

Notes from the Underground

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THE HISTORICAL UNDERGROUND

Historical Confessions from the Underground: Liquid Swords

By: Harold Kemta, Student

Before I can explain why the album *Liquid Swords* has had such a powerful impact on me and my view of history, it is important to start with a discussion about the meaning of the Wu-Tang Clan. Growing up in New York, all the children knew and heard about this group of like-minded lyricists and musical geniuses who came together to shape the world of Hip Hop in the 1990s. However, we never actually listened to them. This wasn't odd in any way because there was a big shift in the kind of music that we enjoyed compared to the older generation. In our neighbourhood, when we asked them to turn that trash off, they usually laughed at us and chalked up our ignorance to the fact that we were just "too young" to understand. Of course, me being young and immature at the time, I usually replied by telling them they were "too old" to understand. Thinking back on life back then reminds me of something that Wu-Tang once said, in fact: "can it be that it was all so simple, then?" Basically, I woke up, got fed, went to school, came home to a roof over my head, went out to play with friends, got back home to a hot meal that would put me to sleep, and then do it all over again the next day. Fast forward a few years later, and I was moving out at 18 to go live in another city with the same idea that life would be all so simple then, too.

Needless to say, I was in for a rude awakening. One morning, I just woke up and felt like I was in hell. I felt as if my life was in a position where, no matter what I did or how hard I tried, there was just nothing I could do to change my circumstances or get out of the situation I found myself in. Life was becoming hopeless, and I was starting to give up.

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During this turbulent time, though, I have to say that I was fortunate to have had a speaker system in the house I lived in, which became my only stress reliever. One day, while playing random artists I had never really sat down and paid any attention to before then, a song appeared on the shuffle called "C.R.E.A.M." I remember how the name of the album the song appeared on had caught my attention: *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)*. The lyrics were profound, and they seemed to stir up something in me that I didn't know I had.

A verse that stood out, for example, is when the artist named Inspectah Deck started rapping about the decisions he made at 15 that led to his incarceration, which he capped off with the phrase, "life as a shorty [i.e., a young kid] shouldn't be so rough." For some reason, at that moment, his words made me think about my uncle who was also incarcerated at a young age for similar choices; choices that the 10-year-old me could never understand why he made. The 18-year-old me, however, was more interested in trying to understand that "why," especially if it could somehow help me stop having a rough life. As these thoughts rushed through me, the next line caught my attention even stronger: "but as the world turns, I learned life was hell; living in the world, no different from a cell." To me, the song was saying, as he got older, he began to realize that no matter what, his life would always be hard. However, would you prefer living in a cell where you can't control your life, or would you rather face these hardships outside, in the world, where at least you have more control over your actions and choices and decisions? In other words, my situation of struggle was not unique, but making decisions that would land me in a cell would only magnify my struggle, so I might as well try to find a different path.

Those same lyrics also got me wondering if this was the same hell my uncle went through when he made his decisions? Is this the same hell that those from the older generation went through in their younger days that made them call me "too young" to understand? If it was, then people have been facing these kinds of struggles since way before me or my uncle or Inspectah Deck. People who thought they knew it all and had life figured out, only to be disappointed when it hits them in the face. That's when I broke out of my slump and started asking myself: "instead of making decisions that could end up landing me in the same situation as those who came before me, how about I instead use all the knowledge they have left behind for me to make sure history does not repeat itself?" Maybe I can ensure that "the saga contin-

ues," but along a different, more productive, path. These thoughts encouraged me, but still I often thought about whether this hell Inspectah Deck spoke of was something that would ever be fully escapable. Maybe it is a question that often comes to my mind because of how easy it was for me to relate to the stories that Wu-Tang echoed in their songs, which I listened to more of after that chance encounter with "C.R.E.A.M." The stories they told were no different from what I witnessed growing up. The streets and blocks they named in their songs were places that me and my family walked through multiple times. Somehow, this seemed to connect me to them in a way, almost as if our shared experiences growing up in similar areas and environments made us one in history. I yearned for more of the knowledge they inspired me to pursue.

That is when I came across the album that really shaped my interest in history. GZA the Genius is one of the many members of the Wu-Tang Clan, and his second solo album, *Liquid Swords*, started me on this path of knowledge. It starts off with the voice of a child talking about his father being "the greatest Samurai in the empire, and he was the Shogun's decapitator," which sparked an interest in me to want to learn more. The voice also mentioned how his father had taken down so many lords that "he wasn't scared of the Shogun, but the Shogun was scared of him." When I first heard this, I wondered who this child was and why his father was going against this Shogun by himself. Was he insane? I had to find out more, so I did a little research and learned that the skit came from a clip of a Japanese/western movie mash-up called *Shogun Assassin*. In the movie, the boy's father is offered his freedom by the Shogun under one condition, which the father meets but the Shogun does not hold up his end of the bargain.

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Where East Meets West: Bactria as a Beacon of Hellenistic Influence

By: Han Byeol Jang, Former TCC Student

In the long history of warfare that has taken place in the world, there have been quite a few great conquerors and commanders. Napoleon Bonaparte of the French Empire, Julius Caesar of Rome, Khalid Ibn A-Walid as the “Sword of Allah,” or Attila the Hun as the “scourge of God,” are just a few examples. Except for maybe Genghis Khan, however (professor Borougerdi made it add that!), none can compare to the conquest of Alexander II of Macedon, who became known as Alexander the Great. He forged an empire from the rocky shores of Hellas (Greece) to the vast land of the Achaemenid Empire (Persia and Anatolia) - even reaching as far as the Indian subcontinent. Some have referred to him as a once in a lifetime military genius, but he was still just a man who lived in the 2nd century BCE. This means that he was mortal like those who came before (and after) him. Proof of this mortality came when he died in 323 BCE, when he was just 32 years old. Some say he died of an illness, whereas others claim he might have been assassinated. Historians still debate over this topic today, but we do know that the vast empire he built was divided up by his generals who became kings of their own portion of his realm after he died. One of these kingdoms became known as the realm of Bactria, which had a tremendous influence on keeping the Hellenistic culture alive.

Nestled in what is known today as the modern country of Afghanistan, Bactria was the furthest Hellenistic region in which Greek authority had extended under Alexander’s reign. This region reached a brutal 3000 miles into the other side of ‘his’ world. Alexander’s men were tired and wanted to go home by the time they reached this distance, which caused him much dismay as rebellions began to break out amongst those under his command. After failing to convince his men to keep going, he finally relented and started turning around to go home. Still, he made sure to leave a contingency of 23,000 men at the Bactrian settlement to protect all that was conquered. These soldiers and their descendants established Greek families in the region, and when Alexander passed away he gave Bactria to one of the lower ranking officers from the Hellenic city state of Cyprus. He did this to make sure everything ran smoothly as power transferred from Alexander’s family to the Seleucid family, who became the new rulers of the new Seleucid state.

Unfortunately for them, though, the east would not be so easily controlled, and in the year 250 BCE Bactria broke away from their Seleucid overlords by rebelling alongside their governor, Diodotus. Sadly, not much is known about Diodotus, but we do have evidence that shows his face depicted on coins that he commissioned during his reign. Much to the dismay of many historians, we have lost a lot of records about Diodotus, but some evidence remains – after all, the Romans certainly kept detailed records, so some of them were bound to survive. Besides the coinage, for example, he is briefly mentioned by the Roman historian Justin in his book, *Epitome of*

Pompeius Trogus, which claims that “Diodotus, the governor of the thousand cities of Bactria defected and proclaimed himself king; all the other people of the Orient followed his example and seceded from the Macedonians [i.e. the Seleucids].” Nevertheless, it has proven to be quite difficult for archeologists to find the remains of the Bactrian kingdom compared to Seleucid Syria and Ptolemaic Egypt, mainly because most of this ancient kingdom existed in a region of the world that has become one of the most hostile political hotspots in modern history. Indeed, Afghanistan has faced a great deal of turmoil throughout the 20th century. The Soviets took this turmoil to another level when they tried to conquer the country in the 1970s, and the United States replaced them in the 21st. In fact, shortly after taking office, Donald Trump dropped the most powerful bomb in history on Afghanistan—known as the Mother of All Bombs (MoAB). All of this turmoil has made the likelihood of researchers and historians gaining access to archeological evidence to study extremely difficult, if not impossible.

However, it is important to recognize that history was not always like that for this region. In fact, evidence suggests that this ancient kingdom was a very rich and hospitable place due to its location and its connection to the great Silk Roads that ran through its territories. These famous roads were like networks of trade routes that connected the East and the West together as a great meeting ground of culture. Eastern goods traveled into western markets along these massive routes, which bound exotic goods from Chinese markets to the Mediterranean world. As such, the kingdom of Bactria was a very wealthy and hospitable place, even if this wealth led to the creation of many envious neighbors. Bactria understood this danger, though, which is why they developed a strong army early on. This army was truly diverse and included those known as the Greco Pikemen (Called Hoplites), as well as Persian light and heavy cavalry. They even had war elephants from India, with a diverse group of people living in the area who worked to establish a solid defensive line against invasions. Indeed, it was a multi-cultural metropolis with a lot of muscle that lasted from the 2nd century BCE until the 10th century CE. It is a shame that this kingdom is so overlooked and forgotten; left to the sands of history, so to speak. However, this kingdom that came after the Greeks left a far more indelible mark. For one, history kept their currency and culture alive, as seen by the great Kushan kingdom that later took the lands of Bactria and carved an empire for itself. It is through this Kushan empire that trade on the great Silk Roads was facilitated and protected. Scholars have found many coins among the region, with some of them dating back to the time of Bactria. Clearly, historical evidence shows that the Kushans were very good at culturally blending different walks of life together, for routes they constructed remained firmly in tact until the Islamic empires emerged and began facing wars with the Christian ones.

A Visual Representation of the Kingdom of Bactria



Conversations from the Underground (CFTU): A Podcasting Project

By: Bradley J. Borougerdi, Faculty

Since October of last year, I have been working on a project with Eric Salas that we have been calling *Conversations from the Underground*. We are in our 18th episode right now and have been recording almost once a week since we began. Neither of us have any experience in the podcast world—other than me having been a guest on a few in the past and Eric listening to many hours of some. The COVID-19 pandemic threw a wrench in many student organizations when it hit, so we wanted to create something that would provide an outlet for members of The Historical Underground to digest when we are not able to meet as a group. However, it has turned into something much more than that; at least for me, *Conversations from the Underground* has become a powerful tool to test out my thoughts, hone my critical thinking skills, explore ideas and concepts, and yes, bring historical perspectives to those who are registered on THU's Canvas page.

The format has changed a little here and there since we began, but the basic concept is still the same. Essentially, we begin each recording as a conversation. Neither of us have any idea what we will be discussing when this conversation begins, and the topic gets generated organically as we respond to each others' points and thoughts about what is on our minds at the moment. I have a document that is over 40 pages long at this point, which consists of historical quotes from various people that I have compiled over the past several years. Before starting this project, I used these quotes to post a "Historical Quote of the Day" on my Canvas pages for the classes that I teach each semester to try and inspire some spark of interest in history for my students. Ever since we started recording *Conversations*, though, I

have also used this document in our recordings, which usually last about an hour (though sometimes much longer). After the conversation winds down, I use this document to search for a quote, on the spot, that helps sum up or capture the essence of the conversation, its theme(s), or the general thoughts that we explored. Sometimes this can be difficult since I am rummaging through the document quickly in search for the right words to use, but it has been an enlightening experience that keeps me on my toes. We like to think of it as a raw reflections of a couple of historians who have been working together for well over a decade now. We do not keep track of how many people or students are tuning in to hear what we have to say, but for us the commitment has been worth it regardless. Reach out and ask to be included on our Canvas page if you are interested in tuning in.



LIQUID SWORDS, CONTINUED . . .

"I can ensure that 'the saga continues,' but along a different, more productive, path."

The film is set in a period of Japanese history (1185-1868) when the Shogun was a title given by the emperor to the most important military general. Even though the emperor was the official ruler, it was the Shogun who wielded the real power in this system. During that time, Samurai were supposed to swear alliance to a Shogun, but in the film the boy's father refused to do this, which went against the norms of society at that time. When I looked back at this history from that movie, I realized that the father was just doing what he had to do to survive his own "hell." To me, the ninjas represented the problems that we all face but can't control . . . our own personal hell. In that sense, this Samurai was no different than my uncle or Inspector Deck, both of whom made decisions to try to escape their hell. I wanted to be like the Samurai, decapitating all my problems. If life was going to throw problems at me, regardless of where I was, then I wanted to fight back. It sounds silly today, but it felt like a light at the end of the tunnel, in a way. I truly wanted to know everything there was to know about being a Samurai, so I studied everything I could about what Samurais did, where they slept, how they ate, etc. Before I even realized it, I had become a student of Samurai culture, all thanks to that opening bit of *Liquid Swords*.

That is just how the beginning of this album influenced me to become a student, but there is much more. In fact, GZA and the other members of the Wu-Tang Clan who are featured throughout the album use countless metaphors that reference historical names, places, and deeply thought-provoking philosophies; both real and fictional. Just like with the sample in the intro of the album, most of those references flew over my head the first time I heard them. It was not until I looked deeply into them that I started to really understand the level of knowledge that existed in their style that I had dismissed as a young kid. With each new metaphor, name, and historical place they dropped upon my ears, I ended up repeating the same cycle of research as I did with the Shogun and the Samurai. As a result, I ended up unintentionally learning a lot of history. This happened so often that, if I wrote down every single part of the album that caught my attention as I listened to it, then this article would seem endless. As a result, I will conclude by pointing to the last song on the album, which is titled "B.I.B.L.E." In it, GZA talks about preferring the study of wisdom over the study of other people. I think this is a wonderful thought that would help the world learn to treat people better more generally, so that maybe, one day, we can finally help more people escape those "hells" they keep finding themselves forced to endure.

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“HISTORY IS OUR WEAPON OF CHOICE”

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“USE IT TO CONFRONT THE PAST”

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Letter from the Editor

Dear Readers,

“The times they are a-changin.” Many years ago, The Historical Underground (THU) was founded by Dr. Bradley Borougerdi and Eric Salas, as an organization on campus that fostered discussion and debate over historical topics and issues. *Notes from the Underground* was created to serve as the mouthpiece for this organization and its members. As students heard of THU, many decided to become members, and some decided to become officers. As time carried on, many of our members matriculated to other colleges, programs, and universities to further their studies, leaving remaining members to carry the cross. For the first time, in the Spring of 2023, The Historical Underground had no members or officers and practically went underground. We had interests from some to start the organization back up, but due to numerous variables, we had to adjust and adapt to changing times. We have since focused more energy into reviving and revamping *Notes from the Underground* and have also started a podcast project known as Conversations from the Underground, which you can read about in this issue, as Dr. Borougerdi details the origin story. In this issue, you will also find an article by Harold Kemta. His article explores the influence of music and how it lead him towards a deeper discovery of history. We also have an article from former member/consul – Han Byeol Jang, who transferred to UTA last semester to complete his BA in history. His article explores the existence and impact of the Bactria Kingdom, serving as a conduit for the Eastern world to the Western world. We would like to thank Professor Mike Downs for his guidance in helping Han see this article come to fruition. As always, we hope these articles pique your interest and motivate you to join the movement and draft a piece of writing for our community of readers to consume with their eyes and their minds in a future edition. So reach out, speak up, be heard, represent your students, or draft your thoughts into an article over a topic of your choice, ranging anywhere from 500 – 1600 words or so. We want to elevate your voice and provide the community of TCC with access to more reading material. For us, reading is a powerful tool that can unlock interests students never knew they had; it is also empowering to see your name in print. You can help make this happen by dedicating some time to drafting an article or spreading the word to others so that they, too, can have their voices lifted.

~ Editors from the Underground