Overview

Any teacher of World History or Human Geography knows that Buddhism is one of the major “world religions.” We often teach of Buddhism’s origins in India, the historical Buddha’s enlightenment and his basic teachings, but how did Buddhism become a global religion? While this brief lesson cannot answer that question completely, a closer look at Buddhism on the Silk Road will elucidate part of the story.

In particular, this lesson will investigate Buddhism on the Silk Road through the experience of one important vehicle of Buddhist teaching, a traveling monk named Xuanzang.

The primary narrative of Xuanzang for students in this lesson will come from Stewart Gordon’s *When Asia Was the World*. Chapter 1 is a profile of the traveling monk. By Studying Xuanzang’s journey, one learns three salient points about Buddhism in the 7th century: Buddhism had (1) a pilgrimage tradition that Xuanzang follows to India, (2) a political network (he is protected by kings who are Buddhist or sympathetic to Buddhism), and (3) monasteries functioning as an infrastructure that promoted trade.

By the end of the lesson, students should know more about Xuanzang - an important figure in Buddhism and Asian culture – and understand that Buddhism was both diffused on and by the Silk Road while also promoting trade on the Silk Road. Students will demonstrate this knowledge in an expository essay.

**The essential questions of this lesson:** How did Buddhism evolve from a regional religion near the foothills of the Himalayas to a “world religion?” What does Xuanzang’s journey teach us about Buddhism’s diffusion across Asia? What factors caused Buddhism to spread across the Silk Road?

**Recommended Grade Level or Course Placement**

This lesson is most appropriate for secondary school World History or Human Geography. In order to complete the essay assignment, students will need the skills of close reading and text-based writing.

**Recommended Time Allotment for Instruction**

This lesson is geared for about one week of reading and instruction. The study of terms should take one class period. The next three classes can be used to teach three main historical points in the reading. The final class will be used for text-based writing. The Supplemental Resources section should provide educators guidance if they wish to expand the lesson into multiple weeks of study. In particular, the books *The Silk Road Journey with Xuanzang* by Sally Hovey Wriggins and *Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Road* by Johan Elverskog could be used for additional class discussions or writing assignments.

**Objectives**

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Knowledge – Students will:

- Identify evidence of a pilgrimage tradition in 7th century Buddhism
- Identify examples of a Buddhist political network along the Silk Road
- Discover the role played by Buddhist monasteries in promoting trade on the Silk Road

Attitude – Students will:

- Appreciate the role of religion in human movement, political alliances, and trade
- Appreciate the stories of Xuanzang, which remains popular in contemporary Asian culture

Skills – Students will:

- Speak and write confidently about Asian history of the 7th century

Materials/Resources Needed

Vocabulary lists and a primary source documents such as *When Asia Was the World* by Stewart Gordon and *The Silk Road Journey with Xuanzang* by Sally Hovey Wriggins

Vocabulary

**Expansion Diffusion** – the spread of a good or idea outward while remaining strong in its hearth

**Hearth** – place of origin of the good or idea

**Relocation Diffusion** – the spread of a good or idea in which the good or idea moves from a hearth to a new location. This type of diffusion is usually caused by migration.

Instructional Procedures

This lesson should arise in the context of a larger unit on regional interactions and specifically Buddhism and/or the Silk Road. Prior to the beginning of the first class, students are asked to read chapter 1 of Stewart Gordon’s *When Asia Was the World*. It should go without saying that the teacher must carefully read chapter 1 as well.

The first activity takes less than one class period. Present the concepts of expansion diffusion and relocation diffusion. Ask the students to generate examples of each and record their responses on **Handout 1**. Fashion provides a ubiquitous, contemporary example of expansion diffusion. Most fashion trends – shoes or hairstyles – remain in their place of origin but also spread to surrounding regions (contagious diffusion) or to early adopters (hierarchical diffusion). Smartphones and other new technologies have spread this way. On the other hand, relocation diffusion involves a good or idea leaving its hearth. Relocation diffusion often takes place through migration. Examples of diaspora often include a group of people taking customs with them as they collectively leave their place of common origin.
After defining these terms, ask the students which term describes the diffusion of Buddhism across Asia. This point is necessary to answer the essential question: how did Buddhism spread across the Silk Road and evolve into a world religion? Buddhism spreads by expansion diffusion in that it remains present in India but spreads to East Asia. The teacher should also help students to see that this form of expansion diffusion is more hierarchical than contagious. In other words, Buddhism spreads to certain people – kings, their subjects, and the monks described in our text – rather than to everyone surrounding the hearth. At the same time, Buddhism becomes a more dominant religion in East Asia than it does in its Indian hearth, which resembles an example of relocation diffusion. In the end, the students should be able to explain the significance of both terms in this example of Buddhism’s spread across Asia. Students will demonstrate understanding when they can explain the variety of ways that Buddhism spread.

Once the teacher has assessed a clear understanding of the various forms of cultural diffusion, the class will turn to a close reading of Stewart Gordon’s chapter. This reading is organized around three points. First, Buddhism had a pilgrimage tradition that Xuanzang follows to India. According to Gordon:

Xuanzang “made up his mind to travel to the West in order to clear his doubts” and bring back crucial books from India, the center of Buddhism. It says much about the continuity of monastic tradition in his day that Xuanzang knew he was not the first to make such a quest and opted to follow the path of Fa Xien and Zhi Yan, who had ventured to India in similar searches two centuries earlier. Several other monks in later centuries would make the same trip” (Gordon 6).

There are a few points about this paragraph to underscore for one’s students. First of all, India – as the “center of Buddhism” - is an important place, drawing monks from across Asia back to the hearth of their religious practice. The reason for Xuanzang’s desire to travel - to “clear his doubts” - is summarized in Gordon’s previous paragraph. Gordon explains that Buddhism in China in the 7th century included many diverse teachings, most of which were dependent on the particular Buddhist teachers (6). Xuanzang was seeking the original teachings of the Buddha and therefore found it necessary to visit the place of the teachings’ origin. The importance of the place, the hearth of Buddhism, is the catalyst for a pilgrimage tradition that was practiced and recorded by other monks and provided Xuanzang a route to follow.

Second, Buddhism has a political network, which is evidenced in the stories of Xuanzang receiving the protection of kings who are Buddhists or sympathetic to Buddhism. For example, Gordon writes:

Less than 200 miles west of Lanzhou, Xuanzang reached a Buddhist monastery in an independent kingdom located along the caravan route on the southern rim of the Gobi Desert. Although politically independent, King Qu-wentai had traveled to the court of the dynasty that preceded the Tang and had heard lectures on Buddhism in monasteries. His own country supported several hundred monks. The king knew how to honor a learned Buddhist monk from China (8).

To assist Xuanzang on the continuation of his journey, he received from King Qu-wentai “twenty-four letters of introduction to kingdoms on his route,” further evidence of Buddhism’s political network. In addition to Buddhism’s political role in Asia, its monasteries also played a role in promoting business.

Third, Buddhist monasteries served as part of the infrastructure for trade on the Silk Road. According to Gordon, “Wherever Buddhism flourished, traders were prominent patrons of shrines and monasteries. One incarnation of the Buddha, the compassionate Avalokiteshvara, became a kind of patron saint of
traders and travelers” (15). Returning to the concept of cultural diffusion, the monasteries connected traders who would become early adopters of Buddhism along the Silk Road. In her book *The Silk Road Journey with Xuanzang*, Sally Hovey Wriggins writes, “It was from monasteries […] that the teachings of Buddhism radiated from India as far as China, a country that was enlightened by the new religion in much the same way as northern Europe had received the teachings of Christianity from the monasteries of Ireland” (20).² They also served as spaces for religious contemplation, community, and scholarship.

Furthermore, Gordon maintains, “Buddhism made the king and his Buddhist subjects joint supporters of the spiritual work of monks and monasteries but gave the king great status and merit as the largest endower” (15). Students may recognize that current fashion and cutting-edge technology are status symbols today. For kings and traders of the 7th century, supporting Buddhist monasteries was good for business and reputation. The Silk Road promoted the spread of Buddhism as it was promoting itself, its infrastructure of trade. As trade grew and the Silk Road network expanded, cultural and religious diffusion expanded as well. Through the Silk Road’s Buddhist monasteries, political and trade networks, and pilgrimage tradition, Buddhism spread from its hearth in India and developed as a regional religion.

**The Essay Assignment:** What factor(s) caused Buddhism to spread across the Silk Road? Choose one of the three factors influencing Buddhism’s spread – pilgrimage tradition, political network, trade infrastructure – and discuss further in the context of a short, informative essay. This assignment should also encourage the students to read carefully and cite evidence directly from the sources.

For additional source material, read chapters of *The Silk Road Journey with Xuanzang* by Sally Hovey Wriggins, which describe Xuanzang’s encounter with various kings, oases, and monasteries. As students read these chapters, they should highlight examples of cultural diffusion, pilgrimage tradition, political alliances, and trade in the text.

Students will be evaluated for their ability to explain how Buddhism spread along the Silk Road and whether they can apply the concepts of this lesson to their close reading of the chapter by Stewart Gordon or additional chapters from Sally Hovey Wriggins’ book.

**Citations/Bibliography**


**Supplemental Resources**


1. Define the term “expansion diffusion” in your own words citing one contemporary example.

2. Define the term “relocation diffusion” in your own words citing one contemporary example.

3. Is the spread of Buddhism from its hearth across the Asian continent an example of expansion or relocation diffusion? Explain by citing examples from Stewart Gordon’s *When Asia Was the World.*