

FROM SILK TO OIL

Cross-Cultural Connections Along the Silk Roads

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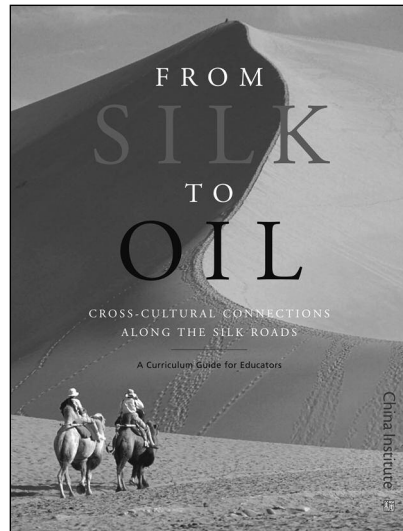
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The Silk Road, a series of interconnected trade routes linking the Far East with the Mediterranean, enabled cultural exchanges significant to the advancement of the greatest civilizations throughout Asia and Europe, and helped lead to the development of our modern world. Consequently, the cultural exchanges conducted along the Silk Road have had effects far greater than the over 5,000 miles that the routes cover. *From Silk to Oil*, a curriculum guide for educators, serves as a tool to facilitate student understanding of the routes' importance in cultural diffusion and in shaping our society.

From Silk to Oil, developed by the China Institute and funded by the US Department of Education, is directed toward teaching high school students, but can be adapted for both younger and older students. The guide begins in 1000 BCE and covers up to contemporary times, focusing on the global interconnectedness of East Asia, Central Asia, West Asia, and Europe. The guide, divided into two parts, is organized around five themes: Geography, Ethnic Relations and Political History, Exchange of Goods and Ideas, Religions, and Art. Part one includes five introductory essays, one on each of the five themes. Each essay has a corresponding unit in part two. Each thematic unit proceeds historically, enabling the study of change over time, and includes three to six lesson plans, each accompanied by supplementary materials. Also included in part two is a collection of maps and chronologies. Other materials appended to the guide are a glossary, a bibliography, biographies about essay authors and project directors, print and online resources, and a list of Asian-related outreach centers and museums.

From Silk to Oil understandably won the 2006 Franklin Buchanan Prize. The interdisciplinary nature of the guide and breadth of material make it suitable for a variety of social studies and humanities courses. The guide's conceptual and organizational approach enables it to be used for analytic comparisons of the diverse civilizations and cultures affected by the Silk Road, and suitable for history and culture courses taught thematically. While all of the units have excellent material relative to social studies courses (especially geography and history), many lessons include global literature excerpts. The most useful unit for literature teachers is unit four, which has lessons focusing on the Chinese epic *Journey to the West*,



folk tales about Buddha and Guanyin, and excerpts from the *Quran*. Excerpts from the drama *Autumn in the Palace of the Han* in unit five are also useful. Such lessons include story maps and other devices for interpreting literature and offer an excellent opportunity for history and literature teachers to develop interconnected curricula. In unit three, a lesson titled “East-West Exchange: Astronomy” offers an opportunity to connect his-

tory and science, while emphasizing global interconnectedness. Unit five, focusing on art, includes painting, pottery, sculpture, and architecture, and can be used for art history or to enrich curricula focusing on culture.

The greatest asset of *From Silk to Oil* is its flexibility. While the guide is designed to interweave its five themes, its components can function on a stand-alone basis. The introductory essays in part one make the guide self-contained. Teachers can use these essays instead of a textbook, to supplement a textbook, or for their own research. Furthermore, each unit can stand alone, and teachers, always under limitations in terms of how much material to cover, have the liberty to pick and choose. Unit four, in particular, contains introductory lessons on Buddhism and Islam that do not need to be used in conjunction with teaching about the Silk Roads. The supplementary materials in each unit, which include textual and visual documents (both primary and secondary sources), maps, charts, vocabulary exercises, DBQs (Document-Based Questions), and even a board game in unit one, can also stand alone. The lists of resources can be used for student projects. Consequently, teachers have a variety of ways to use the guide successfully in the classroom.

However, there is an inconsistency in the wealth of lessons and supplementary materials for each unit and suitability for instant classroom use. For example, not all documents have accompanying questions (notably in sub-units 2D, 3J, and 4Q), and while unit two has six lesson plans, unit one only has three. Still, such minor disappointments occur only because of the exceptional quality of the other units and sections.

The print version of *From Silk to Oil* includes a CD-ROM enabling the complete guide to be viewed as a PDF file. In addition, the guide can be downloaded free of charge from the China Institute's Web site, <http://www.chinainstitute.org/educators/silkguide.html>. ■

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