

# USING FILM IN TEACHING ABOUT ASIA: A Cautionary Essay

BY SYBIL A. THORNTON

## **A**LL OF US STRUGGLE WITH THE CHALLENGES OF TEACHING THE PEOPLES AND CULTURES OF ASIA.

After slides and novels, the first thing that comes to mind is to show a film in class: whether good or bad, a film can bring a narrative “to life” the way no slide or novel can. Or so we think. All moving-image media that might be used in the classroom have problems.

The instructor needs to be aware that all films (newsreels, documentaries, compilation films, studio films) are usually made not by academic specialists, but by filmmakers, whether freelancers or those on long-term contracts. Films are designed to be sold first to possible financiers (all of whom have their own motives) and only then to audiences. Filmmakers make films with the budgets they are given, even when it means cutting corners on research or paying for the best illustrations. This is true even of the vaunted PBS “documentary,” with its imprimatur of the NEH and other respected organizations. PBS is a not-for-profit organization; the makers of its films are not. Thus, even the PBS documentary is put under the same budgetary constraints and other compromises in production that studio films are: the more money, the better the production. However, there is rarely “more money.”<sup>1</sup>

Routinely, historically important content, such as images of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s braces or wheelchair in newsreels, is edited out or otherwise altered.<sup>2</sup> Events are routinely staged. For example, in *The Story of the Weeping Camel* (2003), a documentary about shepherds in present-day Mongolia, two boys ride to town to fetch a violinist for an important ritual for the camels. The boys are filmed with a camera in front of them or in anticipation of the spot where they will arrive from outside the frame.<sup>3</sup> This technique signals to the viewer the extent to which this film leads, rather than follows, the action.

Filmmakers often use the voice-over narrator to impose a particular ideology or to send culturally distorted messages. For example, the 1988 mini-series, *Japan*, pro-

duced by PBS station WTTW in Chicago, shows a clip of a furious sword fight in the rain between nineteenth-century gangs. This clip, taken from a studio film, uses voice-over commentary by Jane Seymour making a sweeping pontification on the natural cruelty of the Japanese people.<sup>4</sup> This technique is also present in Frank Capra’s 1944 *The Battle of China*,<sup>5</sup> and the 1945 *Know Your Enemy: Japan*.<sup>6</sup> The best way to deal with problems like this is to mute the audio and make one’s own commentary.

Academics use specialized terms for documentaries that can help instructors evaluate their classroom usefulness. For example, “direct documentary” refers to an event or process entirely recorded by a moving-image camera. Therefore, one cannot make a direct documentary about the past: one cannot record the past. On the other hand, “compilation film” refers to those PBS and other productions characterized by their assemblages of talking heads, snips of newsreels, photos, illustrations, documents, statues, buildings, the voice-over by a seen or unseen narrator, and re-enactments.

Compilation films are problematic because of the often inappropriate choices of the compiled materials due, as mentioned above, to a lack of suitable illustrations or budget. The filmmaker’s cavalier attitude toward the audience, “who will never know the difference,” does not belong in films for classroom use. Nevertheless, the attitude is prevalent in one of the most questionable practices of contemporary compilation films—the substitution of re-enactments for appropriate

visuals. Often, re-enactments are not identified as such—and can be inaccurate or misleading.<sup>7</sup>

Studio films, because of their much bigger budgets, usually do a better job of re-enacting specific events or recreating specific periods of time. These re-enactment scenes function like mini-documentaries, especially when they illustrate traditions still practiced. Mizoguchi Kenji’s 1953 *Ugetsu* shows briefly the process of making pottery: the potter at the wheel turned by his wife; his brother-in-law lifting the pots onto scaffolds to dry in the sun; his wife ladling glazing inside and outside the pots; loading the kiln; and, finally, keeping the kiln going all night.<sup>8</sup> Again, his 1952 *The Life of Oharu* briefly shows how a courtesan is presented to her new customer for the first time. She kneels opposite him with a servant to her right. She leans forward gracefully, takes up a saké saucer, and three times dips it in front of her, raises it to the



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side of her face, and at the same time makes a very slight figure-eight motion with her chin. When she is finished, she replaces the saucer and the woman beside her calls out, in a very stylized manner, her name and rank in the pleasure quarters.<sup>9</sup> The ritual as re-enacted in Oharu can be reasonably expected to be authentic since there were many places where such a ritual had been preserved: guides to the pleasure quarters throughout the years were many; organized prostitution and its brothels and tea houses were active in Japan until made illegal in 1956; and many popular plays, especially Kabuki plays set in the licensed quarters, were still being performed on stage.

It is not necessary to show a film in its entirety. Show the first twenty minutes or so of *The Concubine and the Assassin* and see how many reproductions of Qin and Han artifacts the students can recognize.<sup>10</sup> Compare the documentary section on the tea ceremony in *Daimyō*<sup>11</sup> with the last scene in *Gonza the Lancer*,<sup>12</sup> also on the tea ceremony. Have students read a story about the Japanese magistrate Judge Ooka Tadasuke<sup>13</sup> and show the section from the direct documentary about China, *Heart of the Dragon: Correcting*,<sup>14</sup> that deals with two sisters trying to sue their brother for money their mother had left them: both will illustrate the continuing tradition of morality versus the letter of the law.

Using portions of video in conjunction with other materials is not easy. However, it is better to do the research and use the bits

you trust rather than have your students pick up questionable ideas you will never be able to erase from their data banks. ■

### NOTES

- For examples of compromises due to budgetary and artistic concerns, see interviews with the producer and the art director of *Ulysses S. Grant*, produced for the series American Experience broadcast on PBS. "Behind the Scenes," American Experience: *Ulysses S. Grant*, 1999-2002, online available at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/grant/broadband/bts.html>.
- "Roosevelt and Churchill at Casablanca" outtakes (1943), Movietone Newsreel, in John E. O'Connor, *Image as Artifact*, Video Compilation, Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association, 1988.
- Die Geschichte vom weinenden Kamel*, directed by Byambasuren Davaa and Luigi Falorni, produced by Hochschule für Fernsehen und Film München and Bayerischer Rundfunk, 2003.
- Japan*, 4 vols., produced by WTTW Chicago (Coronet Film & Video, 1988), approx. 240 minutes, videocassette.
- Why We Fight: The Battle of China* (1944), directed by Frank Capra, produced by U.S. Army Signal Corps, Mpi Home Video, 2001, 65 minutes, videocassette.
- Know Your Enemy: Japan* (1945), directed by Frank Capra, produced by U.S. War Department, Sony Pictures, 2001, approximately 60 minutes, videocassette.
- The most recent and egregious example is *Marie Antoinette and the French Revolution* (2006), produced, written, and directed by David Grubin and broadcast on PBS: bad wigs, bad costumes, an older woman playing a fifteen-year-old girl, bad choreography, a trial with no one in the courtroom but the queen—who would care but an historian trying to teach history?
- Ugetsu (Ugetsu monogatari)*, 1953), directed by Mizoguchi Kenji, produced by Daiei, Kyoto Studio, Homevision, 2000, 94 minutes, videocassette.
- Saikaku ichidai onna (Life of Oharu, aka Diary of Oharu)*, 1952), directed by Mizoguchi Kenji, produced by Koi Productions and Shintōhō, Homevision, 2000, 137 minutes, videocassette.
- The Emperor and the Assassin* (1999), directed by Chen Kaige, produced by Beijing Film Studio, Canal+, China Film Co-Production Corporation, Neue Deutsche Filmgesellschaft, New Wave Company, Pricel, Shin Corporation, Sony Pictures, 2000, 161 minutes, DVD.
- Daimyō*, produced by Giant Step Productions, Inc. in association with the National Gallery of Art, Homevision, 1988, 30 minutes, videocassette.
- Yari no Gonza (Gonza the Spearman)*, 1986), directed by Shinoda Masahiro, produced by Hyōgensha and Shōchiku Kinema Kenkyū-jo, Kino Video, 2000, 126 minutes, videocassette.
- I.G. Edmonds, *Solomon in Kimono: A Wise Judge of Old Yedo (Tokyo: Stars and Stripes, 1956)* and *Ooka: More Tales of Solomon in Kimono, Tokyo: Stars and Stripes, 1957*.
- Correcting* (1984), directed by Peter Montagnon, produced by A.S.H. Films, The English Association Trust, London Trust, United Media, Channel 4 Television Corporation et al., Time Life Video: Ambrose Video Pub., 1988, 57 minutes, videocassette.

SYBIL A. THORNTON, Associate Professor, History, Arizona State University, teaches pre-modern Japanese and Asian History and Civilization, as well as a course Film as History. Her research is in the area of narratology—Japanese epic, Japanese cinema, and the medieval Japanese religious community (and producer of narratives) now known as the *jishū*. Her book on traditional Japanese narrative and the development of the period film is now in press.

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