

Earlham College's Center for Educational Media has provided the following film review. The Center for Educational Media (CEM) is a clearinghouse for information about audio-visual materials on Japan and Asia for educators on all levels. Their services include, but are not limited to, information about curriculum units containing audio-visual components, free-of-charge database searches and newsletters, CD-ROMs, and computer software.

If you desire more information contact: Center for Educational Media, Drawer 202, Earlham College, Richmond, IN 47374.

Telephone:(317) 983-1288. Fax:(317)983-1553. E-mail:cem@earlham.edu.

World Wide Web: <http://www.cs.earlham.edu/~cem.Ed>.

China's Cosmopolitan Age

The Tang (618-907 A.D.)

CHUNGWEN SHIH AND ANDREW PLAKS

THE ANNENBERG/CPB COLLECTION

1993. 60 MINUTES

China's *Cosmopolitan Age: The Tang* incorporates valuable images and broad cultural and historical understandings. This videotape will enhance Asian surveys at the college level as well as term-contained Chinese history courses. For high school students the film will prove effective within both world history and world culture courses. But at neither the college nor high school level do I recommend the film's use in its entirety; instead, the best sections (as indicated below) should be utilized as focused segments to exemplify lecture material or to provide fodder for discussion.

An immensely valuable aspect of this film lies with its visual techniques. While establishing the greatness of the period through an examination of its buildings and urban structure, the film makers several times utilize a "split screen" approach; that is, one sees the deserted, packed earth area where the huge Tang halls used to be. Then, superimposed on the screen are models of these very halls. Also shown is a view of the extant stumps of pillars from one of the halls, followed by a complete model of that original hall plus surrounding Tang palaces.

While the "split screen" tech-

nique and pictures of models and urban diagrams are only used early in the film, the alternation of contemporary Chinese scenes with Tang artifacts characterizes much of the film. This effective approach encourages historical continuity in many areas of Chinese life.

Some examples are the following: views of 1980s Xian merchants compared with pottery figures of Tang traders; present-day Chinese horsemen gallop across the screen and are followed by tri-colored Tang figurines or paintings of horsemen; the Tang engraving of a chess board precedes footage of the ubiquitous group of older Chinese men intensely hunched over their chess game; a contemporary Chinese ribbon dance performed in one of the surviving Tang palaces alternates with exquisite Tang figurine dancers.

No special technique is needed, however, to effectively present the importance of the Dunhuang area where 492 caves have survived. Dr. Chung-wen Shih leads the viewer on an impressively photographed tour of several of these caves containing invaluable Buddhist paintings and statues. This visual treatment of the Tang will greatly enhance students' appreciation of the accomplish-

ments of this Chinese dynasty.

This film does not, and should not, attempt to treat all aspects of the Tang period. In comparison with survey texts, the film makers ignore only internal economic reforms and a clear differentiation between early, middle, and late Tang. To me, that seems appropriate. A bigger problem lies with the film's failure to project a clear organizational framework. According to the film's guide, the conceptual structure revolves around four areas, presented in the following order: the Cosmopolitan Empire, the System of Government, Art and Literature, and the Legacy. Concrete, adolescent thinkers, whether fourteen or eighteen, will find it confusing that visual material pertaining to art and literature, political leadership, the civil service system, trade routes, and religion are interspersed throughout the film.

Since the overall organization is not made clear to the viewer, I recommend focusing on three sections of the film. For both high school and college students, the teacher needs to define "cosmopolitan" and then use the opening twenty-minute segment; this footage treats urban structure, Tang palaces, trade patterns, religious diversity, the arts, social structure, and the latter's intimate involvement with politics through the scholar gentry. This segment includes many of the visual techniques described earlier and allows students to grasp the cosmopolitan, open, worldly character of the Tang.

Whether at the high school or college level, it is valuable to focus on Tang poetry. Twenty minutes into the film, there is a short treatment of this "crowning glory" of the Tang with Du Fu, Li Bo, and Wang Wei clearly identified through drawings as well as readings from their own poetry. One can effectively link these visual images with addi-

tional samples of this poetry. I have always found this an excellent point at which to incorporate literature into history class.

The final twenty-minute segment of the film treats the Tang's "international" character. It starts with current pictures of the Grand Canal and establishes the importance of the internal trade network developed during the Tang and then moves on to explore the silk road which allowed goods to both leave and enter China. These trade routes, plus the impact of Buddhism as seen concretely at Dunhuang, show the ways that the Chinese interacted with cultures to their west. Finally, the film explores the Tang's impact on the East: Korea and Japan. All of these images will greatly enhance a high school world history course, for they clearly demonstrate the interactions among Asian, Middle Eastern, and European cultures during the period of the Tang.

This film will significantly aid college and high school students' understanding of China's sophisticated cultural history. Since, during any Chinese survey course, many of us must select one or two dynasties for in-depth exploration, this film tips the scale in favor of a Tang focus. For those contemplating its use within a world history course, the film's images and understandings encourage exploration of the following topics: comparison of the Tang with the Byzantine Empire as well as that of Charlemagne; comparison of the Tang with India's Gupta Empire of a slightly earlier time period; factors contributing to Tang achievements.

Diana Marston Wood

DIANA MARSTON WOOD is an Instructor at the Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts.