

Among the few videos concerning Chinese religions is this 1993 German production. But rather than illustrate Chinese Buddhism, it provides a muddled and biased depiction of events in the life of one thirteen-year-old girl, and attempts, unsuccessfully, to convince us that such girls enter convents only when driven to do so by intolerable social oppression.

As the video opens in the girl's Sichuan village, the narrator asserts that she was destined to marry "a coarse man, to whom she would be less than a piece of property, a servant." Are the men in this village truly "coarse"? How can anything be "less than property"? Do we meet other women in the village who are treated as "property"? The filmmakers do not care; they simply presume that Chinese women must be oppressed in these ways.

Since Zhaoxing is a schoolgirl, the filmmakers interview her classmates, who profess hopes of rewarding futures in the prosperous Chinese economy. But if they have social and economic freedom, why is Zhaoxing alone destined to become "less than property"? The filmmakers do not interview Zhaoxing—or her family, teachers, or neighbors—to provide data useful for understanding her life. The narrator explains her decision to enter the convent as showing "extraordinary independence of thinking." But is not her act a very traditional one in Chinese society, for boys and girls alike? How, precisely, does it show more "independ-

## Choice for a Chinese Woman

### *Enlightenment in a Buddhist Convent*

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1993. 35 MINUTES

dence of thinking" than her classmates' decision to pursue their education to achieve social and economic success in a rapidly changing China?

The filmmakers impose their own ideology upon this girl's life: she enters the convent to become an "escapee from the village . . . There is no escape, except to the convent." But why do none of the other girls in her village feel any need for such "escape"? Why do girls or boys, Chinese or otherwise, really enter monasteries? The filmmakers really do not care about monasticism in general, or about the social and religious realities of China, past or present.<sup>1</sup>

In the temple, we are told that the girl's father, heretofore unmentioned, is not allowed into her room. What is he doing at the convent? Has he come to drag her back to a life of oppression? No. Could it be that he is a good and caring man, who respects his daughter's religious pursuits, and has come to show his love and support for her?

Next, the girl writes Chinese characters, and the narrator translates: "When you achieve enlightenment, you will always be successful." The writing actually reads "With lucky stars shining on high, all your affairs will be as you like." The words involve astrology, not Buddhism. Nowhere in the film are Buddhist ideas or practices meaningfully explained at all, and the filmmakers clearly have no real intention of explaining them.

The narrator asserts: "Clearly the subject of marriage . . . is something with which [Zhaoxing] has not totally come to terms." But should her decision to enter a convent really be explained in such terms? If such girls ever enter convents because of sincere religious motivations, why should we understand this act as an "escape" from "oppression"? The filmmakers ignore many such legitimate questions—and omit or distort pertinent facts—to convince the viewer of certain conclusions. Is

this girl's ambivalence about eventual marriage really so odd for someone her age? And if she did feel threatened by the prospect of marriage, why did she not just decide to get a job in the city, like her classmates? And do boys enter monasteries because of ambivalence about marriage? Is there anything about Zhaoxing's life that is truly gender-specific?

At the end, the narrator comments: "We expected this story to be tragic." Why? Clearly, the filmmakers just went to China to illustrate what they presumed about women's oppression in China. When the facts did not mesh with their presumptions, the filmmakers ignored them and produced the story that they wanted to produce. Rather than a case study of religion in China today, this video is a heavy-handed example of cultural imperialism. ■

#### NOTE

1. For comparison, see my article, "Huang Ling-wei: A Taoist Priestess in T'ang China," *Journal of Chinese Religions* 19 (1991), 47–73, and my entry on Daoism in *Encyclopedia of Women and World Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1999).

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the woman, but to reach into the chest cavity of the drunken brute to tear out his heart, an action accompanied by intensifying sound effects. Though partially obscured by shadow, there's no confusion over exactly what unsavory brutality occurs to the woman and then to the rapist. Hwang holds up and admires the pulsing heart he's seized.

In addition, as mentioned above and as shown in an explanatory flashback, Hwang beheads Jung-mun, after which Princess Mi-dan cradles the severed head. Similarly, in one dream, Su-hyun's arm is sliced off, and late in the film, Hwang slashes two doctors' faces and throats and, shortly thereafter, unmercifully attacks Su-hyun. In fairness, *The Ginkgo Bed*'s gore and bloodshed is no worse than most, and is even more restrained than some contemporary horror films. Nevertheless, the repetitive violence and its severity must give teachers of any grades below high school serious reservations. Even upper-level instructors should watch and carefully prepare for *The Ginkgo Bed* before showing it to any class.

Though Hwang's unmitigated cruelty and savagery, as he struggles for dominance, are consistent with contemporary standards, the ubiquitous violence all but eclipses the more productive cultural and historical material. Teachers should note the choice of ginkgos (also spelled ginkgo) known as trees of love because they cross pollinate, male to female, to produce edible nuts. Their leaves yield some medicinal benefits. Lovely

trees, ginkgos line boulevards, populate parks and Buddhist temple grounds, and grow as tall as 60 meters.

Three years in production, *The Ginkgo Bed* cost a reported \$3.5 million, a comparatively large Korean budget, amply on display in the beautiful cinematography, atmospheric lighting, and lovely, opening animation. Shot entirely on location in South Korea (copyright 1996), the film won the 1996 Grand Bell Award for Jacky Kang as Best New Director of the Year and also features award winning actors. The film runs 88 minutes, in Korean, with easily read English subtitles. ■

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