

WHG Asian History Lesson: Exploring the Changing Names of Cities

Part 1: Introduction of Concept of Place Changing Place Names

Start by showing the lyrics video to the song "Istanbul not Constantinople"
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ALKjA1t8ibQ>).

Question for class: What two cities with changed names are named in the song?

Answers: Constantinople became Istanbul, New Amsterdam became New York

Question for class: The song hints as to why the name was changed in one case. Did you catch it?

Answer: "That's nobody's business but the Turks."

Question for class: What does that mean?

Answer: The place known as Istanbul has had a number of names over time. The city was founded in 657 B.C.E. and was called Byzantium. It later became a part of the Roman Empire and the Emperor Constantine decided to make it his new capital, the second Rome. In 330 CE the place started to be called Constantinople. In 1453 Ottoman forces, led by Mehmed II, took over Constantinople and it became the capital of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman Empire collapsed after World War I, partially due to the Ottoman Empire being on the losing side of the war. During the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Greeks and Turkish fought a war of independence. Turkey officially gained its independence in 1923 and the capital was moved to Ankara. In 1930, Turkish officials renamed Constantinople Istanbul, which was a name by which it had been informally known for a long time.

Question: Do you understand the pattern for New Amsterdam?

Answer: The British changed the name to New York after taking it over from the Dutch.

Part 2: Introducing and Using the WHG to explore changing place names in Asia

As you can see from the two examples in the song, place names have a habit of changing. In this lesson, you are going to use the web based resource the World Historical Gazetteer (<http://whgazetteer.org/>) to explore changing place names in Asia. You will be given a list of 10 historic place names, many of them capital cities. You probably have heard of their modern version but don't know that the modern cities were once called these other names.

Use the WHG to look up these historic place names and connect them with their modern variants. Using your knowledge of Asian history, come up with an educated guess as to why this place had one name in one time period and another in a different time period.

Old Name	Modern Name	Modern Country	Reason for Change	Year of Name Change
Astana	Nur-Sultan	Kazakhstan	Named in honor of post-Soviet leader Nursultan Nazarbayev upon his resignation as president	2019
Saigon	Ho Chi Minh City	Vietnam	Renamed after Vietnam War	1976
Edo	Tokyo	Japan	Becoming new imperial capital after Meiji Restoration	1868
Bombay	Mumbai	India	End association with British Raj	1995
Rangoon	Yangon	Myanmar	Name changes from Burma to Myanmar by military government	1989
Frunze	Bishkek	Kyrgyzstan	Name change after post-Soviet collapse	1991
Peking	Beijing	China	Northern Capital, pinyin Romanization	Internationally in 1979
Canton	Guangzhou	China	Never actually named Canton, but this name used in postal romanization by the Portuguese	1918
Fort Sandeman	Zhob	Pakistan	End association with British	1976

			colonial rule	
Heijō	Pyongyang	North Korea	WWII and the end of Japanese occupation	Approximately 1946
Kyōngju	Gyeongju	South Korea	Introduction of the Revised Romanization of Korean in place of the McCune–Reischauer system	2000
Fort Zeelandia	Tainan	Taiwan	End of Dutch Colonial Rule	1661

Alternatives: add countries in as well as cities, i.e. Siam to Thailand, Ceylon to Sri Lanka

After 15 or 20 minutes of student work with the WHG, the teacher then goes through the answers with the students and explains the context.

Part 3: What Else Can You Learn about a Place in the WHG

Look at Beijing, see how many things it has been called over time

Look at what traces are there about Beijing

See the different links on the Beijing page, out to Wiki or TGN, etc. See how we can use linked data to learn more about a place

Part 4: Exploring Multiple Uses of the Same Name

Type Beijing into the WHG and see how many places over time have been called Beijing. Why is that the case?

Look up the etymology of Beijing and that it means “Northern Capital.” So there have been different northern capitals in China over time.

As a comparison, look at the current Beijing. How many other things has that city been called over time?

Can you think of another name that has been used in different places around the world?

Take 5 or 10 minutes to see if you can find some other names for places that have been repeated around the world.

Possible others: Alexandria, Antioch, Moscow, Paris, London, etc.

Additional Exercises: Place Oriented

Pick a city of your interest, for example Beijing. Click on Beijing in the search results to open up the Beijing page. In the map window that appears on the new page about Beijing, turn on the optional layers (the layer button in the upper right hand corner of the map): rivers, watersheds, and ecoregions. What can you discover about your city and its history in relation to these environmental features.

Alternatively, click the “nearby places” toggle that is located just above the top right hand corner of the map to see up to 300 nearby places. What does that tell you about your place in question? Do you recognize other important cities? Is it potentially part of a network of those cities? Is it isolated? Do those cities do anything that complement or compete with your city of choice?

Additional Exercises: Trace Oriented

The WHG emphasizes different names that places have been called over time. However, the WHG also wants to emphasize that history happens in places and that places are connected. We use another feature called traces to examine how history has played out over space and time. We consider a trace to be any sort of historical phenomena, including people, events, archaeological and museum objects, texts, art works, and so on.

On the main page, toggle the button above the search bar from “places” to “traces.” Type in “Buddha” to see two sample traces that intersect. One is the lifepath of Gautama Buddha and the other is the travels of Xuanzang, a Buddhist pilgrim on the Silk Road. How did one inspire the other? What places were in common between these two individuals?

Additional Exercises: Leaving Asia

The WHG is still a work in progress. It features broad but shallow coverage of the world with a handful of deep dives into particular regions and periods of history. One of our original, deep scholarly contributions is from HGIS de las Indias, which covers Spanish colonialism in North and South America. You could create similar place exercises for Spanish colonialism and the renaming of indigenous places.

There is also currently a sample trace for Cortes and his conquest of the Aztec empire. A trace exercise could be to identify which places he conquered became key sites for Spain’s colonial empire, or which places are key sites for contemporary Mexican history.

Alternatively, students could be asked to study name changing on any other continent and see if they can find five or ten examples on other continents following similar themes from the Asian examples: colonial powers exerting their domination by renaming places, new regimes reverting to older names or new names to celebrate independence after colonialism or denounce a previous regime, renaming after war, etc. These could be targeted in the context of a specific war, nation, continent, or empire.

Homework

A supplemental homework assignment could be for the students to write short biographies of one or two cities of their choosing following the Istanbul example with outside research. Or, they could make it a larger project where they have to look up and summarize this information for the ten locations.