

*Using Primary Sources in the
World History Survey*
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The world history survey course has become an increasingly prominent part of the American academic environment in recent years; Asia specialists teaching in colleges and secondary schools must come to grips with it. A growing number of colleges, junior colleges and high schools have introduced a world history element, often in place of the more traditional Western Civilization course that has long been a foundation of history teaching. This is, in part, a product of the desire for a truly multicultural curriculum, and in part, a search for a way to prepare students for a world in which the globe is increasingly interconnected. World history is not without its critics: many cogently argue that the sheer breadth of the topic makes it impossible for students to develop a sufficient depth of knowledge for it to serve as an appropriate base for further historical studies. Nevertheless, whether or not we support the idea of teaching world history, historians of Asia must confront the reality that world history is being taught on an increasingly wide scale. Moreover, as specialists in Asian fields, we have a responsibility to see that within the context of world history courses Asia is taught appropriately. That is, the complex societies of Asia are treated accurately, fairly, and without egregious ethnocentric bias. I believe that primary sources can be a crucial tool in teaching Asia fairly within a world history course.

Broadly speaking there are two methods of teaching world history in widespread use: what I shall call the comparative civilizations approach, and the "true global" approach. The comparative civilizations approach examines Western civilization along with one or more other major world civilizations. Usually these are approached discretely and in series: a few weeks on one civilization and followed by a few weeks on another. The "true global" approach, on the other hand, tries to explore historical phenomena on a global scale. Rather than focusing on the distinct and separate development of civilizations, this approach emphasizes the interconnections of different parts of the world, and engages constantly in comparisons of different civilizations or regions. While the comparative civilizations approach is in effect a collaborative effort to bring together regional and national specialties into an umbrella course, the true global approach is closely linked to the emergence of world history as a distinct field within the historical discipline over the last forty years or so. My own experience has been teaching a course of the true global variety, and the comments that follow are oriented to this approach.

For an Asian specialist, teaching world history is a great intellectual challenge. In graduate school, we are trained to try to understand Asian societies on their own terms. Teaching "true global" I am forced to go beyond my training,

not simply in the geographical areas I teach about, but in the relentless effort to examine the interconnections and make comparisons between areas I know a great deal about, and those in which I am frankly quite ignorant. The pitfall is always trying to cover too much. On one extreme it is easy to get bogged down in so much detail that the class has no focus, no central theme. On the other hand if the focus is too broad, and there is little in the way of specific examples, then the conclusions will be banal. The trick, one I have by no means mastered, is to find one or two central themes, and several common examples from different parts of the world, and examine them with care.

To make the true global approach work, to make it an intellectual challenge for students rather than an almost metaphysical exercise in "big" history, we must get the students themselves to engage in the basic analytical process of exploring interconnections and making comparisons across the globe. I believe that primary sources are an essential tool for doing this. There are now a number of primary source readers for world history available from American publishers. The one I have used is Alfred Andrea and James Overfield's *Human Record, volumes 1 & 2*. This publication has around 120 selections in each volume. The selections are short (one to four pages) and drawn from a remarkable variety of sources from across the globe. While I found this text (originally chosen for purely pragmatic reasons) to be very effective, the comments that follow are surely applicable to other readers, or to a teacher's own selection of primary source materials.

There are a number of advantages to using primary sources. First, they bring Asian voices into the classroom. I would rather my students learn about Confucianism from the *Analects*, or to examine the society of Tang China from the window of poems by Du Fu and Li Bo, than to simply to absorb a summary from a textbook, or a lecture. Even when a passage is selected to illustrate a specific point, students can examine the rhetoric, figure out the authors' biases and assumptions, and confront the obscurities of the original text.

Second, carefully chosen primary sources can facilitate teaching about the interconnections between cultures and civilizations. For example, the introduction of Buddhism from South Asia into east and central Asia during the first millennium of the Common Era may be illustrated in a textbook map, with arrows and colored shadings. In this picture, Buddhism emerges as an undifferentiated phenomenon. But a few photographs of Mahayana Buddhist temple figures from different parts of South and East Asia can show the diversity of artistic styles, the transformation of specific figures over space and time (for example, the transformation of the male bodhisattva avalokitesvara into the female figure of Guanyin [often described as the goddess of mercy] in China). At the same time a few written primary source texts can show the diversity of East Asian responses to Buddhism, ranging from acceptance in Chinese Buddhist tracts, to rejection in the famous criticisms written by the Tang Confucian writer Han Yu, to syncretism in Song Neo-Confucian texts, to creative transformation in Japanese Zen.

Students will not get a sophisticated understanding of Buddhism, but they will learn that the spread of Buddhism was not a matter of spiritual conquest, but involved complex cultural exchange, and had quite a variety of results. Similarly, primary sources can be used to make comparisons with other parts of the world. For example, selections from the Lotus Sutra can be used in making comparisons of Buddhist ideas of salvation with those in other world religions.

Third, the use of primary sources gives students a chance to “do history”: to engage in the creative process of analyzing the past through the sources available. At the college level, world history is most often taught as a foundational history course. Along with a knowledge base, students need to learn basic skills: learning to read and analyze primary sources is a crucial skill for any advanced history course. To force reluctant students to do this, primary source readings need to be discussed in class or sections, and used in writing assignments and exams.

There are some limitations to this approach, and indeed to world history as a field. Most of all, students will not gain an in-depth knowledge of any of the areas they study. If we parade one civilization after another before our students, and expect students to retain a sophisticated knowledge of each, we are sure to fail. Consequently, world history does not supplant the need for more specific regional and national histories. However, it can supplement and contextualize them, and encourage students to look seriously at foreign cultures.

If students are not going to get a complex understanding of the civilizations of the world, what can they learn from a world history course? They can learn how diverse parts of the world have been and continue to be interconnected by economy, culture, and politics. They can learn about processes of change and the structures that organize human life; how religion has related to social organization in different parts of the world; how states and empires come into being, compete with one another and fall apart; the various modes in which human labor is organized for production at different times and places; and how technology has spread back and forth across the globe. In short, they can come to an understanding of the historical contingency of many aspects of the contemporary world often taken for granted.

There is one other great advantage that teachers of Asian cultures can gain from teaching world history, particularly a course using primary sources. It forces us to expand our own intellectual horizons, to make the cross-cultural and cross-regional connections and comparisons that are often discouraged in the area studies training most of us received. Teaching from primary source documents, with all of their difficulties and contradictions, demands that we think hard about what we are teaching, and at least sometimes, question long held assumptions about the unique characteristics of the Asian societies we have sought to understand.

Uniting Storylines: Asia in Global Studies

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On the first day of each new term, I give the students in my Asian Civilization, Chinese History and Japanese History classes a multiple-choice, general knowledge quiz on the Far East. Invariably, they are able to correctly identify such momentous people, places, and events as Confucius, the Great Wall, the Opium War, and Samurai warriors. However, during subsequent class discussions, I have found that students usually have no concept of why Confucius is historically significant, where the Great Wall is located (or why it may have been built), who fought in the Opium War, or when the Samurai dominated Japan. They have memorized a few salient facts about Asia, but have not developed any sense of cultural or temporal linkage either within Chinese or Japanese history or between Asia and the West.

In contrast, most new students in my Western Civilization courses are able not only to identify historically significant people, places and events (e.g., Egyptian Pharaohs, the Crusades, Napoleon Bonaparte, and the Revolutionary War), but also to trace the origins of Western law to Hammurabi, politics to the Greeks, and religion to Middle Eastern Jews and Christians. Moreover, they are able to fairly accurately reconstruct an historical time line of Western development from the ancient Tigris-Euphrates civilizations, through the Egyptians, Greeks and Romans, and into the European Middle Ages, Renaissance, and Industrial Revolution. Certainly, being members of a Western culture is a major reason for their greater knowledge of Western civilization. However, after twelve years (or more) of multicultural education, why are they still so woefully under-informed about Asia? Seeking answers to this question, I have examined the three main global studies texts (two social studies, one history) currently being used in middle schools of the Milwaukee public school system. A close look at the organization and content of these books provides insight into a common educational problem.

All three of the textbooks promise a balanced, comprehensive study of the development of world civilizations, a “panorama of human history from the earliest times to the present.” What they deliver, however, is something quite different. The caption for unit one of the first social science book states: “Long ago farming began in two great river valleys. One of the valleys was formed by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in Southwest Asia. The other lay along the banks of the Nile.” The “other”? Were there but two ancient farming communities, both of which conveniently were located in the traditional “cradles of Western civilization”? Remarkable. From Sumer and Egypt, the authors trace the development of “human history” westward, characterizing it as enriched and refined first by the Greeks and later by the Romans. In their quest to fully explain these early stages of global history, the authors devote eighty pages in this textbook to highlighting and exploring