

News and Reviews

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From Opium to Chrysanthemums

>> Directed by PeA Holmquist and Suzanne Khardalian. 2000. 75 minutes.

Drug Story

>> From the series, *Winds of Change*. Directed by Luu Hong Són. 1999. 20 minutes.

These two films provide very different perspectives on the opium addiction of the Hmong people of northern Vietnam, Lao PDR, and Thailand. Viewers will come to appreciate the lifestyle and culture of the Hmong, as they cope with rapid changes in their mountain fields. The films

may work best when shown together, but while both films are informative and well produced, they tell very different stories.

From Opium to Chrysanthemums documents Swedish filmmaker PeA Holmquist's return to the "Golden Triangle" after thirty years. He follows the life of his old friend, Lao Tong, now a respected Hmong elder, through old letters he sent home during his first trip to the region. The many flashbacks show a more pristine mountain and shifting subsistence patterns in both Thailand and Laos.

The Hmong, very much a despised minority from the lowland Thai perspective, paid an "opium tax" to the Thai police, and were constantly wary of unscrupulous opium traders who would take advantage of people like the Hmong with no citizenship or identity cards. Racism against the Hmong goes unmentioned in the film.

The filmmaker then takes us to the uplands of Laos, now the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR). Here we meet similar shifting cultivators living first in the mountain tops, and later forced to resettle in the lowlands. The American bombing in the country in the sixties both

destroyed Hmong villages and disrupted Hmong families, as some clans supported (or were forced to support) the CIA war against the communists and some clans supported the victorious Pathet Lao who formed the socialist Lao PDR in 1975. Stock images of the war add texture to the film, but the complex role of the Hmong still needs more contextualization for viewers unfamiliar with the secret war in Laos. The war resulted in massive population movements as some Hmong escaped as refugees to Thailand and eventually resettled in the United States and elsewhere. The film follows one addicted opium farmer who struggles to feed his family and his habit, and juxtaposes his poverty with the comfortable lifestyle of his brother who escaped as a refugee to California. Ostensibly "disabled," the film shows him mowing his lawn, while his brother in Lao PDR climbs on

his house to repair his thatch roof. Videotaped messages exchanged between the two brothers emphasize, and perhaps exaggerate, the vast differences between the lifestyles of the two men.

Back in Thailand, headman Lao Tong explains his

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COURTESY OF FIRST RUN/CARUS

Above: *From Opium to Chrysanthemums*. Above, right: *Drug Story*.

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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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What's New?

Farewell from Sarah

As of this month, I am stepping down as director of AEMS and editor of *News and Reviews*. I have greatly enjoyed the past five years at AEMS and the Center for East Asian & Pacific Studies, but for a while now I have wanted to spend more time with my family. I have the opportunity to do that now, and I am really looking forward to it. Editing this newsletter has been one of my favorite parts of this job. I hope it has been as much fun for you to read as it has been for me to work on it.

Jenny Huang, who makes her debut as editor with this issue, is replacing me as Director. I was lucky enough to work with her for a couple of weeks after she started, and I am sure she will do a great job. In addition to being knowledgeable about Asia, she is talented, smart, and nice—so keep the reviews and reference questions coming!

—Sarah I. Barbour

Greetings!

It is with much excitement that I succeed Sarah Barbour as director of AEMS and editor of *News and Reviews*. Since its inception in 1997, the program has provided invaluable service to the Asian Studies community. It is my goal not only to build on this excellent foundation but also to take the program to new grounds.

Over the past five years, Sarah has implemented many great ideas for both the program and *News and Reviews*, such as special issues devoted to themes like “Women” and “Religion.” I would like to continue this series by publishing other thematic issues in the future. Of course, this endeavor would not be possible without contributions from our writers and readers. So I hope that you will continue to lend your support to AEMS and *News and Reviews*. They are much appreciated!

—Jenny C. Huang, Editor



Media Award Honoring David Plath Now Accepting Nominations

The Society for East Asian Anthropology invites submissions for the David Plath Media Award for the best work (film, video, audio, and multimedia) on any aspect of East Asian anthropology and/or East Asian anthropology's contribution to the broader field. The prize of \$250 is named for AEMS Senior Advisor David Plath, renowned Japan-scholar and producer of award-winning documentary films. Evaluators of the work will seek to determine the scholarly significance of submissions which contribute to the anthropology of East Asia, and which take the form of research footage and documentation that adds to the historical and/or ethnographic record, or is used for further analysis (such as linguistics, dance, and art); ethnographic media that contributes to theoretical debate and development; media designed to enhance teaching; and media produced for television broadcasting and other forms of mass communication.

Nominations for the prize may be made by producers/authors, distributors, or interested third parties. Three non-returnable copies of the media should be sent by May 1, 2005, to the David Plath Media Award Committee, c/o Professor Laura Miller, Department of Anthropology, Loyola University, 6525 North Sheridan Road, Chicago, IL 60626.

Redesigned Web Site Coming Soon

The AEMS Web site is currently being redeveloped. The new site, scheduled for launch this summer, will feature a new look and improved navigation and searching functions. Over the past five years, our online database of Asian educational media resources has grown tremendously and now includes information on over 5600 titles. The redesign will help make it easier for users to search through this wealth of information. Look for these changes in the coming months and give us feedback about the improved features! ♦

>> Produced and directed by Liesl Clark. 2003. 60 minutes.

As a high school teacher, I have often appreciated the PBS series NOVA, but have struggled to find a way to use it in my classroom. While always of very high quality, NOVA programs have always seemed a bit esoteric for the 15-year-old sitting in a world cultures class. Fortunately, *Lost Treasures of Tibet* provides an intriguing and accessible view of an isolated culture.

The film opens with a brief geographical overview of a Nepalese province called Mustang [moo-stahn] that I must confess I was not previously familiar with prior to seeing the film. The film tells us that historically Mustang was a Tibetan kingdom that has since been absorbed into Nepal, and is the last existing example of Tibetan culture today. As the film progresses, we are introduced to the various elements of Mustang's culture ranging from Buddhism to architecture. Within this historical overview the filmmakers have included some extraordinarily powerful footage of the Chinese take-over of Tibet. Scenes involving the desecration of countless monasteries are especially poignant and are likely to put a dramatic face on an event that may otherwise seem abstract and trivial to many high school students.

The central conflict in the film revolves around the restoration of the main temple of Thubchen in Lo Monthang, the capital of Mustang. The filmmakers draw clear parallels between the restoration of the Sistine Chapel and the preservation of the temple in Mustang. While sixty minutes of footage

chronicling fresco restoration could be quite taxing for the average viewer and most certainly for the average high school student, the filmmakers make the wise decision to inter-cut the restoration of the painting with a revival of the culture of Mustang.

The segments of the film explaining and displaying the creation of great temples using nothing more than clay and wood are fascinating. Scenes of the local Mustang residents repairing their temple by following the same process used over 500 years ago will make an impression on even the most disinterested teenager. The film returns to the concept of cultural norms and values, discussing the decision-making process in which the American and European restoration coordinators negotiate with the King of Mustang and other local officials. This clearly shows the interaction of two different worldviews more clearly than many documentary films I have seen and is quite captivating.

As with all NOVA presentations, the internet resources are outstanding. For more information, interested viewers should turn to the NOVA Web



site: www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/tibet. Teachers will be especially thankful for the well-organized student viewing guides and lesson plan suggestions. All in all, not only will you be educated by NOVA's *Lost Treasures of Tibet*, your students will remember it for some time to come. ♦

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Steve Kellner is a Social Studies teacher at West Chicago Community High School in West Chicago, Illinois. At the University of Chicago, he developed secondary school resources on Asia as a Graham School Fellow. He currently teaches Global Studies, an interdisciplinary class combining Geography and English.

Lost Treasures of Tibet is available from WGBH Boston Video. Price is \$19.95 for general purchase or \$16.96 for WGBH members.

Opium

continued from page 1

shift from the cultivation of opium to vegetable and flower marketing in lowland Thai markets. His participation in a Hmong divorce proceeding underscores the difficult position and condition of Hmong women but the gender dimension of the story is not developed. The film ends, as it opens, with two young Hmong men seeking help for their amphetamine drug addiction from clan elders. However, the film gives no inkling of whether any help was forthcoming or successful.

In *Drug Story*, the Vietnamese filmmaker hones directly in on the gritty reality of the suffering of opium addicts—former soldiers living in squalor in the hills of northern Vietnam. The film traces in chronological order their discovery by the local People's Committee, their rehabilitation in a treatment center where they are “cured,” and their return to their mountain homes one month later, clean and recovered, with an anti-drug fervor and

a claim to be ready to contribute to mainstream Vietnamese society.

In Vietnam, growing opium has been outlawed since 1978, but these former soldiers who “can’t live and can’t die” manage to collect enough wood for sale to buy a daily fix. Their transformation on screen is remarkable, but audiences should be aware that this is clearly a propaganda film recounting successes, not failures, ignoring the complexities of the war and the treatment of minorities such as the Hmong in Vietnam.

Drug Story is told from the perspective of a doctor running the government rehabilitation program and the story is told in a clear and direct manner. Great views and great camera work make the story easy to follow for high school or college students with an interest in the issue of addiction or the transformation of Vietnam. However, the twenty-minute film provides little background on the war, ethnicity, or the Hmong way of life.

From Opium to Chrysanthemums, on the other hand, is a much more ambitious film providing greater detail about the Hmong way of life and

its transformation over the last thirty years. It is harder to follow, both because of the shifts in time between the sixties and the nineties, and in location, between Thailand, Lao PDR and the United States. This complexity demands more of the audience, and one feels the lack of background information about the war, the refugee experience, and Hmong society more acutely. This film would require more background preparation for it to be effective in either high school or college classes. But with the right background materials it is by far the more challenging film to explore rapid changes of minority peoples such as the Hmong in a rapidly changing world. ♦

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Penny Van Esterik is Professor of Anthropology at York University, Toronto.

From Opium to Chrysanthemums and *Drug Story* are available from First Run/Icarus Films. Price for *From Opium to Chrysanthemums* (VHS) is \$440 for purchase or \$100 for rental. Price for *Drug Story* (VHS) is \$185 for purchase or \$45 for rental.

The Life of Mei Lanfang

>> by Isabel K. F. Wong

Mei Lanfang (1894–1961) is internationally recognized as one of China's greatest actors in the *jing ju* musical theater (*jing* means “capital,” i.e., Beijing; *ju* means “theater”; hence, “Theater of the Capital [Beijing]”). The forerunners of *jing ju* first appeared in Beijing, the capital of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), around the late 18th century, having absorbed elements from some older theatrical forms which could be seen in Beijing at the time; these included *kunqu* (pronounced “kwun chu”), the classical theater which first appeared in the 16th century during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), as well as popular regional theaters of Anhui, Shaaxi, and Hubei. It was not until the latter part of the 19th century, however, that the *jing ju* as we know it today emerged. In the West, *jing ju* is commonly known as Peking Opera (“Peking” being the Western postal designation for the city Beijing based on Cantonese pronunciation, a southern Chinese dialect first learned by British traders). This is a misleading term. Opera of the Western stage, according to the *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, is “a drama that is primarily sung, accompanied by instruments, and presented theatrically.” *Jing ju*, on the other hand, is a theater that includes not only singing and instrumental accompaniment on stage, but is a complete performance merging the following elements: choreographed dance movements, complex stylized gestures, acrobatic and mock combat actions, fanciful facial make-up and elaborate costumes that define a character on stage, and finally, dialogue, which is presented either in everyday speech or in heightened speech, serving as a means of characterization. While an actor on the Western operatic stage is primarily a singer, an actor on the *jing ju* stage, in addition to being a good singer, must be a master of all the elements and skills cited above. Mei Lanfang was one of the greatest masters of the *jing ju* stage.

Actors of the *jing ju* theater are trained exclusively in the arts of one of the broad categories of acting role-type (and their subcategories). In other words, a *jing ju* actor is a specialist of one role-type, even though when necessary a *jing ju* actor is capable of playing other role-types on stage. There are four broad categories of role-types: the male role (*sheng*), the female role (*dan*), the painted-face role (*jing*), and the clown role (*chou*). Mei Lanfang was the leading exponent of the art of female impersonation for the *dan* role. In fact, the etymology of the word, *dan*, actually meant female impersonator, a role-type which has existed on the Chinese stage for a long time. Since



the 1920s, professional actresses have played female roles on stage, though they

are still called *dan*. However, great female impersonator *dan* actors continued to dominate the *jing ju* stage until the 1960s.

The art of the *dan* actor is steeped in a tradition which evolved a long time before the emergence of the *jing ju* in the 18th century. On stage, a *dan* actor (either a female impersonator or a woman) must wear facial make-up, which involves the application of thick white powder on the entire face and neck, the application of rouge on the areas around the cheeks and the eyes, eye make-up, and lipstick, as well as an elaborate head-dress, ornaments, and costumes similar to those worn by women of the Ming and Qing periods (i.e., 14th- to early 20th-century) or earlier. Furthermore, a *dan* actor must have the ability to carry himself in a convincingly graceful way by walking with small dainty steps and by using prescribed intricate and feminine finger gestures. In addition, the *dan* actor is required to have a good singing voice. Mei Lanfang not only mastered all the skills required of a *dan* actor, he also made contributions that brought the art of the *dan* actor to perfection. One of Mei Lanfang's contributions was to expand the dimensions of the *dan* role. There are several subcategories of *dan*: the *qing yi* (pronounced “ching yi,” meaning “blue gown”), is the *prima donna*, a virtuous young woman who behaves strictly according to Confucian precepts of decorum for a woman. The *hua dan* (“flower” *dan*) is a lively and flirtatious young woman who often plays the role of a maid or a young woman in the countryside. The *wu dan* (“warrior” *dan*) is a young woman skilled in acrobatics and sword play. Before Mei Lanfang's time, *dan* actors specialized in one of these *dan* subcategories. Mei Lanfang appeared on stage in all of these subcategories, thus effectively breaking the barriers and providing *dan* actors with larger dimensions.

The *jing ju* stage calls for versatility on the part of the actors. An all-around top-notch *jing ju* actor must be attractive when appearing in make-

up, be of pleasing physical proportions, have a pair of expressive eyes, and a rich variety of facial expressions. Mei Lanfang personified all of these attributes on stage. However, according to his own account, Mei Lanfang was never an actor of great natural endowments. It was by sheer hard work that he achieved what he accomplished. He claimed, for instance, that he had a pair of lack-luster eyes when he was a child. To remedy this, he exercised his eyes constantly. He would practice gazing at the movement of an incense flame in a dark room; fly kites and stare at them drifting in the blue sky; keep pigeons in order to look at them soaring in the sky.

Mei Lanfang started his professional training when he was 8 years old. A year later he became the disciple of a famous *qing yi* actor. In 1904, when Mei was 10 years old, he made his stage debut. Two years later, he officially joined a famous professional *jing ju* company as a regular member. Though on stage at this time he specialized in the *qing yi* role, off stage he tried to expand his repertoire by learning the flirtatious maid role (*hua dan*) and the female warrior role (*wu dan*), and these exercises made him an all-around *dan* actor. By 1913, when Mei was only 19 years old, he had already achieved a solid reputation on the Beijing stage, and in that same year he was invited to perform in the treaty port, Shanghai, as a leading *dan* actor playing opposite an established *lao sheng* actor. The Shanghai venture was not only a professional success, for the vibrant and cosmopolitan environment of Shanghai exerted profound influence on Mei Lanfang's artistic development. He encountered for the first time a new form of theater heavily influenced by the western realistic stage. This was characterized by plots that were based on contemporary stories, actors (men and women) wearing contemporary clothing, and performance taking place on modern proscenium stages with modern lighting. After watching a few of these new plays, Mei Lanfang became deeply stimulated, and he joined these new theatrical groups backstage and participated in the costume and set design. After he returned to Beijing, Mei produced his first newly created *wen ming xi* (modern play), which was an adaptation of elements of the Shanghai new theater to the *jing ju* stage. In 1914, Mei was invited back to perform in Shanghai and was a huge box office success. During his half-year performance in Shanghai, his audience included not only Chinese, but Japanese, Americans, British, and other Europeans.

With his international reputation growing, Mei Lanfang was invited to perform in Japan in 1924. Then in 1930, he was invited to perform in the United States. Leading a company of 24 actors, Mei performed in New York, Washington



Nostalgia for the Countryside

>> Directed by Dang Nhat Minh. 1996. 116 minutes.

Discovery Communications in Hanoi, Vietnam, has released *Nostalgia for the Countryside* on DVD. Based in Singapore, Discovery has worked in Vietnam to carefully acquire the rights to several Vietnamese film titles, including the acclaimed series, *Song of the South*. Written and directed in Vietnam in 1996 by Dang Nhat Minh, *Nostalgia for the Countryside* has been available for distribution on DVD for less than a year. It is already eagerly being shown in the United States by Southeast Asian and Asian Studies departments. It serves as a good introduction to contemporary Vietnam.

Given their history, the Vietnamese have made tragedy into a real art—wistful, romantic and hopeful—but resolved to disappointment and suffering. *Nostalgia for the Countryside* is a film that, for Vietnamese Studies, has it all. With the clear eye of a marksman, Dang focuses on the life of northern rural peasants, a life that is oddly poetic in the midst of grinding poverty and beautiful landscapes.

In this movie Dang has given us all of the usual images and personas of Vietnam about which we have grown familiar. We see the Vietnamese as optimistic, enduring, inventive, and industrious, even as they suffer and experience loss

and pain. We see the panoramic landscapes of enclosed villages, ponds, rice paddies, rivers, and mountains. There are ducks and duck herds, hay stacks, water buffalo, and scrappy chickens. People are on the go and are hard at work. Like the water puppet theater that shows its audience scenes with which they are familiar, so *Nostalgia for the Countryside* waxes nostalgia about Vietnamese varieties. The film is honest in its portrayal of daily life and the scenery and sets are shot in the natural settings of a northern village.

The film suggests to the viewer that the Vietnamese countryside, indeed the country of Vietnam itself, will never be the same idyllic expression of rural fortitude and contentment. There can be no return to the simple rural life that expresses itself in the communal *dinh* (village house), no return to the straightforward comforts of the *chùa* (Buddhist pagoda), or the stability of the *gia dinh* (extended family). Indeed, there is reason to believe that this simplicity, straightforwardness, and uncomplicated stability never really existed. Traditional Vietnamese life, best understood as peasant life, has been far more complex and far less narrow and less monochrome than social scientists might have us believe. Nostalgia has a way of over-estimating, romanticizing, and

sentimentalizing community and tradition. In this film, Dang dashes our nostalgia for an idealized peasantry and an idealized countryside, showing us that deep divisions, petty romances, and lies and deception are not properties exclusive to urban enclaves.

The film begins with rice and the rice paddies. A woman crosses a rice paddy in a conical hat. Our young protagonist, 17-year-old *Nhâm*, sweats as he stacks bricks in a kiln building for firing. Exhausted, he lies down on the bricks to take a respite. Outside, the wage laborers take a tea break. The fires are lit and *Nhâm* is called down to receive his meager pay. He says to “give it to my sister” who will, with her pay, as good Vietnamese children do, take it to their mother as their contribution to the family income.

After the titles and credits, *Nhâm* narrates that he quit school at age 15 to go to work as he shares with us the view of his village across the paddy. The village is all but invisible from the main road. The mood music is sentimental, and a passenger jet flies over repeatedly in the film, as *Nhâm* looks wistfully to the sky. His village, his family, and his work are his life, but they are also traps.

Nhâm’s father was in the Navy and died in battle when *Nhâm* was young. *Nhâm*’s mother

People spill off the train, one of them is Minh's youthful teacher. He is a thoroughly sober, modern man, who is concerned that Minh has missed too

This film was quite controversial because of one particular scene in which Quynh is walking with the young schoolteacher who came to the village from the city. To convey Dang's message, the young teacher didactically explains to Quynh that the water puppet scenes, over 1000 years old, remain faithful to the life of the farmers, and that science has not contributed to improving their lives. Moreover, he says, in the modern world, "farmers are forced to buy seeds and fertilizer at high prices," and they are often swindled by "crooked city merchants." He observes that it was mainly peasants who went to the front during the 30-year war for unification and independence and

This irony is not lost in a telling interaction between Quên and the older village teacher, Quy, in which he says (in the spirit of Confucius and the Mandarins) that one goes to school to gain knowledge and to live

Western tourists often conclude that because they see peasants smiling that they must be happy—happy peasants, smiling poor. In the village *dinh* there is ritual dancing and chanting. Nearby the fortune teller tells his customer, “Whoever draws this lot has a lonely destiny.” He says, that “If you want wealth you must jump into life boldly.” Can these rural dwellers, paced by the seasons and by the rituals of farming, escape their destiny of poverty and sadness? The dreamy nostalgia for the countryside hides life’s difficult reality for the agrarian poor who comprise 80% of the Vietnamese population. Despite disappointments in love and life, the character, Ngu, like most Vietnamese farmers, throws herself dutifully and exhaustingly into her work. Quynh learns that happiness cannot be found by a nostalgic return, even as she yearns for it to be so. Rural life is not so simple after all. Quynh can escape to the city and to her life abroad. Nhâm returns to his village and conscription into military service. He writes in his journal that he misses his little village and that one day he will return. We end with Ngu transplanting new rice. Another season has begun. ♦

Jack D. Harris is Professor of Sociology at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, New York. *Nostalgia for the Countryside* is available on DVD from Facets Video. Price is \$24.95.

Traditional Vietnamese life, best understood as peasant life, has been far more complex and far less narrow and less monochrome than social scientists might have us believe.

WGBH Boston Video, P.O. Box 200, Boston,
MA 02134. Tel: 617-300-5400. Fax: 617-497-6830.
Web site: www.wgbh.org.

¹According to UNESCO Publishing, *jukurpa*, or Dreamings, link “the dream as a parallel space-time, a past, present, and virtual memory of the earth and the cosmos” which “manifests itself as Ancestral and Eternal Beings, the myths of their adventures, the trails of their travels, the rituals, or sacred objects that embody their living presence.”