

EAST ASIA FOR UNDERGRADUATES

Balancing Regional Themes and Distinctive Cultures

By David W. Haines

In 2001, four years after returning to academic life as an anthropologist from a career spent largely in government, I returned to teaching about Asia. The last time I had done so was twenty years earlier. That previous course had been about mainland Southeast Asia, at the graduate level, and for a small group of students with some measure of Asian experience. My primary country emphasis had always been Vietnam, and I had generally placed that in a Southeast Asia context. However, I also had some background in Chinese history and had spent eight of my earlier years in Japan. Since my current department offered Southeast Asia courses that dealt only lightly with Vietnam, it made sense to develop an East Asia course that would include Vietnam. Although that may not be the usual regional categorization, it seemed clear to me on historical and cultural grounds that Vietnam could be approached at least as effectively from an East Asian perspective as from a Southeast Asian one.

The initial requirements of setting up this new undergraduate course on East Asian peoples and cultures determined much of its structure. Perhaps most important was my intent to convey both the common currents running through the region and the individuality of the different countries. I felt reasonably competent in doing this for Vietnam and Japan, and marginally so for China. The potential gap was Korea. Yet I was determined to find an equal place for Korea, and that became my own personal goal for the course.

The overall aim at regional commonalities and individual country uniqueness had implications. Most daunting was the practical requirement for the class to make adequate acquaintance with each of these four countries in roughly a three-week period each, in addition to developing a common framework for all of them. As I repeatedly reminded the students, the result tended to be an overemphasis on the homogeneity within each country. Although I could stress the importance of minorities, especially in China and Vietnam, there simply wasn't time to say much about them. There was also limited time to articulate each country's class structure—although such issues eventually began to emerge in class discussions.

One additional factor also strongly influenced the structure of the course. My original assumption had been that students signing up for the class would already have some experience with Asia. George Mason is, after all, a diverse, internationalized university that had recently launched an Asian Studies minor. However, the first day of class revealed a set of students with almost no Asian background. Indeed, most students were taking the course precisely to fill in a gap in their understanding about this region. To my previous goals, then, I had to add a very basic regional introduction. That returned me in many ways to the kind of area studies approach to which I was exposed some thirty years ago.

It would be tempting – and perhaps defensible in an anthropology class – to bypass history simply because there’s so much of it for East Asia, and its exact relevance to current events is not always clear. As something of a compromise, I decided, at the risk of crude simplification, to anchor the region’s history in seven key dates. I attempted to indicate how the events reflected in those dates swept through the region acquiring different implications in each country.

ESTABLISHING A REGIONAL FRAMEWORK

Although the need for a regional introduction was the least expected requirement, it was perhaps the easiest to meet. I limited myself to four general steps in developing the framework.

THE FIRST STEP WAS AN ABBREVIATED VERSION OF THE RIVERINE ARGUMENT about the rise of intensive agriculture and state societies.¹ That permitted an introduction to the way large social systems are built from a combination of kinship and territorial links in agricultural societies. It also enabled a discussion of why large political entities become viable in such societies (because of their agricultural surplus) and why they become necessary (because of the needs to develop irrigation infrastructure and to maintain peace in the paddy fields).

THE SECOND STEP IMPOSED THAT RIVERINE ARGUMENT onto the map of East Asia. With any decent topographical map one can illustrate the basic implications of the lower Yangtze and Yellow River plains in China, the Sichuan basin, Vietnam’s Red River and Mekong Deltas, and the generally smaller river systems and plains of Korea and Japan. The implications of temperature and elevation also permit an easy introduction to the limits of China as an agricultural and political system and its tendency to face north. It is also easy to sketch the defensibility of Japan across the Tsushima Strait, Korea’s original isolation but increasing entrapment between China and Japan, and both the original Vietnam situated in the Red River Delta and the later, more extended Vietnam that stretched southward along the coastal plains and into the Mekong Delta.

THE THIRD STEP WAS HISTORY. It would be tempting—and perhaps defensible in an anthropology class—to bypass history simply because there’s so much of it for East Asia, and its exact relevance to current events is not always clear. As something of a compromise, I decided, at the risk of crude simplification, to anchor the region’s history in seven key dates. I attempted to indicate how the events reflected in those dates swept through the region acquiring different implications in each country. The seven dates were: 221 B.C.E. for the Qin unification (although the implications of that weren’t really felt in Korea and Vietnam until the succeeding Han dynasty); 618 for the founding of the Tang (with a chance for discussion of the imperial model and the centrality of Buddhism); 1206 for the investiture of Genghis as Khan and the subsequent flow of his descendants through China to Vietnam, Korea, and Japan; 1368 for the beginning of the Ming (with a pause to consider Neo-Confucianism); 1839 for the Opium War as the first major salvo in the final stage of European colonial expansion; 1868 for the Meiji Restoration as the beginning of the turning of the tide toward autonomy against the West; and 1945 for the end of the Second World War and the forces unleashed in all four countries. For the individual countries other key dates were added: for example, the independence of Vietnam in 939 and Hideyoshi’s invasions of Korea in the 1590s. As a matter of pedagogical restraint, I kept such additional dates to an absolute minimum. This was not, after all, a history course. Rather, the purpose was to give some sense of the extent of East Asian history and to use these dates to anchor not only important events but particular aspects of society—including Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism.

THE FOURTH STEP WAS A DISCUSSION OF LANGUAGE. Since I have some facility with Vietnamese and some residual understanding of Japanese, I felt comfortable talking about those two languages. Since Chinese is structurally similar to Vietnamese and Korean to Japanese, I could thus at least provide some semblance of an overall discussion. I also took the very little time it takes to learn the Korean alphabet—it is a few hours very entertainingly spent because of the appealing logic and simplicity of Han’gul. With that basis, I could provide some contrasts in phonology (especially tones in Chinese and Vietnamese), morphology (for which I emphasized Japanese verb forms), and syntax. I also taught a few characters to indicate the ideographic (e.g., tree/woods/forest, person at tree resting) and phonetic variants to character formation. I even included sample sentences in Japanese and Vietnamese. (It was very interesting later on

to watch student faces as they concentrated to decipher Chinese characters, and Vietnamese and Japanese sentences written on the board during their first examination.) Only with that background in the languages themselves did I provide an introduction to the various—and sometimes competing—romanization systems for these languages.

I would make no great claims for these particular steps toward a regional framework except to note that they seemed to provide some structure for students, introduced some key issues shared by the four countries, and forced me to break down my own compartmentalization of East Asia. Setting up this framework also sent me back to my own shelves for books on China and Japan that I hadn't looked at for many years. For Vietnam, Keith Taylor's *Birth of Vietnam* (University of California Press, 1983) and Neil Jamieson's *Understanding Vietnam* (University of California Press, 1993) were essential, although Robert Templar's *Shadows and Wind* (Penguin, 1999) provides a very useful update on the 1990s. For Korea, about which I knew the least, I had the good fortune to be reading Bruce Cumming's *Korea's Place in the Sun* (Norton, 1997), which is not only informative but provides a very good evangelical feeling about devoting class time to Korea. But exercise some caution. Regional sensitivities run high, and attention to Korea may well be viewed as criticism of Japan. The recent interview with John Dower in *Education About Asia* (5:3, 2000) provides a reminder of American complicity in the cover-up of many war-related issues during the postwar occupation of Japan.

BOOKS, PAPERS, AND FILMS

Such attempts at a regional framework aside, the central problem of introducing four very distinctive countries remained. The lack of an equivalent set of anthropological work on the four countries seemed initially to compound the problem. This pushed me to be more flexible in my choice of books than I am for other courses. For an initial text, I chose *Preschool in Three Cultures* by Tobin, Wu, and Davidson (Yale University Press, 1989). This is a frequently used text in anthropology and in education. Since it contrasts China, Japan, and the United States, it serves to introduce the difficulties of comparison and to do so with a focus on an institution that reflects social relations among children, their parents, and the state as they articulate what kind of person should be produced for the next generation. The book is also very helpful on the methodological problems in deciding what is “representative” for cultures that are large and diverse.

Given that comparative start, the next requirement was finding an illustrative, if not fully representative, book for each country. For China, I chose anthropologist Gregory Ruf's *Cadres and Kin* (Stanford University Press, 1998). It was doubtless the most difficult book of the class for the students, but it does a rather good job of showing the effects of changes in twentieth-century China on a particular local area, tracing how that local area was affected by the Communist victory in 1949, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and the Deng era after Mao's death. That it does so in Sichuan is helpful in introducing the problems of establishing central government control over distant areas and what that lack of central government control does to the local economic infrastructure: over-taxation, collapse of irrigation systems, narrowing of markets.

For Vietnam I was stymied and, in perhaps the most important of the decisions I made for the course, chose fiction: Duong Thu Huong's *Novel Without A Name* (Penguin, 1996). This is a very good novel on literary grounds and gives a devastating, rich portrayal of the war and its effects on the combatants and their families. It also gives a sometimes jolting introduction to the vividness and sensuality of Vietnamese expression, and the enormous sentiment wound into family (especially mothers) and friends. It is acerbic about corruption and waste. In that sense, and because of the author's international status as a dissident, this is probably an appropriate class choice on political grounds. Students rather quickly came to realize the horrors of the war but also something unique about how the Vietnamese survived it, practically and spiritually.

For Japan, I returned to anthropology using Joy Hendry's *An Anthropologist in Japan* (Routledge, 1999). The book is from a series on anthropological methods stressing the values of “reflexive” approaches, but in Hendry's hands that attention to reflexivity is appropriately casual. Her discussion of life in a Japanese neighborhood rings true and ably conveys issues of gender, family, class, and locality. Students weren't always fond of the book and had some questions about her approach. This may reflect a distinctly British and understated quality to her prose. Students did, however, get a very good sense of Japanese culture. As a result, the discussions of Japan were probably better rounded than for the other countries. They were probably also the most conventional.

Finally, for Korea I used Helie Lee's *Still Life With Rice* (Touchstone, 1996). Helie Lee herself is an American-born writer but here takes on the voice of her grandmother for what is a forceful, harrowing, and often surprising account of a life that spans most of Korea's twentieth century. I had been particularly concerned about a fair representation of Korea, and this book provided that: from the formal patrilineal kinship system to the evident importance of women and the families into which they are born; from the effects of colonial rule (forced changes of names, conscrip-

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tion of women for sexual service) to the surges along the peninsula during the Korean war; from traditional cultural and class structures to the fervency of conversion to Christianity. No student after reading this book will ever forget that Korea is a unique place and that Koreans are distinctive, autonomous, and rather fierce in their convictions.

Having made the decision for impact in the readings rather than for equivalency, the rest of the course fell into place rather easily. An obligatory two examinations made sure that the reading got done and that essay questions forced some general summary analysis. More important, however, were the papers. Rather than a long paper, I opted for four short papers (five or so pages) with one on each country—albeit with escalating comparative expectations over the length of the course. Having already acknowledged diversity in approaches in the required reading, I did likewise for the papers. Students were required to do one each of the following: a review of a novel or memoir; an analysis of a commercial film; observations on a cultural exhibit or performance; and discussion of interviews with people from one of the countries. This set of papers takes a little planning since the resources available for the four countries are not equivalent. There is a particular gap for Korean and Vietnamese exhibits and performances (especially outside the usual holidays) and also for subtitled Vietnamese film. Otherwise the options were good at George Mason University with the Freer and Sackler galleries available in Washington, D.C. and a good number of both Vietnamese and Koreans at the university who were glad to be interviewed. The increasing availability of Korean and Vietnamese literature in translation was a major boon.

This range of paper assignments worked well. Students varied in the ones at which they excelled. Some did well at the interviews, others excelled with the fiction. For some, the museum exhibits seemed to free them up from usual academic constraints to slow down and actually look at things: at color and texture, at the implications of kinds of objects for class structure, and at the relative presence, size, and relations of people and nature. My own view is that the papers about film were the least successful, since the American preoccupation with plot and linear time often kept students from looking at the framing of the film, its use of time, and exactly the issues of color and texture, style and spacing, that they *did* see in the museum exhibits. Reading fiction was probably the best intellectual exercise for the greatest number of students, although the students themselves thought highly of the interview requirement—even though they were initially sometimes resistant to it. (Several students suggested I should have been more directive in how they did the interviews—although my own view is that they did well at figuring out how to do the interviews, and that was itself a useful challenge to them.)

I also decided to use film in class as a point of common focus and, again for impact rather than pedagogical respectability, chose commercial film. Commercial film, it seemed to me, would be more effective at providing internal views of the societies. For China, I used *The Story of Qiu Ju* (slow, but extremely good on social relations at the local level and administrative connections between different layers of government); for Vietnam, *Three Seasons* (not as incisive as *Cyclo* but equally good on the fluidity of relations between men and women and the possibility of redemption); and, for Japan, *Shall We Dance?* (perhaps a bit frothy, but a good counterpoint to the image of Japanese that would subsequently emerge from the Korean perspective). For Korea, the decision was rather more difficult. I finally decided to show *Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?* in its entirety, both because it seems to me to be a very Korean film, and because it is itself a virtual exercise in Buddhism. But I don't recommend this unless you are willing, as I was, to explicitly warn your students that you are on a messianic crusade to make them decipher clues about Korea and Buddhism from what even its admirers describe as an "intensely slow" film. On the brighter side, a fair number of the students came to appreciate the relevance of their own practical difficulties in watching the film: the need to breathe slowly and regularly, the difficulty of maintaining alertness, and a kind of vertigo when the film takes a non-human perspective. If all this sounds a bit forbidding, the recent *Chunhyang* is an excellent alternative.

TALKING IT THROUGH

The heart of the course was discussion. Although my usual approach to class discussion is rather free form, for this class I wanted a little more structure and thus provided four questions that became a rough study guide for each country. The first question involved the basic structure and nature of social relations in terms of gender, generation, and age (including seniority). The aim here was to force a consideration of the most elementary aspects of social relations. The

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second question concerned the structures and interconnection of kinship and locality. Here the aim was to foster consideration of how larger social groups and connections are made and, in particular, how the two central options of ties of blood and ties of locality are utilized in different societies. The third question was essentially an expansion of the issues of kinship and locality into the political realm. For all four of these countries, there is a very long history of coherent, enduring political entities that—academic arguments aside—resemble “nation-states” in at least the most general sense. The question is how that is possible. The fourth question required considering the quite elaborate and complex cultural meanings and expressions in each of these countries, aiming for a general sense of underlying themes in terms either of content or style.

Following the introductory discussions about the region, class discussion was focused on bringing together the specific required reading, a particular commercial film, individual student projects (which yielded papers every three weeks), with these four key questions as a rough guide. The discussions generally went well but were not without some difficulties. On the positive side, students had interesting things to say once they became a little familiarized with the region and especially after we had concluded discussion of China and they had thus done at least one paper. On the other side, students were sometimes uncertain in expressing partial thoughts and ideas before they came to feel such familiarization. Opening the flow of discussion took longer in this class than in most of my other upper-division and graduate courses. But that flow did develop. Above all, the papers and the work they required with different media started to have a very substantial impact by roughly the middle of the course. At that point most students had seen other films to match with those in class, or they had read other fiction to match the Vietnamese novel in class. Thus, class experience with the different countries was accruing in parallel with class competence in looking at different kinds of materials.

The basic set of key questions was vital in keeping discussions in at least a general, common format. As an anthropologist, I was particularly pleased to see that by the time we were discussing the second country (Vietnam), early generalizations about gender roles were becoming more specific—it is not just men versus women in general, but about such role sets as husbands and wives, fathers and daughters, sons and mothers. By the time we were discussing the third country (Japan), discussions of kinship and locality were also becoming more astute. Kinship, students recognized, can be about current relations but also about inheritance or general models for social relations; locality can be a formal structure but also a web of episodic interactions—as among neighbors. The discussions on political structures and cultural expressions were less incisive but, here as well, the class collectively began to develop themes about relations between people and nature, the mechanisms of mass mobilization, and even something of the emotional style of a culture. By the later weeks of the class, it was also possible to introduce more general topics for assessment in terms of all four countries. A discussion of what “modernization” might mean in the context of East Asia elicited what I thought were astute comments about shifting social relations, particularly regarding the similar demographic and economic changes produced by capitalist and communist systems.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

I have presented here a rather personal description of a particular kind of course on East Asia. I have done so because several features of the course may be of some encouragement and assistance in developing similar courses that aim not simply at history, or geography, or language, or society, but at the intermixture of these that makes a culture what it is and a people who they are. The good news is that courses like this are still greatly needed, are immensely rewarding, and are doable. As I noted to the students, a single course on these four countries is not only preposterous in its scope but also runs the risk of recreating every simple-minded stereotype of the region and its countries. Yet the possibility that students would have no course at all on these four countries, either individually or collectively, is a far worse possibility. So there is good work to be done, and in pursuit of it those of us who are not fully expert on all four countries can still claim a useful role.

The not-so-good news is that this kind of course requires great effort. It was by far the most time-consuming preparation I have ever done for any course. This kind of course may also require some rethinking of one's normal teaching approach. For this class, my rethinking of course materials and the development of a varied range of papers were essential. The inclusion of literature—and perhaps above all of Vietnamese literature—was the most crucial decision point in designing the course and led to cascading decisions on using yet other kinds of materials for class and for student papers—whether interviews, museum exhibits, or commercial film. Yet precisely because of those challenges, I myself learned a great deal in the course (especially about Korea) and was spurred to rearticulate for myself what runs as a common flow through East Asia and what is unique to its individual countries. That balance between commonality and diversity was also useful for the class. From their final comments, it is clear that they, too, left with a sense of East Asia as a general region and, more importantly, a sharp sense of the individuality of China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. ■

NOTE

1. The gist of the Riverine Argument is that rivers provide good conditions for the development of intensive agriculture. At some points along a river, reasonably predictable seasonal flooding provides to low-lying fields both water and fertilizer in the form of silt. This permits continuous, rather than shifting, cultivation. Given that starting point, it is then possible for agricultural societies to more carefully control that flooding with dams and gates, to extend fields farther upstream and farther from the river by using canals for irrigation, and to extend fields farther downstream with canals and gates for irrigation and for drainage.

Editor's Note:

Please note that bibliographical references are contained within the text of the article. Information on how to obtain films referenced in the article is provided below.

FILMOGRAPHY

The Story of Qiu Ju

Directed by Zhang Yimou
1992. Color. 100 Minutes. VHS/DVD
www.amazon.com

Three Seasons

Directed by Tony Bui
1999. Color. 110 Minutes. VHS
Cheng & Tsui Company
25 West Street
Boston, MA 02111-1213
Phone: 800-554-1963, 617-988-2401
Fax: 617-426-3669
E-mail: orders@cheng-tsui.com
URL: <http://www.cheng-tsui.com>

Cyclo

Directed by Tran Anh Hung
1997. 123 Minutes. Color. VHS
Facets Video
1517 West Fullerton Avenue
Chicago, IL 60614
Phone: 800-331-6197
Fax: 312-929-5437
E-mail: sales@facets.org
URL: <http://www.facets.org>

Shall We Dance?

Directed by Masayuki Suo
1196. Color. 118 Minutes. VHS
Facets Video
1517 West Fullerton Ave.
Chicago, IL 60614
800-331-6197
www.amazon.com

Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?

Directed by Bae Yong-kyun
1989. Color. 135 Minutes. VHS/DVD
www.amazon.com

Chunhyang

Directed by Im Kwon Taek
2000. Color. 120 Minutes. VHS/DVD
Cheng & Tsui Company
25 West Street
Boston, MA 02111-1213
Phone: 800-554-1963, 617-988-2401
Fax: 617-426-3669
E-mail: orders@cheng-tsui.com
URL: <http://www.cheng-tsui.com>

DAVID W. HAINES is an Associate Professor of Anthropology at George Mason University, where he teaches courses on immigration, refugees, and work—as well as the course on East Asia described in this article.