

CURRICULUM MATERIALS REVIEW

Guide for Teaching Ancient China

A Publication of Primary Source, 2001

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This *Ancient China* guide constitutes an extremely valuable addition to curriculum resources for elementary and middle school teachers. Drawing on the collective experience and creativity of several dozen primarily Massachusetts teachers plus the Primary Source staff, the twenty-eight lessons address a wide range of topics and teaching methods/practices. In the opening statement of purpose, the authors describe the unit as “designed for use in the fourth grade but is easily adaptable for use in grades three to eight. Using this thematic approach to teaching about China, teachers can develop reading, mapping, writing, oral language, and math literacy along with social studies knowledge and skills.” With the goal of testing our evaluation of this unit, we consulted with teachers in grades three to six in three different school systems. Their conclusions and suggestions are incorporated below.

CONTENT

The unit is divided into four strands with two strands subdivided as shown below.

GEOGRAPHY STRAND

GOVERNMENT STRAND

Civics and Government: The laws and rules that governed societies

Political History: The leaders, the major issues that each faced and their accomplishments

ECONOMICS STRAND

HISTORY STRAND

Cultural History: The literature, visual and performing arts, architecture, philosophies, religions, and beliefs of the people

Social History: Daily life of the people. How people lived, family life, what people did for entertainment and recreation

History of Science and Technology: Inventions in industry, science, and technology

In addition, this unit contains an extensive statement of purpose addressing such issues as “Making Big Maps,” “Options for culminating activities,” and “Why learn about China?” Also presented are three introductory lesson plans, a Chinese pronunciation guide inside the front cover, and a section entitled “Resources for Teaching About China.”

ORGANIZATION

Within each strand are three-to four-page background essays with additional prose to introduce each lesson. Also included are goals, key questions, and specific linkages to the grade four “History and Social Science Framework” of the Massachusetts Department of Education. Each lesson contains teaching activities and reproducible pages. Throughout the unit there is an average of two to three activities per lesson. For instance, the geography strand contains three lessons complete with goals, activities, and graphics. The topics are the following: Mapping landforms, Mapping climate, and Comparing life on the Yellow and Yangtze rivers. In contrast, the much longer History strand presents five lessons within the cultural history section (Proverbs, Poetry, Daoism, Chinese Names, and Folktales and Puppetry) and three lessons dealing with science and technology (Silk, Compass, and Paper).

STRENGTHS OF THE UNIT

This 200-page unit brings together in one compact volume a wide array of teaching plans, previously available only in discrete and specialized units and books. For instance, *Guide for Teaching Ancient China* contains six lessons on Chinese holidays, a popular emphasis for the elementary curriculum. These lessons are part of the Social History section within the History Strand. There is one lesson on Folktales within the Cultural History section and three lessons covering the writing system and early dynasties within the Political History section. Since these introductory materials now exist within one volume, we recommend that teachers consult the following focused units and books (not listed in the concluding resources section) which complement the *Ancient China* volume: *The Rabbit in the Moon: Folktales from China and Japan* (SPICE); the Calliope *Exploring World History* books which deal with early dynasties and Confucianism; *Traditional Chinese Celebrations* (SPICE); and *Demystifying the Chinese Language* (SPICE). Sections of all the

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above are accessible for students in grades three to eight with varying degrees of applicability and adaptation.

We found the background essays in *Ancient China* to be especially effective for teachers. They are written in a “chatty” manner and encourage teachers to forge ahead with topics often not tackled with fourth grade students. For instance, in the introduction to the Cultural History section the authors say, “. . . we have included a section on Daoism . . . It is not easy to read the Daoist classics. Normally one would not think of imposing them on fourth grade students. But to the extent that Daoism embraces simplicity, it may well be that fourth graders will have no more trouble getting an idea of what Daoism is all about than people who are much older and more steeped in the ways of the world.”

Throughout the unit, each lesson’s activities are nicely layered so that students can progress logically and effectively toward an understanding of the key concepts. Toward this end the “Key Questions” that begin each lesson provide focus and help connect the individual lessons within each unit. A “Big Map” exercise grounds the Geography unit, establishing China’s landforms and location within the region before adding lessons on climate and the central role of the Yellow and Yangtze rivers in Chinese life. In the Government strand, well-chosen selections from *The Analects* provide a basic understanding of Confucian ethics before connecting the concept of personal morality with a lesson on the Mandate of Heaven. One lesson explores the importance of the Chinese writing system as a unifying force in Chinese history. Following a background essay that addresses the importance of the Oracle Bones and the development of later calligraphy, the lessons move through a helpful chart on the evolution of Chinese writing from pictograph to modern characters, to a lesson on basic brush strokes, before providing reproducible practice sheets to encourage the “hands on” experience of writing characters.

Many lessons provide opportunities for an interdisciplinary focus. A good example is an activity that teaches Chinese units of measurement through a discussion of the size of the Great Wall and its comparison with US measurements. Word problems (how many “catties” do you weigh? The Great Wall is also called the Wall of 10,000 li. How many miles is that?) link math applications with social studies. The elementary teachers we interviewed were especially excited about lessons that promoted the raising of silkworms (in the Science and Technology section of the History Strand) and the construction of terraces (in the Mapping Agriculture lesson of the Economics Strand). They envisioned these lessons intersecting easily with the science curriculum.

Finally, we believe the unit promotes active learning in consistently creative ways. Within various strands the lessons include making lanterns and name chops, paper making, cooking (mooncakes and tan yuan), as well as the aforementioned lessons on Chinese characters, silkworms, and terracing. While these activities may be messy, our consulting teachers proved enthusiastic about such enterprises, recommending them especially for grades three to six. Another active, hands-on resource we recommend to supplement *Ancient China* is the *China Box* (Boulder Run Enterprises). The box itself is filled with “. . . toys . . . household objects . . . ordinary commodities

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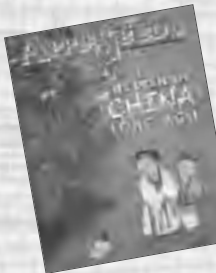
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intended for daily use in China rather than for export." Within the box is a handbook, *China Talk*, which includes excellent lessons on using the abacus, mastering chopsticks, and a language detective exercise using Chinese characters.

SHORTCOMINGS OF THE UNIT

While we found the information in the background essays to be extremely valuable for the teacher's preparation, we believe the vocabulary and conceptual levels are well above grade four and in many cases above grade six. Our consulting teachers independently substantiated the above conclusion. However, in some cases (the Social History section on holidays) they could imagine students reading the background text along with the teacher, especially in grades six and above. We believe that it would be very helpful for teachers if the background essays were frequently adapted for independent student reading. As it is in the big map exercise in the Mapping Agriculture lesson, students are asked to "Discuss the crops and animals of Ancient north China . . . , northwest China . . . and south China . . ." Since the reading is quite advanced, our assumption is that the teacher must provide all this information. In any case, there are no instructions concerning this issue.

As the quote at the beginning of this article indicated, this unit is specifically written to mesh with the grade four standards in Massachusetts and is described as adaptable for use in grades three to eight. This is a huge span. We think instructions concerning the applicability of activities within each lesson to particular grade levels would enhance the usefulness of this unit.

Finally, there are a few smaller issues which should be noted. While many of the maps and charts are clearly designed to be reproduced, the quality is uneven throughout the guide and some pages are blurry. Also, three introductory lessons are included prior to the beginning of the Geography Strand, and we found them distracting since there was no explanation of how they fit into the overall scheme of the unit. While the Resources section, provided at the end of the guide, provides a helpful list of books to supplement the lesson, the Web Resources section neglects to include some outstanding sites such as The Asia Society's *Ask Asia*, *Silk Road Seattle*, and *Education About Asia* (both the Web site and the journal).

CONCLUSION

We are delighted that Primary Source has produced this unique compilation of lessons covering a broad view of Ancient China. The few shortcomings mentioned do not seriously detract from the achievement of this comprehensive guide. The volume constitutes a valuable addition to the libraries of all elementary and middle school teachers. ■

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