

Pedagogical Approaches and Strategies for Teaching Asia

Donovan C. Chau, PhD

Dong Man Kim, PhD, Department of Accounting and Finance
California State University, San Bernardino

Introduction

Asia today is the center of tremendous growth. With the continued rise of China and the influential roles of Japan and South Korea in international affairs, it is no wonder that the 21st century has been dubbed the Asian century. Outside of these influential political actors, one also sees the growing political significance of Southeast Asia in world affairs, led by the city-state of Singapore and by Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim state. While there is much to be hopeful for across the region, potential conflicts are also latent, from disputed islands off the eastern shores of the Asian continent to the unresolved strategic challenge on the Korean Peninsula. Asia, truly, is a central region of international affairs today, politically and militarily.

California State University, San Bernardino offers three major courses related to Asian cultures:

- Humanities 328, Asian Cultural Traditions: offered twice per academic year as a General Education course with 160-180 students enrolling;
- Finance 355, Business And Asian Culture: offered once per academic year as an elective with 15-25 students enrolling; and
- Finance 555, Trade And Business in Asia: offered once per academic year as an elective with 15-25 students enrolling.

A fourth class, "East Asian Politics" (PSCI 305), is one of the elective political science courses within the subfield of comparative politics. It has been taught three times at CSUSB, with approximately 35 students per course.

As Asian economic and political presence becomes even more globally conspicuous, international awareness of Asia will continue to grow.

Problems and Challenges

Throughout the United States, there is an abundant diversity in the population of students in terms of their level of knowledge about Asian cultures. The student body can be divided into three very broad categories:

1. American-born American students or students from non-Asian cultural backgrounds who have never traveled to Asia and never been widely exposed to Asian culture;
2. Asian-American students who have been indirectly exposed to Asian culture through their parents; and
3. International students from Asian countries (China, Korea, Taiwan, and other Asian countries)

The question then becomes, how do we avoid potential cultural stereotyping? Students may develop cultural stereotyping from what might be the norms in one culture but seem foreign and nonsensical in others. In teaching cultural classes, it is essential to

emphasize that there are varieties and differences within one culture, and each has frequent exceptions to acceptable behaviors and practices.

Another challenge in teaching these topics is timing. Quite simply, there are too many topics to be covered within relatively a short time (a 10-week quarter). It is impossible to cover all Asian countries and to cover all aspects of the culture of a chosen country in an introductory Asian culture course due to class time limit and the limits of 10 weeks in one quarter.

Best Practices

“East Asian Politics” (PSCI 305) is one of the elective political science courses within the subfield of comparative politics. It has been taught three times at CSUSB, with approximately 35 students per course. Approached from a multidisciplinary perspective, including history, geography, and politics, the seminar offers an introductory overview of East Asian politics, focusing on significant countries in the region, analyzing domestic and foreign politics, and examining the policies and actions of nation-states within the region. Countries of study include Japan, Indonesia, China, Taiwan, Singapore, North Korea, South Korea, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Vietnam. Because of the expansive nature of the course content within the ten-week academic quarter system, the objective is to provide a breadth of knowledge and understanding about East Asia and its politics so students learn to comprehend and discuss politics in contemporary East Asia.

To overcome the challenge of the breadth of subject matter as well as the general lack of knowledge or experience about East Asia amongst the student body, the seminar seeks to engage students from a fundamental level, geographically and historically. From the first day of class, students are exposed to maps of East Asia, regional and country-specific. A different East Asian country is examined each week of the academic quarter, with discussions of the country’s geography, history, politics, society, and political leadership (see attached sample chronology for an example of history). Students are also given the opportunity to present on current affairs of countries within the region. By actively involving the students in the learning of the region, students become interested in a place quite foreign to them.

An alternative practice is to only select the most important topics to be covered in class. For example, in Asian Cultural Traditions class, four countries are selected to cover in this class based on economic size and similarity of culture among four Far East countries (China, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan). Within those four countries, certain topics are carefully selected that would make students understand the most relevant and practical aspects of their cultures. These topics include: Religions and Philosophies, verbal and Non-verbal communication, business etiquettes, dining etiquettes, gift giving etiquettes, modern histories of their industrialization, and main characteristics and values of their culture.

The practice of studying Asian culture by country allows teachers the chance to compare and contrast similarities and differences among the nations of Asia. Students who have never been exposed to Asian culture have a tendency to regard all Asian culture is the same. By studying each country by topic, instructors can explain differences in their language structure and phonetics and written characters among countries. Examples of culture and values among Asian nations can further help to compare and contrast each country and people, especially in such a diverse geographical area.

Once the countries and topics of the classes have been determined, instructors should next provide numerous examples. The more interaction students have with these

examples, the more they incorporate the practices and better understand the culture. For example, students can practice how to introduce others and how to be introduced, how to present and receive name cards, how to bow, how to be seated and remain seated, and other behaviors in class.

Students have also responded well to real stories associated with each culture. Instructors who provide stories and histories, both good and bad, saw a marked rise in understanding of cultural differences among students. Learning history, especially modern history, helped students to understand cultures of each country. Any culture is the result of accumulated customs for a long period time. Studying history might be the best way to understand any culture, and the studying of modern history helps students understand the current issues of a country. Since culture also affects the modernization process of a society and nation, cultural understanding deepens students' perceptions of foreign countries.

Detailed handouts in classes also proved useful in student retention of the most important aspect of other cultures. Dr. Kim provides about six pages of handouts per each class, and students' reactions to these handouts have always been positive.

For PSCI 305 class, students are assessed according to two quizzes, a midterm examination, a paper, and a final examination, in addition to regular class participation and attendance. Each in-class assessment includes a base map of East Asia (see attached) which requires identification of specific countries and capitals. Students are also assessed according to their conceptual knowledge of East Asia, from states and institutions to individuals, identities, and parties. Students are afforded the opportunity to focus on a specific country of study for their individual papers, which calls for deeper historical and political research and understanding. Taken together, PSCI 305 aims to expose, assess, and, ultimately, teach students about the politics of East Asia, past and present.

Reflection and Implications

Overall, from the three iterations of teaching "East Asian Politics," it appears that students appreciate the breadth of subject matter covered and the fundamental approach taken to teach the material. They come away with substantially more knowledge than they entered the course. For example, while students complain early on in the quarter about map identification exercises, by quarter's end they have learned the importance of geography to the region. Furthermore, the importance of specific dates and history to the politics of East Asia is understood. Indeed, students generally master these fundamentals – geography and history of individual countries and the region – better than some of the conceptual aspects of the politics of East Asia. The latter is a focal point of improvement for future classes. Teaching about the states and institutions as well as individuals, identities, and parties of East Asia is a daunting challenge, but with more examples, including enhanced use of new media, and hands-on in-class simulations, students may more effectively grasp the comparative politics of East Asia in its entirety.

Teaching about the politics of East Asia is an important undertaking today. Capturing a breadth of subject matter beyond the traditional focus on China, South Korea, and China, is a difficult challenge. By focusing on the fundamental aspects of geography and history, however, one may expand the students' knowledge and understanding of the region to include a broader spectrum of nations and peoples. A multidisciplinary approach is also the most effective one, even for a seminar like "East Asian Politics," a comparative politics course within the political science discipline. Theories of comparative politics and political science are still incomplete when studying the world of international politics. Thus, when attempting to educate students about East Asian politics, it is

best to focus on what is most enduring, that is, the geography and history of the countries, specifically, and the region, as a whole.

References

Huang, Xiaoming. *Politics in Pacific Asia: An Introduction*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

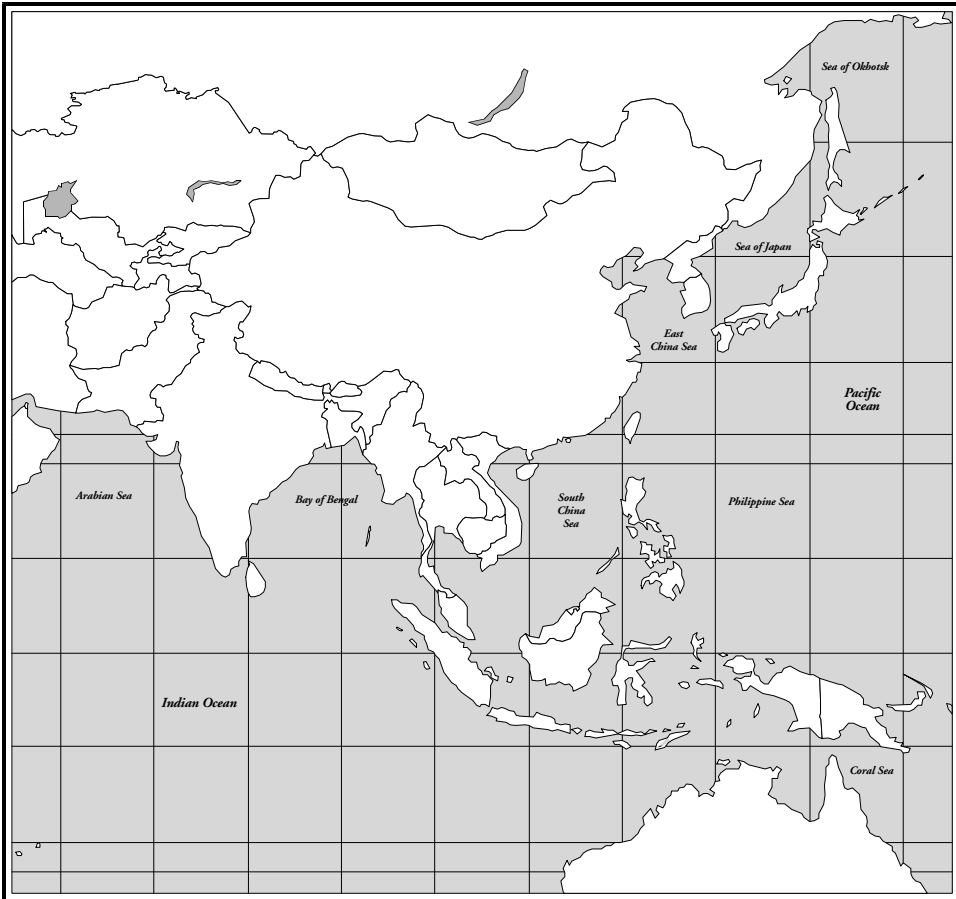
Appendices

See attached base map of East Asia and sample chronology of China

History (1)

- 2000-1500 BC Chinese civilization begins
- 221 BC Unification under the Qin Dynasty
- 206 BC – 9 AD Han ethnic group and culture develop
- 1644-1911 Chinese culture flourishes under Qing Dynasty
- 1839-1862 Opium Wars result in unequal trade agreements
- 1899 Chinese rebel against foreigners; Boxer Uprising
- 1912 Republic of China replaces Qing Dynasty
- 1915-1928 Kuomintang (KMT) rises during warlord era
- 1921 Formation of Chinese Communist Party (July 1)
- 1931 Japan invades and sets up state in Manchuria

EAST ASIA



Produced by the Cartographic Research Lab
University of Alabama