**Unsovereign Space**

0.0 – Module Lesson Plan

This module is part of the History for the 21st Century project (H21). History for the 21st Century is a collaborative project designed to serve students in introductory college history courses and their instructors. Together, we build, assess, and progressively improve free, online educative, enquiry-based curriculum. You can find out more about H21 by visiting <https://www.history21.com/> .

**Module Overview**

Welcome to Unsovereign Space. This is a thematic History 21 module that examines understandings of space, as well as claims, negotiations, and ways humans have attempted to share space across time. Historical case-studies focus on early modern Chinese, Portuguese, and Dutch conceptualizations of space in the Indian Ocean, negotiations in Southeast Asia between Siam and Britain during the era of 19th century imperialism, and the history and present of debates about outer space, cyber space, and earth and the climate.

The module includes four lessons, and is guided by the following key questions:

1. How have humans imagined, understood, and claimed space in the past? How have those ideas changed or remained the same today?
2. In the twenty-first century, when humanity faces mounting pressures on terrestrial and maritime spaces, as well as the resources contained in or below those spaces due to a changing climate and growing population, and when new spaces, like outer space and cyber space, complicate our calculus… How can lessons from the past help inspire solutions for the future?

By the end of the module, students should be able to identify different ways of thinking about and negotiating space across time, the ways access and uses of space can reflect and reinforce inequalities, and reflect on potential ways to circumvent barriers people face accessing and using spaces in order to create a more equitable future.

Because the module is designed for a world history survey, it covers a broad range of material in a relatively short span. This can feel disorienting for instructor and student alike, especially when many unfamiliar names and concepts appear. Remind students that it is okay if they don’t remember specific places or people. The people and events are there to bring the material to life, but they will fade from memory over time. The lessons about understanding, passing through, occupying, and sharing space will hopefully last longer. We live in a time of diminishing and deteriorating territorial and maritime space mirrored by expanding virtual and extraterrestrial space, and it is very important that we reflect upon and remain cognizant of our relationship with these spaces.

Each lesson is designed to build on one another, but they can also be used as self-contained topics for your class. Though they draw primarily from examples in Asia and the United States, as a global history, you can also adapt the module to make connections with other places around the world.

**Module Map**

**Lesson 1: Introduction to Sovereignty and Space**

Lesson 1 introduces students to the module, and aims to challenge our engrained understanding of space and the naturalization of the nation-state system and borders. Students consider how crossing certain borders is different from crossing others, why borders exist, and what impacts they can have. The goal of the first day is to start imagining things differently, so that students can better grasp historical conceptualizations of space. Students are also introduced to the module plan.

**Lesson 2: Ordering and Controlling Space in the Indian Ocean**

The first historical case-study explores two competing “systems” of inter-state interaction and spatial management in Asia while previewing a third system pioneered by the Dutch that would eventually merge with and supplant those other systems. You may opt to divide the lesson into one session on Portugal and China, and one session on the Dutch and the *mare liberum-mare clausum* debate. The overarching goal of this episode is to help students appreciate the impermanence and arbitrariness of the current system of nation-states by showing how people and polities interacted in the past, and to introduce the concept of space and show how space has been subject to interpretation and deliberation.

For the most part, students will probably come with a “European-Age-of-Exploration” mindset to the lesson, so it is important to subtly undercut that perspective by telling the story of Melaka and the Indian Ocean from different vantage points. The account from the *Ming Shilu* offers an instructive counterpoint, though it still represents a Chinese perspective rather than a Melakan perspective. The readings by Grotius and Selden will likely be difficult for students to follow at first, but don’t underestimate what students can do. These readings represent an alternative viewpoint to the *carreira* and tributary systems, but they contain many of the same ideas. The comparison helps to highlight the ways that Portugal, China, and the Dutch operated on different systems, but that those systems all required universal buy-in to function as intended. It also shows how each compromised on their “systems” because they lived in a multipolar world, illustrating further that humans had very different ways of imagining, controlling, occupying, and passing through space in the past.

**Lesson 3: Mapping and Claiming Space in Southeast Asia**

The next lesson explores how the territorializing impulse of empire subsumed and coopted the previously coexisting “systems” of inter-state interactions. It interrogates the idea of “frontiers,” and highlights the role of treaty-makers, mythmakers, and cartographers in establishing imperial power, while also exploring how people in Siam leverage these same tools, at times to assimilate Mons, Khmers, and other peoples into their newly established nation. Students will examine a series of Anglo-Siamese treaties and identify common stipulations like the most-favored-nation clause and extraterritoriality and trace subtle changes over time. Students will also have an opportunity to draft an imagined fourth Anglo-Siamese Treaty, and interrogate maps, as well as the arguments maps make. The main objective of this lesson is to show how seemingly neutral or innocuous tools, like cartography, treaty-making, and mythmaking, played critical roles in establishing imperial power and shaping humanity’s relationship with space.

**Lesson 4: Sharing Space on Earth, in Outer Space, and Cyber Space**

The final lesson in this module takes students to brand new spaces, but students should be able to draw from lessons learned in previous episodes to understand some of the basic dynamics of these spaces. It is important to stress to students that the past can be a guide, but it should not bind us to a certain path or future. Students will examine past concerns and negotiations attempting to regulate outer space and use these to identify commonalities and differences in sharing cyber space and earth and the climate. They can also engage in a student-led discussion on the internet as well as consider solutions to the challenges of sharing and preserving spaces in the twenty-first century.

Students often bring a lot of, but uneven, background knowledge to these topics. Folks with engineering or scientific backgrounds will probably know quite a bit about the internet and outer space, and this is the perfect chance for them to leverage that knowledge and shine in class. Classes tend to work best when everyone can be a teacher. The overarching goal of this episode is to apply lessons from the past to better understand the present while appreciating differences and new challenges that we face that have little historical precedent but incredible influence on our lives.