

Educational Resources and Developments

Polishing the Mirror: A Teaching Unit on Central and Inner Eurasia

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High school teachers who want to teach about Central and Inner Eurasia are faced with a host of problems. Their schools often lack up-to-date information about the post-Soviet republics and the teachers themselves have had little or no training on the region. In addition, most texts for the region are aimed at college-level or other advanced readers. It was in hopes of addressing some of these problems that I collaborated in creating *Polishing the Mirror: A Teaching Unit on Central and Inner Eurasia* in 2000.

When I returned to the U.S. from Uzbekistan in 1997 and went to Vergennes, Vermont, my home town, to talk about the region to various classes at Vergennes Union High School, the dearth of suitable material came as a surprise. In response, R.T. ("Cookie") Steponaitis, then a teacher at the school, and I collaborated to produce this 350-page unit. Gracious support was provided by Betsy Barlow, Outreach Coordinator at the University of Michigan's Center for Middle Eastern and North African Studies and the Center's Director, Professor Michael Bonner. Additional funding came from UM's Center for Russian and Eastern European Studies.

The Unit is designed for high school students and teachers. It has eleven chapters in three sections — Geography, History and Culture — supplemented by photographs, maps and slides. The chronological coverage of the material is from approximately the 8th century to the present, but the focus is selective: for example, Islam and its spread are treated broadly; chapters on the Mongol invasion and Timurids are followed by one on the Russian conquest and colonial experience. Each chapter contains various readings, some drawn from the primary-source literature on the region, others written just for this loose-leaf book. At the end of every chapter is an annotated list of resources — films, music, books — that can help teachers find age-appropriate information on the topics covered in

the chapter, as well as exercises designed to incorporate the materials presented.

The readings are designed so that teachers can either use them together or separately to supplement a textbook that they are already using. All the materials can be readily pulled out and photocopied for the classroom. Questions follow each reading to help students focus on the important material, and the end of each chapter has activities and/or quizzes for teachers to use. Also included are maps specially designed for the Unit, with and without place names, for teachers to use in map quizzes. The maps were prepared in order to show the region as a whole, with its connections to surrounding geographic regions; less focus was placed on the current political boundaries, although current political maps are included.

The texts drawn from the primary-source materials are annotated with pronunciations and other information, so that teachers and students approaching the region for the first time will not be daunted by their lack of familiarity. The texts represent a variety of reading levels; teachers will need to decide for themselves which are most appropriate for their classrooms. Some are considered to be "difficult," such as a short section from Juvaini's *Genghis Khan: The History of the World Conqueror* translated by J.A. Boyle. Although some college professors report that their students "didn't like" the text, the translation does a wonderful job of capturing the flavor of the Persian from which it was translated, and this specific section gives the students access to "war reporting" of the thirteenth century. We hope that with the addition of annotations and some encouragement, students will see some of the marvel of history and language through this sort of primary text. We also made an effort to include photographs throughout the unit in order to provide more of a sense for what the region and its peoples look like. The unit includes 49 slides, keyed to descriptions at the end

of each chapter, which supplement both the readings and the photographs in the text.

Perhaps the most unusual section is that on "Culture," which contains chapters on clothing, food, languages and architecture. These chapters enable teachers to be creative with the information they provide the students. The food chapter, for instance, has recipes for traditional dishes from Central Eurasia. The architecture chapter has a section on traditional decoration that could also be used creatively. This type of basic information is often difficult to find; here it is presented in a very concrete way so that students can get a sense of how life in Central and Inner Eurasia differs from that in the United States.

We wrote the unit without any expectation that teachers would use it in its entirety, although that would certainly be possible. Most teachers will not have enough time in their school year to add so much material. Many sections of the material could be taught independently of the rest and sprinkled throughout a school year. For example, the fascinating set of interviews with women about their lives in the Soviet and post-Soviet period ("Women's Lives and Words") could be used in the teaching of modern Asia; "Jews in Central Eurasia" could broaden the coverage of classes examining Judaism.

The "Teachers' Resources" at the end of each chapter include an annotated list of other sources of information: books, articles, music, videos, Web sites, and maps. The annotations include information on what the resource's particular strengths are, so that teachers whose time is limited can quickly find and request through inter-library loan any materials that might not be readily available in their own libraries. Sources for obtaining scarce resources are also indicated.

Because information on the region is in the process of evolution, these resources are being supplemented by a website. The website (<http://www.umich.edu/~vika/caunit/index.html>) includes scanned versions of nineteenth-century maps in color, to supplement the black-and-white versions in the unit. Once I return to the US from Uzbekistan in January 2002 I will be updating the resources currently available there. In addition, since the unit does not include all the material prepared by the authors, other sections will likely be added to the website in a downloadable or printable form (such as a PDF file) in 2002.

Response to the unit has been overwhelmingly positive: its first printing sold out within a month, and it has been frequently reprinted. In one purchaser's words, "This is how a curriculum unit ought to be!" Following a presentation on the unit at the Michigan Council for the Social Studies/National Council for the Social Studies Great Lakes Regional Conference in Grand Rapids, Michigan (March 2000), the response of the teachers there was to snap up every copy we had brought with us and run to find their friends to see whether they could get one as well. Even college and university level instructors have found the unit useful. One high school teacher even used me as a resource during the 2000-2001 school year, requiring students to ask me questions about life in Uzbekistan via e-mail while I was in Tashkent.

The Unit is available from the Center for Middle Eastern and North African Studies (CMENAS), 1080 South University Ave., Suite 4640, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1106, Tel.: +1/734-764-0350, Fax: +1/734-764-8523, cmenas@umich.edu. The price, which includes slides, is \$75 (Mastercard or Visa accepted); phone orders are accepted.

Teaching the Silk Road

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Some years ago the history department at Hamilton College decided that the traditional surveys of Western Civ or World History were no longer workable as a way of introducing students to the discipline. Instead, each professor teaches an

introductory course based on his or her own specialty. The courses have methodology, rather than content, in common. Each course must cover a broad chronological and geographical span and include exercises involving historical monographs,

primary sources, maps, and concepts of historiography. My contribution to this system is a course called "The Silk Road: Crossroads of Cultures." Teaching the course has been a great challenge, and I have used a variety of sources to reach students in effective ways.

The biggest difficulty in trying to teach the Silk Road is the enormous size and complexity of the topic—how does one provide a coherent account of 2000-plus years of events involving myriad peoples, languages, and religions, most of which are utterly foreign to the average undergraduate? My solution is to keep to a chronological structure, beginning roughly with the Scythians in the 6th century BCE and ending with Babur and the close of overland trade around 1500 CE. The single theme that unites this vast period is trade: in goods, technology, ideas and religions. Defining "trade" broadly allows students to study nomadic and settled societies and the relations between them, methods of exchange across very different cultures, the economic and symbolic meanings of the goods exchanged, and non-commercial exchanges of technology and ideas. Numerous sub-topics can be approached under these categories: language families and the meaning of "race" and "ethnicity" in an ancient context, developments in transportation technology, differing concepts of time and calendars, war as a method of trade, the conditions that facilitate or hinder the exchange of ideas, and so on. David Christian's magnificent textbook *A History of Russia, Central Asia, and Mongolia* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998) also holds the class together.

Because my course serves as an introduction to the advanced study of history, we spend a great deal of time on the definition and use of historical evidence and various methods of doing history. Richard Bulliet's book *The Camel and the Wheel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990) is terrific for this purpose, since he uses archaeological, numismatic, textual, and linguistic sources to understand why the camel replaced the wheel from the Arabian Peninsula to Inner Asia. Bulliet's argument is beautifully structured, and serves as an excellent model for students of clear reasoning and exposition. The history of paper and printing is a good case study in understanding the transmission of technology. Using Thomas Carter's *The Invention of Printing in China and its Spread*

Westward (New York: Ronald Press, 1955) as a source base, we follow the thousand-year journey of paper from China to Europe, the transmission of block printing, and the independent development of movable type by Chinese craftsmen and by Gutenberg. While related, each of these exchanges happened through very different mechanisms, allowing students to construct the chain of reasoning needed to prove that item X was invented at point A and then transmitted to point B. Finally, study of the careers of Alexander the Great and Chinggis Khan generates discussion of whether great men or great events drive history.

Not all sources are so useful, however. In particular, I have been frustrated in trying to find a suitable biography of Alexander the Great. A. B. Bosworth's *Conquest and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993) is probably the most rigorous, but it is difficult to read and shows the historian's hostility toward his subject. Robin Lane Fox's *Alexander the Great* (New York: Penguin, 1973) reads like an adventure for British schoolboys, and Lane Fox romanticizes where Bosworth condemns. This year I think I found a solution: I divided the class into three sections, and gave each group one-third of Bosworth's and Lane Fox's books, along with selections from primary sources. The groups were instructed to prepare class presentations and individual papers comparing how the two historians used the same evidence base to draw very different portraits of Alexander. The drawback was that each group studied only one third of Alexander's life in detail, but that was compensated for by a sharp increase in student enthusiasm.

Because so much information is packed into the course it often leaves students lost in a sea of unfamiliar names and concepts; it is one of the toughest courses I teach. Students have to take a very active approach to their studies in order to survive. For this same reason the Silk Road is a wonderful vehicle for introducing students to the rigor and the fascination of history, as well as the importance of understanding interactions across the Eurasian continent as a whole. This year's course syllabus and related materials may be found on my website, <http://academics.hamilton.edu/history/skeller/skellerweb/teaching.html>. Or, readers may contact me at Hamilton College and I will be glad to share materials the old fashioned way.

“Silk Road Seattle”

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Silk Road Seattle is a collaborative public education project using the “Silk Road” theme to explore cultural interaction across Eurasia from the beginning of the Common Era (C.E.) to the Sixteenth Century. Sponsored primarily by the Simpson Center for the Humanities at the University of Washington, and directed by Professors Daniel C. Waugh, Joel Walker and Cynthea Bogel, the project will include: public lectures and seminars, a virtual art exhibit, photographic and textile exhibits, a general education course as well as professional development seminars and workshops for educators, and a web site containing additional materials. Silk Road Seattle programs have been developed in conjunction with the Silk Road Project, Inc. (<http://www.silkroadproject.org/>), whose concerts will be hosted by the Seattle Symphony in May 2002. Yo-Yo Ma is the Artistic Director of the Silk Road Project, Inc. There is a long list of co-sponsors for our Seattle undertaking, notable among them being the Silkroad Foundation (<http://www.silkroad.com/>) and the Title VI East Asia Center at the Jackson School of International Studies.

Additional information about Silk Road Seattle may be obtained from its web site (<http://www.uwch.org/silkroad/>), by contacting the Simpson Humanities Center, Tel.: +1/206-543-3920, uwch@u.washington.edu, or Prof. Daniel Waugh, Tel.: +1/206-543-5790, dwaugh@u.washington.edu.

Of particular interest for CESS members may be the plans of the project to develop on-line resources which will be suitable for teaching. We are anxious to share these resources and invite participation in their creation. The possibilities are open-ended, but here are three of the areas which we will emphasize:

First, we will create an on-line anthology of selections from primary source texts (in English translation), providing them with a certain amount of annotation and illustrations. The range of what we can include will be limited only by what is available without copyright limitations and/or what we may obtain permission to digitize and post. Submissions of translations by those who hold copyrights would be invaluable, since, as we all know, older translations often are inadequate. If our project were to stimulate the posting of similar collections of resources on other sites, then we would have accomplished one of our goals for promoting education about Central Eurasia.

A second category of important material is maps, since those currently available are limited in scope and access for many who might have an interest in our region. Our goal will be to produce a substantial electronic atlas, using GIS software. We will have a variety of historical maps, maps showing routes of travel, trade and exploration, and maps highlighting key features of physical geography. Where appropriate (and within our technical abilities), maps will be interactive, allowing the user to bring up different sets of data into the same map and trace changes over time.

A third category of material will be images, both in an image bank and integrated into discussions of art and culture. One component of the project is what we hope will be a major “virtual” Silk Road art exhibit, for which we are soliciting the cooperation of various museums in order to reproduce images of objects in their collections. We are inviting contributions of images to our project; as with text translations, contributors would retain copyright for any use of their material other than for non-profit educational projects.