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2025 Mongolian Summer Institute

The Silk Road's Role in Spreading Buddhism to Mongolia

Class
6th Grade Social Studies

Standards
1. Language Standards:
   a. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.7 Integrate visual information (e.g., in … photographs, texts, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts.
2. Content Standards:
   a. 6.5.5. - Know the life and moral teachings of Buddha and how Buddhism spread in India, …, and Central Asia.
   b. 7.3.1 - Describe … reasons for the spread of Buddhism…
   c. 7.3.4 - Understand the importance of … overland trade … in the Mongol Ascendency

Organizing Questions
1. How did the Silk Road facilitate the movement of goods and ideas?
2. How did Buddhism change as it traveled along the Silk Road?
3. What factors shaped the unique development of Mongolian Buddhism?

Introduction
After reading, analyzing, and discussing primary and secondary sources on the development of Buddhism in India, students should have a foundational understanding of this faith. Students should also have an understanding of the importance of trade to historical populations, and its connection to the transmission of ideas and beliefs. This lesson will focus specifically on the role of the Silk Road in facilitating the spread of Buddhism, specifically to Central Asia and Mongolia.

The main goal of this lesson is to guide students through the function and purpose of the Silk Road and its transformative role as a vehicle for the spread of ideas and beliefs. Students will complete two hands-on activities to deepen their contextual understanding. Students will also examine the topic in a student-led discussion, centered on their questions, connections, and observations.

Please note: This lesson is designed to support a case study of Mongolian Buddhism, in connection to a wider comparative world religions unit that focuses on four world religions developed in the ancient period: Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, and Christianity.

Objectives
1. Review and affirm the role of Silk Road trade routes

2. Apply knowledge of Buddhism to the spread of these beliefs to Central Asia, specifically historical Mongolia
3. Use different text sets (maps, photographs, text) to increase understanding of Buddhist teachings in relation to historical and modern Mongolia
4. Provide discussion time/space for students to share their thoughts on this topic with minimal teacher intervention.

Materials

1. *Prior to class:* Assigned reading homework (TCI Online Textbook, Lesson 24, Section 4: The Silk Road, Cultural Exchanges and the Silk Road)
2. *Students responsible for:* Student notebooks and student folders (to take independent notes and care for handouts)
3. Silk Road map handouts, 1 copy per student
4. Variety of highlighters, sufficient quantities for the whole class, with at least three different colors (students can share)
5. Silk Road Telephone Activity placards with selected phrases
6. "3, 2, 1" reflection half sheets, 1 copy per student

Equipment

1. Computer, with appropriate PowerPoint
2. Projector
3. Speakers

Teacher Preparation

1. Preload the PowerPoint and video/audio
2. Make sure visual and audio equipment is working correctly
3. Prepare Silk Road map handouts so they can be easily disseminated to students
4. Prepare "3, 2, 1" reflection half sheets so they can be easily disseminated to students

Time

One 50-minute class period, plus additional homework time to prepare for class discussion.

Procedures

1. Check-in & Homework Review/Debrief (~5 minutes) - *Slides 1-7*
   a. *Slides 3-6* - Set a timer for two minutes and have student groups of 3-4 students review the reading homework. Encourage them to identify the following:
      i. Any notable vocabulary terms
      ii. Questions about ideas from the reading
      iii. Connections to previously taught concepts and ideas
   b. *Slide 7* - Give the whole class an opportunity to share what students discussed within their small groups. Encourage them to record notable vocabulary, questions, or connections as independent notes. These can be helpful for the discussion later in class.

2. Whole Class Activity: Silk Road Map (~10 minutes) - *Slides 8-11*
    a. *Slide 8* - Have student volunteers pass out Silk Road map handouts and highlighters.
    b. *Slides 9 & 10* - Instruct students to use three different color highlighters to mark each route type represented on the map - land, maritime, steppe
        a. Have students make a key on the map that identifies which route type is represented by each color
    c. *Slide 11* - Encourage student identification of what items could traded along different route types of the Silk Road, with the final item being ideas (including religious ones)

3. Whole Class Activity: Silk Road Telephone (~15-20 minutes) - *Slides 12-23*
    a. Objective: Students will have three rounds to play and simulate the spreading of ideas without documentation (with the goal of guiding students to a consensus that having shared written documents would be most effective to transmit ideas over distances).
        i. Ideas/phrases for this activity are derived from a well known Mongolian legend/ folklore story that can be found in full at the end of this document.
    b. *Slides 13 & 14* - Review steps of the activity with students before beginning, allowing for student questions for clarity and understanding.
        a. Students stand in a circle around the classroom with space between them (so they can't hear one another easily). They must whisper their phrases to the other person by going physically to them and the receiving student can't move until they've confirmed they understood the phrase.
    c. *Slide 16* - Round One: One student (at the 12 O'Clock position) is given a phrase placard by the teacher. They read the phrase and, when ready, give the placard back to the teacher. They can then repeat the phrase they memorized to the peer to their left (going clockwise), with the goal of transmitting the idea accurately. This proceeds through the entire class and the final student reveals what they received.
    d. *Slides 17 & 18* - Round Two: Two students (at the 3 & 9 O'Clock positions) are given a phrase placard each and they both share their phrases at the same time to the peer to their left, with the goal of transmitting both ideas accurately. This proceeds through the entire class and the final students (2 & 8 O'Clock positions) reveal what they received.
    e. Have students quickly take a seat and have a brief discussion. Based on the first two rounds, what would help make the memorized phrases more consistent as they travel across distances, especially as more and more ideas are added?
        i. Students should identify that having a common understanding or shared knowledge of the phrases would make it easier to share these ideas consistently.
    f. Share with students the origin story of these phrases:
        i. Say: "Before we move on to Round Three, I'm going to give you some context for where these phrases come from and it's connection to Mongolia. These phrases are from a common folk tale called "Why the Camel Rolls in the Ashes," and it is a story that directly relates to the Mongolian Astrological Calendar.
        ii. *Slide 19* - Modern Buddhist scholar, Tsem Rinpoche, notes on his website that the image on the left is: "This colorfully illustrated handwritten book is part of a collection at NLM (National Library of Medicine in Maryland) of about fifty

manuscripts from Mongolia, many of them dealing with astrology, astronomy, and divination from a Buddhist perspective. Prominent among the subjects divined about are health and wellness. This particular manuscript is full of charts and diagrams that astrologers, generally Buddhist monks, would use to calculate auspicious times to do certain things, such as depart on a trip or remove a dead body from a dwelling."

iii. In the folk tale, the Buddha is responsible for selecting the creatures that represent each astrological month and he is down to the final month but he has two creatures left to choose from: the mouse and the camel. Buddha tells them that the first one to see the following day's sunrise would be the final creature on the astrological calendar. The mouse and camel head out to a flat plain to await the sunrise and the mouse asks the camel if it can climb onto one of its humps so it can see better, facing east. The camel lets it onto its hump and turns to face east, and sure enough the mouse sees the sunrise first because it is higher up. The camel gets very angry and the mouse scampers off, diving into a pile of firewood next to a dead fire. The camel stomps all over the wood and rolls around in the ashes, attempting to crush the mouse, but the mouse escapes and receives its reward from the Buddha, thus leaving the camel out of the astrological calendar."

g. *Slide 20* - The story with the phrases are displayed on the board for all students to read. The teacher reads the first part on the screen aloud and then students are given time to read the listed phrases below. They should realize, upon reading, that the phrases are the same phrases they've been attempting to share in the game. Students should give a thumbs up to the teacher as a signal they are ready to play the final round. Instruct students to quickly return to the circle for the final round.

h. *Slide 21* - Round Three: Two students (at the 11 & 5 O'Clock positions) are given a phrase placard each and they both share their phrases at the same time to the peer to their left, with the goal of transmitting both ideas accurately. This proceeds through the entire class and the final students (10 & 4 O'Clock positions) reveal what they received.

i. *Slides 22 & 23* - Have students quickly take a seat and have a short activity debrief. What did students notice between Round 2 and Round 3?

   i. Students should identify that knowing the story the phrases came from beforehand and seeing the text made it easier to retain the phrases because they had context for the phrases.

j. Transition with student observations into class discussion.

4. Class Discussion: Role of the Silk Road in spreading Buddhism (~10 minutes) - *Slides 24-31*

   a. *Slide 24* - Have a student volunteer read the discussion question for the class and instruct them to write it down in their notebooks for reference

   b. *Slides 25-27* - Give students two minutes to independently review the reading and their notes and record what they would like to contribute to the class discussion.

   c. *Slides 28 & 29* - Briefly review class discussion guidelines and expectations (visually, but can be done verbally if necessary).

      i. Encourage students to use their independent notes during the discussion.

ii. Remind students to back up their thinking with evidence from the text or from the Silk Road Telephone activity.

d. *Slide 30* - Begin with a connecting question to the activity: “How could ideas, like Buddhism, spread consistently to places far from India along the Silk Road?”
e. Allow students to independently discuss this questions with very limited teacher involvement or intervention. Students should be encouraged to “follow” their questions, connections, and ideas until discussion has ended.
f. Teacher can set a timer or keep an eye on the clock and end the discussion after ~10 minutes.
g. *Slide 31* - Debrief the discussion with students and have student volunteers share one of the following:
    i. Something the class did well during the discussion
    ii. Something the class can continue to improve upon during the next discussion
    iii. A shout-out for something that came out of the discussion (an idea, a connection, a question)

5. Lesson Reflection/ Assessment: “3, 2, 1” (~5 minutes) - *Slides 32-34*
    a. *Slide 32* - Have student volunteers pass out "3, 2, 1” Reflection half-sheets and instruct students to complete the half-sheets as a way of reflection and assessment. The
        i. 3 summarizing points from the day’s lesson
        ii. 2 new concepts that you didn’t know prior to the lesson that you want to explore further
        iii. 1 question from the day’s lesson that you would like to ask in a future discussion
    b. Have students record their homework for the subsequent class in their planners.
    c. Collect the students’ responses as they leave class.

Assessment

1. “3, 2, 1” Reflection half-sheet

<u>TCI History Alive: The Ancient World</u> Excerpt
Lesson 24: The Silk Road, Section 4: Cultural Exchanges and the Silk Road

4. Cultural Exchanges and the Silk Road

The trade between East and West along the Silk Road created cultural diffusion, in which ideas and knowledge—as well as goods—spread from one culture to another. For example, China and Rome did not merely trade new products with each other. In time, they learned how to make these products for themselves. By 500 C.E., the Chinese had learned how to make glass. About the same time, the West had learned how to produce silk. Such cultural diffusion occurs in many cultures, past and present, and in many different ways.

Diets, gardening, and agriculture also changed as trade introduced new plants into different areas. For example, China imported many new foods and spices. Among them were grapes, cucumbers, figs, pomegranates, walnuts, chives, sesame, and coriander. The West imported oranges, peaches, pears, and different kinds of flowers, including roses, chrysanthemums, azaleas, peonies, and camellias.

The Silk Road also helped spread Buddhist beliefs. Buddhism had its origins in India. Because the Silk Road passed through many different nations, religious travelers, including missionaries, using the route shared their teachings.

The spread of Buddhism is a good example of how cultural diffusion takes place. Buddhism was introduced to China around the middle of the first century C.E. Some Chinese Buddhists journeyed on foot across Central Asia to India to learn more about their new religion. They returned to China with copies of sacred Buddhist texts. Buddhism would eventually become a major religion in China.

<u>Mongolian Folktales and Legends</u> Excerpt, Translation into English by D. Altangerel
"Why The Camel Rolls in the Ashes"

A great many years ago, the Buddha began assigning an animal to each of the years of the twelve-year Mongolian calendar. When he had finished assigning eleven animals, the Buddha paused to consider which animal should be allotted the twelfth and final year. On hearing this, the camel and the mouse, neither of whom had been selected, rushed to see the Buddha. Bowing respectfully before the Great Sage, each presented himself as a worthy candidate. The Buddha listened in silence as each animal argued his case.

When the elaborate pleas came to an end, the wise Buddha, not wishing to offend either of the eager and equally deserving animals, quietly told the camel and the mouse that they would have to resolve the matter themselves in a friendly and honest way.

The big camel and the tiny mouse, after much discussion and debate, finally agreed that they would settle the issue with a contest. The first to see the light of the new morning sun the very next day would be the winner, and the winner would enter the twelve-year Mongolian calendar for all time.

That night, in the darkness, in the middle of a wide, open plain, the camel took up a position facing East. The mouse, who had asked the camel if he could sit on his hump, fixed his

eyes in a faraway mountain to the West. Eyes propped wide open, the two anxious contestants settled down to wait for the critical moment.

At dawn, when the great fiery ball began its slow ascent, one thin early ray glanced off the snowy western mountaintop. The mouse squealed out:

"There is it! I see the sun! I win!"

"What?" cried the camel, who knew that the sun rose in the East. "Why, you little sneak! You've cheated! You'll pay for this!

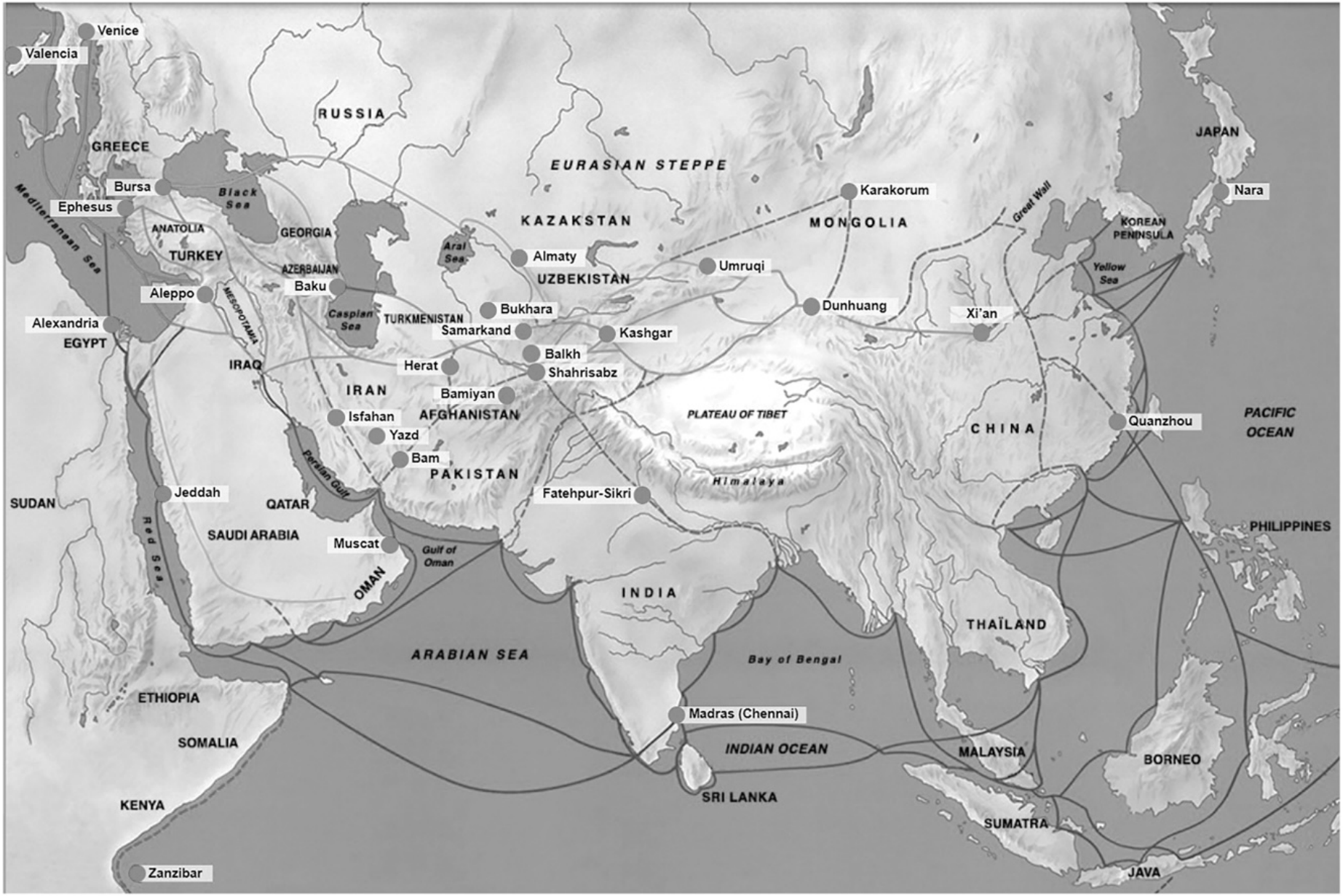
As the terrified mouse scurried down the camel's hump to seek safety in a nearby pile of ashes, the camel charged after him. He threw his heavy body on the ground, and rolled back and forth on the ash pile, hoping to crush the mouse with his weight. The camel didn't squash the mouse that time, but he's certain that one day he will. Whenever he spies a pile of ashes, he thinks the mouse must be hiding inside. He snorts, stamps his feet, then lies down and rolls around and around, trying to flatten his tricky little foe.

So it happened that the little mouse entered the twelve-year Mongolian calendar while the big camel was excluded. Feeling sorry for the camel, the wise Buddha told him gently that he would never be forgotten. No, in fact that camel would be his represented in the Mongolian calendar by possessing one feature of each of the twelve different animals.

If you look carefully at the camel, you will see that the Buddha has kept His word, because the camel has:

the ears of the Mouse
the stomach of the Cow
the paws of the Tiger
the nose of the Hare
the body of the Dragon
the eyes of the Snake
the mane of the Horse
the wool of the Sheep
the hump of the Ape
the head-crest of the Rooster
the crooked back-legs of the Dog
and the tail of the Pig.

Silk Road map *(source: De Gruyter Brill)*



"3, 2, 1" Reflection half-sheet

Name: _____ Date: _____ Class: _____

Directions: Answer the following questions clearly and hand this in to your teacher before you leave class.

- **3** summarizing points from the day's lesson

- **2** new concepts that you didn't know prior to the lesson that you want to explore further

- **1** question from the day's lesson that you would like to ask in a future discussion

Silk Road Telephone - Four phrase placards

Round One (turquoise placard):

the nose of the Hare

the mane of the Horse

the hump of the Ape

Round Two (both yellow placards):

the ears of the Mouse

the eyes of the Snake

the crooked back-legs of the Dog

the stomach of the Cow

the paws of the Tiger

the head-crest of the Rooster

Round Three (green placard):

the body of the Dragon

the wool of the Sheep

the tail of the Pig