

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

understanding, through the lens of a director's camera, of how social networks, and their corresponding obligations, are created and perpetuated in modern Japanese society." This description proved surprisingly enticing and the course was oversubscribed by about 25%. Out of the 24 students I allowed into the course, only four had any prior coursework in either Japanese history or language. Out of twenty-four students, only a handful (no more than five) had ever seen a foreign film. None of the students had ever taken a film course. In short, this was a class which was not fully prepared for such an ambitious course. Given the lack of background in Japanese history, I decided to tone the original goal of the course down to something more basic and achievable for the students. The rest of the course (the mechanics, the assignments, the films themselves) went unchanged. In what follows, I would like to describe the mechanics, goals, and achievements of the course with the intention of providing ideas to any interested in creating a similar course.

### Description and Mechanics

The mechanics of the course were fairly simple. As the course was offered during a January term, each class meeting lasted for three hours. This meant that a whole film could be viewed in one class period, a luxury not necessarily available to a course offered during a regular semester. (I will suggest a few ways of adapting this course to a regular term in the conclusion of this essay.) After a couple of preliminary days during which a few basics were covered, a working pattern was established which was followed through to the end of the term.

The course was divided into two types of days: screening and non-screening days. Spread over these two types of days were five distinct activities: reading, viewing, writing, discussing, and lectures. On screening days a film would be viewed and it would be followed by a short discussion to make sure certain themes were brought up and any questions answered. The students would then go off and write a two- or three-page essay on the film. Each essay was to be divided into two sections; one which critiqued and commented on the film as a distinct text, and the other which sought to place certain themes within the film into a particular historical context. Early on I made it a requirement that the students cite either the textbook or my lectures at least twice in each essay. This ensured that they would actually read the textbook and take good notes during my lectures.

Screening days would be followed by non-screening days that were broken down into two parts. The first half of each non-screening day would be given over to an in-depth discussion of the previous day's film. They were all prepared to do this not only because they had seen the film, but also because they had written about it. The second half of each non-screening day was spent in lecture. I would give an hour-long lecture/discussion on a particular decade in Japan, preparing them for the next day's film.

The preliminary days proved to be crucial to the ability of the students to work with film as a primary text.

Although this was not a film course, it certainly was a course in which films played the significant role. And because this was the case, some introductory study of film was necessary. With this in mind, we spent the first three days of the course getting acquainted with such basic ideas as a "shot" and the implicit meanings behind each type of "shot." I chose Mizoguchi's *Life of Oharu* (1952) for a sort of "practice run" with the students. After reading and discussing a short article on film basics, I let the students take control of the remote and had them identify different shots and techniques (i.e., flashback, fade, juxtaposition, etc.) and try to explain what the director was doing with each one. After the movie was over we held a short discussion of it and each student gave his/her impression and best-guess interpretation of Mizoguchi's meaning. I then sent them home to read an article that gave an alternate interpretation of *Life of Oharu*. This exercise was particularly fruitful for two reasons: 1) it showed students how to approach interpreting a film (i.e., what kinds of things to look for) and 2) that these are interpretations; some may be more valid than others, but that there is not necessarily one "correct" interpretation. This gave the students the confidence to trust the opinions they came up with while watching the films. It meant that they were not just looking to me for answers and meanings.

This structure worked out fairly well. The students felt that they were amply prepared to view the films and make substantive critiques of them. They appreciated the chance for both immediate commentary and feedback as well as the time to consider and reconsider issues and themes that seemed interesting or problematic.

### Goals of the course

With the preliminaries out of the way, the course could begin in earnest. As I mentioned earlier, due to the students' low level of general knowledge of Japanese history, I had to rethink the goals of the course. Rather than aim to study how social networks, and their corresponding obligations, are created and perpetuated in modern Japanese society, the course would serve to introduce students to the history of modern Japan from the 1930s to the present day. In other words, in less than four weeks, the course would attempt to give the students a solid understanding of the main events in Japanese history since the 1930s and to color in the details of how those events affected the Japanese people and their society. To do this, the films would be used in combination with lectures, readings, and most importantly, discussions. The course would advance with decade-long steps from the 1930s up to the 1990s. For each decade, roughly, we would focus on an important theme that would be reflected in a particular film made in that decade. For example, in the post-war period, the obsessive pursuit of economic growth by Japan's conservative political leadership is brought down to the familial level in *Tokyo Story* (Yasujiro Ozu, 1953) which deals with not only growing urban/rural disparities but also the conflicts between modernity (satirized as selfish and money-grubbing) and tradition as reflected in familial relations and obligations. *Woman in the Dunes* (Hiroshi

Teshigahara, 1964) was meant to help the students explore alienation in Japanese society and the failing sense of community during the 1950's and 1960's. Also, *The Family Game* (Yoshimitsu Morita, 1983) was chosen to illuminate the growing pressures on children and families for academic achievement and material success. In this way, the films were to be used as both the focal point of in-depth explorations of such themes as well as starting points for discussions of just why a particular theme was an issue at the time the film was made. This approach enabled us to tie larger issues to specific cases and examples. This, in the end, proved extremely effective for the students.

Because I intended to use the films in this way, it was imperative to use films which were contemporary. While this meant ruling out such films as Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*, I felt that it was much more important to be able to use the film as not merely a description of a given time, but also as an artifact of that same period. I was able to hold to this ideal for all seven decades examined, with the exception of the 1940s. As our library's holdings had no films produced in Japan during the 1940s, I was forced to use *Fires on the Plain* (Kon Ichikawa, 1959) and *Black Rain* (Shohei Imamura, 1988). These worked out fine and led to some excellent discussions on Japanese post-war views of the war.

#### Assessment

In looking back at the course, I have come to feel that it was a solid approach for introducing students to modern Japan. Many commented in their evaluations that they learned a lot more than they had expected to. Now, while that statement certainly says as much about the students and January terms as it does about the class itself, I do feel that the students went away with a basic foundation in modern Japanese history as well as a greater appreciation of Japan. Furthermore, they are now, undoubtedly, more capable of critically viewing a film, particularly a foreign film.

The next time the course is offered I will keep the basic framework and will change only a few of the films. I think the success of the class rested on three things: first, the short discussions immediately following each viewing. These typically lasted no more than 20 minutes. They served to answer basic questions, such as character names and confusing storylines. The discussions also put the students on the same page in terms of what themes should be examined in their papers. This gave me a vehicle for error checking. Sometimes I would direct the students to address a particular scene which I felt was pivotal or key to understanding a theme I was trying to stress. While these discussions could have gone on for longer periods of time, I often cut them off before they got too deep into the film. The reason I did this was that early on, when I let the conversations continue until their natural conclusion, the papers all tended to say the same things, which was usually the ideas of whomever had dominated the conversation the day before. That was not what I wanted. I wanted them to first come to terms with the film on their own, or with the help of a smaller group of people, and then to come and discuss it with the rest of the class after

these opinions had had some time to brew.

The second factor that contributed to the success of the class was the requirement of writing a critical essay after each film. This forced the students to think about each film. They had to confront the issues and themes which arose. If they had not written these papers I shudder to think how the following day's discussions would have gone.

The third factor was integration of the text readings and lectures into the papers. By requiring the students to cite either the textbook or my lecture, they could not avoid contextualizing the film within a particular period of Japan's history. This ensured that they would bring a historical element into their interpretation of the films.

#### Closing Remarks

This course was specifically designed to be offered during a January term. This meant that I would be meeting with the students from 9:00-12:00 every weekday morning for about four weeks. Such extensive and intense contact time argues strongly against a traditional lecture/discussion framework. I thought a course integrating film as a principal element of study could be useful not only in terms of historical pedagogy, but also helpful in terms of breaking the days up and making efficient use of the time without overwhelming the students. This format worked very well for a January term. Teaching this course during a regular fifteen-week semester would certainly be feasible, with minor adjustments. The most significant hurdle would be the viewing of the films. Most of the films have running times over 1½ hours, some run as long as 2½ hours, which makes it impossible to show the films in one sitting during a standard hour-long class. If I were to teach this course during a regular semester, I would not show the film over the course of two days. I have found, in my Asian Civilizations and Chinese history courses, that breaking a film up over two days makes it too hard for the students to follow. I also would not let the students view the films on their own, as homework assignments for instance. As I mentioned above, the short discussions immediately following the viewing added significantly to the student's understanding of the films and the success of the course. Rather, I would seek out a solution whereby the films could be viewed in one sitting. Such a solution could be as simple as scheduling the class for Tuesday/Thursday and informing/warning the students that on viewing days class could, and probably would, run late. There are, of course, other ways of scheduling around this problem, but each would depend on the particular institution and need for departmental/divisional/administrative approvals.