

# Chinese, Japanese, and Thai Families in Feature Films

By Merle Wallace

This spring I am teaching an undergraduate anthropology seminar about families in Asia. I choose the focus on families to help students learn about culture through comparing their own families, everyday lives and values with families, experiences and values in Asia. I include Asian-produced, high-quality feature films with English subtitles to tell engaging and authentic stories about Chinese, Japanese and Thai families.

The course is an upper-level seminar of ten to twelve students and is structured to include a discussion of texts for an hour on Tuesdays and a film followed by an hour-long discussion on Thursdays. I structure this course around the films for several reasons. First, and most importantly, Asia is unknown or little-known to most of my students, so they need films, in addition to texts and discussions, to provide them with an understanding of cultural contexts, family lives and the structures and flavors of interpersonal relationships. Secondly, in an anthropology course in which we study culture, feature films by native filmmakers, directors and actors provide us with rich cultural data that we can analyze and compare with the ethnographic and theoretical accounts in print and Web-based texts. Third, youth culture looms much larger for many students than school learning. Since feature films are considered to be entertainment, they can help to bridge the great divide between leisure and learning in students' experiences.

## PREPARING STUDENTS TO VIEW FILMS

In addition to solving instructional problems, showing films in class may also create them. If students are not prepared to discuss films in fine-grained, thoughtful ways, discussions easily degenerate into simple likes and dislikes. To avoid this pitfall, it is advisable to provide students with a primer on film-viewing techniques related to course goals and then to continually model and encourage their use of these techniques.

I begin by providing information in the course syllabus. I explain my reasons for including films as course texts and cultural data, and also provide broad guidelines about the ways in which we will discuss the films. I let students know that they will each be responsible for facilitating the discussion following one of the films. I advise the discussion leader to view the film in advance and prepare a handout of information for class members. This should include the film title, director and writer, running time and a list of the cast of characters and their roles in the story. I also say that it will be useful for the leader to bring a list of cultural themes and notes about their relation to the texts to guide our discussion. I characterize the discussion leader as having both an agenda for the discussion and openness to other points of view. I have found that asking students to share responsibility for leadership encourages them to learn at a deeper level than if they were simply participating. I have also found that it is important for me to provide models of what I am asking them to do. I facilitate the first few film discussions and nudge later ones that are going astray.

In this anthropology course, we focus on culture. Since students have varying levels of knowledge, and the concept of culture is also variable, it is important to discuss what culture can be and how we will use the construct to guide our reading and film viewing. We begin by discussing what students know about culture. They usually provide a generic definition that includes lifestyle, objects, symbols and rituals. To expand their thinking, I provide several more definitions of culture that focus on meaning and activity. I include Geertz's (1973)<sup>1</sup> notion of culture as shared "webs of significance," Hall's (1959)<sup>2</sup> notion that culture is a tacit theory of the world, and Goodenough's (1957)<sup>3</sup> theory that culture is whatever it is one has to know to be acceptable to others. I suggest to students that we combine these theories through consideration of the thematic quality of culture. Students are familiar with stories and their themes, the common threads that reveal systems and order in characters, beliefs, actions and relationships.

As was noticed by Opler (1946),<sup>4</sup> culture may also be understood by exploring its themes. Cultural themes are shared. They permeate knowledge, action and relationships. They include conscious and tacit understandings and representations of how the world does, can or should work. Themes are also embedded and expressed in activities and their organization and enactment through interpersonal relationships. To encourage a fine-grained, nuanced approach, we also discuss the likelihood that there are exceptions to cultural themes. For clarification and later contrast we analyze the American cultural theme of individualism. Students are quick to include beliefs about individual rights and freedoms, the individual's responsibility for his or her own actions and quest for happiness, the number of people who live alone, who choose their professions and marriage partners, who make prenuptial agreements and arrange for childcare. Students also easily see that in addition to being individualists, some Americans are also patriotic, play team sports and are members of churches, fraternities and other clubs.

I'll use the balance of this limited space to discuss three of the films and a few of the texts that guide our studies of the cultural themes that structure and are expressed by Chinese, Japanese and Thai families. Please refer to the endnotes for a list of all of the films we view in the course.<sup>5</sup> Please also see the course Web site for a syllabus and a complete print and Internet reading list.<sup>6</sup>

## RAISE THE RED LANTERN

This semester, *Raise the Red Lantern* is the first film we watch. Students will have read the first four chapters of Wolf's book, *Women and the Family in Northern Taiwan* (1972),<sup>7</sup> and Gallagher's (2001) article, "Women and Gender."<sup>8</sup> The cultural themes for our first discussion, the Chinese patriarchal ideal and Wolf's notion of the uterine family,<sup>9</sup> are historically rooted and of the highest order. We come to

use them to contextualize much of our study of China. *Raise the Red Lantern* is a film about a wealthy household in 1920 China that takes on a fourth wife. The story provides us with opportunities to analyze the women's roles in this family and their relationships with one another and their common husband/master in terms of these cultural themes. We consider conversations (as presented in the English subtitles), posture, activities and relationships as well as the setting and context as they are artistically presented by director, Zhang Yimou. Before we watch the film I share a handout of basic information (writer, director, characters and their roles) with students.

The cultural themes of the patriarchal and uterine family provide structure and also encourage students to analyze what interests them. One student, for example, raises the issue of the patriarchal ideal of harmonious relationships among the four wives as expressed by the master and the competitive reality experienced by the wives as they try to have sons to justify their existence and gain status. Another student says that we can compare this family to those in the village Wolf describes. So we discuss similarities of patriarchal and uterine organization and differences in social class, historical period and geography. What really struck another student was the limited communication between the master and his wives, almost as if a personal relationship were not important. Students resonated to this film because, as one woman said,

"Can you believe that Songlian (the fourth wife) is only 20 years old? She is our age!"



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## SHALL WE DANCE?

In our studies of Japanese families we read Bumiller's<sup>10</sup> book, *The Secrets of Mariko* (1995), an engaging narrative about a year in the life of a Japanese housewife and her family. In order to provide historical and cultural context, we also read the first three chapters of Hendry's (1995)<sup>11</sup> book on the Japanese family. At the end of the unit on Japanese families, we watch *Shall We Dance?*, a film about a middle-aged salaryman who

comes alive through secretly attending ballroom dancing lessons. By the time we watch this film, we will have discussed gender roles and everyday activities, duties and relationships in Japanese families. The texts and the other films, *Maborosi*, *Makiko's New World*, and *The Japanese Version* (the latter two documentaries) have provided us with numerous examples of the woman as household manager, the "absentee" salaryman, and the child as serious student. We have seen and read about conformity, sex-role stereotypes, and the character of interpersonal relationships and duties in families. We have also seen, read about and discussed exceptions to these. The part of the discussion that follows *Shall We Dance?*, about the relationship and kinds of commu-

nications between a man, woman and their daughter, is one of the finest-grained conversations we have about culture, interpersonal relationships and families. Students can see that Mr. Sugiyama starts his dancing lessons because of the beautiful instructor whom he sees from the train, but wonder why he doesn't talk to his wife about his dancing once he is allured by the dancer. In just this small part of our discussion, we are able to invoke examples of masculinity and male rights and husband-wife roles, duties and interpersonal relationships—the most important Japanese cultural themes.

"Mrs. Sugiyama has duties, do you?" I ask, after watching this film and reading students' papers on gender roles in Japanese families. They are ready for the question because it is one that I have posed for many characters in the Chinese films. Most of my students feel that they are currently responsible for their studies and that as they "grow up" will also be responsible, in various ways, for children, husbands or wives. They ponder their responsibilities toward their parents every time the issue of family duty arises. Including students' emotions and attending to their interests helps them to learn about others in intimate and meaningful ways.

## SUNSET AT CHAOPRAYA

I searched widely and found only two suitable feature films about Thai families—*Sunset at Chaopraya* and *Nang Nak*. *Nang Nak* is an interesting film about a woman's ghost who continues to live with her husband, whom she has under a spell. While the film is quite suitable for classroom use, it has more to say about Thai notions of ghosts than of families. *Sunset at Chaopraya* is a romance set in Bangkok during the Japanese occupation. The story of star-crossed lovers whose family and patriotic duties pull them apart and smash them together draws viewers in, leaving many of us crying at the end. The duties that the Thai woman and Japanese man feel toward their families and their countries are complex, dynamic and context-specific. For the students, it is a tragedy, and they spend quite a bit of time trying to decide when the woman falls in love with the man. They also come to be willing to entertain the roles that cultural themes of family harmony, respect toward elders, and age and gender hierarchies play in love and the family in the film, in Potter's (1977) book,<sup>12</sup> and in their own families. It is important that we are touched by the film and cry, but you certainly wouldn't want to do this in class every week. Like the other films we watch in the course, *Sunset* is a force in our learning. The film evokes our emotions, allows for comparison with our own experiences, and helps us to bring texts and cultural themes to life.



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Source: Grammy Film Co.

## CONCLUSION

For students with limited exposure to Asia, films provide the best, lowest-cost alternative to field trips for learning about culture. Providing introductory information about how students should analyze films and synthesize them with texts helps to ensure that the films will have more than entertainment value. Asking students to take leadership roles in film discussions also encourages them to be more engaged with course topics and materials and to learn more about the films and their value as texts, in this case as cultural texts. Structuring a course around a set of films reinforces the message that films are an important source of information that has great potential to entertain *and* to facilitate learning.

The blending of narrative and theoretical texts in this course confirms my experience that while it is impossible to teach anthropology entirely with narratives because they lack theoretical structure, it is also impossible to teach it without them because they provide rich representations of culture. In this course on families in Asia, the films help students to compare the Chinese, Japanese and Thai cultures by providing them with portrayals of everyday life and the values, beliefs and ideals that underlie activities and relationships. The structuring of our discussions around cultural themes leads students to come to understand that families are variable for individual and circumstantial reasons, but the greatest variability comes from their particular cultural contexts. In the end, most students understand that cultural studies of the family are facilitated with analysis of the ideology, activities and relationships associated with gender roles, rights and duties of members, and the broader cultural and historical contexts. Asking students to explore their own roles and duties in their families and to consider relevant cultural themes helps them, via the comparative process, to understand culture and family more intimately. Focusing on cultural themes also helps students to avoid value judgments, the most dangerous pitfall of the comparative method in culture studies. Just one or two examples of transposing cultural themes helps students to appreciate the complexities of meaning and action systems as well as the endurance and changeability of culture.

There are many more subtitled feature films about Chinese and Japanese families that are available at reasonable cost. There are, unfortunately, very few Thai films with English subtitles. Good documentaries about Thailand are also hard to find. I chose the films listed in the endnotes based on availability, a focus on families and a lack of explicit sex and vulgar language. With the following few caveats, I would recommend all of the films for college and high school students. With the exception of *Eat Drink Man Woman*, a Taiwanese film, the Chinese films make political statements about oppression and contain much hardship and some violence. Students must understand that *Raise the Red Lantern*, *To Live*, *Women from the Lake of Scented Souls*, and *Red Sorghum* make powerful political statements about Chinese oppression. *The Japanese Version*, a documentary about Japan's adaptations of Western goods and ideas, has the potential to trivialize Japan if viewed without other readings or films about Japan. *The Story of Puttinan*, a documentary which focuses on the oppression of children in Bangkok factories, includes several graphic scenes of underfed, drugged children plugging away at repetitive tasks. While there is a serious child labor problem in Thailand, this should not be a student's only exposure to the country. For all of these films it is, I think, important to include contextual information and other perspectives so that students don't develop one-sided views of China, Japan or Thailand.

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## NOTES

1. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973).
2. Edward Hall, *The Silent Language* (New York: Doubleday, 1959).
3. Ward Goodenough, "Cultural Anthropology and Linguistics," in P. L. Garvin (Ed.) *Report of the Seventh Annual Roundtable Meeting on Linguistics and Language Study* (Monograph Series on Languages and Linguistics, No. 9, pp.167-73. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1957).
4. M. E. Opler, "Themes as Dynamic Forces in Culture," *The American Journal of Sociology*, 51 (43-4), 1946, pp.198-206.
5. Chinese films: *Raise the Red Lantern*, *To Live*, *Eat Drink Man Woman*, *Women from the Lake of Scented Souls*, and *Red Sorghum*. Japanese films: *Makiko's New World*, *Maborosi*, *The Japanese Version*, and *Shall We Dance?* Thai films: *Sunset at Chaopraya*, *The Story of Puttinan*, *Walking with Buddha*, and *Nang Nak*. Please consult filmography for film references.
6. The course Web site address is <http://itw.sew.nee.edu/anthro340>.
7. Margery Wolf, *Women and the Family in Northern Taiwan* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1972).
8. Mary Gallagher, "Women and Gender," in H. Giskin and B. Walsh (Eds.) *An Introduction to Chinese Culture through the Family* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2001), pp. 89-105.
9. Wolf's (1972) notion of the uterine family is an attempt to describe an additional family structure that has coexisted within Chinese patriarchal family structures. Historically in China women move and marry into a man's family and lineage. The sons of the union are members of the male lineage. As their mothers before them, daughters marry out of their birth families and into the families, households and lineages of their husbands. Based on years of ethnographic research in rural Taiwan, Wolf asserted that within this patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal family system, women also built uterine families in which they and their children were members. Women relied on their children for affection and closeness and also forged special relationships with their sons so that they would have attachments to family power.
10. Elisabeth Bumiller, *The Secrets of Mariko: A Year in the Life of a Japanese Woman and Her Family* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).
11. Joy Hendry, *Understanding Japanese Society* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
12. Sulamith Heins Potter, *Family Life in a Northern Thai Village: A Study in the Structural Significance of Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).

## FILMOGRAPHY

### CHINESE FILMS

*Raise the Red Lantern*  
Directed by Zhang Yimou  
1991. 125 Minutes. VHS. Mandarin with English subtitles.  
Facets Video  
1517 West Fullerton Avenue  
Chicago, IL 60614  
800-331-6197  
<http://www.facets.org>

*To Live*  
Directed by Zhang Yimou  
1994. 132 Minutes. VHS. Mandarin with English subtitles.  
Cheng & Tsui Company  
25 West Street  
Boston, MA 02111-1213  
800-554-1963  
<http://www.cheng-tsui.com>

*Eat, Drink, Man, Woman*  
Directed by Ang Lee  
1994. 104 Minutes. VHS.  
Cheng & Tsui Company  
25 West Street  
Boston, MA 02111-1213  
800-554-1963  
<http://www.cheng-tsui.com>

*Women from the Lake of Scented Souls*  
Directed by Xie Fei  
1993. 106 Minutes. Color. VHS.  
Facets Video  
1517 West Fullerton Avenue  
Chicago, IL 60614  
800-331-6197  
<http://www.facets.org>

*Red Sorghum*  
Directed by Zhang Yimou  
1987. 91 Minutes. VHS.  
Facets Video  
1517 West Fullerton Avenue  
Chicago, IL 60614  
800-331-6197  
<http://www.facets.org>

### JAPANESE FILMS

*Makiko's New World*  
1999. 57 Minutes. VHS.  
Facets Video  
1517 West Fullerton Avenue  
Chicago, IL 60614  
800-331-6197  
<http://www.facets.org>

*Maborosi*  
Directed by Kore-eda Hirokazu  
1995. 110 Minutes. VHS.  
Facets Video  
1517 West Fullerton Avenue  
Chicago, IL 60614  
800-331-6197  
<http://facets.org>

*The Japanese Version*  
Directed by Louis Alvarez and Andrew Kolker  
1991. 56 Minutes. VHS.  
The Center for New American Media  
CNAM Film Library  
22-D Hollywood Ave.  
Hohokus, NY 07423  
800-343-5540  
<http://www.cnam.com>

*Shall We Dance?*  
Directed by Masayuki Suo  
118 Minutes. VHS. Japanese with English subtitles  
Facets Video  
1517 West Fullerton Avenue  
Chicago, IL 60614  
800-331-6197  
<http://www.facets.org>

### THAI FILMS

*Sunset at Chaopraya*  
Directed by Euthana Mukdasanit  
1996. 135 Minutes. VHS. Thai and Japanese with English subtitles  
Facets Video  
1517 West Fullerton Avenue  
Chicago, IL 60614  
800-331-6197  
<http://www.facets.org>

*The Story of Puttinan*  
Directed by Robbie Hart and Luc Côté  
1994. Color. 26 Minutes. VHS.  
Bullfrog Films  
P.O. Box 149  
Oley, PA 19547  
800-543-3764  
<http://www.bullfrogfilms.com>

*Walking with the Buddha*  
Directed by Clemons Kuby  
1991. 92 Minutes. VHS.  
Facets Video  
1517 West Fullerton Avenue  
Chicago, IL 60614  
800-331-6197  
<http://www.facets.org>

*Nang Nak*  
Directed by Nonzee Nimibutr  
1999. 101 Minutes. DVD  
<http://www.amazon.com>

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