

Faculty Fellows Final Project Report 22-23

Developing Student-Centered Exhibitions on Asia to Build Connections and Community

My project focused on developing a student-curated digital photography exhibition for a class called “ASIA 1000 Origins of Contemporary Southeast Asia”. For this project, I collaborated with the CU Libraries’ Rare and Distinctive Collections using their primary source photographs of colonial Southeast Asia (the 1880s-1930s). Library curator Sean Babbs helped organize two in-person workshops where students were able to come to the library and work with the materials. Students went in person to the library to work with the collections and also had access to many of the photos through digital scans available from the library. Rare and Distinctive Collections digitized these images during winter break 2022 to make them available for this course (and future users). The project was a pilot with a longer-term goal of implementing similar projects into future classes and possibly printing some of these images at some point for an in-person exhibit. Since the project went well I plan to continue using these and other images in future classes.

The challenges that this project sought to address were 1) help students engage concretely with course content about a place in the world where they don’t live 2) help them see how they have power as storytellers and content creators 3) use technology to create an artifact of their learning. The goal was to empower students to drive their learning and become more invested in their projects by giving them a choice in what image to choose and the story that they would tell about it. As I designed this project, I researched other related projects and found advocates for student-created exhibitions who found that these kinds of learning opportunities offer structured opportunities for reflection and integrative thinking, meaningful interactions with peers and faculty, and opportunities to share this knowledge with the public. Much existing research supports the notion that the more students are engaged in creating their learning through project-based work and teaching others the deeper their learning. These practices (detailed in AACU’s high-impact practices work) have been shown to increase retention and persistence and positively impact student affective and cognitive development. I saw a cumulative project like this as an example of student-centered learning that would also achieve the above outcomes. Based on the final project results and students’ reflections on the final project, I think these impacts were generally present in my class as well.

As the final project for this class, students analyzed and explored early colonial photographic prints and photobooks (some of which have yet to be cataloged) to see what hidden stories they could illuminate. For the assignment students had to choose a

single image to analyze and re-story. The project invited them to read the archives in a different register than they might if they were to just take these images at face value. Ultimately, I think the project was a successful first go at a project like this. It took me up to the 11th hour to figure out how to set up a WordPress site with a tool to have students input their content and auto-populate the website, but the BuffsCreate team was extremely helpful in assisting me with getting this set up. This project, and its associated research during development, was a direct result of conversations and materials shared as part of the Faculty Fellows program at ASSETT.

Here is the final website for ASIA 1000 Origins of Contemporary Southeast Asia:

<https://asia1000.asianstudies.buffscreate.net/>

As I get more familiar with the platform and doing these kinds of digital exhibitions online, I plan to transition to using more advanced tools like Omeka, along the lines of [The Fairy Tales Repository](#). Ultimately I would also like to encourage students to share their work through the Center for Asian Studies' undergraduate Colorado Journal of Asian Studies, hosted by CU Boulder Libraries Open Journals.

Here are some sample reflections from students on their research and the project:

Reflection 1:

While many images piqued my interest in the archive, I settled on Kane's Fishing Boats because of the unique confluence of factors it represented, as well as the personal connection I have to the image. As my father is from the Philippines, and my grandparents still reside there, it has always been a very meaningful place in my life and one which I find myself seeking deeper connection with. Although I have been fully raised in the USA, I wanted to learn more about the country from both a personal heritage, cultural, and historical standpoint. Fishing Boats represented a perfect image to explore this through as the boats connect with both commerce, culture, industry, and political influence. Additionally, the image is from the 1930's, a time I found to be very influential and transformative for the Philippines.

I also found this image to be particularly interesting given the themes of colonialism and American (or foreign in general) influence on a Southeast Asian nation, a recurring theme which I have noticed to be a major force throughout the class. I believed that exploring this theme on the scale of a single nation would aid me in better understanding the general dynamics of these relationships from a cultural and political standpoint. While each nation experienced different forces at different times, and thus

specifics vary, the general concept of this interaction was highly interesting to me and seems paramount in telling the story of Southeast Asia.

To create my project, I used a blend of both sources from the class as well as external readings. I thought the class sources helped bridge my findings to concepts we have discussed in class, and using outside sources allowed me to back up my own findings and connect them as well. While I do believe popular media has an important place in many works, I chose to intentionally focus my sources on academic papers and writings given their well-researched and factually backed nature. I wanted to ensure I was using high quality sources to prove my argument and felt as though they fit the scope of my better generally better.

While there were certainly challenges and many considerations along the way, I really enjoyed this assignment. I thought it allowed me to condense my learning for the semester and organize it in a single paper yet express it in a creative way. Using an image to analyze made the writing process far more interesting than a basic essay and is something I would love to continue to see more.

Reflection 2:

I decided to analyze my photo, “The Interior Hall of the Post Office (Saigon),” partly because I was interested in finding a photograph related to Vietnam, but also I found that the French caption was an interesting bit of history that is worth discussing. French colonialism impacted Vietnam to a huge degree, and it’s something I knew about but didn’t quite know the depths of. For others, I think it’s very important to understand the impact of colonial and imperialism because it often dictates how countries are managing in the modern day. Though, there is more to Vietnam’s rich history than the ugly stain that is colonialism/ imperialism, but it’s undeniable that it has influenced the country to such a degree and even has impacted my personal life. My grandma and mom knew French for a reason, and there’s a reason why some of the vietnamese restaurants I see in Colorado are a Viet-French fusion, and there’s a reason why so much of Vietnamese language shares similarities with French.

My project analysis was primarily influenced by the article “Old Soerabaja – New Soerabaja? Circulating the Emptiness of the Colonial City” edited by Sophie Junge, in which colonial photos are often empty and don’t include local people. For sure, this article will stick in my mind because it’s such an intriguing perspective. I reviewed a lot of travel websites, surprisingly, because I was looking up the Saigon Post Office. Buildings from colonial periods are treated as historical tourist destinations now - that’s

how I found out a lot of general, basic information about the post office. It makes me wonder who gets to decide which buildings survive into the contemporary era, and who continues to benefit from tourist visits. I didn't intend to utilize these sources in the first place, but they were good for some quick information and most of all for me to observe the images.

Overall, I liked this assignment. I've never worked on any sort of project like this before, and I think it's great that this assignment encourages students to explore the archives. I've never used the archives before (didn't even know it existed) but it's a great reminder of the library's resources that I wished I took more advantage of earlier in my college career.