



**Personal Statement: J-term in Shanghai: History, Culture, and Art**  
**Elena Valussi, Professor**

When I started teaching at Columbia College three years ago I immediately felt that there was a need to expand the offerings on East Asia, and especially China. Of course, I was biased, because my field of research is indeed China, and I hold a Ph.D. in Chinese Religions. Over the last 15 years I have lived in China on and off for four years, and the last time I was there, in 2002-2003, I spent one year in Shanghai, a really vibrant and happening place.

While my main goal was to do fieldwork and archival work on Chinese religions, because I have always been interested in art, I also sought out artistic organizations. One of them stood out, because it promoted young up and coming Chinese artists with great ideas but little budgets. The person in charge of the organization was Davide Quadrio, and he was interested in providing space and publicity for video art, multi-media installations—which often included dance and music—and generally non-traditional artistic expressions. When I came back to the U.S. and started teaching at Columbia College, I immediately thought that Columbia College and Bizart would make perfect partners, because the student population at Columbia was interested in exactly the same areas that Bizart was trying to promote. I proposed the partnership to Lisa Brock, the chair of the Liberal Education department, who was very supportive, and over the course of two years, I designed a course that would fit in the J-term (the intensive three-week January term). Knowing that I would need a teaching partner who would be able to discuss the artistic side of the course, I approached Natasha Egan at the Museum of Contemporary Photography, who had just done a show called “Made in China.” She was immediately interested, and ever since then we have collaborated equally on the development of the curriculum, on the choice of readings, as well as on the format of the course.

I think that, aside from adding to the few available courses on Asia and especially East Asia, this course is important and unique because it consciously tries to appeal and reach out to students from ALL departments at Columbia. There will be a focus on art, and especially contemporary and multi-media art for Art & Design, Photography, and Film & Video majors; there will be discussions on the business of art, intended to appeal to the business-oriented students; there will be dance and music events; there will be a full cultural immersion for Cultural Studies majors; and inspiration for Fiction Writing majors. As a result of this conscious choice, we are very pleased to see that we have a very diverse group of students going, from Radio, Cultural Studies, Fiction Writing, Film, Photography, Fine Arts, Painting. I think this is a good way for different departments to break down barriers.