

Exploring Medieval European Society with Chess: An Engaging Activity for the World History Classroom

Chess is not merely an idle amusement. Several very valuable qualities of the mind, useful in the course of human life, are to be acquired or strengthened by it, so as to become habits, ready on all occasions.

Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790)

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IN A TYPICAL HIGH SCHOOL World History course, the teacher must teach thousands of years of human history in one year, thus making it the most comprehensive history course offered in school. Given the extended content requirements in a World History course, individual topics are given little time before the class must “move on” to the next topic. It should be of no surprise that teaching a unit about medieval Europe offers students little opportunity to engage with content, other than “Name that Monarch” and a brief overview of feudalism. The “cover the content” approach to teaching World History requires students to be passive learners of the curriculum. For the unfortunate students involved in this type of learning environment, the World History experience is underwhelming and boring.

Effectively teaching World History requires that teachers foster a learning environment that is challenging, interactive, engaging, meaningful, and relevant for the learner. Infusing a game activity into the curriculum offers a way to create a highly interactive and engaging learning environment while supporting meaningful content acquisition. The purpose of this article is to help educators explore the strategy of using the game of chess in the World History classroom. More specifically, it provides educators with a classroom-tested lesson activity for teaching medieval European society content using the game of chess by providing background information on the history of chess, a rationale for including chess in the classroom, and step-by-step procedures to infuse this activity when the topic of feudalism is covered.

A Brief History of Chess

While the game of chess is closely associated with European culture, it is important to note that it is not a European invention. Most of the literature indicates that chess originated in Northern India around 600 C.E., very near the ancient trade routes linking Europe and the Far East. Most of the pieces that are familiar to chess players around the world today were not originally included. There was no queen next to the king; rather, there was a male advisor. Instead of a bishop, there was an elephant that could only move one space at a time. As the game moved west into Europe via Persian traders and Moors over the next several hundred years, it consequently evolved into the manifestation that we know today. The king's advisor became his queen. Christian-dominated European culture installed the bishop over the elephant, and infantry was exchanged for the idea of a lowly pawn. While the pieces had taken on the modern identities by 1100 C.E., it was not until the late Middle Ages that the rules of chess dramatically shifted to resemble the modern game. It was at that time the queen gained her power on the board, the bishops were able to move unlimited spaces diagonally, and game-play intensified, requiring fast-paced, thoughtful implementation of strategy.¹ It is interesting to note how well this massive change of rules corresponds to the reality of late medieval life. It was a time when the Church firmly solidified power with kings over continental Europe and many queens held powerful advisory positions on their husbands' courts. This era also marks the peak of the game's popularity, almost certainly due to excitingly fast play as a result of the new rules and its acceptance by the Catholic Church after a long period of consternation.²

By the 16th century, normalization of the rules allowed for tournament play, the development of chess theory, and modern chess notation. Technological progress allowed for the mass production of chessboards, making the game more widely available to an emerging middle class in Europe. By the late 19th century, international governing bodies for the game had been created in the United States and several other European nations. Then, in 1924, the World Chess Federation was founded to become the world's largest chess association. Thus, modern chess became accessible and attainable to the masses.³

Why Use Chess in the Classroom?

Over the last 600 years, chess has always remained a thinking person's game. It has been associated with the development of critical thinking skills, logic, and increased student achievement on high-stakes tests. The idea that chess and related games can be used as educational tools is

not new. *The Book of the Morals of Men and the Duties of Nobles and Commoners, on the Game of Chess*, a widely read 13th-century text by Jacobus de Cessolis, used an analysis of the game of chess as a metaphor regarding how medieval society should organize itself to maximize civic stability and order.⁴ Board games have been used to teach character education in western culture for at least 150 years.⁵ Additionally, research by Rifner and Feldhusen suggested that chess could be harnessed in the school setting to enrich and enhance the critical thinking skills.⁶ Increasingly relevant in the age of high-stakes testing, Liptrap explained that chess players significantly outperformed non-chess players on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) test.⁷

Ralph Hall articulated a much more interesting and broad-based rationale for using chess in the classroom setting. He argued that chess teaches students to play by the rules and to replace luck with deliberate decision making. Most importantly, he explained that chess play is intrinsically motivating for students as a learning activity. He claimed that game play was a source of satisfaction when successful, positing that games are useful tools to get students to want to learn.⁸ Hall was not alone in arguing that games are a stimulus for student motivation to learn. Malone as well as Bowman contended that technologically advanced games also seemed to indicate a higher propensity for student motivation to learn. Student data from the sample indicated that they focused on the flow of playing the educational games rather the content itself. Essentially, the students forgot they were learning and just did so by playing the game.⁹

As the idea of using games has become more accepted for classroom use, research examining their effect on student motivation has increased. Much of the current trend of research focusing on this phenomenon spotlights electronic games, but remains relevant to the discussion. Within the last decade, it has been proposed that games are inherently motivating to learn with because players learn by actively engaging with concepts and content. Speaking specifically of video games, Squire argues that game players learn by doing rather than by passive reading or listening to lecture.¹⁰ Active learning with games allows players to take on the roles of game play, requiring players to inhabit immersive, first-person perspectives.¹¹ It does not matter if the game is a high-tech video game or low-tech board game; players have access to new identities. Many scholars have theorized that these highly personalized and immersive experiences are highly engaging, addictively fun, and extremely motivating to learn with.¹²

Thus, the utilization of games, specifically chess, should be incorporated into the social studies classroom. Best practices in social studies teaching call for students to have access to content in context; active learning with engaging lessons and analysis of complex open-ended problems. With a

little creativity, chess can be effectively incorporated into a World History classroom and can inspire students to think logically about the game and the content.

Teaching Methodology

This lesson activity was tested in a 9th grade World History classroom at large, urban, public high school in Florida. The lesson is deemed appropriate for middle and secondary students. This lesson is formatted into four segments and can be easily adapted to fit standard or block scheduling. This lesson activity was constructed to supplement existing instructional practices and resources for teaching about late medieval society in Europe. As such, the instructional material using chess would be added to and infused within the compressed unit traditionally allotted to teach feudalism in Medieval Europe required in a comprehensive high school World History course. Its primary focus is the exploration, examination, and evaluation of social structures within European Society during the High to Late Middle Ages. Specifically, the lesson concentrates on issues of social justice, inequality, and relationships amongst the feudal classes.

For the first two segments of instruction, students will have access to chess game play with little more than a brief introduction and basic rules to start. During this time, students will be charged with keeping logs of their movements and be asked to analyze if different pieces have more power and importance than others. In segment three, traditional pedagogical methods to instruct students regarding feudal society are introduced, and the provided chess-specific content should be infused with existing content. By doing so, students will have a tangible frame of reference to understand the differences in societal position based upon class. They will understand the inequities between the peasant class and noble class based upon their knowledge and experience between pawn and queen movement from game play. Finally, segment four calls for a chess-specific culminating activity to supplement evaluation by requiring students to “rewrite” the rules of chess to decrease piece inequity while maintaining orderly game play as well as to evaluate the positive and negative effects of social class inequalities during the Middle Ages while asking if the feudal system had any positive impacts on European Society. Each segment relates to one or more NCSS standards in the teaching of history (see Figure 1).

Role of the Teacher

For the initial phase of the lesson, the teacher acts as technical advisor for students regarding the basic rules and strategies of game

**National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies
and Essential Question relating to Lesson**

Standard I: Culture

Students understand the effect the societal-wide influences have on culture.

Standard II: Time, Continuity, and Change

Students understand the development of the human experience and their place in time.

Standard IV: Individual Development and Identity

How do students come to understand the world in which they live and their role in it?

Standard V: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

What roles do various institutions play in the lives of individuals?

Standard VI: Power, Authority, and Governance

Students understand the historical development of how power and authority to govern evolved.

Standard X: Civic Ideals and Practice

Students understand the unique role of individual participation in democratic societies.

Essential Question:

Did the feudal system bring justifiable order or abject inequality to Europe during the Middle Ages?

Figure 1: Selected NCSS Standards and Essential Question

play. In my experience, the majority of secondary students have some experience with chess. However, it would serve the students well if the teacher is well acclimated to the rules and basic strategies of chess play via personal chess play. Several online sites offer the opportunity to play for free. A teacher need not be an expert chess player for students to successfully engage in this lesson. A good grasp of the rules and a clear conceptual understanding of European societal norms are all that it is necessary.

Segment One: Content Introduction and Game Orientation

Begin by having students brainstorm in small groups words or images that they associate with the game of chess. Students usually associate chess with images of the pieces (e.g., king, queen, horse) or the social stigma of chess being only for smart people (which it is not). Have student groups

share with the class and record student ideas in a large word web for all students to see. Follow up by stating that kings and queens (royalty) have come from nearly every past culture of the globe and ask them if they associate African, Asian, or South American kings and queens or European nobility with chess in their minds. Invariably, they are drawn to images tinged with European culture. Explain to students the history behind the game of chess from its beginnings in Ancient India and the long course of its evolution in European-based culture. Announce that, since the apex of the game's hold on European culture occurred during the height of the Middle Ages in Europe, the class will honor its position in medieval society by playing it. Explain that the activity will get them "into the mind" of the noble class that played. It is at this point that students should be given a brief oral explanation of the basic rules and a copy of the basic rules handout (see Appendix A). Students should not be exposed to point values or led to discuss why pieces have different moves or privileges such as castling. Rather, students should only be given rules for movement and capture. Pair students together for an initial game, matching pairs based upon equitable ability groups. As students are playing the initial game, evaluate the ability groups to ensure the next day's pairings are sufficient. Remind students that chess requires deep thought and planning.

Segment Two: Game Play and Debrief

Pair students together for chess play based upon the previous observation. Before students begin play, announce that they will have to keep a record of their thinking and reasons for making the choices that they do in a Game Log Journal (see Appendix B). Provide several copies of the Game Log sheets to students and have them record their decision making in real-time, including reasons for taking opposing pieces, sacrificing pieces, and game strategy (i.e., why they want certain pieces of their opponent). Allow enough time for students to play several games over a block of time equivalent to 90-100 minutes to ensure students have enough experience with the movement of the chess pieces and to ensure a perception of the relative worth has been self-actualized. After playing a few games, players will inevitably understand that the queen is much more valuable than a pawn, and that a castle can be much more powerful than a knight. Students should begin a new Game Log for each match played. Allow students to play against opponents with a variety of skill levels to maximize strategy diversity. There is no set number of games to complete during this phase of instruction. Debrief students with a discussion about the relative value of the various chess pieces and their perceptions as to if the rules "favor" certain chess pieces. It is at this point that students should be introduced to European feudalism and the social realities of the different social classes.

Segment Three: Augmenting Traditional Instruction

Introduce the feudal system, its social classes, and the complex social class relationships of medieval Europe as normally required in the generalized unit on the Middle Ages in high school settings. This may utilize an adopted textbook, district-provided curriculum, or a personal teacher-designed curriculum. This lesson activity is designed to supplement the content, not replace it. Discuss the different social classes and the concepts that correspond with chess pieces, and introduce the supplemental information from the presentation slides provided (see Appendix C). For example, when introducing nobility, you would use the supplemental material for the king and queen. When discussing the peasant class, introduce the information regarding pawns. As you discuss the relationship between royalty and the Catholic Church, you might want to remind students that the bishops have highly symbolic placement right next to the king and queen. The point of this discussion is to allow students to conceptualize the many inequalities between class and the institutional relationships that generally existed in feudal society, based upon their knowledge of chess piece movement and placement.

Segment Four: Evaluation

As you complete the exploration of European feudalism, ask students to evaluate the fairness of the feudal system as it relates to the different social classes that existed during that time, and if that inequity has a social purpose. Given that they know nothing except life in modern society, invariably, students will indicate the lack of social justice that existed during that time. As a culminating homework activity, have students “right” the wrongs of social inequity and rewrite the rules of chess to maximize piece equality—however, the new sets of rules must maintain the expressed task of ensuring the game can be played to its purpose of capturing the opposing king while protecting one’s own king.

Have students regroup the next day and play a single game based upon the new rules that each player has completed. To capture the opposing king, students had to include some type of inequality amongst the pieces in the rules. Rehash the concept that if all pieces were truly equal, students could not really participate in the game. Clearly, inequality of the pieces brought much needed order to the game.

End by re-asking the Essential Question: “Did the feudal system bring justifiable order or abject inequality to Europe during the Middle Ages?” The answer to this question is highly subjective and really speaks to the heart of the purpose of good social studies instruction. It requires students to utilize information by processing it through their own value lens. Some students may see the order feudalism brought to the chaos of the Middle

Ages as valuable, while others may think it a violation of basic human dignity. In the end, the question requires students to critically analyze European feudalism and make a decision based upon a mixture of content and perspective.

As a supplement to any formal evaluation given to assess student knowledge about European feudalism, include the following essay prompt: “Given what you know about the disorder, lack of education, and desperate times of the Middle Ages, what could have happened to European society if it were not so strictly, yet unequally structured? If you had the ability to be a leader during that time, would you choose to organize society based upon equality or based upon order? Support your position either way.” These questions are based upon the guiding question that provided a basis of the lesson. The essay questions were designed to be answered using higher order thinking, and if your state has a writing rubric that is used to assess standardized writing tests, you can evaluate how your students meet state requirements specifically. In addition, this lesson activity should be tailored to fit the needs of individual classrooms. Teachers should also refer to their respective state curriculum standards to discern how the content of chess fits within those standards.

Discussion

This lesson was tested in a 9th grade World History classroom at a large, public high school in Florida. The population was diverse in terms of ethnicity and socio-economic status. Approximately 70 percent of the student population is on free or reduced lunch and nearly 75 percent of the school is minority. The largest ethnic population is Hispanic, many of whom are second language learners. An overwhelming majority of the students had some previous experience with the game of chess. Most, however, did not have a sophisticated understanding of game play or a positive view of the game initially. As the lesson was introduced to the class, one male student asked, “Isn’t that the boring game?” Another student followed with the statement, “Yes! You have to be mad smart to play!” What was interesting was how willing students were to try to learn to play. They almost seemed to feel that it was a reward to play a game in class, no matter what social stigmas have been placed on it. Furthermore, they expressed that learning by playing seemed too good to be true. One female student stated, “I wish learning could always be this engaging and fun!” and added that she “could get used to doing this.” It should be noted that this student had never played the game before.

To ensure that a true and accurate field testing occurred, this lesson plan was followed precisely. While there were times conversations became

tangential, the integrity of the lesson procedures was maintained. The lesson activity was incorporated into the curriculum and the entire unit on European feudalism was adapted into four segments. Segments one and two of the lesson took one 90-minute block each, segment three took up two blocks, and segment four took up a final 90-minute block.

Even though it was a substantial allotment of time, the students were never observed off task. The game's ability to capture student interest was encouraging. An observing teacher was taken aback by students' intensity during game play. The class maintained lively discussions during game play, however, and the conversations were chess-related.

An observing teacher stated that he was a bit nervous that students would not be able to see the connections between a historical example of society and a board game: "I didn't think they would be able to do that this well." When asked why the Church and the noble classes often enjoyed such close relationships during the Middle Ages, a female student responded, "Well, they supported each other and made sure they were able to stay powerful. The common people were poor, dying, and always being put down by the upper class." She continued, "Just like on the chess board... they protect each other." It was evident in the classroom discussions that students were able to articulate a sophisticated understanding of European feudal society, much of which was related to students' experience playing the game of chess.

Conclusion

Students are dynamic entities. They can learn in a multitude of ways using various formats and learning strategies. Unfortunately, student learning often requires rote memorization, teacher-focused lessons, and disconnected activities in the social studies classroom. Utilizing game-based learning activities offers a promising avenue for new ways with which to engage students in the social studies classroom. What is increasingly clear is that social studies instruction needs to move in a more dynamic direction.

By using chess to augment instruction in the World History classroom, students are offered an engaging, fun, and challenging tool to learn with. This lesson activity offers a practical standards-based method to teach complex historical concepts with a widely available board game. It is a tool with which to engage students in higher-ordered thinking and for teachers to implement best classroom practices. Additionally, this activity enables students to utilize necessary decision making skills, which are considered to be the heart of social studies.¹³

Notes

1. Jenny Adams, *Power Play: The Literature And Politics of Chess in the Late Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).
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3. Ibid.
4. Adams.
5. Harry J. Brown, *Video Games and Education* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe Inc., 2008).
6. Philip J. Rifner and John F. Feldhusen, "Checkmate: Capturing Gifted Students' Logical Thinking Using Chess," *Gifted Child Today Magazine* 20, no. 1 (January-February 1997): 36-39, 48.
7. James M. Liptrap, "Chess and Standard Test Scores," *Chess Life* 41 (March 1998).
8. Ralph L. Hall, *Why Chess in the Schools* (Washington, D.C.: ERIC Clearinghouse, 1983).
9. Thomas W. Malone, "Toward a Theory of Intrinsically Motivating Instruction," *Cognitive Science* 5, no. 4 (October-December 1981): 333-369; R. F. Bowman, "A Pac-Man Theory of Motivation: Tactical Implications for Classroom Instruction," *Educational Technology* 22, no. 9 (1982): 14-17.
10. Kurt Squire, "From Content to Context: Video Games as Designed Experience," *Educational Researcher* 35, no. 8 (November 2006): 19.
11. David Williamson Shaffer, Kurt R. Squire, Richard Halverson, and James P. Gee, "Video Games and the Future of Learning," *Phi Delta Kappan* 87, no. 2 (October 2005): 104.
12. Brown; James P. Gee, *Good Video Games + Good Learning: Collected Essays on Video Games, Learning, and Literacy* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007); John Pagnotti and William B. Russell III, "Using *Civilization IV* to Engage Students in World History Content," *Social Studies* 103, no. 1 (2012): 39-48; Kurt Squire and Henry Jenkins, "Harnessing the Power of Games in Education," *INSIGHT* 3, no. 1 (2003): 5; Kurt Squire, "Video Games in Education," *International Journal of Intelligent Simulations and Gaming* 2, no. 1 (2003): 49-62.
13. Shirley H. Engle, "Decision Making: The Heart of Social Studies Instruction," *Social Education* 27, no. 4 (1960): 301-304.

Appendix A

Basic Chess Rule Sheet**How the Chess Pieces Move**

Each of the six (6) different kinds of pieces moves differently. Pieces cannot move through other pieces (though the knight can jump over other pieces), and can never move onto a square occupied by one of their own pieces. However, pieces

can be moved to take the place of an opponent's piece, which is then captured. Pieces are generally moved into positions where they can capture other pieces (by landing on their square and then replacing them), defend their own pieces in case of capture, or control important squares in the game.

The King

The king is the most important piece, but is one of the weakest. The king can only move one square in any direction—forward, backward, sideways, or diagonally.

The Queen

The queen is the most powerful piece. She can move in any one direction—forward, backward, sideways, or diagonally—as far as possible as long as she does not move through any other pieces. And, like with all pieces, if the queen becomes vulnerable, she can be captured. When she captures an opponent's piece, her move is over.

The Rooks

Rooks (also known as “Castles”) may move as far as they want, but only forward, backward, or sideways. The two (2) rooks are particularly powerful pieces when they are protecting each other and working together.

The Bishops

Bishops may move as far as they want, but only diagonally. Due to the game board and piece setup, each of the two (2) bishops starts on different color squares (one on light, one on dark) and must always stay their respective color. Bishops work well together because they cover up each other's weaknesses.

The Knights

Knights move in a very different way from the other pieces—going two squares in one direction (either forward, backward, or sideways, but not diagonally), and then one more direction at a 90 degree angle, just like the shape of an “L”. The two (2) knights are also the only pieces that can move over other pieces.

The Pawns

Pawns are unusual because they move and capture in different ways: they move forward, but capture diagonally. The eight (8) pawns can only move forward one square at a time, except for their very first move, when they can move forward two squares if the player desires. Pawns can only capture another piece in a square diagonally in front of them. They can never move or capture backwards. If there is another piece directly in front of a pawn, it cannot move past or capture that piece.

Appendix B

Game Log

Name: _____ Opponent: _____

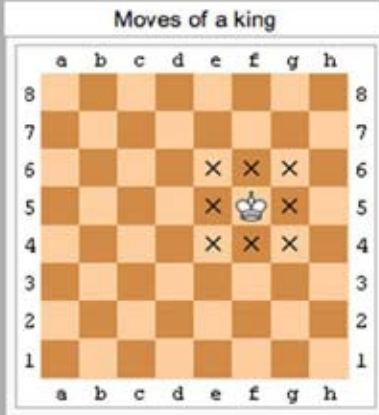
Which of your pieces were lost? What was the capturing method? What plans did you have with the piece?

Which of your opponent's pieces were captured? What was the capturing method? Why did you want this piece?

Strategy Log: What plans have you devised to win? Rewrite the plan as it changes each time, and indicate why you sacrificed a piece if you did.

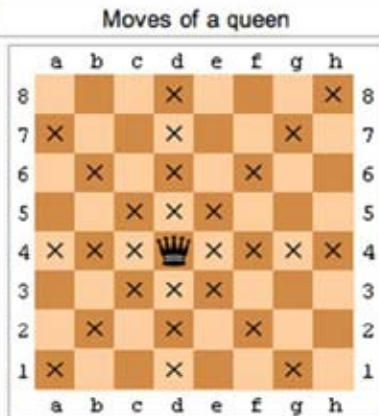
How successful were you? What could you have done differently for more success?

Appendix C



- Movement: One space in any direction.
- Value: Cannot be captured or the game is lost.
- The most important piece on the board and must be protected at all costs.
- If Feudal Kings were defeated, killed, or captured, it had a detrimental effect on the Kingdom.

The King



- Movement: Any number of spaces in a straight or diagonal line.
- Value: 9 points
- Queen has the most freedom to move or capture. In Feudal society, she had the backing of the entire kingdom and could maneuver through society without the political and social constraints of the king.

The Queen



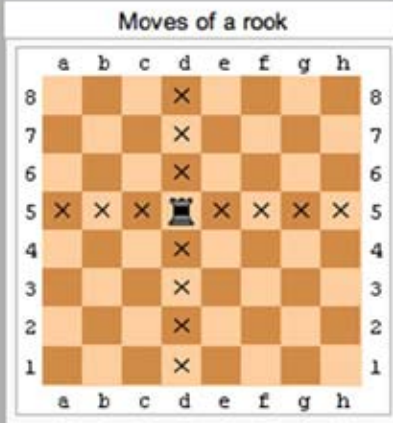
- Movement: Any number of spaces in a diagonal line.
- Value: 3 points
- Represents the power of the church and is closest to the royal family on the chess board initial placement.

The Bishop



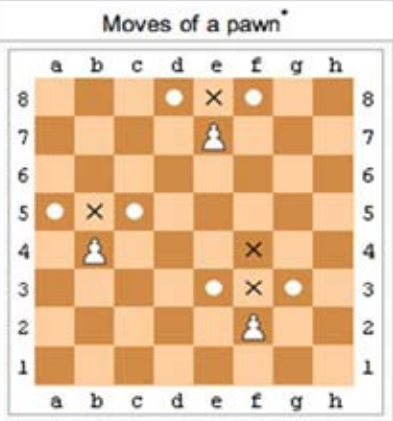
- Movement: Two spaces in a straight line, then one space perpendicular. Can "hop" other pieces.
- Value: 3 points
- Knights have the most restricted movements of the back line in relation to other pieces.
- Knights were loyal cavalry who were held to very high standards within society.

The Knight



- Movement: Any number of spaces in a straight line.
- Value: 5 points
- Represents the physical manifestation of royal power, a Castle. Literally can protect the King from being besieged with a unique move known as "Castling".

The Rook



- Movement: One space forward, except on the first move. Can only capture opposing pieces with by moving a single diagonal space forward.
- Value: 1 point
- Represents the "foot soldiers" of an army. Exposed in the frontline.

The Pawn

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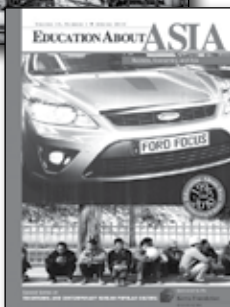
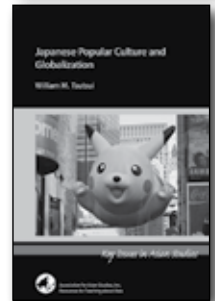
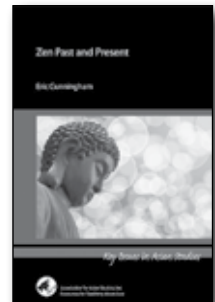
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