists

5000人以上のアーティスト等を支援  
アジアン・カルチュラル・カウンシルの精神

in his apartment. He was in New York on grant but didn't go out; didn't want to meet anybody. Is that still OK?

Sure, it's OK if that cocooning is helpful for that fellow. Suppose that he is a creative artist and might need time to think and so he's cocooning. That's OK.

So the whole thing is based on complete trust.

Yes, of course. Well, because of that, the program may not be 100% perfect, and there's risk-taking involved. But we are always making decisions based on impressions and trust in individuals.

In light of having 501(c)(3) status (for charitable, non-profit, religious, and educational organizations), somehow your organization will have to evaluate what your fellows have done in order to set your organization's course, or direction, for near future and for long term. Then, what would be the criteria for such an evaluation? Apparently it is not based on the grantees' reports.

We are a small organization investing in individuals. I think ACC institutionally, and myself personally, do not really have confidence in quantitative evaluation of arts and culture grant-making – in general. We are investing in people and, because of the personal nature of the grant program, we get to know these people and their work. We stay in contact with them when they are finished with the grant period. We try to nurture them at later stages through networking or through advice, or sometimes through additional support.

So, how to evaluate the success of this kind of grant? You watch 5, 10, or 15 years down the road and see what happens to that person. As we travel through Asia today, wherever we go, we see ACC fellows leading major cultural institutions, and/or being important voices in their respective fields. That's how you evaluate whether or not what you are doing is successful.

So it's really a long-term evaluation.

Yes. Therefore, it is difficult respond to a donor who may want a quantitative evaluation.

Let's talk about the most recent change at ACC.

The change that just took place as of July 1st is that I am no longer going to work full-time for ACC. I've been here since 1976 – for 32 years, and I have been Director since 1991. I am going to start to work part-time, focusing on certain areas that I think I can make important contributions in. It is a personal decision to balance my life in a different way, to pursue some other interests. So my title was changed to Senior Advisor. The new Executive Director is Jennifer Goodale, who has been Vice President for Corporate Contributions at Altria Group (former Philip Morris). She is a marvelous philanthropic professional, and helped to develop the Altria Group's giving program into one of the largest corporate supporters of the arts in this country. She knows the arts very well, and she knows arts institutions in this country very well. She is a marvelous manager; a very experienced fundraiser; a great team player. She has a lot of international experience, though she is not an Asia specialist. But she is surrounded by a team of professionals who know Asia well.

Is there any new mission or new agenda that Jennifer will be carrying out?

No. As I said before, our greatest strength is our consistency. It's the consistency of our program that I think makes it successful. And the board certainly feels that way. But the challenge to ACC that's new today is a financial one. We need to raise

## Presenter Interview

Looking into the heart of the Asian Cultural Council, an organization that has helped support over 5,000 artists

5000人以上のアーティスト等を支援  
アジアン・カルチュラル・カウンシルの精神

money, and that need is greater than ever before. It's a kind of new thing for us in the American context. That's why we started to have fundraising galas in New York City.

You mentioned that Jennifer is a great fundraiser. Then should other Asia-related U.S. organizations – like Japan Society, Asia Society, China Institute, or the Asian section of the Metropolitan Museum, or the Guggenheim Museum's contemporary Asian art projects – be worried about the competition she represents. In other words, will ACC be taking away potential donors and corporations that are interested in involving themselves in Asia?

Of course not. We've been raising money actively here in the U.S. for the last ten years. The kinds of donors who are interested in supporting ACC are a very narrow slice, because we can give the donor very little public acknowledgement. We can't give them what many public organizations – like Japan Society or the Guggenheim Museum can. We can't put their name on a brochure or catalogue; we can't name a program or performance after them; we don't have an exhibition room to name after them. We can't acknowledge them publicly in any way other than in our annual report or website.

In other words, we do not have a "public persona" of any kind because we are a foundation that makes grants: we don't have programs that people see. So we need to tell people who we are and what we do. And when we say we are a foundation called the Asian Cultural Council founded by John D. Rockefeller 3rd, people say, "Oh, you are the Asia Society." We say, "No, no, we are not the Asia Society. That is an organization that presents programs. We are a foundation." And they say, "Oh, you are the Rockefeller Foundation." Then we say, "No, we are not the Rockefeller Foundation." So it's very hard to get out a clear profile.

I think I understand the problem. But for me and for those who know about ACC, we cannot believe that there are so many people who don't know about ACC. For us, and for many artists, ACC has always been *the* funding organization that you should look to first.

Thank you, but I would say we are basically unknown except among those in the Asian cultural field. That means it's difficult for us to raise funds. Our donors really have to be those who have been nurtured to the point where they understand and believe in our program.

Does her job also include maintaining relationship with current donors in Asia and cultivating new donors there?

Yes but that will also continue to be my job and an important part of my work.

You have always said that Americans going to Japan is the most competitive area for grants.

In terms of American creative artists who want to go to Asia, now China is the most popular place and so competitive to get grants for. Still a lot of people want to go to Japan but it's less competitive than before, like in the 90s. But money is always a problem. We have a large number of applications from Americans but relatively small amounts of grants we can make.

Right now how many fellows from Japan do you have in New York, including artists, scholars, and researchers?

There are not many right now. We have Satoshi Hashimoto, who is a visual artist; Yutaka Joraku, a choreographer; Mika Kobayashi, a curator from Tokyo Metropolitan

## Presenter Interview

Looking into the heart of the Asian Cultural Council, an organization that has helped support over 5,000 artists

5000人以上のアーティスト等を支援  
アジアン・カルチュラル・カウンシルの精神

Museum of Photography, who is doing an internship at the International Center of Photography. It just opened a Japan show, “*Heavy Light: Recent Photography and Video from Japan*,” and she has been working on that. And Tomoko Sugawara, a harpist and “kugo” player. Kugo is an ancient member of the harp family that originated in West Asia. Tomoko has been playing these instruments and is very involved over the last 10 years or so in “kugo” projects in Japan, such as the National Theater’s restoration of Nara Shoso-in instruments. Here, she is working under the guidance of Bo Lawergren, a scholar in that field who studied a lot about central Asian harps.

Lastly, I would like to ask you what kind of experience you think is most precious for Japanese artists who spend time in New York?

Maybe it is to get a sense of “artistic community.” Musicians, composers, dancers, painters here in New York talk to each other, support each other, and see each other’s work. These communications create a sense of artistic community, and that is something that is difficult to have in Japan.

I totally agree with you. Many artists from Japan who came to New York on ACC grants told me more or less the same story that getting the sense of artistic community was an eye-opener. Thank you so much for your time and interesting stories.