

DISCOVERING THE

# Uprooted

History Professor Christina Firpo's book recounts a systematic removal of children in Southeast Asia

**H**istory Professor Christina Firpo had just spent months combing through documents in the archives of Hanoi, Vietnam. She was a graduate student at the time and was preparing to leave for vacation when a file from the 1940s caught her eye. One document, written in French, described categorizing children who were born of a French father and a Southeast Asian mother into groups of "white, lightly tinted and dark-skinned." The document instructed police to leave the so-called dark-skinned boys and girls with their families but to remove the white and lightly tinted children — by force if necessary — to be raised elsewhere.

Firpo stared at the document for a while, adjusting her eyes to make sure she was seeing it correctly. "I had to walk out of the archives and take a breather," she said. After reading through the file, she decided to cancel her vacation and stay in Vietnam to dig deeper. Although she was familiar with the French colonization of Vietnam, this story of removing children born of Southeast Asian mothers and French fathers had been omitted from the history books.

While researching, she was shocked to find that what seemed to be a few isolated cases of French officials taking children from their mothers was actually much more. "I kept thinking I must be overestimating all of it," she said. "I kept second-guessing myself

— as any researcher should do — but more so than my other projects because it was such a crazy story."

Her research took her to several cities in Southeast Asia and eventually to archives in France. She found evidence that more than 4,000 children had been taken from their mothers in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. In many cases, and for a wide range of reasons — including death, divorce or end of a romance — the father had left the child in the mother's care. But to French colonial administrators, leaving children of Frenchmen to be raised in the Southeast Asian cultural milieu was tantamount to abandonment.

To "protect" the children, French authorities and civilian-led organizations placed them in state-run orphanages or educational institutions to be transformed into "little Frenchmen." Even more surprising to Firpo was the discovery that the practice lasted from 1890 all the way up to 1980 — long after French colonial rule.

Firpo interviewed some of the children — now adults — who were raised in such institutions. In some cases, they were rescued from homelessness or life on the streets, but some had been taken, often by force, from loving homes. She found one boy's story particularly heartbreaking. Records in Vietnam indicate that his mother strong-armed a priest at the orphanage and took her son back. A search for the

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**Opposite page:** History Professor Christina Firpo. **Left:** Firpo in Hanoi, at Văn Miếu, the Temple of Literature, in 2014. **Top right:** Eurasian children in a French-run institution after being removed from their maternal families. **Bottom right:** Early 20th-century postcard of a Cambodian woman with her Eurasian children.

mother and child ensued, and authorities eventually tracked them down. To prevent the mother from finding her son again, he was sent to an orphanage in a different part of the country and eventually taken to France. Remarkably, the same boy's official documents in France — those he would be able to access as an adult — have no record of his mother trying to get him back. In fact, they say she was completely uninterested in the child.

After more than a decade of research, Firpo finished writing a book about the removal programs. Published in 2016, "The Uprooted: Race, Children, and Imperialism in French Indochina, 1890-1980" won a prestigious International Convention of Asian Scholars Colleague's Choice Book Prize, which Firpo says was just a bonus. The positive response she got from some of the individuals she interviewed meant more to her. "That's the audience I'm most concerned about," she said. "I wanted to do their story justice."

Firpo says she'll never lose interest in the stories of the uprooted, and she hopes her students find a similar passion. "I hope they find something in their professional or personal life — this kind of marathon-type project — that they can put their all into," she said. "Something that's so intellectually stimulating that they can't stop going back to it. It's hard work, but it's fun and so rewarding."



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LEFT: COURTESY OF CHRISTINA FIRPO