What Should We Know About Asia?

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...
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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—which is why 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 misconceptions 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
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 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, 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 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 historical 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
We also engage parents in the educational process. They get young kids into museums and to spark interest. We've found that museum programs are a really good way into it during the tsunami of the East Japan Earthquake. Source: Embassy of Japan in the Netherlands website at https://tinyurl.com/yb6dmmfc3.

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.

We challenged these museums to develop strategies for introducing kids to Asia through interactive strategies 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.

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, Minnesotta, 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


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 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.
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 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: 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.

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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.

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.