Case 80

Support for Asian Studies and Cultural Exchange

Freeman Foundation, 1993

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Background. The Freeman Foundation was born of a trust created in 1978 by Mansfield Freeman, one of the founders of American International Group (AIG). Mr. Freeman had, prior to starting AIG, been a teacher at Tsinghua University in Beijing. He lived in China from 1919 to 1941, had a deep interest in East Asia, and was a published scholar of Chinese philosophy. Over the course of his lifetime, Mr. Freeman became concerned that Americans and Asians knew little about each other, and he hoped through his philanthropy to help bridge the disparate cultures. Upon his death in 1992, Freeman’s family created the Foundation in accordance with his wishes, that it work:

... to strengthen the bonds of friendship between this country and those of the Far East; to develop a greater appreciation of oriental cultures in this country and a better understanding of American institutions and purposes on the part of the peoples of East Asia, and to stimulate an exchange of ideas in economic and cultural fields which will help create mutual understanding and thus lessen the danger of such frictions and disagreements as lead to war.

It is worth noting that, of all American foundations, the Freeman Foundation spends the highest proportion of its resources on international grant-making. In 2002, the most recent year for which these figures have been published, the Foundation spent $60.8 million, equivalent to 74.6 percent of its total appropriations, on overseas grants.

Strategy. Since its creation, the Freeman Foundation has undertaken a broad range of activities to promote in the United States increased awareness of Asian history and culture, and to enable students—from both regions—to study abroad in the other. Most of the Foundation’s support has been targeted at education. As its mission statement explains: “Through education and educational institutes, the Foundation hopes to develop a greater appreciation of oriental cultures, histories, and economies in the United States and a better understanding of the American people and of American institutions and purposes by the peoples of East Asia.” What follows, then, is a sample of the Foundation’s more notable grants in supporting cross-cultural interaction and understanding through education.

- In 1994, the Freeman Foundation made a five-year grant of $10 million to Wesleyan University—Mansfield Freeman’s alma mater—to fund full four-year scholarships for twenty-two students each year. The scholarships are given to promising students from eleven Asian countries, “who would not otherwise have the opportunity to study in the U.S.”

- In 1997, the Foundation appropriated $7.75 million for an emergency loan program to support Asian students in the United States whose ability to continue their studies had been jeopardized by the Asian financial crises of that year. More recently, the Foundation carried over unused funds from that program, ASIA-HELP, to fund a similar relief effort. Freeman-EAS (Emergency Assistance for Students) now offers “educational allowances of up to $5,000 to undergraduates from Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand . . . who are facing serious financial difficulties” as a result of the catastrophic tsunami of December 2004.
The Freeman Foundation has underwritten the addition of Asian studies faculty, course offerings, and study opportunities to eighty-four grantee institutions of higher education. The four-year, $100 million Freeman Foundation Undergraduate Asian Studies Initiative has sought to increase the number of students majoring in Asian Studies, and to encourage and enable more and more American students to study abroad in East Asia.

In 2002, the Foundation commissioned nine children’s museums around the country to create seven different exhibits—each highlighting some facet of oriental culture or history. According to an article in The Washington Post, “the gift . . . is the first time children’s museums have received money as a group. . . . [And it] wants to take advantage of the strong attendance figures [at these museums] to expand interest in Asian culture.”

The Freeman Foundation is also the primary supporter of the National Consortium for Teaching About Asia, “a nationwide initiative [launched in 1998] to encourage and facilitate teaching and learning about Asian history, geography, culture, and social issues for K–12 schools nationwide.” The Consortium, run by five partner institutions, offers seminars and travel grants to teachers, who, it is hoped, then incorporate the Asian Studies material into their lesson plans.

Outcomes. The Freeman Foundation’s Asian Studies grantmaking has strengthened the field, and has exposed students of all ages—from both Asia and the United States—to languages, cultures, and experiences thoroughly unlike their own. The Wesleyan scholarships, for example, have so far enabled 204 Asian students to study at Mr. Freeman’s alma mater. The Foundation’s two emergency loan programs have provided crucial support for Asian students whose homes were struck by disaster. David Arnold, then acting president of the Institute of International Education—which administered the ASIA-HELP grants—rightly identified the donation’s importance in labeling it a “rapid and generous response to [the] crisis.” In that case, as in the more recent case of Freeman-EAS, the Foundation has employed a timely infusion of much-needed funds to preserve for over 1,000 students the dream of an American education.

Meanwhile, the Freeman Foundation Undergraduate Asian Studies Initiative, which paid out the balance of its $100 million commitment in 2004, has funded rapid growth in the study of oriental cultures and languages at American colleges and universities. Since 2000, the initiative has paid for over 100 new full-time faculty hires at the eighty-four grantee institutions. It has also funded the creation of more than 1,000 new courses on Asian studies (including languages), and has led the participating schools to add Asia-related content to over 800 pre-existing undergraduate courses. The initiative has enabled some 2,500 students and 600 faculty members to travel or study in Asia. And it has been the driving force behind a 39 percent increase—at the eighty-four schools—in the number of students majoring in Asian studies.

Freeman efforts to reach a younger audience have also proved effective. The seven children’s museum exhibits underwritten by the Foundation began a tour in 2004 that will take them to seventy museums around the country by the end of 2007. In the first half of 2004 alone, the initial seven host museums had more than 250,000 visitors. And the teacher seminars on Asian studies hosted by the Freeman-funded National Consortium for Teaching About Asia have enriched the curricula of more than 950,000 students so far.

Impact. All told, the Freeman Foundation has been the largest private backer of Asian studies and of cross-cultural exchange between East Asia and the United States. Certainly, much of the West remains under-informed about life in the Orient, and a vastly greater share of attention will likely continue to be paid in American education to the European affairs. But the Freeman Foundation, which made grants last year of over $55 million for these and other Asia-related initiatives, is working
to lessen this imbalance year by year, and, in so doing, “to strengthen the bonds of friendship between this country and the countries of the Far East.” By precisely targeting its grant-making, it has succeeded in achieving outcomes far beyond the measure of its limited resources.

Notes

1168. Ibid.
1171. Freeman Foundation, Annual Report, 2004
1173. Ibid.
1176. Ibid.