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## Research of Note

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A Note From the Editors

With the publication of the Spring 2011 issue of the ASIANetwork Exchange, the editorial staff of the journal will have completed its second and final three-year term of office. We take pride in the fact that the journal’s evolution has reflected the continued growth and health of ASIANetwork, as demonstrated by the quality of articles that appear in this issue. We are particularly pleased with the special section of this issue, “China through the Cinematic Lens.” Under the guidance of Guest Editor, Jie Zhang, several scholars offer creative and insightful analyses of their research into Chinese film and of their classroom use of Chinese movies in the teaching of language, cinema, history, urban studies, and popular music. We offer a special thank-you to Professor Zhang for her excellent work in soliciting and editing these useful articles and for her timely and professional collaboration with our editorial team.

In addition to the guest-edited articles, we include a number of other pieces that are of broad interest to readers. Two authors who contributed to the “Research of Note” section, Anne Beidler and Lianying Shan, focus upon the humanities through their analyses of Japanese detective fiction and Chinese poetry of the Tang Dynasty. In the “Media Resources” section, Anita Andrews, in her review of The Monkey Kid, offers a welcome complement to the articles in the Cinema section through her exploration of the use of this Chinese film in the classroom to uncover themes from the Cultural Revolution.

Perhaps most importantly, we include in this issue two significant products of student research in the section “For Our Students.” Chao Ren’s manuscript, “Revisiting Tagore’s Visit to China: Nation, Tradition, and Modernity in China and India in the Early Twentieth Century,” provides new insights on the problematique of Asian nationalism through his comparison of
the intellectual communities of China and India in the early 1920s. This intriguing study resulted in the author’s being named as the inaugural recipient of ASIANetwork’s new Marianna McJimsey Award for outstanding undergraduate student research. Chelsea Robinson’s contribution, “Presentations of Emperor Hirohito in Japanese War-Related Museums,” was selected as an exemplar of the outstanding student research that is supported by the ASIANetwork Freeman Foundation Student-Faculty Fellows Program.

Together, all of these articles embody what is unique about the teaching of Asia in liberal arts settings: the embrace of interdisciplinarity, the use of creative classroom pedagogies, the willingness to use media in new and exciting ways, the commitment to faculty-student collaboration in undergraduate research, and the belief that the linkage between teaching and scholarship is inextricable. They represent core values that are continually articulated by the members of ASIANetwork and expressed within the pages of the ASIANetwork Exchange.

Our goal as editors has been to enhance the journal’s founding purpose as an exchange of ideas and experiences to strengthen the teaching of Asia in our liberal arts institutions. We are very grateful to the Board for its support of our efforts over the past six years to advance this goal. As this editorial team passes the baton to new editors, Professors Erin McCarthy of St. Lawrence University and Lisa Trevedi of Hamilton College, we know that the journal not only is in good hands, but will continue to grow in exciting ways, exemplifying the vibrancy and seriousness of purpose that make ASIANetwork such an important force within the academy.

Irv Epstein    Tom Lutze    Patra Noonan
About the Contributors

Special Guest Edited Section:

Luying Chen

Luying Chen (Ph.D. in Comparative Literature) is Assistant Professor of Chinese at St. Olaf College. She has taught courses on Chinese language and literature, comparative literature, and Asian studies at Brown University, the Princeton-in-Beijing program, Valparaiso University, and St. Olaf College. Her research interests include the Chinese poetic tradition of reclusion, classical Chinese novels, transnational films, European Romanticism, and the application of her specialty to liberal arts education.

John A. Crespi

John A. Crespi (Ph.D. in East Asian Languages and Civilizations) is the Henry R. Luce Associate Professor of Chinese at Colgate University. He is the author of *Voices in Revolution: Poetry and the Auditory Imagination in Modern China* (University of Hawai’i Press, 2009). His teaching covers Chinese language, literature and culture, and his research centers on modern poetry and Republican-era cartooning.

Jin Feng

Jin Feng (Ph.D. in Asian Languages and Cultures) is Associate Professor of Chinese at Grinnell College. She is the author of *The Making of a Family Saga: Ginling College (1915-1952)* (SUNY Press, 2009) and *The New Woman in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Fiction* (Purdue UP, 2004), and the translator of *Chen Hengzhe’s Autobiography of a Chinese Young Girl* (Anhui Education, 2006). She is currently researching and writing on Web-based popular Chinese fiction.
Haili Kong

Haili Kong (Ph.D. in Comparative Literature) is Professor of Chinese Language, Literature and Film at Swarthmore College. His specialties are twentieth-century Chinese literature and Chinese cinema. His publications include *Beijing: from Imperial Capital to Olympic City* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) and *One Hundred Years of Chinese Cinema: A Generational Dialogue* (EastBridge, 2006).

Jie Zhang

Jie Zhang (Ph.D. in Chinese and Comparative Literature) is Assistant Professor of Chinese at Trinity University. Her research focuses on Chinese narratives, particularly Chinese-language cinemas and late imperial Chinese fiction and drama. She has published on independent Chinese cinema and taught Chinese cinema at Kenyon College, Middlebury Chinese School, Trinity University, and National Consortium for Teaching about Asia workshops.

Other Contributors:

Anita M. Andrew

Anita M. Andrew is an Associate Professor of History at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, Illinois. She is a specialist in Chinese history. She is co-editor with John A. Rapp, of *Autocracy and China’s Rebel Founding Emperors*, Rowman and Littlefield, 2000.

Anne Beidler

Anne Beidler has been on the faculty of Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Georgia (metro Atlanta) since 1992, where she is a Professor in the Department of Art and Art History. Her recent work includes a series of inter-related mixed media paintings, hand-pulled prints and artist books. Beidler’s work has been selected for inclusion in exhibitions throughout the United States.
and internationally. She has been a visiting artist at a number of colleges and universities including Rollins College in Florida; Tulane University and Seoul Women’s University in Korea. Her work is included in collections including those of the Kennedy Museum of Ohio University, special collections at Auburn University, the Wiregrass Museum in Alabama and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (Joan Flasch Artist Book Collection).

Chao Ren

Chao Ren is a senior history major at Illinois Wesleyan University (Bloomington, IL). A native of Dongying, China, he came to the United States for undergraduate studies in 2007. He spent his junior year at Pembroke College, Oxford on a Visiting Student Programme. His academic interest includes the intellectual history of late imperial and modern China and the history of colonial India.

Chelsea Robinson

Chelsea Robinson is a recent graduate of Willamette University with a major in Asian Studies. She participated in the 2009 ASIANetwork Student-Faculty Fellows Program funded by the Freeman Foundation.

Lianying Shan

Lianying Shan is Assistant Professor of Japanese at Gustavus Adolphus College, St. Peter, Minnesota. Her Ph.D. is in East Asian Studies from Princeton University. She teaches various courses on Japanese language, literature and culture, Chinese films, as well as women in East Asia. Her current research interests include representation of border crossing between China and Japan in contemporary Japanese literature and East Asian films.
Call for Applications for a Guest Editor, Special Section of the Spring 2012 Issue of the ASIANetwork Exchange

The Board of Directors of ASIANetwork calls for applications for Guest Editor of the Special Section of the Spring 2012 issue of the ASIANetwork Exchange. Proposals should include the following information and meet the criteria listed below.

General Criteria
1. A successful proposal should have a unified theme of significance to the goal of the ASIANetwork Exchange to serve as a journal for Asian studies in the liberal arts.
2. The proposal should include a brief narrative including the guest editor’s conception of the theme, a rationale for the topics of proposed articles, and ideas on how the audience will be engaged.

Specific Criteria
1. The proposal should be both innovative and geared toward a liberal arts faculty.
2. The proposal should identify 4-5 articles for the Special Section that will be solicited and edited by the author of the proposal to fill 32 pages (or more) of the journal.
3. The proposal should include at least one article incorporating original research and at least one article focusing on pedagogy, media resources, or usefulness for our students.
4. The proposal should provide evidence of viability.
5. Proposals should be no more than 1000 words.
6. The author of the proposal should also include a one-page CV.

Other Considerations
1. Guest editors must be members of the network.
2. Board members or Exchange editors are not eligible to apply.

Please send applications by email to: Erin McCarthy and Lisa Trivedi at anexchange@iwu.edu.

Deadline for applications: June 1, 2011
Introducing the Guest-Edited Section

China through the Cinematic Lens

Jie Zhang
Trinity University

With the global visibility of China as a rising power, Chinese cinema has also emerged and developed into a vibrant academic field in the West since the mid-1980s, as evinced by an increased number of scholarly publications, conferences, film festivals, and university courses on Chinese cinema. More students than ever are interested in studying Chinese cinema in academic classrooms, through which they fulfill common curriculum requirements and have the opportunity to learn about Chinese language, culture, and history. Many teachers find Chinese cinema courses helpful in making Chinese studies more visible both on campus and in the community. The advancement of digital technology has also not only facilitated the research and teaching of Chinese films, but it has also offered students the opportunity to actively contribute to developing cinematic images of China, as more students are now studying in China while equipped with digital devices.

The five essays in this special section introduce and reflect upon using Chinese film in different types of liberal arts courses, through experiences of faculty members who are also active scholars of Chinese culture and cinema. The objective of these essays is to offer perspectives on the history, philosophy, and pedagogy of teaching Chinese cinema, with a special focus on innovative ways of combing individual faculty training with students’ creativity.

Dr. Haili Kong’s state-of-the-field essay reviews the history and approaches to teaching Chinese cinema in United States classrooms within recent decades. Kong’s essay
identifies existing pedagogical patterns, points out areas of Chinese cinema that remain to be included in current curricula, and further provides a list of selected bibliography and resources essential for a basic understanding of Chinese cinema.

**Dr. Luying Chen** presents pedagogical strategies for teaching Chinese films in advanced language classes. Chen reviews the approaches of two recently published textbooks, provides a case study of teaching Zhang Yimou’s *To Live* through a combination of literature and film and using a comparative perspective, and outlines four topics that can be adopted to foster language proficiency and critical thinking in Chinese language courses.

**Dr. Jin Feng** discusses the role of Chinese film in cultural courses, particularly focusing on the steps for teaching China’s Cultural Revolution through the use of Tian Zhuangzhuang’s *Blue Kite*. Feng details her methods for training students to develop cultural empathy through a close examination of both the text and the film, and how to analyze film in historical context, in order to achieve an in-depth understanding of the film and the historical period it depicts.

**Dr. John Crespi** explores how guided and imaginative use of digital video and audio technology can help students engage thoughtfully with local cultures, and how to use these tools in order to foster a reconsideration of often deeply held dichotomies, such as tradition vs. modernity, past vs. present, and East vs. West. Crespi also discusses the selection of course materials and themes to lay groundwork for creating digital stories, and how to negate the problems of choosing a meaningful research topic for digital exploration, possible issues of media literacy, and the process of gathering and editing material on site.

My article focuses on the important role that popular music plays in Jia Zhangke’s six films in general, and in his *Unknown Pleasures* in particular, with an aim to bridge the gap between Jia’s increased use in the classroom and the lack of scholarly attention to his use of popular music. I argue that Jia uses music
to express his characters’ anxiety during a time when China is drastically transformed into a globalized society. Music and noise are used collectively to reflect upon the violent nature of the processes of reinforcing a communal identity in socialist China and of decentralizing that shared identity in post-socialist China.

We hope that our experiences with teaching film courses, publishing scholarly work on Chinese cinema, and supervising students’ video-related projects can benefit and empower other colleagues who would like to integrate visual materials into their classrooms and lesson plans in order to promote a better understanding of China.
TEACHING ABOUT ASIA

Reflections on Teaching Chinese Language Films at American Colleges

Haili Kong
Swarthmore College

“Film Studies” has become one of the fastest developing disciplines at liberal arts colleges in the United States since the early 1990s. Many factors have contributed to the growth of this new teaching field, among which is the fact that new generations of college students are more accustomed than ever before to visual learning due to the influence of media technology. Also with the growth of global studies, “film” is widely used as “cultural text” through which students learn about other national histories, cultures, and customs in a visualized way that is different from conventional text-reading. Chinese-language cinema, with perspectives and content distinctive from Western films, has become an innovative point in the development of Chinese studies curricula. China’s fast-paced economic development and the emergence of the Chinese cinematic movements (so-called “New Waves”) of the mid-1980s have also played critical roles in drawing increased attention to Chinese cinema in classrooms in the United States.

The Chinese cinematic New Waves emerged almost simultaneously in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan in the 1980s. Even though the rationales and motivations for filmmakers in these three geographical and political entities were quite different from each other, the cinematic products of the New Waves nevertheless were marked by similar characteristics. In contrast to the films previously made in greater China, films of the New Waves featured bold political challenges through their subject matter, innovations in audiovisual
design, unconventional camera work, and avant-garde narrative strategies. In the past 20-plus years, these films have received serious attention from international film critics and have won major awards at international film festivals. They have also emerged on college campuses, gradually becoming integrated into the regular curricula of film studies in the United States.

This essay focuses on three aspects of teaching Chinese-language cinema at American liberal arts colleges. The observations here are mainly based on my own experiences of teaching at Swarthmore College since 1994, interacting with colleagues at various liberal arts colleges, and contributing to research about Chinese-language cinema. The essay first discusses general approaches to teaching Chinese films, with an emphasis on thematic contents and aesthetic forms. It proceeds to introduce different teaching methods, including guiding students to perform onsite research and film production. It then concludes with suggestions for future improvements in teaching Chinese-language films at liberal arts colleges in the United States.

**Thematic Contents**

When Chinese films were first taught in the early 1990s, they were mainly offered in literature departments rather than in film studies. The chosen films were mainly adopted as alternative cultural texts to further foster students’ general interest in China. Social and political aspects of the films received primary attention, mainly because films tend to reflect the historical contexts in which they are made and received. In this sense, the New Waves films reconstruct the processes and reflect upon the particular impacts of the unprecedented changes of the 1980s and after, such as economic reform in Mainland China, the anticipation of Hong Kong’s handover in 1997, and the lifting of martial law in Taiwan. For most American college students, China has remained a mystery, even though Chinese language studies have been booming at both secondary and tertiary-level educational institutions since the 1990s, and educational exchange programs with China and tourist opportunities have become increasingly available. Naturally,
Chinese film courses have served mainly to enhance students’ understanding of the changing modern China.

In the early 1990s, many teachers, myself included, were excited to discover the highly unconventional films produced by the Fifth Generation” filmmakers from Mainland China. These film directors belonged to an ambitious group of graduates of the Beijing Film Academy in 1982, whose creativity and talent had been suppressed during the ten-year Cultural Revolution (1966-76). Their films became sensational soon after the milestone film, Chen Kaige’s *Yellow Earth* (1984), won critical acclaim in Hong Kong. The film, through an ambiguous and avant-garde style of filmmaking, presented a political irony that subtly challenged official discourse on revolutionary history. Chen’s distinctive arrangement of color, sound, and space created a shocking viewing experience for audiences. The film also left unanswered a series of questions, with an ambiguity that rarely occurred in the Chinese films produced by previous generations of filmmakers. Chen’s classmate and cinematographer, Zhang Yimou, also made a series of films that featured color symbolism, such as *Red Sorghum* (1987), *Ju Dou* (1990), and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991). These films, together with Tian Zhuangzhuang’s *Blue Kite* (1993), were mostly banned in China but won international acclaim and prestigious awards. These works were nurtured by significant ideological and cultural trends during the 1980s, such as the “root-seeking” (*xun gen*) and “culture fever” (*wenhua re*) movements\(^2\). These movements initiated this young generation’s critical rethinking of the past, the present, and the future—and of themselves as individuals—thus greatly liberating their minds’ yearning for freedom and creativity. Because of this close tie between the Fifth Generation films and these cultural movements, the films were largely treated by college instructors as welcomed visual texts to supplement the teaching of literary works and social and cultural changes in contemporary China.

At the same time, teachers also realized the importance of covering films beyond the Fifth Generation films. For instance, with the intent of providing a larger picture of the evolution of
Chinese cinema and emphasizing the importance of studying films in historical contexts, I created a course called “History of Chinese Cinema: From Silent to Sound.” Through this course I taught films made in the 1930s and guided students to investigate how the movies reflected both historically specific social life and the limits and promises of cinematic technology all the way up to the twenty-first century. The expanded scope of this course offered a new way for students to learn Chinese culture, compare Chinese film at different stages with films of other national cinemas, and map the process of film’s evolution as an art form and an industry.

This wider scope of instruction has also included films made by Taiwan directors and movies that have been an integral part of Chinese-language films from the very beginning. Hou Hsiao-hsien’s works in particular reflected upon the changing political perspectives on the forbidden “February 28 Incident” in Taiwan and the new demand for political openness in the 1980s. His famous *The City of Sadness* (1989) was the first film to recount the tragic 1947 Incident through individual perspectives, and it could largely be considered a public visual eulogy and a call for remembering this event that had long been suppressed in collective memory of the people of Taiwan. Hou not only touched upon politically sensitive topics but also formulated his trademark cinematic style, featuring static camerawork, long takes, long shots, voiceovers and inter-texts, minimal drama, and prolonged silence—features that are simultaneously engaging and powerful. Considered as “one of the three directors most crucial to the future of cinema” according to a 1988 worldwide critics’ poll, Hou’s films are regularly featured in college-level cinema courses and film festivals on liberal arts campuses. Together with films by Ang Lee and Edward Yang, they explore how Taiwan society has experienced the process of modernization and globalization without giving up traditional Confucian ethical values and moral standards. Ang Lee’s *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994) and Edward Yang’s *Yi Yi* (One and a Two) (2001), for instance, have triggered lively discussions in my classes on family structure, generational gaps, and midlife crises in modern Taiwan.
In terms of Hong Kong cinema, most audiences in the West may still have an overwhelming impression of its martial art films and urban romances. Actually, the Hong Kong new wave films produced since the early 1980s have been offering audiences more sophisticated content and cinematic forms. In the early 1980s, the news of the upcoming 1997 handover to Mainland China immediately caused a variety of reactions from local intellectuals. Major Hong Kong New Wave directors, such as John Woo and Wong Kar-wai, developed their own cinematic languages to implicitly address prevalent public anxiety about the handover. For example, John Woo’s *For a Better Tomorrow* (1986), his signature new urban gangster film, clearly represented his optimistic view of the future. By contrast, a series of Wong Kar-wai’s fascinating and stylish films made audiences ponder the tremendous psychological impact of the upcoming handover on Hong Kong residents. His *Fallen Angels* (1985) and *In the Mood for Love* (2001), for instance, represented the Hong Kong mentality of both pre- and post-handover in terms of exploring new meanings or perspectives on time, space, and being, and largely illustrated individual Hong Kong residents’ lives and their search for personal identity and belonging. The unique artistic style and ambiguous philosophical and existentialist themes of Wong’s films had particular appeal to my students. Overall, Woo and Wong’s films, and those of many other Hong Kong directors, have become preferred audiovisual texts that initiate students’ critical thinking and stimulate classroom discussion on these sensitive sociopolitical turning points and related issues.

I have also found Chinese films pivotal in helping students develop insights into universal human situations and philosophical issues. Thus they can be taught as subjects that contribute to common curriculum. Despite language and cultural barriers, my students are generally able to relate to the characters of the films and render thoughtful reflections upon questions such as why and how do human beings exist; how do humans connect with different generations and their fellow humans; and what is life’s meaning in this fast-changing, disappearing, and expiring modern space and physical time? The city as a living space, as constructed in Chinese films, for
example, can be very humane and attractive, but human beings can ironically also be very inhumane and cruel. The transformative relationship between human and machine (such as rickshaw, bicycle, and even the city itself) also demonstrates the naiveté of human desire and the destructive power of materialism. It is a kind of alienation, a question of being, belonging, and becoming, which everyone may have to think about sooner or later. In this sense, Wong Kar-wai’s films, together with films by Wang Xiaoshuai, Zhang Yang, Jia Zhangke, and Tsai Mingliang, provide students with ample intellectual challenges that concern the understanding not only of China’s past and present but also of their own existence as individuals and social beings.

Based on students’ receptions, I have come to believe that theme-based courses, with their clearly defined focuses, are more enthusiastically embraced than more general survey courses of Chinese language films. Theme-oriented film courses that are currently offered at college level have focused on heroism, war and revolution, youth culture, urban and rural divide, among others—themes that also belong to artistic and formal genre studies. These theme-focused courses are structured to foster in-depth understanding of particular aspects of Chinese culture. For instance, a course entitled “What Makes a Chinese Hero?” offered at Kenyon College, can guide students to understand both traditional and changing modern concepts of a hero in China via reading both pre-modern and modern literary texts and viewing Chinese films. Films in such a course can serve to connect and bridge pre-modern and modern materials and thus make the pre-modern relevant and accessible to students’ interest in modern China. In such a course, a comparative study of the character Mulan in its original Chinese text (“Ballad of Mulan”) and in the contemporary Disney movie Mulan can shed light on theoretical issues such as cultural stereotyping, adaptation, and mass appeal. Focusing on a cultural heroine might also give rise to a more thorough engagement with topics related to feminism and film.

In response to the growing impact of Western theories of feminism and cultural studies, numerous essays and books were published in the early 1990s with an intense focus on how
women have been portrayed or positioned in Chinese-language films. These scholarly writings have also been increasingly integrated into college class discussions. For instance, there are quite a few sharp, critical commentaries on Zhang Yimou’s early films, such as his three “reds” (Red Sorghum, Ju Dou, and Raise the Red Lantern), noting Zhang’s tendency of pleasing the “male gaze” and of propagating “Orientalist fabrications.” Such commentaries are not only a reflection of a new pattern of film criticism on Chinese cinema, but also of the merging of Chinese film criticism with international cultural criticism in the context of the globalization, enabling students to expand their intellectual horizon.

Aesthetic Forms

Many Chinese-language films, particularly those from the New Waves, are now considered classics in the history of Chinese cinema. While these films’ cultural and political dimensions are justifiably analyzed closely, teachers and students of Chinese cinema should also be prepared to explore and appreciate the films as artistic compositions. In fact, several research books on Chinese cinema in the 1990s were written or compiled by art historians who are not China experts. These scholars paid special attention to the shared image and frame composition between contemporary films and classical Chinese paintings. For instance, Linda Ehrlich compiled an essay collection on Chinese film, Cinematic Landscapes: Observations on the Visual Arts and Cinema of China and Japan, which offers a special perspective through which to view the political films of the Fifth Generation, stressing that these films’ artistic and intertextual analysis also prevailed in classical landscape paintings. These studies remind us of the importance of addressing the continuity of artistic heritage when we prepare to teach about cinematic innovations.

More often than not, discussions of aesthetic significance can enhance thematic interpretation of the film. For instance, in his analysis of Yellow Earth, Chris Berry points out that the landscape arrangement in the film appears to be associated with the traditional Chang’an painting school and thus implies the director’s rejection of the aesthetics of socialist realism.
Berry’s emphasis on how artistic forms are loaded with meanings can lead our students to rethink why the apparently artistic experiments of the Fifth Generation filmmakers can be interpreted as politically pernicious by film censors of China.

As far as I know, most college teachers in the United States who teach Chinese film were originally trained in the field of Chinese literature or comparative literature. Naturally, their critical vision and analytical ability are different from those who are trained as art historians or film critics. Since the 1980s, thanks to the impact of this new trend of cultural criticism on Chinese studies, the mode of literary criticism has no longer been confined to close-reading and textual analysis, but has been expanded to an intertextual, social-contextual, and interdisciplinary scope. Concretely speaking, all the new “-isms,” including post-colonialism, feminism, post-structuralism, post-modernism, and so on, have all more or less shaped our teachers’ previous training as well as our students’ ways of thinking. As a positive result, the expansion of criticism has rendered a variety of new approaches for film criticism.

As many films were adapted from literary texts and the majority of teachers have literary backgrounds, I propose that it may be fruitful to compare the cinematic texts with their original literary texts and then explore the process of the adaptation. In this way, the analysis may explore how the filmmaker makes changes and may also reveal the differences between visual images and written words, including the resultant differences in receptions of the audience/reader. Conventionally, to be “loyal to the original literary text” (both in its thematic messages and the major plot) seems to be the goal of a cinematic adaption, but such loyalty is always difficult if not impossible to sustain. For the younger generation, however, cinematic adaption has simply meant “re-creation,” often with no consideration of faithfulness to the original text. They treat the original literary text simply as a base.

Among the New Wave directors, Chen Kaige has taken the lead in adapting literary works into films. His Yellow Earth is adapted from Ke Lan’s “Silent Is the Ancient Plain,” a short story based on Ke’s personal experience during the revolutionary era. Chen changed the title to Yellow Earth and made this
personal memoir-type story into a national allegory. In another instance, Zhang Yimou’s acclaimed film *To Live* is based on Yu Hua’s novel *To Live*. However, the film is quite different from the original text, not to mention its mood and tone of the narration; as Yu Hua once humorously commented, “After viewing Zhang Yimou’s film *To Live* for the first time, I noticed something familiar in the film and felt that my novel somehow resembles his film in a way. However, I suddenly realized that it should be his film that resembles mine, not the opposite since mine is the original.”9 Zhang Yimou also drastically adapted Su Tong’s work of fiction *All Wife and Concubines* to the film *Raise the Red Lantern*, with a series of visual elements and symbolism added to enrich the viewers’ imagination. Zhang also added several new cultural rituals, such as hanging red and black lanterns, massaging the feet, and transforming the roof into a new stage for the loners of the household in the story—all of which were Zhang’s re-invention and re-enhancement of the audiovisual power of film. Therefore, it is helpful for our students to compare the original text with the cinematic adaptation so that they can not only find the differences but also have an opportunity to discuss and better understand the process of the transformation from the literary to the cinematic.

After the year 2000, this pattern, from faithful adaptation to re-creation, seemed to be further developed into more or less parodies of the original. If we can still call Zhang Yimou’s *Hero* (2002) a highly conceptualized historical allegory (adapted from an old legend about the assassin and the first emperor in China), then his *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006) became an awkward imitation of Cao Yu’s modern play *Thunderstorm* (1934).10 Zhang Yimou’s *Happy Times* (2001) can also be read as a cheesy comedy at the expense of losing the seriousness of social critique and sarcastic bite that characterized Mo Yan’s short story from which the film was adapted. Why have some well-known filmmakers led the way in turning cinematic adaptations from serious literature into kitschy parodies in the past decade? Is it an impact of irresistible commercialism? This might be an interesting topic worthy of both research and classroom discussion.
In my own classroom discussions I also pay special attention to the films’ audiovisual effects, which is one of most important elements of film itself that requires our students’ intellectual engagement. How to effectively use sound and accompanying music always preoccupies filmmaking, and analysis of this often forgotten aspect of filmmaking has been calling for attention in both teaching and researching. The use of music in contemporary Chinese language films has become more sophisticated and powerful, providing fertile ground for lively classroom discussions. Zhang Yimou often uses folk music to create a contrasting or even ironic feeling, especially in death scenes of his films (particularly in *Ju Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern*).\(^{11}\) Jiang Wen, by contrast, adopted Soviet songs and Italian music in his *In the Heat of the Sun* (1995) in order to enhance the social atmosphere and stir up a generational nostalgia and special sentiments for that disappeared revolutionary era as well as for viewers’ own energetic youth. Prominently, Wong Kar-wai’s films such as *Fallen Angels* and *In the Mood for Love* are full of Spanish love songs and Argentina tango and other romantic dance music, whose strong and haunting rhythms and exotic melodies highlight the floating lifestyle and uncertain personal identity of the postmodern world. I usually encourage music majors in my film class to do in-class presentations and term papers on the use of music in the films, and these efforts have often contributed a special perspective to our class discussion and facilitated our understanding of the film.

The fascinating cinematography itself also deserves pedagogical attention, particularly given that one of China’s most established directors, Zhang Yimou, was first trained as a photographer. The use of camera, the control of light and sound, the montage, and the special audiovisual effects are gradually becoming objects for both research and teaching. This more technologically involved subject often requires our literature-trained teachers to continue learning about more technical aspects of film and our students to acquire basic knowledge of film too, which is an important part of interdisciplinary training.\(^{12}\)
Teaching Platforms and Future Suggestions

When Chinese film courses first emerged at American colleges, most of them served as introductions to Chinese culture and societies. The films were often viewed and used as a window or mirror for students to see social change and understand Chinese history and society. However, recently teachers have felt the urge to engage students not only as consumers and critics of images but also active producers of images. In a creative course designed at Colgate University, students spend a semester studying the subject of the Chinese city on campus, with assignments such as watching Beijing-related films and reading relevant books (see the article by John A. Crespi in this issue of ASIANetwork Exchange). Then the instructor leads them to Beijing for three weeks, where they are required to complete their individual final projects in the form of digitized documentary films that show Beijing city from their individual perspectives. Such a course enables both students and teachers to be actively engaged in the process of teaching and studying the city of Beijing. Offering this kind of course may be costly, but it is welcomed by both teachers and students and worth trying if a college budget allows.

I myself have experimented with teaching a double-credit senior/honors seminar with a special focus on three major filmmakers, Zhang Yimou, Wong Kar-wai, and Ang Lee. Entitled “The Remaking of Cinematic China,” the seminar is regularly offered at Swarthmore and has attracted many students (not only seniors) in spite of its heavy load (screening 34 films a semester plus a long reading list). The seminar offers students with ample opportunities to conduct research on these three filmmakers as individual artists and on their cinematic achievements, and to have discussions in class or via Blackboard on thematic concerns and cinematic characteristics. Each individual student is also required to prepare and raise a series questions on each film and take turns leading seminar discussions once a week. The success of such a course demonstrates that interested students are very well engaged and willing to go even deeper to explore and research selected Chinese filmmakers in whom they are interested.
Chinese language films have also been widely used for language teaching. Chosen episodes, or even a whole movie, are often used as audiovisual texts for Mandarin Chinese language courses beyond intermediate levels. Teachers at Hamilton College pioneered the transcription and use of Chinese-language films such as Chen Kaige’s *Farewell, My Concubine* (1993) as linguistic materials to teach upper-level Chinese-language courses. The students are required to not only understand the content of the films but also narrate the films, analyze their characteristics, and write essays on aspects of them. More recently, Princeton and Yale have also published textbooks mainly focusing on Chinese-language films. Luying Chen’s article in this special section addresses details using these textbooks with the specific needs of liberal arts students in mind.

Since Chinese film has only recently emerged as a field of research and teaching, there are naturally gaps that require further efforts before we can say that our understanding of Chinese-language film is systematic if not complete. As Zhang Yingjin\(^{13}\) pointed out at a recent pedagogy workshop held at Smith College on teaching Chinese cinema, literature, and culture, “The period of socialist Chinese cinema (1949-66) may have been accidentally ignored, or may just simply be missing from our classroom teaching as well as our research.”\(^{14}\) We should rethink the value of films produced during this period, particularly their contribution to the imagination of collective identity in a newly built nation-state and assimilation of potentially subversive views and positions. Currently, Hamilton College offers several film-related courses, such as “Recalling the Chinese Revolution through Film” and “Modern China through Film,” in which several films made during the Mao era are chosen for use, such as the well-known “red classics” *Song Jingshi* (1955, about a peasant-rebellion leader in the late Qing dynasty), *Guerrillas on the Railway* (1956, about the Communist-led guerrillas during the Sino-Japanese war), and *Song of the Youth* (1959, about the student movement during the 1930s Nationalist China). These films from socialist China are adopted in cinema class to show how the twentieth-century revolution was narrated.
and represented on screen. This should be a good experiment in further developing Chinese language film teaching at colleges.

At Swarthmore and elsewhere, teachers have begun to take advantage of Blackboard to do film “streaming” for students to watch films at their convenience. While this new development of technology is handy for both teachers and students, it also needs a lot of technical support and help from the language lab or information technicians for pre-teaching preparation, such as uploading information (including reading documents and selected films) onto Blackboard. The only concern, or disadvantage, particularly in courses studying cinematic technique, is that the film’s special audiovisual effects, so apparent on big screens, are often less evident on the small personal computers typically used for Blackboard film “streaming.”. How to address this issue remains a question for us to explore and solve.

To summarize, when we review the history of offering a variety of courses on Chinese language films at many liberal arts colleges in the past 20 years, we notice that teaching Chinese films has been playing an important role in a healthy and steadily growing development of the curriculum in Chinese or Asian studies programs nationwide. Chinese films are used in different types of classrooms at our colleges, from adopting episodes as visual and linguistic examples in classes of language, history, political science, and culture, to screening carefully chosen films in order to conduct serious film research on certain periods, filmmakers, or chosen themes for courses in film studies or senior seminars. The field of Chinese-language cinema continues to develop vigorously. We can all look forward to welcoming more new films into our classrooms and presenting their cinematic innovations and intellectual challenges to our students in the near future.

Recommended Reading List

General


**Hong Kong**


**Taiwan Cinema**


**Film Theory and General History**


**Monographs on Major Directors**


**Useful websites**

http://mclc.osu.edu/rc/filmbib.htm

**Endnotes**

1 Originally the New Waves in the three parts of Greater China were labeled differently. In Mainland China, the emergence of the Fifth
Generation filmmakers and their films was considered as New Wave, which may also encompass the later, or sixth, generation. In Hong Kong, the New Wave began in the late 1970s, but mainly refers to the Second New Wave represented by John Woo (urban gangster films, such as *For a Better Tomorrow*, in the mid-1980s) and Wong Kar-wai. The “Taiwan New Cinema” wave was initiated by a group of local young directors who were born or grew up during or after the Chinese Civil War (1946-1949), among whom Hou Hsiao-hsien was the lead. Hou’s *The Boys from Feng Kuei* in 1983, released one year earlier than *Yellow Earth* on the mainland, caught the international film critics’ attention and became a Golden Montgolfiere winner and a milestone in the history of Taiwanese films.

As an intellectual movement mixed with popular cultural demands, “culture fever” became one of the most distinguished features of 1980s China and involved the fields of literature, films, arts, music, and so on. What some intellectuals considered the “spiritual isolation” of China during Mao’s era came to an end. Then fresh ideas, new forms of arts, and even popular music and songs from the outside world that came through the open door ignited a cultural fever that stimulated critical thinking about values for the individual and the nation. For more details about these cultural movements, see Jing Wang’s book, *High Culture Fever—Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng’s China*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

The controversial February 28 Incident in 1947 refers to the Nationalist government crack down on anti-Nationalist sentiment and resistance from the local residents of Taiwan after the Nationalists took over Taiwan. Thousands of people were killed during Incident and more arrested during and after it. Only after martial law” was lifted in 1987 was the Incident allowed to be discussed in public and to be represented in film.

See http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0396284/bio.


For more details, see Lu Tonglin, Confronting Modernity in the Cinemas of Taiwan and Mainland China (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

While I don’t have any exact statistics to support my statement here, virtually none of our liberal arts colleges in the United States could afford to hire a specifically trained Chinese cinema expert who did not also have the capacity to teach Chinese language and literature. It may also be telling that all five authors of essays on Chinese film included in this special section are without exception trained in the field of literature. Only a few colleges (mainly research universities) have a handful of faculty members, such as Zhang Zhen at New York University, who make their home bases in film studies rather than Chinese or Asian studies programs.


Cao Yu (1910-1996) was one of the most famous modern Chinese playwrights, and his first and arguably the best play was *Thunderstorm* (1934). *Thunderstorm* is about complex relationships within a wealthy but morally corrupt family and the destructive consequences of incest and patriarchal structure. The play may reveal some obvious marks of Western influences, such as the Oedipus complex and the ancient Greek theater. It was said that Zhang Yimou did contact Cao Yu’s family for consent about the similarity between *Thunderstorm* and his *Curse of the Golden Follow* (2006) before Zhang started making this film.

In his early films, Zhang liked to use children kittens in death scenes, such as when Tian Bai killed both his legal father Jin Shan and his biological father Tian Qing in Ju Dou, and when the third wife was being sent to the death tower in Raise the Red Lantern. Such lighthearted kittens coming out with the most tragic death scenes often created an ironic atmosphere with a horrifying haunting effect over audiences.

As mentioned above, teachers originally not trained in film may need some further training for better teaching of film courses.

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A Pedagogy Workshop on Teaching Chinese Cinema, Literature and Culture, entitled “China Through the Modern Lens” was held on March 5 and 6, 2010 at Smith College, Northampton, Mass. Teachers from Amherst College, Colgate University, Grinnell College, Rutgers University, Smith College, Swarthmore College, Trinity University, University of California, San Diego, and University of Pennsylvania participated in this inspiring workshop organized by Professor Sujane Wu from Smith College.
Teaching Chinese Film in an Advanced Language Class

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Instructors often face a dilemma when using film in language classes. While film is appealing for the rich cultural and linguistic information it offers, finding the balance between teaching content and building language skills can present significant challenges for an instructor. Common approaches to using film in courses taught in English, such as screening one film a week, reading critical essays about the films, and class discussions and lectures, seldom offer the same benefits in a foreign language course due to the fact that students with only three years of foreign language study frequently lack the language skills necessary to discuss films in a foreign language. Yanfang Tang and Qianghai Chen, authors of the textbook *Advanced Chinese: Intention, Strategy, & Communication* (2005), have argued that “[n]either interpreting textual meanings nor decoding linguistic patterns leads naturally to the productive skills needed” for communicating in the target language at the advanced level.¹ They further suggest that “practice, in a conscious but meaningful way is the key to successful transformation of input knowledge into productive output skills.”²

When we use films in language classes, the focus is for students to understand the textual meanings and linguistic patterns within the film, but training productive output skills in students, while fostering cultural proficiency and developing critical thinking skills, can prove to be somewhat difficult to accomplish within normal classroom time constraints. Recently published textbooks, including *Readings in Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (Chou, 2008, hereafter Readings)³ and *Discussing Everything Chinese* (Li-li Teng Foti, et al., 2007, hereafter Discussing)⁴, have recognized this challenge and

2. Ibid., p. 163.
experimented with different approaches to using Chinese film in advanced language classes. However, effective classroom instruction often depends on the instructor’s creative arrangement and presentation of materials to encourage students whose academic interests and goals of language learning can be very different.

In my own experience teaching fourth-year level Chinese classes, previously at Valparaiso University and currently at St. Olaf College, Chinese language films comprised a significant component of each course. I aim to share how I have specifically adopted two lessons from *Discussing* to keep language teaching as a main goal for these types of courses, and how integration of literature and comparative literature can enhance the teaching of critical thinking and empathy. I will also discuss how this approach can be translated into teaching an entire course on Chinese film using *Readings*, which offers a synopsis, a critique, and transcriptions of selected dialogues for each of ten well-known films produced since the 1980s from mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.

**How to Compare Two World Famous Directors in a Third of an Advanced Chinese Language Course?**

The first lesson in *Discussing*, “Chinese Film Directors Zhang Yimou and Ang Lee,” offers a comparison of the subject matter and artistic styles of these two best-known Chinese directors’ works and their respective life experiences, as well as their national and international receptions. The second lesson, “A Look at Modern Chinese History Through Zhang Yimou’s *To Live*,” provides a more in-depth study of a film that covers major historical periods of modern China—the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), the Civil War (1945-1949), the Great Leap Forward (1958-1961), and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Each lesson is divided into two parts, which use a vocabulary list showing examples of the words’ usage in different contexts. The exercises following each lesson primarily focus on the linguistic goals of an advanced Chinese course: narration at paragraph-length discourse, summary, discussion, essay writing, and presentation.
I find it most effective to start with the analysis of *To Live* before moving on to generalities like comparing the two filmmakers. I also adapt Foti's frame of thinking to design the main teaching objectives of the unit: introduce the directors; compare the overall subject matter of the films, their different artistic styles, and receptions; and discuss how their films reflect modern and contemporary Chinese society and history, cross-cultural conflicts, and the conflicts between tradition and modernity. To balance depth and breadth and vary classroom activities, I organize the unit into three segments. Part I (Day 1-Day 7) is a close study of *To Live* when students learn the basic vocabulary to summarize the plot, examine major motifs, and critique the film’s representation of history. Part II (Day 8) is a discussion of *The Story of Qiu Ju* (Zhang Yimou, 1992) for students to practice their newly acquired skill for summarizing films. Part III (Days 9-10) consists of students’ presentations on six other films introduced in the textbook.

The close study of *To Live* starts with an in-class showcase of key scenes after students have already watched the film outside of class. The main objective of the first day is to understand the essence of key scenes and to review the plot in preparation for discussion. Themes of discussion are culturally specific, including the Daoist perspective on the change of fortune, the family as the source of strength to survive political catastrophes, the role of art, and the people’s role in political movements. The change of fortune is best illustrated through two clips involving the main character Fugui and Long’er, who had schemed to win Fugui’s family fortune through gambling, causing the family’s collapse when Fugui’s father dies of anger and his wife Jiazhen, who is pregnant, to leave with their young daughter. A humbled Fugui comes to Long’er’s house—which used to be Fugui’s ancestor’s house—to borrow money to make a new beginning after Jiazhen returns with their two children. Instead of money, Long’er condescendingly lends Fugui a box with puppets. This scene can be contrasted with a highly ironic later scene, in which Long’er is publicly executed by the communist government in the 1950s because of his unwillingness to share his property with the people. Fugui’s reaction to the
sound of gunshot aimed at Long’er, as if he was being shot, and the dialogue between him and his wife (Chou, 300-302) vividly demonstrate an ironic twist of fate. Had he not lost his house, he would have been executed as a rich landlord just like Long’er.

The two scenes that focus on family relationships mainly involve Fugui and his son Youqing. In the first scene, Fugui beats Youqing after the boy pours a bowl of hot and sour noodles on another boy for bullying his deaf sister Fengxia. The other boy’s father accuses Fugui’s family of “sabotaging the revolution.” Jiazhen blames Fugui for beating Youqing, while Fengxia reunites the family by inviting them all to eat dinner together. The next scene has Fugui carrying Youqing to school to attend a political event. The boy is still asleep after a night of participating in the Great Leap Forward movement in which the community was involved in making enough steel to “surpass England and America.” Fugui speaks dreamily, both to Youqing and himself, about a better future. He says that their family is a chicken right now, but the chicken will grow up to become a goose, the goose will grow up to become a sheep, and the sheep will become a cow. After the cow, communism will be realized. That day, after the long night’s work, Youqing is accidentally killed by a car driven by Chunsheng, Fugui’s war-time friend who is now a governmental official. Class discussion of these scenes focuses on the parent-child relationship in China. The last scene is also important when discussing the role of the individual: Is Fugui partly responsible for Youqing’s death?

The next four showcased scenes occur during and after the period of the Cultural Revolution. In the first scene, Fugui is asked to burn his puppets, in spite of his willingness to use them as political propaganda. The burning of the puppets symbolizes the total destruction of art during this period. The second scene portrays Fengxia’s wedding, when posters with revolutionary themes, a song in praise of Chairman Mao as a wedding vow, and a gift from Chunsheng including a collection of Chairman Mao’s writings indicate the marriage between art and politics, as well as political control of private spheres. In the third scene, Chunsheng, who is now being persecuted by the Red Guards, says good-bye and foretells his suicide. Echoing the title of the
film, Fugui tells Chunsheng they have to live no matter what happens. The last scene shows Fugui’s grandchild Mantou playing with baby chicks in the box that used to hold the family puppets after a visit to Fengxia’s grave. When the grandchild asks about what will become of the chickens when they grow up, Fugui repeats what he used to say to his son about the chickens turning into cows, but then remains silent in an obvious departure from the blind following of communist ideology.

Days 2 and 3 of the lessons are devoted to the study of the narrative summary and critique of the film in the textbook, with special focuses on vocabulary and sentence structure learning. Day 4 evaluates vocabulary learning through a quiz, after which the class uses the vocabulary to discuss important motifs in the film by recalling the key scenes. Students are then assigned an outline for a longer essay, either around the introduced motifs or a topic of their own choice, in preparation for Day 5 of class.

The discussion of the film deepened on Day 5 when perspectives from cultural criticism and comparative literature are introduced, and the roles of individuals during political movements are reviewed as a means to teach culture, critical thinking, and empathy. Students in my previous classes articulated how watching the film changed their view of people’s lives during the Cultural Revolution, appreciation of the Chinese people’s spirit of survival, the strength of family relationship, as well as criticism of the communist government. Students said they could easily feel sympathy for the Chinese people in the film, although they had a hard time accepting that the “party” is represented by “party members” such as the town chief, who appears to be totally innocent in the film.

Although I usually hesitate to use class period to discuss scholarly articles not in Chinese, I have found briefly introducing the main arguments from related articles can significantly raise the level of critical thinking in students. For the sake of deepening discussion about Chinese people’s need to survive, I introduced Rey Chow’s article “We Endure, Therefore We Are: Survival, Governance and Zhang Yimou’s To Live.” In Chow’s opinion, the two characters who embody a defiant spirit are Youqing and Chunsheng. Youqing’s pouring the bowl of noodle on the
bullying boy’s head is an action of protest, while Fugui’s public spanking of Youqing is analogical to the party’s discipline of the people. Instead of succumbing to his father’s discipline, Youqing remains unapologetic and defiant, as he later gives a bowl of hot and sour tea to his father and interrupts his puppet performance. This is a symbolic protest against the father’s power as well as the political order because at the time Fugui’s art has become an accomplice of the political movement. Chow also sees Chunsheng’s hint at suicide as equally defiant.

At this point in the discussion, critical empathy becomes a natural part of the learning goal. The questions I ask the class involve how much action an individual can take during a political movement and whether the issues seen in the film are primarily a “Chinese” problem or whether they concern a more universal human condition. Comparing To Live with the Italian film Life is Beautiful (Roberto Benigni, 1997) and the Austrian film Sunshine (István Szabô, 1999), which are introduced through a short lecture, further the discussion of these questions. Life is Beautiful is a film about how a Jewish father teaches his son to survive a Nazi camp by encouraging the boy to think about life in the camp as a game to win a toy tank. It has the most upbeat tone, to the extent that it is unrealistic. However, its celebration of the spirit of human survival offers a different perspective from Chow’s critique that survival is a common Chinese mentality. Sunshine, which tells the story of three generations of a Jewish family dealing with Nazi Germany, also celebrates the spirit to survive through the character of the grandmother. The film contains a voice as equally critical of passivity as that of Chow’s, when the older brother of the family who chooses the revolutionary path while his brother joined the German army, confronts the nephew who has been persecuted in a Nazi camp: What if the entire Jewish group took action in front of the Nazi soldiers of a much smaller number? That question could be asked of all of us. What individual action would we have taken, if we were in such a situation? The purpose of asking such questions was not to seek an answer, but to conduct an exercise to make studying the target language and a foreign culture not an activity of objectifying the Chinese
people and seeing them as victims. It returns learning to a level of self-reflection.⁶

Day 6’s assignment discusses the representations of history through a comparison of the film version of Youqing’s beating by his father and their reconciliation with a corresponding scene in Chinese writer Yu Hua’s novel *To Live*, on which the film is based.⁷ In the beginning of chapter seven of the novel, Fugui beats Youqing because the boy wants to quit school in order not to be a burden to the family. Their reconciliation occurs when Fugui, out of guilt, buys a sheep and Youqing, despite his wish to remain defiant, cannot help expressing his fondness for the sheep. This reconciliation does not serve as strong a political motif as the one in the film. Compared with the film, which is distressing, comedic, and yet melancholically hopeful, the novel uses dark humor and is much more pessimistic. The class discussion also touches upon the melodramatic features seen in both the visual and written texts. In short, the “look” at Chinese history moves far beyond that of the textbook. Students often demonstrate this through the presentations of their essays on Day 7, which are written after their receipt of feedback on their assigned outlines from Day 4.

The two additional components of this film unit are designed to achieve breadth. Part II (Day 8) is a discussion on *The Story of Qiu Ju* (Zhang Yimou, 1992) as a change of rhythm. Students watch the film before class and are asked to prepare a summary of the plot. Class activities focus on guiding students to understand a film about an ordinary Chinese citizen’s fight for basic human rights, a situation in China about which students are much concerned, and the conflict between the governing of law and the long tradition of how society functions through human relationships (expressed in the untranslatable concept of *renqing* 人情).

The third and last segment of the class unit is comprised of student pair or individual presentations on Zhang Yimou’s *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) and *Hero* (2002), and Ang Lee’s *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman* (1994), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), and *Pushing Hands* (1992). Depending on the size of the class, the number of films
that can be introduced, and days required for the presentations, can vary. Each group watches its designated film closely, writes a short summary of the film, selects key scenes to transcribe, turns the dialogue into narration, and provides a glossary to share with the class. In class, each group performs a 15-minute presentation, followed by a “question and answer” session. The goal is not for the entire class to gain a deep understanding of all the films, but to apply the skill of close analysis that they have learned, to learn from their peers’ work, and to be motivated to watch the films at their own leisure. The instructor’s role is to help students prepare for their presentations and to ensure quality scene selections and presentations.

The unit ends with a brief comparison of the two filmmakers on the last day of presentations and an oral exam. During the oral exam, students discuss the film they had presented, with more refined language and in paragraph-length discourse. The feedback in the unit evaluations that have been received in the past has been very positive. Students have described the presentation as a fun project with many opportunities for learning, and they also enjoyed learning from their peers.

**How to Design an Entire Course on Chinese Films?**

The above format is not the only way to organize a unit on Chinese film, nor is my sharing intended as a manual for film teaching. It is rather an invitation for instructors interested in the subject to continue to explore how instructors can use a textbook creatively and how disciplinary training can enrich a language class. I am fully aware that teaching a successful film class in Chinese will involve contributions of ideas from colleagues with various backgrounds and will take years of experimentation. For example, I learned that a handout with specific questions to guide plot summary is necessary to foster discussion, that two days should be used (instead of one) to show a film that is not meant to be closely studied, and that an interactive format of lecturing while reviewing several key scenes can be a more effective approach to discussions.

Thinking beyond a textbook has returned me to *Readings in Contemporary Chinese Cinema* to see how the above
approach can be used and adapted to teach an entire course on “Twentieth-Century China in Film” in three to four units. The lessons in the textbook can be reorganized around the following topics: Rural and Urban China in Transformation (Lessons 1, 2, and 4), An Alternative Imagination of Pre-1949 China (Lessons 3 and 5), Tradition and Modernity Across the Taiwan Strait (Lessons 6 and 7), and The Cultural Revolution (Lessons 8, 9, and 10). My following discussion forgoes the fourth topic here listed as Jin Feng’s article deals specifically with films about the Cultural Revolution. My brief discussion of related films such as Xiuxiu (The Sent Down Girl, Joan Chen 1998) and Bawang bieji (Farewell My Concubine, Chen Kaige, 1993), as well as their use in advanced language classes, can be found in the attached note.  

Unit 1: Rural and Urban China in Transformation

This unit can be organized into three parts: a close study of Not One Less (Zhang Yimou, 1999; Chou 1-35), a shorter study of A Sigh (Feng Xiaogang 2000; Chou 36-61), and student presentations. The teaching objectives can include: the Reform and Open Door Policy in 1978, the historical and social background of China’s resident system and the huge gap between urban and rural China, and the representation of the countryside and the city and social migration.

Part I: Close study of Yige dou buneng shao

Set in a remote mountainous village in 1990s mainland China, the film centers on Wei Minzhi, a 13-year-old girl who is substituting for a village teacher for one month and promised additional pay if she does not lose any students. Initially only interested in getting her menial salary, Wei’s effort to search for Zhang Huike, a naughty boy who takes off in search of work in the big city, turns her into a true “teacher.” Through documentary style depictions of a dilapidated classroom containing multiple grades of pupils and the teacher and pupil’s often helpless experiences in the city, the film captures the huge gap between the conditions in urban and rural China.
A review of major clips from the film should include the scenes that depict the means of communication, such as the scenes involving students copying textbooks; Wei teaching the students to sing a song; the “textual representation” of Zhang Huike, which the announcer at the bus stop uses to look for him; the missing person notice Wei writes in order to look for Zhang; Wei speaking to Zhang through the video camera at the TV station; Zhang Huike speaking to the reporters from the TV station about how he wishes to repay the kindness of his teacher when he grows up and sharing that his most vivid memory of the city is begging; and the children writing characters with hopeful meanings on the blackboard with colorful chalks donated by people in the city, in contrast with the white characters on a black screen at the end of the film announcing that millions of Chinese children do not have a school to attend.

Most of these scenes have been transcribed in Reading. However, the dialogues are mostly in a local dialect. Since learning dialect is not a priority in a language course teaching Mandarin, the use of transcripts is very important. The critique and synopsis is especially suitable for students at the beginning of fourth-year Chinese. To do a more in-depth critique of the film, the instructor may assign a short article by Rey Chow, “Not One Less: the Fable of Migration,” and ask students to summarize its main points, in order to prepare for the discussion of the film.9

Part II: Yisheng Tanxi (A Sigh, Feng Xiaogang 2000) (2 days at most)

A Sigh is set in Beijing in the 1990s and follows Liang Yazhou, a professional writer, who is married and has a daughter, but falls in love with an actress. The two live together for some time but Liang eventually returns to his patient wife who has chosen to wait for his return by painting their newly purchased apartment. As one of the earliest films to reflect the changes happening to Chinese society, such as moral standards and personal relationships, since the economic reform, this film also introduces a fairly new phenomenon in socialist China: families starting to purchase housing. Teaching this film can start with a
review of the major scenes along with their transcription. There is not enough time to teach the synopsis and critique along with the goal of having students produce the language. However, these tools can be used for a translation exercise to check reading comprehension. Students can try to summarize the film in their own words after reading the critique and synopsis.

Part III (2-3 days): Student Projects and Presentations

Selection of texts for presentations can be flexible depending on students’ disciplinary background and academic interests. Those more interested in film as an art form may be interested in comparing Not One Less with Wo de fuqin muqin 我的父亲母亲 (The Road Home, Zhang Yimou, 1999). With stunning visual effects, the latter film focuses on a son’s recollection of the sacrifice made by his father, who belonged to an earlier generation of intellectuals with an idealism to improve education in the countryside. The film in Lesson 4, Laojing 老井 (Old Well, Wu Tianming, 1986) is an option for showing the countryside before an economic reform characterized by the formidable power of traditional beliefs (the attachment to one’s old home, arranged marriage, and the discrimination against a man married into a wife’s house) and the younger generation’s hope to use knowledge to change backwardness. Shiqi sui de danche (Beijing Bicycle, Wang Xiaoshuai, 2001) and He ni zai yiqi (Together, Chen Kaige, 2002) are films distinct in their depictions of the city-rural interactions through the migrant workers’ experience in Beijing. Students with a background in sociology may want to read newspaper articles or use news reports about children left behind in the countryside when their parents become migrant workers in the big cities. An extended topic from A Sigh can focus on the changing women’s status and marriage customs since the late 19th century. For an historical perspective of women in pre-1949 China, the documentary The Great Step Forward: Chinese Women in the 20th Century includes excellent clips from interviews with women who lived through arranged marriages, some of whom later followed the path of revolution.
Unit 2: An Alternative Imagination of Pre-1949 China

Much of canonical modern Chinese literature depicts the era of the 1940s as chaotic and tragic. In the official Chinese terminology, pre-1949 belonged to “Old China” and could only be transformed through revolution. With two little girls at the center of the stories, and portraying ordinary people at the margin of society in the 1940s, both *Bianlian* (《变脸》, *The King of Masks*, Wu Tianming, 1996) and *Cheng nan jiu shi* (《城南旧事》, *My Memories of Old Beijing*, Wu Yigong, 1983) give two refreshing perspectives on this time period. *King of Masks*, a product of the market economy in the 1990s to reimagine Chinese history, tells the story of humanity’s triumph over the political and social institutions through the perseverance and bravery of one little girl, Gou’er (Doggie). Gou’er was sold disguised as a boy by a kidnapper to the lone elderly street folk artist, Wang, as a grandson. Wang believes in passing on his family art to a male inheritor and refuses to teach Gou’er the “real secret” of his art when he discovers Gou’er is female. She finally changes Wang’s heart after she risks her life like the Bodhisattva Guanyin in a play she has watched. *My Memories of Old Beijing*, adapted from a memoir of the same title by Lin Haiyin (1918-2001), written in 1960 when she had moved to Taiwan, is told from the perspective of Yingzi, a girl from a well-to-do and loving family. The life of ordinary people unravels through Yingzi’s interaction with three people: a mad woman who lives in a world of fantasy after her lover—a progressive youth—disappeared and their daughter was abandoned immediately after birth, a thief whose entire hope is in the success of his younger brother, and the family maid Song Ma who is forced to leave her children due to family hardship. Its adaptation from a memoir by an author with a transnational background (Lin was born in Japan, lived in Beijing from age five to 30, and moved to Taiwan in 1948) also gives this film many materials for discussion. The selected scenes and the critique in the textbook are also easy to use. For these reasons, this film can be chosen for closer study.
One approach to the topic of memory and representation is to compare one episode in the film with an equivalent part in the memoir. *King of Masks* contains many idioms and sayings of folk wisdom that students should learn to understand though not necessarily to use. It can be covered in two days by going over the transcribed scenes. The topic of child-abandonment will likely come up during discussions, so the instructor may want to prepare a short lecture ahead of time. Student projects can continue to compare the film and the memoir by Lin Haiyin, compare the various versions of the Bodhisattva (Guanyin) story to discuss the reinvention of tradition, or study other Chinese folk art forms.

**Unit 3: Tradition and Modernity Across the Taiwan Strait**

Chinese cultural tradition affecting modern China is a theme that appears in the majority of films in Chow’s textbook. Ang Lee’s *Yinshi nannü* (*Eat, Drink, Man, Woman*, 1994) and Zhang Yang’s *Xizao* (*Shower*, 1999) provide a good opportunity to compare and contrast the respective settings in Taipei and Beijing and the shared theme of families living in conflicts between tradition and modernity. Lee’s film chooses to let the drama unfold in scenes around the family dinner table in which audiences see how the “traditional” Confucian thinking of obligations has become a burden to all in the family. “Modernity” is represented by the wish for greater personal freedom. Freedom includes being a Christian, choosing a career over a loveless relationship, and marrying at a young age or, in the father’s case, marrying a woman his daughter’s age. A similar alienation within family can be seen in *Shower*, though the social context is more focused on a city in transformation. “Tradition” is embodied in the main character Old Liu and the bathhouse he runs with his mentally challenged younger son in Beijing, marked by an appreciation of traditional art objects and close relationships among neighbors. By contrast, “modernity” is associated with the southern city of Shenzhen where Liu’s older son has been working, and the son’s emotionless face and silence. Father and son are reconciled one rainy night when the son helps mend the leaking roof shortly
before the father’s death. Any nostalgia toward the past is subtly balanced when the father expresses the inevitability of the tearing down of the bathhouse and many older buildings because they are aged and cannot be mended. A protest against the cost of developing is nevertheless voiced through the refusal of the younger son to leave the bathhouse and to be confined in a mental hospital.

It is a hard decision to choose one film over the other as a text for closer study, therefore the classes can be divided equally between them. The textbook has scene transcriptions related to the above highlighted themes, which are all easy to teach and to practice for language output. Study of the narrative synopsis and critique can be selective, both for translation or reading comprehension and for preparing class discussions. The study of the characters in *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman* in the textbook (Chou 140-147) is an excellent preparation for teaching critical thinking, as is the representation of “tradition” vs. “modernity” in both films. A starting discussion and end-of-unit essay can include students’ reflections on generational gaps and familial relationships, which in the past, some of my students have enjoyed, while others preferred to avoid.

Overall, it is important to be prepared and yet remain flexible. Instructors often have more control when designing some linguistic tasks. However, students’ contributions can often inspire the directions discussions can go and it is important to seize such moments.

**Endnotes**


2Ibid., xii.


5Rey Chow, “We Endure, Therefore We Are: Survival, Governance, and Zhang Yimou’s *To Live*” in *Primitive Passions* (South Atlantic...
Another article that suits the topic is by Rujie Wang, “To Live Beyond Good and Evil” (Asian Cinema 12:1. Spring/Summer 2001), 74-90.

These goals appear in ACTFL’s “National Standards for Foreign Language Education” http://www.actfl.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=3392


In this unit, To Live can be taught first because it stretches the history of the entire 20th century China from the War of Resistance against Japanese invasion (1937-1945) until before the economic reform of the 1980s. Farewell My Concubine shifts between the performance of an ancient story involving the tragic love of Xiang Yu (232–202 B.C.) and his concubine before his loss to Liu Bang, the founder of the Han dynasty (206 B.C.–220 A.D.), and the love triangle and betrayal among the two male actors who perform Xiang Yu and his concubine, and the wife of Xiang Yu’s actor against the background of the persecution of artists during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). The Sent Down Girl focuses on a later phase of the Cultural Revolution when city youths were sent down to work in the countryside. Xiuxiu is at first a naïve girl from Chengdu who embraced the movement of going to the countryside on the border with Tibet. Out of a wish to return to the city, Xiuxiu believes in several men’s promise to help her if she sleeps with them. As she gradually loses herself, Lao Jin, a Tibetan man, remains the faithful friend. This unit can focus on the self-reflexivity on the role of art in post-1949 China, and how political movements affect human relationships. Whereas the family in To Live is the basis for the survival of disasters, Farewell deals with a husband’s betrayal of his wife and his best friend, another actor, whose loyalty to him in a play they performed translates into their relationship in real life. While Fugui’s art becomes a political tool in the Great Leap Forward movement and eventually becomes an empty box during the Cultural Revolution, the Peking Opera singer Cheng Dieyi in Farewell resists art’s loss of autonomy and pays a dear price for that insistence. Part four and Part three of the film critique (Chou 50-256) give an excellent analysis of these respective themes. The dialogues in To Live are more teachable than those in Farewell. The selection of materials for language teaching purpose can consider these aspects. Xiuxiu can be introduced in two class meeting times by using the synopsis by Wei Wang (Chou 222-
A lecture can introduce the larger historical context and the subgenre of literature by a generation of the city youths who later returned to the city. Both subjects appear in Wei Wang’s critique of the film (Chou 216-218).


Teaching China’s Cultural Revolution through Film: *Blue Kite* as a Case Study

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“The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” (1966-76), or *Wenge*, as it is referred to in its condensed Chinese equivalent, represents a collective trauma for the Chinese nation and people in the twentieth century. However, compared with more amply researched and lucidly presented parts of modern Chinese history in English language scholarship outside China, its ambiguity, complexity, and political sensitiveness all make this period more elusive and harder to grapple with for scholars and teachers of Chinese history and culture. Within China, although more diverse historical narratives about this period have emerged in recent years, the Cultural Revolution is still barely mentioned in standard high school history textbooks even today.

Yet the Cultural Revolution reveals, in bas relief, the many irresolvable contradictions in China’s quest for cultural modernization and national sovereignty in the twentieth century. Narratives of Chinese people’s experiences of the Cultural Revolution not only expose the dire consequences of Maoist ideologies unchecked by critical thinking, self-reflexivity, and considerations of individual rights, they also show the continued and intensified conflicts between traditions and modernity, nationalism and individualism inherent in the May Fourth radical project of national salvation.1 It is thus all the more crucial to teach our students the historical and cultural lessons learned from China’s Cultural Revolution, and teach them effectively, if we agree with Johnnella E. Butler, who endorses the arts and humanities as wellsprings of empathy and of sustenance for participatory democracy.
Butler argues that democracy requires engagement with others beyond one’s community and thrives on feelings of connectedness to others. At the least, it requires us to accept respectfully the existence of narratives and experiences different from our own. This acceptance relies on empathy, defined by her as the ability to understand and share the feelings of others. Since each person cannot know every historical or imagined fact, or perceive experience exactly as another does, the connections between self and others are not inherent to humankind but require nurturing through exposure and experience. According to Butler, the arts and humanities instill in us precisely the necessary empathy that guards against misunderstandings, fear, essentialism, and hostility.²

Butler in effect also asserts that human beings have a capacity for empathy that transcends boundaries of language, culture, religion, age, gender, and physical ability. The arts and the humanities can inculcate empathy, because in the immortal words of Ronald Takaki, they provide us with “a different mirror” to reflect the connected histories and shared narratives of human beings, be they conflicting or complementary to one another.³ Yet, from my own experience of teaching Chinese literature and film to undergraduate students at a liberal arts college in the United States, it is equally essential to help students explore the most productive way of using this mirror, since we only see what we wish to see most of the times. Thus, only by developing the proper ways of “seeing,” can we derive the most benefits from such a different mirror, and learn to use it to weigh, consider, analyze, and reconcile our relationships to one another.

For my students, the value of studying Chinese literature and film lies in the development of their imagination, sensitivity, and eventually critical thinking and self-awareness. My experience of using Blue Kite, a Chinese language film by the Fifth Generation director Tian Zhuangzhuang (b. 1952), to teach China’s Cultural Revolution shows that it provides not just a mirror for the self, but more importantly, a window on the experience and inner life of others.

In this article I will use Blue Kite as an example to explore some effective ways to teach Chinese film to undergraduate
students in the United States. As I will show below, *Blue Kite* attracted my students because of its unique combination of accessible and gripping plot, provocative yet relatable messages, and, not the least, fluid but complex storytelling through a unique cinematic language. Thus, my students not only found echoes of its central themes in other literary and filmic works that we have discussed in this class: such as the Chinese family, youth, and conflicts between traditions and modernity. More importantly, they responded to the film’s subtle yet haunting artistic effects both viscerally and intellectually, even though it may appear to be less visually striking than some other Fifth Generation films, such as *Yellow Earth* (Chen Kaige [b. 1952], 1985), which boasts sculptural landscape and a powerful color scheme of yellow.

**Notes on Blue Kite**

Filmed in 1993 with funding from both Hong Kong and Japan but banned by the Chinese government upon its completion, *Blue Kite* nevertheless won the Grand Prix at the Tokyo International Film Festival and Best Film at the Hawaii International Film Festival, both in 1993. The story is told from the perspective of a young boy called Tietou growing up in the 1950s and 1960s in Beijing, and describes the experiences of ordinary Chinese people among all the political chaos of the period, such as the “Anti-Rightist Movement” (1957-59) and the Cultural Revolution. *Blue Kite* is generally regarded as a quintessential example of China’s Fifth Generation filmmaking and one of their representative historical narratives of and collective reflections on the Cultural Revolution, along with works by other Fifth Generation directors such as Zhang Yimou’s (b. 1951) *To Live* (1994) and Chen Kaige’s *Farewell, My Concubine* (1993).

The Fifth Generation filmmakers, mainly composed of the class of 1982 from the Beijing Film Academy, are well known for their emphasis on personal style and language as well as their political and cultural commentaries. For the first time in modern Chinese cinema, they insisted that film be viewed as an object of aesthetics and the filmmakers themselves as artists, and commented on the totality of national culture and history at
an allegorical level. The Fifth Generation also took a more anti-establishment stand than previous generations of filmmakers in China, who often reproduced standard images of mainstream ideology in their works. Trained in Western cinematography and interested in reaching out to an international audience, the Fifth Generation also produced works that can better serve as “mirrors” for American undergraduate students to reflect their lives and interests.

*Blue Kite,* in particular, possesses unique artistic features that distinguish it as an especially “teachable” film, compared to other Fifth Generation films I have taught. Unlike the more “artsy” *Yellow Earth,* which to my students seemed to lack plot and action, *Blue Kite* tells a riveting story of an ordinary Chinese family. It also seeks to construct a historical narrative that is highly political yet at the same time deeply rooted in the personal and familial. This characteristic, along with its distinctive cinematic language, enabled me to guide students to both make connections within this course by investigating its central themes and imagery, and increase their self-reflexivity even as they readily related to the characters in the film. *Blue Kite* later also became a point of reference, against which my students compared other cinematic representations of the Cultural Revolution, such as Xie Jin’s (1923-2008) *Hibiscus Town* (1986) and Zhang Yimou’s *To Live.*

By employing long shots and long takes, *Blue Kite* not only presents avian views of Beijing and hence a historical, panoramic perspective, but also enhances a “realistic” feel, since it apparently follows the scenes of everyday living of the common Chinese people: such as a busy courtyard (*siheyuan*) where different households interact with one another, and a small lane (*hutong*) that witnesses both people’s daily businesses and the sudden and unexpected tragedies in life. The spatial arrangement of *Blue Kite* has subverted more standard historical narratives endorsed and disseminated by the Chinese state, particularly if seen against *Hibiscus Town,* a film also set in the Cultural Revolution by then more established director Xie Jin.

Perhaps China’s best known director, Xie Jin’s career spanned six decades and his works had a profound influence upon Chinese society particularly in the 1980s, the decade
immediately following the end of the Cultural Revolution. Scholars have seen Xie’s works as “melodrama,” with not only dichotomizations of good and evil (and insider and outsider) but also static spatial code adopted from traditional theater. As Ma Ning argues, melodramatic conventions in Chinese theater typically code male and female according to a yin/yang dichotomy: “The right designates yang, which means masculinity/positivity/law/order, while that of the left denotes yin, which means femininity/negativity/lawlessness/disorder.”⁷ Ma remarks that Xie Jin adheres to the same gendered spatial coding even while attempting to reverse traditional class structure and depict the profound social transformations brought about by the Chinese Communist Party.⁸

In *Hibiscus Town*, which depicts the trials and tribulations of the lovers Sister Hibiscus (denounced “landlord”) and Qin Shutian (“rightist” and “anti-revolutionary”) especially during the Cultural Revolution, Xie Jin typically places female characters on the left side of the screen. This is especially striking when a newly rehabilitated Qin Shutian meets Li Guoxiang (former “revolutionary rebel,” and nemesis of Qin and his romantic interest) at the ferry toward the end of the film. While Qin is shot with a full frontal image, standing tall and straight and almost filling out the whole screen, Li is depicted as crouching and cowering on the left side of the screen, barely daring to look Qin straight in the eye. Small wonder my students complained about the simplistic way that Xie Jin treats this female character in the film, pointing out that he does not allow the audience to see the psychological abuses that Li had received prior to the Cultural Revolution, even though the novel by Gu Hua,⁹ from which the film was adapted, originally describes Li’s psyche and motivations for joining the Cultural Revolution. Introducing Xie Jin’s melodrama thus helps students understand not only the effective spatial arrangement in *Blue Kite* but also how Tian Zhuangzhuang and directors of his generation attempted to rebuke dominant conventions in order to create their own distinctive styles.

The image of the kite is invested with rich symbolism and thematic concerns. It simultaneously symbolizes freedom, a carefree childhood, and the parent-child relationship on the one
hand, and also represents rootlessness, destruction, and family tragedy on the other. One of the most memorable scenes that feature a kite is the ending of the film, where Tietou lies unconscious on the ground, after having suffered a severe beating by the Red Guards because he has tried to protect his mother, who is being dragged away to a labor camp. Through his half-closed eyes, we see that his kite is stuck in a bare tree, broken and desolately fluttering in the wind, and we also hear the refrain of a childhood song that his mother has taught him, which describes the loving relationship between a mother crow and her son. This scene effortlessly invokes for the audience Tietou’s memories of happier times, such as how his father made a kite for him to play with, how his first stepfather promises to fix a broken toy for him, and how he later also teaches the granddaughter of his second stepfather how to fly a kite. It also makes the breakup of Tietou’s family, including the death of the three father figures in his young life and the forced separation of mother and son all the more poignant. The audience can feel that Tietou is really and utterly alone at this point, even though his mother has been a constant and nurturing presence in his life throughout previous tragedies. The broken kite thus symbolizes the severing of his final family tie and the resulting sense of disorientation and uprootedness.

Additionally, the dominant hues of blue and gray of the film, a “realistic” and forceful recall of the blue and grey Mao suits worn by Chinese people at the time, add to the general tone of melancholy and tragedy, while the bits of red either portend ominous happenings later or prove that personal pleasures and happiness are only too transient and fragile at this trouble-ridden historical moment. For example, the broken head of the red horse figurine, a wedding gift for Tietou’s parents, foreshadows the death of Tietou’s father. Moreover, Tietou’s mother does not dare to wear a traditional-style red Chinese qipao that her mother has made for her wedding, because she fears that the dress’s associations with “old forms” would indicate political incorrectness in the somber atmosphere following Stalin’s death. Tietou’s celebration and enjoyment of the Chinese New Year, full of red fireworks and lanterns, also prove only too fleeting, when his first stepfather falls seriously
ill and dies shortly afterwards. The color scheme of *Blue Kite* also sets up striking contrasts with other films that I have introduced to my students, such as *Red Sorghum* (1987) and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), both directed by Tian’s former classmate at Beijing Film Academy, Zhang Yimou. Originally trained as a photographer, Zhang’s films feature the overpowering use of red, an auspicious color in Chinese cultural traditions, to symbolize the celebration of vital life force even as it also signifies violence and bloodshed in his films.

As will be seen below, precisely because of the rich and complex cinematic language of *Blue Kite* as both a rebuke of established conventions and a bold experiment of new styles of narratives, it provided not only a mirror for my students to see their own images reflected but also a window onto a tumultuous, tragic, and often frighteningly confusing historical period to both those directly involved at the time and later generations.

**Teaching *Blue Kite***

At Grinnell College, I regularly teach a culture-in-translation course entitled “Modern China through Film and Literature.” Since this course has no prerequisites and all readings are in English, non-majors as well as majors from all four years can take it. This provides distinct challenges to me as the instructor. I have to consider not only students’ different levels of previous knowledge and experience related to Chinese culture, but also their different levels of basic academic skills such as discussion, writing, and oral presentation. On the positive side, non-major students take this course mostly out of personal or academic interest, and they are usually curious and motivated in class. Since I do not believe in “dumbing down” course content to suit students, this also provides an opportunity for me to seek a common meeting ground between students and instructor, one that can on the one hand bring recent scholarship in the field to undergraduate education, and on the other train students with a rigorous and engaging curriculum.

In light of these characteristics of students and my own pedagogical goals, I usually do the following things when preparing to teach the course: I compose detailed handouts outlining my expectations, set up a discussion forum online, and
scaffold my oral and writing assignments in such a way that students can have some lead time to familiarize themselves with my requirements and build on previous assignments for more complex and challenging tasks later. I also arrange the readings for this course both chronologically and thematically, and include a variety of genres, such as short stories, novels, critical essays, as well as several films in order to give students a general sense of the evolution of Chinese history and literary culture in the twentieth century.

However, nothing can replace the essential interactions and dynamics that the instructor must create, monitor, and modify in a classroom setting. I am also keenly aware that the nature of this course as a general “survey” requires an eye to the proportion and time devoted to each historical period and representative work, as it could all too easily lend itself to superficiality and monotony. Therefore, it is all the more important for me to facilitate classroom discussion in ways that can both invoke students’ previous experiences and personal memories from the very beginning of the course, and also lead them to eventually step back and evaluate critically both the work under discussion and their own response to it.

For the period of Cultural Revolution, I chose several literary pieces such as Lu Xinhua’s short story “The Wounded,” a canonical work of the post-Mao “Scar Literature,” Wang Anyi’s short story “Lao Kang Is back,” and Gu Hua’s novel Hibiscus Town. I have also selected several films, including Xie Jin’s film adaptation of Gu Hua’s novel Hibiscus Town and Blue Kite. Additionally, I have recommended secondary sources to the students, such as Jonathan Spence’s “Launching the Cultural Revolution” in his The Search for Modern China and documentary film Morning Sun, directed and produced by Carma Hinton, Geremie Barmé, and Richard Gordon. I utilized a variety of historical, literary, and filmic materials in this course mainly in light of my students’ needs, interests, and degree of prior (under)exposure to Chinese history and culture. Furthermore, I also generally adopt an interdisciplinary approach in my teaching for its effective inculcation of integrative thinking and collaborative synergy among my students, who usually come from different cultural and disciplinary backgrounds.
While Jiang Wen’s (b. 1963) *In the Heat of the Sun* (1994) and Dai Sijie’s (b. 1954) *Balzac and the Little Seamstress* (2002) also approach the Cultural Revolution in their own distinctive ways, I chose *Blue Kite* and *Hibiscus Town* not only because of the limited space in this course, but also because they fulfilled my pedagogical goals in two important ways. On the one hand, they complemented the literary works about the Cultural Revolution in this course, illustrating in a painfully vivid way the irreversible losses and ineradicable scars caused by this national trauma, and thus helped my students to understand what had remained inexplicable or mysterious to them in Wang Anyi’s work, in which a survivor of the Cultural Revolution has been reduced to a “black hole” and spends his days repeatedly tracing the Chinese character “rice” on a piece of paper. On the other hand, they dovetailed with the materials we had examined earlier on in the semester. Later films such as *Balzac* tend to dwell on individual memories of youthful passion and personal nostalgia rather than engage in collective reflections of the “sufferings, scars, and indictment of the Cultural Revolution.” In contrast, *Blue Kite*, especially, reinforces and renders anew the central themes and concerns of twentieth-century Chinese intellectuals who promoted the project of self-strengthening and modernization: such as education of the masses, enlightenment of the young generation, and rebellion against the traditional patriarchal Chinese family and power structure.

It may be stating the obvious to observe that American undergraduate students usually demonstrate more aptitude in interpreting films than literary works, since they have grown up immersed in a more visual rather than textual culture. Yet, learning from their experiences of analyzing novels and short stories earlier in the semester, my students showed remarkable progress in skills when we came to this point of the course, about midway through the semester. For example, they could by then come up with nuanced readings of characters in Gu Hua’s novel *Hibiscus Town*. They could better understand and appreciate how the sweeping and relentless force that was the Cultural Revolution brought out weaknesses in normally decent people.
Of course, not all films are created equal when it comes to teaching the Cultural Revolution. While my students unanimously praised *Blue Kite*, they did not show as much enthusiasm for the film version of *Hibiscus Town*, though they liked the original novel better than the film. This was because, they claimed, they could “relate” to *Blue Kite* better than *Hibiscus Town*. I sensed this to be a wonderful teaching moment, for I always feel that instructors should not only remain alert and responsive to students’ needs and limitations, but also try to guide their learning processes in order to help them gain more in-depth knowledge and skills.

Consequently, when leading classroom discussion of *Hibiscus Town*, I told them about the wide popularity of this film in China at the time of its release, and then asked them to try to explain the reasons. Drawing on other stories and critical essays about the Cultural Revolution and the characteristics of Xie Jin’s directing style that they had read, the students were able to come up with several plausible explanations, including the satisfying ending that sees justice meted out, good rewarded, and evil punished. Thinking back on the long years of repression of human emotions, moreover, they came to understand that Xie Jin’s film at that point provided the first and perfect catharsis for the Chinese people after a decade of nightmarish sufferings.

At the same time, my students were also able to provide more nuanced and reflective comments about their own preference. They had identified reasons for their likes and dislikes of the two films. First of all, *Blue Kite* is narrated from the perspective of a first-person narrator, a little boy who gradually grows up in the film, while *Hibiscus Town* has an omniscient narrator who tells the story from an external point of view. Secondly, *Blue Kite* depicts a tumultuous period in modern Chinese history by focusing on the tragedies of an ordinary family in Beijing. It conveys the confusion, sorrow, and kindness of common Chinese people very effectively. *Hibiscus Town*, in comparison, provides a more panoramic view because of its narrative perspective. Thirdly, while both films use long shots and long takes, the former provides a more “realistic” feel through the way that it follows real-life details and feelings, while the latter falls into the category of
“melodrama” that my students disparaged at points. My students thus discovered that they regarded one film as more “relatable” than the other because their own age, background, and learning experience had molded their preferences for certain kinds of literature and film.

As can be seen, Blue Kite provided my students with a “different mirror” not only because it alerted them to the similarity and connectedness they shared with another culture and people, but also in that it revealed to them how different historical, political, and cultural forces shape people’s experiences and tastes. This awareness can also come at unexpected moments during student-led discussions. Before class I had encouraged the students to find particular themes and images that they found most compelling, and try to tie this film with other works that we had discussed earlier in the semester. When the designated student leaders started the discussion, some of their classmates mentioned the representation of youth in this film, and by connecting Blue Kite to Family by Ba Jin, an iconic work about young people’s rebellion against traditional Chinese culture and society during the May Fourth period, were able to trace thematic concerns shared by Chinese authors and artists over the span of more than half a century. Others detected in this film the exploitation of youth and dissemination of communist ideologies, such as they had also seen in the film Yellow Earth, and began to appreciate more the common artistic goals and styles of China’s Fifth Generation directors.

Still others looked at the narrator, and at the advantages and disadvantages of having a little boy providing the focal point and voice of the story. This last point was significant since from the start of the semester I had always emphasized to students that they need to look beyond plot and characterization, and grasp the formal features that make the work. Interestingly, at this moment of the discussion a controversy arose, regarding, apparently, a minor point in the film.

Before Tietou’s father is sent to a labor camp for being a “rightist,” he spanks the little boy for his naughtiness. The boy gets upset and mimics shooting at his father with his hand. My students erupted into heated discussion about this scene. One
American student commented that it was quite normal for kids to act out, and “we all say things like ‘I hate you’ to our parents.” However, her classmate, a Chinese American student, saw this in a different light. He mentioned his own experience of growing up in a Chinese household, arguing that “the Chinese believe in tough love,” and the little boy would have been punished severely were he raised in his home, as his own childhood experience had shown. Although this appeared to be a digression from the normal course of discussion, my students did invest a lot of emotional energy and show a lot of conviction in their autobiographies. I then stepped in to help the student leaders to gear the discussion toward more productive, course-related directions.

We talked about the Chinese concept of filial piety and Confucian ideal of interdependence between family members and different generations. In this way, I helped students to develop their sense of empathy, which in turn aided them to discuss characters and aspects of Chinese culture that they might not understand or relate to otherwise. Gradually my students began to see why in the film all the father figures die away one after another. They remarked that the little boy’s “military” and unfilial gesture (and the intrusion of modern weaponry into a Chinese family) on the one hand allegorizes the collapse of traditional family structure and ethical code caused by the increasingly violent and oppressive state control that led to the Cultural Revolution, hence parents’ loss of their traditional authority. On the other hand, this scene foretells the “death of father”—the demise of father figures and patriarchal authority—in the works of Fifth Generation directors and even in modern Chinese culture as a whole. As we can see, even though the students tended to focus more on plots, images, and literary devices that resonated with their life experiences, they could be taught to take a step back and interpret the work in a more analytical and critical frame of mind.

My students’ discussion about how parents educate their children also indicates that they were particularly able to relate to this film as though it were a “mirror” onto their own lives, because it depicted the Cultural Revolution from the perspective of a family, and in particular that of a little boy. Because of this
empathy that the film induced in them, they were in turn better able to learn from the film as though it were a window onto another culture and period. Indeed, well-directed foreign films are well suited to serve as a window onto other cultures precisely because they are accessible and serve to mirror students’ own emotions and life experiences.

**Final Words**

From the experience of teaching *Hibiscus Town* and *Blue Kite*, I have found that when teaching Chinese literature and culture to American undergraduate students, I have to keep in mind several important lessons. I need to be aware of the students’ usual tastes and interpretive practices. Students at Grinnell are hard working, but they still show more experience with interpretation of visual images than texts. When analyzing films, they also tend to pay more attention to the plot than to the formal features such as camera takes and shots. I also would do well to use students’ previous experiences, knowledge, and skills as a starting point to guide them through new, unfamiliar territories. Last but not the least, although the students sometimes may not respond to the film in the way that I would have expected or preferred, I can teach them how to interpret and self-reflect.

Additionally, although I focus mostly on classroom discussion in this article, I have found scaffolding assignments an effective way to teach any course, while online discussion forum can be utilized to encourage active learning and help students prepare for class discussion. My experience shows that requiring students to post questions and responses online both before and after class not only makes them step up their leadership role in class and take ownership of their own education, but also reinforces knowledge and skills learned in class, and trains them in writing and critical thinking. Needless to say, it also provides a safe and communal space for students who may be too shy to speak up in class.

The effects of my pedagogical explorations in this course were obvious and gratifying. Not only have students become more engaged and proactive in their learning in this course,
many of them also decided to take more Chinese culture courses and undertake China-related research projects in the future. But perhaps most important, I have also learned that to provide students with a “different mirror” through my course is only the first step. Far more significant is that they also learn how to utilize and even construct their own mirror for life-long learning and development through the experience of studying Chinese film and literature.

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Endnotes


5 Ibid.

6 They have also been criticized in China for creating images about a backward, oppressive, rural China that never progresses into a modern society in order to satisfy the Western audiences’ imagination about the Orient.


8 Ibid., 22


14 Differences between “Chinese” and Western parenting styles have again roused much controversy in the United States following the publication of Amy Chua’s recent memoir on how to raise her two daughters, Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother (New York: Penguin Press, 2011).
Living Beijing:  
Encountering the Asian City through Digital Storytelling

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More college students than ever are heading to Chinese cities to spend weeks or months learning Chinese history, culture, and language. And more than ever they and their instructors are bringing with them an array of digital devices, from still cameras to video cameras to laptop computers. Whether on campus or while studying abroad, many of these students will learn about China by analyzing examples of Chinese cinema. But with digital recording and editing equipment right at their fingertips, why not invite them to plunge into China’s history and culture firsthand as they produce their own digital stories right in the midst of the country itself?

This essay explains one approach to how a course integrating digital video and audio technology can help students engage closely and thoughtfully with local cultures. The ideas I present are based on my own experience leading several study abroad trips—the most recent and successful in spring 2010—during which students learned about Beijing by creating their own digital stories on site in that city. What I hope to show is how the general principles structuring such a course, for the most part adaptable to other cities and other topics, can help students confront and rethink some of the stubborn dichotomies that subconsciously shape understanding of other cultures, including China’s. To be clear, this is not a course on filmmaking or video production. In fact, I have received no special training in those areas beyond the sort of media analysis one learns as an academic in the humanities. Rather, I point one way through
the seemingly formidable, but far from insurmountable, challenges that an instructor interested in cinematic analysis and trained in the Chinese humanities or social sciences will likely confront when asking students to apply digital media toward guided exploration and analysis of China’s historical and contemporary experience.

The specific course from which I have developed—and continue to develop—these approaches is called “The Chinese City: Living Beijing.” I have offered it three times since 2003, the second two times in 2004 and 2010, when it comprised two discrete segments: an on-campus portion which met on a half-schedule during the regular semester, and an off-campus “extended study” segment during which students and I visited Beijing for three weeks in May and June 2010. The course is structured such that the on-campus portion builds historical and conceptual knowledge of Beijing, develops technical skills with digital media through technology workshops, and helps students devise and propose final projects in the form of digital stories—sometimes referred to as “new media narratives”—that take on the course’s central theme, “continuities in transition.” The final, on-site portion of the course grants students a broad measure of independence to complete their final projects in the field, and culminates in a screening of their finished products at the end of our tour.

To be sure, a course like this asks a lot of the instructor. Not just technology intensive, it also calls for a good deal of “stretch” among a variety of multidisciplinary course materials, not to mention a willingness to take on the fluid and often demanding circumstances of planning and executing off-campus study. That said, it is important to keep in mind that this kind of academically oriented digital storytelling allows for much flexibility: it can be integrated at a degree that matches one’s comfort level, tailored to mesh with one’s own field of interest and expertise, and does not necessarily even have to be coupled with an overseas study tour. Moreover, you are likely to find support for such experiments from your institution’s information technology staff, who are typically looking for ways to work
with faculty on new learning initiatives. Finally, I can say from my own experience that the ease of using digital technology—both hardware and software—has increased exponentially between my first off-campus experiment with Living Beijing in 2004 and the most recent offering six years later. Similarly, online digital resources for the course, in the form of historical image databases and Creative Commons, have greatly expanded in the past several years, making the collection of digitized materials much easier. Both these trends promise to continue. What has not and will not change, however, is the challenge of teaching historical awareness, research methodologies, effective expression, and ethical representation of others. The spread of digital media impacts all of these, thus the importance of making it a larger part of liberal arts education.

**Setting a Theme, Dissolving Dichotomies**

Directly or indirectly, all the methods and materials included in Living Beijing point toward the making of the students’ final projects: historically textured, intellectually sound new media narratives on topics that the students, as individuals, have a personal investment in learning more about. Course content, then, is quite varied in terms of genre and media, such that when the time comes to propose the final digital project around halfway or two-thirds into the semester, the students, either individually or in pairs, have had their interest sparked by a specific topic or issue. Thematic unity for such wide-ranging content, and for the equally wide-ranging subjects of the students’ final projects, comes from the course’s central problematic: continuities in transition. For this course, continuities in transition means exploring how, over time, historical actors involved with the urban milieu now known as Beijing have constructed and reconstructed that city’s identity. Beyond providing a center of gravity to the course, this theme also helps foreground the inadequacy of some of the entrenched preconceptions that unconsciously structure understandings of China, namely, the opposition of past and present, the notion of authentic “Chineseness,” and the seemingly irresistible but often
misleading distinction between the traditional and the modern. Some elements of the on-campus portion of the course—such as lecture, discussion, and a research paper—are quite conventional; the on- and off-campus digital media assignment, on the other hand, is decidedly less so. Bringing the two together can be tricky, but is essential when laying the groundwork for successful independent fieldwork.

Whatever the potential for learning and insight that digital technology may bring, good old-fashioned lectures do the work of giving Living Beijing its foundation and direction. Most of the lectures address the dichotomies listed above while preparing students to think about and discuss the course’s readings and visual materials. Thus, for instance, a brief introductory lecture linked to Mike Meyer’s book of scholar-journalism The Last Days of Old Beijing, points out how modern commentators, both Chinese and western have, over and again, been rather sad witnesses to the imminent disappearance of “old Beijing.” The message here—which I like to reinforce by reflecting out loud on my own conflicted sense of nostalgia while visiting Beijing over the past 20 years or more—is to beware the narrative of loss, and more specifically, to keep in mind how the city we see today, which seems to have irrevocably destroyed so much of its historical identity through modernization and “westernization,” will within the students’ own lifetime acquire its own historical aura and become an object of evocative longing. The point here is to break down the imagined differences between the past, the present, and even the future so that students can begin to question the familiar, but intellectually restrictive and usually quite disappointing, quest for Chinese authenticity.

Another way to destabilize the search for Beijing’s Chinese authenticity, also built into the lecture component of the course, is to stress how, despite the eminently “Chinese” cosmological structure that scholars like Jeffrey F. Meyer see “built into” Beijing’s architectural layout, the city has had non-Han Chinese rulers—the Khitan, Jurchen, Mongol, and Manchu—for nearly two-thirds of its thousand-year history as an imperial capital. Similarly, the very location of Beijing—the “northern capital”—
derived from the Han Chinese Ming dynasty ruler Yongle’s desire to create a border city that straddled the non-Han nomadic regions to the north and China’s cultural heartland to the south. More, as a capital city, Beijing has long been a magnet for peoples from elsewhere, including Persian, Arab, and Central Asian scholars and architects, diplomatic missions from areas bordering the Chinese empire, Jesuit missionaries, and, of course, peoples from China’s own internally varied cultural geography. The city’s fictional world, too, is populated by migrants drawn by the magnetism of Beijing, with the most famous example being the country boy turned rickshaw puller Camel Xiangzi, the protagonist of Lao She’s panoramic 1930s novel Rickshaw (Luotuo xiangzi). Contemporary documentary films also highlight the continuing pull of Beijing as a cultural mecca. In his documentary Swing in Beijing (2000), for example, Shuibo Wang interviews a series of musicians, artists, filmmakers, and playwrights all drawn to the city’s rich potential for performance, exhibition, inspiration, and intellectual exchange. Beijing, in other words, has long been a site of negotiation between the local and the non-local, as well as a place whose power, prestige, wealth, and cultural resources have attracted and assimilated peoples from near and far. Such features define the city’s heterogeneity to this day, and can lead students, in the making of their digital stories, to reflect critically on their own sojourn to Beijing as seekers of personal enrichment.

**Integrating Theme and Media**

Beijing’s long and mutable identity as a melting pot of peoples and cultures also helps complicate the compulsion to categorize things seen and heard in China as either “traditional” or “modern.” Potentially even more effective in this regard is the topic of urban space. Lecture, reading, and discussion on representations of urban space can go far toward questioning this dichotomy, and there is no shortage of excellent materials to choose from. But in a course that culminates in the making of new media narratives, why not kill two birds with one stone by selecting written and visual materials that students can use
to create short and relatively straightforward “training” videos? For instance, one of the early units in Living Beijing integrates written and visual materials into the making of digital stories that recreate the pre-modern Chinese urban space in the famous Song dynasty hand scroll, Spring on the River (Qingming Shanghe Tu). The unit itself comprises several components: a lecture based on a full-length digital version of the scroll, conceptual and historical readings, a technology workshop on basic video editing, and two assignments that ask students to produce and write about their own digital representations of the scroll. Where the lecture and historical readings present scholarly interpretations and basic aesthetic principles of Spring on the River, the conceptual readings introduce a vocabulary for talking about how urban space is constructed and experienced. Thus an excerpt from Kevin Lynch’s seminal study of urban space, The Image of the City, makes available the theoretical terms “paths,” “edges,” “districts,” “nodes,” and “landmarks.” A very brief (two-page) but highly evocative excerpt on “keynote sounds,” “signal sounds,” and “soundmarks” from R. Murray Schaeffer’s classic The Tuning of the World encourages students to think about the city space as an aurally experienced “soundscape.” Finally, a chapter from Jianfei Zhu’s Architecture of China provides theoretical analysis of the pre-Cartesian spatial logic of Chinese urban space depicted in the scroll.

The two assignments in this unit both rely on the high-resolution images of the Qingming Shanghe Tu provided in

Figure 1: Detail from the Spring on the River hand scroll (Qingming shanghe tu).
the online version of Valerie Hansen’s *The Qingming Scroll and Its Significance for the Study of Chinese History*. The first—and quite simple—assignment asks students to “grab” (by simply pushing the “shift-apple-4” keys on a Macintosh computer) several detail images from the scroll, paste them into a word processing document, and briefly analyze them using the unit’s historical and theoretical ideas. For the second, more involved assignment, students attend a technology workshop where they learn the basic video editing skills needed to create two- to-three-minute digital stories. Working with their own selection of high resolution still images from the digitized scroll, and with audio clips downloaded from the Creative Commons Freesound.org database, students work in pairs to develop a poetic theme, narrative line, or even an interpretive argument derived from their personal, but informed, understanding of the scroll.

While one might ask students to add explanatory off-screen narration, I have found it more constructive if the stories “show” rather than “tell.” This way, students have to express their ideas and themes solely through thoughtful coordination of images (zooms, pans, transitions, etc.) and sound (volume, timing). Leaving the words out of the video challenges students to work directly with nonverbal visual and aural rhetoric as a medium for communicating ideas, constructing arguments, and representing space—not to mention encouraging them to master useful editing functions of the software. Verbal explanation of the digital stories can be required in the form of accompanying essays, individually written, in which students account for their digital stories’ compositional choices. Separating the digital and written components also makes evaluation of the assignment more meaningful, as it gives the instructor a clearer sense of the larger process behind the “making of” each digital story (more on this later), not to mention the degree to which students have worked to assimilate reading and lecture materials in their own creative adaptations of the scroll.

Aside from learning to create their own short digital stories, students can also learn much, both conceptually and practically, from viewing film documentaries. Once again, there is no lack
of documentary cinema available to teach about Beijing, or for that matter China in general. But whatever the topic of one’s course, it again makes sense to choose materials that build toward several goals at the same time. For a course like Living Beijing that culminates in a digital story project, films should both introduce the history of the city and raise awareness of the art of documentary itself. The former aspect provides the all-important “content” that structures any course while also providing topical points of departure for students’ own final projects. The latter aspect raises awareness of documentary film’s constructedness as it points toward the formal options available for constructing their own projects. An excellent resource here is the book *Introduction to Documentary*, in which film scholar Bill Nichols details the various “modes” that have defined documentary film’s development through the twentieth century. Because of its overwhelming dominance on television and in educational films, student documentaries tend to gravitate toward the “expository mode,” which stresses logical argument and “a voice-of-God” verbal commentary accompanied by supporting imagery. While there is nothing wrong with the expository style, it should not be allowed to crowd out other approaches, such as the “poetic mode,” which emphasizes mood or tone through ambiguous but potentially rich association and patterning; the “observational mode,” which eschews supplementary music, sound effects, and voiceover in favor of a seemingly objective recording of life “as it happens” in front of the camera; or the “participatory mode,” where the filmmaker steps out in front of the camera to interview and interact with his or her subjects.

One can show clips of classic examples of each mode in class during lecture or, if you are comfortable with “small-screen” viewing, assign them on YouTube if what you need is available there, or through your own institution’s online streaming video. There is, however, no substitute for full-length screenings of documentaries themselves. For Living Beijing, the panoramic 1995 documentary *Gate of Heavenly Peace*, which traces the development and suppression of the 1989
protest movement, serves as an informative and compelling sample of expository filmmaking. An excellent example of participatory documentary is *Meishi Street* (2006), a film in which the director hands the video camera to a Beijing restaurateur whose neighborhood is being torn down to widen a street in the run-up to the 2008 Olympic games. The other documentary I have tried, *Swing in Beijing*, demonstrates how Nichols’ modes are frequently combined in a single film. The director of *Swing* mixes elements of the expository, observational, and poetic modes by letting Beijing-based artists “speak for themselves,” without off-screen narration, in a series of interviews interspersed with expository-style backup footage and impressionistic montage sequences. I have found that these “sample” documentaries used in the course can have a direct influence on the students’ final projects, sometimes moving them toward exploring certain topics, but more often guiding them stylistically at the fieldwork stage, during the process of gathering and editing material. At this point, students find themselves either choosing among or forced into identifiable documentary modes based on personal inclination, practical limitations, and the nature of their subject. Theory, in other words, informs concrete practice, and students learn firsthand how documentary filmmakers negotiate the border between representation and “reality.”

**Developing and Evaluating Digital Stories**

Obviously, there is an entire raft of practical and ethical issues involved in preparing and executing digital stories in a foreign country. How does one steer students toward choosing the “right” project? How coordinate with technology and library staff? How does one anticipate potential ethical considerations? And finally, what standards can be used to evaluate digital stories?

First, the selection and development of the final digital storytelling projects depend, of course, on the subject matter of the course. In general, it is simplest to assign students to explore a relatively specific, specialized topic—most likely aligned with
one’s own area of expertise. Such an approach has the advantage of providing disciplinary depth. The disadvantage of a more narrow topical focus—and this can be crucial to the success of digital storytelling projects—is that it might limit opportunities for students to choose a subject with which they can identify personally. In Living Beijing, I aim for a middle ground by opening up the field to any plausible and potentially meaningful topic, as long as it relates to Beijing and incorporates the “continuities in transition” theme. Next, as with any substantial research project, the assignment as a whole is broken down into several distinct stages: 1) a short pre-proposal, due around mid-term, describing the basic idea for the project, its proposed use of digital media, and an annotated bibliography; 2) a “researched proposal” that includes a formal research paper on the history of the topic along with a narrative description of how the students plan to carry out the project itself on site, and; 3) a final oral presentation of the project at the end of the regular semester, during which students might present digital “rough cuts” drawing from materials available on line (as opposed to gathered on site in Beijing).

Students receive feedback, from the instructor and their classmates, at each stage. Guidance is probably most crucial, however, for the pre-proposal, as it is here that the instructor can intervene most effectively to shape a project’s eventual success. There may be feasibility problems, such as a proposal to carry out man-on-the-street interviews right in Tiananmen Square, which would surely be squelched by security, or, more commonly, proposals that overreach in their ambition to “cover” impossibly broad swaths of urban geography. Other proposals may seem valid on paper, but would end up unrewarding in practice, like a pair of students who initially proposed studying consumer habits in Beijing’s KFC outlets. After I pointed out that they might regret spending their valuable time abroad cooped up in fast-food outlets, they came back with a second proposal: to explore the developing music scene in Beijing—a much better idea, not just because I lack expertise in sociological methodology, but because the topic is more city-specific and,
crucially, because both were accomplished jazz musicians who could and did use their instruments and musical talent to open doors and make friends in places ranging from a tranquil guqin studio to wild punk rock clubs. In general, one should expect students’ digital stories to evolve, often quite drastically, through initial conception up to the last stages of touch-up editing. It is precisely through the bumps and jolts of revision, however, that students come to understand the unpredictable nature of field research, as well as the intellectual rewards that come from head-on encounters between preconceptions and on-the-ground “reality.”

Digital storytelling projects require not just close planning and coordination with students, but also with the technology and library staff, and in the case of ethical considerations, your school’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). Especially when it comes to technical issues, the earlier you can begin consulting with support staff, the better. Not only will there be a schedule of workshops to set up, but you and the tech staff will need time to match equipment needs with the technical ambitions of the course. For example, will the digital stories be limited to still photos and audio, or will students be encouraged to take on the more complex technical demands of video production? (I would recommend the former, for simplicity’s sake) What kind of software will the students be using, and how will it be made available to them both on campus and off? What elements of digital hardware will you and the students need to borrow, and when will you need them? Coordinating with library staff will likely be less intensive, but essential to confronting issues of source documentation and media literacy. By nature, media projects immerse students in the potentially murky world of digital downloading. Library staff, when contacted in a timely way, can provide structured guidance in the accurate and responsible use of the copyrighted and Creative Commons materials available to students through Internet searches as well as the expanding realm of online image and audio databases (see Selected Online Resources below for a sampling of both). As for issues of ethical research practices, institutional review
boards at colleges and universities provide guidelines for research involving human subjects. Normally, course-based student research projects are exempt from IRB review. But all the same, the IRB can advise on matters such as interview consent procedures, limitations on public viewing, and the like.\textsuperscript{11}

One of the more daunting questions confronting instructors, not to mention students, regarding new media projects is how to evaluate them, especially when neither the instructor nor the student is a video artist or filmmaker, and the course itself focuses not on professional mastery of digital media, but its use as a means to achieve broader educational ends. One of the most comprehensive guides to assessment of new media narratives can be found in Jason Ohler’s book \textit{Digital Storytelling in the Classroom}, as well as on the accompanying website, JasonOhler.com. Ohler breaks evaluation down into a list of over a dozen optional “assessment traits,” ranging from project planning and research through originality, voice, economy, pacing, source documentation, and what he calls “media grammar,” that is, the way image, audio, editing, and overall organization contribute, or detract, from, the telling of the digital narrative.\textsuperscript{12} The overarching goal here, Ohler emphasizes, is to “assess the process” as fairly as possible by recognizing the many varieties and levels of effort that go into creating such projects.

As mentioned above regarding the students’ Qingming Scroll videos, one way to sharpen the assessment process is to require written “making of” assignments alongside the digital stories. For the final, on-site projects completed in Beijing, written work supplements digital work from start to finish. Even before stepping onto the plane, students have mapped out their projects in a series of proposals and research papers. While on site, students can also be required to submit regularly a written record of their project-related activities—that is, a detailed log of where they went, whom they met, the difficulties they encountered, the solutions they came up with, and so on. The “back stories” that emerge in the logs can, in fact, reveal more about what students actually learned about their topics than the media.
projects themselves, which on their own represent only a very narrow cross-section of the learning experience. More practically, if a student cannot bring the digital project to final completion due to, say, illness or a disastrous loss of data, the log can serve as substantive, alternate grounds for evaluation. Also when on site, it is important to schedule at least one “rough-cut” screening for peer-review, as well as several individual meetings—formal and/or informal—to monitor and guide projects, especially in the final draft stages, when a few well-placed suggestions and easy edits can make a vast difference in the quality of the completed digital narratives.

**Conclusion: Extended Encounters**

Three weeks is not a lot of time for novice videographers to shoot, edit, script, and polish a documentary, especially in foreign, unfamiliar territory, and in tandem with group tours and several guest lectures. But with good planning, realistic expectation, and a bit of luck, it can be done. The videos from our spring 2010 trip (seven of which can be viewed in streaming video; see Selected Online Resources) are a mix of the raw and the cooked; yet they all attest to the variety of personally engaged, educational encounters that students can carry out in a large, culturally dynamic city like Beijing. Some of the projects evolved directly out of students’ individual personal hobbies, skills, and family history; others led students into entirely new zones of knowledge. Regarding the former, I was able to pair up one student who had an interest in children’s drama with another interested in migrant workers by putting them in touch with the Beijing-based nongovernmental organization Hua Dan, which uses drama exercises to teach life skills to migrant-workers’ schoolchildren. Another two—who between them had combined fluency in English, Mandarin, French, and Spanish—created a poetic and poly-lingual exploration of people’s reactions to what was then the latest addition to historical monuments on Tiananmen Square: a pair of massive video screens. Then there was the student who, having discovered that his great-great-grandfather had been an officer in the
American forces of the Second Relief Expedition during the 1900 Boxer Rebellion, designed a project that retraced his ancestor’s journey through that tumultuous event. As for encounters with the entirely new, a pair of seniors—one majoring in English and the other double majoring in Chinese and economics—centered their project on interviews with working artists at the Shangyuan Art Center, which brought them direct and memorable insight into the contestation and ambiguity behind the phrase “avant-garde Chinese art.”

There is, of course, much more to discuss regarding the practical and conceptual approaches to directing student new media projects in Beijing, China, or for that matter anywhere in Asia or the world. It should be clear by now that setting up a course that integrates digital media into the study abroad experience presents the instructor with new and possibly unfamiliar challenges, some of which I myself have yet to resolve. On the other hand, once on site in Beijing, or wherever your teaching interest leads, you will find yourself in the enviable role of facilitator, with the educational heavy lifting being done not by you, but by the inexhaustibly rich milieu of the city itself.

Selected Online Resources
China Heritage Quarterly. An online journal, part of The Australian National University China Heritage Project, including a number of excellent articles on the history of Beijing, as well as a detailed summary from a scholarly conference on the Qingming Shanghe Tu (see No. 4, December 2005). http://www.chinaheritagenewsletter.org/
George Ernest Morrison Collection. State Library, New South Wales. A digital archive that includes photographs from the life of the Australian traveler and journalist also known as “Morrison of Peking.” Images of Beijing (and other locations) date from between about 1895 and 1920, with particular focus on the Boxer Rebellion and Foreign Legation Quarter. http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/index.html

Google Books. A good resource for non-copyrighted, 19th-century accounts of travel to Beijing, locatable through an advanced search for full-view books on “Peking.” http://books.google.com/


Visualizing Cultures: Image-driven Scholarship. A component of MIT’s Open Courseware system specifically designed as a Creative Commons resource for education about East Asia. Currently expanding to include more rare, high-resolution historical images of China and other regions in East Asia. http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/home/index.html

Endnotes

1I have found that digital media projects work best when students collaborate in pairs. Individual students can be hesitant to explore a foreign environment, while groups of three can have difficulty coordinating with one another. Pairs, on the other hand, tend to offer mutual support to one another when developing projects, doing fieldwork, and resolving technical problems. Except for the researched proposal, however, written assignments are done individually. It also bears mention that for the instructor, group work helps keep the total number of projects manageable. Regarding language skills, independent fieldwork is, of course, much easier and rewarding when students have relevant training. I was fortunate to be able to select students who, except for one, had had some Chinese language background.


Please refer to my syllabus for The Chinese City: Living Beijing, downloadable where this essay is listed under “Articles,” at http://www.colgate.edu/academics/FacultyDirectory/jcrespi.html


Valerie Hansen, The Beijing Qingming Scroll and its Significance for the Study of Chinese History. http://www.yale.edu/history/faculty/materials/hansen-qingming-scroll.html. The full-length PDF of the scroll I use in class and provide to students is available for download at my Colgate faculty profile site (see note 4 above). I also show students a full-size reproduction of the scroll to provide a feel for the scale and format of the original painting.

We used FinalCut Express as our video editing software. Your own technology services staff may recommend and support different editing tools.


Nichols develops two more modes, the “reflexive” and “performative,” the former foregrounding the constructedness of documentary itself, and the latter—often autobiographical—stressing the filmmaker’s subjective, personal experience in the documentary process. These two modes can be included, but in the interests of relevance, simplicity, and time saving, I left them out.

Nichols lists examples for films from each mode. A classic example of the poetic mode is Godfrey Reggio’s 1982 film Koyaanisqatsi; the observational mode, Frederick Wiseman’s 1968 film High School; and for the participatory mode any of Michael Moore’s films. Examples of expository documentary are virtually everywhere (nature documentaries, news documentaries, etc.), but the locus classicus of this mode is the work of Scottish filmmaker John Grierson. Of course, eventually one can also screen students’ digital stories from previous classes for modeling purposes.

Note that it is also important to obtain the students’ consent for the university or other institution to post or otherwise screen the videos, ideally with a signed release agreement.
12 Jason Ohler, “Art, Storytelling, Technology and Education Resources for Educators, Parents, Innovators.” http://www.jasonohler.com/storytelling/index.cfm. Ohler’s book (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin Press, 2008) provides an excellent general guide through the methods and pitfalls of using new media narrative as an educational tool. For his discussion of assessment, see pp. 177-191. Perhaps the best way to understand what students put into digital media projects is for instructors to create their own model projects ahead of time as part of course preparation work. Your own institution’s digital media support staff can assist. Or if you are more ambitious, you can find funding for a workshop by an organization like The Center of Digital Storytelling based in Berkeley, Calif., www.storycenter.org/.

13 Previous issues of AsiaNetwork Exchange are, of course, an excellent resource for practical knowledge related to what I discuss here. On student production of short video documentaries from digitized historical images, see John Williams, “Making History with Digital Video: Student Documentaries from Photo to Film” (vol. 14, no. 1). For firsthand advice on collaboration with colleagues on study-abroad trips, see contributions by Sun Weijie, Jonathan Marshall, and James G. Lochtefeld (vol. 18, no. 1). These three articles would be essential if you plan to co-teach on site with, say, a colleague with specific expertise in video art. Steven Emmanuel’s article on a combined student research, documentary film-making trip to Vietnam (vol. 17, no. 2) describes a quite different approach to the kind of engaged learning we pursue in the Living Beijing course.
With his documentary-style films reflecting upon China’s unprecedented transformation from a state-controlled to a market-driven economy, Jia Zhangke has risen from within the movement of independent Chinese cinema that began to flourish in the late 1990s to become one of the most recognized filmmakers of contemporary China.  

Born in 1970 and raised in the underdeveloped Shanxi Province, Jia studied film theory at Beijing Film Academy and was first noticed for his controversial “Hometown Trilogy”—Pickpocket (Xiao Wu, 1997), Platform (Zhartai, 1999), and Unknown Pleasures (Ren xiao yao, 2002). These three films, shot with handheld video camera on the streets of his hometown province, focus on the reckless changes that China’s aggressive economic growth and globalization have brought to socially marginalized groups. Like other independently made films—films that are produced with capital from outside the state-sponsored avenues and without the approval of film censorship, and that are not allowed to be shown in China’s public theaters—Jia’s first three films reach domestic audiences only through unofficial DVD copies and small-scaled screenings at universities, film bars, and art salons.  

His limited domestic influence sharply contrasts with the critical acclaim that he receives from international film festival audiences, who are searching for alternative film culture from China after the Fifth Generation directors. By the late
1990s, Jia had become a spokesperson for an ever-increasing group of aspiring Chinese independent filmmakers, particularly through writings and interviews that theorize independent Chinese cinema’s practice. Jia believes that films should critically and honestly capture China’s ongoing changes rather than succumb to the state’s authority and commercialism. Positioning himself as a “director from the bottom of the society,” Jia further seeks to show that everyone, and particularly “the silent majority,” should have access to cinematic representation. His films have centered on the lives of social outcasts, such as pickpockets, prostitutes, and migrant workers. With the release of his fourth film, The World (Shijie), in China in 2004, Jia has over time become an “aboveground” director, even though he continues to assert the importance of keeping his works out of mainstream cinema. In 2006, he released his Still Life (Sanxia haoren), a film set in one of China’s ancient towns that is being demolished for the construction of the Three Gorges Dam, around the same time when Zhang Yimou released his much-publicized mega production The Curse of the Golden Flower (Mancheng jin dai huangjinjia). Jia’s specific purpose in choosing this time for the release of his film was to break the dominance of mega-production (shangye dapian) over Chinese theaters and raise public awareness about alternative approaches and styles of filmmaking. In his more recent film 24 City (Er shi si cheng ji), Jia focuses on the trajectories of individual lives previously constrained by state control and socialist mentality, and only further compromised by the recent marketization of state-owned factories. Jia’s films have become a window into not only the new forces of Chinese cinema but also a drastically changed contemporary Chinese society.

Jia’s films have been the subject of some scholarly endeavors and have also been increasingly referred to in college classrooms as works representative of post-socialist Chinese cinema. Much critical attention has been directed toward his identity politics and professed cinematic malcontent, focusing on how he and other independent filmmakers negotiate with
the censorship of the state authority, the expectations of the international audience, and the established cinematic conventions, shaping an alternative Chinese film culture that could not have been possible 20 years ago. While Jia’s emphasis on the local culture through his dialect-speaking characters has been examined in other studies, critics have recently also begun to investigate the transnational aspects of his filmmaking as a many of his films involve international capital and references to foreign cultures. However, Jia’s distinctive use of sound, such as ambient noise, silence, and music, has seldom been the focus of existing studies. The need to study his use of popular music is particularly significant when we consider that two of his six full-length films are named after pre-circulated popular songs (Platform and Unknown Pleasures) and virtually each and every one of his films is comprised of significant musical elements. While this critical negligence can be explained by the fact that film is still largely considered an art of image rather than of sound, it can also be attributed to Jia’s use of pre-existing popular songs, which gives the impression that his use of music is not original and creative.

Through this article I would like to challenge this particular assumption and I aim to argue that Jia’s use of popular music in particular constitutes an important part of his cinematic creativity. If ambient noise and temporal intervals mark his distinctive “realist” approach, popular music is then the most obviously constructed element of his films, in that oftentimes when Jia’s characters sing a song, the scenes begin to counteract his use of hallmark minimal drama. It is, however, important to consider what has made Jia use popular music so often, even if there is a risk of contradicting his “realist” approach. On a different note, pedagogically, to young audiences like American college students, popular music may well be the most approachable aspect of Jia’s slow-paced, thrill-lacking, minimalist dramatic films, as the appeal of popular culture can transcend language and cultural barriers. Therefore, both a research gap and a pedagogical need call for an investigation of how Jia uses popular music to build characters and plots,
articulate themes of his films, and promote an understanding of his theory that films should function to memorize the experience of commoners going through China’s unprecedented economic growth and the social changes that it has caused. While referring to all six of Jia’s films, this article particularly looks at the use of popular music in *Unknown Pleasures*. In addition to being an important piece of social commentary, containing the stories of lost youths and clear references to Western culture, *Unknown Pleasures* is the film most likely to generate lively discussion in college classrooms and trigger further interest in Jia and independent Chinese cinema.

Set in China’s industrial coal mining city, Datong, and its noisy and dusty public places, *Unknown Pleasures* portrays the spiritual malaise of China’s urban youth when they encounter the market economy and globalization. The film is named after the theme song of a 1998 TV series, which is sung by the popular actor and singer Richie Ren. The song became a top hit of the year because it struck the hearts of those aspiring for individual success and longing for intrepidness against all odds, which is illustrated through the uplifting lyrics:

>A hero unashamed of his humble origins, many are my ambitions […] whenever sorrows come, whenever regrets come, as long as there is someone who understands my love; whatever suffering comes, whatever weariness comes, I’ll follow the wind and roam carefree…

The concept of “roaming carefree” (or *xiaoyao* in Chinese) dates back to the writings of ancient Chinese philosopher Zhuang Zi around the fourth century B.C., and originally is registered with the Daoist idea of spontaneous accord with the nature. In the context of the song and the film, *xiaoyao* should be interpreted as free, at ease, without burden, and with much excitement, however momentary this state may last. As Qiao Qiao, the female dancer whom Xiao Ji falls for in the film, explains, “we should do what feels good.”

*ASIANetwork Exchange*
The popular song helps Jia build the two protagonists of the film, Binbin and Xiao Ji, and mark their dilemma and disorientation in experiencing a fast changing world. Without a job, an education, or any prospect and interest in the future, 19-year old Binbin must also deal with his mother’s despair after she loses her long-time job in a textile mill and finds the government has restricted the practice of Falungong, a system of beliefs and practices that she adheres to. When asked by his mother to join the army in order to making a living, Binbin learns through the required physical screening that he suffers from hepatitis, which only adds to his dismay. Shy and reticent, Binbin occasionally sells pirated DVDs, but mostly hangs out with his equally aimless yet more restless friend Xiao Ji, who later convinces him to take part in an attempt to rob a bank with a fake bomb, for the mere sake of momentary excitement and the fantasy of being carefree. The only times when Binbin breaks his vocal silence in the film are when he sings the song “Unknown Pleasures.” The first time he sings with his girlfriend who will soon leave for college in a karaoke room that they frequent, and the second time he sings upon the request of a policeman when detained for the attempted bank robbery.

It is significant that both times Jia edits the film in such a way that it allows Binbin to sing the song in its entirety, which is characteristic of the singing scenes in many of Jia’s films. Popular songs, in Jia’s view, not only mark the often short lengths of time in which they were popular and therefore index people’s memory of fleeting past years, but are also the only opportunity for self-expression for a socially marginalized people who otherwise have difficulty articulating for themselves. Just like Binbin, the pickpocket Xiao Wu in Pickpocket, the anonymous teen boy of the demolished town in Still Life, and the laid-off workers in 24 City sing songs, either alone or as a group, in order to express their ambition, passion, nostalgia, fantasy, or frustration. Devoting screen times to allow for singing the songs in their entirety is Jia’s way of forcing attention upon these socially and discursively underprivileged people and their unheard cries for hope and a decent life. For Jia this is both an ethical
and political issue that must be addressed in order to make his films an honest and complete representation of contemporary Chinese society.

Jia is deliberately challenging cinematic conventions when he forces the representation of his characters to be taciturn with only occasional singing that seems to be out of place and inconsistent with the pace and style of the film, particularly given that a reserved character’s singing a song in its full length can disrupt the narrative and make the story appear unconvincing, in addition to the fact that there is certain superficiality in one’s singing whatever other people are singing. However, Jia forges ways to make these vocalizations not only thematically relevant, but also emotionally touching. The voices of the characters are far from elegant or sophisticated, but because audiences are given extended time to approach their feelings and emotions with the familiar songs as bridges, audiences gradually begin to enter the characters’ minds and think sympathetically of them. When Binbin holds his girlfriend’s hand to tap mechanically with the rhythm of the MTV and the couple actually begin to sing together in the dark karaoke room—”A hero unashamed of his humble origin…”—we sense their determination to be optimistic despite all the problems that they cannot resolve. Highlighted by the knowledge that while she is climbing the ladder of success through attempting to enter college, he already knows he is stuck and is aware that they are beginning their journeys down separate paths, and their relationship cannot last much longer. While they sit parallel to each other, both facing the TV, and without eye contact, there is a

Workers of the to-be-demolished 420 Factory singing “L’International” (in Chinese) in 24 City
The singing scenes in *Pickpocket* and *Still Life* also have the same effects upon the viewer. When the dominantly reserved Xiao Wu starts singing “Heart Rain” (*Xin yü*) in an empty public bathhouse, fully naked and in an unconfident voice, we see a shy, lovelorn and tender boy’s heart embedded in the unappealing body of a morally flawed pickpocket. When he sings the same song to Mei Mei when she is sick, we sense his timid expression of love but simultaneously become aware of her impending disappearance, as this is foreshadowed in the lyrics of the song “because tomorrow I will become the bride of another man…. .” Similarly, in *Still Life*, an unknown, half-naked adolescent boy sings “Mouse Loves Grains” (*Laoshu ai dami*) one of the most popular songs of the year, while standing upon the piled wreckage of a half-demolished building in which the demolition crew takes a break while other workers spread sanitizing mist around the area. The camera pans to show Han Sanming standing against the wall of the building, as the boy’s only audience, and in a momentary contemplative mood. Han,
the film’s protagonist, has come to Sichuan to look for the woman who was abducted, sold to him as a wife in Shanxi, only to be rescued and sent back to her home with their daughter sixteen years before. Facing a town that will be flooded for the construction of a dam, the uncommunicative miner has only the faintest hope of finding his wife, but somehow the unknown boy’s singing helps him come to terms with love, which in any audience’s opinion, is the last emotion that can be involved in a relationship based on human trafficking:

Even if just for one day, make all my dreams come true, with all my heart and soul, I’ll always be true to you. Whatever it takes, my dream will come true. I’ll whisper in your ear, my vow. I love you, only you, like a mouse loves grain. I’ll stay by your side. I’ll be there no matter what.

This moment of sentimentality helps further Han’s character development and marks the birth of love and hope from within the least likely circumstances as an underlining thread of the film. To Jia, this kind of determination to retain hope when one faces despair constitutes the most admirable part of the mentality of the socially marginalized Chinese people and is actually the backbone of his country as it goes through economic reform and social instability.

However, Jia never intends to suggest that popular music can be a redemptive force for hardship in reality. The ironic ending of *Unknown Pleasures* purposefully deflates this illusion and further suggests that even this humble expression of feelings can be appropriated and teased by political authority. Binbin, handcuffed and standing against a wall and a closed door of the police office, is ordered to sing a song he knows well to entertain the policeman, who has apparently become bored by the hyperbolically official TV newscast about the opening of a highway that connects their city and Beijing. It is ironic that Binbin, now legally liable and physically restricted, begins to sing “Unknown Pleasures,” the very song that cries for a
carefree life unburdened and unconstrained by anything. It is also tragic that Binbin’s singing, an expression of his ambition, now only serves to entertain the authoritative power, as symbolized by the policeman who holds him for the attempted bank robbery. Once his singing becomes a device to entertain others, it is taken away from him and becomes irrelevant to him. Binbin has therefore not only lost freedom but is here deprived of the last form of expression that he can hope to resort to. His being cornered in the police office is here both mimetic and symbolic, showing how he has been fixed into a position of inferiority and silence.

Unlike Binbin’s reservation and disinterest, Xiao Ji is passionate and even impulsive, but he also lacks a goal in life and ends up being driven into various transgressions by the sole motivation of devoting his energy to a cause bigger than himself, even if it is a wrong cause, so that he can forget about his own problems and avoid falling into ultimate hopelessness. Xiao Ji admires the legendary Monkey King because “he is free as the wind,” which directly relates to the carefree lifestyle as cried out in “Unknown Pleasures.” Xiao Ji looks like an underdeveloped adolescent boy, but that does not prevent him from launching into the desperate attempt to woo Qiao Qiao, a dancer whose boyfriend Qiao San is a member of the powerful mafia. It seems that his romantic rivalry with a powerful man (or a possible father figure), which results in violent beatings and public humiliations, helps fill Xiao Ji’s otherwise empty ego, grants him some “unknown pleasures,” and makes him feel personal significance. Even this misguided illusion cannot last long as Qiao San dies overnight, not by Xiao Ji’s hands but
rather through some random accident. When Xiao Ji finally has a chance to go to a hotel room with Qiao Qiao, there is a sense of confusion rather than triumph on his part, which makes the romantic moment awkward. The ego that Xiao Ji works so hard to build is deflated not only because the source from which it draws life has disappeared, but is also reduced when he cannot manage to open the faucet of the shower, a thing too modern for a boy like him with such “humble origins.” The scene ends with Qiao Qiao using a bath towel to dry Xiao Ji’s hair and body, as if she is an older sister taking care of a vulnerable little brother. The masculinity that Xiao Ji works so hard to inflate is ultimately deflated by this newly emerged sister-brother relationship, which Qiao Qiao stressed when they first met but Xiao Ji denied willfully.

Throughout the film, Xiao Ji constantly throws himself into frenzied search for excitement but always ends up finding himself out of the game. Xiao Ji and Binbin’s re-enactment of the robbery scene from the American film *Pulp Fiction* in real-life China is perhaps the most surreal plot element in this largely realistic film, marking the desperation of Xiao Ji to soak up someone else’s dream. *Pulp Fiction* is mentioned several times throughout the film, but it is through a club dance scene that Jia indicates Xiao Ji’s blurring of the boundary between fiction and life. Xiao Ji and Qiao Qiao dance together with the music sampled from the soundtrack of *Pulp Fiction*, but their enjoyment is interrupted by Qiao San and other mafiosos. They take Xiao Ji take away from the dance pool and threaten him with the question “Are you having fun?” and when Xiao Ji answers “fun,” he is slapped on the face and the question is repeated; with every answer the same, he is consequently slapped at least ten different times. Receiving violence seems to redeem Xiao Ji’s feelings of emptiness, and violence becomes something necessary for him to reach a certain sense of fulfillment. When these confrontations disappear with Qiao San’s death, Xiao Ji has to find something else to pursue and channel his energy into.
Undoubtedly through Xiao Ji’s character, the director aims to deliver critical commentary about contemporary Chinese society. Jia has written that living in today’s China is close to a “surrealist” (chao xianshi) experience, with demolition ongoing everywhere; with the speeding up of everything from new construction to trains; with newscasters busily delivering news about China’s rise while glossing over thorny issues; with people’s “unknown” excitement about success and prosperity, yet tensions and resentment have never been so intense. *Unknown Pleasures* specifically mentions several pieces of breaking news from the year 2001, the year the film takes place, through diegetic TV and radio news reports: the self-burning of Falungong practitioners at Tiananmen, the Hainan Island incident with the United States, China’s entry into the World Trade Organization, a sabotage in a factory residential building in north China, and China’s successful bid to become the host city of the 2008 Summer Olympics. Compared with Xiao Ji and Binbin’s uneventful life, the reality of the year 2001 seems more theatrical. Jia uses these theatrical events as a backdrop for Xiao Ji’s search for excitement and drama to show how these events, despite the excitement they promise, are irrelevant to the actual experience of individuals living on the margins of the society.

Through a distinctive juxtaposition of news broadcasts (flooding the ears of the characters) and prolonged silence of the characters (with occasionally singing as analyzed), Jia intends to suggest how grand narratives about the rise of a modern nation no longer hold together a coherent collective identity for the Chinese people. The underprivileged people like Binbin and Xiao Ji are confused, angry, and are desperately searching for something to hold on to. In *Unknown Pleasures*, Xiao Ji’s motorcycle breaks down many times in the middle of the road, leaving him to kick and curse the motorcycle, and feel hopeless about where he is going in life. The dysfunctional motorcycle, a symbol of modernization itself, is a metaphor that bears Jia’s worrisome feelings about rapid economic development leaving many underprivileged Chinese behind. Toward the end of the film, while the policeman is watching news about the opening
of a new highway that promises prosperity and convenience, Xiao Ji’s motorcycle breaks down again in the middle of the road, ironically connoting how far the Chinese people can sustain the surrealistic speed of development without anger and resentment taking over. In this light, it is significant that the bank that Xiao Ji and Binbin attempt to rob is called “China’s Construction Bank.” They are so eager to play a role in China’s ongoing construction project—understood in the broadest possible term—which has neglected them for so long, that they begin to become destructive elements.

In a way, Unknown Pleasures can also be read as Jia Zhangke’s discursive deconstruction of China’s grand modernization project, a position consistent with his self-conscious attempt to remain alternative and non-mainstream. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, Jia himself also appears briefly in Unknown Pleasures, as an unidentified minor character singing passionately “O Sole Mio” around the Textile Mill’s residential complex where Binbin lives. We see Jia’s character through the eyes of Binbin who happens to pass by when he is singing: Jia’s character is in a worn out, dull, typically Chinese white tank tee while singing in Italian and imitating Luciano Pavarotti’s formal
presentation of the song. This scene serves as a possible means to understanding Jia’s self-reflection and self-mockery, especially as a director who has gradually gained international recognition but who is still avoided by many Chinese domestic audiences. For Chinese audiences, who counter the pressure of living in a fast-changing society by taking escape in highly entertaining mega-productions, Jia’s “realistic” works speak in an unfamiliar filmic language, just like Jia’s character singing in a foreign language unfathomable to them. But Jia insists on embracing the alternative film culture to which he belongs and contributes, even if that means he can never become popular or mainstream in his home country. In *Unknown Pleasures*, when Binbin sells pirated DVDs, he has borrowed money from Xiao Wu, played by the same actor of *Pickpocket*, who suggests that Binbin should try to sell copies of *Pickpocket* as it has become so popular and profitable. This deliberate intertextuality can be seen as Jia Zhangke’s self-teasing due to the fact that he knows very well that in reality even people like Xiao Wu would not like to watch *Pickpocket*. The burden of reality is already so prominent a topic and it takes tremendous courage, and economic cost as film tickets have become very expensive in China, to produce and watch a film like Jia’s, and appreciate its representation of the many changes and challenges that common Chinese people face every day. Many people choose to be oblivious about the current issues within their society, but Jia sees it is a filmmaker’s responsibility to try to remind people of the importance of not forgetting about these issues through their representation in his films, which capture a fleeting moment of the present before it disappears into the darkness of history.

**Endnotes**

1 One can learn about major issues related to Jia’s films through reading Michael Berry’s interview of Jia in English, “Jia Zhangke: Capturing a Transforming Reality,” in Michael Berry, ed., *Speaking in Images: Interviews with Contemporary Chinese Filmmakers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 182-207.
For complete scripts of these three films, together with early reviews and studies, see a series of three books in Chinese compiled by Lin Xudong, Zhang Yaxuan, and Gu Geng, Jie Zhangke’s Film: Xiao Wu, Jia Zhangke’s Film: Platform, Jia Zhangke’s Film: Unknown Pleasures (Beijing: Zhongguo mangwen chubanshe, 2003). For an introduction to these three films in English, see Michael Berry, Jia Zhangke’s “Hometown Trilogy”: Xiao Wu, Platform, Unknown Pleasures (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

For studies of independent Chinese cinema, see articles in Paul Pickowicz and Yingjin Zhang, eds., From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).


In a speech after a screening of Still Life in Beijing in 2006, Jia stated that he would like to see how many audience still care about “good men” (haoren, as in the original Chinese title of Still Life) in this age of “gold”-worshipping, which is a direct reference to Zhang’s film. In an interview with Xu Baike in 2007, Jia further criticized Zhang Yimou for monopolizing the resources of filmmaking, including capital and market, which should be made available to China’s young directors. He also referred to mega-productions as “viruses” (xijun) that destroy social values through uncritically catering to mass entertainment. See Jia Thoughts 1996-2008: Jia Zhangke’s Film Notes (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2009), 186-202.

Examples are Cui Shuqin’s “Negotiating In-Between: On New-Generation Filmmaking and Jia Zhangke’s Films,” Modern Chinese Literature and Culture 18, 2 (Fall 2006), 98-130; Valerie Jaffee’s “Bringing the World to the Nation: Jia Zhangke and the Legitimization of Chinese Underground Film,” Senses of Cinema 32 (July-September 2004); and Zhang Hongbing’s “Ruins and Grassroots: Jia Zhangke’s Cinematic Discontents in the Age of Globalization,” in Sheldon Lu and Jiayan Mi, eds., Chinese Ecocinema: In the Age of Environmental Challenge. (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), 129-153.

Some studies mentioned Jia’s use of music in passing, but have not studied this aspect of his films in the context of other audio features of Jia’s films. Lu Tonglin’s article “Music and Noise: Independent Film and Globalization,” The China Review 3, 1 (Spring 2003), 57-76, focused on music and noise in Pickpocket and needs to be updated with discussions of Jia’s later films from this perspective.

In Unknown Pleasures, Qiao Qiao referred directly to Zhuang Zi’s “Dreaming of Being a Butterfly” and “Unknown Pleasures” (Xiao yao you) in her conversation with Xiao Ji. Qiao Qiao also notably has a butterfly tattoo on the front of her left shoulder, indicating a desire to be carefree and to live without the burden of reality.

Jia Zhangke, “Director’s Words on The World,” in Jia Thoughts 1996-2008: Jia Zhangke’s Film Notes (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2009), 146.
Beyond Detective Fiction: 
A Brief Study of Natsuo Kirino’s 
*Gyokuran* (Magnolia)

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Natsuno Kirino (b. 1951) is a female detective fiction writer from Japan. She has published more than 20 novels and several of them, including *Out* (2004), *Grotesque* (2007), *Real World* (2008), and *What Remains* (2008), have been translated into English. Due to her close attention to female psychology in a patriarchal society, Kirino is often considered as a feminist writer. J. Madison Davis comments on Kirino’s rich imagination in *Out* in an article published in a recent issue of *World Literature Today*, in which he points out that her fiction creates not only fascinating plots but also a rare sense of reality, especially reality that women face in contemporary Japan.  

*Out* centers on a murder-mystery case, which involves a housewife killing her abusive husband with the help of three female coworkers from a *bento*-box factory. Behind the murder mystery there is a shocking depiction of reality — although Japan is among the most industrialized nations in the world, women still suffer social and economic inequality and violence within the family.

Compared to her successful detective fiction, less is known about her untranslated novel *Gyokuran*, which focuses on the main character Yuko Hirono traveling to Shanghai to escape from gender discrimination she experienced in Tokyo and from her boyfriend Yukio’s mistreatment of her. Kirino uses the trope of women’s international travel to reveal the persisting gender inequality in Japanese society. Kirino says in an interview: “A few years ago, many female college graduates in Japanese companies began to realize their limitations as women in Japanese society. As a result, they traveled to New York or
Hong Kong to obtain certificates or working experience abroad. However, they often found it difficult to achieve their dreams abroad and had to return to Japan [without achieving their dreams]. I was concerned about why they went abroad and what obstacles they encountered there when I was writing *Gyokuran*.” Kirino does not idealize women’s transnational mobility as a sign of women’s freedom and improved social status but uses it as another scenario of women trying to escape from social inequalities in Japan.

What makes this novel distinctive is that Yuko’s journey to Shanghai connects her to an earlier generation of Japanese who traveled to Shanghai in the first half of the twentieth century. Much of the novel’s mystery results from such an unimaginable connection. While living in Shanghai, Yuko’s unexpected encounter with the phantom of Tadashi—her paternal uncle—makes her want to learn more about his life in Shanghai. Yet Tadashi’s phantom soon disappears from her surroundings. The novel then picks up a new plot. Tadashi’s love relationship with Namiko in Shanghai and his life in postwar Japan are narrated in a separate story line. Both Tadashi and Namiko were from a low social class and suffered from discrimination in Japan. Their migration to Shanghai was linked to their dream for freedom and social justice. Yet for these poor people the foreign city was not a new world but another testing ground for their will, perseverance, and human relationship. Namiko was abused and abandoned by her first husband and fell into becoming a prostitute in Shanghai. Although migration did not help her raise her social class it did enable her to develop consciousness about her economic, political, and gender situation.

*Gyokuran* shares certain elements with other detective fiction by Kirino—crime and mystery. The criminal in the novel is Namiko’s common-law husband, Inoue Shozaburo, who brought her to Shanghai to do socialist activities but completely disappeared a few years later. In fact, he abandoned her and returned to Japan. After the war, he became an important businessman in Japan with the money he embezzled from the Comintern, which sponsored his activities in Shanghai. The
helpless Namiko became his direct victim and died of illness in Shanghai. Although Inoue’s crimes are moral crimes beyond the surveillance of law, his character and behaviors not only show male privileges in society as an important reason for women’s suffering but also suggest other social elements, such as class struggle, political hypocrisy, and postwar conservatism in Japan that have shaped women’s lives.

It remains mysterious how the phantom of Tadashi could appear in front of Yuko. Tadashi is in his late nineties and lives in Japan at that time. He has long ago lost touch with his family, and he may not even know he has a niece named Yuko who is now visiting Shanghai. Yet what Yuko sees in Shanghai is clearly the ghost of Tadashi who appears still in his twenties. In their conversation, Tadashi encourages Yuko to search within her true self and tells her that the new world she is looking for in Shanghai does not exist externally but internally. Another mystery is when Yukio comes to Shanghai to visit Yuko he encounters the images of both Tadashi and Namiko in his dream. He finds himself in their house in Shanghai in the 1920s. In his dream Namiko is dying of TB, and the desperate husband Tadashi asks Yukio—the doctor—when the cure for TB will become available. It remains mysterious to Yukio why he dreams about two people he has never met before. It is even more mysterious that Yukio becomes Tadashi himself in his dream. He is both Yukio and Tadashi at the same time.

Besides these two explicit mysterious incidents, the novel frequently depicts a mysterious symbol—the magnolia flower, which blooms everywhere in the streets of Shanghai in summer. It is the flower that indirectly connects Yuko and Namiko—Yuko loves watching and smelling the flower, and Namiko has the flower on her chest when she dies. The magnolia flower also connects them to Tadashi. At the end of the novel when the 96-year old Tadashi wakes up from a dream in which he meets with a certain young woman, he smells the magnolia flower nearby that reminds him of his nostalgia for Shanghai. It seems that the image of magnolia not only represents Shanghai but also symbolizes Yuko and Yukio’s unconsciousness, which is closely related to the past. They no longer have direct and
intimate connection with in the present because their unconsciousness has been suppressed by the collective consciousness of contemporary Japan. Yet their search for self-identity seems to guide them once more to the suppressed unconsciousness and history.

*Gyokuran* is not a typical detective fiction because it does not solve any mystery but presents human life itself as a mystery that connects one with history and others in unexpected ways. There is no detective figure in the novel to solve the crimes and mysteries and to combine the stories together to reach a coherent conclusion. It is up to the reader to make connections between the separate story lines and decide what messages the crimes and mysteries convey. It is not difficult to find that crimes are manifestations of the social ills of male-dominated Japan. The agents of the crimes are men and victims of the crimes are women, specifically Namiko and Yuko, who suffer from TB and insomnia, respectively. Their physical illnesses are the concrete manifestation of the negative effects of social problems on their bodies. The novel emphasizes that despite all the problems in social reality the characters are interconnected, and they cannot achieve self-identity without understanding the others. Although Namiko suffers tremendously from her marriage with Inoue she gains sympathy and love from Tadashi. In turn, Tadashi’s suffering in postwar Japan is rescued by the love and companionship of another woman—Tomiko. Although Yukio’s infidelity and arrogance hurt Yuko and make her flee Tokyo, he later realizes his own inadequacy and wrong assumptions about Yuko. His dream about Namiko and Tadashi during his trip in Shanghai in fact shows his suppressed unconsciousness. Although he is not aware of this on the conscious level he is worried deep inside that as a medical doctor he can only cure certain physical diseases but not all of them and that he has little understanding of human sufferings. His transformation into Tadashi in fact shows his fear and uncertainty deep in his unconsciousness. True crimes in the novel suggest social problems that cause individuals to suffer. The mysteries underline the fact that each individual is connected
with others consciously and unconsciously across temporal, spatial, and personal boundaries.

Besides the historical context, we also need to situate the novel in a larger literary context in order to understand its significance. There are a large number of Japanese literary works set in Shanghai in the early twentieth century, corresponding to the mass migration and travel of Japanese intellectuals, businessmen, and other civilians during Japan’s colonial and military expansion in Asia. This type of transnational literature disappeared with the end of World War II and the repatriation of the Japanese. The continental experience itself was nearly forgotten in postwar Japan. Since the 1990s, with the increase of travel and migration of a new generation of Japanese to Asia, there once again appeared literary works set in major Chinese cities such as Beijing, Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Xi’an. Different from the earlier writings, which are situated in the colonial and war context and are written by male writers, the new transnational writings are written by female writers and about the private life of the individual in the global context. Moreover, in contrast to the modernist nature of the earlier writing about Shanghai, contemporary writings are more autobiographical and personal. There is no preconceived Japanese subject in their writing, but often exists a self searching for identity in a global context.

There is a gendered division in modern Japanese literature’s description of Shanghai. Male writers tend to portray Shanghai symbolically as a sign and a racial Other for Japan. An example is the novelist Yokomitsu Riichi’s famous novel *Shanghai* written in the late 1920s.\(^3\) Written in the modernist style, the novel portrays Shanghai as the decadent Other against which a modern Japanese identity is constructed and questioned. Women writers, on the contrary, tend to describe Shanghai as a concrete space in which their characters live their everyday life and negotiate their fluid identity with what they encounter in Shanghai. In the female literary tradition in modern and contemporary Japan, the domestic space has been portrayed as the restrictive space that oppresses and stifles women. In contrast, spaces outside of the domestic sphere, such as a foreign
locale, nature, or a mythical space, are linked to women’s spiritual liberation and freedom. This helps to explain female writers’ different attitudes toward Shanghai than male writers. An example would be Hayashi Kyoko’s novels and short stories about her childhood experience in Shanghai in the 1930s, such as *Mitchell’s Lipstick* (1980) and *Shanghai* (1983). For female writers, Shanghai is less a national space than an everyday life space, and less about encountering the racial Other than about rediscovering the self. Kirino’s *Gyokuran* needs to be situated in such a literary tradition. She does not use Shanghai as the cultural and racial Other for Japan to construct its own identity. Rather, Shanghai, together with magnolia flowers, symbolizes the unknown part of the Japanese Self—its unconsciousness.

In light of the historical, social, and literary contexts discussed above, we understand that *Gyokuran* is not simply a detective/mystery novel but a serious investigation of the unconscious and the unfamiliar realm of the postwar Japanese subject. The search for self-identity leads the individuals to cross the temporal, spatial and personal boundaries and arrive at the collective unconsciousness found in a foreign locale and in the reminiscence of a recent past.

**Endnotes**

Gardens and Gateways: 
Journeys within the Vision of Han-shan

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Although rooted in the work of the T’ang poet Han-shan, this paper is ultimately about the ways in which writers and artists engage with what they experience in the world. The work of filmmaker Trin T Minh-Ha, poems by W.S. Merwin, Burton Watson’s translations, and the thoughts on the creative process of translation by Tony Barnstone and Gary Snyder have all informed my work as an artist and the images I present here.

The complexity of China has always seemed astonishing to me. In my travels there, I have contemplated how best to engage the country’s vast history and rich visual texture. I have also struggled to discover common threads that connect one of the world’s oldest cultures with the current, great masses of people. And how can I as the artist-traveler, the stranger or waigouren, mediate this unfamiliar space and interpret it creatively?

On my first trip to China, I brought along a small book of 100 poems by Han-shan from the T’ang Dynasty. These writings by the reclusive yet deeply socially aware Buddhist monk, who is thought to have lived anywhere between 627 and 750 A.D., held many of the answers I was looking for. I have returned to this volume many times.

Here translated by Burton Watson is #29

I spur my horse past the ruined city;
The ruined city, that wakes the traveler’s thoughts:
Ancient battlements, high and low;
Old grave mounds, great and small.
Where the shadow of the single tumbleweed trembles
And the voice of the great trees clings forever,
I sigh over all those common bones—
No roll of the immortals bears their names.¹

Han-shan’s poem echoed as I visited famous spots such as Xi’an’s terracotta warriors, the Forbidden City, and the Great Wall and most strongly when walking down an unknown street in a city or looking out a train window across fields lit with many little fires from farmers’ brush piles. It was the unnamed souls of Han-shan’s poems, whose presence is strong in these places, that have resonated most deeply for me. China’s history in the recent centuries makes this sentiment more poignant.

The two most eventful trips to China were for the adoption of my two young daughters. My daughters’ Chinese names are Yu Yao (beautiful jade) and Qiu Qing (autumn calm/clear) As they have grown, we have moved together through the complex spaces and time from the culture they were born into, to the one they currently inhabit.

I (and increasingly they) have often felt the invisible ties that connect us to each other and to China through time and space. The adoption community often refers to these connections as the red thread, referring the old Chinese story of those predestined to be together.

The birth mothers of my daughters, though never to be known, are always present for me like ghosts of memories.

In her introduction to Karin Evans’ book, Lost Daughters of China, Anchee Min takes on the role of stern ayi or auntie, telling the “raw truth” of their histories. She tells the lost daughters
that for their birth mothers, who for whatever tragic reason had to relinquish them, they will be forever “a broken arm hidden inside the sleeve.” And when my daughters have asked, “Do you think she ever wonders about me?” I have said, “My dear, every day.”

In his poem “A Message to Po Chu-I,” recently published in The New Yorker, W.S. Merwin has a wrenching conversation with another T’ang poet, across the centuries. He traces the metaphorical migration of an old goose from ancient times when there was war and starvation, to the current days of global strife and ecological disaster. In each epoch the goose is given protection by the poet and we are left with the hope that some future poet will become his guardian.

“A Message to Po Chu-I” by W.S. Merwin

In that tenth winter of your exile
the cold never letting go of you
and your hunger aching inside you
day and night while you heard the voices
out of the starving mouths around you
old ones and infants and animals
those curtains of bones swaying on stilts
and you heard the faint cries of the birds
searching in the frozen mud for something
to swallow and you watched the migrants
trapped in the cold the great geese growing
weaker by the day until their wings
could barely lift them above the ground
so that a gang of boys could catch one
in a net and drag him to market
to be cooked and it was then that you
saw him in his own exile and you
paid for him and kept him until he
could fly again and you let him go
but then where could he go in the world
of your time with its wars everywhere
and the soldiers hungry the fires lit
the knives out twelve hundred years ago

I have been wanting to let you know
the goose is well he is here with me
you would recognize the old migrant
he has been with me for a long time
and is in no hurry to leave here
the wars are bigger now than ever
greed has reached numbers that you would not
believe and I will not tell you what
is done to geese before they kill them
now we are melting the very poles
of the earth but I have never known
where he would go after he leaves me³

The 2001 film, The Fourth Dimension by Trin T. Minh Ha, has influenced me through the years of developing this project. Her creation of the images within film as segments or vignettes of space, color, and form reminds me of the way an artist book can be engaged. Her notions of the images made by a visitor or guest engaged with, but ultimately separate from, a culture are beautifully explored in this particular film.

The creative form known as the artist’s book is a format for an unusual kind of interaction between the viewer and the creative work. The world of each book is entered separately by individual viewers. Each encounter is specific. Each dialogue is unique.

My book works also allude to the notion of the carried shrine or Gau, as used in Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, and Mongolia. The Gau box usually contains a written prayer or a sacred diagram. The prayers are usually hand inscribed or block-printed by a priest and they are always blessed before use.

The focus of the imagery for these mixed-media works is based in color and images from my own photographs, including photographs of Chinese and Korean gardens, temples, gateways, and street scenes. My photographs have been digitally printed
onto organza or silk and layered onto the canvas surface. Found materials include Chinese joss paper that is used to honor ancestors. Small tin niches (small places of worship) seem to echo temple entryways and become a kind of gateway. Applied media include ink, paint, wax, sewn pieces, and collage.

I have experimented with an overlay of printed images and drawn images. I am also very interested in how printmaking media may begin to come together with painting. These pieces are often created on deep canvases which give a sense of levels and three-dimensional spaces. They can be placed on deep railings along the gallery wall and thus viewed in sequence.

Each image becomes a gateway the same way garden or temple gateways invites exploration. The works are meant to evoke an ancient place often visited and long remembered.

Ancient images of the Buddha and the female bodhisattva, Guan Yin, who gives solace to the hurt and provides the blessing of children, evoke a place of contemplation. My young daughter’s face is overlapped with that of Guan Yin and in the background
are the images of other bodhisattvas or perhaps ancestors. The lone woman with her back to the viewer evokes once more the unnamed souls of Han-shan’s poems.

Recently, I have drawn inspiration from the writings by translators of Chinese poetry. Their ideas have helped me understand more about my role and the validity of interpreting experiences with China. Both Gary Snyder and Tony Barnstone speak of translation as a creative act in itself.

Barnstone says in his essay from *The Symposium on Translating Asian Poetry of 1999*, “Translators bring their linguistic patterns, cultural predispositions, and aesthetic biases to the creative act, not merely holding up a mirror to something old, but giving the text original new life in a strange environment.”

Snyder writes in his reflections on translating Han-shan, “A truly apt translation of a poem may require much effort of imagination, almost as great as the making of the original. The translator who wishes to enter the creative territory must make an intellectual and imaginative jump into the mind and world of the poet, and no dictionary will make it easier.”

About her film, *Shoot for the Contents from 1991*, Trin T. Min-Ha says, “The image is mediated by the translator—a literal translator during the interview with the Chinese filmmaker, but also other translators heard or seen through the voices of the narrators and of myself as writer, editor, and photographer of images of China. The fact that both makers and viewers depend here on translation in order to have an entry into the culture was clearly brought out in the sound-image. On one level, this interdependence made visible and audible may appear artificial, but on the level of its function within the process of producing meaning and images, it is totally natural.”

Perhaps this is true for the artist as well, as one tries to capture experience that is one’s own, but also belongs to others. Snyder goes on to say that “Han-shan was not exactly a nature poet. He was a person who left behind his old self to walk in the world of no obstruction, which is in the practice of Zen, just this very world. And that the recurrent image of Cold Mountain and its roughness is the narrow gate through which Han-shan tried to
force his perception of a *whole* world and this helps explain his poetry’s calm intensity.”

Here Snyder translates Han-shan:

> In a tangle of cliffs I choose a place—  
> Bird-paths, but no trails for men.  
> What’s that beyond the yard?  
> White clouds clinging to vague rocks.  
> Now I have lived here—how many years—  
> Again and again, spring and winter pass.  
> Go tell families with silverware and cars  
> “What’s the use of all the noise and money?”

Let me conclude with two more poems by Han-Shan, which allude to memory and representation. Again, with translation by Burton Watson.

#4

*Above the blossoms sing the orioles:*  
*Kuan kuan, their clear tones.*  
*The girl with a face like jade*  
*Strums to them on her lute.*  
*Never does she tire of playing—*  
*Youth is the time for tender thoughts.*  
*When flowers scatter and the birds fly off*  
*Her tears will fall in the spring wind.*

#97

*My mind is like the autumn moon*  
*Shining clean and clear in the green pool.*  
*No, that’s not a good comparison.*  
*Tell me, how shall I explain?*

**Endnotes**


Gary Snyder “Reflections on My Translations of the Tang Poet Han-shan” *Manoa*, vol. 12, no. 1 (Summer 2000), 137-139.


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**Bibliography**


Film Review

*The Monkey Kid: A Personal Glimpse into the Cultural Revolution*

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*The Monkey Kid*, written and directed by Xiao-Yen Wang, is probably one of the best Chinese feature films ever made but few Americans have seen. Released in 1995 by the Beijing-San Francisco Film Group, the film “was an Official Selection at the 1995 Cannes International Film Festival and received the Grand Prize at the 1996 Aubervilliers International Children’s Film Festival, awards for Best Film and Best Director at the 1995 Danube Film Festival, Best Foreign Film at the 1995 Fort Lauderdale International Film Festival, the Young Jury Award at the 1996 International Women’s Film Festival at Créteil, and the Critic’s Prize at the Cinestival 97 at Marseille.” (http://www.bsffilmgroup.com/mk/about.htmlSan) Despite its critical acclaim, *The Monkey Kid* was not available for distribution until December 2010.

The film is the autobiographical account of director Xiao-Yen Wang’s childhood in China during the Cultural Revolution, the great political upheaval that gripped Chinese society and politics from 1966-1976. Ms. Wang is not just a casual observer
of the times. She is an accomplished writer and director who graduated from the Beijing Film Academy in 1982. That same class of directors came to be called the famed Fifth Generation of Chinese filmmakers and included Chen Kaige (Farewell My Concubine, The Emperor and the Assassin) and Zhang Yimou (Curse of the Golden Flower, Hero, House of Flying Daggers, Ju Dou, Raise the Red Lantern, Red Sorghum, The Story of Qiu Ju, To Live). Ms. Wang has also written and directed two other films, The Blank Point (1991) and I’m Seducible (2006).

At first glance, The Monkey Kid may seem like a simple slice-of-life story about one family during the Cultural Revolution, but it is much more than that. This feature film shows just how much Maoist ideology affected everyone in China, especially mothers, fathers, and children. Every family felt the turmoil in some way. What makes this film about the Cultural Revolution different from all others is that it offers a way to understand revolutionary society from a child’s perspective.

The story centers on a nine-year old girl from an intellectual family living in Beijing circa 1970. Intellectuals were both the lifeblood of the new China since 1949 and a despised political class. During Cultural Revolution, they were often associated with Mao’s enemies within the Chinese Communist Party and thus became targets of political campaigns. Workers, peasants, and soldiers were the most important classes in this society.

The main character of the film is Shi-Wei. For much of the film, Shi-Wei and her sister, Shao-Qiong, are alone in the family’s apartment. Her parents live apart in two different locations in rural China as part of the campaign to have intellectuals learn from the peasants. During the film, both the father and the mother return home for short periods of time. Otherwise, Shi-Wei and Shao-Qiong must take care of themselves. They do their homework, keep the apartment tidy, shop for vegetables from street vendors, and even cook the way their parents have taught them, without any adult supervision.

The film depicts Shi-Wei as a model child. She takes on a lot of the responsibility at home while her parents are away. She also does well in school and serves as a class leader. In
one scene of a school assembly, Shi-Wei reads the essay she wrote about how Chairman Mao’s ideas inspired her to be a better person. Her teacher singles her out quite often to be a helper and to read aloud from the *Quotations from Chairman Mao*, their ideological textbook. Shi-Wei’s childhood is a testament to the politics of the times. She sings revolutionary songs and plays revolutionary games. Chairman Mao would be proud.

Yet even Shi-Wei is not perfect. In one of the first scenes of the film, Shi-Wei arrives at school late because she and her friends were playing in the snow. Other students would have been punished, but Shi-Wei counts on the fact that she is a “teacher’s pet.” Shi-Wei just whispers some excuse to the teacher and all is forgiven. Later in the film, when Shi-Wei’s father returns home for a short visit, he brings a big box of chocolates for everyone to share. Her father tells Shi-Wei only to have a few chocolates each day, but she sneaks into her father’s dresser where he keeps the chocolate and eats her fill on the same day; as a result, Shi-Wei ends up with a stomachache and there were few chocolates for anyone else. Finally, Shi-Wei is so tempted by some dried persimmons she wanted from a fruit stall near her home that she stretches out her hand to take one when the vendor is not looking. Her mother intervenes just in time and takes Shi-Wei home, but both parents are quite hard on her for such a moral lapse.

Shi-Wei and her sister must also deal firsthand with the fact that their parents’ class background as intellectuals affects them, too. Someone sets Shao-Qiong’s hair on fire. A group of bullies in the neighborhood call Shi-Wei derisive names, throw rocks at her, and chases after her. Shi-Wei is not intimidated easily, however. She is tough and determined yet still a happy child at heart. This attitude seems to be due to her mother.

The mother is clearly the hero of this film. She teaches her young daughters how to steel themselves against political attacks by telling them stories from ancient Chinese history and literature and even offers ways for the girls to defend themselves when necessary. She also tries to give them some small measures of normalcy in a highly charged political age. One of the first
things the mother does when she returns home is to make new, colorful, padded jackets (mián ˈjou̯) for her daughters. Shi-Wei calls her jacket “pretty” even though style is not supposed to matter in Maoist China.

At a time when Western influences, especially classical music, were rejected on ideological grounds, the mother somehow acquires a record of Bizet’s opera, Carmen, and plays it very softly for her daughters and their friends. She wants the girls to experience the beauty of the music. She even encourages Shi-Wei to climb a tree the way she did when she was a child and to ride her bicycle in the rain just for the pure joy of it. The mother teaches Shi-Wei to enjoy her childhood and be a “monkey kid,” a term which may refer to the freedom a monkey has to do what comes naturally. Such an attitude would have been incredibly risky, but it is indicative of the type of small acts of individuality that must have occurred to help people endure food rationing, family separations, and fears of political reprisals.

The Monkey Kid is not a new film, but educators should not be afraid to use it in the classroom. It is especially helpful for illustrating the many ways in which Mao’s cult of personality dominated this era. It offers a view of the Cultural Revolution that is both compelling and entertaining. I have used the film with great success in both undergraduate and graduate classes on modern China. Students report that more than any other film about the Cultural Revolution, The Monkey Kid stays with them long after its showing in class because of the story line, the acting of the children, and the effective direction. The film always generates much discussion about class divisions, ideological education, and mass mobilization.

I highly recommend the film for high school and college audiences.

“The Monkey Kid” is now available through the director’s studio (Beijing-San Francisco Film Group, P.O. Box 14017, San Francisco, CA 94114. Telephone: 415-626-6786. Email: info@bsffilmgroup.com) at a reduced rate (under $30 plus shipping) for educational institutions.
Revisiting Tagore’s Visit to China: Nation, Tradition, and Modernity in China and India in the Early Twentieth Century

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Abstract
This paper aims to discuss the historical background of Rabindranath Tagore’s visit to China in 1924, which proved to be a failure because of harsh criticism from the Chinese side. The paper explores both the Chinese and the Indian sides of the story, examining key intellectual and cultural movements in the two countries in their early encounters with the West. The paper further argues that the difference in attitudes toward tradition demonstrated by the two countries during this period...
was an important difference worthy of further attention in our reflection upon the historical writing of the non-western world in general. This deep-rooted difference about tradition was a key reason of Tagore’s failed trip in China.

What is being “modern” and what is modern about “modern China”? These are important questions in the study of Chinese history. In the popular understanding of Chinese history, it is widely acknowledged that the “modernity” of “modern China” comes from a rejection of tradition. This dichotomy of “tradition vs. modernity” was also deeply inscribed in the study of Chinese history in the West by pioneers such as John King Fairbank. Despite much criticism, this conceptual framework still dominates much of our understanding of Chinese history, both academic and popular.¹

Students of Chinese history rarely look beyond the Himalayas at its crowded neighbor.² In this essay, I would like to draw our attention to such a comparative project between Chinese and Indian history. The value of this comparison lies in the historical difference in the attitude and treatment of “tradition” in these two countries. India provides us with a path of history that is beyond our conceptual framework of modernity as rejection of tradition and therefore merits our own reflection. This crucial difference was demonstrated most dramatically when India meets China, specifically in the case when the Nobel Prize laureate Rabindranath Tagore visited China in the spring of 1924.

The Event: When India meets China

A ship named Atsuta Maru steamed into the Huangpu River in Shanghai on the morning of April 12, 1924. A large crowd was waiting at the dock, which included journalists, intellectuals and representatives of various Chinese educational and literary organizations, and members of the Shanghai local Indian community.³ When the ship finally docked on the west side of the river, the crowd swarmed onto the deck immediately. At the center of the crowd was an old man, dressed in a long gown, wearing a pair of fancy glasses and an impressive beard,
huge and white. He was given a flower ring by the representative of the local Indian community, and was invited to be seated in a chair, surrounded by the welcoming crowd and the curious journalists from China and Japan who grasped every opportunity to interview and photograph this respected guru.

This old man was Rabindranath Tagore, Bengali poet and Nobel laureate in literature in 1913. He was invited by Jiangxueshe, one of the recently founded intellectual organizations that burgeoned during the May Fourth era, for a lecture series tour of several Chinese cities. Jiangxueshe was devoted to inviting eminent foreign intellectuals to travel around China and give lectures, hoping to change China intellectually. Previous guest lecturers included leading intellectual figures such as John Dewey and Bertrand Russell. In response to one of the journalists’ questions, Tagore talked about the purpose of his visit wishfully: “My general idea is to advocate Eastern thought, the revival of traditional Asian culture, and the unity of the peoples of Asia.”

However, after six weeks of stay, the poet was not as confident as he had been when he first arrived. During the six weeks, Tagore gave public lectures and met with Chinese intellectuals and political leaders in Shanghai, Hangzhou, Nanjing, Jinan, and Beijing. The major theme of his lectures was, as promised, the profundity and superiority of the spiritual civilization and culture of the East over the material civilization of the West, and the (cultural, not political) unity of all Oriental peoples. Friendly in intention as he was, and despite the warm welcome he got from the Chinese literary groups, Tagore did not enjoy his visit very much, but instead received harsh and bitter criticism during his six-week stay in China. In one extreme case, he was virulently attacked and labeled by someone as “a petrified fossil of India’s national past” (Yindu guogu de toushi). Very few people in China accepted Tagore’s “message of the East.” The criticism against Tagore was so strong that he had to cancel the last three of his previously scheduled lectures in Beijing and leave in tremendous disappointment. In one of his farewell addresses, Tagore made a self-criticism and said: “In the depth of my heart there is a pain—I have not been serious enough. I
have had no opportunity to be intensely, desperately earnest about your most serious problems.”

Xu Zhimo, the famous Chinese poet who was Tagore’s guide, translator, and closest friend in China, commented on the last speech of Tagore in Shanghai: “These words contained unlimited bitter pain, unlimited resentment. At that time I felt very sorry for him.”

Explanations: Why Was it?

Why did Rabindranath Tagore receive such a negative general response from his Chinese audience? Scholars have proposed several different explanations. Stephen Hay, an India specialist trained at Harvard, was the only person so far to have done a book-length review of Tagore’s visits to China and Japan. In 1970 he published the revised version of his doctoral thesis under the title Asian Ideas of East and West. In this well-researched monograph, he argues that the failure and humiliation of Tagore’s trip to China was Tagore’s own responsibility: Tagore tried to “play the role of a prophet rather than a poet,” and propagated the ideal of a unified Orient characterized by spiritualism—a myth essentially nonexistent and created by the West. “The idea of the East” being one of the key things that Hay examines in his work, he unsurprisingly puts Tagore’s idea of the monolithic East as a most significant reason of the failure of the visit.

The scholar who has published most extensively on Tagore’s visit to China in the Chinese-speaking world is Sun Yixue, a literature scholar at Tongji University in Shanghai. In recent years he has compiled and edited Tagore’s speeches and responses to them in China into several volumes (a little repetitively). He interprets the failure of Tagore’s visit as “a misunderstanding of the time” (shidai de wuhui). He says “the unsuccessfulness of Tagore’s visit to China was because he came in a ‘wrong season’ with a ‘world-saving messianic message’ that was not suitable to China’s conditions, and that he came among a group of Chinese intellectuals who didn’t understand him (both supporters and opponents).” Sun further enumerates the five “misunderstandings of the time” of Tagore by his Chinese contemporaries. He uses the word “actually”
nine times in six pages when he talks about these five misunderstandings.\textsuperscript{15} He gives readers an impression that the perceptions of Tagore’s visit at the time were incorrect, and that all the misunderstandings could have been avoided as long as Tagore was understood and perceived in the correct way. Therefore they could have made the beloved poet’s stay in China a pleasant one and not shamed themselves with their rudeness to the respected old wise man.\textsuperscript{16}

Neither of these explanations is persuasive enough. Stephen Hay’s explanation is acceptable in a certain sense, but his conclusion puts too much emphasis on Tagore’s own idea and attributes the responsibility of the failure of the trip exclusively to Tagore himself. He fails to pay enough attention to the historical context and intellectual conditions of the two countries at the time of the event. Sun Yixue’s explanation is a good-willed romanticization of a historical event. In sharp contrast to Hay’s conclusion, Sun attributes the responsibility of the failure of Tagore’s trip almost completely to Tagore’s Chinese audiences. Trained as a scholar of romantic literature, Sun has not been able to propose a successful historical explanation of the failure of Tagore’s visit.

This essay would like to suggest a new approach to this question. During the course of the two countries’ encounter of Western modernity, intellectuals in China and India had drastically different attitudes toward “tradition.” These different attitudes were crucial to their conceptualization of modern “nationhood” as well as to the development of nationalist political movements in the two countries in the following decades. In this essay I would like to argue that the difference in attitudes toward “tradition” in the two countries was an important reason of the disappointing failure of Tagore’s visit to China in 1924.

The Case in China: “Totalistic Iconoclasm” and the Repudiation of Tradition

The Chinese side of the story was characterized by a strong cultural and intellectual inclination to totally reject and repudiate the Chinese traditions in the broader historical context of the May Fourth era. This rejection of tradition was a key reason why the
Chinese audiences of Tagore refused to accept his messages and engaged in active and angry opposition instead.

1. The Voices of Opposition and “Totalistic Iconoclasm”

The welcome of and opposition to Tagore’s visit to China had started long before the poet actually set foot in China. They began in as early as September 1923, when words of certainty about the poet’s planned trip first came to China. The news about the coming of the Nobel laureate excited the literary community in China. The Chinese literary leaders had launched a literary reform movement less than ten years earlier to liberate Chinese literature from old-fashioned conventions to a freer and more expressive style by advocating the use of vernacular Chinese in written language. Therefore, they viewed Tagore, who received worldwide recognition for his effort to liberate Bengali literature from obsolete conventions, as their colleague.

At the center of this Chinese literary reform was the Literary Studies Association (Wenxue yanjiu hui). Its official publication, Short Story Monthly (Xiaoshuo yuebao), was the most important literary magazine in China. When the young editor of the magazine, Zheng Zhenduo, heard of the news of Tagore’s coming, he conceived of a special issue for his monthly. In September and October, two issues of Short Story Monthly were published as “Tagore Numbers,” with the editor himself writing an enthusiastic introduction to welcome the literary giant. Most of the articles in these two special issues were translations of Tagore’s literary works and introductory essays about Tagore’s literature, with only a couple of exceptions discussing Tagore’s biographical information and his criticism of nationalism.

However, the effort to welcome Tagore was soon overwhelmed by the voices of opposition. In response to the words of hospitality from the literary circle, left-wing intellectuals soon published several articles in mid-October to voice their unwelcoming attitude toward Tagore. Guo Moruo and Chen Duxiu both wrote articles emphasizing the urgency of national salvation and how the “worship” of Tagore would undermine the Chinese audience’s sense of this urgency by proposing the “unprincipled propaganda of non-violence” and “thoughts of...
utter stupidity against material civilization and science.”

One of the key leaders of the Chinese intellectual world at the time, Chen Duxiu was so angrily and virulently against Tagore that he planned to launch a special issue for his magazine, *Chinese Youth (Zhongguo qingnian)*, with the explicit and straightforward name “Opposing Tagore.” When the poet was about to come to China in early April 1924, Chen Duxiu wrote a letter to his friend Hu Shi asking the latter to compose an article for this special issue. Hu Shi did not respond with a ready publication condemning Tagore and hence the plan for the special issue ended up as an abortive attempt, yet not long after Tagore’s arrival many articles of criticism of the beloved poet emerged among the Chinese magazines. The most famous of the authors of these articles were left-wing writer Mao Dun, future Communist leader Qu Qiubai, and then-Communist leader Chen Duxiu himself.

What did these men write about? One thing that keeps coming up in all these articles of criticism is the sense of crisis. All of these articles demonstrate a strong tone of Social Darwinism, which had been a very powerful and influential thought among Chinese reformist and revolutionary intellectuals ever since Yan Fu’s translation of T.H. Huxley’s *Evolution and Ethics* in 1897. Starting in the late 1910s, perceived crises from both inside and outside of the country gave these Social Darwinist intellectuals an unprecedented sense of crisis for China. In these articles of criticism, including those mentioned above by Guo Moruo, the authors employed Marxist historical materialism as the main method of analysis of contemporary sociopolitical problems. Also, the authors kept writing about Western imperialism and class oppression, and consequently national revolution as a necessary means to the liberation of the oppressed nations. It was obvious that these authors were strongly influenced by Lenin’s thinking about imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism. In these Marxist-Leninist thoughts, there is necessarily the concept of progress and the notion of historical evolution. So in these articles we can capture words such as “backward/left behind” (*luohou*) and “advancement” (*qianjin*). According to this line of thought,
the new was necessarily better than the old. Under the cultural and intellectual situation of the time, this judgment meant that Confucianism and anything of the old time were bad, backward, and reactionary; a new revolutionary culture lay in front waiting to be created, at the center of which would be “science.”

And Tagore, since he was propagating a return to the spiritual civilization created by the ancestors of the East, would undoubtedly be labeled as backward and reactionary as well. For example, Qu Qiubai labeled Tagore as a “man of the past” (guoqu de ren) in his article title, let alone the metaphor about the “petrified fossil.”

There is one very interesting phenomenon in the two articles by Qu Qiubai and Chen Duxiu published on April 16 and 18, 1924. At the end of Qu Qiubai’s ironic piece the final sentence reads: “Mr. Tagore, thank you! There are already plenty of Kongmeng (Confucius and Mencius) in our country!”

Apparently, the Kongmeng here has an assumed negative meaning without the need of an explanation. In Chen Duxiu’s even more ironic article, the final sentence strikes us with its similarity: “Tagore! Thank you! There are already a ton of human-monsters in China!”

The clear parallel of the two sentences indicates that to this radical group of Chinese intellectuals, the long-respected Confucian tradition was already considered as evil and horrendous as “human-monsters.” It was less than two decades after the abolition of the thousand-year-old civil service examinations, and the Confucian tradition was already detested to such a degree!

The above example is a perfect illustration of the strong sense of antitraditionalism among Chinese intellectuals of this period. It is hard to conceive of a more appropriate term to describe the cultural and intellectual condition in May Fourth China than the classic “totalistic iconoclasm,” which was originally coined by Lin Yu-sheng in his 1978 book, The Crisis of the Chinese Consciousness. In this study, Lin Yu-sheng identifies radical antitraditionalism as the main intellectual trend in China during the May Fourth period. He finds two main reasons for the rejection of traditions in the late 1910s: the collapse of the imperial order in 1911 and the abuse of tradition.
by Yuan Shikai and Zhang Xun in mid-1910s. Therefore, a strong tide of antitradi

tionalism held sway in the middle and late 1910s, exemplified by figures such as Chen Duxiu, Hu Shi, and Lu Xun. However, as the Great War in Europe came to an end, some Chinese intellectuals started questioning the value of Western civilization, and hence proposed a reassessment of the previous antitradi
tional, iconoclastic approach to the sociopolitical problems in China. The totalistic iconoclasm needed a defense.

2. The (Re-)consolidation of Antitradi

tionalism: The Debate on Science and Metaphysics (Ke-xuan zhi zheng) in 1923 as the Background of Tagore’s Visit

The questioning of antitradi
tionalism among Chinese intellectuals reached its height in the early 1920s, made possible by two influential publications of two famous authors. Liang Qichao published his Reflections on a Trip to Europe (Ou you xinying lu) around 1920 after a trip to Europe, casting his doubts on Western civilization and Chinese antitradi
tionalism. According to Hu Shi, this book declared the “bankruptcy of science.” One year later, Liang Shuming published a series of his lectures into a book titled Eastern and Western Culture and Their Philosophies (Dong xi wenhua ji qi zhexue), in which he took on an ambitious comparative study of European, Chinese, and Indian civilizations, and adamantly came to the conclusion that the spirituality of the East was superior to Western materialism. These two books fostered hot discussions and debates in the intellectual world. The situation worried the intellectuals upholding science and antitradi
tionalism, who felt their position endangered. A renewed battle had to be fought in reaction to this Thermidorian Reaction in the intellectual realm.

Such an opportunity arose when, on February 14, 1923, Chinese philosopher Zhang Junmai delivered a speech at Tsinghua University. The title of the speech was “Rensheng guan” (A view of life), and the question posed for the Chinese public could be summarized as “Can science govern a view of life?” Zhang Junmai had recently returned from the trip to Europe with Liang Qichao and a couple more years of study
with European idealist thinker Rudolf Eucken. In the speech, published by the *Tsinghua Weekly* (*Qinghua zhoukan*), Zhang Junmai claims that a view of life cannot be governed by science because, according to his famous formulation, a view of life is “subjective, intuitive, synthetic, freely willed, and unique to the individual,” while science is “objective, determined by the logical method, analytical, and covered by the laws of cause and effect and by uniformity in nature.” Thus Zhang Junmai warned the audience of the limitations of science and the importance of cultural and spiritual pursuits.

The situation soon unfolded into a heated debate as Ding Wenjiang, one of the foremost geologists in China, challenged the opinions of his close friend, Zhang Junmai. Outraged by Zhang’s conclusion and alleged problematic reasoning, Ding Wenjiang wrote a long response to Zhang Junmai’s speech. In this response, he half-jokingly ridicules Zhang Junmai as haunted by a “ghost of metaphysics” (*xuanxue gui*) and associates Zhang with the detested tradition of the medieval past in both Europe and China, especially the reactionary Roman Catholic theologians who prosecuted Galileo and the *Xinxue* school of Neo-Confucianism. Ding defended “the omnipotence of science, the universality of science, and the comprehensiveness of science” by saying that these qualities of science “lie not in its subject matter, but in its method [emphasis original].”

Ding’s article soon attracted another reply from Zhang Junmai and then numerous subsequent articles in 1923. The debate soon swept through the entire intellectual community and attracted the attention of many. While the debate became increasingly heated, it also proved long-winded, diffuse, and off-topic. As two key proponents of science, Hu Shi and Wu Zhihui, later joined the debate, the scale of opinion leaned increasingly toward one side over the other. In December of that year, two publishing houses published collections of debating articles on science and metaphysics, and the two collections were respectively prefaced by Chen Duxiu and Hu Shi in one, and Zhang Junmai in the other—each side seemingly claiming its own victory. However, in the end there was general
agreement in the public that science had won a victory “of propaganda if not of understanding,” as pointed out by a previous study.\textsuperscript{34} The academic prestige of Neo-Confucianism suffered another serious blow, and public opinion in the intellectual world again favored those who upheld science in opposition to the Chinese tradition. The position of the antitraditionalists was defended and consolidated through this renewed battle.

The Debate on Science and Metaphysics served as the key intellectual background of Tagore’s visit to China, on the eve of which the positions against tradition again held sway. After a full year of heated and emotionally charged debate, Chinese intellectuals with a belief in science and progress, firmer in their conviction than ever before, could not endure more attacks on science or praise of the superiority of spirituality. They put an enormous amount of personal emotions into their quest for a new China, built upon and made powerful by science. They would not tolerate any reactionary voices.

The Case in India/Bengal: Brahmo Samaj, Swadeshi, and Hindutva

In the 1925 edition of \textit{Talks in China}, Rabindranath Tagore edited a special piece of his speech titled “Autobiographical” and put it at the beginning of the book, obviously in a purposeful response to the cool reception he received in China.\textsuperscript{35} In this talk, Tagore describes his different experiences of Indian and Chinese observations and comments about him, and expresses his shock at the amazing contrast. He says:

According to him [an observer] I was altogether out of date in this modern age, that I ought to have been born 2,000 years ago.... This has caused me some surprise.... Almost from my boyhood I have been accustomed to hear from my own countrymen angry remonstrances that I was too crassly modern, that I had missed all the great lessons from the past, and with it my right of entry into a venerable civilization like that of India. For your people I am obsolete, and therefore useless, and for mine, new-fangled and therefore obnoxious. I do not know which is true.\textsuperscript{36}
In hope that his Chinese audiences would understand him better, Tagore then started off talking about his own experiences and the cultural, social, and political conditions into which he was born. He says, “Just about the time I was born, the currents of three movements had met in the life of our country.” By these three movements Tagore means first, the religious movement of Neo-Hinduism or Brahmoism, headed by Rammohan Roy, and made popular by Rabindranath’s own father, Debendranath Tagore; second, the literary movement of Bengali literature, led by Bankimcandra Chatterji; third, what Tagore calls “national movement,” the political struggle of Bengalis and other peoples of India against British imperialism.

These movements, Tagore says, had had significant influence upon his life, and had been crucial to the formation of his thoughts and ideas as a thinker. It has been a common problem in the study of Rabindranath Tagore, as David Kopf points out, that historical scholarship “rarely places the right emphasis on the sociocultural and ideological background of his period.” Therefore it is important for us to put Tagore into historical context and to study these historical movements of his time, which will help us better understand Tagore’s thoughts and ideas as they were.

1. Early Discourses: Brahmo Samaj

The Brahmo Samaj was a religious movement starting in early nineteenth-century Bengal in attempt to reform traditional Hindu religion. Originally, Brahmo Samaj (formerly named Brahmo Sabha) referred to a reformist religious society founded by Rammohan Roy, who was highly respected and commemorated in subsequent centuries and hailed as “the Father and Patriarch of Modern India.” The Brahmo Samaj was started by Rammohan Roy in 1828 and later made popular by the effort of Debendranath Tagore, son of the first Bengali capitalist entrepreneur Dwarkanath Tagore (who was a very close friend of Rammohan Roy) and father of Rabindranath. The Brahmo Samaj movement clearly had a strong impact on the life and thought of Rabindranath, as also could be seen
through his pride in announcing his own father as a key leader of this movement.\textsuperscript{41}

The founding father of this religious movement, Rammohan Roy, was well-versed in both Sanskrit and Persian religious classics. Through exposure to Islamic thought, young Rammohan became intrigued by the idea of Unitarianism, which later prompted him to pursue active studies of Christianity. Thus monotheism later became a central theological doctrine of the Brahmo Samaj. Another aspect of Rammohan’s thought was his anti-idolatry. He considered the worshiping of idols in religious practices as erroneous and engaged in active debate against it. What was considered orthodox Hinduism had both elements of polytheism and idol worship, so it was something unacceptable to Rammohan. Noticeably, however, unlike the Chinese intellectuals discussed above, Rammohan did not oppose the orthodox Hindu tradition holistically or embrace a readily available Western alternative. Instead, he chose to reform the Hindu tradition by looking backwards into antiquity, into the very early traditions of Hindu religious discourse: the Upanishads. Rammohan translated the Upanishads from Sanskrit into Bengali and English for a wider readership. He revived the reading of the Upanishads because of its ancient polemic role in challenging the orthodoxy of the Vedic ritualistic traditions.

Rammohan’s position against orthodox Hinduism subjected him to hatred and criticism for opposing the Hindu tradition. In response to such charges, Rammohan explains the rationale of anti-idolatry and deviation from the Vedic tradition of the Brahmo Samaj: “The ground which I took in all my controversies was not that of opposition to Brahmanism, but to a perversion of it; and I endeavoured to show that the idolatry of the Brahmans was contrary to the practice of their ancestors, and the principles of the ancient books and authorities, which they profess to revere and obey.”\textsuperscript{42} In response to the crises of early colonial Bengal, Rammohan, together with his influential Brahmo Samaj, looked back into the ancient traditions for solutions, rather than discarding the tradition entirely in hatred and disgust. Rammohan’s effort was later inherited and
popularized by Debendranath Tagore, and had a strong impact on his youngest son, Rabindranath.

Rammohan’s strategy was, in the words of Professor Brian Hatcher, “to retrieve the Vedanta of the Upanishads from oblivion and to identify in it a religion that could both answer the challenges of modernity and provide new norms of collective identity.” The quest for a new collective identity was a new phenomenon in the subcontinent in the early years of colonialism. In reaction to early contacts with the West, Rammohan employed religion to construct identity and self-definition. He was the first to introduce the word “Hinduism” into English. In subsequent decades, this quest for a new cultural and political identity became increasingly strong and took the shape of popular movements, which formed the basis for the rise of Indian and Bengali nationalism.

2. Indian Nationalism: Swadeshi and Hindutva

One such popular movement that heavily influenced (and also was heavily influenced by) Rabindranath Tagore was the Swadeshi movement, which took place around the turn of the century. Swadeshi in Bengali means “land of our own,” asserting a strong sense of the consciousness of self, which also assumes the existence of a non-self “other,” the British. The Swadeshi movement reached its height when public unrest arose in reaction to Lord Curzon’s order concerning the partition of Bengal in 1905. However, the root of the movement, and even the key slogan, could be traced back two decades earlier, in the fictional works of the great Bengali literary figure, Bankimchandra Chatterji.

Bankimchandra Chatterji’s most famous and influential work was his historical novel Anandamath. The story was set in the eighteenth century about an ambivalent conflict between the locals and the foreigners who came to this isolated and unexposed area. The plot was clearly allegorical and foreshadowed the nationalist struggles of the Bengali Indians. In the novel, because of the coming of foreigners to this insulated land, the local residents started to search for an identity of themselves. In doing this, they identified the shared land and
past of the community, and announced their pride of this shared identity in the expression “Bande Mataram,” “Hail to the Mother.” (Ever since then, “Mother India” has become a very popular expression, though it was used in different intentions. For example, Katherine Mayo titled one of her books *Mother India* for a clearly ironic purpose.) A secret society was formed and the members were determined to stand up against the foreigners when needed.

Bankimchandra Chatterji was extremely popular and influential in Bengal in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. When *Anandamath* was first published serially in Bankim’s own journal, *Bangadarshan*, in 1881, it received extremely wide acceptance and high popularity. When Rabindranath Tagore recounts his childhood memories about the novel, he says: “At the time, *Bangadarshan* made a tremendous impact….All that everyone in the land could think of was ‘What’s happened now?’ and, ‘What’s going to happen next time?’ [in the story]. As soon as *Bangadarshan* arrived, the afternoon siesta would be out of the question for everyone in the neighbourhood.”

Chatterji’s novel foretold the popular movement that happened two decades later. The Swadeshi movement in Bengal at the beginning of the 1900s saw mass mobilization and active leadership of local Bengali elites in the creation of national consciousness against foreign cultural and economic influence. The activists hailed “Bande Mataram” and declared Bengal as “swadeshi,” “land of our own.” Reacting against the influence of the West, many in the Swadeshi period turned to traditional Hinduism in search of a purely indigenous and popular form of nationalism. This explains the “curious but by no means unique phenomenon” of intellectuals “utterly westernised in outlook” turning to orthodox Hindus overnight during this period.

At the height of the Swadeshi movement, popular unrest included violent actions such as burning foreign textiles and attacking western missionaries. The actions involved in the movement seemed to be very anti-Western; however, Tagore criticized the excessive violence in the movement as a Western
import that was foreign to India. In 1910 he wrote a novel named *Home and the World*. In this novel of only three main characters, he depicted the two possible positions that he saw in the nationalist struggle: Sandip, representing the radical, materialistic revolutionary position, which he considered to be Western and alien, and Nikhil, representing the moderate, spiritual reformist position, which he considered superior and native to India, with Nikhil’s wife Bimala in the middle choosing between the two. Tagore’s criticism of the Swadeshi movement (in which he was also a leader) reflected his thoughts about the “Indianization” of nationalist approaches: the spirit and attitudes of traditional Hinduism being enshrined in the nationalist struggles of the modern era, rather than hailing traditional Hinduism as a symbol and excuse for mass violence. In both the Swadeshi movement and Tagore’s criticism of it, we can clearly see the important place of Hindu tradition: it was used by both parties, who both upheld the Hindu tradition as of utmost importance to the nationalist struggle.

Another important event in the development of Indian nationalism was the publication of V.D. Savarkar’s *Hindutva* in 1923. We are not sure how much Tagore was influenced by Savarkar’s thought, yet it can certainly give us some insights into the intellectual conditions of India at the dawn of the poet’s trip to China.

Savarkar’s *Hindutva* was a poetic booklet in praise of the greatness of Sindhu, the land between the rivers, mountains, and the ocean. It talks about the long history of the land, the glory of the faiths that originated there, and the greatness of the community called India formed by the descendants of the ancient inhabitants of this holy land. The book was a passionate composition of exuberant emotions, exciting national pride based on the greatness and wonder of the national past. Savarkar’s little book received tremendous popularity and has remained a classic on Indian nationalism till today. It represented the core value of Indian nationalism in the early twentieth century: the glorification of national traditions.
Conclusion: Same name, different paths

After examining the cases in both China and India, it is now clear to us that the two countries had drastically different attitudes toward tradition during the course of their encounter with the West and in the process of their own nationalist struggles. Generally speaking, Chinese intellectuals in the early twentieth century tended to repudiate the dominant Confucian traditions and embrace Westernization as a readily available alternative; Indian pundits and intellectuals, however, were inclined to preserve and cherish the Hindu traditions and look back to ancient traditions for solutions to modern crises. For the Chinese of this period, the most important thing about nationhood was national survival: if the nation ceased to exist, what would the tradition be affiliated to? For the Indians, however, the issue of utmost importance about nationhood was national essence: if the nation did not have a clearly defined essence, what would make it what it was? These were some interestingly drastic differences between Chinese and Indians in the early twentieth century, which provided the historical background for Rabindranath Tagore’s visit to China in 1924. With the two such different ways of thinking, it was hard to avoid some bitter conflicts and quarrels between the two. No doubt Tagore was confused about the different treatments he received at home and in China. This important difference in attitudes toward tradition, rather than the responsibility of Tagore’s own ideas or the misunderstanding of Tagore by the Chinese, is the key reason for the failure of Tagore’s visit to China in 1924.

It is also interesting to look at the historiography, especially the naming of the two intellectual events during this time period in the two countries: the May Fourth Movement and the Bengal Renaissance. When Chinese intellectual leader Hu Shi spoke at the University of Chicago in 1933, he titled his lecture series “The Chinese Renaissance,” recalling the name of a student magazine started in Peking University in 1918.46 The intellectual movement in Bengal was also named a “renaissance,” spanning roughly from the time of Rammohan Roy to that of Rabindranath Tagore. However, these two “renaissances,” though bearing
the same (Western) name, were characterized by very different content and attitudes, as discussed above. Hu Shi describes the word “renaissance” as a movement of “reason versus tradition,” which fits with the Chinese picture. Yet the revival of ancient traditions in the Bengal Renaissance seems to be more suitable to the original meaning of the French word “renaissance.” Both countries grabbed this Western term to label their own intellectual movements. Confusion arises when the same name refers to different things. Tagore was confused, but we are no more.

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Endnotes

1 For a recent example of this conceptual framework in what can be considered both academic and popular history, see Rana Mitter, Modern China: A Very Short Introduction (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 11-16.

2 On the Chinese negligence of India, see Susan L. Shirk, “One-Sided Rivalry: China’s Perceptions and Policies toward India,” in Francine R. Frankel and Harry Harding, eds., The India-China Relationship:


4“Jiangxueshe” was translated differently by Chow Tse-tsung, Stephen Hay, and Sisir Kumar Das, respectively, as the “Society for Lectures on the New Learning,” “Peking Lecture Association,” and “Universities Association.” None of these translations is satisfying enough, so I made the decision to use the transliteration. See Chow Tse-tsung, The May Fourth Movement (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967), 187; Stephen Hay, Asian Ideas of East and West, 139; and Sisir Kumar Das, ed., Talks in China (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1999), 15.


7Wu Zhihui, “Wangao Taige’er” (Courteous advice to Tagore), in Sun Yixue, ed., Taige’er yu Zhongguo (Tagore and China) (Shijiazhuang: Hebei renmin chubanshe, 2001), 256.

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13Sun Yixue, “Yici buhuan’ersan de wenhua juhui” (A cultural gathering without a happy ending), in Buhuan’ersan de wenhua juhui: Taige’er laihua yanjiang ji lunzheng (Cultural gathering without a happy ending: Speeches and discussions on Tagore’s visit to China), ed. Sun Yixue (Hefei: Anhui jiaoyu chubanshe, 2007), 15.

14Ibid., 16.

15Ibid., 16-21.

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18Xiaoshuo yuebao (Short Story Monthly) 14, no. 9-10 (September–
October, 1923).


22 For example, Guo Moruo explicitly mentioned “historical materialism” (weiwu shiguan) in his article. See Guo Moruo, “Taige’er laihua de wojian” (My opinions on Tagore’s coming to China), in Zhongguo mingjia lun Taige’er (Chinese famous writers on Tagore), 67.


24 Qu Qiubai, “Guoqu de ren—Taige’er” (A man of the past—Tagore), in Taige’er tan Zhongguo (Tagore on China), 143.

25 Qu Qiubai, “Taige’er de guojia guan yu dongfang” (Tagore’s view on nation and the East), in Taige’er tan Zhongguo (Tagore on China), 142.

26 Chen Duxiu, “Taige’er yu dongfang wenhua” (Tagore and Eastern civilization), in Taige’er tan Zhongguo (Tagore on China), 163.

27 In this essay I use the word “antitraditionalism,” which was also a creation by Lin Yu-sheng, as an interchangeable synonym and shorthand for “totalistic iconoclasm” to refer to the intellectual trend of opposing Chinese traditions and upholding science and western civilization as an alternative.

28 Hu Shi, “Xu er” (Second Preface), in Kexue yu rensheguan (Science and a View of Life), prefaces by Chen Duxiu and Hu Shi (Hefei: Huangshan shushe, 2008), 9-11.


32 Ibid., 51, 56.

34 Charlotte Furth, Ting Wen-chiang, 133.

35 The 1925 edition of Talks in China was the second edition of the book. The first edition, published in 1924, was “withdrawn almost immediately from the market for reasons not known to us,” and a new, completely restructured edition was published in February 1925. It was very likely that Tagore was not happy with the contents of the first edition and arranged the second edition himself. See Preface of *Talks in China* (1999), written by Sisir Kumar Das.


37 Ibid., 30.

38 Ibid., 30-32.


47 Ibid.
Editors’ Note: The following article was selected by the editors from a number of final reports recommended by Van Symons, Director of the ASIANetwork Student-Faculty Fellows Program funded by the Freeman Foundation, as an outstanding example of student scholarship. Chelsea Robinson traveled to Japan as a participant in the Program with a team of students from Willamette University in the summer of 2009. Professor Miho Fujiwara was the faculty advisor.

Presentations of Emperor Hirohito in Japanese War-Related Museums

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Abstract
Emperor Hirohito is a controversial figure in the narrative of World War II. Depictions of his role as monarch have ranged from the deified leader of a militaristic nation to a tragically powerless figurehead. My research examines depictions of Emperor Hirohito in Japan today through the multimedia and multipurpose modes of museum exhibits. The three Japanese war-related museums examined were selected for their variance in management and educational purpose. This paper aims to investigate the variety of ways in which Japanese war-related museums utilize or omit Emperor Hirohito and how the emperor’s portrayal contributes to the agenda of each museum.

Rationale & Objectives
Emperor Hirohito and Japan at War
In order to analyze Emperor Hirohito’s complex image, we must first try to understand the political and social situation leading up to and during his rule. The situation may be traced back at least as far as the Meiji Restoration (1869), which took place in the name of the emperor, and the formation of Japan
into a constitutional monarchy. The meaning of the term “constitutional monarchy” was not without ambiguity, but it essentially granted the Japanese emperor freedom of governance within the bounds of the constitution. The Meiji constitution, issued in 1889, ascribed the emperor a number of vague qualities and rights, among which were his situation in an eternal line of emperors (Article 1); sovereignty through divinity and inviolability, which placed the emperor above the law (Article 3); and command of the army and navy (Article 11).

These qualities—particularly the emperor’s divinity and military role—would later be enforced by the Imperial Rescript on Education and Imperial Rescript on Soldiers, both of which emphasized service to one’s family and nation through service to (and, as was increasingly emphasized, death for) the emperor.¹ The Rescript on Education became compulsory material for schools and was read to students in assemblies across the nation on a regular basis, usually with the accompaniment of a portrait of the emperor in Western military attire, to which students and teachers were required to bow.² Under this same pretext, military drills became a part of school curriculum.³

The pervasiveness of the idea of emperor worship, particularly in association with patriotic death, can be seen in many firsthand accounts of the war. It is perhaps particularly telling in the journals and letters written by members of shinpū tokubetsu kōgeki tai, more commonly known as kamikaze. Ohnuki-Tierney has written a volume that compiles the contents of five such journals,⁴ and the Yushukan museum has on display a great deal of similar records, though their respective selection criteria account for great differences in their content. Whether or not the writers seemed to take the idea of death for the emperor to heart, the recurrence of this theme certainly speaks to the prevalence of the ideology.

When the war came to an end, it was the charge of the occupying forces to determine the emperor’s future. Should he be removed from the throne and tried as a war criminal, or should he be allowed to remain? These questions were hotly debated around the world during the months following Japan’s
surrender. It was the opinion of many that the emperor would be invaluable in stabilizing Japan in the absence of its former government. This idea proved effective when the emperor’s radio announcement of the end of the war facilitated the initial mission of the occupation. The decision was eventually made that the emperor would maintain his throne under the new constitution. With this decision came a necessary image change. From a divine general, Emperor Hirohito’s public image was transformed to one of a peaceful, and slightly more humanized, monarch. The image promulgated worldwide of the emperor’s role in Japanese aggression was that, although personally adverse to war, the emperor was no more than a figurehead who had granted validity to, but had no power over government and no say in decision-making processes.

The decision to maintain Emperor Hirohito by no means put an end to the debate over his war culpability. The questions of exactly how much power the emperor held and whether he could have used his power to prevent the war remain to be answered. The scholarship conducted on the question to date is of a wide range, depicting the emperor as everything from a powerless figurehead to a diabolical war criminal. Scholars have examined journals and other firsthand accounts to construct a picture of Emperor Hirohito’s personal motivations and concerns. They have also looked at the emperor’s position within the government, attempting to better understand the constraints that the system placed on him.

A limited number of scholars have maintained that Emperor Hirohito held great responsibility for the war. An early example is David Bergamini, writing in Japan’s Imperial Conspiracy (1971). As the title implies, Bergamini proposed that the passive image of the emperor promulgated by General Douglas MacArthur and the occupation government was nothing more than a cover-up, that in fact Emperor Hirohito had been the instigator of Japanese aggression and should be held solely responsible for the war. His book was criticized on the grounds of thin evidence, anonymous sources, and poor translations of Japanese primary sources. The idea, however, was not put to
rest. The most recent example written in this vein is Herbert Bix’s *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* (2000).\textsuperscript{9} Considerably more widely researched than Bergamini’s work (as evidenced by his endnotes, though he provides no bibliographical information), Bix gives a wide-ranging description of the wartime government, including constraints put upon the emperor’s decision-making powers, while also attempting to paint a vivid picture of the emperor’s character as an individual. He ultimately argues that Emperor Hirohito’s main concern was with preserving *kokutai* (in this case, the imperial line), and that his efforts to do so contributed greatly to Japan’s aggressiveness. Like Bergamini, Bix highlights the post war necessity of General MacArthur and the Truman administration’s efforts to paint a picture of the emperor that would facilitate the goals of the occupation, and that this image acted effectively as a cover-up of the emperor’s actual wartime behavior.\textsuperscript{10} While Bix’s book was criticized for its subjectivity, it has been widely read outside of scholarly circles, and received a Pulitzer Prize in 2001.

Other scholars have taken an opposing position. Much early scholarship and bibliographical work on Hirohito following the war was in the vein of the helpless figurehead image of MacArthur’s time. Robert Butow’s *Japan’s Decision to Surrender* (1961) was an ambitious analysis of the structure of Japan’s wartime government, within which the emperor was unable to play a substantial role, though his personal inclination was toward peace.\textsuperscript{11} Leonard Mosley’s *Hirohito, Emperor of Japan* (1966), though criticized for the absence of political analysis such as Butow had undertaken, similarly claimed that Emperor Hirohito was a proponent of peace, focusing largely on the emperor’s upbringing and education to paint a picture of him as the unfortunate victim of a turbulent time in history.\textsuperscript{12} David Anson Titus’s *Palace and Politics in Prewar Japan* (1977) focused on the emperor, but did so by continuing in Butow’s vein of political, rather than personal, analysis, examining specifically the imperial institution and its position in government. While, like Bergamini, he found that in fact the emperor was
much more involved in matters of state than earlier scholars had reported, he ultimately concluded that the system so severely limited the emperor’s power that it was unreasonable to hold him accountable.\textsuperscript{13}

Later scholarship has tended to depart somewhat from the strict binaries of earlier years. This may be attributed to the gradual release of primary sources, giving more insight into prewar and wartime decision-making, such as General Honjō’s diary, translated by Mikiso Hane in a volume that included a number of essays on Honjō and Emperor Hirohito and published in 1982.\textsuperscript{14} In addition, such events as the death of the emperor in 1989 and the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war in 1995 have made the last decades a period of re-evaluation and have seen, in addition to Bix’s work, a number of other critical evaluations of the emperor’s war responsibility. Steven Large, in his book \textit{Emperor Hirohito and Showa Japan: A Political Biography} (1992), proposes that Emperor Hirohito was concerned with adherence to his position as a constitutional monarch, particularly in so far as “a constitutional monarch should always abide by and not interfere with the decisions reached by his government.”\textsuperscript{15} For Large, the emperor’s goal was to facilitate the workings of the government, rather than command them. Peter Wetzler’s \textit{Hirohito and War: Imperial Tradition and Military Decision Making in Prewar Japan} (1998) also attempts to explain the emperor’s thinking through examining the imperial institution.\textsuperscript{16} He hypothesizes that the emperor’s primary motivation was to protect \textit{kokutai}, an idea that Bix would later borrow in his work. He agrees with Large that Hirohito’s role as a constitutional monarch, while not excluding him from matters of state, did limit his ability to oppose the decisions of his government, pointing out, as did the emperor himself, that to do so may have resulted in a coup. Wetzler concludes that the emperor in fact shares partial responsibility for the war.

\textit{Museums and National Narrative}

As evidenced by the scholarly debate outlined above, while the topic of Emperor Hirohito’s war culpability is sensitive, it is
Presentations of Emperor Hirohito in Japanese War-Related Museums

by no means dead, nor is it likely to die out as long as Japan’s imperial line continues. The question seems likely to go unanswered, and for this reason it was not within my ambitions to answer it in my research. Rather, it was my intention to gain a greater understanding of the wide variety of narratives regarding World War II, and the way that they attempt to answer, or evade answering, the questions of Emperor Hirohito’s war responsibility.

I approached this goal by visiting three Japanese museums representing the history of the war. Museums, like books and documentaries, are one source of information that people have exposure to and that play a role in the creation of the viewer’s conception of history. Museums collect a variety of media that are intended specifically to distribute information to the public in general, rather than to one specific demographic of people. They aim to be interesting and informative, while also easy to comprehend. The language used is often simple enough for young people to understand. This quality of accessibility to all ages, combined with the use of visual aids and interactive elements, as well as translations of some or all of the exhibits into other languages truly makes museums sources of information that are accessible to a great variety of people of different ages, occupations, and even nationalities.

However, is the purpose of a museum purely educational? Some, in fact, have argued the exact opposite. To quote Texas Representative Sam Johnson on the controversy over the Enola Gay display at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, “It’s not a teaching institution. It’s a museum, plain and simple, a display.” Geoffrey White uses this quote to open his article on museums as spaces that combine educational and memorial functions. White examines the Enola Gay case alongside the USS Arizona Memorial for parallels in controversy over the content presented to visitors. One expects a museum to be a place to collect new and unfamiliar information, while a memorial assumes that visitors are already familiar with the narrative that the nation supports. He points out that, while the names of the two institutions indicate that one functions primarily as a museum and the other primarily as a memorial, in practice

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both institutions serve in both capacities. In both cases, controversy arose when content from outside of the institute’s narrative (especially the national narrative) was proposed or introduced, as “professionalized historical practices introduced new representations competing with the narrative I-voice.”

Ultimately, a multifaceted, academic presentation of history often comes secondary to adherence to a museum’s function as a commemoration of one specific historical narrative.

As highly visible, intentionally accessible sources of historical narrative available to the public, museums and their contents commonly come under scrutiny and criticism. The Enola Gay controversy at the National Air and Space Museum is a famous American example, and White is not the only scholar to address these issues. Such controversies surround museums in Japan as well. Conservative Japanese museums have tended to justify World War II as self-defense, while the existence of many left-wing “peace museums” is a testament to the existence of a public desiring Japan’s wrongdoings to also be presented. Modifications to the exhibits at Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum are one example of the results of these public concerns. The addition of multiple new exhibits in the 1990s took place in response to public requests that the museum present a more complete story of the war, and not only the suffering endured by those residing in Hiroshima at the time of the bombing.

In Japan, peace museums (particularly those concerned with exposing atrocities committed by Japan in Asia for the purpose of providing context to Japan’s subsequent suffering) in particular have come under attack from right-wing groups. Laura Hein and Akiko Takenaka described the controversy over Peace Osaka, which was criticized heavily by members of the Liberal Democratic Party and other conservative groups, including later the Group to Correct the Biased Exhibits of War-Related Material (Sensōshiryouō honkōtenji o tadasu kai).

Peace Osaka, as well as other similar museums whose veracity has been challenged, have tended to make concessions to their challengers. For example, Peace Osaka changed some of its explanations of graphic photographs, and agreed to fly the hinomaru flag outside the building.
These are just a few examples of controversy over museum exhibits related to war. Each museum examined in the course of this research is a part of this ongoing debate, and some of the issues introduced in both American and Japanese examples are relevant to the topic of this paper. Ultimately, each museum’s narrative is determined both by its goals and, to some degree, by the social or political pressure under which it is placed. As related to this research, depictions of Emperor Hirohito in each museum may reveal not only what the museum wishes to say about the emperor himself, but also what the museum’s overall goals are, as well as its reactions to external pressure.

**Methodology**

My research took me to the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, the Kyoto Museum for World Peace at Ritsumeikan University, and Yushukan at Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo. Each of these museums aims to inform its visitors of Pacific War history, and while each strives for historical accuracy, each also has a different mission and presents different perspectives on the war. I spent an average of five six-hour days at each of these museums over the course of three weeks. This allowed me sufficient time to spend one day getting a feel for each museum by viewing it in its entirety. This step involved marking a map with the locations of information relevant to Emperor Hirohito or the imperial system. While this process facilitated later note taking, it also gave me an opportunity to observe what overall message the museum tries to impart to its visitors.

Once I had determined relevant locations, the second step was to return and record the text and layout of relevant areas. Taking photographs of panels and images was the most efficient method in terms of time. However, because neither of the last two museums allowed photography inside, this was the stage that consumed the most time. Relevant panels were any that mentioned Emperor Hirohito or the imperial system. When possible, I took note of both Japanese and English language translations. I made notes on layout, observing use of photographs or other visual aids, and the location of the noted panels within the overall layout of the museum. In addition,
both the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum and the Kyoto Museum for World Peace provide Japanese and English audio guides to supplement the information in the exhibits themselves. In the case of the Kyoto museum, I made exact transcriptions of the relevant portions of these audio guides as well. (Refer to the appendix for examples of notes and transcribed texts.)

In collecting and assimilating this data, I approached each museum with a number of questions:

§ How often is Emperor Hirohito mentioned? How important is he to the museum’s overall narrative?
§ Is Emperor Hirohito presented as an individual, and if so, what kind of person is he said to have been?
§ How is the emperor depicted in relation to other members of government?
§ Is Emperor Hirohito linked to past emperors or to nationalistic myth?
§ Is the issue of Emperor Hirohito’s war responsibility approached directly?
§ How does word choice contribute to the image of Emperor Hirohito?
§ Overall, how does the inclusion or exclusion of the emperor contribute to the narrative of the museum?

**Results & Data Analysis**

**Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum**

The Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum is a large building located at the southern end of Heiwakinen Park in central Hiroshima. This municipal museum was established in 1955, and continues to draw visitors of a great variety of ages and nationalities. Its goal is “to communicate to the people of every country the truth of the damage caused by the bombing of Hiroshima and to contribute to nuclear weapon abolition and eternal world peace, which are the heart of Hiroshima.”

The museum itself is divided into three large sections. The Main Building displays an impressive collection of artifacts from the demolished city, accompanied by information and stories that attempt to communicate what conditions were like on the ground following the bombing. The first floor of the East Building,
which was added later to provide context for the exhibit mentioned above, introduces the history of Hiroshima city before 1945, as well as the United States’ decision-making process that led up to the bombing. The second and third floors detail the history of nuclear arms development, the state of nuclear proliferation today, and the movement toward nuclear arms abolition. In addition, there are temporary exhibit halls located in the basement: one reserved for films, one for art and stories contributed by survivors, and one rotating exhibit hall.

Mention of the emperor in this museum is extremely limited. He is first mentioned in the section on the first floor of the East Building that deals with the United States decision-making that led up to the bombing of Hiroshima. Specifically, this section contains two panels, as well as a copy of Secretary of War Henry Stimson’s journal, regarding the Potsdam Declaration. “The Declaration contained no provision guaranteeing continuation of the emperor system, which was known to be key to obtaining surrender,” explains one panel. Similarly, Stimson’s journal reflects the tensions among members of the United States government regarding provisions in the Declaration for the preservation of the emperor system. While Stimson, and others with knowledge of Japan, felt that preserving the emperor system would ease the transition into occupational government, ultimately it was fear of domestic criticism that caused this section to be removed from the Potsdam Declaration.

The section regarding the United States is done in great detail, meticulously mentioning the names and positions of each individual involved in the decision-making process. In this context, it is interesting to note that decisions made by the Japanese government at this time are all but ignored, both here and throughout the museum. Very few names of individual politicians or military leaders are mentioned, and contextual content regarding Japan at war is largely limited to events within the limits of Hiroshima City. Not only Emperor Hirohito, but the Japanese political situation in general is largely omitted. The effect of this omission is not only that the museum avoids the sensitive topic of the emperor’s role in the war, but also fails to
look at Japan’s wartime decision-making critically, while implicating the United States. Even the narrative of the Potsdam Declaration, by its focus on the fact that the United States had knowledge of the importance of the emperor system but chose to ignore it, fails to point out that the Japanese played a role in the Declaration’s initial rejection. It is the United States’ concern for domestic criticism, and not Japan’s choice to hold out for better terms, that is implicated in the fateful continuation of the war.

The omission of any discussion of the emperor becomes more confusing in the next section of the narrative, the only other instance in which the emperor is mentioned. Atomic bombs have been dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and Japan has signed the Potsdam Declaration. The panel reads simply, “The following day, the emperor spoke on the radio announcing to the Japanese people that Japan had surrendered. The long war was over.” Without prior knowledge of Japan, and of World War II in particular, a scrutinizing visitor might find this passage confusing. The emperor—who has been mentioned very infrequently in the museum so far—is the one who ultimately brings the war to an end. Again, decision-making on the Japanese side is unmentioned. The emperor is the only individual to whom the end of the war is attributed. However, the passage is certainly not accusatory.

From the limited information presented by the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum regarding Emperor Hirohito, it might be unfair to attempt to construct an image of the emperor. However, conclusions can be drawn about the role that the emperor plays in Hiroshima’s war narrative, exemplified as much by his absence as by the instances of his mention. That is, given that the goals of this museum are to communicate the story of the bombing of Hiroshima to contribute to nuclear abolition and world peace, what purpose does the emperor’s absence serve?

The Hiroshima museum’s main concern is with what occurred within the precincts of its own city, a fact reflected both in the museum’s mission statement and in its exhibits. The
original exhibit in the Main Building, which depicts in detail the effects of the bomb on Hiroshima, remains the most thorough and powerful section of the museum, overshadowing the supplementary “context” exhibits in the East Building. The exclusion of almost any information regarding Japan’s actions during the war is justified through this narrow focus. Extending the museum’s content to include anything beyond Hiroshima’s borders would open up the museum to criticism for ignoring many of the controversial issues of the war, including Japanese war atrocities, which might detract from the impact of the graphic exhibits. In this Hiroshima-centered narrative, Emperor Hirohito has no place. Whether or not the Japanese emperor had decision-making powers is not within the scope of this museum, which does not discuss the Japanese at war abroad at all. This being said, however, it seems unbalanced that this Hiroshima-centered story includes great detail on the United States’ decision to drop the bomb. The emperor is used in this section to expose internal conflicts in the United States. The validity of a system that puts the continuation of the emperor system above the lives of its citizens is not discussed; rather, the narrative points to the failure of certain members of the United States government to recognize the importance of the emperor as the cause that eventually leads to the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima.

Kyoto Museum for World Peace

The Kyoto Museum for World Peace is located next to the Ritsumeikan University campus in northern Kyoto. Its establishment in 1992 is just one example of Ritsumeikan’s ongoing dedication to anti-war sentiment, borne of the university’s extensive military involvement in World War II. Professor Anzai Ikuro, the museum’s director, states, “The fundamental principle of the peace museum is to face the past faithfully. We must face the past sincerely and admit what actually happened in history. We feel that the Japanese government is not facing the past faithfully and (as a result) there are many controversial problems between Japan and Korea and China.” Overall, the museum’s goal seems to be
to expose the atrocities caused by war around the world, beginning with a critical admission of Japan’s conduct overseas, conduct in particular many other historical narratives are afraid to touch.

The first section of the museum deals critically with Japan’s military activities overseas, leading up to and during World War II, and also includes a large section on Japanese citizens who criticized their nation and strove for peace. Additional exhibits have continued to be added since 2005, and the museum’s content now deals with conflicts around the world, and also has space upstairs for rotating exhibits. This paper will focus largely on the first section of the museum.

Unlike the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, the Kyoto Museum for World Peace uses the emperor extensively as a key player in its narrative. After an animated video about a Japanese boy growing up to be deployed to the warfront and killed, the first line of the first panel in the museum, labeled “Soldiers and the Armed Forces,” reads, “The modern Japanese military forces were deemed to belong to the Emperor, not to the people, and soldiers’ human rights were severely suppressed.” In this first section of the museum, the panels continue from this initial assertion to explain the power granted to the emperor through the Maiji constitution and through imperial rescripts. Young men were conscripted into the army at age 20, where their education under the Imperial Rescript to the Army and Navy taught them that the emperor was their supreme commander, and that they were to regard any order from a senior officer as an order from the emperor. Emphasis on the mental power of the army meant that supplies and modern weaponry were ignored, resulting in a number of deaths in the ranks. All of these compromises were made possible, the Kyoto museum explains, by the system that put the nation before the rights of its people.

The emperor’s power is depicted as almost limitless. Another panel states, “By the Japanese Imperial Constitution, promulgated in 1889, the emperor held an absolute right called ‘Imperial Supreme Authority.’ The Constitutional Legislature
was only able to limit the emperor’s rights by a small amount.” His power was widespread—the museum details the promulgation of the Imperial Rescript on Education to schools, where children began exposure to Japan’s emperor-centered ideology at a young age. These same children were forced to bow before the small shrine containing a photograph of the emperor, a claim illustrated by a photograph of a row of children in uniform, bent at the waist, their heads inclined to an object in the background.

This version of the imperial power story differs considerably from the version publicly accepted from MacArthur’s time onward, which depicts the emperor as a powerless puppet. It even goes further than scholars like Titus and Wetzler in their questioning of the puppet image. The emperor of the Kyoto museum was a powerful figure indeed, backed by a favorable constitution framed by an ancient myth, aided by a widely distributed state military ideology, and completely in control of the lives of his subjects. Furthermore, the Kyoto museum rarely mentions politicians or military leaders, the other individuals in positions of power at the time, to whom museum visitors might be able to allocate some of the blame for the atrocities presented later in the museum. “Japan’s army was the emperor’s army,” the museum states, and proceeds to expose some of the most controversial and horrible events of the war, all of which took place at the hands of Japan’s military government. While the museum does not directly implicate the emperor in any of the atrocities, it also does little to assuage the idea that the emperor, as the supreme commander of the military, was responsible.

However, does the Kyoto Museum for World Peace really succeed in depicting the emperor to be at fault? It is important to note that what this museum is criticizing is not the emperor as an individual, but the imperial system. Emperor Hirohito is never mentioned by name, and is instead referred to as “the emperor”; only by looking at the dates of events can visitors distinguish between Emperor Hirohito and his predecessors. Furthermore, while the museum points out the great power granted to the emperor through the constitution, he is never
depicted as an individual who has volition or makes decisions. Not once is he depicted as taking any action. When decisions take place, they are by the military government, which is empowered not by the emperor as an individual, but by the imperial system itself. Even the audio guide explains that the ultimate decision to continue the war even after most of Japan’s major cities had burned to the ground was “for the purpose of maintaining kokutai.” According to this museum, it was Japan’s imperial system that ultimately was responsible for military expansion and overseas atrocities.

The Kyoto museum, however, does not entirely sidestep questioning Emperor Hirohito’s war responsibility. It does so in a panel with the heading “Some Japanese war criminals were not tried because it did not meet the intentions of the United States.” Alongside Japanese experiments with biological and chemical warfare overlooked by the occupation, the panel reads, “In order to make the occupation easier for the United States and other nations, the emperor was excluded from the list of war criminals.” The panel does not elaborate further, allowing the visitor to make up his or her mind on the issue. However, given the extremely anti-imperial sentiment of this museum, visitors without prior biases would be hard pressed to defend the emperor based on the museum’s story alone.

While Emperor Hirohito is never mentioned by name, he is, in a way, a crucial figure in the overall narrative presented by the Kyoto Museum for World Peace. The museum depicts an imperial system that grants inviolable power to its leader, in fact even to the image of its leader. The individual behind the title of emperor in this narrative is absent almost completely—the one person who, according to the Japanese constitution, should have been able to put an end to the cruelty and war perpetrated by the Japanese military. It is through this system that the gross breaches of universal human rights, which are the focus of this museum, were able to take place. The emperor’s role in this narrative is to provide a focus for blame, and his service in this capacity does not seem entirely inaccurate.

The museum’s neglect to investigate or even mention the possibility of internal constrictions on the emperor’s power not
explicitly mentioned in the constitution calls into question the overall accuracy of the museum. However, this omission certainly helps to simplify the narrative of the oft-ignored social injustices that the museum aims to face. Fair treatment of the Japanese government or the imperial system is not the concern of this museum; rather, it aims to explain, as Professor Anzai Ikuro put it, “both what we experienced in the war as well as the experiences of the Asian people at that time.” Rather than explaining Emperor Hirohito’s, or any other leader’s, individual role in the war, this museum’s primary function is to describe the experience of war from the ground. The all-powerful emperor described by this museum is an image that dates to this time. Its inclusion seems meant to leave visitors with the same feeling that Japanese citizens might have felt: powerless, compromised, and perhaps even resistant.

**Yushukan**

Yushukan is located just next to Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo. Though officially the two are not directly connected, their proximity and the fact that the museum is most easily accessed through the shrine gates make them appear as two parts of the same entity. The museum was established in 1882, not long after the establishment of the shrine in 1869. The museum itself is maintained by the shrine, and calls itself one of Japan’s oldest war museums. The dedication on the website states, “Yushukan is a museum to inherit sincerity and records of enshrined divinities of Yasukuni Shrine by displaying their historically important wills and relics.” The divinities mentioned in this explanation are war heroes, men and women “who dedicated their precious lives for their loving motherland, hometowns and families.”

Yushukan, like the shrine next door, sometimes comes under criticism for its portrayal of Japanese history, its nationalistic bent, and its glorification of war. On these counts, it is certainly of a different ilk than the museums in Kyoto and Hiroshima.

After walking through an impressive entryway displaying military machinery, visitors head upstairs and into a pair of rooms displaying “the history of the Japanese warrior.” The first room
is minimally filled, with a few glass panels displaying poetry and symbols of warrior spirit, patriotism, and the Japanese nation. The room directly behind this gives a timeline of famous Japanese wars and overseas expansion, notably beginning with Emperor Jimmu (711-585 BC), ostensibly the first emperor of Japan.30

The ensuing narrative, though focused on the military aspects of Japanese history, is in a way centered on the narrative of the imperial line. Emperors throughout history, including Jimmu, Komei (1846-1867), and Meiji (1867-1912) are depicted primarily as wise leaders with a great deal of concern for their subjects—qualities that are reflected in their poetry, which is quoted calligraphically on panels throughout the museum. The presence of the emperors throughout the museum adds a somber—it would not be inaccurate to say “religious”—tone to what is otherwise a tale of battles won and lost.

The inclusion of, and even the centrality of imperial history in the Yushukan narrative of Japanese wars is not coincidental. Yushukan is, in fact, a particularly visible retelling of well-known Japanese nationalist history. In this tale, the emperor’s family line is of the same lineage of deities that created Japan, and it is through the power of these deities that the emperor is able to rule. In this way, the purported unbroken line of emperors from ancient days up to the present is the very essence of the Japanese nation. Although in fact the imperial household has held various amounts of power throughout Japan’s long history, Yushukan’s narrative clearly comes to a high point at the Meiji Restoration, when the emperor’s power is restored. The use of the term “restoration of imperial rule of old” implies a return not only of the emperor’s power, but of the correct order of things.

This use of imperial narrative is extremely valuable to the museum’s overall goal, historical representation of Japan’s military history, in a way that supplements the deification of war heroes at the neighboring shrine. War heroes are those who died in service of their nation, a concept which cannot exist without the simultaneous existence of a unified nation to
die for. Of course, the concept of Japan as a unified nation begins with the end of the Warring States period (mid-fifteenth century to early seventeenth century), and evolved into something close to its current state as late as the Meiji period (1868-1912). In spite of this, the Yushukan narrative goes back to a time before recorded history, and certainly before the unification of Japan into one nation.

What unifies this extremely long history of Japan into one cohesive narrative is the imperial line. From a Japanese mythological perspective, the unbroken line of emperors has existed from the beginning. Yushukan introduces legendary military leaders alongside the emperors of old, and their mission is depicted to be more or less one and the same—to ensure the prosperity of their homeland and, by association, the imperial system.

Against this backdrop, Yushukan presents a long and detail-oriented narrative of Japan’s military history after the Meiji restoration. The exhibits are resplendent with maps and diagrams, heavily supported by photographs and personal effects of the war heroes enshrined at Yasukuni Shrine. The museum’s function as a glorified repository for such objects is clear; meanwhile, Japanese internal politics are largely unmentioned in this section of the museum.

Before proceeding to narratives of Japan’s involvement in World War II specifically, where Emperor Hirohito appears for the first time, there is one more room in the museum that is notable for the purposes of this study. This is the Special Exhibition Room, reserved for exhibits related to the imperial family. Visitors entering from the long side of a rectangular room are immediately faced with portraits of Emperors Meiji, Taisho, and Showa (Hirshito). Two glass display cases along the sides of the room contain photographs, documents, and personal effects such as swords and military uniforms. The Special Exhibition room stands out, particularly as it seems an obvious break from the chronological order imposed on the rest of the museum—its effect is something like an intermission in a long documentary. The uniqueness and importance of this exhibit is further emphasized by its position in the museum, in the rear
center of a rectangular building. The plaque at the entrance notes that this is the most honored position for the exhibit to be placed—the same position that the sacred object would occupy in a shrine. The building itself, then, is organized as a shrine, surrounded by a number of deities, the greatest of which is located in the sacred center.

Yushukan’s organization, unlike that of the two museums discussed earlier in this paper, is largely chronological. For this reason, Emperor Hirohito himself does not appear until near the end of the historical narrative, which draws to a close shortly after the conclusion of World War II. His role begins in a timeline laid out across the wall of multiple rooms, which outlines negotiations between Japan and the United States between September and December of 1941, the time between initial Hull Note negotiations and Japan’s declaration of war against the Allies. Among terse entries reflecting Japan’s wish for peace and the unwillingness of the Americans to negotiate, the notes on the imperial conferences are something of a break. One reads:

At an Imperial Conference, the decision is made to go to war with the United States unless an agreement has been reached by late October. Emperor Showa requests that every effort be made to reach a peaceful settlement after reciting the poem by Emperor Meiji:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Across the four seas} \\
\text{All are brothers.} \\
\text{In such a world} \\
\text{Why do the waves rage,} \\
\text{The winds roar?} \\
\end{align*}
\]

Subsequent entries depict the emperor in a similar fashion, cautioning his officials “not to be bound to decisions,” to choose peace over war if possible.

The tale, as it is told here, is tragic. The Japanese nation, under the caring and moderate guidance of the emperor, began expansion into Asia “to ensure the stability of East Asia and to
contribute to world peace,” declares an Imperial Rescript dated December 8, 1941. Hostilities in China were due to China’s “failure to comprehend the true intentions” of the Japanese Empire, and were only exacerbated by support from the United States and Britain. Under economic and political pressure from the war mongering Allies, Japan was left with no choice but to go to war.

This timeline is followed by another detailed account of battles won and lost, which draws to a close as Japan’s prospects take a turn for the worse and Japanese forces begin to retreat. In spite of the efforts of “pro-Japanese experts” Henry Stimson and Joseph Grew the Potsdam Declaration is issued without any assurance that Japan’s imperial system (kokutai) would be preserved. The Japanese government chooses to wait until a reply is received from the Soviet Union regarding mediation in negotiation of surrender terms, but a mistranslation leads to the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Here follow two long accounts of Imperial Conferences regarding the Potsdam Declaration, which took place on August 9 and 14, respectively. Emperor Hirohito is the focal point of these two reports. In both instances, government officials are unable to decide whether or not the terms of surrender should be accepted. Their anxiety is over the lack of any assurance of the preservation of kokutai. In both instances, the officials ask Emperor Hirohito for seidan. On the first occasion, in a short quote, the emperor expresses his wish that the innocent people of Japan should be spared, and that the war should come to an end, but the second conference is even more climactic. The emperor is given a long quote, in which he expresses eloquently his wish that his people should be saved, at risk of his own life. The emperor’ words end “amidst bitter sobbings of all those present at the conference.” Subsequently an Imperial Rescript is issued to announce the end of the war. The panel adjacent to this one contains a poem written by the emperor regarding the August 14 Rescript:

Saddened by the loss  
Of the precious lives
Of so many of my people
I ended the war.
It mattered not what became of me.

Following the emperor’s radio announcement of surrender, the Japanese nation sadly but obediently lays down its arms, impressing even the occupation forces with their compliance with the emperor’s wishes. The narrative finishes with the January 1 Rescript (in which the emperor renounces his divinity—Yushukan claims that the emperor’s true intention was to declare a return to the principles laid down by Emperor Meiji and to bolster the spirit of his people) and the emperor’s subsequent travels across Japan, which “cheered and reassured Japanese people, and reminded the occupation authorities that the Emperor and his people were one and inseparable.”

Overall, the image of the emperor that we draw from this museum is very different from those given in Kyoto and Hiroshima. Emperor Hirohito is described as an individual with a distinct personality and individual concerns. His primary worry is the well-being of his people. In this way, his personality does not differ greatly from that of the other great emperors who came before him. In fact, while he is an individual, his reign is still linked to the great imperial myth, both implicitly through the inclusion of the imperial line narrative throughout the museum and explicitly through his purported references to Emperor Meiji. He appears greatly respected, both by members of the Japanese government and by the Japanese people, of whom no better example can be given than the hundreds of photographs of young men who lost their lives in the war. Ultimately he repays their sacrifice by his willingness to sacrifice his own life for the safety of his people.

Emperors throughout the museum, and Emperor Hirohito specifically, are shown to have a great deal of power to decide the fate of the Japanese government. How, then, does the Yushukan narrative explain the emperor’s exclusion from the list of those tried for war crimes in the Tokyo Trials? There are two factors that contribute to his innocence. The first is Emperor
Hirohito’s continual dedication, according to the records presented, to the quest for peace, as mentioned above. The second, however, is this museum’s justification of Japan’s motivation in going to war. Yushukan’s war narrative greatly downplays the severity of the effects that the Japanese occupation had on Asian countries, emphasizing instead Japan’s intent to free Asia from colonial rule by Western countries and bring peace to its neighbors. It claims that Asian nations’ failure to comprehend Japan’s peaceful intentions, combined with the determination of the United States and Britain to foil Japan’s plan, was responsible for Japan’s involvement in World War II. This strain of logic leaves not only the emperor innocent, but also suggests that other war criminals (including the seven Class A war criminals enshrined at Yasukuni, whose photographs are displayed prominently in the museum) should be pardoned, as their intentions were pure and their leadership concerned only with peace.

Conclusion
Each of the three museums selected for investigation during the term of this research has taken a radically different approach to its presentation of World War II. The material in the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum is limited in order to focus on what happened in Hiroshima when the atomic bomb was dropped. The Kyoto Museum for World Peace, in an almost penitent tone, harshly criticizes the decisions and conduct of the Japanese military in order to highlight social injustices, which its curators feel have been largely ignored by the Japanese. Yushukan’s primary goal is to showcase the personal effects of the deified war dead, and goes to great lengths to glorify the Japanese nation and its military history in order to do so.

To these ends, all three museums give preference to some events, while downplaying or completely excluding others. The manner in which Emperor Hirohito is described (or excluded) in the narrative of each museum is certainly not exempt from this pattern. On the contrary, we have seen that presentations of Emperor Hirohito are indicative of the museum’s intended
narrative as a whole. Hiroshima is able to exclude him almost entirely, due to its focus on events within the city, though an exception is made both for the emperor and for the museum’s regional limitation in the section dealing with the United States. Kyoto does not distinguish between Emperor Hirohito and the imperial system, but heavily criticizes the latter and uses it as the focal point for the anger that visitors are sure to feel after viewing exhibits that expose the social injustice of war. By contrast, at Yushukan the imperial system is the thread that ties together the narrative of glorified, patriotic wars. Emperor Hirohito, while depicted as one in a long line of noble leaders, is without a doubt one of the most important—he saved his nation and his people by ending Japan’s most destructive war ever, and his dedication to his people continued.

Not only are these depictions of the emperor telling of each museum’s overall message, but they also give an idea of the great range of approaches to the issue of Emperor Hirohito. While the Hiroshima museum pragmatically avoids this figure, Kyoto and Yushukan seem to take opposite stances, with the former blatantly critical, the latter bordering on worship.

However, are the two truly directly opposed? It is notable that the Kyoto museum criticizes the system, but not the individual. Had it chosen to be critical of Emperor Hirohito as an individual it would not have been alone in the world of World War II discourse, but instead it avoids any mention of individual emperors at all. It is possible that this is a reflection of the pressure put on liberal peace museums of this type by conservative groups. However, it also seems possible that a lack of direct criticism of Hirohito in any of the museums indicates something else. Whether this is a reflection of positive public opinion of Emperor Hirohito himself, or of a taboo on direct attacks is a topic for further research.

**Bibliography**


Presentations of Emperor Hirohito in Japanese War-Related Museums


Appendix I–Examples of Notes from Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum

Image 1: Layout sketch, Hiroshima Museum
Appendix II—Example of Notes from Kyoto Museum for World Peace

Item 1: Example of panel, in English and Japanese

Soldiers and the Armed Forces

After the Meiji Restoration in 1868, Japanese military forces were deemed to belong to the Emperor, not to the people, and soldiers’
human rights were severely suppressed. Even at the time of the so-called “Fifteen-Year War” (1931-1945), emphasis was put on mental rather than physical power; weapons were old-fashioned and supplies were poor. No attention was paid to the dignity of the soldiers’ lives. Inevitably, these conditions resulted in increasing numbers of deaths in the ranks.

In addition, Japanese military forces conducted indiscriminate bombing and used poison gases and biological weapons against countries such as China. In war zones, they killed and tortured soldiers and civilians alike, their operations aimed at totally destroying areas that put up resistance.

**Item 2: Example of transcribed audio guide**

Today the world no longer accepts the old saying “All’s fair in war.” The Hague Convention of 1907, establishing the laws and customs of war on land, and the Geneva Convention of 1929, on the treatment of prisoners of war, outlawed the use of poisonous substances, the plunder of occupied territories, the killing or abuse of prisoners of war, and other such acts, defining them as war crimes. After World War II, the definition of “war crime” was expanded, so that the very act of starting a war of aggression was considered a crime against peace, and the massacre of civilians was punishable as
a crime against humanity. After World War II, surviving Nazi leaders were tried for war crimes in the Nuremberg Trials, while the war crimes committed by Japanese military leaders were addressed in the Far East International War Crimes Tribunal, which was held in Tokyo. Tojo Hideki, the Japanese Prime Minister who ordered the attack on Pearl Harbor, and six other Japanese leaders were sentenced to death for Class A war crimes. Of the 5700 Japanese accused of regular war crimes, and tried as B and C Class war crimes tribunals, 984 were executed. However, responsibility has not been settled for many other war crimes committed by both sides. Unresolved issues concerning the conduct of the Allied Forces include the indiscriminate bombing of Japanese civilians, the dropping of the atomic bomb by American forces, and the internment of Japanese in Siberia by Soviet forces. On the Japanese side, they include the Emperor’s responsibility for the war, the sexual enslavement of the so-called “comfort women,” and the abduction of civilians for use as forced laborers. The public apology and expression of remorse for the Japanese invasion and occupation of Asia by Japanese Prime Minister Murayama in 1995 was a notable sign of progress in Japan’s acknowledgement of its responsibility. This section of the exhibit includes photos of the Far East International War Crimes Tribunal and panels describing issues yet to be resolved, including the crimes of Japan’s infamous Unit 731, and compensation for the so-called “comfort women” who were used for sexual slaves for Japanese troops during the war. Displays in the glass cases also cover the internment of Japanese in Siberia, after the end of the war, and include items used by some of the Japanese held there.

*Item 3: Photograph Notation*
Appendix III– Examples of Notes from Yushukan
Image 1: Timeline– “Japan’s Quest for Avoiding a War”

The United States helps Chiang Kai-shek government to continue the war with massive assistance, which has adverse effects on U.S.-Japan relations. To strengthen Japan’s negotiating position vis-à-vis the United States for the purpose of avoiding a war, the Kenzo Cabinet decides to sign the Tripartite Act which Foreign Minister... p. 73

Matsukata Yosohe strongly proposed.

Hull’s Four Principles

Hull does not change basic attitude, accuses Matsukata of hindrance.

Matsukata is not included in 3rd Kenzo Cabinet.

Japan hopes for U.S. understanding, but Roosevelt hints at an oil embargo and neutrality for French Indochina.

Japan advances into southern French Indochina.

freezing of assets and oil embargo.

U.S. hands Ambassador Nogawa a warning.


At an Imperial Conference, the decision is made to go to war with the U.S. unless an agreement has been reached by late October. Emperor Shōwa requests that every effort be made to reach a peaceful settlement after reciting the poem by Emperor Meiji: p. 74

“Across the four seas
All are brothers,
In such a world
Why do the waves rage,
The Winds roar?”
Image 2: Meiji Emperor’s Imperial Letter

Appendix IV – Selected Photographs

Image 1: Hiroshima Peace

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Presentations of Emperor Hirohito in Japanese War-Related Museums

Image 2: Kyoto Museum for World Peace

Image 3: Yasukuni Shrine

Endnotes

3John Benson and Takao Matsumura, 135.
5Masanori Nakamura, The Japanese Monarchy: Ambassador Joseph

6 John Benson and Takao Matsumura, 221-222.

7 David Bergamini, Japan’s Imperial Conspiracy, (New York: Morrow, 1971).


10 Ibid, 18.


14 Shigeru Honjo and Mikiso Hane, Emperor Hirohito and His Chief Aide-de-Camp: The Honjo Diary, 1933-36 (Tokyo: Tokyo University Press, 1982).


18 Ibid.

19 Ibid, 24.


22 Ibid, 72.

23 Author’s translation, from the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum Mission Statement

(広島平和記念資料館条例「第1条 原子爆弾による被害の実相をあらゆる国々の人々に伝え、ヒロシャマの心である核兵器廃絶と世界永久平和の実現に寄与するため、広島平和記念資料館を設置する。)

Kyoto Museum for World Peace, Ritsumeikan University, Ritsumeikan, 3 (1), http://www.ritsumei.ac.jp/eng/newsletter/summer 2005/3feature 3-1.shtml (accessed April 25, 2010).

It is interesting to note that the Japanese version of the text uses the word 犠牲 (victim) to describe the soldiers who died under these conditions, an implication that is lost in the English translation.

This word is translated as “imperial system” but has strong connotations of nationalism. This is the only occasion where this museum uses the word kokutai instead of tennousei (天皇制) which translates literally to “imperial system” and is not so heavily nuanced as kokutai. It is notable that the audio guide, following this quote, even interprets the word for the audience, explaining that “preservation of kokutai” literally meant protecting the emperor.


Ibid.

According to the Kojiki, Emperor Jimmu is a descendant of the sun goddess Amaterasu. This myth has long been used to legitimate imperial rule, and was used especially during the wartime Showa Period (1926-1945) to explain Japan’s history of expansionism.
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