

CURRICULUM MATERIALS REVIEWS

Cobblestone's Elementary School Magazines on Asia

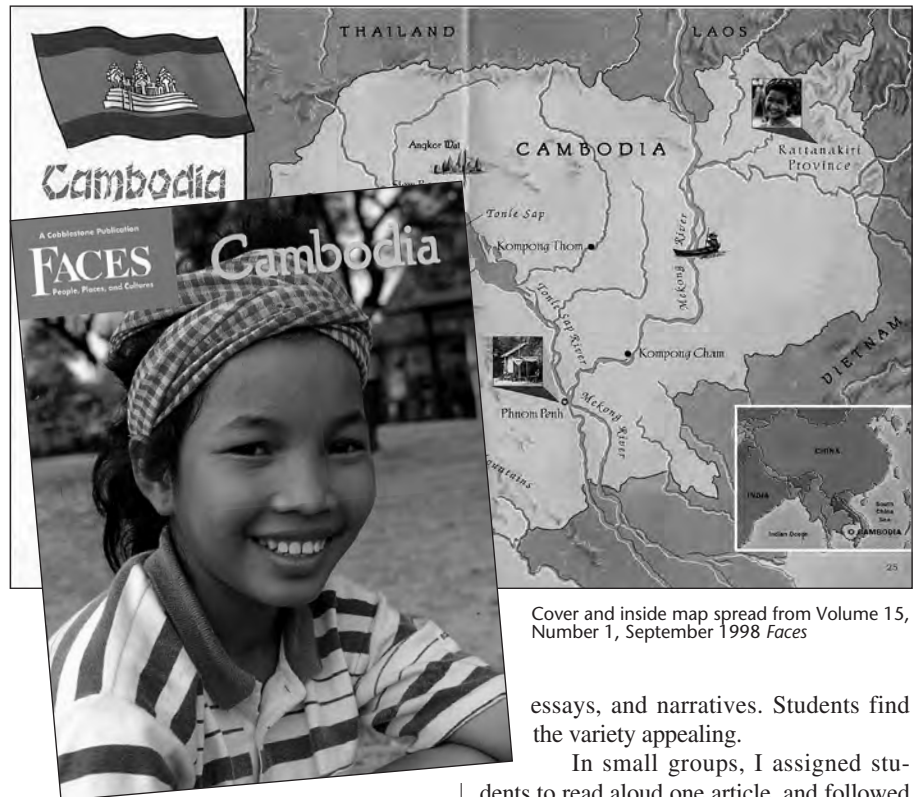
By Patricia Burleson

It can be quite a challenge for elementary teachers to find appropriate materials for their students in the field of Asian studies. Information must be presented through a suitable reading level in a format interesting to students, and still provide accurate facts in a culturally sensitive manner. Finding resources that offer a balance between activity oriented ideas and accurate information can be difficult. Too many times we get stuck into making "cute" things, and run the risk of perpetuating a stereotype and a sense of the "exotic" about another culture. It was with these expectations in mind that I reviewed the Asian content of several Cobblestone publications.

As an elementary-level classroom teacher, I have long been familiar with materials from the Cobblestone Publishing Company, a part of the Pearson Education Group. They are particularly well known for their magazine format publications. *Cobblestone* focuses on themes in American history, for grades 4–9. *Applesseeds* provides quality nonfiction reading for students in grades 2–4. *Odyssey* provides adventures in science for grades 5 and up. *Footsteps* is a collection of articles about African-American history for grades 4 and up. *Calliope* explores world history for grades 4–9. *Faces* are thematic publications about people, places and cultures from around the world, for grades 4–9.

Both *Faces* and *Calliope* have several issues that focus on Asian cultures and history. For this review, I have used the following issues from *Faces*: "Japan" (April 1990), "Indonesia" (May 1991), "Philippines" (March 1993), "India" (November 1993), "Thailand" (October 1994), "Growing up in China" (January 1996), "Central Asia, the Crossroads of Civilization"

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Cover and inside map spread from Volume 15, Number 1, September 1998 *Faces*

(December 1996), "Korea" (April 1997), "Vietnam" (September 1997), "Cambodia" (September 1998), and "Hong Kong" (May 1998). From *Calliope* I have used: "Samurai" (January/February 1993), "Hinduism" (March/April 1993), "The Mongols" (November/December 1993), "Buddhism" (March/April 1995), "The Ming Dynasty: The World of the Yongle Emperor" (May/June 1995), "China's First Emperor: Shi-Huangdi" (October 1997), and "Shinto" (March 1998).

To determine student interest and readability, I turned to my classroom of fourth and fifth graders. They were asked to sort issues that "looked interesting" first. It comes as no surprise to any teacher that they chose the most colorful issues as the most interesting. The issues from mid-1997 through the most recent 1998 issues were done with color photos and illustrations. The photos in all issues appear to be thoughtfully chosen and successfully present honest visual impressions of cultures and people. Students did not giggle because photos were strange. They found it easy to accept that these were pictures of real people living real lives in other places. Both publications teach facts, history and culture through a variety of genres. Included are nonfiction articles, folk tales, legends, photo

essays, and narratives. Students find the variety appealing.

In small groups, I assigned students to read aloud one article, and followed with comprehension questions. Specifically, I used: "The Best Alphabet in the World" from *Faces* (April 1997); "Nomads of Central Asia: The Kyrgyz" from *Faces* (December 1996); "Understanding Shinto" from *Calliope* (March 1998); "Discovery and Excavation of Shi-Huangdi's Tomb," *Calliope* (October 1997); and "From Temples to Textiles," *Faces* (October 1994). Most students individually, and all students cooperatively, were able to respond appropriately to both literal comprehension and higher-level thinking questions. *Faces* and *Calliope* are meant for fourth through ninth grade students. That's quite a range of reading abilities, and I was pleased to find that most of my students easily read the material.

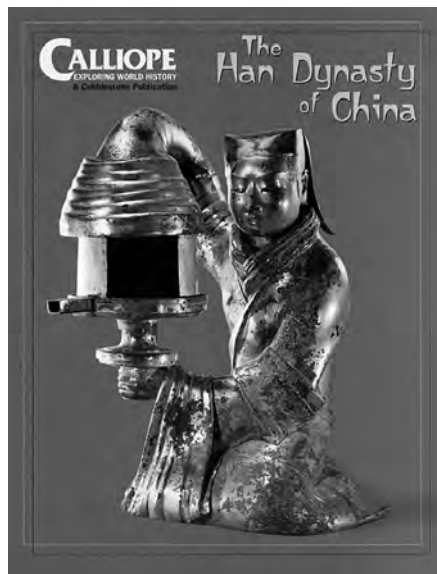
All students liked the "Fun With Words" department that is a regular part of *Calliope*. This section does a nice job of helping students connect to their own culture. Some are words commonly used in our country that are traced to their Asian origins. They learn that "checkmate" originates from a Persian phrase meaning "the king dies," in "Mongols" (November/December 1993). Others are words that help break stereotypes. Actual definitions of "sushi" and "sayonara" give them their proper place in "Shinto" (March 1998). "Fun With Words" includes the original meaning of "nirvana" as well as the way it

has been adopted in the English language helping us understand why we use the word in "Buddhism" (March/April 1995). Putting "karate" and "judo" and "ninja" in their proper historical place in Japan helps our students get beyond the commercialized versions of these terms in "Samurai" (January/February 1993).

Activities found in most *Faces* and *Calliope* issues include art projects, food recipes to try, games, science experiments, and writing prompts. The art projects, for the most part, use readily accessible materials and require only a little preparation ahead of time. Subjects chosen for activities have cultural significance. Making a Cambodian book out of oak tag helps us understand the historical use of palm leaves for books, as well as the important role books play in Buddhist culture, in *Faces*, "Cambodia" (September 1998). In *Calliope*, "Buddhism" (March/April 1997), students read a short article explaining the mandala as an aid to meditation, then follow simple instructions to make their own. The background they are given explains the symbolism of the design and lends a sense of respect, making the geometry/art project culturally significant. The instructions for the project lead students to focus on symbols of their own lives, helping them to understand the place a mandala has in the lives of those who use them.

Recipes use readily available ingredients and are simple enough to prepare in the classroom. An author who grew up in China writes about symbolism of certain foods, and the recipe invites students to prepare "Longevity Noodles" in "Growing Up in China" (*Faces*, January 1996). Wordfinds, scrambled word puzzles, and word matching exercises reinforce important terms from the articles in many issues of both *Faces* and *Calliope*.

A feature found in the newer issues of *Faces* is "Think About It." Included here are critical thinking questions to be used with students. Some of these questions ask students to take a stand on an issue and give reasons for their position. For example, in "Hong Kong," (*Faces*, May 1998), students are asked to think about whether religious ceremonies should become tourist attractions because some believe that the outside interest will keep traditions alive. In "Cambodia" (*Faces*, September 1998), students are challenged to consider examples of courage. After reading a folk tale that honors courage, students are asked to find



Cover from Volume 9, Number 2, October 1998 issue of *Calliope*.

examples in current newspapers and magazines that demonstrate acts of courage. This section gives teachers an easily accessible way to go beneath the surface of the topics addressed and provides an avenue for students to connect the learning to their own lives.

Maps and time lines are an excellent way for elementary students to begin grasping a concept of history. Choosing events from several different issues of *Calliope* would allow students to get a broad global idea of the sequence of major historical events. *Faces* also includes maps to locate the culture highlighted in each issue.

In the back of both publications is an annotated list of related books, teaching materials, Web sites, and other resources, such as *Calliope's* "Off the Shelf" and *Faces'* "Further Exploring." These lists are a noteworthy source of information for teachers. Each magazine also contains lists of back issues available for purchase.

To support classroom application, Cobblestone offers Theme Packs for classroom use. Each theme pack contains all related back issues of Cobblestone's *Faces*, *Calliope* and/or *Odyssey*, and a teacher's guide. The guides contain discussion questions, vocabulary lists, art ideas, writing assignments, and teaching suggestions. The themes available for Asian studies include Asia and World Religions. I have not used either of these theme packs, but I am familiar with other theme packs from Cobblestone. I found them to be easy to use, thoughtful, and thorough. It would be nice

to see other packs become available for Asian studies. I reviewed 18 back issues for this article, and many of these would work for theme packs.

In other classroom application techniques, elementary and middle school teachers need to rely on their own creativity. With a collection of the issues relating to Asian studies in the classroom, students could: search for and compare the elements of folk tales from different countries, make time lines of major events in Asia and discuss how they relate to each other, discuss values and beliefs of different cultures, compare common foods, compare and contrast design elements in architecture, identify folk art motifs, look at family structures and daily life, and compare homes and clothing. This is only a partial list of the potential areas one could explore through the issues reviewed here. There most certainly are others.

In determining accuracy of information in a publication, the author's credentials are of utmost importance. An elementary teacher is not a specialist and must depend on the credibility of authors to insure that accurate information is presented to students. Lacking appropriate author credentials, one looks for a knowledgeable editor or consulting editors. I found the credentials of authors and editors in *Calliope* and *Faces* of mixed validity.

Faces presented a good collection of authors with experience in studying, traveling and living in the cultures they wrote about, with very few examples of qualified consulting editors. Furthermore, the issues on "Korea" (April 1997), "Vietnam" (September 1997), and "Cambodia" (September 1998) presented very little background information on their authors or editors and left me questioning the validity of the contents. *Calliope* seemed to rely heavily on the credentials of consulting editors. Although many of the authors are simply referred to as freelance writers and authors of other children's books, a teacher can feel confident if the material has been edited by a professor of Asian studies or world religions. Overall, most of the material included in *Faces* and *Calliope* seems to be well documented. I would still caution teachers to look for credentials in individual issues and articles.

More information can be found on their Web site at: <http://www.cobblestonepub.com>. ■