Dr. Jeannette Cockroft grew up in central Maine, in what she called “the poor part of the state,” adding, “I couldn’t wait to get out of there. I couldn’t understand why everyone didn’t want to get away.” Cockroft, an associate professor of history and political science at Schreiner, arrived at her present position by way of a pre-law major and a passionate interest in Chinese history and culture.

She spent her first three college years at the University of Maine in Orono on the pre-law track, majoring in political science and history and working as a paralegal for student legal aid.

“There were at least six student paralegals, one lawyer and one adult paralegal in the office,” Cockroft said. “One of the biggest issues our students had was the Columbia Record Club—trying to get out of their commitment to buy more records after getting the first five free. I had to hold my tongue to keep from saying, ‘You’ve got to be kidding; buy the records!’ I realized I didn’t have the temperament to be a lawyer and I didn’t want to spend my life like that.”

Somewhere in there, she took a Chinese history class.

“I became fascinated with Chinese history,” Cockroft said. “It’s so different from American and European history. So, after three years and deciding not to go to law school, I decided I needed to study the Chinese language.”

There were no classes in Chinese at the University of Maine, so she went to the University of Pennsylvania. After two years there, she graduated cum laude with a bachelor’s degree in Chinese language (Mandarin) and culture.

“I started to work on an M.A. in Chinese language at the University of Kansas,” Cockroft said. “About one and a half years in, my advisor died. The Kansas economy was really bad in the early ’80s and a lot of Asian Studies professors were leaving for the University of Washington [Seattle], so I switched to political science.”

She went on to earn a Ph.D. in history from Texas A&M. Her dissertation research focused on Margaret Chase Smith, the first woman to serve in both houses of the U.S. Congress, and the development of Chase’s career from the 1920s to the 1950s.

“Margaret Chase Smith grew up in my hometown in Maine,” Cockroft said. “She graduated from the same high school I did and my uncle was on her staff.”

After receiving her doctorate, Cockroft went to China for a year and taught English as a Second Language at Suzhou University in Jiangsu, People’s Republic of China, about an hour west of Shanghai. She started teaching at Schreiner in 2002.

“I really like teaching and helping students develop,” she said. “The students here are amazing: warm, generous, sweet. They make teaching the coolest job. Ever.”