

News and Reviews

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Hana-Bi and Kikujiro: Films of Takeshi Kitano

>> *Hana-Bi (Fireworks)*, a feature film directed by Takeshi Kitano. 1997. 103 minutes.

>> *Kikujiro*, a feature film directed by Takeshi Kitano. 1999. 121 minutes.

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

Review

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.

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. With its excellent cine-



matography and beautiful images of Japan, such as rock gardens, cherry blossoms, and Mt. Fuji, *Hana-Bi* will allow the viewers to see

beyond its violent content. There is a clear contrast between graphic

scenes of violence and the beauty portrayed in these surroundings. There is also a contrast between the explosion of violence and the silence and subtlety surrounding the main characters.

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 communi-

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Actor/director Takeshi Kitano in *Hana-Bi*.

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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.

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For more information, contact:

AEMS, Center for East Asian and Pacific Studies
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
230 International Studies Building, MC-483
910 South Fifth Street
Champaign, IL 61820

Telephone: 1-888-828-AEMS (1-888-828-2367)
or 217-265-0642
Fax: 217-265-0641
E-mail: aems@uiuc.edu
Web: www.aems.uiuc.edu

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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: A Free Web Resource

in focus

Developed at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University,

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. ♦





HHH: A Portrait of Hou Hsiao-Hsien

>> A documentary film directed by Olivier Assayas. 91 minutes. 1996.

Part of the French TV series *Cinema of Our Time*, *HHH* is a documentary about the life and work of the Taiwanese director Hou Hsiao-hsien. Directed by Olivier Assayas, a French filmmaker and film critic who first came to know Hou in the mid-1980s, this documentary is tinged with Hou's distinctive style: long takes, calm observations, and juxtapositions of the past and the present. It is an appropriate tribute to Hou, whose importance to cinematic innovations at the turn of the millennium has been compared by some to that of Godard or Truffaut to the cinema of the 1950s and 1960s.

Assayas appears in this documentary as an interviewer accompanied by an interpreter. He rarely asks questions, however. The camera mostly focuses on Hou, following the three of them to various locations that are of particular significance to Hou's personal and artistic experience. The first stop is Fengshan in south Taiwan, where Hou grew up. Perfectly at ease among his old acquaintances, Hou passionately recalls his childhood experience: how he felt time and space coming to a halt when he was alone in a tree, or how his grandma believed that a short trip by foot would take her across the bridge leading to her home in the mainland. "Grandma had lost her mind," Hou

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 disil-

lusioned 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

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Kikujiro: A father-child relationship found

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



From the film *Kikujiro* by Takeshi Kitano.

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. ♦

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).

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correct 1895. The most problematic is the translation of “Taiwan *benshengren*” (local Taiwanese residents, as opposed to “*waishengren*,” emigrants from the mainland in 1945) into a homogenous “Taiwanese.” Thus when Hou talks about the conflict between “*benshengren*” and “*waishengren*” as represented in *The City of Sadness*, the subtitle makes 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. ♦

The City of Sadness \$12.95 (VHS)
Goodbye South, Goodbye \$19.98 (VHS) or
 \$24.98 (DVD)

>> A feature film directed by Wu Tianming. 1996. 101 minutes.

THE
KING
OF
MASKS

SAMUEL GOLDWIN'S FILMS PRESENTS A SHAW BROTHERS (H.K.) PRODUCTION "THE KING OF MASKS"
 CHU YUK, CHAO YIM YIN, JOJO MOHA FONG, KUN POU CHU
 WU MINGLIN, WU TIANMING, WU TIANMING

Shaw Brothers

be passed on to a male. Indeed, it is his strong desire to follow this tradition that leads him to purchase an heir from a slave-trader in the first place. 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

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what tradition and filiality mean to Chinese.

[illegible]

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



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).

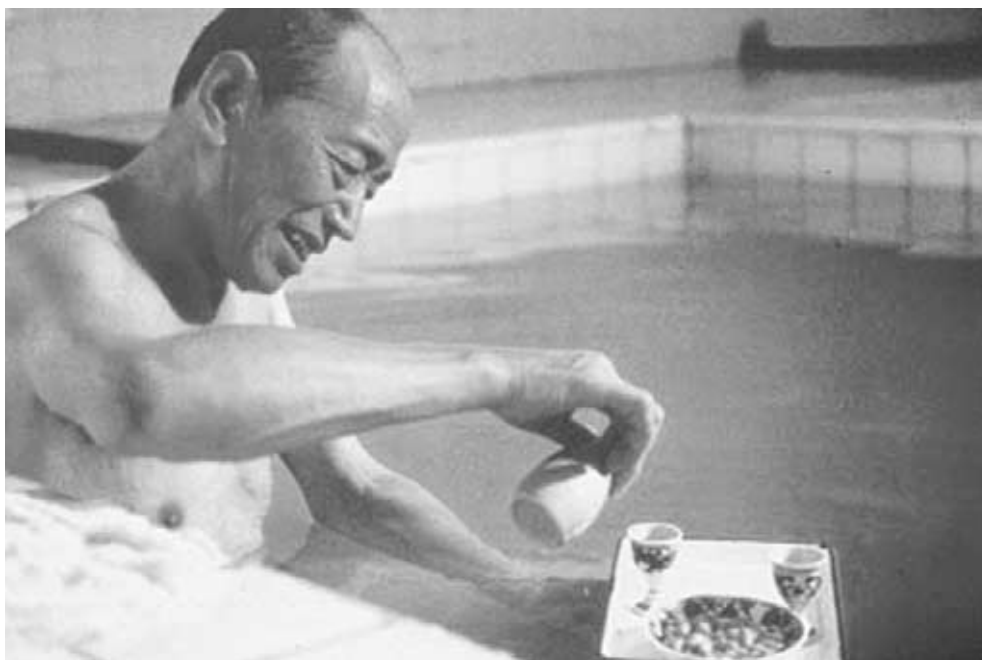
When Mong-nyong, the aristocratic son of the provincial governor, sees the beautiful sixteen-year-old Chunhyang flying high on a swing, it is love at first sight. He hears that Chunhyang's mother is a lower class *kisaeng*, a professional entertainer, so he treats the young girl as a servant. (It was 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 realizes that he cannot reveal his marriage to a commoner until he passes the rigorous tests at a

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 Mongnyong 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. ♦

Mary E. Connor is a teacher of Asian studies
and United States history at Westridge School,
Pasadena, California. She is the author of *The*
Koreas: A Global Studies Handbook published in
April, 2002. *The Koreas* is part of ABC-CLIO's
new *Global Studies: Asia* series.

Chunhyang is available from Facets Video.
Price is \$94.98 (VHS) or \$29.95 (DVD).



Shower

>> A feature film directed by Yang Zhang II. 2000. 92 minutes.

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* (*Huang tudi*, 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 Impressionable 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

**Reflected
in *Shower's*
imagined China
are some of the
familiar elements
of Orientalism...**

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 audiences'. 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 tradi-

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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 unmistakable 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 culture (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 discussed. 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. ♦

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Hong Yin, Professor and Associate Dean of School
of Media and Mass Communications, Tsinghua



>> A feature film directed by Khyentse Norbu. 1999. 94 minutes.

This is a delightful film, one that has already garnered 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 practiced 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 disciplinary 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.

University, China. This review was translated by **Zhiwei Xiao**, Assistant Professor of History at California State University at San Marcos. His research interests are Chinese film and popular culture.

Shower is available from Facets Video. Price is \$21.96 (VHS) or \$29.95 (DVD).

The abbot hesitates, momentarily wondering if there is sex involved in the World Cup (he is quickly reassured on the point); the question 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 prominent 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 fascinating 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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Elliot Sperling teaches at Indiana University where he chairs the Department of Central Eurasian Studies. His areas of research are Tibetan history and civilization and Sino-Tibetan relations.

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

Yellow Earth is available from Facets Video. Price is \$19.98 (VHS). *Red Detachment of Women* is available from Third World Newsreel. Price is \$275 for purchase.

Information on other films mentioned in this review is unavailable.

Lagaan

>> A feature film written and directed by Ashutosh Gowariker, produced by Aamir Khan. 2001. 224 minutes.

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 Gowariker 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 decolonized film-making. The film, its characters, its passion, its music, its lyrics are self-consciously Indian. If the audience, unfamiliar with its Indian-ness, 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 dif-



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ferent times of British presence in South Asia. Captain Russell, irritated by what he considers Bhuvan's insolence when the latter describes cricket as a "*sadiyal, bhaddha 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 sirf khel 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

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>> A feature film directed by J'afar Panahi. 2000. 91 minutes.

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 (*rigcha 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, the society outside the prison walls.

We are not told for what kind of crimes these

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Republic of Iran,
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degree its rigid bureaucracy overwhelm us. As the movie unfolds, several more women appear who also do not fit the overly rigid normative structure. These women are homeless, or unwed mothers, or women who abandon their children, or women who prostitute themselves.

This film is suitable for high school and college students. Some prior knowledge of Iran would be very useful. The educational value of the film is enormous. It shows the back alleys and the traditional markets of Tehran. It also shows places that produce a great variety of soft consumer goods as they have done over the centuries. In these places, transactions for goods from sex to fabrics are conducted informally. The filming in Tehran takes one from the vehicular congestion of the streets to the highly specialized guild, the traditional *teemcha*. Viewers are also taken to the bustling circular building of the bus station and finally to the circular holding pen of the police at the end of the movie. It is in this pen that women

three women were imprisoned. More importantly, we are not permitted by the film to make any judgments about them. Panahi zooms in on their plight while showing us the reality of Iranian society around them, forcing us to question the social system's capacity for mercy—or lack thereof—in contrast to the kind of justice that has been meted out to them. The theocracy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, its hypocrisy, and to some



are held after being picked up at the end of their first day of "freedom." In a single day, these women go through several agencies of social control, from jail, into the oppressive society, to jail again, thus completing the circle.

Another theme that emerges is that women without proper documents or without a man cannot 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 women's lives in the movie and for women's lives in general.

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. ♦

M. Mobin Shorish is Associate Professor Emeritus
of Comparative Education and Economics of
Education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-
Champaign

The Circle is available from Facets Video. Price is \$79.98 (VHS) or \$24.98 (DVD).

Lagaan

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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 South Asians. Gowariker and Khan use film as a powerful medium to raise the bar for de-coloniz-

ing 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. ♦

Jyoti Grewal is an Associate Professor of History at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa. She teaches South Asian history, colonialism and gender, and uses popular culture, particularly films, as texts.

Lagaan is available from Facets Video. Price is \$24.95 (VHS) or \$27.96 (DVD)

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