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Teaching Asian Religions Through Film: Response and Reflections

Abstract

This article presents reflections on Chien's, Richey's, and Mixon's articles on the benefits of using film as a component of courses about Asian religions. I first explore how incorporating film can help meet the goals that instructors set as part of their course planning, and then shift to analysis of the various pedagogical strategies Chien, Richey, and Mixon employ, highlighting how the techniques that they use for East Asian religions and Islam can be valuable in teaching about other Asian religions as well.

This paper was part of a panel on "Teaching Asian Religions Through Film" presented at the Association for Asian Studies conference in Honolulu, Hawaii, March 24–27, 2022. The panel offered concrete examples on how to adopt cinema and TV to discuss Asian religions, culture, and modernity in the classroom and contributed to the developing analysis concerning the use of visual media in Asian studies pedagogy.

Keywords

Asian religions and film

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Author Notes

Robin Rinehart is Professor of Religious Studies at Lafayette College. Her research on Sikh, Hindu, and Sufi religious literatures of the Punjab and north India has focused on the genre of hagiography, and shared religious practices and beliefs.

Gloria Chien, Jeffrey Richey, and Candace Mixon have each written fascinating and thought-provoking articles about how they use films to deepen students' engagement and knowledge and challenge persistent stereotypes and misconceptions when they are teaching about Asian religions. In this response and reflection on their work, I will highlight some of the key points from each article, focusing first on ideas about course planning and content, and then on specific pedagogical strategies for using films. Throughout, I will note how the insights from these articles addressing East Asian religions and Islam are also more widely applicable across Asian religions, drawing on my experience as a teacher and scholar of South Asian religions.

Course Planning

Richey's article provides an excellent starting point for some of the goals we consider in planning a course exploring some aspect of Asian religions. We want to avoid presenting Asian religions as artifacts of the premodern past, because this can lead to mistaken assumptions or possibly cement presuppositions that students already have, such as the view that East Asian religions are living fossils, unchanged over time, and that as a result East Asian religions are useless anachronisms, irrelevant in modern contexts. Although Richey's focus is on East Asian religions, this insight can be extended to other parts of Asia as well.

Longstanding traditional, text-based approaches to Asian religions often take a particular text or textual tradition as their starting point, and present it as the definitive illustration of a religion. While much recent scholarship has moved well beyond such models, these ideas persist in many introductory level textbooks and other arenas through which students may first be exposed to Asian religions. It is not uncommon, for example, to find textbooks that present the Vedas as the primary sacred text of Hinduism, even though access to the Vedas has been limited and many Hindus rarely, if ever, perform Vedic rituals. Sacred text-centric approaches to Buddhism too may not provide a solid foundation for students to engage with the many varieties of Buddhist practice throughout Asia. Introductory textbook discussions of the life of the Buddha and his teachings often place strong emphasis on the quest for the “historical Buddha,” downplaying the supernatural elements that are found throughout the many biographical traditions.¹ Introductory course materials that emphasize primary texts may privilege particular teachings and practices as definitive and the most authentic forms of Asian religions, with the result that when students encounter the diversity of people’s practices, many may come across as accretions, “popular” or “folk” traditions, and somehow inauthentic or less true than some essentialized form of a particular Asian religion. This is an issue for Islam in Asia, too, further complicated by the fact that as Mixon points out, popular conceptions of Islam may center on the Arab world even though the majority of the world’s Muslims live in Asia. The use of films that illustrate

religions in practice can be an effective strategy for dislodging such text-centric models of Asian religions and helping our students develop more nuanced perspectives on religious and cultural traditions, and the nature of “religion” as a category itself.

The academic study of religion, with origins lying largely in a Protestant Christian framework, has tended to emphasize belief over practice, as well as the idea that one believes in one specific form of one particular religion, with the most authentic forms of that belief expressed in a specific text. That approach to thinking about religion has had significant effects in parts of Asia, especially those that came under European colonial rule. However much scholarship has moved away from these frameworks and challenged the utility of the concept of religion itself, these ideas still hold great sway and may have shaped the perspectives our students bring to their study. But we know that such models of religion almost never match up with reality. Religious identity and practice in East Asia, for example, often cannot be defined within the boundaries of only Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, or Shinto. Chien shows how the film *A Chinese Ghost Story* helps students understand how Buddhist and Daoist elements, as well as popular practices, in fact often blend together, providing the basis for discussion of syncretism or other theoretical frameworks. This, too, is an insight that we can extend to other regions of Asia. For example, if we look at Buddhist practices in Southeast Asia, or Christian practices in some parts of India,² or indeed Islamic practices throughout South Asia,

especially prior to the rise of various reform movements during colonial rule, we see that people's religious beliefs and practices cross many seeming boundaries. Similarly, popular conceptions of Islam may treat it as a monolithic tradition, eliding the varieties of practice across different regions of the globe. We may often find ourselves teaching against existing models of Asian religions derived from older forms of scholarship and the wider imagination in the western world, and sometimes movements within Asian religions that seek to essentialize them in some way as well. Using films in our courses that illustrate people's actual religious practices can help us challenge the idea of separate, bounded religious traditions.

Alongside essentialized models of separate religions, we may find that students have been exposed to stereotypes about specific religions as well, especially Islam. Mixon has addressed how to teach against Islamophobia by helping students to recognize it and to understand its many permutations, including situations in which people who are "apparently Muslim" may be targeted. She notes that while Islam often serves as a theoretical metonym for the Arab world, the majority of the world's Muslims live in Asia, with many varieties of Islam. She also points out that we may run up against popular conceptions of Islam that center on gender, and violence. Here, too, using film can both help students learn how to identify various forms of Islamophobia, and get a more nuanced picture of the actual diverse experiences and practices of Muslims.

Islamophobia is especially powerful and prevalent, but there are also popular images of other Asian religions that students may bring to our courses, and that we need to teach against. Some students may have the impression that Hinduism is primarily about yoga and a sort of otherworldly mysticism, or that Buddhists are mainly into meditation. They may also associate both Hinduism and Buddhism with pacifism and nonviolence—which are of course part of those traditions—yet we need only consider some forms of Hindu nationalism, for example, or Buddhist movements in Sri Lanka or Myanmar that have endorsed violence to see the limitations of the views that our students may have been exposed to before they're in our courses.

Many of our students do not have experience in close reading practices, and as result they may gravitate towards more easily digestible, reductive models of Asian religions such as Buddhism's Four Noble Truths, Confucianism's Five Relationships, Islam's Five Pillars, the Three Yogas of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and so forth, an approach that is reinforced by introductory textbooks and supplementary materials such as study questions and quizzes that are often included with them. Viewing films that depict diverse religious practices, however, can drive home the limitations of such models, and this in turn can help students become better critical readers.

Whether a course is specifically about film in Asia, or just incorporates film as part of the course content, Chien, Richey, and Mixon have each demonstrated

how the use of film can be a powerful pedagogical strategy to help dislodge many misconceptions and stereotypes about Asian religions. Of course, they need to develop visual literacy skills as well, and each of the articles suggests powerful pedagogical strategies for doing so. Chien, Richey, and Mixon have provided examples of different approaches to using film—an in-depth analysis of a single film, a selection of films from different regions, and an assignment that has students choose from a list of films and documentaries.

Pedagogical Strategies for Using Films

Chien has given us a richly detailed exploration of the 1987 film *A Chinese Ghost Story*, from its origins and enduring popularity to its many remakes. She points out that there are some aspects of the film that most students wouldn't likely understand entirely without further background, and shares the strategies she uses to make her students more informed viewers. She shows us how important it is to give students background and context to deepen their viewing experience. Her students read an article about ghosts in Chinese culture, and learn Chinese literary ghost stories so that they can better understand the film's love story of the young debt collector and the ghost who had died before marriage, unable to become an ancestor. Targeted readings and course discussions bring greater clarity to scenes that depict or make reference to things such as a funeral procession, the powers of a Daoist master, the

realms of rebirth, and rituals such as exorcism, the use of talismans, and burnt paper offerings meant to aid those in other realms. She highlights the role of demonological concerns in both Buddhism and Daoism. As Chien points out, the use of talismans is in and of itself highly complex, so she focuses on one in particular, showing students texts that provide background for the talisman and suggesting why this particular one was used in the film. Delving deeply into one example is a great way to help students appreciate the complexity of a vast topic without overwhelming them with details, as is so common in many course materials.

It is especially striking that in an interview, Wu Ma, one of the actors in the film, referred to the “Buddhist” consultants who gave advice on the exorcism rituals depicted in the film. Chien points out that these consultants were more likely Daoists; nonetheless, the film still featured a Buddhist text, the *Diamond Sutra*, used in conjunction with Daoist elements in exorcistic performances. Sharing that with students is a powerful way to show how the boundaries between Daoism, Buddhism, and popular religion in Chinese society can be blurred, and in fact are not always meaningful. This insight is applicable in other regions of Asia as well. The essays in Eliza Kent and Tazim Kassam’s 2013 edited volume *Lines in Water: Religious Boundaries in South Asia* present myriad ways that Muslims, Hindus, and Christians in South Asia engage in practices that challenge distinct boundaries between religions. The title was inspired by a comment attributed to a Mughal

prince who was asked to distinguish between different religions, and he replied by asking how one could draw a line in water. Using a film and supplementary readings as Chien has described is an effective way to convey the reality of the lines between different religions as sometimes blurred, or perhaps not even relevant. Chien's use of *A Chinese Ghost Story* yields other valuable insights for students. It can open the door to discussion of diverse topics such as ancestor worship, sexuality and marriage, and festivals. Students see that people may be more focused on using sacred texts for their apotropaic power rather than their study and analysis. Even the film's humorous moments are useful in demonstrating that not all religious matters are solemn and serious. Chien's quotes from her students' work show that the visual aspects of film deepened their understanding.

Richey's article demonstrates that using films can make theoretical models for understanding Asian cultures more vivid and meaningful for students, and thus easier for them to apply. Chang Kyung-sup's concept of "compressed modernity"—the compressed modernization that took place in East Asia from the late 19th to late 20th century, which led to the "dynamic coexistence of mutually disparate historical and social elements"—is a great starting point for giving students a theoretical framework for reflecting on the images and juxtapositions they may encounter in their study of East Asian cultures, and here too, the lessons can be extended to other regions. When a student sees a photograph of a cow walking in front of a Mercedes on a busy urban street in India, they often have the

sense that this captures something but they may not have a framework for expressing it. Compressed modernity is one model for exploring the complexity of such images and situations in which the “traditional” blends with the modern.

Richey uses films from China and Japan which juxtapose Confucian, Daoist, and Shinto traditions. The film from China, *Tiān zhùdìng*, with four vignettes based on well-known news stories, and the animated film from Japan, *Kimi no na wa*, telling the story of a 17-year old boy in modern Tokyo and a young woman in a shrine in a fictional small town, each, as Richey puts it, bring about contact with living traditions. They illustrate Confucian moral melodramas, the tradition of family reunions and honoring ancestors to celebrate the Lunar New Year; and shed light on the symbolic meanings associated with animals in Daoism and rituals such as Buddhist animal release ceremonies.

The films Richey uses refer to current or recent events such as workers’ struggles in China, and the triple disaster of earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown in Japan in 2011. These films illustrate how people may search for meaning using a range of approaches from Confucian moral critique and Daoist practices to romantic Shinto revivalism, demonstrating that these practices are still relevant, alive, and meaningful to people. Richey uses Robert Ford Company’s concept of “cultural repertoire”³ as opposed to a “religion” as a way of making meaning seems especially effective in getting students to move away from looking for a clearly defined religious identity to explain what happens in a film. Students

also are likely to find these films relatable in many ways through their explorations of work, romance, and anxieties about social connections, as well as the experience of participating in rituals when one may not have much knowledge of them.

Richey also uses Dianna Minor's helpful "OPTIC" framework for helping students develop their visual literacy skills, ensuring that they gain an overview [O] of the film, learn about important parts of the image [P] and how the title contributes to the meaning of the film [T], as well as the interrelationships among images in the film [I], and then reach a conclusion that interprets the meaning of the film [C].⁴ The "OPTIC" framework can help students focus on key themes in the films they view, and the concept of compressed modernity can suggest ideas for analyzing those themes.

Mixon has shown how Sadia Habib and Shaf Choudry's "Riz Test"⁵ is another tool students can use to enhance their visual literacy skills and explore the complexity of representation of Muslims in film. Inspired by the Bechdel Test that assesses how women are depicted in film, the Riz Test hones in on how Muslims are portrayed. In her film assignment, Mixon makes the critical point that it's important to situate Islamophobia within Asian contexts, and to acknowledge that Islamophobic violence can extend to Sikhs and many others whom some people view as "apparently Muslim." Drawing upon Elizabeth Barkley and Claire Howell Major's research on student engagement techniques,⁶ she reminds us that to foster active learning and not just use it as a buzzword students need an emotional

connection to the topic they are studying, and that they can learn more when our coursework builds on something they already know (for example, they are aware of the issue of media biases), so that they have a sense that what they're doing has meaning and is therefore worth remembering.

While Chien and Richey choose films for their students to view, Mixon has students choose a film or documentary from a pre-selected list and explore its representation of Muslims. After reading short pieces about Hollywood representations of Muslims, they use the Riz Test while viewing the film they have chosen in order to analyze whether Muslims are portrayed in stereotypical ways, for example as terrorists, misogynist, irrationally angry, superstitious, or as oppressed women. The fact that students can choose a film and then share their findings with other students helps build the connections among different themes and concepts that foster active learning, and the short written paper they submit allows them to elaborate on the insights they have shared with their classmates. Just as the films Chien and Richey use help students see the complexity of people's actual religious practices and spiritual experiences or their cultural repertoires in East Asia, Mixon's assignment, especially the key fact that students share clips from the films they analyze and present their work to one another, helps students recognize the incredible diversity of Islam, and ideally move away from seeing Islam only in the context of war, violence, and oppression of women. Using the Riz Test forces students to struggle with ambiguity, and Mixon makes the case that

students' work on this assignment can help improve their media consumption habits, and perhaps even move from empathy to solidarity with people who are different from them.

Taken together, these articles demonstrate many benefits of using films in our courses on Asian religions. This “pedagogy of the visual” can of course be more engaging and accessible for students. They hear different languages, see scenes from urban and rural landscapes, and see people going about their daily lives. As we work to help them develop and strengthen their critical thinking skills, they gain experience in identifying their own biases and filmmakers' biases too. They can learn about how Asian religions may blend or mix together, how actual practices may not line up exactly with classical texts, how and why people perform rituals and what they may understand and possibly not understand about what they're doing, how people don't fit common stereotypes, and just generally are reminded that real life is more complicated than what a textbook may present—as Mixon put it, they can become more comfortable with ambiguity.

Chien, Richey, and Mixon have each explained how they incorporate films and supplementary materials in their courses. Students gain experience in recognizing the components of the “cultural repertoires” that inform scenes and storylines, and build skills that they can apply in other contexts. Students who have learned about one talisman from Chien's class will have a better idea of how to find out more about another talisman or ritual object they may encounter in some other

situation. The “OPTIC” framework and the Riz Test are memorable strategies that can help students retain key points about what they have watched and read, and they can apply them in other contexts as well. Using such strategies can help transform the emotional response students may have to a film into a deeper understanding, and enhance their retention of course concepts.

The insights that students gain from these films can also lay a foundation for wider discussions about the limitations of defining people in terms of religious identity, and even the limitations of the concept of religion itself. Although Chien, Richey, and Mixon did not address this issue in detail in their articles, the lessons gleaned from people’s practices as portrayed in films provide evidence that the concept of “religion” itself often doesn’t always map exactly onto terms and concepts that people use in Asia. Films’ depictions of people from diverse backgrounds can also show the variations in people’s religious practices. Given that a majority of the classic texts of Asian traditions have been produced and transmitted by and reflect the perspectives of elite males, characters in films can amplify voices that otherwise might not be heard and show a wider range of experiences, such as the young female character Xiǎoyù in the film *Tiān zhùdìng*. Further benefits include the ways that individual characters can open discussions of complex topics such as gender and sexuality, illustrated, for example, in *A Chinese Ghost Story*. Purely text-based approaches may give students less insight into how people navigate these issues.

Some cautions are in order as well; Richey makes sure that students know in advance if a film depicts violence. Mixon mentions the importance of making sure that films are accessible to students when we ask them to view them outside of class. It's also important to acknowledge the diverse student populations in our courses, and reflect on how we can draw upon different students' backgrounds and experience to deepen class discussions. Along somewhat different lines, if we're using films to challenge assumptions about Asian cultures, it's worth keeping in mind that some films and documentaries made in Asia may themselves normalize stereotypes about "Asian cultural values" or promote specific forms of nationalism, or may privilege the perspectives of elite and majority populations. It is critical that we add to our interpretive frameworks questions about whose perspectives are not being represented and whose voices are not being heard in contemporary Asian cinema.

Students who have grappled with the intricacies of interpreting a single talisman will be better prepared to analyze other ritual objects they encounter in the future; students who have seen concrete examples of compressed modernity are better positioned to recognize it in other contexts, and also are less likely to assume that modernity and Westernization are one and the same. Students who have explored films from different regions of Asia are more likely to recognize the diversity of East Asian cultures and Asian cultures more generally. Enhancing their visual literacy may also help deepen their engagement with course readings because

the images from films may make textual materials more vivid. Chien and Richey have outlined effective strategies for enhancing the content and analytical tools we provide for students; Mixon's Islamophobia assignment makes students better equipped to reflect upon and critique representations of Muslims and their experiences. Each of these articles has effectively demonstrated how the use of film in courses on Asian religions can deepen and enhance students' learning.

¹ Hans Penner's *Rediscovering the Buddha: Legends of the Buddha and Their Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) provides an excellent analysis of how much of the scholarship on legends of the Buddha's life has downplayed or ignored the centrality of the legends' mythic components.

² Selva Raj and Corinne G. Dempsey's edited volume *Popular Christianity in India: Riting Between the Lines* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002) is a thoughtful introduction to the range of Christian practices in India, and the ways in which people navigate apparent boundaries between religion in everyday practice.

³ Campany, Robert Ford. "On the Very Idea of Religions (In the Modern West and in Early Medieval China)." *History of Religions* 42, no. 4 (May 2003): 287-319.

⁴ Minor, Dianna. "Visual Literacy Is Critical for 21st Century Learners." *National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Blog*, January 13, 2021, <https://ncte.org/blog/2021/01/visual-literacy-critical-21st-century-learners/>.

⁵ <https://www.riztest.com/>

⁶ Barkley, Elizabeth and Claire Howell Major. *Student Engagement Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty*. 2nd ed. San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass Press, 2020.