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Foundations of Eastern Civilization

Course Guidebook

Professor Craig G. Benjamin
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PUBLISHED BY:

THE GREAT COURSES
Corporate Headquarters
4840 Westfields Boulevard, Suite 500
Chantilly, Virginia 20151-2299
Phone: 1-800-832-2412
Fax: 703-378-3819
www.thegreatcourses.com

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Printed in the United States of America

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Professor Craig G. Benjamin is Associate Professor of History in the Frederik Meijer Honors College at Grand Valley State University (GVSU), where he teaches East Asian civilization, big history, ancient Central Asian history, and historiography to students at all levels,

from freshmen to graduates. Professor Benjamin received his undergraduate education at The Australian National University in Canberra and Macquarie University in Sydney. In 2003, he was awarded his Ph.D. in Ancient History from Macquarie University for his dissertation on the migration of the Yuezhi, an ancient Central Asian nomadic confederation, and its impact on the establishment of the Silk Roads. In that same year, Professor Benjamin moved to the United States to take a position at GVSU in western Michigan, where he has taught ever since.

For the past six years, Professor Benjamin has taught a two-semester course on East Asian civilization in the Honors College at GVSU. He has also received several awards for teaching, including the 2012 Faculty of Distinction Award from Omicron Delta Kappa Society (a national leadership honor society) and the 2009 Student Award for Faculty Excellence from the GVSU Student Senate.

Professor Benjamin's primary research interest is in ancient Central Asia, specifically the relationship between the great nomadic confederations, such as the Scythians/Saka, Yuezhi, and Xiongnu, and the major civilizations of the period, including Han China and the Roman Empire. He is also involved with teaching and researching big history, a relatively new field that examines the past on the largest possible timescale, from the origins of the universe to the present day. Professor Benjamin has written more than 30 published papers, articles, and book chapters. He is the author of *The Yuezhi: Origin, Migration and the Conquest of Northern Bactria* and *Readings in the*

Historiography of World History and coauthor (with David Christian and Cynthia Stokes Brown) of *Big History: Between Nothing and Everything*. Professor Benjamin has coedited several volumes in the Brepols Silk Road Studies series and is editor of the *Cambridge History of the World*, volume 4, *A World with States, Empires, and Networks, 1200 BCE–900 CE*.

Professor Benjamin is vice-president (and president-elect) of the World History Association and treasurer of the International Big History Association. He is also a consultant for The College Board and a member of the SAT® World History Subject Committee and the Advanced Placement World History Development Committee. In addition to his many professional activities, Professor Benjamin has been featured on The History Channel. Before taking up an academic career, he was a professional musician and jazz educator for 25 years in Australia, playing flute and saxophone. In addition to pursuing his academic and musical interests, Professor Benjamin has spent much of his life hiking and climbing in the great mountain ranges of the world. ■

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

Professor Biography	i
Course Scope	1

LECTURE GUIDES

LECTURE 1

Journey to the East.....	4
--------------------------	---

LECTURE 2

Yin and Yang—The Geography of China	12
---	----

LECTURE 3

Early China and the Mysterious Xia	19
--	----

LECTURE 4

The Coming of the Shang.....	26
------------------------------	----

LECTURE 5

The Shang and Writing for the Gods	33
--	----

LECTURE 6

The Zhou and the Mandate of Heaven.....	40
---	----

LECTURE 7

Great Ideas of the Zhou—Confucianism	47
--	----

LECTURE 8

Great Ideas of the Zhou—Later Confucianism	54
--	----

LECTURE 9

Great Ideas of the Zhou—Daoism.....	61
-------------------------------------	----

Table of Contents

LECTURE 10	
Great Ideas of the Zhou—Legalism.....	68
LECTURE 11	
The Qin and the First Emperor of China.....	75
LECTURE 12	
Contact with the West—The Early Han	82
LECTURE 13	
Triumph and Tragedy—The Later Han.....	89
LECTURE 14	
Silk Roads—In the Footsteps of Nomads	96
LECTURE 15	
Silk Roads—The Envoy Zhang Qian.....	104
LECTURE 16	
Silk Roads—Perils of Camels and Caravans	111
LECTURE 17	
Silk Roads—Rome and Roads from the West	118
LECTURE 18	
Silk Roads—The Lost Kushan Empire	125
LECTURE 19	
Origins of Buddhism	132
LECTURE 20	
The Age of Disunity	140
LECTURE 21	
The Great Taizong and the Rise of the Tang	147

Table of Contents

LECTURE 22

Changan and the Glittering Tang 154

LECTURE 23

Korea—Mysterious Beginnings 162

LECTURE 24

Korea—The Land of Morning Calm 169

LECTURE 25

Korea—The Unified Silla 176

LECTURE 26

Korea—The Koryo 183

LECTURE 27

Japan—Geography and Early Cultures 190

LECTURE 28

Japan—Treasures of the Tomb Period 197

LECTURE 29

Japan—Nara and the Great Eastern Temple 204

LECTURE 30

Japan—The World of the Heian 211

LECTURE 31

Southeast Asia—Vietnam 218

LECTURE 32

Southeast Asia—Indian and Islamic Influences 225

LECTURE 33

The Industrial Revolution of the Song 232

Table of Contents

LECTURE 34	
Intellectual and Cultural Life of the Song.....	239
LECTURE 35	
The Mongols Conquer the World.....	247
LECTURE 36	
Shaking the Foundation—Mongols in the East	254
LECTURE 37	
The Rise of the Ming	262
LECTURE 38	
Great Treasure Fleets of the Ming.....	269
LECTURE 39	
The Qing—Nomads Return from the North.....	276
LECTURE 40	
The Qing—The Last Emperor of China.....	283
LECTURE 41	
Korea Choson—Rise of the <i>Yangban</i>	290
LECTURE 42	
Korea Choson—The Last Dynasty.....	298
LECTURE 43	
Medieval Japan—Samurai and Shoguns	305
LECTURE 44	
Tokugawa and Meiji Japan	313
LECTURE 45	
The People's Republic of China	320

Table of Contents

LECTURE 46

Isolation and Cold War Conflicts327

LECTURE 47

The Rise of the East Asian Tigers334

LECTURE 48

The Enduring Ideas of Eastern Civilization.....342

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Bibliography.....349

Foundations of Eastern Civilization

Scope:

Much has been written about the foundations of Western civilization, from Greek and Roman antiquity through to the present day. Yet Eastern civilizations have also played a significant role in shaping our world, and to truly understand the modern world, it is essential to know something about the many extraordinary contributions Eastern civilization has made. Gaining this knowledge is even more imperative given the incredible dynamism of that region today. East Asia is home to two of the world's top three economies and about 22 percent of the world's population—it matters! As the process of globalization brings our world ever closer together, the foundational ideas of both Eastern and Western civilization are becoming more and more interwoven. Simply put, it is no longer enough to know just the “Western half” of the story; both Eastern and Western are critical to understanding our present and our future.

This course focuses on the history and core foundational achievements of the major cultures and regions of the Eastern Hemisphere, especially China, Japan, Korea, and Southeast Asia. It examines the origins and development of the philosophy, science, religion, economics, politics, and social life of these important cultures and measures their influence on other Eastern states, as well as their legacy to the contemporary world. One of the questions we will pursue throughout the course is: How did these nations build on their ancient roots to develop into such successful modern societies? To seek an answer, we must go back to the very beginning of Eastern civilization.

We begin our exploration in China with a consideration of the diverse geography of this, the third-largest nation on earth. We follow Chinese history and culture over thousands of years, from the migration of early foraging humans into the region to the appearance of the first sedentary agricultural communities. It is in the shadowy transition of these early communities into full-blown city-states and, eventually, imperial dynasties that we see the origins of cultural and philosophical ideas that evolved into the core foundational elements of Eastern civilization.

We follow the evolution of the Chinese dynasties and their fundamental political and philosophical ideas—such as the mandate of heaven, Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism—from the first Xia dynasty through the Shang, Zhou, Qin, Han, and Tang. We also look at the Silk Roads in this section of the course, tracing connections that developed among Rome, India, the steppe-nomadic world, and East Asia that led to extraordinary levels of cultural exchange. Perhaps the most significant of these exchanges was the spread of Buddhism into China and East Asia, because this Indian spiritual philosophy quickly became another of the core foundational elements of Eastern civilization.

In the next part of the course, we explore the history and cultural development of three other Eastern regions: Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia. Despite the powerful influence of China, these societies constructed their own fascinating and unique cultural traditions. We begin with the arrival of early human migrants into the Korean Peninsula and Japanese Archipelago and use the findings of archaeologists to tease out the origins of core cultural ideas that appeared in both regions. We then trace their evolution through to the fascinating Three Kingdoms and Silla periods in Korea and the sophisticated Nara and Heian periods in Japan. In Southeast Asia, we explore the long and complex relationship between China and Vietnam, which resulted in a rich blending of original and imported practices, and we follow the diffusion of Hinduism and Islam into Southeast Asia, which helped shape the extraordinary societies we see in the region today.

After this, we return to China under the creative and economically powerful Song dynasty, before the Mongols arrived to temporarily disrupt the flow of Eastern civilization. The Ming and Qing attempted to restore traditional Chinese cultural practices but were forced to do so in the face of an expansionist West. As China loses sovereignty to Western powers, we return to Korea and Japan to follow their complex relationship with each other—and the rest of the world—into the 20th century.

In the final four lectures of the course, we return to the question of how these nations built on their ancient roots to develop into such successful modern societies. And we ask how many of these foundational ideas still resonate in modern East Asia today. This course unfolds a 10,000-year-long story of

triumph and tragedy without parallel in world history—a story of emperors and peasants, princesses and concubines, Confucians and Legalists, Daoists and Buddhists, camels and silkworms, revolutions, war and peace. We have much to explore, many fascinating people and ideas to encounter, and many historical and cultural threads to follow as we tease out the core elements of Eastern civilization and consider their role in the making of the modern world. ■