

An EAA Interview with

Graeme Freeman

In 1978, Mansfield Freeman, an American who spent much of his life in China and who helped found the company that later became American International Group, Inc. (AIG), established a trust whose primary mission would be to create a foundation that would facilitate the development of mutual understanding among Americans and East Asians. Since then, the Freeman Foundation has touched the lives of millions of educators, students, and citizens in both Asia and the United States.

Graeme Freeman, his grandson, now presides over the Freeman Foundation, a philanthropic foundation headquartered in Honolulu, Hawai'i. The foundation focuses on developing a greater appreciation between the United States and Asia through collaborations with K-12, undergraduate, and graduate institutions throughout the US. In addition to educational interests, the foundation has worked with policy research organizations, including CSIS and the Brookings Institute, and humanitarian groups such as the Red Cross and Mines Advisory Group. Humanitarian efforts have included disaster relief efforts in Southeast Asia, Japan, Việt Nam, and Samoa. The foundation also has had a strong interest in land conservation and historic preservation in Vermont, Hawai'i, Japan, and China. Named Executive Director when the foundation was established in 1993, Freeman was appointed President in 2010. We offer our sincere thanks both to Graeme Freeman and to EAA editorial board member and interviewer Lynn Parisi, Director of the Program for Teaching East Asia at the University of Colorado Boulder and National Co-Director of NCTA.



Graeme Freeman. Source: Photo courtesy of the Freeman Foundation.

Freeman was appointed President in 2010. We offer our sincere thanks both to Graeme Freeman and to EAA editorial board member and interviewer Lynn Parisi, Director of the Program for Teaching East Asia at the University of Colorado Boulder and National Co-Director of NCTA.

Lynn Parisi: *Graeme, on behalf of Education About Asia, thank you for your time and your contribution to this special section on "What Should We Know About Asia?"*

The Asian studies community internationally is indebted to the Freeman Foundation, and to your family, for their transformational vision in supporting Asian educational programming in this country and exchanges for Asian students to study in the US. The Freeman Foundation is now nearing its twenty-fifth year. How have you seen the foundation evolve?

Graeme Freeman: The Freeman Foundation was started by Mansfield Freeman, who began his business career working for a small company, American Asiatic Insurance Company, in Shanghai, China, in 1923. AAIC was one of the small companies that eventually became part of the insurance conglomerate American International Group (AIG). Mansfield Freeman worked for them until 1960, retiring at the age of sixty-five. In forming the foundation in 1993, we knew we wanted to expose Americans to Asia, and we wanted to focus our attention on students, kindergarten through higher education. But beyond that, we weren't really sure what we wanted to do. At that time, American perceptions were still fairly Eurocentric—with the exception of several geographic areas like the West Coast and Hawai'i. So when we started, we felt



Mansfield Freeman.
Source: Lynn Parisi's interview of Houghton Freeman from the fall 2007 issue of EAA at <https://tinyurl.com/y89dsc1w>. Originally provided by the Yale University Library.

it was important for US students at the K-12 level to learn something about Asia. It wasn't that we wanted to create Asianists—experts within a particular field of Asian studies. That would be great, but this was not a top foundation educational objective. We just wanted young people to learn about Asia in schools the way they were learning about Europe.

What we didn't foresee was the explosion of the internet and social media, and their impact as critical factors in raising awareness about Asia. Now, Asia is in the news every day—unfortunate circumstances are often the reason for it; bad news has good legs—but if there's an earthquake, tsunami, or terrorist attack, we hear about it. The internet has been invaluable in terms of raising awareness and curiosity about Asian nations we all need to pay attention to. We've become a smaller world—technology allows us access to people and places without leaving home. The explosion of information technology was unexpected for us, but it has worked in our favor in terms of our mission of exposing young people to Asia.

Since the foundation was established, it has stuck to its core mission of educating Americans about Asia. But in addition to our work with K-12, primarily through the National Consortium for Teaching about Asia (NCTA), we've also worked with higher education—supporting the strengthening of Asian studies programs and departments. To a lesser degree, we've worked with graduate programs

and policy research organizations. For example, we are currently working with the nonprofit Northeast Asia Economic Forum on a project that brings together young leaders from six Asian countries and the United States to discuss economic issues.

At the same time, the foundation's work has gone beyond education. The Freeman Foundation has also been able to respond to natural disasters with some humanitarian work in parts of Asia, starting with flood damage in Việt Nam and earthquake reconstruction following the Kobe Earthquake in Japan. Most of our humanitarian work has been in collaboration with agencies like the Red Cross. For several years, we worked with the Mines Advisory Group in England to conduct landmine clearance in Việt Nam. We recently began a project to do similar work in Cambodia and Laos.

Our work in Japan following 3.11 has been interesting for us. After such a disaster, it's so important for communities to be able to rebuild in order to recover. Many smaller towns and villages were devastated after 3.11. The foundation chose to focus on efforts that prefectural and national governments might not have necessarily supported financially at the time. Our efforts went to smaller establishments that needed resources to resume their business operations.

Specifically, we supported projects to rebuild in the fishing community of Kesenuma in Miyagi Prefecture, funding reconstruction of structures that housed local businesses so those businesses could remain viable. In Kesenuma, we funded restoration of several damaged temples, reflecting another of the foundation's long-standing interests in historic preservation.

Looking back over twenty-five years since our work began, the foundation has evolved and I think it will continue to evolve. I think the biggest change in our world is the explosion in technology and how that, in turn, has facilitated the foundation's mission. The foundation has been really fortunate that our message has been aided by technology.

Lynn: *Spending so much time in Asia clearly had an important impact on your parents' worldview and commitment to Asia. You, in turn, spent a good part of your childhood in Japan. How has that experience helped shape your own perspectives?*

Graeme: I was born in Vermont, but shortly thereafter my family moved to Tokyo, where my father was working at the time. So my older sister and I really grew up in Tokyo, spending fifteen years and most of my school years there. After spending my childhood in Asia, I was often struck by a lack of exposure to and knowledge of Asia when I came back to the US. And growing up in Japan certainly impacted my worldview.

From kindergarten to tenth grade, I attended St. Mary's International School in Tokyo. It was a wonderful experience because I went to school with kids from forty countries. During my years in Japan in the 1950s and 1960s, Japan was a developing country. People were wonderful to us; I don't think I've ever felt safer than in Japan.

The experience of growing up in Japan, then returning to the US to finish my education, made me conscious of a need for Americans to learn more about Asia.

We left Japan my sophomore year, and I finished high school in a K-12 school in New York. But it's really the kids at St. Mary's whom I'd known since kindergarten and elementary school that remained my close friends. To this day, I have my closest associations with classmates from elementary and secondary school in Japan. I'll be attending my forty-fifth reunion soon—the president of the class thought some of us might not make it to a fiftieth so we'd better have a forty-fifth!

Moving from Japan back to the US was a real culture shock for me as a teenager. And at the time, I think that was my first exposure to a general lack of knowledge about Japan by Americans—mostly my classmates at the time. I remember I was asked, "Did you live in a paper house in Japan?" and similar questions that made me aware of misperceptions about Japan and Asia.

I remember this still being the case in college in the mid- to late '70s. I was living in environments in which there hadn't been a lot of Asian immigration—certainly that was true in Vermont, where my family lived at that time, and Connecticut, where I went to college. There were not many Asians at my university—maybe 1 percent of the population, if that. Without much opportunity for exposure to Asia, many students at my university were naïve about that part of the world. They knew something about Japan because World War II was still in the recent past and because imports of Japanese cars were taking off in the '70s. But for other parts of Asia, my classmates seemed to know very little. Of course, that has all been changing for the better. Americans have far more exposure to Asia now. But the experience of growing up in Japan, then returning to the US to finish my education, made me conscious of a need for Americans to learn more about Asia.

Now, having lived in Hawai'i for the past ten years, I'm constantly reminded of regional differences in education and in general knowledge of other parts of the world. The long tradition of Asian immigration and mixture of Asian ethnic groups seems to give people of the West Coast and Hawai'i more insight and interest in that part of the world.

Lynn: *Many EAA readers will be familiar with the National Consortium for Teaching about Asia and the Freeman Foundation's other K-16 educational programming. What do you view as critical factors in education that have motivated the Freeman Foundation to maintain its strong commitment to funding Asian studies programs at the elementary, secondary, and higher education levels?*

Graeme: To me, and I think to the foundation for many years, in the work we have done with our various partners—NCTA, universities, schools—the critical factor is and has been teachers. They are at the forefront of change and of our educational efforts. If there weren't teachers with the interest to teach about Asia, students wouldn't be learning about it.

As I mentioned earlier, we see the internet as having created an environment that has made Asia more familiar and sparked interest in Asian cultures and events, especially among young people, but it's the teachers who can take advantage of that spark to teach about the culture; that's

The National Consortium for Teaching about Asia

(NCTA), funded by the Freeman Foundation, is a multiyear initiative to encourage and facilitate teaching and learning about East Asia in elementary and secondary schools nationwide. NCTA is a premier provider of professional development on East Asia.

Current national sites include The University of Southern California, The University of Pittsburgh, Indiana University, The University of Washington, Columbia University, The University of Colorado Boulder, and The Five College Center for East Asian Studies at Smith College. In addition, twelve universities throughout the nation serve as NCTA partner sites.

enormously important. They hold the key to broadening and deepening young people's knowledge of Asia. Innovative teachers with knowledge and resources also exercise choices in their classrooms and can make curricular decisions that this content is important for students to learn, even finding room in a curriculum that may not give much space to Asia. NCTA is a program that has supported American teachers to do that.

Thinking about teacher flexibility and what they can and can't teach, there is one thing that surprised me when we were working with the NCTA directors on expanding NCTA programming after the first couple of years. I asked the directors about how flexible teachers were, especially given No Child Left Behind, which was being implemented at that time. I asked how much class time a social studies teacher, or maybe an English teacher, could actually spend on Asia. Can they incorporate Asian content into their curriculum? Were their hands tied? I was gratified to hear that, while teachers certainly had material they had to cover, they also had flexibility to teach additional topics or enhance certain topics. I know that every state has standards, but I hope that we never get to the point where there is no room for innovation and flexibility for teachers interested in teaching about Asia to their students.

I've also seen how teachers make choices within the curriculum that reflect their local environment—the demographics and interests of the community. A teacher in a community that hosts a Japanese manufacturing facility may have a different angle on what she teaches than an educator who teaches more about the various culture(s) of Asia reflected in the local population. Either way, these local contexts can translate into more exposure to Asia in the classroom.

In the long view, employers have to go where their markets are, and employers increasingly have a global view. This is true for corporations, government, and NGOs—who all want to hire people with genuine interest in regions where they are concentrating efforts. When teachers enable students to learn about Asia, students entering the workforce after college are going to be able to show valuable knowledge to prospective employers.

School administrators are also key factors in this process. In many cases, school administrators give teachers the flexibility and support to teach about Asia in their classes, as well as the encouragement and support to undertake professional development courses like those offered by NCTA.

Lynn: *NCTA is the Freeman Foundation's longest-running program (twenty years of funding to one program may be unprecedented, and we thank you). What do you see as the biggest impact/most rewarding impact of this program for the foundation?*

Graeme: The foundation sees NCTA as a program that has successfully supported American teachers. In over twenty years, more than 36,000 teachers have taken NCTA Asia-related seminars and courses, and incorporated that

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knowledge into their curricula. Cumulatively, it's probably several million students who have spent more time on Asia than they would have if their teachers hadn't received this professional development. It may range from the kindergarten student that learns something about the Great Wall or students who are exposed to Asia through the K-12 grades and want to continue to learn about it.

The exposure young people have had due to NCTA is phenomenal. The Freeman Foundation did not anticipate that NCTA programs would reach so many students.

Lynn: *As a parent, you must have direct interests in K-12 education. From that perspective, what would you like teachers to know and teach about Asia and the world?*

Graeme: I'm enormously impressed with what teachers are teaching about Asia. I'm biased, of course, about the importance of Asia, since I lived in Japan. One can't teach everything, but since teachers understand children—their clientele, so to speak—the choices of what to teach are in their hands.

My kids had very different education experiences. My older child went through public school; my younger one went through private school, although actually both kids had the same kindergarten teacher in Vermont. She did an entire interdisciplinary unit on the Great Wall, incorporating math, geography, and history. This was in 1995 for my older child and 2003 for the younger. These were great, high-interest topics for five-year-olds, and that's what they need—something to grab their interest.

Lynn: *EAA readers may be less familiar with the Freeman Foundation's preservation work in Asia. Can you introduce our readers to some of this work?*

Graeme: We have done a lot of that. Our first project was the Qianlong Gardens, built during the Qing dynasty in the Forbidden City. The World Monuments Fund (WMF) approached the foundation about this project, and we thought it had significant educational value in addition to the opportunity to help preserve a great historic structure. Although the garden had not been destroyed, it suffered from almost a century of neglect. We were initially asked

to fund restoration panels of artwork inside the structure, and we later went on to fund more structural work to return the gardens to their earlier state. This was our only restoration project in China, although we also supported the construction of the Stillwell Museum in Chongqing, again because of its historic and educational value. Houghton Freeman, who was a Naval Language Officer in the US Navy, had been stationed in Chongqing during World War II because he spoke both Japanese and Chinese.

In Japan, we had several projects as well. Again, our interests were largely historical preservation and educational value. Working with the WMF and local preservation groups, in the 1990s and early 2000s, we contributed to restoring some lovely small temples in Kyoto and the surrounding hills. These temples historically had been the homes (convents) of daughters of the Imperial family who chose to become Buddhist abbesses. We've also helped restore some temples in Ehime Prefecture and



Qianlong Gardens interior of the "Studio of Exhaustion From Diligent Service," a hall in the Palace of Tranquil Longevity after restoration. Source: World Monuments Fund website page "Qianlong Garden Conservation Project" at <https://tinyurl.com/yb718q8a>.

several historic buildings surrounding Kumamoto Castle in Kumamoto Prefecture. Among our smaller projects, with the same goals, was a restoration project for some of Kyoto's *machiya*—the traditional, long, narrow buildings that served as restaurants and homes, and still exist in the downtown area.

As I mentioned earlier, after 3.11, we contributed support to help restore the fishing village of Kesennuma in Miyagi Prefecture, which was decimated by the tsunami. Our support focused on several buildings that were essential to the economy—the town's sake factory, a store that supported the fishing industry, and a new building that housed a café that could help rebuild a sense of community. The actor Ken Watanabe donated other funds for the community center in Kesennuma.

One of the rewarding things for our foundation is that we can support small projects as well as large initiatives. We look for areas in which we can be helpful. In many cases, our giving is about critical niches and responsiveness to small but important needs.

Lynn: *You noted at the outset that education is the Freeman Foundation's overarching mission. I know the foundation has had several funding programs in museum education. What direction has the foundation taken in this area?*

Graeme: Since about 2000, we have been interested in strengthening opportunities to educate children about Asia through art. We've had several initiatives with art museums, as well as other museums with Asian collections. We've found that museum programs are a really good way to get young kids into museums and to spark interest. They also engage parents in the educational process. Our goal is not to develop Asianists, but to raise interest and knowledge about Asia in American society.

In our original museum funding program, beginning in 2000, we worked with nine museums that had strong Asian collections and good community education programs. We challenged these museums to develop strategies for introducing kids to Asia through interactive strategies



The main office building of the sake brewery in Kesennuma City was damaged by a vessel that crashed into it during the tsunami of the East Japan Earthquake.

Source: Embassy of Japan in the Netherlands website at <https://tinyurl.com/yb6dmfc3>.

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that developed visual literacy. We wanted children to be able to visualize Asian culture through art, to see as well as read about Asian society and culture.

We also supported these grantees to actively reach out to schools to incorporate local exhibits in their teaching. Over the years, we've learned that one of the issues with children's exposure to these art museums is transportation—especially in inner cities. Part of our support has actually been giving museums money to support trans-

porting school kids to the museums.

Another museum initiative that we felt was very successful was our 2001 funding program to the ACM—the Association of Children's Museums. In that case, the ACM identified nine children's museums—in Seattle, Minnesota, Washington, DC, Boston, Brooklyn, Houston, Austin, Manhattan, and Madison. We funded them to produce a total of seven exhibits that ranged from a Hello Kitty exhibit to a reconstruction of a Tokyo subway car to Việt Nam- and China-themed exhibits.

After the producing museums held the exhibits, all seven exhibits traveled to additional children's museums around the country, a total of fifty museums in four years. At the end, exhibits went back to their home museums and often became part of the permanent program.

A few years ago, we decided this initiative had been successful enough to support a similar venture. For our second round of this program, the foundation supported five producing museums, each of which developed an Asia-themed exhibit that then traveled to nine other museums between 2014 and this year.

Lynn: *I understand the foundation has recently launched a new initiative in museum education. Can you share information on your new directions in this area?*

Graeme: We have a new museum initiative that began this year in which we invited art museums, specifically Asian art museums and museums dealing with Asian history and culture, to submit proposals. We were quite flexible, but

National Consortium for Teaching about Asia 1998–2018 Statistics

1998–1999: Five national sites offered twenty-seven NCTA seminars for 478 teachers.

2000–2001: The first two NCTA study tours were conducted for forty-four teachers.

2007–2008: NCTA expanded to seven national sites. By its tenth year, NCTA had offered 544 seminars for 9,810 teachers and sixty-two study tours for 1,135 teachers.

2009–2010: By year twelve, NCTA added different types of courses to its traditional NCTA thirty-hour seminar. In this year, fifty-two seminars and eleven shorter courses were taught to 1,472 teachers.

2012–2013: By year fifteen, NCTA had offered 771 seminars and seventy-eight different types of programs, such as summer institutes and shorter workshops, for 18,393 teachers. NCTA also had offered ninety-nine study tours for 1,736 teachers.

2017–2018: By its twentieth year, NCTA had offered 918 seminars and 838 other programs for 36,079 teachers, as well as 118 study tours for 2,025 teachers.

In over twenty years, more than 263 universities, school districts, museums, and other organizations have collaborated on NCTA programs.

the common theme was “new directions in outreach to K–12 students.” Some museums already had outreach programs; some did not. I think our process was very democratic—we had a four-person review panel with very different perspectives; we selected fifteen from a group of forty-eight invited institutions. These museums received two-year grants this past spring. The funded projects are a really interesting mix. Some projects are enhancing outreach programming that is already part of their mission. Some grantees focus more upon Asian history than art. Several colleges that have smaller collections and limited staffs will incorporate art students into their outreach projects.

Lynn: *The Freeman Foundation also has a relatively new program supporting undergraduate student internships in Asia. With growing economic ties across the Pacific, this seems like a very timely project. What kinds of experiences and impacts are students in this program having?*

Graeme: In 2013, we embarked on an initiative to send undergraduate students from fifteen institutions to Asia on internships. Each institution works with their respective students to establish individualized internships, mostly within each student’s country and area of interest. Many of these schools had established offices in Asian countries before our funding, such as the University of Southern California and George Washington University, but others have worked through third-party programs, which has worked well. But in all cases, we wanted to expand from “study abroad” to “experience abroad.” That is, wouldn’t it be interesting to have the opportunity to live in an Asian country and experience the culture by working there? By working there, one gains a much better sense of what people from that country are actually going through. You’re not in a classroom with other students; you’re working in the environment, whether you’re a barista, doing research at a university, or working in a hospital. Internships run from six weeks to several months. In some cases, the students have finished a study abroad semester and stay on to do an internship. Every university and college has implemented something a little bit different.

We’ve now done this program for four years; twenty-six colleges and universities have been involved, each sending approximately ten to twenty students per institution, per year. These students have created some really innovative internships; I’m impressed with what they are doing. In some cases, college funds help support the interns’ expenses; in other cases, students raise some of their own funds. The Freeman funds provide stipends to lower



Hello from Japan! Children’s Museum of Manhattan, New York.
Source: Freeman Foundation *Asian Culture Exhibit Series* webpage at <https://tinyurl.com/ybjvz5fo>.

the costs and make this opportunity feasible for many students, giving them the opportunity to work in a foreign country, build up their résumés, make connections, and possibly encourage them to become more involved with Asia in their careers. Some of the most interesting internships include engineering students who monitored landmine and unexploded ordnance removal robots in Cambodia and a group who worked on elephant research in Thailand. Other interns typically worked for private companies, NGOs, and educational institutions during their time in Asia. Often, interns have reported that this experience changed their lives. That isn’t our intention; our intention is for them to enhance their lives by *seeing and experiencing* an Asian culture. But it is still very gratifying to hear.

Lynn: *Graeme, the Freeman Foundation’s vision, energy, and generous support have been invaluable to the field of US–Asia relations and Asian studies education. Thank you very much for your time sharing the work of the foundation both within and beyond education. In closing, would you like to share any parting comments with EAA readers?*

Graeme: K–12 teachers and K–12 systems are critical if younger generations are going to learn about Asia and we are going to have a more globally informed society. Yes, we have the internet as a learning tool and we can say, “Here, go learn about Asia,” but it really is the teachers who make the difference. For the teachers reading *EAA*, they are the ones making a difference in student learning about Asia—their students are the ones fortunate enough to have that special teacher or teachers. When I was in high school, I took a course on Latin America from a newly naturalized

citizen from Cuba—probably the best teacher I ever had. A single very good teacher can have a strong impact. I think there’s lots of evidence of this. *EAA*, NCTA, and other programs are making this possible. The Freeman Foundation is pleased to be able to facilitate this teaching and learning through our education initiatives. ■



In June 2016, more than two dozen Illinois Wesleyan University students interned in Asia, thanks to a \$400,000 grant from the Freeman Foundation.

Source: Illinois Wesleyan University website at <https://tinyurl.com/yat86ycp>.

EAA readers who are interested in a first-person account of twentieth-century China before 1950 might want to read Lynn Parisi’s interview of Houghton Freeman from the fall 2007 issue of *EAA* at <https://tinyurl.com/y89dsc1w>.