

Unit Plan – Silk Road Encounters: Real and/or Imagined?

Prepared for the Central Asia in World History NEH Summer Institute

The Ohio State University, July 11-29, 2016

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Grade Level – 9-12

Subject/Relevant Topics – World History; trade, migration, nomadism, Xiongnu, Turks, Mongols

Unit length – 4-8 weeks

This unit plan outlines my approach to world history with a thematic focus on the movement of people, goods and ideas. The Silk Road serves a metaphor for one of the oldest and most significant networks for long distance east-west exchange, and offers ample opportunity for students to conceptualize movement in a world historical context. This unit provides a framework for students to consider the different kinds of people who facilitated cross-cultural exchange of goods and ideas and the multiple factors that shaped human mobility. This broad unit is divided into two parts: Part A emphasizes the significance of nomadic peoples in shaping Eurasian exchanges, and Part B focuses on the relationship between religion and trade. At the end of the unit, students will evaluate the use of the term “Silk Road” to describe this trade network.

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Part A - Huns*, Turks, and Mongols, Oh My! Nomads of the Eurasian Steppe

The purpose of this sub-unit is to prompt students to consider the role that nomadic peoples played in shaping diplomacy, trade, and cultural developments across Eurasia. Students will examine environmental, economic and political conditions that led to the formation of prominent nomadic empires on the Eurasian steppe. They will study how these nomadic peoples interacted with sedentary states of Eurasia, and assess Eurasian nomads' contributions to cross-cultural exchange of material goods and ideas. They will also deconstruct nomadic and sedentary civilizations as categories of analysis.

Focusing Questions

- How are nomadic civilizations defined? What similarities hold this category of people together, and what are some exceptions to the patterns of nomadic life?
- To what extent can we see nomadic and sedentary civilizations as dichotomous categories of analysis?
- How did nomadic and sedentary peoples interact with each other? What are the short term and long term consequences of such interactions?

* The title for this sub--unit reflects the uncertainty and disagreement in the scholarly debate over whether the Xiongnu and the Huns of the western Eurasian steppe were related. According to Peter Golden, recent scholarship indicates a partial connection between the two groups. See Peter Golden, *Central Asia in World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 33-34.

Introductory Module:

Topic 1 – Looking at Material Evidence: The Ornamental Trousers

Material objects are fascinating sources for investigating intercultural contact in the ancient world. In this lesson, students examine images of a pair of ornamental trousers excavated from Xinjiang, China to raise questions about the groups of people who engaged in cross-cultural exchange, what goods and ideas they valued, and how ideas changed through the process of intercultural contact. The full lesson plan can be found at <http://digitalcommons.imsa.edu/proflearningday/2015/history/7/>

Sources:

Hansen, Valerie. *The Silk Road: A New History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

The cover art from this book is an image of the ornamental trousers that students analyze.

Wagner, Mayak, et al. "The ornamental trousers from Sampula (Xinjiang, China): their origins and biography." *Antiquity* 83, No. 322 (2009): 1065-1075.

Topic 2 – All About the Land: Eurasian Geography, Ecology and Nomadic Pastoralism

Objectives

- To develop awareness of the varied landscape, topography, climate, and resources across the Eurasian landmass
- To identify the various ecological zones of Eurasia
- To understand the relationship between ecology and the prominence of nomadic pastoralism in Eurasia
- To understand the development of nomadic pastoralism as an alternative to sedentary agriculture as a basis of organizing human societies

Activity i: Students will label a blank map of Eurasia with prominent geographic features – mountain ranges, lakes, rivers, deserts

Activity ii: Students will analyze images and data sets of the Eurasian landmass from NASA's Earth Observations website

<http://neo.sci.gsfc.nasa.gov/>

Hint – Focus the following datasets and images:

- Land → Land Cover Classification, Average Land Surface Temperature (Day and Night), Snow Cover, Topography and Vegetation Index
- Atmosphere → Rainfall

Students should answer the following questions based on their examination of the NASA images:

- Which areas have regular access to fresh water? Minerals (copper, tin, etc.)? Construction material?
- Which areas are more suitable for farming?
- Which areas are more suitable for raising herd animals?

- Which areas do you think are difficult to travel through?
- Which areas do you think are more suitable for sustaining cities?
- Which areas do you think are suitable for nomadic life?

Activity iii: After students have analyzed images and data from the NASA website, they will outline and label the Eurasian ecological zones described below.

Ecological Zones of Eurasia

- **Urban-agricultural zone:** fertile soil allowed for growth of surplus crops and raising of domesticated animals; where early urban civilizations arose
- **Steppe-pastoral zone:** grasslands north of urban-agricultural zone; stretches from Mongolian plateau in the east to the Hungarian plains in the west; drier location unsuitable for growing grain but suitable for livestock breeding, especially of horses; inhabited by different groups of nomadic peoples
- **Taiga forest zone:** located at northern edge of steppe, has dense coniferous forests, rich in minerals and stones, inhabited by hunters and gatherers

Activity iv: Students will read the essay, “Nomadic Challenges and Civilized Responses” (<http://history-world.org/nomads.htm>), and discuss how nomadic pastoralism developed as an alternative to sedentary agriculture, and how the people of the different ecological zones interacted with each other.

Student Readings:

Guisepi, R.A. “Nomadic Challenges and Civilized Responses.” *International World History Project*. Accessed August 9, 2016. <http://history-world.org/nomads.htm>.

Additional Sources:

Liu, Xinru and Linda Norene Shaffer. *Connections Across Eurasia: Transportation, Communication, and Cultural Exchange on the Silk Roads*. Boston: McGraw Hill, 2007.

See especially the introduction.

Module I – Let’s Get Down to Business to Defeat the Xiongnu

Objectives:

- To understand the origins and development of the Xiongnu as horseback-riding nomadic tribes to the north of China
- To understand how mastery of horseback-riding and related military strategies shaped Xiongnu social organization
- To identify the sources of tension between the Xiongnu and Han Dynasty China
- To define and analyze *heqin* trade-tribute concept between the Xiongnu and the Chinese
- To understand and question Chinese perceptions of the Xiongnu

Topic 1 – Origins of the Xiongnu and Territorial Expansion

Activity i: Xiongnu Territorial Expansion on the Steppe

- Students will compare and contrast a series of maps depicting the territorial expansion of Han Dynasty China from 200 BCE to 200 CE, and the Xiongnu empire from the same period. Students will construct a hypothesis on the sources of tension between the Chinese and the Xiongnu.

Activity ii: Primary Source Analysis

- Students will read Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian of China*, Early First Century BCE 37 in Xinru Liu, *Silk Roads: A Brief History with Documents* (2012), and discuss the questions below.
- How did Sima Qian describe the actions of Motun? Do you think Sima Qian described Motun in a positive or negative light? Why?
- According to Sima Qian’s description of the Xiongnu, what was the role of warfare in Xiongnu society?
- Do you find Sima Qian’s description of Motun’s rise to power believable? Why/why not?
 - How do you think Sima Qian learned about Motun’s story?
- Sima Qian was a Chinese historian who lived from 145-86 BCE. If all you knew about the Xiongnu came from Sima Qian’s description, what would be your impression of the Xiongnu?

Topic 2 – When the Xiongnu Meet the Han

Activity i: Secondary Source Analysis

- Students will read Jerry H. Bentley, *Old World Encounters*, pp.35-42 and discuss the questions below.
- Chinese sources often depict nomadic peoples as a nuisance and a threat. However, Bentley argues that Chinese states also posed a threat to the northern nomads’ way of life. Why?
- What were some ways that Han officials sought to normalize relations with the Xiongnu? How well did these strategies work?
- What were some ideas or policies that the Xiongnu and the Chinese adopted from each other?
- How did Chinese efforts to regularize relations with the Xiongnu lead to proliferation of long-distance trade?
- On pages 39-40, Bentley discusses Sima Qian’s description of Zhonghang Yue’s mission to the Xiongnu. What kinds of questions did Bentley raise about Sima Qian’s account? Why?

Activity ii: Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Xiongnu? Reading and Discussion

- Students will read Ban Gu, History of the Former Han Dynasty, Late First Century CE 44, in Xinru Liu, *Silk Roads: A Brief History with Documents* (2012). They will compare and contrast this account with the one by Sima Qian in a previous activity.
- Students should note that the almost a hundred years separate the two accounts. By the time of Ban Gu's writing, internal dissent was growing among the Xiongnu, and the Xiongnu confederacy was beginning to decline.
- Discuss the following question: What particular biases did the Chinese historians have when writing about the Xiongnu? What can we learn about Chinese attitudes towards the Xiongnu based on these sources? What are the limitations of using these sources to learn about the Xiongnu way of life?

Student Readings:

Sima Qian, Records of the Grand Historian of China, Early First Century BCE 37. In *Silk Roads: A Brief History with Documents* by Xinru Liu, 37-43. Boston: Bedford St. Martins, 2012.

Bentley, Jerry H. *Old World Encounters: Cross-Cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Pre-Modern Times*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. pp. 35-42.

Ban Gu, History of the Former Han Dynasty, Late First Century CE 44. In *Silk Roads: A Brief History with Documents* by Xinru Liu, 44-47. Boston: Bedford St. Martins, 2012

Additional Sources:

Golden, Peter B. *Central Asia in World History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
See especially Chapter 2.

Liu, Xinru and Linda Norene Shaffer. *Connections Across Eurasia: Transportation, Communication, and Cultural Exchange on the Silk Roads*. Boston: McGraw Hill, 2007.
See especially Chapter 1.

Module II – Before There Was Turkey: Pre-Islamic Turkic Peoples

Objectives:

- To understand the origins of Turkic peoples as Central Asian nomads
- To recognize the migratory routes of Turkic peoples
- To explore the cultural diversity of Turkic peoples
- To examine the relationship between Turks and other sedentary communities of Eurasia
- To develop a framework of reference for Turks as a group of people and consider its meaning for modern-day Turkish identity

Topic 1 – Origins and Migrations of the Turkic Peoples

Activity i: Guided Reading

- Students will read the essay, “The Cradle of the Turks”
<http://archive.aramcoworld.com/issue/199402/the.cradle.of.the.turks.htm>. Below are some guiding questions:
 - According to the author, how is the term “Turk” defined?
 - From which area of Asia did the Turkic peoples originate? Does this surprise you? Why?
 - Which group of people were the first to write about the ancient Turks? What conclusion can you make about the origins of the Turks based on this factor?
 - What does the term *khagan* mean? Does this word look similar to other terms you’ve encountered before?
 - The article discusses a legend that describes the origins of the Turks. What is this legend? Have you heard of such legends in other cultures? Why do you think this legend is significant?
 - Describe the significance of warfare for the Turkic peoples. What military techniques or innovations have helped them succeed?
 - Describe the significance of trade to the Turkic peoples.
 - The Turks, like the Xiongnu, had conflicts with the Chinese. What strategies did they use to deal with the Chinese? How were these strategies similar to or different from the strategies used by the Xiongnu?
 - Unlike the Xiongnu, the first Turkic empires did leave behind a limited written record. Why is this significant?
 - How did the Turks deal with other sedentary civilizations they encountered? (ie. the Sassanians, the Byzantines)

Activity ii: Mapping the Turkic World

- Based on the information from the essay, students will do research online to produce the following:
 - Annotations on a blank map showing the origins of the Turkic peoples, the location of the major Turkic empires mentioned in the essay, and the location of major civilizations of sedentary populations
 - A timeline tracing the origins of the Turkic peoples, their westward migrations, and foundation of major Turkic empires.

Topic 2 – Turkic Peoples and Their Encounter with Others

Activity i: Primary Source Analysis

- Students will read the Orkhon inscriptions, from *Islamic Central Asia: An Anthology of Historical Sources* and fill out the 6 Cs of Primary Source Analysis worksheet (available online)
 - This is an excerpt from 8th century inscriptions in old Turkic, found in the Orkhon valley in Mongolia. These inscriptions were one of the earliest by the Turks about their people.
 - How did the Turks describe their own history?
 - What awareness did they have of their past as a people?
 - The Turks, like the Xiongnu, had conflicts with the Chinese. How did the Turks interpret their encounters with the Chinese? What strategies did they use to deal with the Chinese?
 - How did encounters with the Chinese affect the Turks' way of life?
 - How were the Turks' encounters with the Chinese similar to or different from the the Xiongnu's encounters with the Chinese?
 - Unlike the Xiongnu, the first Turkic empires did leave behind a limited written record. Why is this significant?
- Optional reading – Ibn Fadlan: Journey to the Northern Lands, from *Islamic Central Asia: An Anthology of Historical Sources*
 - In this excerpt, Ibn Fadlan, a 10th century Arab author who traveled as part of an embassy to visit a local ruler in the Volga region, describes his encounter with the Ozghuz Turks.
 - Students will compare and contrast Ibn Fadlan's description of the Turks with the Orkhon inscriptions. They should note that these are dramatically different sources, originating from different time periods, and describing different Turkic tribes. While it may be difficult to draw significant conclusions from a comparison of these two sources, students should still be able to appreciate the diversity among Turkic peoples.

Activity ii: Us and Other – Considerations of Identity

- Students will listen to a podcast featuring Carter Vaughn Findley, a scholar of Turkish history. Link: <https://15minutehistory.org/2013/11/13/episode-31-who-are-the-turks/>
- Discussion the following:
 - Why is the nomadic origin of the Turks a problematic issue for nationalists?
 - How have the Turks' encounters with other societies transformed their culture?

Student Readings:

Lawton, John. "The Cradle of the Turks." *Aramco World*. Accessed August 10, 2016. <http://archive.aramcoworld.com/issue/199402/the.cradle.of.the.turks.htm>.

Orkhon inscriptions: The Early Turks. In *Islamic Central Asia: An Anthology of Historical Source*, edited by Scott C. Levi and Ron Sela, 51-55. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010.

Ibn Fadlan: Journey to the Northern Lands. In *Islamic Central Asia: An Anthology of Historical Source*, edited by Scott C. Levi and Ron Sela, 65-68. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010.

Additional Sources:

Findley, Carter Vaughn. *The Turks in World History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

McCarthy, Justin and Carolyn McCarthy. *Who Are the Turks? A Manual for Teachers*. New York: American Forum for Global Education, 2003.

Module III – When Mongols Ruled

Objectives:

- To understand the unification process of Mongol tribes
- To identify factors that contributed to unity and fragmentation of the Mongol empire
- To examine bias in the way people from sedentary societies have described the Mongols
- To examine the role of Mongols in facilitating Eurasian trade
- To consider the extent to which Mongols represented a typical example of nomadic peoples

Topic 1 – What Would Chinggis Do? Unification of Mongol Tribes and Territorial Expansion

Activity i – Visual Analysis

- Students will look for some artistic depictions of Mongols from the 13th to 15th century online and discuss the following questions about each image:
 - Who were the producers of the image? How were Mongols portrayed in each image?
 - Do you notice any similarities between these images?
 - What about differences? Do they differ depending on the people who produced these images?
 - What generalizations can you make about artistic depictions of Mongols during the medieval period?

Activity ii – Mongol Empire Infographic

- Students will use the Mongols in World History website (<http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/mongols/index.html>) to create an infographic poster that contains the following details:
 - Timeline and map of the rise of the Mongol Empire, its expansion, and its decline
 - Family tree of Chinggis Khan and his successors
 - Factors leading to unity of the Mongols
 - Factors leading to disintegration of the Mongol Empire
 - Major religious groups that lived under Mongol rule
 - Religions that Mongol rulers adopted

Topic 2 – The Pax Mongolica: Mongols and Eurasian Trade

Activity i – Visual Analysis

- Students will look at some artifacts from MET Museum online exhibit on the Mongols. And discuss the following questions
 - What goods and services do you think the Mongols valued?
 - From whom did the Mongols acquire their material goods?

Activity ii – Primary Source Analysis

- Students will read descriptions of the Mongols by Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta and discuss the following questions:
 - How did Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta each view the Mongols? Did they despise the Mongols? Admire them? Respect? Give specific evidence to show this.
 - What aspects of Mongol life did each traveler describe? Why do you think they emphasized these aspects of Mongol life?
 - Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta were able to travel across much of the continent because of the stability that Mongol rule established, especially for merchant caravans. Find specific evidence of this in the two texts.
 - How believable to you consider these two accounts of Mongol life to be?
 - How do these texts compare/contrast with the image of Mongols you see depicted in medieval art?
 - Mongols were a nomadic people who adapted fairly well to sedentary life. Find specific evidence in these texts to support this claim.

Topic 3 – Mongols: Exceptional Nomads?

Activity i – Student debate

- Students will engage in an in-class debate on whether the Mongols were the exception or the rule as Eurasian nomads. A good way to prepare students for this debate is to have them make a chart detailing the similarities and differences between the Xiongnu, Turks, and Mongols.

Optional Movie Screening – Mongol: The Rise of Genghis Khan (2007)

- Students can read selections from the Secret History of the Mongols in order to engage in a discussion on whether the movie is a realistic representation of Mongol society.

Student Readings:

Marco Polo, Description of the World. In *The Mongols in Global History*, edited by Morris Rossabi, 128-133. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2011.

Travels of Ibn Battuta. In *The Mongols in Global History*, edited by Morris Rossabi, 84-87. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2011.

The Secret History of the Mongols. In *The Mongols in Global History*, edited by Morris Rossabi, 43-59. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2011.

Additional Sources:

Morgan, David. *The Mongols, 2nd Edition*. Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007.

Part A Concluding Discussion:

Topic: Why Nomads Matter in World History

- Students will engage in a discussion of the original focusing questions, or write a brief essay on one of the focusing questions.

Student Project: Diary of Joe/Josephine Nomad (Instruction for students)

The Eurasian nomads did not leave behind an abundance of written sources. Because these were primarily non-literate societies, many of the written sources on these people were created by people from settled civilizations. If the nomads could tell us about their encounters with the settled civilizations, how would they tell that story? What evidence would they leave behind?

You will create an artifact based on descriptions between nomadic and sedentary civilizations written by one of these authors

- Sima Qian
- Ban Gu
- Ibn Fadlan
- Marco Polo
- Ibn Batutta

However, you will tell the story from the perspective of the nomads. For example, if you use Ban Gu's text describing Zhang Qian's mission, how would the Xiongnu record the encounter between Zhang Qian and their people?

What you will produce:

- The Artifact: The artifact can be any non-written source – ie. an oral story (you can record it as an MP3), a stone carving, an item of clothing, a tapestry, a decorated weapon, etc. Use your imagination! (You do not need to make the artifacts out of real materials that were actually available to the ancient nomads. For example, a paper maché version of an ornamental pot could stand in for a clay pot. You could even draw the artifact and specify what it is in your report.)
- The Explanation/Analysis: a 3-5 page report on your artifact that contains the following details:
 - What is it? What is it made of? How is it made? What is it used for? (You may need to do some additional research to answer these questions.)
 - What was going on at the time this artifact was produced? (Briefly explain the encounter between the nomads and sedentary civilization as described in the primary source you have chosen for the basis of your assignment.)
 - Why do you think this artifact is realistic?
 - How does this artifact depict the nomads' encounter with a sedentary civilization?
 - Whose perspective is depicted in this artifact? (A warrior? A tribal leader? A woman?) What is special about this perspective?
 - How is this artifact related to issues we have discussed in this unit?
 - What does this artifact tell us about the nomads' world view?

Part B - Monks, Missionaries and Merchants: The Role of Religion in Eurasian Trade (General Overview)

This purpose of this second sub-unit is to examine the diversity of religious traditions across Eurasia and its relationship to trade. Students will assess the role of religion in Eurasian trade by studying the spread of Buddhism and Islam in comparison. Students will examine how these Buddhism and Islam developed in relation to existing religious and cultural traditions. They will explore the concept of syncretism by analyzing how these religions adapted to and incorporated ideas from local cultural practices as they spread throughout Eurasia. Finally, students will consider whether trade encouraged the spread of religion or vice versa.

Essential Questions

- What factors contributed to diversity in religious traditions across Eurasia?
- Why and how did Buddhism and Islam adapt to local conditions as they expanded their influence across Eurasia?
- What are some similarities and differences in the way in which Buddhism and Islam spread across Eurasia? What broader conclusions can we draw from these comparisons?
- Was it the presence of trade networks that encouraged the growth of Buddhism and Islam across Eurasia, or was it the spread of Buddhism and Islam that contributed to significant expansion of Eurasian trade networks?

Additional material for Part B is under development.