

## MULTICULTURAL APPROACHES TO TEACHING ASIAN HISTORY

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Educators at all levels of instruction face common problems in broadening the perspectives of their students and the parameters of traditional courses. Among these are limited time, large class size, lack of student preparation, the over-specialization of faculty in one cultural area, and inadequate texts. Sadly, the one course colleges and secondary schools most rely upon to open multicultural horizons, surveys in world civilization or courses in non-Western history, are often so bound by these same limits that they become part of the problem, rather than the cure. Yet, those teachers searching for multicultural approaches to the teaching of Asia will find many avenues listed or discussed in Kevin Reilly, editor, *Syllabi in World History* (New York, 1988), Heidi Roup, *Teaching World History in High School* (Armonk, New York, 1994), Jerry Bentley, *Old World Encounters: Cross-Cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Pre-Modern Times* (New York, 1993), Anislie Embree and Carol Gluck, editors, *Asia in Western and World History: A Guide for Teaching* (Armonk, New York, 1994), Donald F. Lach, *Asia and the Making of Europe* (1965-1994), and any volume of the World History Association's *Journal of World History* or its teacher-oriented *Bulletin*. These sources will well serve those seeking a better integrated, multidisciplinary course whatever the subject. This said, however, it is unusual for an established instructor to suddenly reach out to pre-

digested, but unfamiliar models, and even more unusual for any of these models to cover a variety of subjects germane to virtually any course.

One solution may be what is termed here a *Multicultural Mini-Lesson*. A Multicultural Mini-Lesson draws on areas of personal interest/experience of the instructor to engage him or her directly in the creation of a supplemental lecture that, rather than illuminating a narrow aspect of standard course content, opens up the full panorama of human experience without forcing the restructuring of a course. The remainder of this essay employs one such lesson, entitled "The Forgotten Dragon:- American Exchange in the Early Modern World System," as a case study designed to encourage similar efforts. It is entirely based on material drawn from readily available sources, primarily recently published textbooks on American, Chinese and Pacific history, in order to demonstrate the ease with which parallel case studies can be prepared for virtually any course in history. The subject itself was chosen not because this writer, a historian of South and Southeast Asia, had any particularly academic expertise in the field, but because of his bi-coastal experience of life in California and Georgia and his casual interest in cultural exchange between early modern China and Europe. A set of critical response questions to the mini-lesson is provided to suggest at least one means of integrating the lesson into existing teaching strategies.

### The Forgotten Dragon

The study of the early modern period of world history is rightly dominated by two developments: the Columbian Exchange and the world revolution of Westernization. Practitioners of world history, however, often employ these entirely appropriate foci in such a way

as to obscure the persistence of Asia's traditional role as a factor in global trade and cultural exchange. As a result, the study of the expansion of Western power in Asia has relegated that region to the status of a victim of European imperialism entirely bereft of the capacity to shape the West as it once did. It is not until the appearance of the new economic Tigers of the Pacific Rim that Asia is looked at again as a source of innovation and change. Similarly, many who study the Columbian Exchange do so only in terms of exchange patterns flowing across the Atlantic, thereby failing to grasp the significance of its trans-Pacific leg (Manilla-Acapulco-Vera Cruz) or even note the presence of Chinese in New Spain as early as the sixteenth century. Ironically, not only has the prevailing vision of the eclipse of Asia in the early modern period impeded our understanding of the place of Asia in world history, it has limited our understanding of the very issues--the rise of Western dominance and the Atlantic ecumene--that are the very cause of this lacunae. Evidence of why we must be alert to these problems in world historiography can be found in the histories of California and Georgia. The history of California identifies both the breadth of the impact of Chinese culture on the Americas and the Asian reach of the Columbian Exchange. The history of Georgia shows quite clearly that China had a major cultural influence on the West in the early modern period, even influencing the form and content of the West's conception of the settlement of the Americas.

### The California Connection

Today, California bears the mark of a resurgent Asia. Its downtown areas are being reshaped by Asian investors from Hong Kong and Taiwan, and its suburbs are increasingly inhabited by Asian immigrants seeking



homesite possessing the proper spiritual spacial orientation for habitation. The son of one of these immigrants, Michael Woo, is a Los Angeles County Supervisor who recently ran for mayor of Los Angeles on a platform that openly advocates Chinese family values as the key to the city's future. These changes were noted by California's film industry, which revived the long dormant Hollywood tradition of the East-As-Teacher with decision of Turner Network Television to rerun episodes of the David Carradine series, "Kung Fu" last produced in 1975 and the reappearance of Carradine's Kwai Chang Cain in the new television series "Kung-Fu: The Legend Continues." To the casual observer, these developments would seem to indicate a marked change in both the influence or status of Asians in Los Angeles over the past eighty years and in the pattern of modern East-West cultural exchange. They would be right, for it is a long journey from coolie shanty to City Hall. But the twentieth century is not the first time that Eastern Asia has had a visible impact on California.

In the century after the Pacific voyages of Magellan and Cano, Spain worked diligently to turn this vast body of water into a Spanish Lake, across which it could tap the Asian markets denied them by Portuguese control of the Indian Ocean routes to the East. The control of Polynesia and the conquest of the Philippines brought European influence where none had previously existed and enabled Spain to cement relations with both China and Japan established earlier via Africa and India.<sup>1</sup>

The impact of Spain's trans-Pacific trade in certain respects matched or exceeded the impact of the trans-Atlantic elements of the Columbian exchange. Rice increasingly became a delicacy for the rich as maize and the sweet potato imported to China via Manilla became the staple crop of much of the Chinese peasantry. Unlike rice, maize did not require irrigation and could thus bring into



cultivation otherwise barren regions.<sup>2</sup> China's population grew from 150 million to 450 million from the early Ch'ing to the nineteenth century at least partly because of these dietary changes. It should not be forgotten that the introduction of American maize and the potato into Europe had a similar effect. Of even greater possible impact upon China was the enormous amount of American silver Spain transported to China to support the purchase of Chinese goods the Iberians took by sail to Acapulco, portaged to Vera Cruz and shipped onward to Barcelona, Antwerp and Venice. Due to the Chinese effort to grab the silver ring of prosperity offered by the Spanish trade, the economy of southern China boomed, the merchant class grew and merchant townships appeared, offering unprecedented opportunities for social mobility, including opportunities for women, in the Chinese equivalent of European-style factories and mills that grew to meet the demands of trade. Beginning in 1571, more than 40 Chinese ships carried Chinese goods to Manilla in pursuit of what by 1821 amounted to one-third of the entire supply of silver taken from American mines during this period.<sup>3</sup>

As with its trans-Atlantic counterpart, the trans-Pacific branch of the Columbian exchange was not entirely beneficial to all parties. It must suffice here to say that the nexus of this trade, Manilla and its environs, experienced Western cultural imperialism no less devastating than that experienced by Tenochtitlan, while the massive influx of Spanish-American silver undermined the value of Chinese paper currency and the imperial government's control of the state economy, though full control of the Chinese economy remained in Chinese hands until the nineteenth century. Though the inflation that inevitably followed the prosperity stoked by the expansion of the trade in silver may have contributed to the fall of the Ming dynasty, China survived the subsequent boom and bust better than Spain and the

Ottoman empire, which rode the same economic tides to disaster.<sup>4</sup> For good or for ill, the Manilla trade ultimately hastened China's integration into a pattern of world trade that was changing the face of the global economy. The nature and pace of this process, if not its ultimate result, is today at the center of perhaps the liveliest of all debates in world history.<sup>5</sup>

The Manilla trade also had an impact on the world's artistic heritage. Today, China's place as the source of one of America's greatest trade imbalances, Japan's role as a leading investor, and the increasingly pervasive impact of 20th Century Asian migration to California noted above, have come to dominate most Californians' view of the impact of the trans-Pacific trade system. Yet, the close lay observer, the art historian, and historians of the Catholic Church, can identify influences whose origins pre-date Asian immigration and is centuries older than the Chinatowns, Little Japans and Little Koreas that dot the contemporary Californian urban landscape. As the settlement of California, both Alto and Baja, progressed and the Pacific galleon trade developed in scale, it was no longer the European market alone which was the final destination for Chinese products such as textiles, porcelains, silk and paper. A steadily growing amount of the galleon trade was diverted to the interior of Western Mexico, to the Pueblo de Los Angeles, to the growing port at Santa Barbara, to the capital, Monterey, and to all the mission stations in between. These goods carried a significance greater than most imports. They represented much of the few source elements of high culture available to the Californian settler elite and became models for local production entrusted to the hands of their Amerindian servants. In time, not only did California's haciendas fill with the treasures of Chinese art, so did its churches. Chinese silk textiles adopted for Church purposes and many church

pulpits have survived which feature stairs and balustrades crafted by Chinese artists. In fact, examples remain of Church decorations, furniture and liturgical implements of Chinese manufacture that bear Confucian motifs. A discerning eye will see that at least some of these designs have their origins in Spanish colonial and Amerindian folk adaptation of early modern Chinese ceramic designs brought across the Pacific, principally of that of the Ming and Ch'ing. So profound was this realization that recent exhibitions of Mexican art have featured entire sections which focussed on the local derivations of Ming and Ch'ing decorative arts and handicrafts.<sup>6</sup>

### The Georgia Connection

Students of the modern world respect the legacy of China for world history, but often consider its contributions slight after the emergence of modern Europe. They contend that, while before 1650 China was a teacher of Europe, afterwards it was Europe, initially through the good offices of the Jesuits, that became China's teacher. They maintain that it was in those sciences that most closely address the ordering of the universe, from astronomy to geography, that Europe first came to surpass China, and the rest followed. There is some truth in this contention, but it discounts the power and longevity of the round of contributions to Western thought China made between 1688 and 1773, the high period of Jesuit intercultural transmission. In 1688 the Jesuit Order presented the Pope with translations in European languages of over four hundred Chinese works of philosophy and literature. These works ultimately came to influence the cream of the European Enlightenment from Diderot to Spinoza, Goethe to Adam Smith, and Leibnitz to Voltaire.<sup>7</sup> The knowledge of China expressed in these works may have influenced the



construction of the most elegant city in Georgia. It certainly had a profound influence on the economy of Georgia and may have helped inspire, if only indirectly, the political order of that city and the state and nation of which that city came to be a part.

When James Oglethorpe secured a charter to create a British colony to the north of Spanish Florida, he sought a city plan suitable for his capital, Savannah. It appears that the plan he choose to follow was at least indirectly based upon the Chinese ideal form of urban design, the garden city built around urban squares.<sup>8</sup> This model, then so popular in London as to reshape much of the British capital, is thought to have been the Chinese city of Beijing and well it may be. Oglethorpe certainly had access to a map of that city.<sup>9</sup> He may have also had access, however, to maps of another Chinese city that in both its social and physical characteristics is a much closer match: the T'ang imperial capital of Ch'ang An which, in its heyday, was the world's largest and most cosmopolitan capital.

Ch'ang An was certainly an appropriate model for what Oglethorpe had in mind. He wished Savannah to be a trade entrepôt: Ch'ang An had been the eastern terminus of the trade routes linking China with central Asia and the lands beyond. Oglethorpe wished Savannah to be an administrative center: Chang An had been the place where the world's finest bureaucracy had been organized. Savannah was to be a cosmopolitan city where diverse settlers would feel at home: Ch'ang An had provided a home to religions as diverse as Buddhism and Judaism, and was an unsurpassed center of art and learning. Above all, Savannah was to be a garden city reflecting the order of the natural world out of which it was to be literally carved. Chinese urban models such as that provided by Ch'ang An may well have then appeared to Englishmen like

Oglethorpe to hold the secret of such a harmonious relationship, an appreciation expressed in the British Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew which were built upon Chinese prototypes.<sup>10</sup>

Beijing approximated Ch'ang An's urban grandeur and shared to some degree its predecessor's broad, tree-lined avenues and repeated residential squares and checkerboard design. It lacked, however, an essential element that Ch'ang An's design possessed and Oglethorpe sought for Savannah. Oglethorpe was determined to build a city that would be divided into socially egalitarian, but socially discreet, urban wards that would serve as independent community centers.<sup>11</sup> This was not characteristic of Beijing, but was a defining element of Ch'ang An's urban landscape: the wards in Ch'ang An were so self-contained that "two friends in adjacent wards might be able to see each other's homes but find it difficult to visit."<sup>12</sup>

Whether the founder of Savannah sought inspiration from the urban plans of Ch'ang An, Beijing or the London that was then being remodelled to match their collective characteristics, there seems little doubt that Oglethorpe looked to Chinese designs for the physical layout of his harmonious cosmopolitan garden city. He may have looked to the same source for the shape of the politics he wished the new city to reflect. Oglethorpe may have shared, with Adam Smith, Voltaire, Spinoza and Diderot, an appreciation of the orderliness and rationality of Chinese government, characteristics exemplified in its separation of church and state.<sup>13</sup> He certainly was sufficiently impressed by such ideas that he not only designed Savannah so that the houses of its inhabitants would be built and located to reflect the harmony in which he wished them to live, but he also designed the colony's governing compact so that its inhabitants would enjoy the freedom to think, communicate,

trade, and worship enjoyed in its Chinese predecessors. Oglethorpe's commitment to these values echoed that of T'ang China: he went so far as to defy his fellow Trustees' attempts to exclude Jews from Savannah, a gesture rewarded by the manifold contributions of Savannah's Jewish community to that city's growth and success in subsequent decades.<sup>14</sup>

Whatever its sources, the fruit of Oglethorpe's intentions can be measured by Georgia's status as a cradle of a major non-conformist religion, Methodism, as the birthplace of Martin Luther King, and by the state's current status as a major player in Asian-American trade. The latter is particularly noteworthy as Georgia's economy has benefitted from its Asian connection since colonial times. No sooner was the colony founded than Chinese mulberry trees and silk worms were imported and a silk industry begun (silkworms figured prominently on the common seal of the Georgia Colonial Board of Trustees). In 1740, Chinese soya beans were introduced into Eastern Georgia and remain a staple of the region's economy.<sup>15</sup> Today, Japan is, after Canada, the leading foreign investor in Georgia. The leavening of Chinese ideas of orderly, cosmopolitan government with the modern West's interpretations of its own classical democratic heritage, together with Asia's role in the world economy, may thus have left no small mark on the political heritage of Georgia, its trade patterns, its urban landscape, its economic past and, perhaps, its economic future.<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion

As the world moves toward a single market and, perhaps, a single culture, men and women will seek to identify the impact and place of their local traditions in the new and larger world order. Such identifications can act to



inhibit or even destroy the movement toward unity or they can help pave its way by focusing on the great degree to which the emerging global civilization is a product of intercultural exchange. The above discussion suggests that the impact of the Columbian Exchange and the place of China in the early modern period of world history can be properly understood only if the investigative vision is as broad as the scope of early modern trade itself, and that the perspective thereby offered will not only illuminate the rise of the West, but the enduring contributions of Chinese culture to the global civilization advanced by, if not inherent in, the world revolution of Westernization. In the resultant ecumenical vision of world history there is a place for both junks and galleons, conquistadors and comparadors, the mid-Atlantic Basin and the Pacific basin, and, ultimately, a festival of cultural heritages where all the inhabitants of a shrinking world can find meaning and validation.

#### NOTES

1. See O. H. K. Spate, *The Pacific Since Magellan*, Vol. 1, *The Spanish Lake* (Minneapolis, 1979).

2. Rhoads Murphey, *A History of Asia* (New York, 1992), 170.

3. Jiu-Hwa L. Upshur, et al., *World History* (New York, 1991), 444.

4. Peter N. Stearns, Michael Adas and Stuart Schwartz, *World Civilizations: The Global Experience* (New York, 1992), 653.

5. Andre Guder Frank, "The World Economic System in Asia Before European Hegemony," *The Historian* 56 (Winter 1994), 259-275.

6. For the influence of China on Mexican art, see John P. O'Neill, *Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries* (New York, 1990).

7. Upshur, 453.

8. See Kenneth Coleman, *Colonial Georgia--A History* (New York, 1976), 19-22.

9. Laura Palmer Bell, "A New Theory on the Plan of Savannah," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* (June 1964), 159-160 and Historic Savannah Foundation Inc., *Historic Savannah* (Savannah, 1968), 2.

10. Upshur, 453.

11. Coleman, 19-21.

12. Conrad Shirokauer, *A Brief History of Chinese and Japanese Civilizations* (New York, 1978), 110.

13. Ibid.

14. For the image of the colony as a "holy experiment" in egalitarianism and tolerance, see Kenneth Coleman, gen. ed., *A History of Georgia* (Athens, GA., 1977), 15-22.

15. Ibid., 21-22.

16. For further information regarding the place of China in the history of Georgia, see Jonathan Goldstein, ed., *Georgia's East Asian Connection: Into the Twentieth Century, Volume XXV, West Georgia College Studies in the Social Sciences* (Carrollton, GA., 1990).

Appendix  
Critical Response Exercises:  
"The Forgotten Dragon"

After reading the mini-lesson "The Forgotten Dragon," answer the following questions based on its contents:

1. Why has the history of Asia in the early modern period been neglected by Western writers?
2. What was the impact of the Spanish trans-Pacific trade on California?
3. What was the impact of the early modern Spanish trans-Pacific trade on China?
4. What was the impact of early modern European contact with China on Europe and the early modern world.
5. What early modern Chinese ideas may be embedded in the early history of Georgia?
6. What elements of Chinese culture did friends of the Enlightenment like James Oglethorpe most admire?
7. In what ways do California and Georgia still bear the imprint of their early relations with East Asia?