



Spotlight on **INNER ASIA** The Bizarre Bazaar

Teacher & Student Resource Guide

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NEW YORK: THE AMERICAN FORUM FOR GLOBAL EDUCATION, 2001

FUNDED BY THE UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION,

TITLE VI GRANT

283 PAGES

LOOSE-LEAF BINDER. ISBN: 0-944675-68-9

This valuable new resource covers the geography, history, and cultures of Western China, Tibet, Inner Mongolia, Central Asia, Northern Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, a bit of the Caucasus, and the Caspian Basin. It is aimed primarily at high school social studies classes, but middle school teachers will also find it useful.

In the introduction, the editors lay out a set of questions to consider about the part of Asia that stretches between today's Turkey and China: Where are the boundaries of this region? What should the region be called? Why have so many countries formed there? Who created them? Why have they been overrun by so many different civilizations? The image of the bazaar is explored as a way of thinking about the great diversity and interdependency of the peoples of Inner Asia.

The bulk of the guide consists of dozens of readings selected through consultation with senior scholars and arranged in four categories: geography, movement and exchange across the region, the Mongol empire, and Inner Asia in the contemporary world order. These readings, excerpted from other publications, are varied and interesting. They come from the pens of travelers, historians, archaeologists, embassy personnel, and pilgrims. In addition to history and geography, topics include how cultural heritage was transmitted via architecture, weaving designs, and

oral traditions, as well as the development of philosophy, astronomy, math, medicine, and other sciences. The translations are often recent and well done. Useful related Web sites are noted in many instances.

The content is particularly strong for three periods: the era of the Mongol empire of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the era of European exploration and imperialist rivalry of the nineteenth century, and the post-Soviet era of the 1980s and 1990s. Unfortunately, work on the guide was completed prior to the recent U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, but teachers will be able to add their own supplemental material relating to this development. It would have been harder for them to track down the interesting information in the section on the new Silk Road trade in drugs and drug-related diseases (AIDS) than information on the Afghanistan war.

The editors note that, although Inner Asia is a vast area, it has been traversed for centuries by conquerors such as Alexander the

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Great and Chinghis (Genghis) Khan, as well as by countless merchants and pilgrims. Because of this constant intercourse across the region, the existing nations share some characteristics.

- Linguistically and culturally, the roots of Inner Asia can be found in Iranian/Persian and Turkic cultures from prehistoric times.
- The Turkic populations have traversed the area for over a millennium.
- Economic life is often at subsistence levels.
- Islam is the predominant religion, though Lamaist Buddhism and some forms of Christianity can be found among some populations.
- Inner Asia has been spotlighted only a few times in the broad sweep of world history; it has generally occupied a more marginal position, often surrounded by vast empires.
- In recent history the formation of new states has created political problems, and changes in the global economy point to the need for economic reform.

Those who use this resource will discover that Inner Asia consists of layers of cultures over a landmass that has been the meeting place of civilizations. In an area of overlapping spaces and artificial boundaries, many nation-states have been created, perhaps as accidents of history. The region may never have had a “center,” but was pulled this way and that by a succession of neighboring empires that rose and fell. Historically it was unified only under the domination of others.

In addition to the readings, the editors have provided a Teacher Guide with suggested approaches to teaching the material. The recommended methodologies are open and broad-stroked, leaving each teacher room for individual style and classroom needs. They include prior knowledge exercises; vocabulary, writing, and review strategies; and involvement (cooperative learning) activities. Specific teaching approaches discussed are semantic mapping, “What I Know” charts, Cloze charts, learning logs, and double-entry journal writing.

UPCOMING ISSUES OF *EDUCATION ABOUT ASIA*

FALL 2003—Expanded section
on Asian Film coordinated by
Asian Educational Media Services.

SPRING 2004—Thematic Issue on
Teaching Asia Through the Visual and
Performing Arts.

Various approaches to understanding and teaching Inner Asia are suggested:

- Geography: Landscape and climate using map studies, plotting explorers’ routes, and/or the quest for water. Settlements and dwellings via CD-Rom, internet searches, travel brochures, ancient cities revisited, and the role of religion.
- Movement: Migration through explorations, quests, and conquests. The careers of “women warriors” and other Silk Road travelers. The exchange of knowledge and the establishment of great libraries. Understanding trade and material exchanges by following particular products, such as rugs. The melting pot of religious beliefs. Learning about culture and customs by exploring child raising and the role of the horse.
- The Mongol conquest: This section contains six sample lessons to show how the readings can be integrated into classroom settings. The topics are human and environmental interactions, cultural geography, the Mongol land empire, use of primary documents describing the Mongols in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and interdisciplinary perspectives analyzing the literary epic *The Secret History of the Mongols*.

The readings and map work suggestions are great, but a middle school teacher would have to lay considerable groundwork before using them in class. High school students will be more likely to engage in the readings and discussions with eagerness born of more classroom experience with geography and history, as well as with a better understanding of current events in Afghanistan and surrounding countries. Both middle and high school students will be interested in the guide’s evenhanded coverage of the politics of oil and environmental problems in Inner Asia.

From the teacher’s point of view, the major problem with the presentation is the lack of a clear guide to the readings, so that selections relevant to a particular lesson can be located easily. For example, one sample curricular unit on the Mongols instructs the teacher to distribute a reading selection, but there are no indications where the reading might be found—such as the page number. This problem persisted throughout. A detailed table of contents is included, but the titles of the reading selections are often too vague to judge their contents. A serious deficiency is the lack of an index to help one locate ideas and topics within the resource. Also lacking is a bibliography listing additional sources. Nevertheless, with the maps, time line, glossary, and readings offered by this guide, there can be no further excuse by educators for not including Inner Asia in social studies and current events lessons. ■

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