



INTERVIEW WITH BUCHANAN PRIZE WINNER WAKA TAKAHASHI BROWN

Editor's Note: *This is our eighth interview with the winners of the Franklin R. Buchanan Prize. The Association for Asian Studies awards the prize annually for the development of outstanding curriculum materials on Asia. Waka Takahashi Brown won the 2004 prize for her curriculum guide Religions and Philosophies in China: Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Waka is a Curriculum Specialist and the Reischauer Scholars Program Coordinator at the Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education (SPICE).*

Lucien: *Congratulations on winning the 2004 Buchanan Prize for your excellent curriculum guide Religions and Philosophies in China! Please tell us about your background and previous work before you assumed your present position at the Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education (SPICE). How did your previous experiences prepare you for the development of this curriculum guide?*

Waka Takahashi Brown: I have a BA in International Relations and an MA in Secondary Education. Writing curricula on international topics is a way I've been able to put both degrees to work. I also taught middle school social studies during my student teaching year and high school Japanese for two years. My experiences in the classroom definitely shape how I write curricula. For instance, when I research and write content pieces, I try to think of how to make the material accessible and interesting for students. When I formulate activities, I try to visualize the logistics of how an activity would have taken place in one of my classes. Finally, I ask myself, "What kind of materials and activities would I have wanted as a teacher?" Writing curricula for SPICE gives me the luxury of creating lessons I wish I'd had time to create when I was teaching. In addition to teaching, I spent two years on the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program as a Coordinator for International Relations. Although I didn't teach in the schools at that time, I learned quite a bit about Japanese, and more broadly, Asian culture.

Lucien: *Since because of our decentralized system, it is often difficult for American educators to learn about good curricula, believe it or not there are probably very good teachers reading this interview who aren't familiar with SPICE. Please briefly describe SPICE and its educational function.*

Waka Takahashi Brown: In 1973, a program called the Bay Area China Education Project (BACEP) was developed by Stanford scholars and San Francisco Bay Area teachers to help upgrade teaching about China in schools. By 1976, other regional and country-focused projects were added to BACEP to form the Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education (SPICE). Since 1976, SPICE has served as a bridge between Stanford University and K-14 schools by developing multidisciplinary curriculum materials on international themes. As a program of the Stanford

Institute for International Studies, SPICE reflects the scholarship of Stanford University in its curricula and professional development seminars for teachers. The curricula and seminars focus primarily on contemporary issues in the context of their cultural and historical underpinnings.

Lucien: *Although the guide might be used in other courses, my guess is it will most appeal to high school World History instructors. Why do you think it important for World History students to learn about traditional Chinese belief systems? How do you see the material you and colleagues developed changing the way high school teachers treat the topic of Chinese philosophy and religions in their classes?*

Waka Takahashi Brown: I believe it's important to learn about traditional Chinese belief systems for a number of reasons. First, I believe everyone should be exposed to ideas different (and similar) to one's own. It's important for students to realize as early as possible that some ideas are different, but not necessarily "right" or "wrong." In addition, it's important for students to realize that different belief systems can have ideas very similar to the belief systems that they are more familiar with. Confucius' "*do not do to others as you would not wish done to yourself*" is strikingly similar to the Golden Rule, variations of which can be found in many different religions. Also, studying traditional belief systems helps create a more broad-minded, educated, and tolerant populace through aiding in understanding culture and historic events. I've had the opportunity to demonstrate this unit with middle and high school teachers over the past two years, and SPICE has received feedback from teachers who use the unit extensively in their classrooms. Based on comments from teachers, I believe the unit has helped to broaden the coverage of the topic of Chinese philosophy and religion in their classrooms in multidisciplinary ways. Teachers are using the unit in both language arts and social studies.

Lucien: *Since I've used the guide in my National Consortium for Teaching About Asia seminars, I am well aware that it contains more about China than just material on Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Why did you use a broader approach in the construction of the guide rather than simply focusing upon the above three belief systems?*

Waka Takahashi Brown: While many middle and high school students have a basic knowledge of China, I think many do not, and it would be difficult to teach about Chinese religions and philosophies without making a broader connection with students about China first. The introductory lesson in the unit serves to create a bridge between what students already know and new information about China. For this purpose, I've included images of schools and students of similar ages to help pique interest in China and to not view it as a remote, inaccessible place with which they have nothing in common. Of course, if teachers have already covered this material in their classes, the lessons are designed so that they can teach whichever lessons best suit their students' levels and needs. I have also been surprised with the extent the unit is being used at independent schools throughout Asia. Many are affiliated with the East Asia Regional Council of Overseas Schools. English-language materials on Asian philosophies and religions that are accessible to young students are very much in demand at these schools.

Lucien: *Have you received any specific feedback from educators or students who are using the guide? If so, please share some anecdotes with our readers. Were there any uses of the guide in particular classes that surprised you?*

Waka Takahashi Brown: As with all SPICE units, this one was reviewed and field-tested by a number of teachers before it was printed. Since its publication, teachers have been very kind in their feedback. In terms of student feedback, one teacher let me know that a student of hers thought Buddhism was something like astrology before learning about it through the unit. Another junior high school student responded that after studying the unit, he finally understood how philosophies can affect society, and the significance behind Buddhist prayer beads (previously he thought they were a fashion statement).

Finally, I just want to say that I was very honored to receive the Franklin Buchanan Prize. This unit would not have been possible without the support of the Freeman Foundation, the SPICE staff, the Stanford Institute for International Studies and its director, Professor Coit Blacker, teachers, reviewers, and my content advisor, Dr. Xiaohong Shen.

Lucien: *Waka, thank you for this interview and for sharing your experiences with our readers. ■*

Readers who wish to learn more about this curriculum guide should refer to the review of the guide in the Spring 2004 issue of *EAA* (Volume 9, Number 1). For information about ordering *Religions and Philosophies in China*, visit the SPICE Web site at <http://spice.stanford.edu>.

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