

# Christina Firpo

Christina Firpo is an Associate Professor of History at CalPoly University in San Luis Obispo, California. She was a fellow at IAS during Spring-Summer 2013 and a fellow at the KITLV during Summer 2014. Her book, *The Uprooted: Race and Childhood in Colonial Indochina, 1890-1975*, will be published by the University of Hawai'i Press in 2016.

IN MAY 2013, I ARRIVED in Leiden where I would spend the last four months of my sabbatical at IAS. My task was to finish writing my book on mixed-race children in 19th and 20th century Vietnam. IAS provided a perfect writing atmosphere, and more. I was immediately charmed by Leiden, its museums, and the 19th century café that served delicate meringues. To my delight, I learned that the institute was located in a 16th century house on the elegant Rapenburg canal. The story goes that after the residents of Leiden resisted the Spanish, William of Orange rewarded them with a choice of either tax exemption or a university. They chose the latter—a people after my own heart. The original University building is a church converted into a lecture hall, symbolizing the sacrosanctity of knowledge in Leiden's community.

At the Rapenburg office, I settled into a third floor workspace where I had a bird's eye view of the canal below. Within a few weeks of arriving, I was entertained by watching a barge come through to pull rusty bicycles out of the canal—and it had a heaping pile. As the Spring set in, crocuses broke through the ground, the weather warmed up, and the sun set later each day. My new friends and I took advantage of the northern latitude to enjoy late drinks along the canal, discussing our research.

My fellowship at IAS was fruitful. The institute was impressively organized: they took care of fellows' housing, organized talks and field trips, and gave us helpful tips for getting around the Netherlands. The most valuable aspect of the IAS fellowship was the intellectual community that the institute fostered. Director Philippe Peycam, also an historian of colonial Vietnam, offered me sage professional advice and introduced fellows to important contacts within the University of Leiden and the KITLV. He went above and beyond his duties as director to cook dinner for fellows, share his vast collection of mid-century Japanese music, and entertain us with jokes and slang in flawless Vietnamese. Paul Rabé introduced me to new ways of approaching my

second book project on illegal prostitution in the major cities in colonial Vietnam; and I continue to work with Paul van der Velde on the ICAS book prize committee. I also made lasting friendships with other fellows who also took up temporary residence at IAS. A dynamic cohort quickly formed, and included scholars from the US, India, Japan, Italy, France, and local Dutch scholars. The scholars in our group studied a variety of disciplines and countries: history of science in Japan, political science in Laos, art history of India, Sanskrit and Indonesian linguistics, city planning in Mumbai, heritage conservation in Cambodia, and I studied history of Vietnam. The intellectual connection was valuable for everyone. We listened to presentations, read each others' work, offered valuable suggestions, and gave professional advice. The exposure to varied types of research forced us to think about our work in broader Asian terms and from an interdisciplinary perspective. When we weren't working hard, we geeked out, goofed off, and gobbled up the delights from the Wednesday market.

IAS offered more than the four walls of Rapenburg 59. I took advantage of the University of Leiden library and the KITLV collection. I made trips to The Hague to admire the architecture and visit museums. I took boat rides and tested every local cheese in Amsterdam, Utrecht, Haarlem, and other cities. I quickly fell in love with the complexity of the Dutch culture's perfect simplicity.

The fellowship at IAS also proved fruitful in ways that I could never have predicted. Writing flowed from my fingertips. Before I knew it, my book was finished and it will be

published with the University of Hawai'i Press in Spring 2016. In addition to finishing my first book, while at IAS I made substantial headway on chapters for my second book on clandestine prostitution in colonial Vietnam. Through my contacts at IAS, in the summer of 2014 I was invited to work on my second book at the KITLV. I also joined the book prize committee for the International Conference of Asian Scholars (ICAS) taking place in Adelaide, in July of this year. I see staff members almost every year at the Association of Asian Studies conference and other conferences. I look forward to seeing them again at ICAS 9, where my cohort will have a reunion in Australia.

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## The Alumnus



Top:  
Christina Firpo.

Below:  
Christina with other  
fellows at IAS.