

News and Reviews

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Hollywood Films in Class: The Case of *Mr. Baseball*

>> by Richard Chalfen

The following essay discusses the use of “Hollywood” feature films—specifically *Mr. Baseball*—in an undergraduate course given at Temple University entitled “American Culture in Japan.” This introductory-level course is offered every spring semester and is cross-listed between Anthropology,

American Studies, and Asian Studies. After watching the documentary *The Japanese Version*, we view feature films such as *Mr. Baseball* (1992), *Black Rain* (1989), *Tokyo Pop* (1988), *The Barbarian and the Geisha* (1958), and clips from several others.

Two reactions generally accompany any suggestion to use feature films during class time, and this list in particular. First we hear such films offer only “inaccurate” and stereotypically embarrassing representations. The second objection is that such films are too time-consuming for class use. To address the first complaint, we can develop a re-

packaging strategy focused on teaching “through” films, that is, teaching scheduled course content as part of commentary and analysis of a popular film. Regarding time constraints, such films do not need to be screened in their entirety; carefully selected segments can do very well. Students can be required to view rented videotapes—preferably in small groups—and answer prepared questions as homework.

On the positive side, I know that students are ready (even eager) to learn from and react to such materials. Taking a cultural product out of the assumed context of popular entertainment and repositioning it as a learning opportunity—which it might already be doing in implicit ways—is generally appreciated and remembered by students. Acknowledging that feature films serve



unwittingly as sources of social and cultural information helps us better understand the information our students bring to the classroom. I try to incorporate the following principles when adopting this perspective:

Students must be encouraged to ask the following questions: (a) “What did the producers of this film want you to think?” (b) “How is this sense of credibility created and enhanced?” And (c) “What were the economic/political/social circumstances that contributed to a production studio’s prediction that this film’s

story line would be popular and thus profitable?”

The challenge is to treat feature films as cultural products and, in turn, as pictorial cultural documents, as suggested by Weakland (1975, 1971), and Drummond (1996) among others. As instructors, we need to foster a critical approach that sees feature films not as “natural,” transparent views, but as culturally constructed views containing intentional and usually well-timed statements.

Film producers frequently speak of the “pro-

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BAI XIAOTIAN/COURTESY OF SONY PICTURES

In *Not One Less*, Wei Minzhi (right) plays herself, a 13-year-old put in charge of a class of thirty children. Tian Zhenda (left) plays Mayor Tian. See review, page 6.

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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?

In conjunction with the Asian American Studies Committee, AEMS co-sponsored its first on-campus speaker last spring. Regge Life, producer and director of numerous films and television shows, is widely known for his documentaries *Doubles: America and Japan's Intercultural Children*; *Struggle and Success: The African American Experience in Japan* and *After America, After Japan*. These films have aired on PBS nationwide, as well as in Japan.

While here, Mr. Life screened *Doubles* and *Struggle and Success*. He then gave his audience more background on the making of each film and answered questions. Mr. Life generously shared his time and his thoughts with all of us. We thank him for coming and hope that he will visit us again soon.

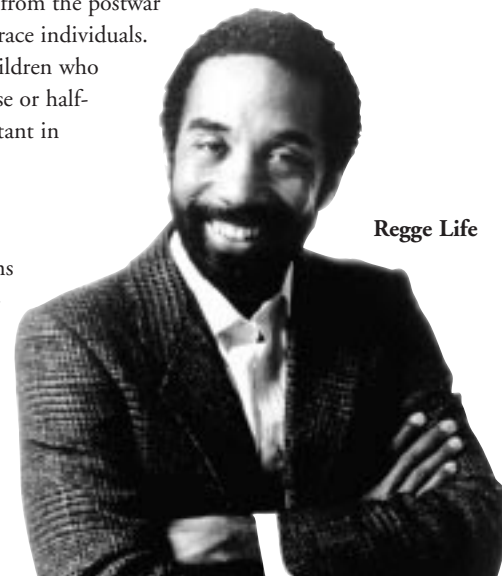
Doubles: America and Japan's Intercultural Children (1995, 85 minutes)

Doubles traces the lives of several now-adult children from the postwar era who struggled to find their place in society as mixed-race individuals. "Doubles" is a term adopted by parents of mixed-race children who believe that the usage of "half" in relation to half-Japanese or half-American does not reflect both cultures as equally important in shaping their identity.

Struggle and Success: The African American Experience in Japan (1993, 85 minutes)

Through a series of interviews with African-Americans living and working in Japan, the issues of race and ethnicity in Japan are presented. The experiences of African-Americans living and working in Japan are examined. Issues of racism and Japanese attitudes are addressed. ♦

Doubles and *Struggle and Success* are available from Film Library. Price is \$175 each. More about Regge and his films can be found at <http://www.globalfilmnetwork.net>.



Regge Life

Hollywood

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duction values" that give a particular look to a film. We should be able to discern the social and cultural values that surround, and partially determine, film contents and particular points of view. Feature films do not spring from cultural vacuums. Both macro- and micro-contextual factors can shed considerable light on a specific film's existence and degree of popularity. On the macro-contextual level, instructors should be able to address certain historical and political circumstances surrounding a particular film. On the micro-contextual level, students can be asked to review published articles about studios and production personnel. In the case of *Mr. Baseball*, reference can be made to "Japanese Buy Studio, and Coaching Starts" (Weisman 1992) or "Lessons on Baseball (And Life) in Japan" (Maslin 1992) to learn more about relationships between studio and international politics. Students may also benefit from reading Robert Whiting's popular and accessible text, *You Gotta Have Wa* (1989) or Whiting's articles (1986, 1979).

Instructors should always take advantage of the stop/pause features of VCR technology to introduce questions related to the readings, and to

allow for discussions. Since our choice of films is not arbitrary, relevant issues should never be a problem. Do not expect students to see and interpret the films the ways you intend. You may be competing with strong forces that enhance a less useful interpretation of the film text. In fact, the topic of "alternative readings," including dominant, referential, critical, negotiated, etc., is quite popular. This is always the case when students come to the class with varying degrees of familiarity with Japan—from never having been to Japan, to having traveled there briefly or studied there on a short-term basis, to having been brought up and gone to school there. Conflicting assessments can create lively class discussions. But generally I find students want to learn what I see in the film for comparison or addition to what they feel they already know.

To give just one example, I am particularly fond of *Mr. Baseball* for how it illustrates the notion of "culture broker." Most feature films with an intercultural story line include one or more characters responsible for translating features of one culture to another, including audience members. This film shows us three examples of the important culture broker role:

■ American baseball players always need a Japanese translator. Here, Yoji is the person hired by the team to avert trouble by smoothing out

Through the Consul's Eye

>> Directed by Jorge Amat. 1999. 50 minutes.

This video, originally produced for French television as *L'œil du Consul*, uses an exciting trove of rare early photography of China. The subject is Auguste François (1855–1935), a French diplomat who served originally in French Indochina and then in China between 1886 and 1906.

François left behind an exceptional collection of still and movie photography that recorded his life in both Vietnam and China. The video uses François' movie and still photography interspersed with other early archival film. Contemporary maps, including field drawings made by François, are used effectively. Director Jorge Amat and screenwriter Gerard Guicheteau take a biographical approach drawing on François' diaries and letters in addition to his photography to depict him as a critic of French imperialism. In this version released in the United States, the narrative is in well-spoken English, but Chinese place names are rendered in awkward pronunciations.

The narrative portrays François as a well-educated bourgeois Frenchman sensitive to Chinese culture, whose adventurous nature made him into an intrepid amateur photographer-ethnologist. He is said to have possessed “an ironic and deeply generous eye” that separated him from ordinary French colonial officials and settlers. This favorable characterization is pushed too far when François is depicted as a man yoked unwillingly to French imperialism, for the video clearly shows François engaged in intelligence work throughout his career in Vietnam and China. His consular postings in China were a direct outcome of French efforts to expand influence into southwestern China following the Sino-French War of 1884–85. Whatever his misgivings about French policy, Auguste François was undeniably an agent of French imperialism. The filmmakers quote François' strong words against Paul Doumer, the famous rationalizing administrator in French Indochina and later President of the French Republic, but grumbling against a colonial superior do not an anti-imperialist make.

Indeed the narrative quotes François making observations combining an appreciation with familiar imperialist disdain for the Chinese. The many photographs of François himself—sometimes times with great flaring mustachios in a full dress uniform and other times with a huge beard under a pith helmet—show him as a man quite comfortable in his role as a representative of French imperialism.

The video begins with a short segment of film and narrative depicting François' first decade of



COURTESY OF FIRST RUN/ICARUS FILMS

service in French Indochina and then shifts to his first diplomatic post in China at Longzhou, here transliterated into French as “Long Tcheou.” Longzhou was the first significant Qing administrative seat in Guangxi province and lies on the north bank of the Zuo River whose tributaries extend into Tonkin, and was thus placed along the natural lines of communication between Vietnam and China. François' cameras recorded street scenes such as official processions, funerals, temple gatherings, opera performances, and markets, as well as events at the consulate, including a reception, lion dancing, and pig butchering.

In 1896 François was posted to the much larger and more important city of Yunnanfu (present-day Kunming), the Qing administrative center of Yunnan province and target of French expansionist aims. About ten minutes of the video focus on François' adventures during the Boxer Uprising. Yunnanfu was far removed from the

main action of the Uprising, which took place in Beijing and Tianjin in 1900, but the local population around Yunnanfu attacked both Chinese Christians and French Catholic missions in the area. In these menacing circumstances, the French Foreign Minister sought Qing assistance for an overland march to extract the Frenchmen at Yunnanfu. François, together with two dozen other foreigners and their Vietnamese staff, along with horses and sedan chairs and accompanied by an escort of more than three hundred Qing troops, marched southward from Yunnanfu beginning on June 24, 1900, through the rough countryside to the border pass into Tonkin. After reaching Hanoi, François wrote an angry letter to the French Foreign Office detailing his belief that Doumer had hoped all along that François' party would be slaughtered, as happened elsewhere that year to foreigners under Qing military escort.

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Learning One's Sums: *Not One Less*

>> Directed by Zhang Yimou. 1999. 106 minutes.

Not *One Less* is a touching film that calls for some reflection in order to appreciate the nature and plight of a fair number of school children in China's countryside today. For ¥50 (\$US6) thirteen-year-old Wei Minzhi is hired to keep thirty-odd kids in school for a month while the old village teacher takes leave to visit his ailing mother. Wei herself has just finished grade school and has no idea how to teach. All her thoughts are on getting paid, and when she suspects that she might not be, she chases after the village head and old teacher demanding payment. The two promise to pay her after thirty days, and if no more children drop out of school, Wei will get an extra ten yuan bonus. It is this added "bonus"

**Wei, the village head,
the old school master,
the head of the TV station,
the obtuse gate guard
in the city, and the
village kids all more
or less play the roles
they have in real life.**

the door. She learns from the class monitor, four years her junior, to treasure the simple white chalk sticks—the instruments of education. Slowly, she begins to win respect. Having been schooled on what is expected of a teacher, Wei leads the class in tackling the matter of recovering the ten-year-old class imp, Zhang Huike, who has just dropped out of school. Zhang goes to the city to make some

sum that gives Wei focus. She will make sure that there will be "not one less."

Wei soon learns that her students pay no heed to a young girl who simply writes something on the blackboard and then sits outside guarding

money to help his widowed mother. This is when the math lessons begin for the students—and the audience—as Wei and her charges try to calculate how much money it will take to go the big city and bring him back. While the students get their figures right and manage to raise the cash, it turns out that their cost estimates are wrong. Wei calculates they have a surplus of ¥6 so she leads them to the village store where they share two cans of Coke—the new flavor of things. The next day they find out they are short over ¥40 for the costs of the bus tickets to the city.

Via determination, Wei makes it to the big city. Once there, her pertinacity wins out when, three days later, the local TV station broadcasts Wei's tearful plea for Zhang to come home. A kindly food stall proprietress sees the program and realizes that the street urchin she has been

continued on next page

Inexpensive Resources for Teaching about South Korea

In the past century, America has had extensive involvement with Korea. We fought a costly, bloody war on its soil, buttressed the South Korean regime for decades afterward, and still maintain a large military presence on the peninsula. According to the United States Census, there were 798,849 Korean-Americans living in this country in 1990, and that number is projected to increase substantially once the most recent count is tabulated. Despite all this, however, there is a dearth of multimedia resources focusing on Korea, especially when compared to countries like China, Japan, or even Vietnam. The ones that are available for under \$40 tend to be rather general, focusing on issues like geography or family life. But there are also a few quality videos analyzing historical and political developments that can be recommended to high school and college educators. Therefore this issue's column will be broken into two sections, one for resources aimed at introducing Korea to middle school students and younger, and the other, for more advanced classrooms, that discusses media focusing on South Korea's transformation into a modern society.

Bargain Buys!

Korea for Kids: Materials for Elementary and Middle School Students

The Asia Society, recognizing the lack of popularly available materials on Korea, has done a terrific job producing several documentaries appropriate for younger students. Its 1988 series *Discover Korea* is composed of three videos, each accompanied by a teacher's guide and poster and each focusing on a different aspect of Korean society: *Family and Home*, *School and Community*, and *Geography and Industry*. All three are similar in format, focusing on the experiences of one or two children in order to make broader inferences about the entire society. The entire series is aimed at students between fourth and ninth grade.

The first video, *Family and Home* could be retitled *Leave it To Beaver—Korean Style*, because the family it covers seem to have come straight out of 1950s American television. This video deals with numerous Korean traditions and contains some very entertaining moments (most involving the main character's teeny-bopper older sister), but I fear that students will come away from this video feeling that all Korean families are as beautiful and scripted as the one portrayed. This film should be tempered with other documentaries and readings. For a more realistic view of Korean families, check

out *Families of South Korea*, part of the *Families of the World* series for elementary school students I have recommended in previous issues.

The Asia Society next produced *School and Community*, an endearing documentary focusing on a schoolgirl, her male friend, and her teenage brother (all of whom are more realistic than the *Family and Home* characters). We follow all three of them as they go to school, run errands, attend various activities, such as tae kwon do and violin lessons, and play outside. Unlike the other videos in the series, this documentary takes place entirely in an urban center. *Geography and Industry*, the final film in the series, follows a young boy as he travels around South Korea, visiting his uncle in the southwest countryside and traveling on a bus to the northeast mountains. Along the way, he meets a young girl from a tourist town called Yosu in the southernmost part of the peninsula and tells her about the industrial town of Ulsan in southeast Korea where he lives.

All three of these videos are only 15 minutes each, perhaps too brief for students to absorb very much information about Korea. The teacher's manuals, each over forty pages, somewhat correct for that shortcoming by providing detailed background information about each subject, recommended readings, an annotated script with explanations, supplementary essays, and even a few fun activities for the classroom. Of the three included posters, I am partial to *Geography and Industry's* two-sided poster about the Korean Tiger, featuring different types of tigers and legends in which they appear.

Several years after releasing the *Discover Korea* series, The Asia Society produced *Tune in Korea: Geography and Society*, an information-packed hour-long video designed to inform middle school students everything they need to know about Korea. This video features a group of young American high school students who are supposedly each producing a segment about different aspects of Korean society. The segments, which

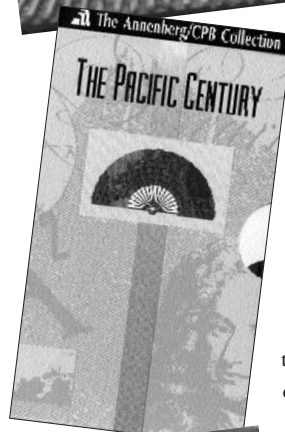
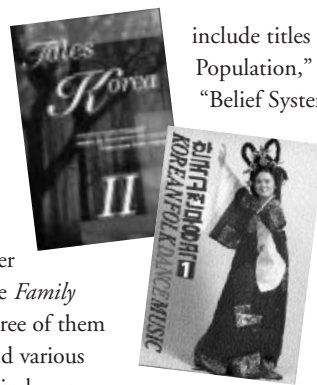
include titles such as "Resources and Population," "History," "Language," and "Belief Systems," are in no way amateur, however. Teachers will find the section recap, a list of all the major ideas in each lesson, particularly useful. This video is more informative and up-to-date than the *Discover Korea* series, but it is less personal and does not come with a teacher's guide. Although I was unable to

find any inexpensive videotapes focusing on Korean arts, two audiocassettes, *Korean Folk Dance Music*, featuring traditional music, and *Tales of Korea*, a collection of stories accompanied by Korean instruments, both serve as nice auditory introductions to performing art forms.

Beneath the Surface: A More Sophisticated Look at the Land of the Morning Calm

The twentieth century was a period of great upheaval for Koreans. They have endured invasion by the Japanese and later the Cold War forces, followed by a brutal and lengthy civil war that continues to divide them. More recently, North Korea has been afflicted with terrible famines and South Korea still faces political instability caused by dictatorial leaders and frustrated students. On the other hand, for the first time in its history, South Korea is a major world player and, despite recent downturns, continues to wield significant economic and political clout. *The Pacific Century*, a series produced in the early 1990s, does an excellent job discussing the successes and conflicts present in modern Korean society. *Big Business and the Ghost of Confucius*, the seventh video in the series, includes about twenty minutes of discussion about how Confucianism continues to influence Korea, with both positive and negative repercussions. The eighth video, *The Fight for Democracy*, describes another side of South Korea, including images of students and workers rioting in the street for more democratic rights and women fighting for social reforms. This hour-long video questions whether average Koreans have fully reaped the benefits of the "economic miracle."

Going back in time, The History Channel has produced an acceptable



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Asia for Kids, P.O. Box 9096, Cincinnati, OH 45209. Tel: 513-563-3100 or 800-765-5885. Fax: 513-563-3105. E-mail: info@afk.com. Web site: <http://www.afk.com>.

Asia Society, 725 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10021. Tel: 800-ASK-ASIA or 212-288-6400. Fax: 888-FAX-ASIA or 212-517-8315.

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Columbia University Press, 61 W. 62nd Street, New York, NY 10023. Tel: 800-944-8648. Fax: 800-944-1844. Web site: <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/cup>.

Filmakers Library, 124 East 40th Street, New York, NY 10016. Tel: 212-808-4980. Fax: 212-808-4983. E-Mail: info@filmmakers.com. Web site: <http://www.filmmakers.com>.

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