

ASIANetwork Conference 2001

Cleveland, Ohio

Asian Cinema in Asian Studies Gita Rajan, Fairfield University; Yi Sun, University of San Diego, Stephen Udry, Carthage College; Sarah Barbour, Asian Educational Media Service

Bringing Asian Art into the Classroom: Teaching Methods and Curriculum Development Lisa Safford, Hiram College; Elizabeth Ayer, Hartwick College

Encountering Indian Christianity on its Own Terms Elizabeth Galbraith, Coe College; Father Abraham Mulamootil, Syro-Malankara Church; Job Thomas, Davidson College

Globalization: Its Impacts on the Philippine Environment Aurora Alerta-Lim, Central Philippines University (UBCHEA Visiting Scholar at Warren Wilson College)

Visualizing Asian America: Explicating Identity through Film

Gita Rajan
Fairfield University

I present here a collage of ideas instead of an essay, in an effort to position and then interrogate important theoretical constructs that are used to understand the nuances of being an Asian American in the United States. This effort, consequently, will explicate the meaning of Asian American identity as a lived experience. The theoretical constructs that I underscore through these film clips reveal specific aspects of cultural engagement and interaction between majority and minority cultures in the US. My strategy is deliberately irreverent, for I have found that students allow themselves to debate and discuss difficult issues, such as race relations, when it is done with delicate irony and abundant good humor. The films that I use address all the concerns listed below:

(a) The confusion over the name "Asian" in mainstream US cultures is the first point to be addressed. Most often, "Asia" is shorthand for China and Japan. Because of orientalist patterns prevalent in popular culture and dated forms of explaining the "orient" in the academy, differences in geography, history, culture, religion, tradition, and migration patterns of the numerous nationalities within "Asia" are lumped together into easy stereotypes. For example, things most familiar about Asia are the "exotic other" images in popular culture or the "model minority" category within the academy. In other words, the fact that Afghanistan is located in Asia, or that there are practicing Jews in India, or that China's culture is very different from that of Sri Lanka, or that history of Vietnam is embedded in French colonization and goes beyond the US-Vietnam war is sometimes news to our undergraduates. The films make this easy to understand.

(b) Lisa Lowe argues that the problem of

misrecognition is not limited to white students alone, but indeed, exists on the inside as well. She says, "Asian American discussions of ethnicity are far from consistent; rather, these discussions contain a wide spectrum of articulations that include, at one end, the desire for an identity represented by a fixed profile of ethnic traits, and at another, challenges the very notions of identity and singularity which celebrate ethnicity as a fluctuating composition of differences, intersections, and incommensurabilities. The latter efforts attempt to define ethnicity in a manner that accounts not only for cultural inheritance, but for active cultural construction as well" ("Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences in Diaspora," 27).

(c) Race marks Asian Americans as visibly different, and that is a major factor in classroom discussions. Amott and Matthaei write that, "whites discriminated against second-generation Asians, who unlike white ethnics, could not disguise their ethnicity by speaking English and adopting European-American ways. Thus, barriers to upward mobility in the labor market compelled many Asian Americans to seek advancements through self-employment in family businesses—for the Chinese, laundries and restaurants; for the Japanese, truck farming; and for the Koreans, grocery stores" (*Race, Gender, and Work*, 195). These films reveal how clearly racial differences are articulated in, managed by, and inserted into mainstream US culture, always to the advantage of white populations. Further, issues and subjects of interest to Asian Americans are elided into mainstream discussions without attention to diasporic or immigration patterns. Recollecting one's own history of migration, diasporic or enforced, allows a Vietnamese American student, for example, to mark her place in the university's culture as being distinct from that of an Indian American. These internal differences are important in understanding how class structures get manifested in patterns of assimilation. These films point to these clear distinctions while also gesturing towards partial versions of immigration history of Asians as circulated in mainstream US accounts.

(d) The above factor allows students to recognize

the impossibility of a facile assimilation into the "melting pot" that is the myth about "America." This, in turn, allows second and third generation Asian Americans to raise their voices in resistance against marginalization and racism. The films point to this factor and indicate the fallacy of a purity of origin, i.e., when students make racist remarks like "go back home," Asian Americans can and do speak out.

(e) These films also show that the category "Asian American" cannot be glibly orientalized along the poles of tradition and modernity, but rather, that they must be constantly negotiated as viable, sustainable identities. In order to make this point, the many films selected here reveal that uncritical, liberal generosity is based upon extremely pejorative remarks like "we respect you even though you are different."

The films are:

My America, or Honk if You Love Buddha (Director/Producer Renee Tajima Pena. Distributed by Women Make Movies. Chinese American primarily).

Shepherd's Pie and Sushi (Distributed by 100 Miles Film Group. Japanese Canadian)

This Bloody Blundering Business (Director Peter Davis. Distributed by Transcontinental Films. Filipino American)

Pure Chutney (Director/Narrator Amitava Ghosh. Indian American and Indian Caribbean diaspora)

Exile and Displacement (Producer Prajna Parashar. Distributed by Women Make Movies)

Three film clips I did not have time to screen:

Riding the Tiger (Vietnam War, a male account) and *The Long Haired Warriors* (North Vietnamese women as revolutionary, fiercely patriotic warriors), and

Between Two Worlds (Korean American, gay identities.)

I thank Gurudev, Rohin Rajan, Catherine Benton, and Ramona Islam, Media Librarian at Fairfield University, for their help as I prepared this work. These films can be ordered from www.cinemaguild.com and www.womenmakemovies.com.

Bibliography:

Amott, Theresa et al. *Race Gender and Work: A Multi-Cultural Economic History of Women in the United States*. Boston: South End Press, 1996.

Hagedorn, Jessica. *Charlie Chan is Dead: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Fiction*. Penguin, 1995.

Liu, David Palumbo. *The Ethnic Canon: Histories, Institutions, and Interventions*. University of Minnesota Press, 1995.

Lowe, Lisa. "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marketing Asian American Differences" in *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, Spring 1991, 1:1, 24-44.

Lowe, Lisa. *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*. Duke University Press, 1996.

Lowe, Lisa et al., eds. *The Politics of Culture in the*

Shadow of Capital. Duke University Press, 1997.

Maira and Srikanth, eds. *Contours of the Heart: South Asians Map North America*. Temple University Press, 1996.

Teaching Chinese History Through Film

Yi Sun

University of San Diego

My experience of teaching a Chinese history course through the use of feature films and documentaries has been a very successful one. The three-hour class allows the students to first study the historical contexts from a short lecture which, in conjunction with pre-assigned reading materials, enables them to obtain a firm grasp of the relevant factual information, watch a selected film and then engage in oftentimes heated and reflective discussions of a particular topic or time period in Chinese history. After each film, students are required to write their own "thinking" questions for group discussion. The film reviews that the students are required to write need to demonstrate their analytical understanding of key issues and events in Chinese history. Though similar in its topical coverage to other courses that deal with the history of modern China, this class nevertheless generates a sense of vividness and immediacy to the students' learning experience. While placing the analysis of important historical events and developments in a chronological framework, the lectures, films and class discussions are all designed to highlight the significance of Chinese culture in shaping its political struggles and economic endeavors. After providing some necessary background knowledge about the language, environment, ethnology and philosophical/religious foundations, the class focuses on the trials and tribulations as well as the dynamics and challenges in Chinese history since the mid-19th century with the onset of Western imperialism.

Encounters with the West are illustrated with the film *The Opium War*, directed by Xie Jin, perhaps the most celebrated director in China, and released in Beijing in 1997 to coincide with Hong Kong's reversion to the mainland. Unlike some earlier Chinese films on the Opium War, this one presents a more balanced and objective portrayal of the events that led up to the outbreak of the war, the treaty negotiating process, and the internal dissensions with the Qing government. It depicts the Chinese cultural complacency as well as the British arrogance and the latter's practice of "gunboat diplomacy." One notable change from the previous Chinese interpretation is the depiction of the character Qishan, who is recorded in many Chinese history books as a traitor responsible for the humiliating terms that China had to accept as stipulated in the Treaty of Nanjing. In this film, Qishan appears as a more realistic diplomat who advocates for a peace-