

Rhoads Murphey, Eurasia, and World History

By Franklin Rausch

Assessing the value of a work created by as renowned a historian as Rhoads Murphey is certainly intimidating. This is made all the more so considering his experience in China during World War II as an ambulance driver (Murphey was a conscientious objector) and his later service as executive director of the Association for Asian Studies and editor of the *Journal of Asian Studies*.¹ This reviewer will, however, do his best, in part hedging his bets by focusing on the question of assigning “The Shape of the World: Eurasia” to students today.

Before answering that question directly, one issue that must be examined is the scholarship that lays behind Murphey’s article. The overriding purpose of this article, stated so succinctly in the first sentence that it demands quotation, is to “enrich the student’s understanding of Western civilization by pointing out its interconnections with Asia throughout history.” Murphey does so elegantly by pointing to concrete examples of such connections, first making clear how, geographically speaking, it is useful to think of a single “Eurasia” rather than a distinct Europe and Asia, and then providing examples of economic, technological, and religious connections to support and illustrate this point. Particularly worthy of note is Murphey’s reference to the impact of China on Enlightenment thinkers, allowing him to connect that country to Thomas

Jefferson and the founding of the United States. At the same time, there also exists a subtheme that decenters the West. This is well illustrated by a reference to the Battle of Talas, which, had it gone the way of the Tang, would have led to further spread of Chinese Buddhist civilization at the expense of Islam. In other words, world events were determined by two Asian powers without reference at all to the West. Scholarly speaking, therefore, Murphey’s thesis is clear and well-supported by evidence, and thus persuasive, making it worthy of consideration for assignment to students.

As to the question of whether I would assign it, I think it might be helpful to ask myself that question at three moments: now, during my career as a student and later TA at Indiana University, and then at the University of British Columbia. Murphey’s text would have been available for me to read in the 1997–1998 academic year, when I was a sophomore at Indiana University. At that time, I was a history major steeped primarily in American (and to a lesser extent) European history, but thinking of specializing in Asia (which I would eventually do by becoming a double major). Part of my interest in Asia had grown out of the fact that having grown up in a small town in Indiana, before going to university, I had hardly seen any Asian people in my life (I distinctly remember the first, a young Chinese boy whom I played video games with at an arcade—his parents ran a restaurant in the mall’s food court). And then, at university, I became friends with students from China, Japan, and Korea, and wanted to learn more. I would have struggled a bit with Murphey’s work, owing to my unfamiliarity with some of the terminology and history he deployed, but I would have been much better for making my way through it. Moreover, it would have given me ammunition in my responses to criticisms from fellow students who thought I was wasting my time studying countries that were either, in their view, inferior to or enemies of the United States (it is sad to reflect on how common and unashamedly expressed were such sentiments). These reactions illustrate the importance of Murphey’s work, particularly at that time—it appears to have then been fairly common for Americans to not see Asia as relevant to their lives.

I would graduate in 2000 and then continue on to earn an MA, and would serve as a TA for one year in a 100-level introduction to Asia course. I think many of the students would have come from a similar background as me (most were from small or smallish, predominantly white towns) and would therefore have benefited from Murphey’s article. Like I would have, I believe many would have struggled, as Murphey’s work is deep, and we would have needed to devote a significant amount of our discussion section helping students understand it. Still, I think it would have been good for us to have wrestled with that text.

I would later serve as a TA for two years at the University of British Columbia (located in Vancouver, Canada) in an introductory class that actually used Rhoads Murphey’s *A History of Asia*. And while that textbook was useful for our class, I believe that “The Shape of the World” would not have been as helpful. The reason has to do not so much with the article itself, but the class. While memories are tricky things, if I recall correctly, more than half the students in that course had Chinese surnames, and the majority of other students were of Asian descent. Such students, many of whom had strong living connections with Asia, did not need to be convinced of the relevancy of Asia, or at least not to the same extent that my fellow Hoosiers required.

To answer the question of whether I would use Murphey’s work today, it helps to reflect on my position and our student body. I teach at a smaller, teaching-focused, public, four-year university. As such, I have to be something of a generalist, and I therefore teach upper-level courses in Asian history, religious history, public history, and even a course on comics and

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animation (which naturally includes anime and manga). My lower-level classes are the two halves of our world history sequence, which were created in large part to support our program for training history teachers (those in that area must pass a state-mandated exam that includes questions on world history). While the accent is different, in many ways, my students are similar to those I taught at Indiana University in that many have not had much experience outside of small towns. However, they are significantly different in the diversity of the population of those towns, which is increasing. Moreover, they do not need to be convinced of the relevance of Asia today. The growing power of China, the popularity of K-pop, anime, manga, martial arts movies, and so on are things many know well, and actually is what pulls them into my classes (in other words, I became interested in Asia to better understand my Asian friends, while they are often drawn in by the popular culture Asian people are creating). And this interest comes with a growing familiarity and comfort with Asian cultural products. I have seen this in particular with the anime club I advise, as well as the art students who take my classes and create art in Japanese-inspired styles.

Thus, I do not feel the need to show interconnection between Asia and Western civilization—student experiences make it unnecessary. However, I still use Murphey's approach in what I do assign. The primary text for the first half of world history that I teach is the Oxford graphic history *Perpetua's Journey*, which is about the martyrdom of a third-century North African woman by the Roman Empire, and in the second half *Abina and the Important Men*, which is about a West African woman living in a British colony and her quest for justice following her illegal enslavement.² Just as Murphey sought to convince American students to take Asia seriously, I am seeking to do the same with Africa. In a sense, then, Murphey's article is not so relevant today because it has accomplished what it set out to do.

I believe that Murphey, as a serious historian who lived through a time of radical change, would understand my decision and likely would seek to write something new and broader were he alive today. In fact, the events since 1997, when that work first appeared, are so momentous that Murphey might well have dramatically rethought his essay. After all, Murphey's formative experience with Asia was witnessing the Chinese Nationalist government's decline during World War II and its conflict with the Soviet Union, so of course China's continued rise and the Communist Party's hold on power would have no doubt impacted him. Moreover, his attention to India would have meant he would have taken seriously its increasing power and prosperity. The rise of these two great powers would, I believe, lead Murphey to discuss the question of the nature of the interactions he focused on—what is positive about them and what is negative? Are countries with such different political systems destined to enter into serious conflict, or can some middle road be found?

Dealing with such questions would also perhaps help address an issue I have with Murphey's original piece in that his primary focus is on China and India, with comparatively little attention to smaller countries (though perhaps this is just the special pleading of a Koreanist), which can lead to misunderstandings in some ways. For instance, Murphey's "The Shape of the World: Eurasia" focuses primarily on more positive interrelations, particularly at the end of the work and its celebration of the Enlightenment.

Greater attention to Japan's "Christian Century" would show quite clearly how complex these relations could be—Catholicism growing by leaps and bounds (much to the jealousy of missionaries working in China), only to be later crushed as a public faith and driven into the catacombs for more than two centuries. Greater attention to smaller powers—Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, and so forth—is particularly important for understanding Asia and its connections with other parts of the world (especially Africa), and would need to have a place in a reworked version of this article. Moreover, the interconnections created by religion could also use more attention.

So while I do not believe that assigning Murphey's "The Shape of the World: Eurasia" in my classes is warranted, that is not a critique of the article itself. Murphey's work was shaped by a particular time and need, and it helped, in a sense, to create a world in which its purpose is no longer suited to many students. Of course instructors should still read it and integrate its conclusions into their own lessons where they judge it necessary. And for instructors who seek to do that but wish for a more multimedia experience, they might find the work of several YouTube channels helpful. The gaming channel Extra Credits produces videos in their Extra History series that often focus on individuals who have not traditionally received the attention they deserve.³ TED-Ed produces many history videos that are around five minutes long, making them perfect useful "breaks" when teaching.⁴ Finally, for those seeking videos that are broad, deep, and marked with helpful animations, graphs, and maps, and that pay a significant amount of attention to pre- and early modern history, the Kings and Generals channel would be of great use (the author is a proud patron of this channel—remember to like and subscribe!).⁵ ■

NOTES

1. This information is taken from Rhoads Murphey's obituary, published by the American Association of Geographers, found at <https://tinyurl.com/8hfkzf6t>.
2. Jennifer A. Rea and Liz Clarke, *Perpetua's Journey: Faith, Gender & Power in the Roman Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press 2017); Trevor R. Getz, *Abina and the Important Men: A Graphic History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).
3. See <https://www.youtube.com/extracredits>.
4. See <https://www.youtube.com/teded>.
5. See <https://www.youtube.com/c/KingsandGenerals>.



FRANKLIN RAUSCH received his PhD from the University of British Columbia and is an Associate Professor in the History and Philosophy Department at Lander University in Greenwood, South Carolina. His research focuses on Korean religious history, particularly Catholicism. He has published on such subjects as voluntary martyrdom, Fr. Emil Kapaun (an American Catholic chaplain who died in a POW camp during the Korean War), and Catholic missionaries in Korea. His recent translation, carried out with Dr. Jieun Han, *An Chunggün: His Life and Thought in His Own Words*, was published by Brill in 2020.