

Engaging Inner-City Students in East Asian Studies Martial Arts, Warriors, and Gender

By Eleni Vryza

For the past two years, I have taught high school students from urban schools in Chicago that were targeted by the University of Illinois at Chicago as a part of the Transforming Roadblocks into Opportunities (TRiO) Academic Support Program. Students who come from low-income families, families with no college graduates, or who are individuals with learning disabilities can participate in the program and may bring their brothers and sisters. My students are African-American and Hispanic, and the high schools they attend are riddled with violence. Classrooms are often disorganized or targeted as turnaround schools where the staff is replaced by Chicago Public Schools. The goal of the TRiO program is to prepare students upon high school graduation to enter college by providing various academic activities, including trips to visit colleges and universities. Students participating in the program have been able to turn the odds around and go on to undergraduate and graduate schools, as well as come back to teach!

I recently used media such as PBS documentaries (*China from the Inside*) and movies (Rob Marshall's *Memoirs of a Geisha*, Zhang Yimou's *House of Flying Daggers*, Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, and Ann Hu's *Shadow Magic*) because themes such as the lives of women and martial arts have a basic appeal for students. For example, some of my students already had an interest in martial arts, so I set aside materials that I was interested in and focused on martial arts movies. We also had good discussions and a great opportunity to explore topics of more interest to me, such as gender in East Asian cultures. I learned from my students' perspectives and the media they liked along the way.



Screen capture from *House of Flying Daggers*. © 2004 Sony Pictures Classics.

The House of Flying Daggers (2004), a *wuxia*-style martial arts film, offers stunning cinematography with intense colors, the signature of films by Zhang Yimou. He also made *Hero* (2002), a film that follows the *wuxia* style by featuring honorable heroic men (the left radical on the Chinese character *xia* refers to man). For example, Wu Sheng is a character in Beijing opera that features his martial arts abilities. Typically, the heroes in Chinese *wuxia* fiction belong to the lower social classes of ancient Chinese society. They are usually bound by a code of chivalry that requires them to right wrongs, especially when the helpless or the poor are oppressed. The Chinese *xia* traditions bring to mind the Japanese samurai's *bushidō* tradition, the chivalry of medieval European knights, and the gunslingers of America's Westerns.

The House of Flying Daggers, in addition to being a *wuxia* story, might also be called historical fiction, as it is explicitly set in the Tang dynasty period, with costumes and settings based on real Tang paintings. The Tang period was a time of many cultural exchanges with Central and West Asia. Objects found at various excavations reveal an extremely open society where women felt comfortable taking part in social life and flaunting their femininity (*Women of the Tang Dynasty: The Genius of China*). At the end of Tang, there was a shift away from Buddhism, and external artistic and cultural influences diminished.

Beautiful green landscapes of bamboo forests match the green costumes of the female warriors in *The House of Flying Daggers*, which is led by a woman who also runs an entertainment house as a cover for rebel activities. Ziyi Zhang plays Xiao Mei, a beautiful member of the rebel group. This movie follows the tradition of classic Chinese love tragedies. It ends with the death of the lover in a snow-covered scene when two government captains (Andy Lau as Leo and Takeshi Kaneshiro as Jin) fight in an effort to win Xiao Mei. The instructor can review similar love stories where nature participates, like *Butterfly Lovers*, expressing grief with a snowfall in the midst of summer, for instance. Here is how one of my students summarized *The House of Flying Daggers*:

My perception of the movie is that a girl is trapped in the island of love. When a guy takes her comb that was given to her by her mother, she has the determination and drive to get it back. She runs to the man that has her precious comb, trying to take back what is rightfully hers. He traps her and chains her up, but that does not stop her. After retrieving her comb, she falls madly in love with the soldier. They fight, but at the same time, love is always in the air.



Screen capture from *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. © 2000 Sony Pictures Classics.

Ang Lee's movie *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) provides a wonderful opportunity to focus on various female characters and to discuss challenges women in East Asian societies face as they attempt to gain equality in a male-oriented society. The film explores the female characters and the different routes and responses they choose to follow with the costs and benefits of their actions. Ziyi Zhang stars as Jiao Long, the beautiful and mysterious daughter, and Michelle Yeoh stars as Yu Shu Lien. The governor's daughter (Jen Yu in the Mandarin version and Jiao Long in the English-dubbed version) refuses to get married as Yu Shu Lien advises her. When Jiao Long expresses admiration for warrior Yu Shu Lien, she stresses the difficulties of her life, such as living in cold and decrepit places. Jiao Long is the most puzzling figure as she breaks free from her marriage and her relation-

*I was delighted to find out how my students connected with the determination and persistence of Sayuri (Ziyi Zhang) in *Memoirs of a Geisha* . . .*



Screen capture from *Memoirs of a Geisha* © 2005 Columbia Pictures, DreamWorks.

ship with the man who abducted her while traveling with her family as a teenager. One of my students interpreted the last scene as a suicide.

Although a female warrior, Yu Shu Lien feels at ease living in a male-oriented world. She is the unrequited love of Li Mu Bai, the great warrior and wuxia style hero. Following the wuxia-style martial arts film tradition, Li Mu Bai dies honorably seeking justice for the death of his master. There is also the evil Jade Fox. Jade Fox killed Li Mu Bai's master because he refused to accept her as his student due to her gender. Jade Fox became a murderer to compensate for her society's injustices toward women. Jade Fox was Jiao Long's governess and taught her martial arts. Jiao Long, who surpassed her teacher's skills, also stole Green Destiny, Li Mu Bai's sword, although she did not become a murderer. This film explores answers to questions such as what women do when the going gets tough. Here is how one of my students responded:

This movie has many topics: love, revenge, freedom, and justice. The warriors want to be free by fighting and to get rid of the sorrow caused by death. While the non-fighters want to be like them, they all want to love but in different ways. They are just trying to find their ways to be happy.

I was delighted to find out how my students connected with the determination and persistence of Sayuri (Ziyi Zhang) in *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005) because these qualities are certainly needed to succeed academically as a minority student in urban US public schools. Mameha (Michelle Yeoh) is the nice geisha who renounced her own romantic feelings and accepted her position as a geisha and her lack of options in society. Hatsumomo (Gong Li) is the rebel geisha who ignores the rules of geisha in hairstyle and costume choices. She becomes a broken woman when she must abandon her lover because geisha were not allowed to keep them. She could not take this any longer and was ousted from the *okiya*, the dormitory where geisha lived in Gion, Kyoto's geisha district. It was rumored that she then became a prostitute. One of my students asked why she did not take a job, and we discussed the lack of jobs for women in war and Occupation-ridden Japan, especially for women with no family or other connections. Perhaps he saw the characters in *Memoirs of a Geisha* as *picaros*, roguish heroes of low social class who live by their wits in a corrupt society, or anti-heroes who do not work. *Picaros* are often abandoned by their families and have some hungry nights.

The movie also offers a window to discuss dance halls in contemporary Beijing, where many young women from the provinces work as escort dancers, as well as strippers in contemporary American urban centers. The film is a good opportunity to discuss cultural differences and similarities and to make connections between different cultures.

Memoirs of a Geisha is an adaptation of a novel by an American, Arthur Golden, who based his book on extensive research and interviews with a real geisha, Mineko Iwasaki. Mineko Iwasaki wrote her own memoir, *Geisha, A Life*, (2002) which presents a very different view of her experiences. Her *Geisha, A Life* contests any involvement with the practice of *mizuage* (literally to give up water—meaning the sale of a young geisha's virginity) and portrays her work as professional and highly lucrative. These different points of view created controversy around the film, which I did not address in my class. Some of my students are avid readers, and although I mentioned Golden's book, I encouraged them to seek Iwasaki's autobiography and Nagai Kafu's *Geisha in Rivalry* to get a better insight on the lives of geisha. Still, the myth of geisha, as embodying aesthetic sensibilities and cultural practices, occupies the pride of place among stereotypic images of Japanese ideals, even within Japan.

Shadow Magic by Ann Hu (2000), set in Beijing in 1902, clashes and interweaves East and West by bringing together Liu Jinglun, a smart, young portrait photographer who is interested in Western movies, and Raymond Wallace, an Englishman who hopes to make a fortune with his Shadow Magic Theater. Liu falls in love with Ling, daughter of Lord Tan, a famous Beijing opera performer. The world of everyday Beijing, the court of the Empress Dowager, and the businesses of Lord Tan and Wallace clash together, raising questions about Qing society and the role of movies in preserving traditions as they bring change.



Screen capture from *Shadow Magic*. © 2000 Sony Picture Classics.



Screen capture from *China from the Inside*, episode 2, "Women of the Country." © 2007 PBS.

The PBS documentary, *China from the Inside*, discusses challenges that women in China face through a series of interviews of contemporary Chinese migrant women and researchers on <http://www.pbs.org/kqed/chinainside/>. It captures migration and its effects on families from Tibet

and Muslim minorities from the west to the east of China. It encompasses suicides in China and factory work in the cities, where women gain confidence and independence through hard experiences. Xie Lihua, *Rural Woman's* editor, said, "There's a saying among men, 'Marrying a woman is like buying a horse: I can ride you and beat you whenever I like.'" Government control of policies relating to dowry paid by the groom, unwanted girl babies, and reproductive rights are covered with vivid examples of rural couples in China. The students have an opportunity to see how differently situations are handled in various places around the world. My students are also able to make connections with their own urban communities. One commented on the high homicide rate in US cities when we discussed how, in China, one woman commits suicide every four minutes—one of the world's highest rates. Families are fractured when spouses leave for the cities, where they often create new families, while their wives are left in the villages to tend to the family homes with hard manual labor, unaware of what is happening and feeling desolate, as a Tibetan woman explains in the documentary.

Here is what one student wrote as a response to the section *Women in the Rural Areas*, which we viewed in class:

The documentary on China is so obnoxious. I don't like the way they treated the women, very wrong and not equally to the men. Some of the women didn't even see their husband and children, and they didn't even put two and two together that their husbands were cheating. I would not want to go to this part of China. [sic]

These films also provide an opportunity to discuss aspects of Asian history, such as the Qing dynasty in *Shadow Magic* and the role of monasteries in training warriors in *Crouching Tiger*, to cite just two examples. *Memoirs of a Geisha* offers a survey of Japanese history from the 1920s through the American Occupation of Japan. Movies are a rich resource for stunning landscapes of western China and Japan's geisha districts, and they offer an excellent vocabulary tool for teachers of Mandarin Chinese to introduce and review conversational Chinese phrases and expressions.

Ziyi Zhang, who graduated from the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing, China, and Michelle Yeoh have been a common thread between the movies *Crouching Tiger*, *Hidden Dragon* and *Memoirs of a Geisha* since they were the main female characters. Movie bonus features give students an opportunity to learn about actor training and introduce Asian societal concepts that may not be known to Western audiences.

The films included in this essay brought together actors of various linguistic backgrounds and trained them rigorously in a short time to present Asian arts, such as martial arts or geisha arts, tea ceremonies, playing the *shamisen* and song, dance, and acting. Through their many subplots, the films often include love stories that engage teenagers and young adults alike. Instructors can understand the developmental challenges of adolescence and use romance and action to initially engage student interest in East Asia. ■

ELENI VRYZA taught Mandarin Chinese Language and Culture at the University of Illinois at Chicago and the Chicago Public Schools for the last four years. She also infused Asia-focused materials, while teaching at The City Colleges of Chicago in Child Development and pre-credit English courses. She has been active with recent presentations on Beijing Opera performers and migrant Chinese female laborers at ASDP national conferences.

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