

## Studying Japan with Hollywood Films



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### SHOWING **MR. BASEBALL** IN CLASS

DIRECTED BY FRED SCHEPISI, UNIVERSAL CITY STUDIOS, INC., COLOR. 108 MINUTES. VHS/DVD. 1992

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BY RICHARD CHALFEN

**W**here do most of our students get their information about Japan? While I have no empirical data to address such a question, we can speculate on several sources. From actually traveling to Japan? From parents and friends who have been there? From classroom instruction including, perhaps, documentary films? From Japanese restaurants? Or from forms of popular culture including such sources as *National Geographic*, television shows, or feature films?

As educators, we must face the reality of an expanding mediascape—with direct relation to affecting the quantity and quality of information about Japan—information and ideas that students bring to our classrooms. But are we offering sufficient training in critical media participation? Are we conscious of alternative representations and, as Stuart Hall suggests, alternative readings of the “same” thing? Or are we insisting that only “our” versions of Japan (read: academically sanctioned or canonically accepted models) are worthy of examination? Is there a chance that if

instructors were familiar with popular forms of information, and could create critical assessments based on “common ground,” that they could become more effective in their classrooms?

We generally recognize a legitimacy to using certain types of films in arts and sciences curricula. An assumed didacticism justifies the screening of “documentaries,” for instance, during actual class time. But the pedagogical use of Hollywood feature films might generate a sense of eccentricity or curiosity, at best, and perhaps suspicion, at worst. We must ask: What might such films have to teach us about Asia in general, or, as in my case, Japan in particular?

Surely the once popular dichotomy of education/entertainment has undergone considerable re-evaluation. We acknowledge that each contains elements of the other, and that people can (and do) “learn” from unlikely sources. Does this mean that all information sources can be treated equally? Hardly. But our first job is to recognize the diversity of representation that does exist, and,

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secondly, to construct critical models of interpretation. In short, I am arguing that instruction must include the political economy of representational forms as well as historical and ethnographic information about Japanese society and culture. While such a claim can be made for all instructional materials, I am particularly concerned about the study and pedagogical uses of Hollywood feature films.

But additional problems become apparent. Anthropologists recognize that we can no longer speak of bounded and isolated societies and cultures. So too we find parallel claims for type of reports and documents. Consider the “blurring of genres” which usually refers to written forms. But we also see the proliferation of such audio-visual forms as the docu-drama, “mocumentary films,” “edutainment,” and “infomercial” TV shorts, and the like. What are we looking at, and how are we meant to interpret what we read, hear, or see? All of these problems are central to critical media studies.

The remainder of this essay discusses the use of “Hollywood” feature films—specifically *Mr. Baseball*—in a Temple University undergraduate course entitled “American Culture in Japan.” This introductory-level course is offered every spring semester and is cross-listed among 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.

The following brief description from the 1993 *Motion Picture Guide Annual* (p. 230) is provided for readers not familiar with the story line of *Mr. Baseball*.

*A fading U.S. baseball star, power-hitter Jack Elliot (Tom Selleck) is abruptly transferred by his agent to play for a Japanese baseball team and help win the league pennant. Elliot becomes an instant star and gains the name “Mr. Baseball.” But he rejects just about all of Japanese baseball and culture in favor of American habits. He wants to ignore long and strenuous practice sessions, to contradict coaches’ advice, to avoid doing TV commercials for Japanese products, and to ignore playing by Japanese rules in both games and everyday life. Elliot’s coach, Uchiyama (Ken Takakura) is very strict, and after Elliot’s hitting fails him, starts to re-make his skills and career. Meanwhile Elliot has fallen in love with Hiroko (Aya Takanashi), the team’s promotion manager and, unknown to Elliot, just happens to be the coach’s daughter. After much strength training and new mental discipline, Elliot’s career is hot once again, and he wins the pennant for Uchiyama’s team. U.S. scouts from Major League Baseball watch the championship games and eventually Elliot is called back to the U.S. as a coach, taking Hiroko-san with him.*

## A SOURCE OF SOCIAL AND CULTURAL INFORMATION



Directed by Fred Schepisi  
Color. 108 Minutes. VHS/DVD.  
1992  
www.amazon.com

Two reactions generally accompany any suggestion to use feature films such as *Mr. Baseball* during class time. First, we hear such films offer only “inaccurate” and stereotypically embarrassing representations. Second, we hear 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 respond to 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 as sources of social and cultural information helps us better understand the information our students bring to the classroom. I do my best to incorporate the following principles when adopting this perspective:

### Students must be encouraged to ask the following questions:

1. What did the producers of this film want you to think?
2. How is this sense of credibility created and enhanced?
3. 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)<sup>1</sup> and Drummond (1996),<sup>2</sup> 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 “production 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. As macro-contextual factors, certain historical and political circumstances surrounding a particular film should be addressed by instructors. 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)<sup>3</sup> or "Lessons on Baseball (And Life) in Japan" (Maslin 1992)<sup>4</sup> 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),<sup>5</sup> or Whiting's published articles (1986, 1979).<sup>6</sup>

### MR. BASEBALL'S "CULTURE BROKERS"

Instructors should always take advantage of the pause/stop features of VCR/DVD technology to introduce questions related to assigned readings, and allow for in-class commentary and 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. In fact, 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 in Japan. 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 already know.

To give just one example, I am particularly fond of *Mr. Baseball* for how it illustrates a 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 cross-cultural language and social confusions, both in the clubhouse and in front of an eager press corps.

- The Dragon's baseball team already includes an African-American player, Max (Hammer) Dubois (Dennis Haysbert), when their new star hitter, Jack Elliot (Tom Selleck), arrives. Hammer also plays the role of a middleman, interpreting the Japanese model of baseball to Selleck, who initially insists that the game is the same everywhere.



- Perhaps the most important broker-figure is Hiroko-san (Aya Takahashi), an independent businesswoman who just happens to be the daughter of the Dragon's coach, and thus Selleck's boss. Her character is most responsible for the majority of the cross-cultural interpretation in this film, focusing on Selleck, who starts his stay in Japan as the stereotypical ugly American, exhibiting rather heavy-handed egocentric and ethnocentric vulgarities. In several scenes, Hiroko-san gives audience members cultural lessons by explicitly correcting Selleck's misguided understandings of Japanese people and society. One scene, a turning point in the film, is particularly relevant—when Hiroko-san invites Selleck to her grandparents' home for lunch—when differences in interpersonal communication and etiquette conflict in dramatic, though humorous, ways. Matters related to business and etiquette—greetings, sitting, drinking, eating—all illustrate cultural differences. Minimally, viewers are offered powerful visual lessons on what not to do, and with appropriate in-class, instructor-led commentary, what to do.

### SHOWING JAPANESE FILMS WITH THEIR HOLLYWOOD RE-MAKES

Readers should also be aware of other uses of feature films. The in-class criticism of films like *Mr. Baseball* can be extended to coursework that involves major studio features in other ways. For instance, in a comparative cultures course focused on the U.S. and Japan, I have had good results by asking students to rent and study one pair of the following films: *The Seven Samurai* (1954) by Akira Kurosawa with Toshiro Mifune and *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) with Yul Brynner and Steve McQueen; *Yojimbo* (1961) by Akira Kurosawa with Toshiro Mifune and *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964) by Sergio Leone with Clint Eastwood; or *Rashōmon* (1961) by Akira Kurosawa with Toshiro Mifune and *The Outrage* (1964) with Paul Neuman and Edward G. Robinson.

## Instructors will need to respond to the inevitable appearance of cultural stereotypes and, in turn, take on the responsibility of unpacking—often reversing—knowledge that students bring to the classroom in the form of stereotypes.

In each pair of films, the latter is a re-make of the former. Students are then asked to write a review-essay based on the following kinds of questions: What structural similarities and differences do you see? What kinds of transformations of Japanese culture do we find? What in American culture is responsible for the changes? Or, given that the second film is primarily for American viewers, we can ask: How does the re-make reflect American culture? Discussion of significant problematic themes embedded in the central questions of this assignment has always been lively and instructive. With an eye on the future, I would also predict that *Mr. Baseball* will soon have its own companion piece, namely a film featuring a Japanese pitcher coming to the U.S. to play major league baseball.

### DEFINING AND/OR REDEFINING STEREOTYPIC CHARACTERIZATIONS?

Instructors will need to respond to the inevitable appearance of cultural stereotypes and, in turn, take on the responsibility of unpacking—often reversing—knowledge that students bring to the classroom in the form of those stereotypes. Clearly students come to films similar to *Mr. Baseball* with a rich accumulation of media-gained knowledge of others (Gumpert and Cathcart, 1982).<sup>7</sup> Commercial feature films generate, reify, and even exploit the existence of stereotypic characterizations. Stereotypes are the staple of many media forms that comprise our contemporary mediascape and are meaningful parts of any overall process of media socialization. For instance, it is highly unlikely that any high school or college student views this film without having ever seen, heard, or thought something related to Japan or being Japanese—something gained from mass media.

The major variable in such films is if and how the film suggests any sense of redesign, revision, or even elimination (if ever possible) of such stereotypes—just as instructors should be doing. As I have implied, *Mr. Baseball* offers viewers a constructive approach to stereotypes. The film monitors Elliot's demonstration of physical and cultural tropes. Viewers witness a series of corrective exercises throughout the film—in short, the work of the cultural brokers mentioned above. This strategy enhances a sense of critical and culturally sensitive reading of this and similar feature films.

And, finally, classroom instructors must acknowledge that an American feature film “about Japan” may simultaneously be about America and American culture. Instructors will want to address the question of what these films say about Americans, especially in contexts of participating in Japanese society and culture. For instance, when American characters arrive in Japan, they are often depicted as psychologically, socially, and culturally lost. A common reaction by these characters is to act out some sense of latent aggression through varying degrees of ethnocentrism by claiming everything is wrong, backwards, or upside down.

The major variable seems to be the willingness of visiting Americans to allow for differences and even accept change. The American-in-Japan absorbs audience empathy (or possibly sympathy) and potentially attains the status of hero by demonstrating some sense of cultural relativity in the foreign culture. Selleck's character, Jack Elliot, illustrates this pattern quite well, as does the American heroine “rocker” in *Tokyo Pop*, the American detectives in *Black Rain*, and even John Wayne in *The Barbarian and the Geisha*. Of course, any such generalization about Hollywood films will be controversial. Statements of general pattern and orientation are tempting, but readers may be able to cite exceptions.

My conclusion is that with appropriate preparation, Hollywood films can be effectively built into college courses with considerable success. Instructors' interpretive skills and examples contribute to the pedagogical advantages of such films. Students gain experience seeing how Japan is depicted by our media elite, and begin to understand the ways many people “know” Japanese people, society, and culture. Students also gain experience in film criticism or, as it is sometimes referred to, media literacy. There is much to be gained by using popular visual materials, using good/bad examples, and turning negative aspects into positive attributes. ■

#### NOTES

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