

# News and Reviews Vol. 9, No. 1 Spring 20

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## Mardi Gras: Made in China

>> Directed by David Redmon. 2005. 60 minutes.

🚺 n his film, *Mardi Gras: Made in* China, producer and director David Redmon deftly juxtaposes two stark realities side by side. On one hand, he

Review

visually leads his audience members down Bourbon Street, offering them a

China, which produces

these beads. Instead of

wide streets filled with

Americans, the camera

self-indulgent young

travels down narrow

paths filled with dan-

gerous machines. In a

syncopated rhythm,

glimpse of the hedonistic Mardi Gras festival, as intoxicated revelers toss beads back and forth as part of a voyeuristic ritual. Then, in a split second, Redmon and his camera take the viewers thousands of miles away, to the factory in southern



Producer and director David Redmon

each machine spits out mile after mile of shiny bead strands, while dozens of teenage girls put the finishing touches on the plastic jewelry. The contrast between the hedonism of New Orleans and the sweatshop atmosphere of the factory could not be more obvious. Not surprisingly, this film utilizes this contrast to spectacular affect. Instead of producing a subtle look at modernization in China, Redmon provides an overpowering critique of free-market capitalism, globalization, and inequality. The technique is extremely effective.

Redmon's passion is obvious both in the film and in the story of its creation. Redmon earned a PhD in sociology from the State University of New York (SUNY) at Albany, but left his job in academia to work full-time on the film, serving as the director, producer, editor, and cinematographer. Eventually he convinced Deborah and Dale Smith, two previously unknown individuals who heard about the project, to provide \$5,000 for production. The resulting film has a gritty, proletarian feel to it.

AADE IN CHI

The characters in the narrative come from a wide range of backgrounds. Roger

Wang, the owner of Tai Kuen Bead Factory, is a self-made man who shows off his factory with pride. He unflinchingly explains how he penalizes his workers for needlessly using the bathroom and how he prefers to hire teenage girls because "they are easier to control." One of Wang's employees, Qiu Bai, provides the viewer with a different perspective. A middle-school dropout, Qiu Bai left her family in the countryside to work for Wang, sending her paychecks home to pay for her younger brother's schooling. During the Chinese New Year, Qiu Bai returns home for her annual visit, only to hear her parents crassly discuss her financial contributions. In addition to Wang and Qiu Bai, Redmon introduces the viewers to many other bead factory workers, all of them young teenage girls. Interspersed throughout the film, Mardi Gras participants share their views on revelry, plastic beads, and even globalization.

Individuals of all ages will be able to recognize the message of this film (though several scenes are inappropriate for younger viewers). Nevertheless, it is important that they understand the film simplifies an extremely complex situation. Unquestionably, the recent changes taking place in China are nothing short of revolutionary. During the last 15 years, millions of Chinese have moved from the countryside to the city. Most of them are hoping to find greater financial opportunities in urban factories but upon arriving in the city, these migrants face immense challenges and suffer in extremely difficult work conditions. Redmon's work highlights these problems without becoming entangled in intractable details or venturing possible solutions. It seems safe to assume that he is not interested in presenting a subtle, nuanced film, but rather a challenging, confrontational attack on globalization.



Mardi Gras beads at Tai Kuen Bead Factory.

### Viewers must

also be aware that China's problems are in no way unique. While there is tremendous disparity between China's rich and poor, similar disparities exist in other societies. Economists point out that the wealth in China is more evenly distributed than in the United States. Furthermore, as China continues its march toward industrialization, it is facing many of the same problems previously experienced by Great Britain, the United States, and every other industrialized nation. As elsewhere, China's young women make up an extremely large percentage of the unskilled labor force; hazardous work conditions are frequently the norm; the costs of pollution are passed off to the public; and organized labor struggles to find a foothold.

I recently showed this film to a group of college students. After seeing the film, they posed questions

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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 audiovisual 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 three times a year, services include a free call-in/write-in service and a website. 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?

### New Feature on AEMS Website

In an effort to create additional resources for teaching with film, this spring AEMS launched a new venture to videotape film-related events happening on the University of Illinois campus. Readers will be able to "participate" in discussions featuring important guest speakers from Asia by watching the videos online through the AEMS website (under "New at AEMS").

So far, we have "broadcasted" two events on the web. The first is a presentation on "Korean Cinema Today," featuring renowned director Kang Je-Gyu of the South Korean blockbuster, *Taegukgi: Brotherhood of War.* The second is a panel discussion on the 1970s women's movement in Japan, held along with the screenings of *Ripples* of *Change* and *Thirty Years of Sisterhood* (see review



Professor David Desser (Cinema Studies, UIUC) organized a panel discussion on the film *Taegukgi: The Brotherhood of War*. Invited panelists included Lee Young-Lan, professor of Theatre, Kyung Hee University, and an actress in *Taegukgi;* and Lee Hana, co-producer of *Taegukgi.* Photo above shows Desser, Lee (actress), and Lee (producer) at the February event on the U of I campus. Videos documenting events like this are now available online at www.aems.uiuc.edu.

of Change and Thirty Years of Sisterhood (see review on opposite page). Incidentally, a review of Ripples of Change will appear in the special film section of the next issue of the Education About Asia journal.

It is our hope that these event videos will be useful for your teaching and classroom discussions. As we consider new ways to share local resources please let us know if you have suggestions for turning events happening on your campus into resources for others.

### Symposium on Asia in the Curriculum

Last December, AEMS attended the "Asia in the Curriculum" symposium, held at the East-West Center in Honolulu. For those who missed the presentation, our PowerPoint file and notes on other conference programs have been uploaded to the "New at AEMS" section of our website. Those interested in teaching about Asia should consider attending the 2006 symposium, which will be held at UCLA on October 13–14. For details, go to www.asia.ucla.edu/aic. ◆

—Jenny Huang Yang, Editor

### Mardi Gras

continued from page 1

to a faculty panel (consisting of representatives from history, economics, and gender studies). Judging from the reaction of the audience and the panel members,

the film is extremely provocative and engaging. If viewers are informed of the complex issues involved in globalization, they will find *Mardi Gras: Made in China* to be entertaining and illuminating. Educators teaching about globalization, international affairs, or world history will find this film a helpful addition to their course syllabi.  $\blacklozenge$ 

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**David Kenley** is an associate professor of Chinese history at Elizabethtown College in Pennsylvania. His research focuses on modern Chinese history and world history. He is the author of *New Culture in a New World: The May Fourth Movement and the Chinese Diaspora in Singapore*, 1919–1932 (Routledge Press).



*Mardi Gras: Made in China* is available from the director at www.mardigrasmadeinchina.com. Price is \$303.85 for the DVD. Please specify if requesting the edited (for nudity and language) version.

Editor's Note: In addition to the documentary, the recently released DVD contains several special features, including deleted scenes, footage of the Sundance Film Festival, theatrical trailers, and other peripheral materials. Most interestingly, the special features also include an audio commentary by David Redmon and several video interviews with academic heavyweights such as Immanuel Wallerstein and Noam Chomsky.

# Thirty Years of Sisterhood: Women in the 1970s Women's Liberation Movement in Japan

>> Directed by Chieko Yamagami and Noriko Seyama. 57 minutes. 2004.

*hirty Years of Sisterhood* opens with a number of older, casually dressed women dancing joyfully together to lively music. The site is a mountain retreat, where in 2003, 27 women active in the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s have gathered for their fifth reunion. The women's easy laughter and their mutual trust in telling deeply personal stories build on experiences shared in the Movement. The film invites the viewer into this circle, moving back and forth from the reunion to longer interviews with featured women, including the well-known authors Tanaka Mitsu and Akiyama Yoko. We learn why the women joined the Movement, the diverse shapes their activism took, and how essential the experience continues to be for them.

Participation in the student protest movements of the late 1960s gave many of the women their first taste of politics. Male sexism against women in the ranks, which in one woman's case even involved rape, led the women to refuse to cook

and clean for the men and ultimately to decide that they favored different, nonviolent tactics. They also wanted to refuse to follow in their mother's footsteps. But, as one reporter recounts, when they sought careers, they faced blatant wage discrimination. Much like women in the U.S., Europe, and Australia, who were frustrated with sexism and a lack of opportunity commensurate with their

increasing education, young Japanese in the 1970s were ready to demand more. The women in *Sisterhood* describe their excitement over the events that launched the Women's Liberation Movement in Japan: the Tokyo women-only demonstration on October 21, 1970, the women's symposium on November 14, 1970, and the series of women's liberation camps that began in August 1971.

*Sisterhood* dramatizes how vital participation in such events was to the women interviewed. They were not alone, for hundreds shared their outrage. They felt a heady sense of freedom, able to vent without fear of appearing unfeminine or unfilial, and able to act. Their

activism took the form of creating consciousness-raising groups, publishing newsletters, demonstrating, and initiating the "Silly Pumpkin Troupe" to perform feminist comedies. Some of the women formed the Shinjuku Lib Center in 1972, working on behalf of women in need while experimenting with communal living themselves. All the interviewees remember these activities with pride, becoming visibly excited as they talk about the fun of breaking the rules and the hope of effecting change.

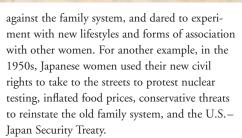
The simplicity of this documentary is well suited to its subject. The filmmakers chose to interview the women inside their current offices, homes, and at the mountain retreat. Archival photos amplify the women's recollections. Narration spoken in Japanese and subtitled in English loosely ties the stories together. The film's mini-

The film's minimalist style keeps the focus on the women's narration and in some sense replicates the homespun, bare-bones quality of the early "Lib" publications, plays, and organizing strategies, as well as the Movement's relentless attention to the personal.

> Japan nor to the significant strides made since the 1970s. Near the end of the film, activist Miki Soko says, "We thought, we acted, and we organized in a way that nobody ever did... or had expressed before." This is not entirely accurate. For one example, the Seitō-sha or Bluestocking Society, which began in 1911 as a small band of ambitious young women educated beyond the opportunities available to them, also made "the personal political" and published a magazine that stimulated "consciousness-raising." They, too, were lampooned in newspaper cartoons, spoke out

malist style keeps the focus on the women's narration and in some sense replicates the bare-bones, homespun quality of the early "Lib" publications, plays, and organizing strategies, as well as the Movement's relentless attention to the personal. While Sisterhood offers a powerful oral history of the Women's Liberation Movement, it does not connect it to the long

history of feminism in



Sisterhood documents all post-1970s activity solely in terms of the interviewees' personal growth over the past decades. No mention is made of such reforms as the 1986 Equal Employment Opportunity Law, the 1999 Basic Law for Gender Equality, or the advent of Women's Studies in Japan. The interviewees are not asked to comment on the potential legacy of their Movement nor on the status of gender politics in Japan today. Nevertheless, *Thirty Years of Sisterhood* can bring the spirit of 1970s activism alive for students and prompt them to read about women's rights movements and feminism in Japan. ◆

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Jan Bardsley teaches Japanese literature, theater, and women's studies in the Department of Asian Studies at UNC-Chapel Hill. In 2001, she and Joanne Hershfield produced and directed the documentary, *Women in Japan: Memories of the Past, Dreams for the Future.* With Laura Miller, she co-edited *Bad Girls of Japan* (Palgrave, 2005).

*Thirty Years of Sisterhood* is available on DVD from Herstory Project. Price is \$40 for individuals and \$200 for libraries, plus shipping.

#### Suggested Reading

- Fujimura-Fanselow, Kumiko and Atsuko Kameda. Japanese Women: New Perspectives on the Past, Present and Future. New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1995.
- LeBlanc, Robin. *Bicycle Citizens: The Political World of the Japanese Housewife*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.
- Mackie, Vera. Feminism in Modern Japan: Citizenship, Embodiment and Sexuality. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Sievers, Sharon. Flowers in Salt: The Beginnings of Feminist Consciousness in Modern Japan. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983.



Aishwarya Rai as Meenakshi in Bride & Prejudice.

# From Hansom to Handcart: Jane Austen among Cinematic Natives

>> Bride & Prejudice. Directed by Gurinder Chadha. 2005. 111 minutes. >> I Have Found It (Kandukondain Kandukondain). Directed by Rajiv Menon. 2000. 150 minutes.

urinder Chadha's 2004 film Bride and **J** *Prejudice* is an adaptation of Austen set in a transnational context of the Indian diaspora. It attempts to wed formal dramatic and musical elements of the popular Bombay film with issues of nomadic movements across the borders of a globalized world. The film tries to stage a gendered battle between east and west in a milieu marked by transnational flows of commerce,

cultures, opinions, lifestyles, insecurities, identities, and perceptions. This, in itself, is a growing impulse in different metropolitan cinemas of the world, one that wavers between interesting experimental combustions and superficial cosmetic displays. Baz Luhrmann's Moulin Rouge! (2001) and Terry

Given that Bride & Prejudice sets itself the task of questioning stereotypes and ethnocentric biases and phobias, it is surprising that it is full of one-dimensional characters that are not subsequently deconstructed.

Zwigoff's Ghost World (2001) are both examples of interesting mergers between signatures of "Bollywood" and American big studio or independent filmmaking. In the recent past, Hollywood behemoths have greenlit mainstream projects of

matic imaginations, in the form of talents like Ang Lee (Sense and Sensibility, The Hulk), Mira Nair (Vanity Fair), or Alfonso Cuarón (Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban). This has of course added to a general environment of curiosity about foreign films triggered both by the video and DVD revolution, and the general climate of multiculturalism in the nineties. Thus, the time seems indeed ripe for what Chadha's bilin-

the west to be animated by Asian or Latino cine-

gual Bride and Prejudice promises in its tagline-"Bollywood meets Hollywood... And it's a perfect match." The film is budgeted at seven million dollars, which is on par with Indian blockbusters, but modest by American standards. It stars Aishwarva Rai, former Miss World and presently

a movie star in India, and Martin Henderson, best known for his lead turn in the American remake of the Japanese horror flick The Ring. They are supported by excellent character actors like Anupam Kher, Nadira Babbar, Naveen Andrews, Namrata

Shirodkar, Daniel Gilles, Nitin Ganatra, and Sonali Kulkarni. American singing star Ashanti appears in a cameo.

Produced by European outfits like Kintop, Pathé Pictures, and the UK Film Council, Bride and Prejudice has been very self-consciously made and marketed as a crossover picture. Here the cinematic commerce between east and west is neither marginal nor a matter of passing homage; it is central to the narrative and its presentation on screen. Thematic polarizations in Austen, like the divide between an agrarian gentry and its old world values and a new mercantile ethos of London are amplified in Chadha's film into a gulf that has opened up between "traditional" Indian societies of North India, their high-caste family values and the new peccadilloes of a diasporic younger generation growing up or working in metropolitan Los Angeles or urbane London. Darcy here is played by Martin Henderson while Elizabeth "Lizzie" Bennet, called Lalita Bakshi, is acted by Aishwarya Rai. The crew of the film is also an international one, with Bollywood musical veterans like Anu Malik (music), Saroj Khan (choreographer), Nitish Roy (Art Director), and Santosh Sivan (cinematographer) creating the colorful song and dance sequences.

Will Darcy (Henderson), a New York-based hotel magnate, visits India with his friend Balraj (Naveen Andrews) to attend a wedding. The Bakshi family are also among the invited ones and Mrs. Bakshi (delightfully played by Nadira Babbar) is on a mission to "catch" eligible husbands for her four daughters. Plan A succeeds, with sparks flying immediately between Balraj and Jaya (Shirodkar), the eldest sister. However, for Darcy and Lalita, it is war at first sight, primarily initiated by Darcy's tactless remarks about the practice of arranged marriages and Lalita's pious retorts, defending her civilization and culture. The proposition that arranged marriages are backward is thus countered by saying that it is more of a global dating service now, run by parents and relations, rather than professionals. Besides, Americans cannot really afford to have a "know-it-all" attitude on the matter, since their divorce rate is the highest in the world. Thus begins a series of debilitating and humorless exchanges of pieties and moralisms that on the one hand simplify the complex aspects of merging cultures in a globalizing world, and on the other, make for very schematic and preachy cinema. They lack the subtlety and irony that mark the best work of Jane Austen. The dialogues are replete with clichéd gems like: "We want Balraj to look at Jaya's eyes, not your mummies (breasts)," or "I thought we got rid of imperialists like you." In the same way, the lyrics in the song sequences often throw up unfortunately phrased declarations of home-baked desi [a colloquial term meaning South Asian] feminism like,

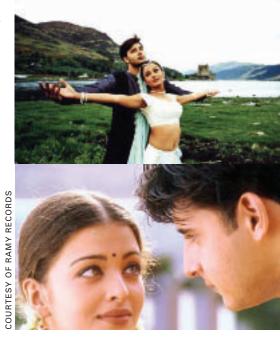
"I want a man who gives something back/Who'll talk to me and not to my rack."

Given that Bride and Prejudice sets itself the task of questioning stereotypes and ethnocentric biases and phobias, it is surprising that it is full of one-dimensional characters that are not subsequently deconstructed. Johnny Wickham (Daniel Gillies) becomes a smarmy yuppie backpacker, instead of Austen's military cad, who ends up threatening the virginity of Lakhi, Lalita's youngest sister. William Collins emerges from being a boring reverend in Austen's novel to the prototype Non-Resident Indian (NRI) Mr. Kohli, whose success is measured not just by the dollar balance in his bank account, but also by his proximity to Beverley Hills and Hollywood movie stars. This particular character however is rescued to an extent by a resplendent performance by Nitin Ganatra, just as the domineering and unevolving Mrs. Bakshi is by Nadira Babbar's wonderful acting. The same however, cannot be said about the two leads-Martin Henderson and Aishwarya Rai. The former flits between two expressions (a bewildered one and a not-so-bewildered one) in a decidedly underwritten role, while the latter reduces acting to plastic smiles, flaring nostrils, and indignant pouts.

Bride and Prejudice involves itself with some complicated issues pertaining to the changing contours of tradition, sexual morality, urbanity, and conjugality. The predicament of Mrs. Bakshi pertains to the fact that in the new environment of information, blending lifestyles, opened up spaces, and transformed moralities, it is becoming increasingly difficult to perform a core ethnophobic task of "tradition." That is, to protect the women in one's own community from "foreigners" and to ensure that eligible young men from one's community are not lured away by the voluptuous appeal of white women. One of the reasons why the film fails is because it refuses to enter into a relationship of distance and empathy with a "homely," conservative, desi, casteist, patriarchal ethnophobe like Mrs. Bakshi. That would have allowed for the irony to prosper. Instead she remains a high shrieking cardboard caricature, while the so-called liberal vision of the film wavers between a patronizing stance and a solemn disapproval. The same is true in regards to the form and paraphernalia of a socalled traditional India (read: the ritualism and piety of a high-caste, high-class, and half-feudal North Indian Hindu milieu). This self-aware film that purports to bring Bollywood to more cosmopolitan quarters attempts to do so by largely establishing a "wink wink, nudge nudge" relationship with the instruments of the former, like the wedding songs, the snake charming dance, or the melodramatic conventions. The result is thus either a vacuous cosmetic appropriation of Bollywood or a touristic, ethnographic appropriation of the same. The feel-good laughter that we are supposed to let flow never passes through that sublime zone in which something becomes funny not just because the old changes into the new, but also because it at once registers the pain and wistfulness of such a change itself.

I Have Found It, Rajiv Menon's 2000 remake of Austen's novel Sense and Sensibility starring model Tabu ("Sowmya") and Bride and Prejudice actress Aishwarya Rai ("Meenakshi"), is far more modest in its objectives. It attempts to locate the story in a pretty straightforward way, within the cinematic milieu of Tamil Nadu. In the process, it comfortably inhabits the high-strung dramatic formats and musicality within this tradition, exploiting them without apology or piety. The changing aspects of a society under globalization, the withering away of a feudal aristocratic ethos, commercialization, urbanization, and the clash between tradition and modernity are all touched upon in a far less reductive and thus, more easygoing manner. The narration approximates Austen's tale to a generous extent, but also makes interesting departures in a quiet and unobtrusive style. It charts the trials and tribulations of a widowed mother and her three unmarried daughters. They are cheated out of their family property by unscrupulous relatives and have to travel to the city in search of a living. In the city the erstwhile landed gentry has to begin life as all fresh arrivals do—as refugees. The two eldest daughters enter the professional life to make ends meet. One becomes a computer programmer and the second struggles with a singing career. The men in their lives also have to deal, in different ways, with the vicissitudes and insecurities of a modern professional and social existence. The disabled ex-army man Captain Bala is a successful merchant who battles a drinking problem, a melodramatically accentuated poor self-image, and a midlife crisis. Manohar, who woos the eldest daughter Sowmya, is a struggling assistant director in the movies, while the sleek and slippery Srikant, who initially bedazzles the middle daughter Meenakshi, is not simply an out and out scoundrel, but an existential con artist caught between his desires and the ethics of the financial market he attempts to rule through deception.

However, the song sequences make up the most interesting aspects of this film. That is the case not just because of their visual or aural appeal, but because they quite successfully present the disparate energies and contradictions of modern urban existence in India. Consider the "Yenna Sola Po Girai" (What will your answer be?) sequence that takes place immediately after Manohar makes his earnest professions of love to an unsure Sowmya. The setting changes from a nondescript railroad crossing in rural India to the spectacular desert landscapes of Egypt. The two characters reappear here in exotic costumes, inhabiting an autonomous mini tale of love denied by communal/tribal opposition, told within the scope of the song itself. There is a similar transportation, without obligation to the main narra-



Scenes from I Have Found It.

tive, to a medieval European castle this time, with the smarmy New Age businessman Srikant appearing as a caped crusader. It is in this manner that Menon's film cannibalizes idiomatic aspects of a multifarious metropolitan culture of the planetary kind-the travel film, MTV, consumer advertisements, the Hollywood historical epic, designer fashion—to draw out the basic ironic dissonances between the no-holds-barred worldly aspirations of an educated third world citizenry, and their complicit acceptance of, or wishful escape from the realities of poverty, hunger, and disenfranchisement that surround them. For film students and enthusiasts alike, I Have Found It will serve as a much more rich and engaging introduction to Bollywood cinema in the age of globalization and planetary communications than Chadha's rather stilted and cosmetic enterprise. +

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**Anustup Basu** is assistant professor of English and Cinema Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. At present he is completing a book on contemporary Indian popular cinema in the age of globalization and transnational electronic publicity.

*Bride and Prejudice*, released by Miramax Film Corp., is available in DVD format from most online retailers like amazon.com or bn.com. Prices start at \$12.99.

*I Have Found It* is available in DVD or VHS format from Kino International. Price is \$18.71 for DVD and \$19.95 for VHS.

# Spirits of the State: Japan's Yasukuni Shrine

>> Directed by John Nelson. 2005. 28 minutes.

Given the recent controversy regarding visits to Yasukuni Shrine by Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro and the debate about how the Second World War and the sacrifices of the Japanese should be memorialized in Japan, John Nelson's film comes at a critical time. His *Spirits* of the State: Japan's Yasukuni Shrine manages to highlight some of the major issues involved. The video can be helpful in high school or undergraduate classes as a means of stimulating debate, but should be used in combination with books and articles, which can properly place the film in its historical and contemporary context.

The documentary provides relevant information regarding the history and prewar use of the shrine, although it is presented in a choppy, nonlinear fashion which might leave those unfamiliar with its history more confused than enlightened. The frequent reuse of shots, imperfect match-ups with the script, and use of old interviews (some from 1995) indicate that the final film was largely cobbled together out of numerous sources. It is not assembled unskillfully, but it is jumpy and the visuals sometimes distract from the underlying script.

The most useful sections for stimulating student discussion center on the religious functions of the shrine and the role of the various bereaved families organizations. Nelson claims, probably rightly, that not all who come to the shrine to mourn for loved ones necessarily subscribe to the shrine's assertions about the justice of the war, but it would be helpful if there was more in the way of interviews or commentaries to demonstrate this.

The coverage of the present day uses of the shrine is reasonably thorough but suffers from a sort of stream of consciousness description, making the relationship of the various constituencies who utilize the shrine vague and unclear. Apart from the shrine priests and bereaved families, right-wing patriotic groups and politicians (most affiliated with the Liberal Democratic Party) also utilize the shrine for various ends. While he correctly states that the shrine authorities deny the involvement of the Japanese military in wartime atrocities and refuse to consider the notion that Japan's actions in the war were not justified, he does not spell out in any detail exactly what version of history the shrine authorities prefer.

This is most notable in his discussion of the adjacent Yushukan museum. Nelson notes that the

museum has undergone an extensive expansion project but has no footage of the new displays

and exhibits. This is especially unfortunate, for the newly expanded museum is dedicated to pushing a version of the history of the war (presented very slickly) as a just war on the part of Japan to expel Western Imperialism from Asia, taking credit for the growth of Asia in the late 20th century, and utterly denying any role for the Japanese military in wartime atrocities like the Nanjing Massacre

or the use of "comfort women." Having visited the shrine and the museum just last year I can tell you that the most striking thing about Yasukuni Shrine as a memorial is the relative absence of the war dead themselves. The authorities are at pains to justify their sacrifice, to make Yasukuni "a place where personal loss is valorized, legitimized, and even made sacred," but the shrine places remarkably little emphasis on the sacrifices of the individual Japanese. It is the insistence of the shrine authorities on this version of history, and the seeming acceptance of it by politicians who visit the shrine in violation of constitutional restrictions, that most poisons relations between Japan and its Asian neighbors. This is where supplemental materials can be most helpful so students can better understand the contemporary relevance of the issue.

Nelson notes that all nations face similar problems in deciding how to memorialize their war dead and lays out the numerous ways in which the shrine is utilized for this purpose in Japan, but he does not pursue the comparative perspective. After watching the video students should be encouraged to pursue this topic for discussion. For instance, how does Yasukuni compare to America's Arlington National Cemetery or to the U.S. Vietnam Veterans Memorial, which honors the sacrifice of the men and women who fought, without an overt justification of war? ◆



Left: Prime Minister Koizumi (in the black kimono) at the Yasukuni Shrine.

Below: Protests greet Prime Koizumi's (first) visit to Yasukuni in 2001.



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**Paul Dunscomb** is assistant professor of East Asian History at the University of Alaska, Anchorage. His research examines the domestic political aspects of Japan's occupation of Siberia, 1918–1922, and its relationship to the evolution of Japanese Imperialism.

Spirits of the State: Japan's Yasukuni Shrine is available in VHS or DVD from Films Media Group. Price is \$89.95 for purchase.

#### Suggested Reading

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Major Mary Ohn singing Cole Porter's "Don't Fence Me In" in a refugee camp.

# Don't Fence Me In: Major Mary and the Karen Refugees from Burma

>> Directed by Ruth Gumnit. 2004. 30 minutes.

uth Gumnit's film Don't Fence Me In: Major Nary and the Karen Refugees from Burma, is a 30-minute documentary that presents the lives of the Karen people, the second-largest ethnic minority group in Burma, in refugee camps inside Thailand. The documentary is largely an interview with Major Mary Ohn, a 70-year-old freedom fighter who is responsible for eight of the Karen refugee camps. In the film, she recounts a very personal history of persecution and suffering under the Burmese military's 50-year-long campaign to "Burmanize" the country.

After a series of statements about the history of the conflict, viewers are presented with the sounds of rifles and screams of terror above the sounds of crackling fire. They also see scenes of people running from their burning villages, crossing mountains and rivers as they escape from the Burmese military. Although some people might imagine Burma as a land of many pagodas where Theravada Buddhism is practiced, the film provides interviews with refugees in the camp that show the viewer another side of Burma. Throughout the documentary, Karen villagers share personal accounts of how they and their family members were tortured, killed, and conscripted into forced labor. Some of the interviewees are not able to recount their stories without shedding tears, and others express how much they miss their own villages and neighborhoods. Even more troubling, we see children left orphaned,

growing up thinking the refugee camps are their homes. It is clear that these children do not fully grasp the complexities surrounding the Karen history.

In spite of their misery, people in the Huaykaloke refugee camp try to preserve their culture, for example, by teaching the children the Karen dohn dance. The lively dohn is wellknown in Burma for enticing onlookers to participate in the dance. In this documentary, however, the dance is spiritless; the faces of the

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dancers have more sorrow than happiness, and the music is mournful instead of being the joyful music of celebration after harvest. At times, the Karens have had to live on bamboo shoots, roots, and leaves-a situation forced upon them by the Burmese military government so that "when you open the Karen's belly you will only see leaves," says Major Ohn.

The spokesperson for the Karen people in this documentary is Major Mary Ohn, whom the Burmese army has threatened to torture if ever she is caught. Ohn first entered this Karen revolution with no self-confidence, but she is now in charge of managing eight camps. She is loved, respected, and relied upon by her fellow Karen. In the film, we can see clear evidence of how the war has transformed Ohn. First, we see photographs of a beautiful, feminine girl with long hair, wearing a pearl necklace and a blouse. Next, we see her as a long-haired girl in military uniform. Finally, we see Ohn in her present form, with short hair, dressed like a man, and carrying a gun. The Karen National Union's General Bo Mya encouraged her to dress like a man because "otherwise, you will get married and you'll have to deal with a man." She has sacrificed a family life and romance because she felt they would only interfere with her fight for freedom for her people. Her responsibilities take her to the military camps, to rehabilitation centers where she encourages the disabled, and to a teashop where she chats with other women about when they will be able to go back to Burma. In contrast to a picture of her shining gun and talking bitterly about the cruelties of the Burmese military government and their policies, we see her tender side, when she is kneeling and praying. She admits to feeling scared during battles and talks about how she copes with it by tying knots on a string and reciting Psalm 23 to keep herself calm.

Even though the Huaykalok refugee camp is located in Thailand, we see in the film how it

> gets attacked by the Burmese military. Following the attack, the people in the camp are moved to another place, much closer to Burma and even more dangerous than before. People caught in the war are tired and want it to end. Singing Cole Porter's song, "Don't Fence Me In," Ohn explains that all she and her people want is "land, lots of land under starry skies above" and not to be fenced in, either in a refugee camp or inside Burma. The documentary ends with a scene of Karen children flying kites,

which provides a sense of hope about the future.

Since this is a short documentary film, it might not provide enough information about the Karen people for viewers who are not familiar with Burmese history and current events. For example, most people know of Burma, Thailand, and Laos as Buddhist countries, but in the film, there were multiple references to Christianity, including Major Ohn praying to the Christian God and reciting scriptures from the Bible. In addition, viewers may also have many questions about the Karen homeland and their culture that

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are not addressed in this film. Occasionally, viewers get a glimpse into the lives of the Karen people through black-and-white footage—people working with elephants, crossing a river on a bullock cart, and soldiers carrying rifles. When using this documentary in a classroom, either the instructor or the discussion leader can be better prepared by reading Jonathan Falla's *True Love and Bartholomew*, which has more information on aspects of Karen life such as music, food, love, the patterns of forest and river life, women, language, weaponry and mercenaries, and the symbols of rebel nationalism. Similar documentary films, such as *In the Shadow of the Pagodas* (a 52-minute documentary film by director Irene Marty), *No Place to Go: Internally Displaced People in Burma* (a 14-minute documentary film produced by WITNESS, in association with Burma Issues), and *Cease! Fire!* (a 49-minute documentary film by Saw Eh Doh Wah and Scott O'Brien) could also provide further information on the Karen people in Burma and the situation of ethnic minorities in Burma.  $\blacklozenge$ 

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Than Than Win has a PhD in English from Northern Illinois University. Currently, she is an interpreter/translator as well as a part-time Burmese language teacher at the University of Washington, Seattle. Don't Fence Me In: Major Mary and the Karen Refugees from Burma is available in VHS or DVD from Documentary Educational Resources. Price is \$195 for purchase or \$50 for rental.

### Suggested Reading

Falla, Jonathan. *True Love and Bartholomew: Rebels* on the Burmese Border. Cambridge University Press. 1991. Available from Amazon.com

### Suggested Films

- *In the Shadow of the Pagodas* is available from Accent Films online at www.accent-films.com.
- No Place to Go: Internally Displaced People in Burma is available from WITNESS at www.witness.org.
- *Cease! Fire! More Broken Promises, More Broken Lives* is not currently commercially available at this time.