

FULBRIGHT CURRICULAR PROJECT:

Summer 2010: Seminar on US/China Relations

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Introduction to Project:

This project will focus on the incorporation of the film *The Joy Luck Club* in the second half of a five-week exit course.

This course is designed for undergraduate students to the Associate Arts degree program. In order to be eligible for this course, one must have completed at least 40 credit hours and at least three of those hours must be in English 1. The purpose of this course is to both introduce students to an interdisciplinary approach to learning and to evaluate their ability to incorporate techniques and knowledge already learned. This is a one-credit course and will focus on the interconnection between history and literary film.

Course Title: “On Becoming American: Cinematic Representations of Female Acculturation”

Course Number: IDS 2100

Course Overview:

This course attempts an in-depth analysis of cinematic representations of the marginalized female as she attempts to integrate into mainstream American culture. This course focuses on the adaptations of two films: *Daughters of the Dust* by Julie Dash and *Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan and looks specifically at how these films represent the generational differences in coming to terms with and becoming a part of mainstream American culture. The selection of texts is designed to foreground and problematize the issues associated with the illustration and viewing of cultural representations and to address the similarities and differences represented between the Asian Other and the African-American Other in mainstream American society.

Rationale for Primary Texts:

Both *The Joy Luck Club* and *Daughters of the Dust* tell the story of three generations of women who migrate to mainstream American or who are currently struggling to reconcile the tension between the traditional and the modern ways. Both films make references to historical events that mark both the building of identity and the importance that history plays in forming culture. *Daughters of the Dust* takes place at the turn of the century in 1902 and references the American institution of slavery, the anti-lynching crusade in the late 1800s, led by African American journalist Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and the exclusion of the Gullah people off the coast of South Carolina due to the economics of slavery and lack of infrastructure between the islands and the mainland. *The Joy Luck Club* takes place in the late 1980s and works backward to the historical references of lack of woman suffrage during the communist era of 1930s, the decades of warfare that ravaged China and led to the Chairman Mao's takeover in 1949, and the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 70s.

Both these texts demand a serious study of time and place in order to understand the motivations of the older characters who struggle with both understanding and incorporating western ideology into their lives without allowing it to completely usurp their native culture or to cause the deterioration of not only the family but also of their heritage. The younger generation consequently represents an eye towards the future and questions whether a balance between the Euro-centric world of America and the African-centric or Chinese-centric mindset of the past can be achieved.

These texts both privilege family while exploring how young women come to find voice and agency in the hybridized world of a hyphenated America. The films are chosen for their similarities in approach, their focus on issues that are specifically female, as well as their rootedness in a historical culture. I believe that a comparative study of these two films provides students with a frame of reference to appropriately analyze each film.

*****Note:** The following plan focuses strictly on *The Joy Luck Club* and is designed to provide educators interested in incorporating film with a Chinese-American focus into the curriculum. The other film mentioned in this project is *Daughters of the Dust* and is used to provide a very brief sketch as means of understanding the context of the discussion in which Tan is presented. *Daughters*, of course, is not the only pairing appropriate for Tan's *Joy Luck*, but is one that presents a similarity of context for instructors interested in coupling *Joy Luck Club* with another under a thematic focus.

Course Plan:

Course Objective:

- Students will demonstrate their ability to think critically.
- Students will demonstrate their ability to express themselves clearly in written and oral language.
- Students will demonstrate their understanding of and appreciation for the value and significance of culture.
- Students will be able to explain the role of history in the assigned cinematic texts.
- Students will be able to articulate what it means to become visible in white American culture
- Students will be able to discuss the politics of identification as it is articulated through the subjective histories of the characters in *Daughters of the Dust* and *Joy Luck Club*.

Daily Plan:

Week 1	First session	Second session	At home prep	Miscellaneous and due dates
	<i>Daughters of the Dust</i>	<i>Daughters of the Dust</i>		
Week 2				
	<i>Daughters of the Dust</i>	<i>Daughters of the Dust</i>	1.View: <i>Joy Luck Club</i> in its entirety 2.Read: “Film as Ethnography”	Online posting due second session of class Be prepared to discuss film and article for week 3
Week 3				

	<p><i>Joy Luck Club</i></p> <p>History: Japanese occupation</p> <p>Essential Question: What conflict and attitudes does this history bring to the text?</p>	<p><i>Joy Luck Club</i></p> <p>Cinematic presentation:</p> <p>Essential Question:</p> <p>Where does this film stand in the argument of selling oriental exoticism to a Western audience?</p>	<p>1.Read: excerpts from</p> <p><i>Cultural Background of China's Folk Customs</i></p> <p>2."The Spectrum of Diaspora in <i>The Joy Luck Club</i>"</p>	
Week 4				
	<p><i>Joy Luck Club</i></p> <p>Culture: Essential Question: How do Tan's couplings depict relationships that are uniquely Asian, Asian-American, and universal?</p>	<p><i>Joy Luck Club</i></p> <p>Diaspora: Essential Question: How does Tan represent the diasporic experience for women?</p>		<p>Online posting due second session of class</p>
Week 5				
	Writing guidelines	Paper discussions		Final paper due

Online Posting:

Select between one of the two for your posting. Your postings should be one paragraph and should have depth and clarity. It should be a well-organized thought and should speak specifically about the issue at hand.

Week 4 Posting

1. In using *The Joy Luck Club* as an example, discuss what you see as the benefits or problems of cultural translation. I am not speaking about the translation of language here, but rather am speaking about China as the sum total of the history and culture of a people. Discuss how you see *Joy Luck Club* dealing with the issues that concern the translation of one culture for another?
2. Discuss how Amy Tan's text incorporates itself in the discourse of the Diaspora. What are the preoccupations of the text in terms of dislocation and relocation? Please narrow your discussion so that you can speak concretely and logically.

Essay Questions (final paper):

You will select one of the following questions for the focus of their final essay. This essay should be a minimum of five double spaced pages and a maximum of seven. This paper should also include a Works Cited page in proper MLA format. This is a separate page from the body of the paper and is not included in the minimum page limit.

1. Research the details and circumstances of women's life in 1930's China, examining both poor and wealthy families. Bring this research to your reading of the film. How do the stories of the mothers relate to the actual historical realities?
2. "The old ways" play a big part in both the texts of *Joy Luck Club* and *Daughters of the Dust*. Using either one or both of the texts, explain how the author/director demonstrates the connection between tradition and the diasporan culture.
3. Write a comparative reading of both texts studied. Select one scene from each text that carries a similar theme such as the theme of marriage or language and discuss how these authors deal with these ideas. Be sure to examine the differences and similarities of approach and discuss what these approaches communicate about the process of becoming American for their respective subjects.
4. Discuss the role of the mother/daughter relationship in *Joy Luck Club* in terms of power, agency, and the cycle of oppression.

Scene Analysis:

1. Opening scene -- begins with a tale in which an immigrant woman buys a goose that is said to have transformed itself into a duck. The duck then becomes transformed into a swan, but this swan is taken away from her at her entrance to America. She is left with nothing but a feather as memory. This scene introduces the idea of myth and storytelling and seems to suggest that the legacy of this woman (the mothers) is transmitted almost subliminally. This raises questions about whether the daughters turn into their mothers.
2. 13:43 – The Japanese occupation renders Suyuan homeless and she is forced to leave her babies on the road in the hopes that someone will come to take of them. This is the past the Chinese women bring with them to America. These are the experiences that make them specifically Chinese.
3. 18:30 -- Lina's mother kills her own son in a post traumatic rage. She says "I took from him the only thing I could," signifying, on a number of levels, the lack of value women hold in pre-modern China. This scene is significant because it speaks to Western cultural expectations and it might be argued that like many of these types of scenes exoticizes the role of the Chinese woman and her culture.
4. 23:30 – Lindo becomes promised to a young man at a very young age and at the age of 15 leaves her mother's house to live with her promised husband whom she does not know and does not wish to know. These experiences are told in silent retrospect suggesting that these experiences are alien to their daughters.
5. 1:18 – An-Mei illustrates the tradition that only the most dutiful of daughters would put her own flesh in a soup to save her mother's life. She depicts the values of loyalty in the face of rejection, and the options open to Chinese women during a war-torn China.
6. 1:25 – Racism – Rose is invited to a family function of her new boyfriend when she is taken aside and told by her future mother-in law "don't take this the wrong way" but your being Asian could cause problems in professional circles for her son. This scene is a pivotal scene that carries the baggage of the root of Chinese racism in America. It announces the idea of the "other" and asks the viewer to focus on the considerations that inform a hyphenated American as being simultaneously insider and outsider.
7. 1:40 – Rose – I was raised the Chinese way. I was taught to desire nothing, to deserve nothing and to eat my own bitterness. This scene comes at the near close of the text and seems to take us back to the beginning of the text where the view is introduced to a feather that functions symbolically as an internal link between mother and daughter.

Rose's words leaves us with the question of if and how do these cultures blend, do these daughters reflect a new Chinese, or can the cycle of oppression ever be broken?

Bibliography:

Bhattacharya, Chidananda. "The Spectrum of Diaspora in *The Joy Luck Club*." *Journal of Indian Writing in English*. 36.2 (2008): 47-54. Print.

This article discusses the diasporic experience of the women in Amy Tan's novel. In her discussion of the role that Tan's Chinese immigrant mothers play, the author characterizes these mothers as a necessary spirit needed to confront the experience of dislocation and relocation. She takes a positive view of the immigration process, referring to the novel as a "celebration of the Chinese dynamism of spirit"(49). Although Bhattacharya tends to simplify the daughters' conflict of balancing the American independence with the Chinese passivity of their mothers' past, the focus of the article seems to suggest that one is always in the process of becoming and that culture need not remain closed and fixed.

Chow, Rey. *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography and Cotemporary Chinese Cinema*. New York: Columbia UP, 1995. Print.

In her article "Film as Ethnography" Chow examines the problems associated with cultural translation. She takes as her premise the problem of Western anthropologists viewing non-western cultures as inferior, primitive, and/or secondary to western cultures. She posits that one way to achieve a more objective reading and presentation of non-western cultures is for those previously ethnographized to begin ethnographing their own culture. This, she states, begins the process of visuality. Visuality, however, becomes a complicated issue of translation because the "rendering of China into film, even at a time when the literary bases of Chinese society are increasingly being transformed by the new media culture, [the representation] is bedeviled by suspicion and replete with accusations of betrayal"(183). Chow questions the ability to appropriately translate culture especially when it is dominated by a Western discourse and suggests that

translation is possible when the notion of the “other” is rediscovered and resurrected as a contemporary of Western culture.

Hu, Zong-feng. *Cultural Background of Chin’s Folk Customs*. China. 2010.
Print.

Hu’s book, written and published in China, provides a description of a host of cultural Chinese practices. His section on marriage, for example, details practices such as “belly pointing,” a marriage agreement made for children still in the womb, and “room changing marriage,” a custom where the bride marries the kin of her departed husband. The practices Hu details are numerous and certainly interesting, but the book is poorly organized with no prefaces to these customs and few references to time frames. Never the less, he does provide a thorough listing of which the novice to Chinese culture might find quite enlightening.

Useful Websites:

1. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/award99/cubhtml/>

This is a library of Congress site that focuses on the Chinese in America from 1850 through 1925. There are a number of resources here that you might find interesting and helpful, but please pay particular attention to the Topical Overview Essays and Galleries.

2. http://www.pbs.org/becomingamerican/ce_resources.html

This is a PBS site complete with essays, quizzes, timeline, personal histories, historical information and more.

3. <http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/historyonline/china1.cfm>

This is a very brief but concise history on the Chinese Exclusion Act, Chinese immigration, and the building of the Transcontinental Railroad. Be sure to click on Asian Americans as this is a site that covers the scope of American history.