

Teaching About Asia in a Time of Pandemic

A Conversation with David Kenley

In the spring of 2020, educators suddenly found themselves teaching remotely as they and their students began a multiweek period of pandemic-induced isolation. As weeks turned to months, administrators announced that students would not return to campus until the following school year and perhaps even longer. Teachers quickly scrambled to design new pedagogical approaches suitable to a socially distanced education. *Teaching About Asia in a Time of Pandemic* presents many lessons learned by educators during the COVID-19 outbreak. The volume consists of two sections. Section 1 includes chapters discussing how to teach Asian history, politics, culture, and society using examples and case studies emerging from the pandemic. Section 2 focuses on the pedagogical tools and methods that teachers can employ to teach Asian topics beyond the traditional face-to-face classroom. Both sections are designed for undergraduate instructors, as well as high school teachers, using prose that is easily accessible for nonspecialists. The volume is a collaborative work between the AAS Asia Shorts series and EAA, exemplifying the high standards of both publishing ventures.



Editor, David Kenley.

David Kenley, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Dakota State University and a longtime EAA collaborator, is Guest Editor for the book. Kenley's research interests focus on Chinese migration. His publications include *New Culture in a New World: The May Fourth Movement and the Chinese Diaspora, 1919–1932*, as well as *Contested Community: Identities, Spaces, and Hierarchies of the Chinese in the Cuban Republic* (with Miriam Herrera Jerez and Mario Castillo Santana). He has also recently published a second edition of his AAS Key Issues in Asian Studies volume, *Modern Chinese History*. In the following interview with EAA Editor Lucien Ellington, Kenley discusses *Teaching About Asia in a Time of Pandemic* and highlights various essays and resources from the volume.

Lucien Ellington: David, your current academic leadership position notwithstanding, you have many years' experience as a scholar of modern China who teaches undergraduates. This includes, most recently, experiencing the same COVID-19 online conversion challenges virtually all professors and teachers suddenly faced in early spring 2020. Had this volume been available last spring, in your own field, what chapter or chapters from either section of the volume might have been immediately helpful to you in configuring student readings, or as practical pedagogical case studies that would enhance your effectiveness as an online instructor? Please elaborate.

David Kenley: Joseph Schumpeter's concept of "creative destruction" suggests that disruption and ruin inevitably provoke innovation and entrepreneurship. For many of us, spring 2020 seemed replete with destructive forces negatively impacting our educational structures. Within a matter of days, administrators shut down classrooms, brought students home from study abroad, and emptied the dormitories. Like many of us, I expected it would be a very temporary hiatus and we would quickly get back to our normal routines.

It eventually became clear that we would not be returning to normal anytime soon. Some educators responded by installing dividers in their classrooms and canceling extracurricular activities. Others chose to "think outside the [Plexiglas] box" and adopted far more creative, inventive solutions. Fortunately, some of them have shared their ideas within the pages of *Teaching About Asia in a Time of Pandemic*.

There are several chapters in the volume that would have been immediately helpful to me in my classes when the pandemic shutdown first

happened. As a historian, I would have assigned my students to read Jeffrey Wasserstrom's essay, "We've Never Been Global." Wasserstrom looks for historical precedents to make sense of our current situation and finds some rather surprising candidates. I would have also appreciated Melody Rod-ari's chapter, "Death, Disease, and Buddhist Patronage in Japan: The Great Smallpox Epidemic of 735." But there are also some chapters that, while not directly linked to my teaching, nonetheless would have been tremendously helpful. For instance, Gareth Barkin penned a chapter titled "Zooming to Indonesia." Barkin was faced with the challenge of recreating a study abroad experience when study abroad was no longer an option. As with most of us, I wasn't actively planning a study program overseas. Nevertheless, I was shocked at how countries around the world responded to the pandemic by closing borders, shutting down market access, and stoking xenophobic nationalism. Use of the term "China virus" led to a metaphorical pandemic of anti-Asian sentiment, with numerous companies, governments, and individuals infected. Barkin's essay discusses ways in which we can transcend closed borders and open our students' minds to cross-cultural differences. As is the case with this one example, I am confident our readers will glean something useful from each chapter of the volume.

Lucien: As you know, many EAA readers teach undergraduate and high school-level world history EAA survey courses. You've worked with many high school teachers in educational programs, and probably at some time in your career taught undergraduate world history survey courses. Imagining yourself teaching world history as an online or hybrid course, what chapters strike you as especially promising as student

readings and practical pedagogical strategies in light of the high probability that even when the current pandemic is conquered, undergraduate institutions and high schools will still have a high demand for these teaching resources?

David: World history is a staple in both the high school and university curriculum, and this volume will be a tremendous asset to teachers in this field. World history compels us to think across national boundaries and approach our subject from a global perspective. Similarly, COVID-19 is no respecter of national borders. While we may think of ourselves as Indian, Chinese, American, or Australian, pathogens do not carry passports and refuse to recognize customs officials. Several chapters in the volume exemplify this border-crossing perspective, including Sarah G. Grant's virtual ethnographic field trip through the "wet markets" of contemporary Việt Nam. Rather than portraying these as sites of exotic wildlife consumption, Grant challenges her Western readers to reflect on their own xenophobic culinary practices and the cultural politics of zoonotic transfer. Minjung Noh's piece looks at the role religion plays in the pandemic. Worship services at Korea's Shincheonji Church of Jesus became that country's first "super-spreader" events. By critically evaluating Shincheonji and Korean Confucianism, Noh demonstrates how some nebulous religious concepts travel along global currents—much like pathogens—and are continually reified in the process.

The study of world history is not only about border crossing. It also asks us to think carefully about non-state and pseudo-state entities. Hong Kong and Taiwan may be two such examples. In his essay "Teaching the Edges of Empires," Justin Wu shows how geopolitics and a history of exclusion from international organizations affected the response of both Hong Kong and Taiwan to the pandemic. Lucien Ellington, Jeffrey Melnik, and Thomas J. Shattuck use their chapter to highlight the so-called COVID-19 miracle in Taiwan, where public health officials have nearly eliminated the disease from society, much to the envy of international observers.

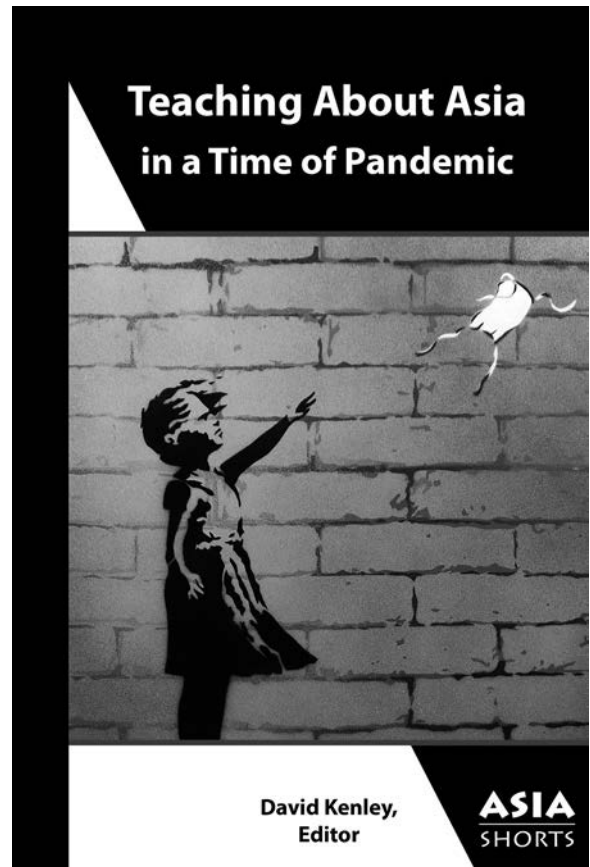
For anyone teaching world history, one of the greatest challenges is deciding what to include in the curriculum and what to exclude. We simply don't have time to cover everything in one or two short semesters. Even a single nation, such as contemporary India, can be incredibly complex. How can we help our students understand this complexity in a relatively short amount of time? In her chapter, Tinaz Pavri does just this, by using India's pandemic response as a case study highlighting that society's knotty religious, political, social, and cultural systems. Tejpal Baniwal takes a similar approach as he shows how Sikhi (Sikhs) practice the difficult-to-define concept of *sarbat da bhala* during a pandemic. COVID-19 is a perfect entrée for introducing complicated and abstract ideas.

Lucien: *Those reading this interview should not presume the book is "history-centric" since a robust number of chapters are intended for academic disciplines ranging from politics and anthropology, to sociology, comparative religion, and global languages. Please elaborate a bit upon some examples that might be of interest to readers who focus upon these disciplines.*

David: As you have noted, there are chapters written by religious studies scholars, foreign language teachers, political scientists, psychologists, anthropologists, and yes, even historians. One of my favorite contributions was written by Susan Spencer, an English literature professor. She investigates the value of medieval Japanese literature for addressing the themes of "loss, sudden change, and a confrontation with the transitory nature of what one has taken for granted—life events that all of the students, regardless of background, were struggling with [during COVID-19]."

Beyond discipline diversity, we wanted to include chapters that promote interdisciplinarity. Kin Cheung's excellent piece on "Myth-Making

For information about Teaching About Asia in a Time of Pandemic, please visit the AAS website at www.asianstudies.org/publications



"Teaching about as huge and diverse a region as Asia is hard in 'ordinary' times. In the midst of a global health crisis, it may seem an even more daunting challenge. Fortunately, this timely collection offers teachers knowledge, wisdom, and advice from a community of colleagues who have thought deeply about how to help students enrich their lives through study of Asia. The many short and stimulating essays not only contextualize the pandemic in Asian history and contemporary Asia, but also provide practical suggestions for teaching about Asia in these challenging times."

— KRISTIN STAPLETON, University at Buffalo, SUNY

and COVID-19: Asian Alternatives to ‘Warfare’ against Disease” typifies this approach. Though Cheung is a religious studies scholar, his essay sheds interesting light not only on comparative religion but also literature and political science. Richard Aidoo’s “Explaining the Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on China–Africa Relations” is another wonderful example of interdisciplinarity, as economists, international studies scholars, and anthropologists will all appreciate its interesting insights. Aidoo argues that COVID-19 has impacted technology transfer, debt forgiveness, and the long tradition of China–Africa solidarity that traces its roots back to the 1955 Bandung Conference.

Of course, we also wanted to include authors with varied experiences and worldviews. While the majority are currently based in the United States, they have extensive experience living and studying in various Asian nations. Their submitted essays focus on China, India, and Japan, but also Korea, Indonesia, Việt Nam, and Taiwan. Some of the contributors are housed at RI doctoral universities, while others are at regional teaching colleges. We also included skilled teachers working in the K–12 level. The chapters by high school teachers Matt Roberts (“Investigating the COVID-19 Pandemic: An East Asian Perspective”), Tanya Roth (“China in the Age of COVID-19: Strategies for Teaching”), and Jared Hall (“Teaching Asia: Online Harkness Discussions”) remind us that the challenges of pandemic pedagogy affect all educational levels.

If you are expecting a typical “history-centric” text, you will be pleasantly surprised at the variety of disciplines, regions, and perspectives represented in *Teaching About Asia in a Time of Pandemic*.

Lucien: *Authors of several pedagogical essays focus upon topics such as online fieldwork, student exchanges, seminars, blogging, and podcasting. Please preview a few examples from this section of the book.*

David: That is correct, the essays in section 2 of the volume focus on pedagogical tools and methods that can be used in a socially distanced pandemic environment. But rather than merely discussing such tools and methods, the authors demonstrate how to use these to teach specifically about Asia.

Since the spring, all of us have become much more adept at using Zoom and other videoconferencing platforms, but the available resources

go well beyond these. For instance, Jeffrey Gil, Han Lin, and Gwendolyn Campbell show how they use the social media app QQ to enhance the student experience as they create a virtual “Chinese corner” for their Chinese-language students. Tristan Grunow challenges us to rethink the value of both listening to and creating podcasts. Not only can podcasts provide a creative outlet for our students, they can also be a tool for scholars to share their ideas with a wider audience otherwise isolated by the pandemic. Grunow shares nearly twenty podcast resources for teaching about Asia, several of which specifically address China or Japan. Nabaparna Ghosh shows how she uses blogging to “[transform] students into responsible digital citizens who are aware of global cultures and are trained to use social media in sensible ways.” Most of these resources are relatively simple to use and readily accessible to any student with an internet connection. For example, Phillip O’Brien analyzes the potential benefits of student-conducted virtual fieldwork using such common web-based tools as Google Earth while Petra Hendrickson introduces several face-to-face simulation activities that can be readily replicated online. In his chapter “Somatic Approaches to Teaching Asia Online: A Case Study of Taijiquan Training for Actors,” Adam Frank challenges us to push away completely from the computer screen and incorporate greater kinesthetic learning into our courses. He explains how he uses the martial arts Taijiquan as a training mechanism for actors, and as a gateway to understanding Chinese poetry, painting, philosophy, and medicine.

While the pandemic has at least temporarily upset many of our traditional teaching methods, the authors of this volume responded imaginatively to such “creative destruction.” Even after the arrival of the long-awaited COVID-19 vaccine, the insights they have shared will be eminently beneficial in our courses. I’m confident *Teaching About Asia in a Time of Pandemic* will be invaluable in both our pandemic and post-pandemic classrooms.

Lucien: *Thanks, David, for the interview!* ■

Teaching About Asia in a Time of Pandemic — Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION: Getting Past the Plexiglass — DAVID KENLEY

SECTION ONE: PANDEMIC CASE STUDIES

- 1: We’ve Never Been Global: How Local Meanings Mattered in 1900 and Still Matter Now — JEFFREY WASSERSTROM
- 2: Sikhi, Seva, and Sarbat da Bhala in a Pandemic — TEJPAUL SINGH BAINIWAL
- 3: Understanding South Korea’s Religious Landscape, Patient 31, and COVID-19 Exceptionalism — MINJUNG NOH
- 4: Death, Disease, and Buddhist Patronage in Japan: The Great Smallpox Epidemic of 735 — MELODY ROD-ARI
- 5: Taiwan and COVID-19: Global Pressure, Domestic Success — LUCIEN ELLINGTON, JEFFREY MELNIK, AND THOMAS J. SHATTUCK
- 6: Mythmaking and COVID-19: Asian Alternatives to “Warfare” against Disease — KIN CHEUNG
- 7: Explaining the Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on China–Africa Relations — RICHARD AIDOO
- 8: India’s Pandemic Response as a Mirror on Understanding India’s Complexities — TINAZ PAVRI
- 9: A Literature of Loss: Studying Narratives of Exile in Medieval Japan in the Context of COVID-19 — SUSAN SPENCER
- 10: Teaching the Edges of Empires: Hong Kong and Taiwan Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic — JUSTIN WU

SECTION TWO: PEDAGOGICAL TOOLS AND METHODS FOR A PANDEMIC

- 11: Zooming to Indonesia: Cultural Exchange without Study Abroad — GARETH BARKIN
- 12: Somatic Approaches to Teaching Asia Online: A Case Study of Taijiquan Training for Actors — ADAM D. FRANK
- 13: Podcasting during the Pandemic and Beyond — TRISTAN R. GRUNOW
- 14: Designing and Implementing a Tandem Language Learning (TLL) Program for Learners of Chinese and English Using the Social Media App QQ — JEFFREY GIL, HAN LIN, AND GWENDOLYN CAMPBELL
- 15: Digital Investigations: Using Virtual Fieldwork in the Classroom — BYRON HAAST AND PHILLIP O’BRIEN
- 16: Blogging as Digital Citizens in an Online Course — NABAPARNA GHOSH
- 17: Teaching Asia: Online Harkness Discussions — JARED HALL
- 18: What’s in a Wet Market? Anthropology of Food and Asia during the COVID-19 Pandemic — SARAH G. GRANT
- 19: Teaching College-Level Asian Politics through Simulations in Online Environments — PETRA HENDRICKSON
- 20: Investigating the COVID-19 Pandemic: An East Asian Perspective — MATTHEW ROBERTS
- 21: China in the Age of COVID-19: Strategies for Teaching Survey Students — TANYA L. ROTH