The Asian Educational Media Service: 
Valuable Resource for Asian Media Information and Reviews 

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Editors’ note: An exceptional resource for teachers of Asian studies is the Asian Educational Media Service. In order to spread the word about this resource, we asked Jenny Huang, AEMS Director, if she would be willing to write a brief article about AEMS for ASIANetwork Exchange and permit us to share with our members a couple of sample reviews from AEMS’s News and Reviews. Her article and the reviews follow, reprinted here with permission from AEMS.

You enjoy using media to teach about Asia and you want to stay on top of information about new web and film resources and how they’re being used in the classroom. You are interested in showing some documentaries to your students, but you are not sure what materials are available and where to begin the search. A colleague told you about a great television program series that might be useful for your undergraduate class, but it doesn’t seem to be available for purchase anywhere.

Do any of these statements describe you? If the answer is yes, then the Asian Educational Media Service (AEMS, pronounced “aims”) is here to be of service. Whether you are an instructor, a student, a school librarian, or someone who is simply interested in learning more about Asia, AEMS can help you find information and resources that will further your exploration and study.

Since 1997, AEMS has been promoting education about Asia in K-16 classrooms through the use of media and technology. Funded through the generous support of the Freeman Foundation, AEMS maintains a comprehensive website (www.aems.uiuc.edu) with a searchable media resource database. Three times a year, we publish News and Reviews, an eight-page full-colored newsletter with reviews of documentary and feature films as well as essays about teaching with film and technology. Anyone who needs special assistance can take advantage of our free call-in and mail-in reference service. The following descriptions highlight three of our services that are of particular interest to our national audience. We hope that it will encourage you to take advantage of our resources.

Comprehensive website and media resource database

Visitors to the program website (www.aems.uiuc.edu) have many options for navigation. For first time visitors, we recommend that you start with the sectional tabs (located below the page banner) “About Us” takes you to information regarding our overall mission and activities, the people on our staff and advisory boards, the history of the program, and projects by our affiliate unit, the Media Production Group. “Resources” takes you to an index of helpful teaching materials (particularly for K – 12 classrooms) developed by AEMS and other educational outreach programs. The “Reviews” tab directs you to our online newsletter (see News and Reviews information below) archive where the latest and past issues can be viewed and searched. The “Related sites” section contains a comprehensive list of other online resources for further exploration, including the websites of many film distributors and links to image galleries. As new features are added and updates are made, they will be announced in the “New at AEMS” section, accessible by clicking on the phrase that appears near the top of the page.

Those who prefer to conduct quick searches can find information efficiently by using either the Media Database or the Google-powered search tools. A search for the film “To Live” through the Google search option, for example, returns a list of all available resources, the first being a teacher’s guide, which includes reproducible handouts for the classroom. Using the Media Database search option, on the other hand, yields a list of four film titles, and users can view detailed information about each film by clicking on the title link. If you are interested in a particular subject or country but do not have a specific title in mind, the “Advanced Search” option allows you to customize the search using criteria such as country, region, audience, subject, media type, and keyword, among other fields.

AEMS News and Reviews

Another popular AEMS resource is the News and Reviews newsletter, which is published three times a year at the beginning of each academic term (including one issue for the summer months). This popular newsletter is sent free of charge to about 4000 individual and organizational subscribers and we would be happy to add you to the mailing list or to send you extra copies for your next workshop.

Since 1998, News and Reviews has been helping to inform readers of the latest media materials available for learning about Asia. The film reviews and essays cover a wide range of geographical regions and subjects, and past special issues have focused on themes such as women, religion, and bargain buys for classroom instruction. Topics slated to be covered in the next two issues include: the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge period in Cambodia, 1970’s feminist movement in Japan, the Korean War, the Yasukuni Shrine, and Indian adaptations of Jane Austen, etc. AEMS receives regular notifications from distributors about new releases and we are always looking for reviewers to help evaluate these materials for the classroom. Please let us know if you are interested.

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Indonesia: The New Order and Beyond


Indonesia’s 30-year New Order began in 1966 with the overthrow of the country’s first president, Sukarno, and his replacement by General Suharto who served as president until forced to resign in 1998. He was succeeded by then Vice President B.J. Habibie. The New Order was characterized by considerable economic and educational development, but also by military rule, ecological damage, human rights violations, and corruption in business and government. These films illuminate three violent points in the New Order’s history: its beginning in mass killings following an alleged communist coup attempt; the occupation in 1975 of East Timor (after its decolonization by the Portuguese in 1974) which lasted until 1999; and conflicts which have arisen as new democracy is expressed following the end of the New Order regime and exploitative development projects are challenged. All three films would be suitable for high school grades 11 and 12, college, or adult audiences.

Shadow Play takes its title from popular puppet plays of Java and Bali, which portray the machinations and wars of kings in tales from India’s Ramayana and Mahabharata and from Javanese history. Its subtitle is a play on the successful Australian movie, The Year of Living Dangerously, which portrayed the chaos in Indonesia immediately before the fall of Sukarno. Shadow Play focuses on events surrounding September 30, 1965, when six Indonesian generals were murdered on one night, allegedly by supporters of the Indonesian Communist Party as part of a coup, which was put down within 24 hours by General Suharto. This led to a nationwide purge of suspected communists and brutal killings in villages and towns, mainly in Java and Bali, but also other areas. Hundreds of thousands of people died and were buried in mass graves. Local scores were often settled following Indonesia’s chaotic political and economic situation in the early 1960s. Many persons were imprisoned for the next several decades, and others were classified as communist sympathizers, and their job and educational possibilities were restricted.

The film’s title, Shadow Play, also relates to its central argument that before 1965, Australian, British, and American government representatives and agents were manipulating Indonesians through propaganda, misrepresentations, monetary support, and intelligence information as part of the Cold War fear that Communism was spreading throughout Southeast Asia and that Indonesia, with a large communist party, was a prime target. The thesis is supported through interviews with a variety of governmental and private persons, including survivors of prisons and torture, as well as consideration of recently released documents of several governments. The film would be useful in classes concerned with Southeast Asia, the wider implications of the Vietnam conflict, and the history of the Cold War.

Children of the Crocodile concerns the aftermath of Portugal’s withdrawal from Portuguese Timor in 1974. This event heightened anti-Communist fears in Indonesia’s military elite, with the rise of a revolutionary and allegedly leftist political party in East Timor, Fretlin, and led Indonesia to invade and occupy East Timor in 1975, with tacit support from the United States and Australia. Timorese fought the Indonesians during a violent two decades in which as many as 200,000 Timorese may have died from fighting, displacement from farming areas, hunger and disease. Many East Timorese fled to Australia. After the fall of President Suharto, President Habibie offered the East Timorese a choice: become an autonomous region in Indonesia or become independent. In a referendum managed by the United Nations in East Timor and among overseas refugees, a resounding 78% chose independence to the surprise of the often misinformed Indonesians and the chagrin of the military. Violence by Indonesian-sponsored militia drove many people to flee or be driven from the area. A U.N. military force came to help protect East Timorese from the militia and, after a period of U.N. trusteeship, East Timor became a nation on May 20, 2002.

The film’s title refers to a myth in which a Timorese man befriends a crocodile which eventually repays him by turning into the island of Timor where he and his descendents can live. The film, made by Australians, tells the story of two women, Cidalia Pires and Elizabeth Exposto, whose parents and many relatives were among thousands of refugees who fled East Timor to Australia in 1975. The film portrays events in the lives of these two young women as they grow up in close and highly political refugee families in Melbourne, become (continued on next page)
Australian, but also engage in the struggle for the freedom of East Timor. Filming was done skillfully in the two countries and captures vividly the life and chaos in occupied East Timor and the women’s activities and family lives in Australia. Filming is augmented with home movies and photos from family albums.

The film shows the rich cultural life of the refugees and their many efforts to aid the struggle from overseas. It shows poignantly how the two women face and surmount different personal situations in relating to East Timor. Elizabeth eventually goes to East Timor and works with the U.N. agencies to improve the situation there, though she envisions her future in Australia. Cidalia, a performance artist, helps organize dance and music groups in Australia and also goes to East Timor to record music and dance to take back to Australia. Her family all return to East Timor, but she, being a lesbian, feels that she could not fit into Timorese society, though she can continue her engagement through the arts. The film highlights clearly the dilemmas of identity, which face migrants and refugees in so many parts of the world, including many communities in the U.S. where this film might be usefully shown in classrooms.

A Trial in East Kalimantan, filmed on site in 1999, portrays the attempts by Benuaq Dayak people who are influenced by the new, post–New Order democracy to resist their exploitation by an Indonesian and foreign-owned company planting oil palms on their traditional hunting and farming grounds and on sacred burial sites. The company, lacking permission from Indonesian forestry or land granting bureaus, had only the permission of the provincial governor to take over thousands of hectares of land for its use, dispossessing the local Dayak. Such has been characteristic of many land grabs by the immensely profitable forest industry in both Indonesian and Malaysian Borneo. A group of Dayak villagers resisted by demanding to meet company and government authorities and to receive compensation. When company representatives failed to meet them, and they were offered what they considered to be a bribe by government officials, they burned down some company facilities and equipment. They were arrested, imprisoned for many months, and then tried. They gained support from human rights lawyers, student groups, and media which aided the men and demonstrated for them, voicing loudly their doubts about government concern for the people and the legitimacy of courts which, under the New Order, were often corrupted.

The film dramatically portrays the lives and opinions of those arrested and the situations of their families and the story is well constructed as it moves toward a suspenseful conclusion (which I shall not reveal). The filmmaking is not quite as slick technically as Children of the Crocodile, but is fine cinema verité as it shows the disputes between protesters, officials, and police, the prison situation and court proceeding, the home lives of the protesters, and the demonstrations and work of activists. Subtitling and translations are clear and well done.

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Clark E. Cunningham, Professor Emeritus of Anthropology, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, taught courses about Southeast Asia and did field research and teaching in Indonesia and Thailand.

Shadow Play is available from First Run/Icarus Films. Price is $390 for purchase or $75 for rental.
A Trial in East Kalimantan is available from Documentary Educational Resources. Price is $194 for purchase or $50 for rental.
Children of the Crocodile is available from Women Make Movies. Price is $250 for purchase or $75 for rental.
Sample Review from News and Reviews–AEMS

Shinto on Film


Three popular videos used in courses to help students gain a deeper understanding of Japanese religions in general and Shinto in particular are Nature, Gods, and Man in Japan; Buddha in the Land of the Kami; and Religions of the World. Shinto. The three films were produced in different decades (the 1970s, ’80s, and ‘90s) and provide a glimpse into how the study and perception of Shinto and Japanese religion have developed and changed over the years. But perhaps the best indicator of how effective these videos are in the 21st century in introducing classes to Japanese religion and culture is to ask the students themselves for their evaluations. What follows is a brief description of each film accompanied by the comments and insights of students in Japanese Religion and World Religions classes.

Nature, Gods, and Man in Japan was produced in 1977 by the Japan Society Film Center and, although it is the oldest of the three films under review, it provides the most visually arresting cinematography. The film utilizes serene and mystical images of Shinto with footage that lingers on the beauty of Japan’s natural landscape to help convey some of the basic traits and themes, such as permanence and renewal, which characterize Shinto. Two of the most important and sacred sites in Shinto—the Ise and Izumo shrines—are shown, as well as ceremonies, local festivals, and seasonal celebrations. Shinto images and works of art are also depicted to help explain how Shinto evolved through interaction with other Japanese religions, especially Buddhism. Most of the students’ comments, however, focused on two aspects of the film: the cinematography and the film’s emphasis on nature and harmony.

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The emphasis on the mystical nature of Shinto and the aesthetically pleasing cinematography affected students in a number of ways. Some said they could feel the serenity and peacefulness of Shinto through the video. They found it especially helpful to see the Ise and Izumo shrines and how their architectures express Shinto themes. Other students, however, felt that the pace of the video, the lingering footage of scenery, and the resonant tone of the narrator made it difficult to maintain concentration. One student said that the scenery footage was pleasant and beautiful but excessive and slow-paced and made her “want to cuddle up with a blanket and sleep.” Indeed, some students in class fell asleep!

In the view of some students, the emphasis on Shinto as a religious tradition in harmony with nature resulted in an unbalanced view of the religion. A number of students commented that they would have liked to learn more how Shinto affected the lives of ordinary individuals and their communities as Shinto is as much a dynamic tradition of communal festivals as it is a religion of tranquil beauty. The focus on Shinto as a harmonious religion also meant that State Shinto was not discussed in the video, much to the dismay of some students.

For the most part, students thought Nature, Gods, and Man in Japan was an informative and stunningly beautiful film. The video rightly points out that Shinto is an amalgamation of various influences yet also preserves essential characteristics such as the emphasis on purity, the affirmation of nature, and the closeness between nature and the divine.

The second video, Buddha in the Land of the Kami, was produced in 1989 and highlights the role of Buddhism and Chinese culture on the development of Shinto and Japanese culture from the 7th to 12th centuries. It is actually part of the Japan Past and Present film series that spans Japanese history from the 7th century to the 20th century. As such, the video provides a good historical framework from which to view Japanese religion and culture and offers insight into the evolution of various Japanese traditions, including sumo, rice paper making, calligraphy, and the creation of Japanese gardens.

Students responded positively to the ritual performances of the Shinto creation myths at the opening of the film. They (continued on next page)
found the explanations of kami (gods), the myths involving the deities Amaterasu and SusanM, and the Shinto sacred rope, or shimenawa, both interesting and helpful. The video also tells how the arrival of Buddhism and the culture it brought along influenced Shinto. For example, kami were not depicted in any distinct shape or portrayed in human form until contact with Buddhism. There is also an intimate look at ritual ceremonies that illustrates the integration of Buddhist and Shinto traditions.

Although Buddha in the Land of the Kami contains some beautiful footage of Japanese scenery and arts, there were also some odd claims made in the film that caught the attention of students. Statements such as the one made at the beginning of the video that the kami are not actually gods and the assertion made near the end that Shingon Buddhism is only practiced by a select few are simply not accurate. But the remark that produced the most discussion in class was the one made in the first part of the film that the kami are well disposed to humans, especially the Japanese. Students would have benefited from more detail and explanation regarding these statements.

Overall, Buddha in the Land of the Kami provides good historical context for understanding the development of Shinto, especially in regards to its interaction with Buddhism and Chinese culture. Students found the historical emphasis of Buddha in the Land of the Kami helpful in explaining how contemporary Japanese art and aesthetics can be traced to earlier practices.

Although there are some clear strengths to the 1998 Religions of the World: Shinto, the video improves little on the two earlier films. What students found especially positive about this video were the insights and comments of a professor interviewed during the course of the film, something that the other two videos lacked. The film conveys the complexity of the kami concept and clearly explains how Shinto adopted and incorporated other religious traditions into its framework. Shinto also raised the issue of World War II and State Shinto, topics not covered in the other videos.

Students also found a number of weak points that detracted from the overall quality of the video, however. To start with, the narrator, Ben Kingsley, had difficulty pronouncing several terms which gave the perception he was simply reading from a script and did not know much about the subject. Also, a number of students thought too much time was spent on subjects not related to Shinto. For example, there is a long sequence on Christianity that lacks any clear reference to how it directly impacted Shinto. There were also occasions where the video footage did not match the narration, which left students wondering what they were watching.

Perhaps the most telling comments about the film come not from the students who watched the video but from the professor who appears in the film itself, John Nelson, a Japanese religion scholar and Shinto authority. Nelson has written elsewhere of his frustration in trying to help create “an intelligent, visually interesting, and accurate documentary on one of Japan’s most long-lived and pervasive religio-political traditions.” Space does not permit the listing of all the errors and problems Nelson found with the video; however, two glaring mistakes should be mentioned. Near the middle of the video we are told that the most important Japanese festival is the New Year’s celebration. This may be true, but the footage shown accompanying this statement is not a New Year’s celebration but scenes from a summer festival! Also, the “evil Kami” mentioned and depicted in the video are not Shinto kami at all but Buddhist guardian deities! Such errors as these led Nelson to recommend that Shinto be taken off everyone’s purchase list.

Taken as a whole, the three films complement each other and provide a clearer picture of one of Japan’s most enduring religious traditions. Separately, however, the distinct emphases and focuses of each film (mystical, historical, analytical) result in an uneven presentation of the complexity and richness that color Shinto. This tells us as much about the inherent ambiguity and amorphous nature that characterize Shinto as it does about the effectiveness of the films to disseminate a deeper understanding of Japanese religion. The attempt to capture and convey in video the important themes and issues that inform Shinto can be a fascinating and frustrating endeavor for both the filmmakers and their audiences. Yet the study of Shinto and Japanese religion is richer because of it.


Jay Sakashita received his Ph.D. in Japanese Religion from the University of Stirling in Scotland and currently teaches religion courses at the University of Hawaii and at Leeward Community College. His area of research is Japanese new religions.

Nature, Gods and Man in Japan is available from the Japan Society. Price is $85.

Buddha in the Land of the Kami, part of the Japan Past and Present series, is available from Films for the Humanities and Sciences. Price is $159 for purchase and $75 for rental.

Shinto, part of the Religions of the World Series, is available from Social Studies School Service. Price is $39.95.

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Reference service

Some of you have been teaching with film and technology for a long time and you are familiar with resources that are available. However, every once in a while, you might encounter problems with locating a copy of a film or have a teaching focus that goes beyond the coverage of any current materials. In both cases, if you contact AEMS, we would be happy to help with your special needs, be it to track down hard to find films or to research materials that will meet your specific needs. If, on the other hand, you are just getting started in using film and technology in the classroom and would like some advice, AEMS would be happy to help you get started.

We’d love to hear from you!

AEMS is committed to the important mission of promoting greater interest and understanding about Asia. We believe in the potential of media and technology to help facilitate the learning process and work hard to research, identify, and develop film and web resources helpful to educators. We understand the challenges faced by Asian Studies faculty and how those at small liberal arts colleges with limited resources face even greater difficulties. We hope that you will consider us a resource and take advantage of the many services we provide.