

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.)

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## 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-19<sup>th</sup> 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-

ful settlement of the war, with the realization that China is in no position to challenge the British gunboats. Another telling point in the film is at the very end, when Lin Zexu, the imperial commissioner, who is entrusted with the mission of destroy the opium in Guangzhou, and who is in favor of military confrontation with the British, asks Qishan to present a globe to the Emperor. "Tell him that there are many powerful countries in the world besides China," says Lin. He has obviously come to realize that, in a drastically changing world, China can no longer afford to remain isolated or indulge in its own cultural complacency. These seemingly subtle suggestions in the film can be seen as strong indicators of China's changing attitude toward the outside world in the midst of its economic reforms. The lively class discussions following the film session convinced me that my students not only caught a powerful glimpse of the situations surrounding the Opium War, but also gained new perspectives on the contemporary developments of Chinese economy and politics.

*The Last Emperor* tells the dramatic life story of Pu Yi, the last emperor in China's long dynastic history. Forced to confess his "sinful past" by the new communist leaders following the establishment of the People's Republic, Pu Yi's flashbacks take the viewers through the various significant episodes in Chinese history. Ascending the throne at the age of three, forced to abdicate in 1912 by the Republican Revolution, Pu Yi is imprisoned inside of the Forbidden City, and later becomes the puppet emperor of Japan's Manchukuo in the early 1930s. After the process of "thought reform," Pu Yi has to perform physical labor as a gardener in Beijing. The film in many ways serves as a primary source documenting several intricate chapters of Chinese history. It also captures the grandeur of the imperial palace better than any historian can recount. Even those students who had seen the film before found it more meaningful to watch it again with the historical context in mind.

When dealing with the theme of tradition versus an emerging new culture, *The Family* is an extremely effective film. Based on Ba Jin's masterpiece originally published in 1931, the film presents the conflicts between the stifling old tradition and the liberating new cultural dynamics during the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Gao family, consisting of four generations and servants, personifies that conflict. Through the lives of the three Gao brothers—Juexin, Juemin and Juehui as well as the women in their lives, the students learn how the deeply-entrenched Confucianism, with its emphasis on filial piety and social conformity, shaped the collective experience of "the family." At the same time, they also see how it came under fierce attacks during the new culture movement, when many progressive intellectuals undertook painful scrutiny of China's past and agitated for sweeping social and cultural changes. The victimization of Juexin, the eldest brother, by the old tradition, and the rebellion of Juehui, the youngest, are powerfully portrayed in the film. Meanwhile, the tragic deaths of Cousin Mei whose love for Juexin cannot be requited; of the servant girl Mingfeng who is driven into suicide as a way to escape the claws of the concubine system; and of Ruijue, who loses her life at child

birth due to an outrageous superstition, all point towards the necessity of liberating women from the fetters of the old patriarchal family system.

After watching the film, the class engaged in lengthy and thoughtful discussions on the practice of arranged marriages and concubinage, both of which institutionalized the discrimination against women, the various social and cultural customs as evident in the family's daily life, and the influence of new ideologies as seen in the student activism. My students were quick to point out the symbolic death of the family patriarch and the shattering of the family portrait as the signal of the slow but inevitable demise of the old Chinese cultural structure.

While documentary videos such as *China in Revolution: Struggle for Survival* and *Fighting for the Future* help students understand the complexities of Chinese internal politics and foreign relations from 1911 to 1949, it is films like *To Live* that drive home the historical twists and turns that affected the lives of ordinary Chinese. This critically acclaimed film portrays the social, political and economic changes that unfolded from the late 1940s to the late 1970s through the tear-jerking story of one Chinese family. The extent of political indoctrination during the Great Leap Forward Movement and the Cultural Revolution is clearly reflected. While terms such as "counter-revolutionary timber" and "certificate of revolution" as well as the "Mao buttons" and the "little red book" appear to be amusing to Western students, they convey the intensity and extensity of the Chinese political history far more vividly and convincingly than any simple lectures can. The tragic deaths of Youqing and Fengxia are results of man-made disasters, that is, the never-ending political movements during the 1950s and 1960s. Youqing, a ten-year-old boy, has to participate in the "backyard furnace" campaign during the Great Leap Forward by collecting scraps of iron. He is killed by falling bricks when he falls asleep at the foot of a pile of bricks. Fengxia, the daughter, dies in childbirth because medical doctors are sent to the "cowsheds" during the Cultural Revolution while the hospital is operated by a group of young, ignorant Red Guards. At the end of the film, there was not a dry eye in the classroom. Several of my students were able to catch two telling moments. Fugui, the father, tells his son about the promising prospect of rural life: "after [we have] geese there will be sheep, after sheep there will be ox, and after ox, there will be communism." However, in the end, he can only say this to his grandson whom he and his wife have to raise after the loss of their daughter: "... after ox, I don't know. . . there will probably be airplanes." As my students aptly point out, this seemingly minor detail indicates that, after all the pain and suffering wrought by the political campaigns, the Chinese have lost their faith in communism, and that it also forecasts the impending economic reforms at the end of the 1970s.

The Cultural Revolution is also forcefully depicted in *Hibiscus Town*, a rural town in southern China, where the lives of its several main characters, Hu Yuyin, Qin Shutian and Wang Qiushe, are intertwined with the political movements during the 1960s. Yuyin, who runs a small but thriving

bean curd restaurant with her husband, is forced to close it down when she is classified as a "rich peasant" during the "four clean-up" campaign prior to the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution. Qin Shutian is labeled as a "rightist" intellectual who is sent to Hibiscus Town to receive "re-education" from the peasants. After her husband Quigui commits suicide under the political pressure, Hu Yuyin and Qin Shutian gradually fall in love while they are both punished and have to render their daily chores of sweeping the streets; however, the puritanical, stifling political culture at that time makes it impossible for them to openly announce their relationship. Qin is later sentenced to a ten-year prison term and Yuyin almost loses her life in a difficult labor. Throughout their ordeal only one person, the demoted former village head Gu Yanshan, remains their friend. The film has a very thought-provoking ending, when Yuyin is able to reopen her popular bean curd restaurant with the onset of economic reforms while Wang Qiushe, a poor peasant who gains power and prestige during the Cultural Revolution largely due to his class background, has gone insane, unable to cope with the vicissitudes of the political climate. It goes without saying that the ups and downs in Chinese political history are threaded through the lives of the protagonists in the film; their experiences together tell a compelling story of the fragility of human life as well as resilience of human spirit in an era of unprecedented social and political chaos. My students "confessed" to me that while they may forget the details in my lectures on the Cultural Revolution, films such as *Hibiscus Town* and *To Live* would always stay with them.

The topic of the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident is studied with the use of *Gate of Heavenly Peace*, a documentary produced by Richard Gordon and Carma Hinton. Through a significant number of interviews with participants in the pro-democracy movement, student leaders and eyewitnesses, together with news coverage and photographs, the video provides a thorough and objective account of the events and developments before and during the movement as well as that crucial last few hours before the governmental crackdown. It reveals the complexity of the whole process and prompts the students to take a closer and more reflective look at the situations leading up to that tragic night on June 4<sup>th</sup>.

When dealing with the dynamics and dilemmas that characterize the current economic reforms, the film *Shower* encapsulates the essence of the struggle between tradition and modernity. Daming is a young Beijing native who, riding the tide of economic reforms, has struck it rich in Shenzhen, China's first special economic zone. His aging father and younger, mentally-retarded brother Er-ming run a man's public bathhouse in Beijing, one of the traditional trademarks of the city. The bathhouse is the place where neighbors and friends gather to chat, play chess, sing, share their personal secrets, and release their stress. During his unplanned home visit, Daming finds it difficult to accept the old practice that his father and brother are immensely proud of. He can hardly conceal his contempt for the old-fashioned way of life. The family tension is mounting when Er-ming is missing and the

Father blames Daming for it. After the father unexpectedly passes away, Daming has to take over the responsibility for taking care of his brother, and decides to postpone his return to Shenzhen, not without some reluctance. At the end of the film, another telling moment appears when the bathhouse has to close down and the old neighborhood is demolished; in its place will rise a new commercial center. Amidst comic laughter, the students get a clear sense of the coexistence of tradition and modernity as well as the inherent contradictions between the two in contemporary China. The warmth and coziness of the old way of life are placed in sharp contrast with the cold efficiency and wealth of the new era. They also see the human dimensions of the struggle, which are vivified by the story of one family.

These afore-mentioned feature films and documentaries have made my class a great deal more interesting and effective. They enable the students to stay actively involved in the entire learning process by not only providing visual illustrations but, more importantly, highlighting significant historical themes and events. My students commented that the films have indeed helped to enhance their understanding of modern Chinese history and culture. A number of other films can be used to achieve the same purpose. The coverage of this particular class is chronological in nature, but it is certainly conceivable to take a more topical approach by dividing certain films into several different categories according to their main themes, such as women, politics and modernization. It is fair to say that films, carefully selected and critically reviewed, can play an invaluable role in the teaching and understanding of history.

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## A Social History of Modern Japan Through Film A January-Term Course Stephen Udry Carthage College

In January of 2001, I taught a January-term course entitled "A Social History of Modern Japan Through Film." The course was described in the catalogue as one which would "examine the changing representations of women, family, work, and duty, as well as issues such as identity and alienation, as presented in the popular media of Japanese cinema." The description pointed out that, through critical viewing of films by directors such as Ozu and Mizoguchi, students would investigate the relationship of history and its photographic representation. Lectures and selected readings would provide the students with the necessary background and tools for critical analysis. Furthermore, the description held that "the goal of the class was to come to an