He has lost his daughter and his wife has a terminal illness. While he is visiting her at the hospital, his partner gets shot at the scene of a stakeout and becomes confined to a wheelchair for life. Another detective on his team is killed at the stakeout by the same gunman. This troubled past haunts Nishi and propels him to change his life. He quits the police force and heads for a destructive yet fulfilling life involving his wife and yakuza gangsters.

Nishi, played by the director Kitano himself, is a very quiet man with very few lines. He remains mysterious and his facial expressions are hidden behind sunglasses. The hyphenated title, Hana-Bi, (written with the characters for “flower” and “fire”) suggests both life and death. Life and death are suggestively symbolized when Nishi’s partner comes to terms with his life in a wheelchair, while Nishi heads for death.

Takeshi Kitano, a.k.a. Beat Takeshi, has been well-known in Japan for decades, first as a comedian, then as a serious actor. More recently, he has turned his hand to directing. The results have garnered him critical acclaim both in Japan and abroad. His two most recent films, Hana-Bi and Kikujiro, not only introduce American audiences to Kitano’s originality and vision, but also offer a glimpse of a Japan that goes far beyond stereotypes.

Hana-Bi: Contrasting images of life and death, explosion and silence

Hana-Bi is a powerful movie, full of violence, yet full of subtlety and beauty. It tells a story about a hard-boiled ex-police detective, Nishi, whose life is forever changed by a succession of painful events. He has lost his daughter and his wife has a terminal illness. While he is visiting her at the hospital, his partner gets shot at the scene of a stakeout and becomes confined to a wheelchair for life. Another detective on his team is killed at the stakeout by the same gunman. This troubled past haunts Nishi and propels him to change his life. He quits the police force and heads for a destructive yet fulfilling life involving his wife and yakuza gangsters.

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Hana-Bi is recommended for college students and older viewers, due to its violent scenes. This movie can be shown as a supplement in a Japanese culture course or can be included in a survey course of Japanese films when the emphasis is placed on the contemporary. Points for useful discussions would include the means of communication.
Asian Educational Media Service

The Asian Educational Media Service (AEMS) is a program of the Center for East Asian and Pacific Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. AEMS offers information about where to find audio-visual media resources for teaching and learning about Asia, and advice about which ones may best suit your needs. In addition to AEMS News and Reviews, published quarterly, services include a free call-in/write-in service and a Web site. To add your name to our mailing list, request additional copies of the newsletter to use in workshops or to share with your colleagues, or ask for help in locating resources, please contact us.

AEMS is made possible by generous support from The Freeman Foundation and The Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership.

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What’s New?

New Teacher’s Guide for Doubles
www.aems.uiuc.edu/HTML/Doubles/Table.html

Gary Mukai and Shari Epstein of the Stanford Program for International and Cross-Cultural Education (SPICE) have created a teacher’s guide to Regge Life’s documentary Doubles: Japan and America’s Intercultural Children. The guide, which is aimed at junior and senior high school level students, offers historical background, discussion questions, and activities.

New Assistant Program Coordinator

This summer I replaced Elizabeth Cothen as Assistant Program Coordinator at AEMS. Since my arrival I have seen firsthand how invaluable Elizabeth has been to this organization. I wish her the best as she continues her graduate studies in library and information sciences.

At Emory University I majored in Asian Studies and Economics. During my studies I had an opportunity to spend a semester abroad at Kansai Gaidai University in Osaka, Japan. As a student I especially focused on my interests in Asian history, politics, and film. After graduation I returned to Japan as an educator, participating in the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program.

I feel fortunate to be part of AEMS as I believe it provides a unique and effective resource for educators of Asia. I am very enthusiastic about my position, and I plan on continuing to provide the exceptional level of service AEMS offers. I will also contribute to the ongoing expansion of our Web site. I encourage you to visit us online to search our media database, lesson plans, and other features.

—Alfredo Arcila, Assistant Program Coordinator

Feature Film Web Sites

There are many informative Web sites that focus specifically on Asian feature films. A few particularly helpful ones are:

Asian Film Connections
www.asianfilms.org

- Lists feature films made in China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan from 1998 on. Includes reviews, essays, interviews, and filmographies.

Asian Film Foundation
www.asianfilm.org

- Information on screenings, film archive societies, relevant readings, links to interesting sites, and more.

Inside Film Magazine Online:
Asia Film Festivals
www.insidefilm.com/asia.html

- Contact information for film festivals throughout Asia.
SEAsite (www.seasite.niu.edu) features language and culture learning resources on Southeast Asia for students of all ages. SEAsite features cultural material in English on the history of Burmese art, the recent political and social history of Cambodia, the Indonesian “reformasi,” gamelan music, Thai poetry, and many other topics. A keyword-searchable picture database has recently been added.

In addition, there are copious learning materials for both beginners and intermediate students of the languages of Southeast Asia. Lessons in Thai, Indonesian, Khmer, Lao, Vietnamese, Tagalog, and Burmese are all available. These materials consist of a rich mixture of text, audio, and pictures, as well as interactive, on-line dictionaries for Indonesian and Tagalog. These language and culture resources are available free to anyone who has access to the Internet. In order to make the use of SEAsite a more active experience than typical “point-click-see” Web sites, a variety of interactive exercise types have been created that allow learners to test their own knowledge and to practice skills such as vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension. These exercises include:

- **Multiple choice:** One multiple choice quiz format presents questions in sets of three and does not allow students to continue until they have answered all three questions in the current set correctly. In this way, they are encouraged to focus on the content and questions;
- **Flashcards:** Flashcards are a time-honored way for a student to practice new vocabulary. The SEAsite flashcard exercise presents words in random order, and allows students to remove cards which they feel they have already mastered;
- **Matching:** Whereas flashcards depend on the student’s introspective honesty in knowing if a word is correctly recalled, matching gives immediate explicit feedback;
- **Word drag and drop:** This quiz type presents learners with a task or question involving the manipulation of syllables, words, or phrases. Text “chunks” are displayed on the screen, and the learner’s task is to use the mouse to drag them to form the correct answer;
- **Picture drag and drop:** This question type is well suited for listening comprehension questions. A set of draggable pictures (books, glasses, table, bookcase, chair, etc.) is shown, and the student is asked, for example, to “put the books on the table.” Graphical feedback is given to indicate which objects are in the correct place, and which objects are not.

For more information about SEAsite and other free resources, call the Outreach Office at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, Illinois at (815) 753-1595, email jlamb@niu.edu, or go to www.niu.edu/cseas.

SEAsite is funded by the International Research and Studies Program and the International Education and Graduate Programs Service of the U.S. Department of Education as part of the Title VI National Resource Center Program, and the National Security Education Program of the U.S. Department of Defense.
laughs; almost unnoticeably, however, he wipes away a tear. This revealing episode helps us understand the autobiographical elements in Hou's film *A Time to Live, A Time to Die* (1985) or his other early films, as well as the melancholy yearning, hidden beneath the childhood innocence, for a home and nation forever lost.

Hou also takes us to Jiufen, where he shot *The City of Sadness* (1989). He invites Assayas to sit down at the tea shop where, in the film, a group of young Taiwanese intellectuals drink wine in celebration of Taiwan's return to China only to be quickly disillusioned by the Kuomintang's killings of the local elite. A scenic train ride then takes us to the mountain town of Shifen where *Goodbye South, Goodbye* (1997) was shot. Eventually, Hou and company come back to Taipei and meet Gao She and Lin Giang, two stars in *Goodbye South, Goodbye*, in a Karaoke bar, as if to reenact a scene in the film. The documentary ends in Hou's passionate singing of a Taiwanese folk song.

These trips are interspersed with clips of Hou's films. The clips and Hou's own narrative refer to or explain each other: they are so seamlessly connected that Hou's voice may very well be regarded as voice-over for the clips. Assayas also chooses appropriate moments to insert comments and observations from Hou's colleagues and friends, including Chu Tien-wen, a famous Taiwanese writer who wrote screenplays for almost all of Hou's films, another film director Chen Kuo-Fu, actor and screenwriter Wu Nien-Jan, and so on. They recall how the new Taiwanese cinema was initiated, how they began their collaborations with Hou, or how Hou and a group of friends first made movies based on their personal experiences before they extended their cinematographic representations to the collective history and memory of Taiwan. This is extremely valuable information that should interest not only critics and fans of Hou's films, but also film historians who wish to trace the development of Taiwanese cinema or find patterns shared by independent filmmaking with distinctive regional or national identities.

Gradually, by the end of the documentary, a portrait of Hou Hsiao-Hsien is completed. In this portrait, we see not so much a world-renowned director as an ordinary human being, a cigarette-smoking, betel-chewing Taiwanese man, who loves his native land, his home, his people, who is generous, humorous, passionate, easygoing, accessible, and a bit macho.

Overall, this documentary is a successful work. It is useful for film critics who, despite familiarity with Hou's films, need more personal and historical information for in-depth study. A recent article by Jean-Michel Frodon, for example, cites from this documentary Hou's account of the tree-climbing experience for introducing Hou's unique understanding of cinematic space and time. It is continued on next page.

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**Hana-Bi and Kikujiro**

continued from page 1

cation (both verbal and non-verbal), especially between Nishi and his wife and between Nishi and his colleagues, and the less-known images and realities of the “other” side of Japan, such as yakuza and violence. It would be interesting to generate further discussions on the two contrasting themes, life/death and violence/docility, in Japanese society.

**Kikujiro: A father-child relationship found**

Quite different from *Hana-Bi*, *Kikujiro* is a comedy with pathos surrounding a nine-year-old boy. On the first day of summer vacation, he sets out on a journey to find his mother whom he has never met. He is accompanied by a middle-aged man the boy calls *Ojisan* (Mister). Mister is sort of a punk or a small-time yakuza, and is ordered by his wife to be the boy’s chaperon on the journey. On the road, they have many adventures, including gambling at the bicycle races and hitchhiking. When they get to their destination, the boy’s mother’s house, they sadly discover that she has a new family. Still, the journey continues while involving unique characters. Of course, the time comes when the journey is over and they say good-bye.

Kitano plays Mister with a lot of silly tricks and slapstick. He calls people names and uses harsh, rough language. At first, he does not appear to care much about the boy he is supposed to look after. That changes, however, as the journey progresses. We the viewers come to understand that there is something warm and humane about this man. This movie starts and ends in an old neighborhood of Asakusa in Tokyo in July. The scenes of the neighborhood shops are refreshing and pleasing. This neighborhood of tradition and warm-hearted people appears well suited for a movie about people looking for each other. As for its educational application, a Japanese contemporary culture course at the undergraduate level should be able to accommodate this movie easily. The inclusion of this movie should allow the instructor to review the issues of the family and society in general. In almost all the discussions on families in Japanese society, the mother is portrayed in terms of her strong bond with her child/children (e.g., the education mother, the mother complex). The father is usually an absent figure and often missing in the discussion of child-rearing. Here in *Kikujiro*, the premise of this movie is finding a mother, but what actually occurs is a formation of a father-child relationship, albeit a surrogate one.

Besides Mister, all the characters in the movie are unique, and it is this uniqueness that may be the best asset of *Kikujiro*. Even within a rather homogeneous society like Japan, there are a variety of people, both good and bad. By showing this, *Kikujiro* provides an excellent opportunity for the students to see what textbooks are sometimes unable to translate.

– Sachiko Hiramatsu

**Sachiko Hiramatsu** is a Ph.D. candidate at the State University of New York at Buffalo. In addition to Japanese language, she has taught Japanese culture courses at SUNY Buffalo and St. Lawrence University, Canton, New York.

*Hana-Bi* is available under the title *Fireworks* from Amazon.com. Price is $29.95 (VHS) or $26.96 (DVD). *Kikujiro* is also available from Amazon.com. Price is $21.96 (VHS) or $26.96 (DVD).

**HHH**

continued from previous page

not useful, however, for K–12 and college teachers who intend to teach about the latest cinematic innovations or to use Hou’s films as illustrations of Taiwanese history. For one thing, this documentary assumes that its audiences are already as familiar with Hou’s films as with those of David Lynch or any other contemporary Western directors. For another, since the documentary’s primary languages are Chinese and French, American audiences must rely on the English subtitles, which make us believe that it was “Chinese” who massacred “Taiwanese.” Since Hou himself is a second-generation mainland emigrant, how can we not be confused by Hou’s identity as a “Taiwanese” who nevertheless belongs to the group that repressed “Taiwanese”? The English translation is therefore unacceptable, for it not only diminishes the significance of this documentary but also creates unnecessary confusions and misconceptions.


**Gang Gary Xu** teaches modern Chinese literature and film at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His recent publications include articles on Gao Xingjian and Hou Hsiao-hsien. He is currently writing a book on contemporary Chinese cinema.

**HHH: A Portrait of Hou Hsiao-Hsien** is available from First Run/Icarus Films. Price is $440 for purchase and $100 for rental. The feature films mentioned in this review are all available from Facets Video. Prices for purchase are as follows:

- *A Time to Live, A Time to Die*, $19.98 (VHS)
- *The Puppetmaster*, $19.98 (VHS) or $24.98 (DVD)
- *The City of Sadness*, $12.95 (VHS)
- *Goodbye South, Goodbye*, $19.98 (VHS) or $24.98 (DVD)

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From the film *Kikujiro* by Takeshi Kitano.
The King of Masks

The King of Masks is a well-done, entertaining film which touches upon many important issues that could keep a class interested in learning about Chinese society. Set in Sichuan of the 1930s, The King of Masks is a story about the relationship between an old man and a young girl. The old man, a street performer called The King of Masks (bianlian wang), practices an art called “Bianlian” (in which, while telling a story, colorful, beautiful masks appear and disappear on his face like magic). Tradition holds that he must only pass on his secrets to a male heir. Unfortunately, his only son has died and his wife has left him for someone else. The danger of his situation is made clear in a meeting with a well-known Sichuan Opera star in which the King of Masks is encouraged to make sure his art does not disappear with him. In his desperation he visits a child market looking to purchase a boy. He is quickly surrounded by girls, but finds no boys being offered. Just as he is about to leave, he is called back by a small eight-year-old boy. The boy's father wants ten dollars for him, but the old man bargains him down to five and brings his new heir back home. Things go well for awhile, but eventually, the old man finds out the boy is actually a girl and here the story starts to pick up its pace.

There are many twists to the plot and facets to the film, which would allow for numerous talking points in a class discussion. Kinship, adoption, worth of females, religion, and crime are all topics for which this film could be used as a starting point. However, the two themes which stand out are “tradition” and “filial piety.” In this story the two do battle and filial piety comes out on top as the most important value. This tension could provide ample fodder for a discussion of both topics, tradition and filial piety.

The central narrative of the film is built around the resolution of the King of the Masks’ need to find a male heir and his inability to find one. The problem arises because of the old man’s strict adherence to tradition. The art of the King of Masks has been handed-down for generations and here the story starts to pick up its pace. It was his misfortune, we are at first led to believe, that he ended up purchasing a “worthless” girl. Yet, in the end, the girl proves to be not so worthless after all, saving the King of the Masks’ life through a desperate act of filiality. The beauty and devotion of this act allows the old man to see that tradition must yield to filiality. (An added point of interest is that the girl learned the worth of this type of act from watching a Sichuan Opera, “Guanyin Attains Nirvana.” This opens up even more avenues for classroom discussion: Buddhism and Confucianism, transmission of morals, etc.).

What this movie is not capable of doing is conveying a sense of what life was like in Sichuan in the 1930s. The peasants look too well fed and well dressed for such a chaotic and war-torn time. Even the scene in the child market appears too sanitized. Furthermore, no background or historical context is provided. The political situation is only vaguely alluded to in two ways; first in the power of an army general, and second in the people’s fear of a small group of soldiers who have come to watch the King of Masks perform. While this film could certainly be used in a history class, it tells very little about the period it is set in. The story and the message of the film are not specific to any particular time period. Rather, depending on how the film is used in class, it could work to show, in general, what tradition and filiality mean to Chinese.

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In short this film could be used effectively within a classroom setting. However, its length (about 101 minutes) makes it difficult to use in full. Well chosen clips would probably be the best use of this entertaining film.

Stephen Udry is Assistant Professor of History at Carthage College where he teaches courses on modern Chinese and Japanese history as well as courses on film in Asia. He is currently working on a book on the shamanisms of the Manchus.

The King of Masks is available from Facets Video. Price is $22.95 (VHS) or $27.95 (DVD).
Chunhyang

Chunhyang is a unique and virtually flawless introduction to Korean film and culture. Im Kwon Taek, South Korea’s most creative and gifted director, has created a visually stunning remake of his country’s most beloved folk tale. Im does not transform his film to suit Western culture, and that is one of the film’s major charms. The music reveals the diversity and richness of Korea’s musical tradition, and the cinematography includes some of the most extravagant sets and costumes in the history of Korean film. Long after watching the film, viewers will remember vibrant images of life during the late Choson dynasty (1392–1910). Audiences will also be impressed by the gorgeous sets, the period costumes, and location shots of the beautiful countryside. The younger generation will be captivated by the passionate love story of a very beautiful and sensual young woman, Chunhyang, and the handsome Mong-nyong.

The film grew out of Im’s Sog’jonge (1993), the first internationally recognized Korean film, which incorporates the hauntingly beautiful sounds of p’ansori, an ancient operatic form of music. Im’s objective in Chunhyang was to combine the sounds and spirit of p’ansori with Korea’s most enchanting and famous story of star-crossed lovers. For Im, Chunhyang and p’ansori are the essence of Korean culture. In a Los Angeles Times interview he explained that “I wanted to let people know about the pleasures of p’ansori, and I thought that through film it might be the easiest way to reach them.” Another reason to make the film was “to remind people of the fidelity and courage of Chunhyang who braved torture and the threat of death to remain faithful to her lover.”

The story of Chunhyang is the story of true love, long-suffering virtue, and triumph over evil. It also conveys a very powerful message about the oppressive class structure of feudal Korea. For years scholars tried to trace the origins of the story, and recently found a bit of evidence that it might be based on a true story. Im narrates the famous tale through recordings of Cho Sang Hyun, Korea’s foremost singer of p’ansori. Cho appears briefly at the beginning of the film before a captivated audience, but what we hear was recorded thirty years earlier. The film begins with live concert footage of Cho and then, with his voice in the background, the story unfolds magically before us. The unique aspect of the film is that the story is told mostly in p’ansori. The music is riveting (some liken it to Navajo chanting).

When Mong-nyong, the aristocratic son of the provincial governor, sees the beautiful sixteen-year-old Chunhyang flying high on a swing, it is love at first sight. He hears that Chunhyang’s mother is a lower class kisaeng, a professional entertainer, so he treats the young girl as a servant. (It was the custom of the age to inherit one’s mother’s social class.) He demands that she entertain him. She refuses. Mong-nyong then learns that Chunhyang has upper-class blood from her father’s side of the family, and was brought up like a lady. She reads and behaves like a member of the aristocracy. Chunhyang’s aristocratic heritage deepens Mong-nyong passions for her. They fall deeply in love with one another, abandon the strict class divide, and marry secretly. Before long Mong-nyong learns that his father has been called to Seoul to be a member of the king’s cabinet. The despondent Mong-nyong vows revenge.

Meanwhile, the new governor, a villainous one, arrives. He believes in brutalizing his subjects, especially the beautiful Chunhyang, who refuses to accept her legal position as one of his courtesans by declaring loyalty to her lover. After she refuses his advances, Chunhyang is brutally beaten and sentenced to death. Her public beating is the film’s most disturbing scene. With each lash, Chunhyang suffers terribly, but she refuses to yield. The scene conveys the Confucian belief that a woman’s greatest virtue is loyalty to her husband, regardless of the circumstances. When Mong-nyong returns and hears of his lover’s plight, he vows revenge.

Viewers may initially struggle with the unfamiliar sounds of p’ansori, but the captivating story and the exquisite cinematography should hold the attention of virtually any audience. When the film was released in Korea, Im was criticized for hiring a sixteen-year-old for the part of Chunhyang. Secondary school teachers should preview the film and possibly fast-forward through one of the particularly passionate sex scenes. ♦
The father/son relationship has been an important theme in contemporary Chinese cinema. After the end of the Cultural Revolution, the desire for independence from patriarchal authority on the part of the new generation of filmmakers was first articulated in films like *The Yellow Earth* (*Huangtudi*, directed by Chen Kaige, 1984). The prevailing sentiment towards fathers in the 1980s was a mixture of intellectual questioning and emotional attachment. By the 1990s, the “Fifth Generation” filmmakers demonstrated a more defiant posture and many of their films revolved around rebellions against the old patriarchal regime. In the past few years, a group of even younger filmmakers born in the 1960s and 1970s has given the theme a new twist. In *The Impressive Age* (*Ganguang shidai*, directed by A Nian, n.d.) the story focuses on a young man who rejects both his father (who stands for lofty ideals) and his sister (a symbol of the materialist lure). In the end, he leaves home, breaking away completely from what was once his family. In *How Steel Is Made* (*Zhangda chengren*, directed by Lu Xuechang, n.d.) the narrative centers on a group of orphans looking for their fathers in the aftermath of the 1976 earthquake which devastated the city of Tangshan and killed hundreds of thousands of people. However, the real concern of the film is not about the natural disaster and the human tragedy, but about the failure of those orphaned children in their search for fathers.

Viewed in the context of this cinematic convention, *Shower* deviates from earlier trends to de-emphasize the father figure by bringing him back onto the center stage. Its story also deals with the conflict between a father and his son, but ends with the son embracing his father’s world. The father in the film, Old Liu, operates a public bath house which is portrayed as a sanctuary amidst the chaos of urban life. It offers comfort to people stressed by their modern lifestyle, therapy to a couple experiencing marital difficulties, and shelter for the mentally handicapped. The only person rejecting this place is Old Liu’s older son, Daming, who years ago left his family and went to Shenzhen, a coastal city and symbol of the new commercialism in China.

Obviously, the film creates a deliberate asymmetry here: the bath house is associated with the interior, traditional, and “Chinese” and Shenzhen the cosmopolitan, the modern, and “Western.” In so doing, the film casts the dramatic conflicts between the father and his son in terms of the larger confrontation between the interior/traditional/Chinese and the coastal/modern/Western. Thus, the father’s victory over his son in the end has ideological implications beyond a family drama. When Daming decides to succeed his father and assumes the responsibility of managing the bath house, he signifies a complete surrender to his father, which has to be interpreted as the triumph of the traditional/Chinese over the modern/Western.

It is important to point out that throughout the film Daming is a witness to events taking place at the bath house, a position purposely identified with that of the audience. Therefore, the positive qualities associated with the father and his bathhouse are meant to induce approval from the audience. The passing away of the father in the film happens at the very moment when the son is set to follow his father’s path, a detail echoing two earlier revolutionary movie classics, *The Song of Youth* and *Red Detachment of Women* (directed by Xie Jin, 1961) in which the representatives of the communist party are portrayed as fatherly figures who pass away after successfully converting their young followers. When juxtaposed against a long series of Chinese films that have dealt with similar themes, *Shower*’s glorification of the indigenous tradition...


Shower

do the father
and patriarchal authority is both regressive
and unsettling.

One of the most crucial imageries in the film
is water. In contrast to The Yellow Earth, in which
the peasants’ prayers for rain to relieve them from
a draught are never answered, the water in Shower
is generous, therapeutic, purifying, and possesses a
magic power that can solve all kinds of complex
human problems. Clearly, water is presented as an
essential symbolic element of traditional Chinese
culture. The phrase engraved in a wooden panel
hanging over the bathhouse, “Water embodies the
highest moral principle,” (shang shan ruo shui) is
taken from classic Taoist texts, and is an unmistak-
able attempt to associate water with traditional
Chinese beliefs. There is a significant detail in the
film that highlights the mythic power of water
(i.e., Chinese traditional culture). A frequent
patron to the bathhouse, a young man named
Miao Zhuang, is a Pavarotti fan particularly fond
of singing O Sole Mio. However, he can only sing
it when he is in the shower. When other patrons
are irritated by his singing and turn off the water,
he immediately loses his voice. During a formal
performance, Miao walks onto the stage in his
Western suit, but just cannot bring himself to
sing the song that he has practiced countless
times. Only after someone sprinkles him with a
water hose is he able to release the beautiful
melody. The implication is clear: Western culture
(as signified by the song and Miao’s Western suit)
can only blossom when mediated by Chinese cul-
ture (water).

Undoubtedly, Shower’s thematic orientation
has to do with the fact that the film was financed
by a production company founded and headed
by an American. Reflected in Shower’s imagined
China are some of the familiar elements of
Orientalism that Edward Said has insightfully dis-
cussed. Regrettably, in their eagerness to join the
world community, some Chinese have uncritically
accepted the Western construction of the Orient,
including that of China. The portrayal of the
bathhouse in this film as a source of human
warmth, social harmony, and a place for spiritual
cleansing is an apparent effort on the part of the
filmmakers to cater to the West’s taste for the
exotic and its search for what is lacking in its post-
industrial society. Seen from this perspective, the
primary function of the film’s fictional China is to
provide Western audiences an additional object of
gaze. Incidentally, the aggrandizement of “Chinese
culture” also satisfies some Chinese nationalists’
sense of self-importance.✦

The Cup

This is a delightful film, one that has already gar-
ered its share of attention from critics in a number
of countries (it was a 1999 selection at the Cannes Film
Festival and won several international film festival awards
that same year). The story is simple, but the glimpse it
gives of Tibetan Buddhist monastic life as it is actually
lived in the refugee centers in South Asia is something rarely
afforded interested audiences in most cinematic treatments of Buddhism. The
monks and novices in this film spend their time
engaged in study, as one naturally expects; but
they also have very human interests beyond that,
and therein lies a nice tale.

The Cup is set in 1998, during the time of the
World Cup tournament. Orgyen, a young monk
at a Buddhist monastery in India, is already prac-
ticed at sneaking out of the monastery to go to a
make-shift video parlor. And as a result of what he
has watched outside the monastery walls he has
become quite familiar with the progress of the World
Cup: which countries have strong teams, and
which teams represent countries that have been
sympathetic to Tibet. Even though his nocturnal
trips have come to the attention of the
monastic authorities and have resulted in discipli-
nary measures, he is fired up enough to plead for
the rental of a TV and satellite dish in order that
the monks might be able to watch the final game
between Brazil and France. There are obstacles.

The abbot hesitates, momentarily
wondering if there is sex involved
in the World Cup (he is quickly
reassured on the point); the ques-
tion of raising enough money
among the monks is a problem
in itself. And, of course, there is
the ever-present threat of power
outages. At the same time, the
political reality of exile monastic
life is ever-present: two new
novices, who have only just
escaped from Tibet, are promi-
nent characters.

As noted, this is a simple
story, but the presentation of monks as three-
dimensional characters in real-life situations makes
for a disarming and engaging film. The monks
are accessible people whose lives become fascinat-
ing to viewers through the sheer simplicity of the
plot. The Cup is the sort of film that will hold the
interest of a wide audience, one not uniquely
limited to students. It is enjoyable and, without
a hint of being didactic, makes a part of the
Tibetan Buddhist world more understandable.
For teaching purposes the film is easily suitable for
students in high school or college. But beyond
that, the film is simply charming and thoroughly
entertaining.✦

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The Cup is available from Facets Video. Price is $19.99 (VHS).

As a work of fiction, Lagaan (meaning land tax) has enough credibility in its story-telling to exist in the borderlands between fiction and history. Lagaan’s prominent frame of analysis is the political economy under British colonialism. Appropriately then, the film’s opening credits depict a coin with Queen Victoria’s impress portentously spinning over the heart of the subcontinent. Filmmakers Ashutosh Gowarikar and Aamir Khan deliver a drama which reminds Indians of the reasons why South Asia battled against the crippling institution of British colonialism: namely, unrelenting rape of land and of human dignity. It is cleverly done by placing one current passion of South Asian popular culture within the other—cricket in a Mumbai film.

The entire film is a counterpoint to the nostalgic British Raj depictions that have been the standard fare for at least thirty years now. Between BBC and Hollywood, the British Raj has been written into the western consciousness variously as a benevolent mission of mercy, or exotic pomp and circumstance, or just heat, dust, and lust. Lagaan is a postcolonial interpretation; the first generation of Indians born in free India have inaugurated in popular culture the beginning of de-colonized film-making. The film, its characters, its passion, its music, its lyrics are self-consciously Indian. If the audience, unfamiliar with its Indianness, feels on the outside, this is the result of an intentional attempt by Gowariker and Khan. Lagaan is not a story about the British Raj; it is an effective drama of resistance to the British Raj.

The plot of the film, set in a fictitious village called Champaner, is deceptively simple; the story is constructed as two interlinked parts, the first segment as the frame and the second its consequences. Bhuvan, the main character of the film, is a farmer who bristles at the presence of the English, their laws, and their greed. He resents paying taxes to the indigenous ruler of his kingdom as much as he detests British presence in his land. The English cantonment captain, Andrew Russell, a man prone to whimsy bordering on cruelty, is drugged with his own sense of power. Captain Russell is in charge of providing military assistance to various rulers who are being played off one against the other in exchange for high taxes (lagaan) which support the military in India as well as fill the coffers of the Chancellor of the Exchequer in London. This method, called the Subsidiary Alliance under the British East India Company, existed under various guises during different times of British presence in South Asia. Captain Russell, irritated by what he considers Bhuvan’s insolence when the latter describes cricket as a “sadyaj, bhuddha sa khel” (“rotten, scruffy game”) threatens to first double, then triple, the lagaan on the villagers of Champaner unless they beat the English team at a one-day cricket match. The villagers, suffering from the effects of no rain—thus no grain—with which to pay the lagaan, are forced by Bhuvan’s acceptance of the challenge to learn the game. The film proceeds with a gripping tale: learning the game, unity between unlikely allies, concerns with everyday life and love, betrayal by one’s own—all told in a tale which is reminiscent of the Indian nationalist movement in ways that move beyond the oft-recounted heroism of larger-than-life Gandhi and Nehru. It is a story about ordinary people charged with learning an alien game for the express purpose of owning the produce of their labor, and they learn the game but after their own fashion. Gowariker writes this intense story with just enough humor so that the film retains its tension; cleverly, the humor does at times transcend cultural specificity.

Gowariker and Khan use cricket as a political metaphor. As J.A. Morgan has said in The Cultural Bond: Sport, Empire and Society, “The greatest game in the world is played wherever the Union Jack is unfurled…. On the cricket grounds of the Empire is fostered the spirit of never knowing when you are beaten, of playing for your side and not yourself, and of never giving up a game as lost. This is as invaluable in Imperial matters as in cricket.” The entire film is entertaining but it hovers just above acute tensions and violence. The second half of the film focusses on the cricket match; however, since the film is not about cricket per se but a political metaphor for the contest between the English and the “darkies” (language used by the English throughout the film) the film retains its grip, even on audiences unfamiliar with the game. Cricket, the sport, is quite effectively appropriated by Gowariker to comment on human resilience in the face of colossal odds. It is as if Gowariker and Khan decided that the imperial enterprise, nicknamed the Great Game by the master imperialist Kipling, had to be inverted. Indeed, the Great Game is soundly criticised when Bhuvan says, “Goron ke liye yeh srf khet hai, lekin hamaare liye hamaari zindagi.” (“For the whites it is only a game, but for us it is our life.”)

The narrative of the film is primarily masculine, not unlike colonialism and resistance to it. However, it is interesting that Gowariker deliberately centralizes those who have been traditionally marginalized in speech and action. Ordinary Indian women and Dalits, both of whom have been positioned as silent non-agents in the stories of the more intriguing ambiguities of relationships between English women and Indian women and men are enacted. ...For perceptive audiences these are absorbing moments of the film which problematize simplistic gender narratives.
Some stories do not change though they may take many forms. *The Circle* is one of these stories. By an artful twist, J’afar Panahi insightfully details one day in the lives of a particular group of women in Tehran.

The film starts outside a delivery room in a hospital with a circular staircase where a Mrs. Ghulami gives birth to a girl. The birth of the girl and the terrible reactions of her relatives signal the tone of the movie. It is ominous. We know that the child’s birth is also the end of Mrs. Ghulami’s marriage. It seems that her husband will divorce her for not giving birth to a boy. To spread the terrible news of the birth to others, one of the relatives leaves the hospital to make a phone call and by sheer coincidence this tragedy merges into the tragedy of three young women on the run who happen to be by the phone booth.

There are common threads connecting these three women and others that appear in *The Circle*. They all have similar experiences in several dimensions of their society, first as women and secondly as having some sort of criminality in their past. As such these women are more vulnerable (ridgehe bepa darand—“have pebbles in their shoes”) than the ordinary Iranian women. These women on the run seem to have left one formal agency of social control—the prison—for another agency of social control, from jail, into the oppressive society, to jail again, thus completing the circle.

Another theme that emerges is that women not move around easily. Fear of the authorities and the fear of the violation of societal norms are real. The ubiquitous police drive these points home. Panahi uses the circle metaphorically for the rigid bureaucracy of social control, from jail, into the oppressive society, to jail again, thus completing the circle.

In this DVD there are some errors in translation to the English subtitles. However, these are not serious enough to undermine the message of Mr. Panahi’s film.

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**Lagaan**

*continued from previous page*

of Indian nationalism, are present not as mere tokens but as dynamic actors in the story. For example, Mai, in her white sari with a demeanor suggestive of something magical, is a representation of Mother India, a depiction that most Indians recognize immediately. Appropriately, Bhuvan is her son. The film opens and closes with her as central to the screen. The women are equal participants at every step of the struggle as active agents in the endeavors of “the game.” Most interestingly, it is with women characters that some of the more intriguing ambiguities of relationships between English women and Indian women and men are enacted. The ambivalent relations are investigated within the frame of “the game”; for perceptive audiences these are absorbing moments of the film which problematize simplistic gender narratives.

The narrator’s last line in the film is: “Bhuvan’s name is lost in the pages of history.” In keeping with the postcolonial interpretation of South Asian nationalism, Gowariker and Khan comment here on ways in which local resistances to British colonialism have been subsumed in cinema’s master narratives of South Asian nationalism and Independence. While such erasure is being rectified in historiography, *Lagaan* is the first film in its genre to launch this correction. Mumbai’s film industry has a peerless charismatic appeal for Indian imagination at a time when globalization and a crisis in secularism offer new challenges in rapidly changing socio-economic realities.

This film is appropriate for undergraduate and graduate students. It has a broad enough appeal to be used in classes of several disciplines: history, anthropology, women’s studies, political science, and film studies. It would benefit students learning about colonialism and post colonialism on a graduate level.

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*The Circle* is available from Facets Video. Price is $79.98 (VHS) or $24.98 (DVD).
Guide to Distributors


Facets Video, 1517 West Fullerton Avenue, Chicago, IL 60614. Tel: 800-331-6197. Fax: 312-929-5437. E-mail: sales@facets.org. Web site: www.facets.org.

First Run/Icarus Films, 32 Court Street, 21st Floor, Brooklyn, NY 11202. Tel: 718-488-8900. Fax: 718-488-8642. E-mail: info@frif.com. Web site: www.frif.com.

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