

Spotlight on Confucius

Chinese Classics and Cultural Values

EDITED BY LINDA ARKIN

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Spotlight on Confucius: *Chinese Classics and Cultural Values* has as its goal to “examine the flow of Chinese thought and examine its implications for the Chinese both in China and abroad.” It was produced and published by The American Forum for Global Education and follows the favorably received *Spotlight on “Rāmāyana”*: *An Enduring Tradition*. Professor Chad Hansen of the University of Hong Kong directed the project and expanded upon the goal by noting the rising importance of including studies of China in social studies for “all students” and not just for those of Chinese descent who are interested in learning more about their heritage in their adopted country. In his introduction to this compilation of lesson plans, background information, source materials, and teaching tips, he argues eloquently for presenting “viable alternatives [to] our outlook on life,” and goes on to state that China’s is the “richest and most diverse alternative history has delivered to us.”

The main strength of this curriculum unit (it is referred to in the preface as “enrichment material” but due to its high level of detail and comprehensiveness deserves to be part of a curriculum) is that it was compiled by twenty-five teachers working with eight college and university professors. Having this many minds facilitating this much articulation between secondary and tertiary education is breathtaking and worthy in itself of emulation. Coordinating so many contributors must have been an enormous task, yet somehow the lessons progress in an orderly, meaningful fashion, with few lapses. It is obvious that different participants worked on different lessons to be included in the compilation (which complicated the transitions and thematic links between them all the more), but this strategy appears to have had a serendipitous consequence: several of the lessons have “background material” or “student handouts” that repeat and reword the fundamentals about Confucius and Confucianism. I don’t know whether or not this was intentional, but the effect is to reinforce the key concepts so that all users of this curriculum should feel comfortable with it.

The next question, therefore, is for whom is this material intended? If indeed it is for enrichment purposes, then we have one explanation for the repetitive nature of the background material, namely, that the individual lessons are meant to stand alone. I still maintain, however, that this material is worthy of a unit unto itself. The title is somewhat misleading; to better capture the flavor of the lessons, a better title might have been “Spotlight on Chinese Philosophy: the Heritage of Confucianism and Daoism.” All or parts of several of these thirty lessons deal with Daoism (both Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu), Legalism, Confucianism as interpreted by Mencius, and Buddhism. As such, this is a neat overview of Chinese thought, prepared specifically for secondary learners. It is challenging both in the range of thinking that the various suggested exercises and activities require, and also for the fact that it deals with frequently unfamiliar topics with historical figures who have odd alphabetic aggregations for names. How does one pronounce “tzu,” anyway? (I found one reference on page 88, but

how many scholars would recognize “shoon-tsa” for the Confucian Superior Person, “chun-tzu”?)

That leads me to another point: the strength of this material is not only that it is written specifically for secondary students and is easily accessible to them; it is also readily accessible to secondary teachers, more and more of whom are searching for materials about China, Japan, Asia, and the Pacific Rim. There is not a whole lot available with the rigor and completeness of this unit. I can safely recommend *Spotlight on Confucius* to any secondary teacher who wants to include Chinese philosophy and culture in the classroom, although the authors would be well advised to include a pronunciation guide in future revisions of the work so that novices to the quirks of Chinese romanization can feel confident that they are not teaching grossly deformed pronunciations. For example, using the “oo” from “book” and the “i” from “dirt” as models, students would learn “chun tzu” as “**joon dzi**” (emphasis on bold word). If it were me, however, I think I would include a page on proper pronunciation of pinyin, be consistent with the use of pinyin throughout the unit, and attach the traditional names parenthetically to the pinyin versions, e.g., Lao Zi (Lao Tzu). Confucius, of course would remain the same!

There is much to like in this unit, some of which is mentioned above. Additionally, there is the judicious use of cartoons (evidently original ones, since I could find no attribution; I was searching for it, too—they are that good) to elucidate important concepts. It’s amazing how attractive cartoons are to teenagers. Even the most obscure or mundane Confucian topics (benevolence, filial piety) seem lively and compelling to teenagers when filtered through the cartoonist’s viewpoint and pen. It’s hard to underestimate how this strategy draws in the students and opens them up to other concepts, the great majority of which appear in regular text. The homily about a spoonful of sugar and medicine is applied most effectively here—after a few cartoons even Legalism and the Rectification of Terms go down easily. The clear, consistent formatting of lesson plans is a strong point, too, along with the nice annotation of key Confucian terms which appears at the beginning. The interviews with contemporary Chinese citizens about Mao and Confucius are gems, and the culminating “Game of Sagehood” simulation will also attract students’ interest and attention.

There are a few weaknesses, too. First, the bibliography is woefully incomplete, containing only a small fraction of the resources mentioned in the lessons (even the *Analects* is not listed). Second, since this unit could be used by those not completely familiar with Chinese philosophy, answers should be provided to all questions posed, as they are with the worksheet on page 123. This will reinforce the teacher’s grasp of the material and supply confidence for teachers leading the many class discussions suggested in the lessons. Even for the experienced teacher, it is nice to compare answers with the experts to test one’s facility with some of the most up-to-date thinking on the topic. Third, at least two handouts referenced in the lesson for distribution to the students seem nowhere to be found. Fourth, I think the addition of a lesson on the *I Ching* would be appropriate to link Confucianism and Daoism together, and also provide the opportunity for a fun activity for the students (casting hexagrams). Finally, I would suggest that the authors recommend certain sets of lessons for teachers to use for one-week, two-week, and four-week units, and prioritize resources in the bibliography for new teachers of this topic who have limited funding with which to get started.

CURRICULUM MATERIALS REVIEWS

I strongly recommend *Spotlight on Confucius* for use in the secondary classroom. Best for juniors and seniors, it provides a wealth of material written by experts intentionally for the high school and accessible to virtually all teachers regardless of their background in Chinese philosophy. It is well-composed, edited, and laid-out, with pleasant graphics and clear lessons that build on each other. While the energetic teacher may feel compelled to create additional hands-on activities to bolster the reading and group work involved, the curriculum can easily stand on its own and is a welcome addition to the growing supply of materials designed to teach American (and other) students about China and the Pacific Rim. ■

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Teaching About India

A South Asia Curriculum

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Teaching About India is a comprehensive study guide for secondary teachers planning either short units or in-depth courses on South Asia. The author has taken great pains to avoid a one-sided perspective or a Western bias, and has devised a variety of interactive strategies which will engage students of all levels. Each detailed lesson plan is guided by a "Focus Question," which appears on each page of student readings, and includes extensive background notes for teachers who may not already possess knowledge about India, questions and ideas for getting started, and clear learning objectives. While not all lessons will appeal to all teachers, there is a wealth of material here suited to a variety of learning and teaching styles. Some of my favorite activities were designed as "jigsaw" style cooperative learning exercises to cut down on the reading load for students. These can certainly be completed in a single class period, but could also serve as extended lessons.

The curriculum is divided into five chapters or themes. Theme I contains twelve lessons on "The Physical/Historical Setting," from an introduction to geography and historical periods to an exploration of the *Rāmāyana* and Indian folk art. I liked the jigsaw approach to "Water: A Key to Understanding India" which has students read and analyze the effects of the monsoons. The historical lesson "Contacts and Conquests" is overly complex, though it has good material about the early Indus River valley civilizations. Likewise, the issue of "Hinduism as a Way of Life" is not likely to be understood by my 9th graders, though I think the material here on caste and dharma may be

helpful. I have to assume that teachers will have other materials to supplement this discussion of Hinduism. The last lesson deals with Akbar's attempt to build a pluralistic society. Students work in groups to compare Ashoka and Akbar, and then evaluate subsequent Mughal rulers. This exercise can lead to a discussion much closer to home about the value of a multicultural society.

Theme II, "The Dynamics of Change," consists of five lessons dealing with British rule. In "Two Views," students contrast statements excerpted from American and Indian textbooks with strikingly different points of view. This leads naturally to questions about the writing of history and the necessity of reading critically. Other lessons deal with the effects of colonization, the Nationalist movement, and a case study of Gandhi.

Theme III, "Contemporary South Asian Nations and Cultures," contains nine lessons which analyze problems as well as successes since independence. These are difficult lessons due to their complexity as well as the lack of experience of younger students. Readings challenge students to assess the Partition, India's success both as a democracy and in unifying its people, and social issues such as the population crisis, the treatment of women, and education reform. These are each topics worthy of lengthy research.

The fourth theme, "Economic Development in South Asia," consists of six focus questions. Again, these are weighty issues, such as whether India can become an industrial giant, and examining poverty in the South Asian context. I fear that the average 9th grader will have trouble with much of this material. However, the author has suggested ways to frame the questions and structure group work to reach a wider audience. For example, a lesson on environmental problems assigns a case study to each of five groups, and students analyze the problems and suggest solutions.

The last theme, "South Asia in the Global Context," is perhaps the most ambitious of all, for it consists of a role play simulation, "ATOMIC," in which representatives from countries attempt to reduce nuclear proliferation in South Asia. This game was developed by Martha M. Keys for the Moorhead Kennedy Institute in 1994. It is designed for eighteen to thirty-two students 9th grade and up, though younger students may benefit also with additional preparation, and will take three classroom periods. Students are assigned roles of real people and work as a delegation while they deliberate. It is preferable that they remain in character to better understand the nuances of international diplomacy. As with any project of this type, the teacher's role as a facilitator requires knowledge and command of all materials and a cool head to anticipate and resolve conflicts which may arise.

On the whole, *Teaching About India* is an outstanding collection of source material, student readings, and activities. Obviously, a teacher will never be able to use all of these lessons, but may dip into this rich well for a four-to-six-week unit or a full quarter. Its strength is in the thoughtful design of interactive strategies to involve students in the process of learning while tackling challenging topics. ■

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