

Editor's Note: Rhoads Murphey (1919–2012) was a Geographer and Historian of Asia who taught at the University of Washington and the University of Michigan. He served for many years as Executive Director of the Association for Asian Studies, and in 1987–1988 as its President, as well as Editor of the *Journal of Asian Studies*. Murphey published his influential essay “The Shape of the World: Eurasia” as part of the edited volume *Asia in Western and World History: A Guide for Teaching* in 1997. In the following symposium, three invited essayists reflect on the essay twenty-four years later and its relevancy in teaching world history today. It is highly recommended that Murphey’s essay in the *EAA* online supplements be read first before reading the symposium.



Symposium

Reflecting on “The Shape of the World: Eurasia” by Rhoads Murphey

Rhoads Murphey. Source: The University of Michigan website at <https://tinyurl.com/jzb2eybc>.

The Shape of the World

By Rebecca Byrd

As a secondary world history educator, connecting past events with the lives of my students is a constant challenge. As a teacher who began my career thinking that an overhead projector represented the zenith of educational technology, I hoped that the emergence of the internet as a tool for learning would make demonstrating connections a mere click away. Unfortunately, this has not been the case. I have a number of students who are experts on K-pop but have no idea why the United States has such close economic and military ties with South Korea. Rhoads Murphey’s article “The Shape of the World: Eurasia” offers teachers an important tool for demonstrating the connections between Asia and the Western world.

Like many teachers, I often bemoan my students’ lack of geographic knowledge. While being able to locate landforms and bodies of water is certainly important, understanding how geography shapes human experience is vital to understanding history. Murphey begins the article by providing readers with a clear explanation of how the geographic barriers of steppe, desert, and mountains divided the civilizations of Europe and East Asia, and led early European mapmakers to believe that the landmass of Eurasia was two separate continents. The addition of a map of Eurasia would help students visualize Murphey’s point while also providing an opportunity for students to improve their geographic literacy.

Murphey uses the familiar story of Marco Polo as a hook to draw readers into his argument about the connections between Europe and Asia. This is particularly effective for high school students, as most have some prior knowledge of Marco Polo. Other strengths of the article are the specific examples of East–West contact that Murphey offers, such as the use of the Roman *testudo* defensive military formation (in which troops encase themselves in a turtle shell-like covering of shields) by Central Asian troops fighting Chinese troops near Tashkent in 42 BCE or the presence of Roman coins in sites along the west coast of India. Murphey provides multiple examples of the flow of trade goods, technology, and ideas from East to West from 2000 BCE through the Enlightenment.

While Murphey mentions the role of Arab traders as intermediaries in the movement of both goods and ideas from East to West, an updated version of the article could expand upon their contributions to European understanding, particularly in the areas of technology and mathemat-

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ics. Likewise, Murphey describes the influence the Chinese Confucian state had on Montesquieu and other Enlightenment philosophers as the result of knowledge transmitted by Jesuit missionaries, but says little about how the knowledge was transmitted or what impacts the Jesuits had on China. A more detailed explanation of the role of the Jesuits and other missionary groups in the exchange of ideas would be another welcome addition to an updated version of the article.

In the decades since the article’s publication, many new intriguing avenues for historical research have emerged that an updated version of the article might draw upon to add nuance and depth to the argument. For example, the technology for conducting DNA testing has advanced significantly. Archaeologists now work closely with genetics experts to extract DNA from human remains that are thousands of years old and to trace the descendants of ancient peoples in modern populations. The PBS program *Secrets of the Dead: Amazon Warrior Women* (season 4, episode 5) demonstrates the usefulness and limits of DNA testing as a tool for understanding historical population shifts, as well as a connection between Asia and the West.

One area that has advanced significantly is the analysis of satellite images to uncover evidence of ancient civilizations and trade routes. The article “Peering through the Sands of Time: Searching for the Origins of Space Archeology” by Pola Lem, available on NASA’s *Earth Observatory* website, explains how the use of satellite imagery and LIDAR 3-D laser scanning has revolutionized archeology since 1990. The inclusion of satellite images showing the trade routes and locations Murphey describes would help students better understand his initial observations about the geographic barriers that divided Europe and Asia, as well as help students visualize the vast distances Marco Polo and others traveled.

Another intriguing new area of research focuses on the diffusion of foods and cooking practices as a way to map the connections among cultures. The common use of noodles in both Chinese and Italian cooking has led to much speculation concerning a possible Chinese origin for Italian pasta. A quick internet search yields a number of articles arguing for and against a Chinese origin for pasta. Teachers might expand upon Murphey’s article by having students research the question and evaluate the veracity of the digital sources they find. Additionally, PBS Learning Media’s World Explorers Collection has excellent short videos on Marco Polo,

Ferdinand Magellan, Vasco Da Gama, and the Chinese explorer Zheng He that can be used to extend a lesson based on the article. In addition to the videos, the collection also includes lesson plans and Google Earth Voyager Stories that allow students to trace the routes taken by the explorers. The Google Earth Voyager Stories can be used in the classroom, but would also be a splendid resource for distance learning. While numerous avenues exist to expand the original article, “The Shape of the World: Eurasia” remains a useful essay for high school world history teachers. Murphey’s clear writing style and vocabulary choices make the article accessible to high school students. This is especially important for English-language learners and students who may be learning in a hybrid or virtual environment. The ongoing pandemic has shown everyone how interconnected Asia is with the West not only because of the spread of the COVID-19 virus, but also because of the product shortages that continue to occur due to disrupted supply chains. Rhoades Murphey’s article reminds all of us that those connections are not new and are most certainly relevant to our lives today. ■

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Eurasia and the End of History

By Wynn Gadkar-Wilcox

One of the difficulties of the world history curriculum, whether in high school or in college, is that by its very nature it requires presenting students with grand and sweeping statements about the past. Even at the college level, teachers of world history stand up in front of a group of freshmen, many of whom are taking the course to fulfill some general education requirement (and are perhaps not that enthused about being in the class) and who may not have taken world history in any meaningful sense in high school. Faced with the need to give these students an adequate bird’s-eye view of history, we are starved for brief, digestible summaries that can introduce major themes and basic facts in a minimalist way. In the past, world history teachers have therefore felt that they needed works such as Rhoades Murphey’s “The Shape of the World: Eurasia.” We especially

needed these kinds of texts in the late 1990s when it first appeared, as this was precisely the period in which courses in world history were becoming required and we needed help organizing and formulating themes for these still-nascent courses.

We are fortunate to have had someone as esteemed and experienced as the late Professor Rhoades Murphey to write such an essay. Only a person of his considerable erudition could write seven short pages on the entire sweep of Eurasian history and still make meaningful statements capable of giving students a passable overview. It is an astounding text from which students can still learn a great deal. Yet despite his herculean effort, any text presented at this level of generalization will inevitably obscure as it enlightens and will reflect the peculiar interests and obsessions of the time in which it was written. This article will make three arguments: first, Murphey’s analysis reflects a 1990s view of globalization; second, despite its framing of an argument about a single, united Eurasia, it tends to contrast differences and narrate contacts at two poles of Eurasia, namely western Europe and China, and largely excludes discussions of interactions in the Middle East, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia; and third, that certain of its ideas, such as Aryan migration, need to be updated in light of new research that has been published in the past two decades.

To make these points is not to say that any historian in our current era would write a seven-page essay on Eurasia any better than Professor Murphey did more than two decades ago. It is rather to suggest that this work has these flaws despite its being an excellent rendition. It is the best possible outcome from an impossible task. Aiming to be both comprehensive and brief enough for our world history audience is like pouring two gallons of water into a one-gallon jug: no matter what technique one chooses, one inevitably loses half the content. My suggestion is for teachers of world history to abandon this noble effort at sweeping historical comprehensiveness and instead encourage their students to embark on close readings of texts that speak to a much narrower set of Eurasian experiences.

Murphey’s work delights in relating the substantial contacts and borrowing across Eurasia from ancient times in a way that reflects the spirit of the mid-to-late 1990s. From the outset, he makes several points that world history students need to hear. He notes that Eurasia is a single, continuous landmass and that Western civilization has had “interconnections throughout history.” Western civilization is indebted to the East, as it really originated in the Middle East and was deeply influenced by places such as Persia, still farther east (7). Murphey’s main purpose is to celebrate the considerable Asian contributions to European material culture in the forms of shipping, mathematics, and technology, as well as intellectual culture in the form of the admiration of enlightenment intellectuals for Chinese political culture. His emphasis is on positive interactions, mutual contributions, and celebrating interconnections. His approach to understanding Eurasia as a single landmass and moving beyond the idea of Europe and Asia as separate continents recalls Kären Wigen and Martin Lewis’s *The Myth of Continents*, which was published in 1997, the same year as Murphey’s short piece, and which devoted many pages to the fictional nature of the Asia–Europe divide.¹ In addition, this kind of celebration of interconnectedness may reflect the triumphal spirit of the immediate post-Cold War world, when globalization was viewed positively and the “end of history” could be prognosticated.² What these views obscure, however, is that the cultural interaction being celebrated often had militaristic and imperialist origins, as was the case with the Mongol invasions that facilitated European travel to Asia, as well as the European imperialism that dominated Asia in much of the Modern Era.

Second, there is some inherent tension between the concept of a unified Eurasian landmass and the noncontiguous contact of the “western and