In addition to the differing impacts of globalization on the workers, the culture clash between the two groups is fascinating. The Germans are incredulous at the speed and lack of environmental and safety consciousness of the Chinese workers. The Chinese find the Germans’ meticulous observance of regulations, especially safety regulations, and the resultant German disapproval of Chinese methods condescending. But the Chinese managers are confident that only successful results count in the end. China, in their view, is the clear winner here.

Losers and Winners has much to offer students of China, Germany, globalization, sociology, and labor. For those who don’t want to immerse themselves in the dynamics of this sometimes dry film, the “Culture Clash,” “Exemplary Workers,” and “End of the Era” sections capture the main themes effectively. Each can easily be used independently in the classroom.

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TEACHING NARRATIVE ANALYSIS WITH A&E’S BIOGRAPHY

Hồ Chí Minh
AN A&E BIOGRAPHY PRODUCTION
DISTRIBUTED BY A&E HOME VIDEO
DVD, 50 MINUTES, COLOR, 2000

Kim Jong Il
AN A&E BIOGRAPHY PRODUCTION
DISTRIBUTED BY A&E HOME VIDEO
DVD, 50 MINUTES, COLOR, 2003

Dalai Lama:
The Soul of Tibet
AN A&E BIOGRAPHY PRODUCTION
DISTRIBUTED BY A&E HOME VIDEO
DVD, 50 MINUTES, COLOR, 2005

Reviewed by John Sagers

A &E’s Biography series provides a valuable source for analyzing narrative and representation of Asian subjects on American commercial television. Focusing on programs about the Tibetan Dalai Lama, North Korean dictator Kim Jong Il, and Vietnamese revolutionary Hồ Chí Minh, this essay will outline a method for classroom analysis of historical stories and what these stories mean for their target audiences.

Historical accuracy is a concern when using any documentary in class, and Biography programs often raise questions. For example, if Kim Jong Il’s personal life is shrouded in secrecy, why indulge in speculation? Does it matter if film footage illustrating Hồ Chí Minh’s travels show mistreatment of colonized Africans and Asians that he may not have witnessed himself? How should we evaluate statements of Hollywood actors and Tibet activists about the Dalai Lama’s spiritual depth? It is important to raise these questions, and debunking the programs could make interesting term paper assignments.

However, with limited class time and additional research, we can set aside factual issues for the time being and analyze the historical narratives on their own terms. Biography programs usually follow a similar structure of dramatic narrative.1 In the first few minutes, the protagonist confronts a serious problem. Pausing five minutes into the program, we can ask what kind of story we expect given the introductory remarks. “The fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet is a monk, politician, diplomat, and Nobel Laureate. He is also the spiritual and secular leader of a nation that only exists in exile. Tibet, the lost kingdom, once known as Shangri-la.” This suggests a tale of heroic struggle to preserve a lost culture. Hồ Chí Minh’s story is one of persistence against all odds: “He was small even by Vietnamese standards. Only four feet eleven inches tall and barely 100 pounds, he appeared frail. . . . Perhaps no leader in history has resisted the guns of the enemy...
A&E’s Biography series provides a valuable source for analyzing narrative and representation of Asian subjects on American commercial television.

The purpose of these Biography programs is stated in an ad appearing at the start of the Hồ Chí Minh video, “Slip into the lives of some of the world’s most fascinating people. Watch A&E’s Biography and escape the ordinary.” These are stories selected and constructed to entertain a television audience with provocative (sometimes even sensational) coverage of subjects already familiar to viewers. Nevertheless, the Biography series, an excellent classroom resource for teaching critical analysis of the stories surrounding Asian leaders, will hopefully encourage students to read more about them.

NOTES
1. For an excellent guide to dramatic non-fiction, see Jon Franklin, Writing for Story (New York: Penguin, 1986).

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