

Fulbright-Hays Seminar Abroad in China 2013
Curriculum Project
Author: Jun Okada, PhD
Assistant Professor
Department of English
SUNY Geneseo

TITLE: Fiction and Nonfiction Cinematic Representations of the Cultural Revolution

ABSTRACT:

This project is part of a course I will be teaching Spring Semester 2014 called Film studies 369: The Cultural Revolution in China. It is a mid-level, college film studies course that will also involve viewing films and reading theoretical essays and reviews. The material covered in the 15 week course is broad and historical in scope, looking at the origins of cinema in China to the emergence of the People's Republic through the various tumultuous political movements, leading up to the cinema of the Fifth and Sixth Generation filmmakers.

This particular lesson plan will cover a three week period and focus on the notion of trauma and the modern event and allow students to analyze ways in which films have attempted to represent such momentous and difficult times, specifically focusing on comparisons between fiction and nonfiction. Students may use this course for credit toward the English Major, Film Studies minor as well as the Asian Studies Minor. As a film course, I intend it to introduce not only the topic of China and the Cultural Revolution, but connect it to other traumatic events in 20th century history and how cinema has had an important role in creating meaning about these events—specifically, the nature of totalitarianism, censorship and the Chinese communist party, the contrast between history and memory, the West's view of the East, and views about the impacts of the Cultural Revolution on contemporary China.

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

Film Studies 369: The Cultural Revolution in China

This course explores the period of history in China known as the Cultural Revolution. This period, which officially occurred between 1966 and 1976, represents a time of severe hardship and violence during which millions of people died as the result of Mao Zedong's attempt at enforcing a brutal ideological paradigm shift in communist China. The course itself looks at representations of this time, both the propaganda that was produced as part of the revolution as well as reflections of the recent past by people who survived the trauma of this period. We will view two films as well as theoretical essays and reviews. Students may use this course for credit toward the English Major, Film Studies minor as well as the Asian Studies Minor. I intend this course to introduce not only the topic of China and the Cultural Revolution, but connect it to other traumatic events in 20th century history and show how cinema has had an important role in creating meaning about these events—specifically, the nature of totalitarianism, censorship and the Chinese communist party, the contrast between history and memory, the West's view of the East, and the contemporary, 21st century repudiation of the Cultural Revolution.

LESSON TITLE: History and Memory of the Cultural Revolution

This lesson explores an underexamined period of Chinese history through fiction and documentary cinema. By examining films and other pop cultural items, this lesson aims to shed light on a history that is often opaque because of its obscurity and otherness for American students.

LESSON MATERIAL:

FILMS:

To Live (*Huozhe*) (Zhang Yimou, 1994)

Zhang Yimou's sixth film is a fictionalized account of a family during the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution. The film focuses mainly on the personal struggles of a couple (played by Gong Li and Ge You) and their two children against the backdrop of the Cultural Revolution beginning in 1949 through the hardships of the Great Leap forward.

Morning Sun (Carma Hinton, 2003)

The film *Morning Sun* attempts in the space of a two-hour documentary film to create an inner history of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (c.1964-1976). It provides a multi-perspective view of a tumultuous period as seen through the eyes—and reflected in the hearts and minds—of members of the high-school generation that was born around the time of the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, and that came of age in the 1960s. Others join them in creating the film's conversation about the period and the psycho-emotional topography of high-Maoist China, as well as the enduring legacy of that period.

THE FILMS and FILMMAKERS:

Zhang Yimou and the Fifth Generation:

Zhang Yimou is the most celebrated member of the Fifth Generation filmmakers, a group renowned for being the first graduates of the Beijing Film Academy after universities reopened following the end of the Cultural Revolution. They had been closed by Mao Zedong in the 1960's. These filmmakers, among them, Zhang Yimou, Tian Zhuangzhuang, Chen Kaige, and Zhang Junzhao, reintroduced China to the world in a number of realist works that portrayed a new China in varying, but mostly historical,

modes. Though celebrated by the West for their cinematography and exoticism, some of these films were the source of heated debate and censorship by the Chinese government. Yet, the debates were not so simple. Many scholars in the West, such as Rey Chow, took issue with the problematic representation of China through the seductive surfaces and palettes of its distant, pre-Communist past, especially of Zhang Yimou's consistent employment of "self-orientalization." In using the beauty of actress and muse Gong Li, Chow argues that Zhang essentially plays to the West's expectations of the East and elides the reality of China's more recent traumas and their impacts on its citizens.

Carma Hinton and the Documentary Representation of China

In contrast to Zhang Yimou's fictional treatment of these events, Chinese born and raised American filmmaker Carma Hinton was one of the first documentary filmmakers to cover a very touchy subject in recent Chinese history, the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989. Hinton has made a career of making films about China, most recently, her documentary about the Cultural Revolution, Morning Sun. Among the interesting things about comparing To Live with Morning Sun are questions of culture and authorship—how does being an American change the way we as viewers in the U.S. understand the Cultural Revolution and China? Does it enable or hinder a deeper understanding of these events?

As the readings and discussion questions suggest, this lesson is most concerned, not with the history of the Cultural Revolution, but with its representation. The lesson raises key questions for a humanities course—how are stories told, what do we value in fiction versus nonfiction, what are the politics in the representation of monumental events of trauma?

READINGS:

Week 1:

1. Chow, R. (1996). We Endure, Therefore We Are: Survival, Governance and Zhang Yimou's 'To Live'. *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 95(4).
2. Zhaohui Xiong, "To Live: The Survival Philosophy of the Traumatized" in E. Ann Kaplan and Ban Wang, eds., Trauma and Cinema: Cross Cultural Explorations. (Hong Kong Univ. Press, 2004), pp. 203-215.
3. reviews of To Live in newspapers and film journals.
4. Thomas Elsaesser, "Subject Positions, Speaking Positions: From Holocaust, Our Hitler, and Heimat to Shoah and Schindler's List." in Vivian Sobchack, ed., The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event. (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 145-183.

Assignment: write a one page film review of To Live.

Week 2:

1. Introduction and Chapter 1: "Camera Images and National Meanings," in Tangled Memories (Marita Sturken, University of California Press, 1997), pp. 1-43.
2. Bill Nichols, "The Fact of Fiction and the Fiction of Objectivity," in Nichols, Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991) 165-198.

Assignment: write a one page film review of Morning Sun.

LEARNING GOALS:

- understand the significance of films in memorializing monumental events of history
- problems and issues of representing trauma in fictionalized accounts and documentary film
- be able to distinguish the rhetorical, aesthetic, and ideological strategies of fiction and documentary cinema
- develop debating skills in writing and speaking

SCHEDULE:

Week One: Day 1: Show To Live. Day 2: Discussion about the film and the readings.

Discussion questions:

1. Identify some of the pivotal traumatic events in the lives of the main characters.
2. Of these events, which seem the most significant? Why?
3. Of these events, which do you recognize as large, historical events that affected everyone in China during the Cultural Revolution?
4. After reading Zhaohui Xiong's "To Live: The Survival Philosophy of the Traumatized," what is his overall argument about the film? Do you agree or disagree?
5. How about Rey Chow's article, "We Endure, Therefore We Are: Survival, Governance and Zhang Yimou's 'To Live'?" What is her argument and do you agree or disagree with her viewpoint?
6. If you were to choose between Chow's point that To Live is about the complicity of ordinary people in the Chinese regime or Xiong's view that the very acts of

- ordinary life represent an affirmation of life, that such witnessing and survival is implicated in a subtle politics of resistance, which would you choose and why?
7. What is the value of ordinary life in the representation of such catastrophic trauma?
 8. Does the focus on individuals obscure the harder truths of the Cultural Revolution?
 9. After reading Elssaesser's article, how does the Cultural Revolution compare to the Holocaust in terms of the politics of its representation?

Week Two: Day 1: Show Morning Sun . Day 2: Discussion.

Discussion questions:

1. What are the key events that the documentary chronicles?
2. Which are the events in the Cultural Revolution that both films represent?
3. How are the events represented differently? Is one film more effective than the other? How?
4. What does Sturken mean when she talks about the importance of “camera images” to stand in for memory? Which film does a better job at memorializing trauma—To Live or Morning Sun?
5. Ultimately, is it possible to have an “objective view” of historical trauma through nonfiction methods?
6. Zhang is a Chinese director and Carma Hinton is American. However, Hinton has spent her childhood and early adulthood entirely in China and therefore considers herself Chinese in some ways. What does this suggest about authorship

and the representation of such complex events in such a complex culture such as China? Why does China seem so opaque to Westerners?

Week Three: Students present in class debate about the films. Classroom is divided in half and each side will spend 10-15 minutes preparing their debate. Each side will take on a yes or no position on the following question:

Question: After much consideration, which film, Zhang Yimou's To Live or Carma Hinton's Morning Sun, would you show to someone with the purpose of enlightening them about late twentieth century China and why?