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Teaching about East Asia: Integrating East Asia into World Geography in 2008-2009 Narrative Introduction

Ravenwood High School is a six year-old public high school (Williamson County, TN) serving the cities of Brentwood and Nolensville. School enrollment is 1800 for the 2008-2009 school year, with 470 incoming freshmen. Almost 98% of students graduate, and most go on to college. One-third of students are in AP classes and a large percentage of students take Honors classes. The average ACT score is just under 24.

A significant percentage of Ravenwood's student population is international, i.e. many students were born in other countries or are first generation Americans. However, this variety translates but to a small portion of the usual populations of African Americans and Hispanic Americans; most "internationals" are truly from Asia, Europe, South America, and Africa.

These "international" students show great involvement in multi-cultural events and programs, including a club I sponsor, Model United Nations (YMCA). There is a distinct willingness (I say with pride and amazement) to work with others, regardless of the nation of origin.

Most freshmen take World Geography (13 classes; 3 teachers). Ravenwood High School is one of two public schools in Williamson County requiring World Geography (unfortunately, not a state requirement in Tennessee). In just two years I have been given the freedom to build a quality World Geography program reaching most freshmen. We believe we have the largest high school World Geography program in Tennessee.

All three World Geography teachers at Ravenwood are world travelers and intensely intrigued by other cultures and perspectives. I am traveling to Turkey this summer, and another World Geography teacher is traveling to Korea (both of these are educator study tours, in which we were selected from a pool of applicants). We are keenly interested in the concept of perspectives on the ways in which we live in different cultures and the various ways people perceive the world. This is a key and guiding principle in our teaching of World Geography.

It is the belief of our World Geography section that understanding these differing world perspectives will also help remove inaccurate perceptions, myths, stereotypes, and prejudices about other cultures. How? When students place themselves “in the shoes” of others, they tend to more highly regard the lives of others and understand their decision-making processes, their experiences, and their culture, especially in light of their national history, geography, traditions, and beliefs.

A Chronological Narrative on Effective Integration of East Asia Into Ravenwood High School World Geography

From the “get-go” Ravenwood World Geography students hear about Asia. Why? Two of three teachers have either traveled or lived in Asia. For me, I lived in Japan as a child for three years. The impact on my life was-and is-significant; I grew up with a unique perspective on nature, environment, other cultures, and an acceptance of the ways of life of others. I also have a deep respect and love for the East Asian culture, especially Japan-it is unshakeable!

On Day 2 of my classes I actually challenge students with the concept of “perspective” by asking them to share their images of Asia. By using vocabulary, pictures, and stereotypes, I seek to unravel misconceptions in their understanding-and even prejudice-about Asia and Asians. Here one of two main branches of geography comes into play-with this focus on Human Geography (Physical Geography being the other main branch).

In the first seven weeks students encounter the basics of geography. When we deal with environmental issues, I introduce the Three Rivers Gorge Dam as an example of the challenges facing our world ecology: How do we balance economic need with environmental responsibility? Students will study this dam and make their own choices as to the impacts, challenges, and possibilities of this huge endeavor.

Transitioning to climate and weather, we survey the increasing changes in these areas. Of particular note is the North Pole: What will happen if the polar ice cap melts significantly or altogether? Will this enhance trade from East Asia to the rest of the world with the disappearance of the ice cap and the subsequent establishment of new trade routes across the “top of the world”?

Weathering and erosion are two huge forces that shape geography and geology. Recent examples are abundant in China of the effects of earthquakes and subsequent erosion, including the creation of a huge lake that threatened the lives and safety of others. Students will study the development of this temporary lake, how it was controlled, and what processes of erosion affected villages and the countryside of this devastated part of China.

Population trends, especially increases, are certainly a major factor in East Asia, especially China. While China grows, even with restrictions on childbearing, Japan continues to decline in population. Students will study what problems China faces with a growing population. They will also learn of the unusual decline in population in Japan and how the Japanese might cope with future economic growth paired with a declining labor force.

Religion is a huge aspect of geography. In my own life I have always had a more unique and distinct “bent” as a Christian. While not worshipping nature as some religions do, including Shinto, I have a rich and deep appreciation for the God who made this wonderful Creation. That has not always been understood by my fellow Christians, including during my years in seminary and ministry. However, earthly stewardship must be an aspect of our lives; to live otherwise is to disrespect the God who made this planet.

With this in mind, the geography of religion plays a huge role in determining the lifestyles, destinies, policies, and even economy of many nations. With East Asia, students will learn about the tremendous impact of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Dao in China, and the impact of these religions and Shinto in Japan. They will also discover the unique growth of Christianity in South Korea. How did this growth happen in South Korea, but not Japan? How can two nations so close to each other geographically and historically develop such different religions? How has religion played such a significant part in East Asia?

As we move to a study of economic systems, students will learn that modern China fits no clearly-defined textbook model. Is it capitalistic? Communist? What is modern China? And how do the rich nations of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan fit into this China? What roles do trade and natural resources have in the development of the huge wealth now in East Asia? Students will study economic patterns, resources, and technology to determine the answers.

As we move through our geographical tour of the world, many comparisons of what other nations we study will be made to the “powerhouses” of East Asia. How will other emerging nations meet their own energy needs, when Asia is soaking up and demanding so much of that market? How will goods be exchanged and traded fairly and equitably with East Asia? How will pollution and environmental issues in East Asia affect the rest of the world? How will Japan’s huge demand for fish and the growing threat of over fishing affect the needs of other nations? What will these countries do to supply their own natural resource needs?

As we begin after Christmas to study the mega-continent of Asia-and specifically the study of East Asia-deliberate attention will be given to the histories that have shaped this important part of the world. Particular attention will be paid to the differences in these cultures and the struggles Westerners have in distinguishing those differences. There is chagrin on my part that prejudice and stereotypes often rule the day in our perceptions of Asia. These will be dissected and studied-and challenged. I succeed as a teacher when students encounter the truth and adjust their world perspective to that discovery!

Students will learn of the historic impact of Perry’s visit upon Japan and Japan’s emergence, rather quickly, into a world power. The unique nature of Japan’s physical geography (tectonic forces) will give students an idea of the shortage of some natural resources, such as oil and coal, and the desperation Japanese felt in its need for such resources in the 20th century. It was “take” then; today it is trade. Why the change? What happened? How did the U.S. occupation of Japan shape modern Japan?

(In anticipation of our study of Japan in the spring, I have recruited Emily Winckler from the Japanese Consulate to address an assembly of all geography students).

The impact and significance of East Asia will flourish in World Geography and be a major reference and study point throughout the year. At last East Asia will get its due worth in the study of World Geography!