Incorporating Asia in the General Education Curriculum

By Thomas Kennedy, Fritz Blackwell,
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Washington State University is probably not very different from many mid-sized universities, rooted in mid-America and laboring in the midst of a curriculum reform. This article, the distillation of the experience and study of three of our general education faculty members, is submitted in the hope that it may prove useful to the hundreds of faculty in scores of similar institutions struggling with the problem of how to integrate Asia in the general education curriculum. Specifically, we have been engaged for more than a decade in revising a general education program that is the heart of undergraduate education for some fifteen thousand students. The foundation and center of this program is a two semester sequence of courses in World Civilizations required of all students. Historical in approach and interdisciplinary in content, these courses are taught by a cadre of faculty at various stages of professional development, from disciplines in the College of Liberal Arts. Instructors participate in an ongoing faculty development program: summer workshops, periodic subject matter presentations, and familiarization with multimedia techniques used to enrich instruction. In sections of approximately one hundred students, faculty members follow a curriculum of stipulated topics related to major world civilizations, employing texts and methods of evaluation of their own choosing.

In this academic context, there has been from the outset a unanimous faculty agreement that Asian civilizations should occupy an important position in these courses. Our faculty, including Asian specialists and nonspecialists, seasoned instructors, and newcomers, have devised individualized instructional approaches to accomplish this. In what follows, a senior Indologist, a historian of modern China, and a Ph.D. candidate in European history with a background in Middle Eastern studies explicate important topics related to the civilization each is introducing, drawing comparisons selectively with other civilizations. There is no effort to conform to a uniform list of topics for each civilization or a standard method of comparison. We hope this article will provide useful results for other general education faculty introducing these civilizations, and that we may receive your comments and concerns about what we have to say.

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SOUTH ASIA

In introducing South Asia in the World Civilizations curriculum, experience has led me to focus on a few themes fundamental to the civilization: defining the modern regional construct of South Asia, clarifying basic religious concepts, demystifying the "exotic," tracing the passage of ideas back and forth between familiar Western figures and Indian leaders, and identifying influences of other great civilizations. I have found comparison with familiar concepts, when possible, to be a "user friendly" teaching technique.
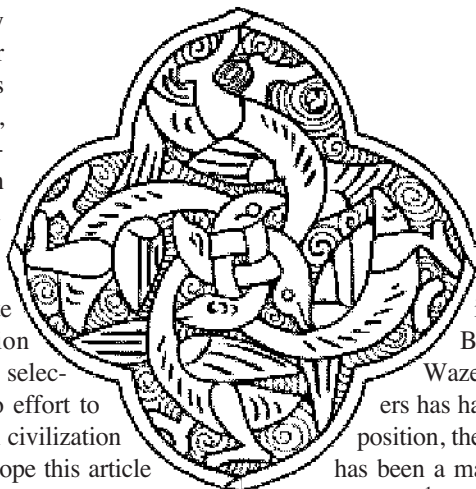
The term "South Asia" employed frequently in the postwar years can be difficult to define: often Afghanistan is included on the western fringe, and Burma, now Myanmar, on the eastern. A convenient definition is simply the seven nations that comprise the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), an association focusing on social issues and economic cooperation. Most of the member states were nonexistent before the colonial era and today are linked by a loose cultural affinity. India and Pakistan were historically and culturally part of India until 1947. The remaining states, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, are less crucial to the world civilization curriculum. There is also a strange political phenomenon in the region that captures students' attention: female heads of government in cultures traditionally male-dominated. The first female prime minister ever was Sirimavo Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka. Now over eighty, she is again prime minister although the position has been made largely ceremonial, with the real power residing in the position of president, occupied by her daughter, Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga. Others include the late Indira Gandhi of India, Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan, and Hasina Wazed of Bangladesh. While each of these leaders has had to be very adroit in order to maintain her position, the essential ingredient for each to gain power has been a male predecessor, either a father or husband, often martyred.[1]

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The graphic image used in this article is a 10th to 13th century rotating design from *Islamic Designs for Artists and Craftspeople* by Eva Wilson. Dover Publications, Inc. 1988

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teaching about South Asia to American undergraduates. If one can get students to think, seriously, about the meaning and effects of the concept of rebirth, a great deal can be accomplished. This involves differentiating rebirth from "reincarnation," as advanced in Western culture from Plato to Shirley MacLaine. The idea that *ātman* is not the same as soul/souls, and exists as plurality only in a relative, not an absolute, sense is challenging. Even more challenging is the Buddhist *anātman,* in which there is rebirth without anything to be reborn. I have also found that reference to popular theoretical physics[2] can be effective in illucidating such elusive Buddhist concepts as no-thingness (*śūnyatā* and holistic relativity, *pratītya-samutpāda*). Students have proven far more sophisticated in such matters than I had anticipated. If the terms are used as labels for the concepts, with emphasis on the concepts and their interrelatedness, they are not difficult for the conscientious student to grasp.

One must also be careful not to create the impression that South Asian cultural materials are exotic, to make too much of their "other" or alien nature. Focusing on similarities can help; for example, a handout on the same theme as treated by three widely separated poets: Solon's "The Ages of Man," Bhartrihari's "For an instant he is a child," and Shakespeare's "All the world is a stage."[3]

The tone of all three is remarkably similar, but this arresting similarity has to be Jungian, it cannot have resulted from cultural contact. It is extremely unlikely that Bhartrihari or Shakespeare were aware of Solon's poem, or that Shakespeare knew of Bhartrihari.

Conversely, demonstration of cultural contact, where it does occur, can be highly effective, most especially so in dealing with Sanskrit-English cognates; e.g., *mātr*, *pitr*, *duhitr*, for mother, father, daughter. But if one does not want to get that linguistically involved, the parallel for numbers one through ten works just as well, both by name and by figure. Folktales can work also, such as the Indian folktale wherein a mongoose saves a baby from a cobra, and the Irish version, in which it is a wolfhound who saves the baby from a wolf. At the same time, one could point out that the Eire of Ireland is cognate to the Sanskrit word for noble, *āryan*—a word which must itself be carefully distinguished from modern usage.[4]

Perhaps the most famous instance of East-West contact in ancient Indian history is that between Chandragupta Maurya and Alexander the Great. Alexander presumably provided the example of empire for the founder of the Maurya empire. But Alexander cannot have provided the Machiavellian manual attributed to Chandragupta's minister, Chanakya. Beyond having interest and value in its own

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right, this work provides a contrast with the approach of Chandragupta's grandson, Asoka, and his rule by *dhamma* (Sanksrit, *dharma*).[5] These two great early Indian rulers both wanted the well-being and security of the state: Asoka viewed the state as the people and stressed the idea of responsibility on the part of the individual as the means of attaining security, while his grandfather, Chandragupta, viewed the people as subordinate to the state and assumed that security could only be obtained through an almost totalitarian use of fear (*daṇḍa*, literally, stick). It could be useful, as well, briefly to compare Asoka's *dhamma* to Gandhi's *satyāgraha*[6] and to have a reprise later in the course, when dealing with Gandhi.

Similar to the centrality of Asoka in ancient times is that of the great Mogul, Akbar, a contemporary of Elizabeth I of England. Queen Elizabeth sent an ambassador to Akbar, but he saw no need to reciprocate. He was right, there was none. India had what England wanted, and England had nothing India needed (similar to the relationship between ancient India and Rome). Ironically, this had much to do with the development of imperialism. Though there is the danger of oversimplifying imperialism, this seems a point worth making in an introductory course. Indeed, the mixed legacy of imperialism can be treated in a manner which neither excuses nor justifies but recognizes that British influence was decisive for India to achieve national unity and establish parliamentary democracy. As a simple illustration of British influence, it is worth pointing out that both M. K. Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, two principal architects of Indian independence, earned law degrees in England, and both were better versed in British constitutional history than the viceroys who ruled India in their time. Further, the English language provided the means for communication among the intellectual elite who led India to unity and independence.

Mogul rule in India (1526–1756), the setting in which Western imperialism extended its reach, also introduced a vibrant Islamic culture. The resulting synthesis of Muslim and Hindu mysticism, music, poetry, and architecture produced notable cultural achievements: sufi-bhakti devotionalism, north Indian classical music, Kabir and similar poets (with influence on the twentieth century Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore), and architectural designs such as the *chātā* (great umbrella) on palaces and mausoleums. Indeed, the Taj Mahal itself stands as a splendid example of this synthesis.

Perhaps it is with Gandhi that the greatest opportunity for understanding India's intellectual influence in the West arises, especially if one uses the critique of *satyāgraha* by Martin Luther King.[7] King clarifies this elusive concept without resort to
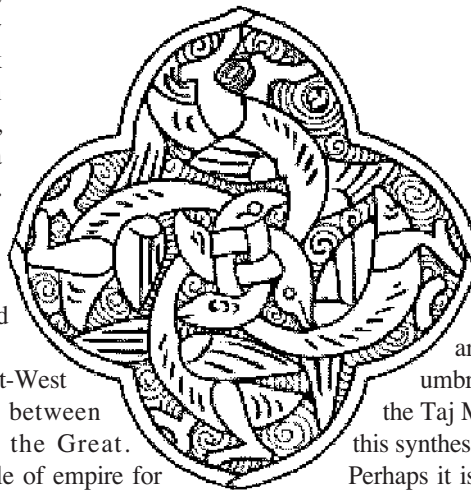
Sanskrit terms or Hindu concepts. This, of course, opens the way to note the influence of Gandhi's nonviolence on the American civil rights movement. There are differences between the Indian experience in the drive for independence and the American quest for equal rights, but as long as the instructor prevents the students from concluding that Gandhi's sources were Christian and European, those differences are not of great importance in this class. The point is that both movements relied on nonviolence as a positive force for affecting (and effecting) social and political change.

CHINA

In looking at the world as a totality, or a system, instead of as a sum of self-contained societies and cultures, we are faced with a set of educational expectations which must include approaches associated with broad concepts such as globalism, multicultural-ism, and internationalism. In trying to inte-grate China in the World Civilizations curriculum, I have been experimenting with two interrelated approaches: one is to focus on major patterns in Chinese history, and the other, to examine these patterns within the international context. In Derk Bodde's short essay "Introduction to the History of China,"[8] he lists five major patterns in Chinese history: the passage from feudalism to empire, the emergence of the universal Chinese empire, the interaction and tension between China and its neighbors, the growth of urbanization and commercialization since the Song dynasty, and the interaction and conflict between China and the West. Despite some obvious limi-tations in this approach, given the time constraints of the World Civilizations courses, it satisfies the basic requirements of provid-ing students with an understanding of some of the most critical problems and developments in Chinese civilization.

The second approach attempts to examine Chinese civiliza-tion not just as an isolated entity, but as part of the world. S. A. M. Adshead's *China in World History*[9] offers an interesting and useful method of seeing China in the international context. Adshead divides his work into six chapters covering six periods: from 200 B.C. to 400 A.D., 400 to 1000, 1000 to 1350, 1350 to 1650, 1650 to 1833, and 1833 to 1976. Each chapter covers the same four topics: China's place in the world, avenues of contact, interchanges, and world institutions. The first topic assesses China's relative standing and internal characteristics by compar-ing China with other major civilizations within each period. The second topic examines the different routes of contact between China and other peoples. The third topic focuses on what trav-eled along these avenues of contact, including peoples, flora and fauna, commodities, technologies and ideas. The final topic concerns the contributions by different civilizations to the devel-opment of world institutions.
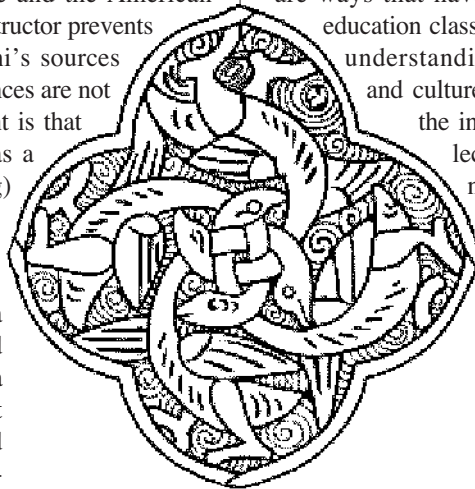
". . . it is important to spend a significant amount of time explaining the essentials of Islam as a religion of submission to God which cares deeply about the relationship of the individual believer toward other people."

I have found no single or best method in developing a balanced and cogent approach to incorporating China in World Civilizations curriculum. What I have discussed are ways that have worked in the setting of large general education classes to provide students with an introductory understanding and appreciation of Chinese history and culture in a global context. In the final analysis, the instructor must rely on his or her own intel-lectual orientation, social and political incli-nations, and perhaps, intuition.

THE MIDDLE EAST

Studying the Middle East in a World Civilizations program, like the study of the other regions of Asia, involves drawing students into a close examina-tion of "other people's history."[10] This "otherness" is best demonstrated by the fact that most undergraduates view the Middle East through generalizations, or "folk truths." Instructors can examine such generalizations in order to expose a class to the richness of other cultures which "folk truths" tend to hide. Following are three examples which illustrate this technique.

For many westerners, the Middle East and Islam are synonymous. Moreover, the image of Islam is frequently a violent one. Accounts of "Islamic terrorism" in the news media make the connection between Islam and violence all too explicit. Yet, such a connec-tion is simplistic. In terms of the predominant Islamic tradition, it is also wrong. Islam is, at its heart, a religion of peace which preaches love for others. For this reason, it is important to spend a significant amount of time explaining the essentials of Islam as a religion of submission to God which cares deeply about the relationship of the individual believer toward other people.[11]

When this point is made, students will occasionally object that *jihad*, which they usually translate as "holy war," is a central point in Islamic thought. The truth is subtly different. Muhammad taught that there was both a greater and a lesser *jihad*, or exertion. He regarded the "greater" *jihad* to be that which each believer has with his or her own faith and need for repentance. The exertion or struggle of armed warfare—the "holy war"—was the "lesser" *jihad*. The "*jihad*" to which all Muslims are called is the struggle to live a life of submission to God.[12] Muslim opinion regarding *jihad* has evolved greatly since the time of the Prophet, and has been interpreted by some regimes as aggressive war against unbelievers. However, one can argue that this development has usually served political ends more than religious ones.[13] Instructors might note in this regard, that the dominant Islamic states were often remarkably tolerant of other monotheistic religions. Christian and Jewish communi-ties lived for centuries under Islamic rule in relative peace during

a period when European governments were much less willing to tolerate religious dissent of any stripe.[14]

A second, related "folk truth" suggests that to be Middle Eastern and "Arab" is the same thing. While the Arab language played a dominant role in the Middle East after C.E. 632, it is a vast oversimplification to suggest that pre-Islamic peoples, cultures, and languages simply disappeared after the Arab conquests. The truth is that "Arab culture" is a synthesis resulting from the interaction of Arabs with Greeks, Persians, and Syrians who lived under the government of the Arab caliphate. Moreover, pre-Islamic languages and traditions continued in use throughout Middle Eastern history. The most important of these was Persian, a language which flourished at various times under the caliphs, despite the fact that after the reign of the Umayyad Caliph Abd al-Malik (r. 685-706 C.E.) the official language of the caliphal state was Arabic.[15] At the same time, there were many non-Arab peoples, such as the Turks and Mongols, who entered the region, adopted Islam, and made their own contributions to Middle Eastern civilization.

Finally, there is one other theme which deserves emphasis in any introductory study of the Middle East. The "folk truth" suggests that the Middle East was a stagnant culture which merely awaited the coming of European ideas and technology. In fact, the Middle East was home to a vibrant culture with connections to South and East Asia, Europe, and Africa. The caliphate, the Seljuk Turks, the Mamelukes, and the Ottomans absorbed and adapted the art, science and mathematics, and literature of the cultures with which they came into contact, added new concepts, and developed new methods. Many of the ideas and science which are commonly associated with Europe have their roots in the creative hybrid culture of the Middle Eastern region of Asia.[16]

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The experience of our faculty set forth in the foregoing presentations discloses simple and time honored pedagogical methods effective in introducing Asian civilizations. First is the use of comparison and contrast. Comparing features of Asian civilizations with familiar patterns of Western civilization can illuminate important aspects of Asian civilizations such as belief in reincarnation. Whether the comparison discloses similarities or differences does not seem as important as establishing a known point of reference on which the student may base his or her own thinking. Such comparisons can sometimes be introduced through historical encounters such as that of Chandragrupta and Alexander the Great. It is essential, however, that the students have a broad familiarity with Western civilization in order for such comparisons to have meaning.

Secondly, organization of complex, detailed material into broad conceptual frameworks, chronological or topical as Bodde and Adshead have done, enables students to approach another civilization that might otherwise appear overwhelming. This amounts to shepherding introductory students through the first stage of learning about a nonwestern civilization. In the interest of saving time and facilitating learning, it seems well worth the instructor's effort.

Finally, the well established practice of picking apart familiar stereotypes and "folk truths" about nonwestern societies works to open students' eyes as we see here in teaching about the Middle East. It can be equally effective in presenting other civilizations, as in the popular video "Misunderstanding China"; and it can also lead to fruitful debate of intercultural issues such as those advanced by Bernard Lewis and Edward Said regarding the latter's classic work *Orientalism*.[17] n

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NOTES

1. Recently I took two pages of matrimonial classifieds (one for brides, one for bridegrooms) off the Internet from the Sunday Observer (Colombo, Sri Lanka) and made overheads, which I projected in class. This opened up a very lively discussion in regard to marriage practices in different cultures. The first question was, "No one answers those, do they?" It was an enlightening experience, as much for the instructor as for the students, in that some very strong opinions were expressed.

   To that end, the Internet has become a remarkable resource for cultural and historical information, as well as for providing an Internet edition of daily and Sunday papers. Sources of which I am aware are:

   http://h-net.msu.edu/~asia/
   (Asia Pacific Network; course syllabi and other source information, East, South, and Southeast Asia).

   http://www.columbia.edu/~magier/SAsia.html
   (David Magier's South Asia Book Marks, Extensive listing of sites).

   http://www.webhead.com/WWWVL/India
   (www.Virtual Library: Asian Studies: India Subsection; various services and links, including historical and cultural [dance, art, etc.]; very rich source).

   http://www.yahoo.com/Regional/Countries
   (yahoo listing of all seven SAARC nations as well as nations around the world; largely introductory information).

   http://www.vtourist.com:80/vt
   (The Virtual Tourist; historical summaries, cultural and tourist information for regions and cities).

   http://WWW.indiaserver.com/news/thehindu
   (The Hindu, daily from Madras).

   http://express.indiaworld.com/
   (The Indian Express, daily from Bombay).

   http://www.lanka.net/cgi-bin/index2.html
   (Sri Lanka Web Server; outstanding source of various information, including cultural, even recipes; also the access to the Daily News and the Sunday Express of Colombo).

2. E.g., any of the numerous works of Paul Davies, Michio Kaku, Fred Alan Wolf, or the numerous others who write for the popular market.

3. Solon (poet and legal reformer of sixth century B.C. Athens), "The Ten

Ages of Man" in Richmond Lattimore, *Greek Lyrics*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 23. Bhartrihari (A.D. seventh century Sanskrit poet), untitled, first line "For an instant he is a child" in Barbara Stoler Miller, *Bhartrihari: Poems* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), p. v; first line "For one short act, a child . . . ," in John Brough, *Poems from the Sanskrit* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1968), 137. Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act II, Scene vii, lines 140–66.

4. That is, it must be distinguished from the racist and incorrect application of the term by Nazis and self-styled neo-Nazis. A clear analysis of the problem is provided in J. P. Mallory, *In Search of the Indo-Europeans: Language, Archaeology and Myth* (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1989), 266–72.

5. This term, central to Hinduism but difficult to translate in any precise manner, has been effectively defined by Jawaharlal Nehru in his classic, *The Discovery of India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 74, "It is an ethical concept which includes the moral code, righteousness, and the whole range of man's duties and responsibilities."

6. While there are numerous translations for this cover term of Gandhi's nonviolent independence movement and the philosophy behind it, the one which I prefer is a literal rendering: "grasping toward Truth" (or, God; Gandhi equated Truth and God).

7. Martin Luther King, *Stride Toward Freedom* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 102–107.

8. Derk Bodde, *Essay on Chinese Civilization* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 39–42.

9. S. A. M. Adshead, *China in World History* (MacMillan Press, 1988).

10. The phrase is borrowed from Bernard Lewis's essay, "Other People's History," in his *Islam and the West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 119–130.

11. See, for example, John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 19–33; and Frederick M. Denny, *Islam and the Muslim Community* (San Francisco: Harper, 1987), 40–56.

12. Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 168.

13. See Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, 93–94; Denny, *Islam*, 56–57.

14. On "the people of the book," see Denny, *Islam*, 37-38; and Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, 34–37.

15. For an excellent introduction to these issues, see Arthur Goldschmidt, Jr., *A Concise History of the Middle East,* 4th ed., (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), 52, 63–66. A general description of the role of Persian language and literature in Middle Eastern culture can be found in G. M. Wickens, "Persian Literature: An Affirmation of Identity," in *Introduction to Islamic Civilization*, R. M. Savory, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 71–78.

16. On Islamic civilization see, for example, R. Sandler, "Islamic Art: Variations on Themes of Arabesque," 89–109; G. M. Wickens, "The Middle East as World Centre of Science and Medicine," 110–119; and idem, "What the West Borrowed From the Middle East," 120–125; all in Savory, ed., *Introduction to Islamic Civilization*.

17. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1979).

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CHINA

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MIDDLE EAST

Denny, Frederick M. *Islam and the Muslim Community*. San Francisco: Harper, 1987. This is a clear, concise introduction to the Islamic religion and its community of faith in history. Denny provides an excellent explanation of the basics of Islam along with some useful examples of the daily life of Muslims in various parts of the world other than the Middle East.

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