

## **Asia in World History: Notes on Pedagogical Scholarship**

LUCIEN ELLINGTON

*University of Tennessee at Chattanooga*

After discussing high school and undergraduate students' problematic perceptions toward world history, Lucien Ellington describes four pedagogical works that can help students better understand the role of Asia in history—and that can help instructors teach about Asia more effectively in world-history survey courses.

### **Teaching Asia More Effectively**

Pedagogical scholarship adds to the knowledge and understanding of teaching.<sup>1</sup> This essay is a discussion, with attendant suggestions, on how to teach Asia more effectively in introductory high school and undergraduate-level world-history survey courses that are required for either high school graduation, university admission, or undergraduate general education. The assumption of this essay is that only a small minority of world-history survey students at any of these levels will have unusually strong backgrounds or interest in world history.

How to teach about Asia more effectively in world history is an important question. Despite substantial progress in addressing the issue during the past decade and a half, probably no Asianist in this country interested in world history is satisfied either with current understanding about how to teach Asia effectively or with our students' levels of rudimentary knowledge about Asia.

### **Examining Problematic Student Perceptions**

About two-and-a-half years ago, I began to grope toward working on two observed problematic student perceptions that I consider critical in addressing this issue. The first is a vague notion that in history, Europe was dynamic while Asia was static. Europe was the source of most of the world's greatest ideas, while a much different Asia was characterized by stagnant and static societies ruled by Oriental despots and peasant populations.<sup>2</sup>

Asian societies had little or no freedom, prosperity, or prospects of social mobility. The second problematic perception is that Asia and Europe had little or no interaction through much of history.

Most readers are familiar with the “California School” of Asian and world historians, whose cutting-edge scholarship challenged the conventional wisdom that Europe and “modern” are synonymous—and that nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europeans either imposed modernization upon Asians or that Asians modernized by copying Europeans.<sup>3</sup> Although the works of California-School scholars have deeply influenced my own thinking and teaching, for the most part, I find their work not useful in disabusing world-history survey students of the stereotypes described in my introduction for two reasons.

The most important is that these scholars vastly overestimate how much knowledge the typical survey student possesses about European history. Although many students believe that, historically, Europe was advanced and Asia was backward, they also have little prior knowledge of European history. Much of the focus of the California School lies clearly upon comparative history and rigorous critiques of Eurocentric presumptions that rationalism, private enterprise, commercial economies, and science coupled with variants of Judeo-Christian values meant that, until recently, only the West could be advanced and “modern.”

If students do not have rudimentary knowledge of European topics such as the scientific revolution, the three Enlightenments, John Locke (1632–1704), Adam Smith (1723–90), and the interplay between religion and nationalism, they tend to be more confused by an approach to world history that involves extensive comparisons. Comparisons that focus upon one narrow topic such as Keith Knapp’s (2007) excellent article on the question of whether at any point in its history Imperial China had a “medieval period” can be effective; but broad-based comparative arguments tend to be lost upon world-history survey students because of their lack of extensive prior knowledge about European history, even in Eurocentric forms.

A secondary reason that I refrain from using extensive content from the California School in introductory world-history survey courses is my agreement with the school’s sympathetic critics that, in some cases, these scholars replace a Eurocentric narrative with an Asia-centric counter narrative. As is the case with Eurocentric narratives, a counter-narrative that minimizes European contributions to world history potentially impedes the development of a genuine world-history survey that includes serious study of both Asia and Europe—and the connections between them (see Carton 2006).

## Introducing Four Pedagogical Works for World History

In the remainder of this essay, I briefly describe four world-history pedagogical works: a brief essay, a Web-site component, a book, and a chapter from an edited volume. I believe each to be an effective basic tool in assisting survey students to understand that, in world history, no clear dichotomy can be drawn between “dynamic and modern Europe” and “backward Asia”—and that mutual interaction and influence have occurred between Europe and Asia since antiquity.

Murphey, Rhoads. “The Shape of the World: Eurasia.” In *Asia in Western and World History: A Guide for Teaching*, ed. Ainslie T. Embree and Carol Gluck, 7–13. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1997.

In the first sentence of this masterful seven-page essay, the author asserts that his purpose is “to enrich the student’s understanding of Western civilization by pointing out its interconnections with Asia throughout history.” Murphey uses concrete examples—such as the range of interactions among Southwest Asia, the Greeks, and South Asia in antiquity; the influence of the Silk Road; the export of a religion of Asian origin, Christianity, to early South Asia; and Columbus’s intimate knowledge of Marco Polo’s journal—to lucidly achieve his purpose.

Asia for Educators. “The Song Dynasty in China (960–1279): Life in the Song Seen through a 12th-Century Scroll.” New York: Columbia University, 2004. <http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/song>.

In this component of a superb East Asia pedagogical Web site, chief consultant and noted textbook author Conrad Schirokauer and his colleagues use an artifact, the ca. twelfth-century Beijing Qingming Scroll (*Qingming shanghe tu* 清明上河图), as the central teaching visual to help students understand that a case can be made that “modernity” as we understand it began in the Song 宋 period (960–1279). Students learn about private entrepreneurs; variants of economic freedom and limited government; and impressive commercial, technological, and cultural vibrancy in this era of Chinese history by examining close-ups of various urban scenes from the scroll and through accessing related readings, maps, and other materials.

Gordon, Stewart. *When Asia Was the World*. Philadelphia, PA: Da Capo Press, 2007.

This book is highly recommended as an assigned student reading for university or high school instructors (assuming that the latter group of educators have students who are reading at least on grade level). In this 191-page book, Gordon examines Asia from 500 to 1500. Most of the chap-

ters focus on both famous (e.g., Ibn Battuta [b. 1304], Babur [1483–1531], and Xuanzang 玄奘 [ca. 602–64]) and little-known individuals to impart significant understanding of the Pan-Asian networks, interactions, commerce, and religions that made Asia the center of the world during the period addressed. The book includes excellent maps and photographs as well as notes, suggested readings, and an index. Gordon's work offers a highly readable and superb use of biographical vignettes as mediums for the impartation of historical understanding.

Spence, Jonathan. "Western Perceptions of China from the Late Sixteenth Century to the Present." In *The Heritage of China: Contemporary Perspectives on Chinese Civilization*, ed. Paul S. Ropp, 1–14. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990.

Jonathan Spence incorporates a range of viewpoints about China in this chapter, ranging from those of Voltaire (1694–1778) to Benjamin Franklin (1706–90) to Hegel (1770–1831). Spence clearly illustrates how visions of China—or an imagined China—affected the thought and, in some cases, actions of influential Westerners, thereby problematizing student notions that China and the West were absolutely separate worlds.

### **Creating an Approach to Teaching about Asia in Survey Courses**

The above works, in my opinion, add to our understanding and knowledge of how to teach about Asia in introductory world-history survey courses. They also have the potential to position students who take additional history courses to understand more sophisticated analyses of Europe and Asia, such as those of the California scholars. (For some examples, see the works in note 3, below; see also Fowler 1998 and Landes 1998.) As I continue to work on the topic of teaching Asia in the world-history survey course, I welcome responses from readers who share an interest in this topic.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup>The late Ernest Boyer (1990) first defined teaching or pedagogical scholarship in his expanded definition of scholarship that included four kinds: discovery, integration, application, and teaching.

<sup>2</sup>Although many others have used the term, Montesquieu (1689–1755) is credited with first popularizing the notion of "Oriental despotism" as the type of government pertaining to a lawless society based on the equality of subjects in fear and powerlessness (see Arjomand 2004).

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, works by such scholars as Andre Gunder Frank (1998); Kenneth Pomeranz (2000); R. Bin Wong (1997); and Robert B. Marks (2006), who provides a good introduction and discussion of some of the ideas of the California School.

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