# Teaching East and Southeast Asia through Asian Eyes

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**Abstract:** Colonialism and indigenous responses to its varied forms dominate modern Asian historiography and imbue the history of the region with rich and multifaceted connections to world history. As a result, the histories of East and Southeast Asian nation-states since 1500 cannot be viewed outside of the context of global affairs. Imagining Asian peoples and cultures during this time is problematic for students, who typically approach colonialism from a western perspective. This article explores various means of incorporating pedagogical materials and diverse media sources into the classroom to facilitate a more grounded examination of East and Southeast Asian colonies, peoples, and nation-states. It pays special attention to teaching colonialism, anticolonialism, nationalism, and transnationalism from the perspective of Southeast Asia's indigenous peoples.

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In 1960, renowned Southeast Asian historian D. G. E. Hall published a call to arms for Asian historians, and particularly historians of Southeast Asia, writing, "The need therefore for a big effort of expansion in the serious study of Southeast Asian history in the United States has become very urgent" (Hall 1960, 281). Despite the passage of more than 50 years since the penning of that article, Hall's complaint still resonates with Asian historians today. Nowhere is the dearth of Asia-centered histories and sources felt more keenly than in the classroom. A myriad of challenges confronts teachers of Asian history in the U.S., and irrespective of the types of institutions at which Asian history is taught, these challenges more or less remain the same.

Broadly speaking, these issues are well known to historians who visit the various professional forums frequented by teachers of Asian history. Most of them concern the general lack of familiarity with Asian philosophies, culture, and languages exhibited by American students. A recent thread on the H-Asia listserv, for example, questioned the value of teaching Asian history beyond the survey level to students unfamiliar with Asian languages. The crux of this dilemma seemed to center upon two questions: can one effectively introduce Asia to non-Asian students and, if so, how? I believe that a solution to this difficulty can be found in a careful reevaluation of the types of sources used in the teaching of Asian history. Film, fiction, and memoir are essential ingredients in the successful development of cultural understanding in the classroom.

In the past, Western discussions of pedagogical approaches to diverse media having to do with Asia have tended to focus upon the failure of these media to give true insight into Asian history. Such discussions have emphasized the many colonial, neocolonial, or Orientalist perspectives displayed by Western media, and then discussed best practices for analyzing these biased sources in a way that broadens student understanding of Asian issues in a global society.[1] Insofar as these approaches help us (and our students) understand the racial and ethnocentric preconceptions that Western students often bring into the Asian history classroom, they can be useful; however, using them to the exclusion of other materials fails

to expose students to the breadth and depth of Asian memoirs, fiction, and film available for classroom use.

The late Chinese historian Harold Isaacs once commented that "every 'reality' is made up of somebody's images; every 'image' is part of someone's reality. Images, moreover, appear in the eye of the beholder. Who, then, is beholding, and who is being beheld, when, where, in what circumstances...?" (Isaacs 1975, 258) No group is more capable of expressing who "Asians" are—whether historical or contemporary—than the writers and filmmakers of Asia itself. Given that indigenous filmmakers and authors may not be historical or ethnographical experts, issues of historical authority and veracity provide additional fodder for contextualization and group discussion in class. This essay offers some suggestions for resources to use when teaching Asian history in general and Southeast Asian history in particular. It also examines ways in which these sources might be used to speak to some of the broader historical themes that are central to courses in Asian and global history.

Before entering into a more exhaustive survey of specific current Southeast Asian sources, it is important to look critically at methods of conveying "images" of Asia that transcend the bounds of classroom lectures and recitations of historical fact. In particular, the use of film as a medium for enhancing historical and ethnographic understanding remains hotly contested in pedagogical scholarship. In the field of Anthropology, a mournful discourse has emerged addressing the issues surrounding what are largely documentary films and students' less than optimal responses to them. Elizabeth Bird and Jonathan Godwin criticize what they term the "unspoken assumptions…that films 'speak for themselves' in a direct way that books may not, or that students in a media-saturated society will naturally respond better to media than to lectures or reading" (Bird and Godwin 2006, 285). They highlight the realities of the modern freshman classroom, warning readers not to show "classic" ethnographic films in their entirety: "Do not expect distracted, media-saturated freshmen to appreciate the elegiac beauty of [indigenous peoples] – they are much more likely to react to 'disgusting' habits and 'primitive' conditions" (Bird and Godwin 2006, 296). Bird and Godwin are certainly correct in cautioning teachers to contextualize their selections of media sources carefully.

Teachers of language, culture, and history, on the other hand, generally report more satisfaction with media-based pedagogy. Historian Denise Blum speaks of the power of film when she suggests that, when properly presented it, "is not just about the transfer of information as film is traditionally used in classrooms. Rather, it engages memory, emotion, and the intellect in the production of knowledge and meaning" (Blum 2006, 301). In writing about her experience screening a film about the Arab-Israeli conflict, Blum notes that "identities are a key ingredient in the film experience. Depending on which political identities are engaged and the form in which the film is produced, viewed, and facilitated, the experience can vary tremendously" (Blum 2006, 303). This idea is reinforced by the work of Janet Staiger, who highlights the multidimensionality of film reception and audience response, a heterogeneity based largely upon the experiences and identities with which viewers, or, in our case, students, approach the screen (Staiger 2000). Elissa Tognozzi, an Italian professor, concludes that film-based assignments expand "students' notions of how to interpret other cultures and how to communicate within their social contexts, emerging from the experience with a far deeper cultural awareness" (Tognozzi 2010, 81).

These inconsistencies in evaluating the medium of film revolve largely around issues of audience bias and receptivity: pedagogical success or failure seems to hinge upon appropriate contextualization of the media by the instructor. Contextualization is an essential element in the use of any medium, whether film or printed, fiction or nonfiction. Many

teachers, especially in secondary and community college education, cite "providing subject matter content" as a rationale for using expanded media, but this reasoning has serious flaws (Marcus and Stoddard 2007, 315). Levstik and Barton (2001, 9-12, 358) have already established that rote memorization is not an effective method of fostering historic understanding, but the unproblematized use of fiction, film, and other media is equally unproductive. Adam Woelders (2007, 365) argues for a distinction between ineffective teaching with film and the immensely useful process of "teaching *about* history *with* film," which "challenges students to construct their own historical knowledge based on inferences, speculations, and conclusions drawn from evidence, not solely from any authoritative source such as the teacher, the textbook, or the information" they glean from other course materials like film, fiction, and memoir. In this paradigm, in the college classroom, the act of assigning critical value to narrative sources based upon information already gleaned from more didactic pedagogical methods such as lecture instructs students in historical relativity and bias while simultaneously enabling them to hone their skills at historical interpretation.

Film as a means of increasing students' historic empathy, while potentially quite effective, can also be pedagogically suspect. After all, increased empathy is no guarantee of improved understanding or knowledge of historic events. As so many of the scholars cited in this article have agreed, the key to enhanced cultural awareness and historic understanding lies in the careful contextualization of prominent events and cultural realities of the past. With proper groundwork, however, fiction, memoir, and film become invaluable resources for enabling students to understand what otherwise might seem, as Bird and Godwin put it, "primitive and disgusting" cultures and events. To this end, the remainder of this article shall address a variety of literary and film sources that offer particular insight into various time periods and themes of Asian history.

One of the more difficult tasks when teaching Asian survey courses is to sufficiently explain numerous and complex Asian philosophies in order to contextualize the histories I am trying to illuminate. In my classroom, I have begun experimenting with assignments that combine primary source examples of historical events with the philosophical texts themselves. For example, when discussing the Confucian value of filial piety in an East Asian survey course, we read and discuss brief excerpts from the *Confucian Analects*, Mencius, and the *Classic of Filial Piety* (Xiao Jing) (de Bary, Bloom and Adler 2000), but we also read Lady Hyegyong's 1805 memoir (Hyegyong 1996, 241-337). This classic and chilling tale of the path of madness and murder taken by Lady Hyegyong's husband, Korean Crown Prince Sado (1735-1762), eventually ends with Sado's public execution at the hands of his father, King Yongjo. This tragedy, given perspective and emotion by Lady Hyegyong herself as she grapples with her own Confucian responsibilities, creates the perfect backdrop for a writing assignment dealing with the multidirectional obligations inherent in the Confucian family structure. The pathos and horror of Lady Hyegyong's tale bring 18th century Korea to vivid life—even for students raised on *Law & Order* and *CSI*.

Carefully selected combinations of primary texts also lend themselves to writing exercises that employ methods of historical, cultural, or political role playing. Historian Noel Miner has argued convincingly in favor of the employment of historical role-playing techniques, including having students write and perform their own three-act plays distilled from selected historical events and sources in class. Miner argues that while

> simulation and role-playing techniques cannot be considered panaceas to replace the lecture and textbook in every history class, … the potential emotional impact of simulated events and the opportunity to manipulate events which will become history justifies use of these pedagogical methods. Students involved in these classes

> have stated that the exercise had been both intellectually stimulating and enjoyable.... Especially among non-history majors there was genuine enthusiasm for a subject which too often succumbed to the listing of arcane facts and forgettable names. For a brief moment, history had come to life in the classroom. (Miner 1977, 227-8)

While Miner's complex multi-act play assignment might be too time consuming for use in a survey class, role playing in other forms can still involve students more personally in the philosophies of a given place and time.

Students have responded very positively, for instance, to a writing assignment that has become a staple of my pre-modern East Asian history class: a letter written to an imaginary king of the Warring States period urging him to eschew the ideas of certain prominent philosophers of the time while encouraging the wholesale adoption of the ideas of another. Each student is required to develop his or her own rationale for supporting the chosen philosophy. Given all of the philosophers from this broadly-conceived period—Confucius, Mencius, Han Fei Zi, Mo Zi, Lao Zi, and Zhuang Zi—this assignment encourages students to delve into and engage with a selection of philosophical readings in a way that mere description or recitation of facts would not.[2] Similar writing assignments addressing early confrontations between Asia and the West have also piqued student interest and received favorable reviews in end-of-semester course evaluations.

In upper-division classes, longer papers and a heavier reading load allow for more complex assignments. In a recent senior-level course on Japan, my students looked at a variety of sources dealing with three prominent periods in Japanese history in order to envision these eras more clearly and personally. For the Heian period, Murasaki Shikibu's *Tale of Genji* (1990) provided a fictional account of Heian society that was brilliantly reinforced by an iconic Heian diary, *The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon* (Shonagon 1991). Video clips of modern kabuki performances and PowerPoint presentations emphasizing Heian art and architecture breathed life into a period whose aesthetics might otherwise appear fussy and effete in a modern classroom. Finally, with regard to Japan in the aftermath of war, Kenzaburo Oe's short stories (for example, those found in the 1994 collection *Teach us to Outgrow our Madness*) nicely complemented John Dower's exemplary traditional history *Embracing Defeat* (Dower 2000). In this modern era, films such as Ichikawa Kon's 1956 gem *The Burmese Harp*, Honda Ishiro's 1954 film *Gojira*, or even the more recent 1988 anime film directed by Takahata Isao, *Grave of the Fireflies* (based on Nosaka Akiyuki's semi-autobiographical account of his childhood in wartime Kobe, Japan) could all be used as further platforms for discussion of the impact of war upon Japanese society.

The strength of all of these memoirs, novels, stories, and films rests in the vividness with which they portray the culture, people, or zeitgeist of a different place and time. When Sei Shonagon writes lists of things she finds annoying, modern college students find that they can relate because they find some of the listed things annoying too. When students weep over the fate of Seita and Setsuko in *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988), they have transcended cultural barriers to empathize personally with the film's protagonists. When their hearts break for *The Burmese Harp*'s (1956) main protagonist, Mizushima, as he wanders around Burma to bury the untended piles of Japanese dead, the stereotype of the fearsome and single-minded Japanese soldier is severely damaged. In the Western classroom, relating to Asian characters on these levels transcends mere human empathy; in fact, it represents the replacement of myth, stereotype, and fantastical imaginings with "images" of greater authenticity. While The *Tale of Genji* may not be representative of the Heian-era Japanese lifestyle in general, it still depicts with some significant fidelity the mores and aesthetics of a

real time and place. Can the same be said of *The Karate Kid*'s (1984) Mr. Miyagi?

The examples I've discussed so far have all involved the study of East Asian history, which, while certainly exotic in the minds of most American students, is bolstered by a substantial body of translated primary sources of all varieties and in all major media. Historians of Southeast Asia, on the other hand, are not yet blessed with such a bounty of primary source material in translation. But despite the paucity of major Southeast Asian works in translation, many of the sources that do exist are ideal for "reimaging" Southeast Asia in the eyes of American students. The remainder of this essay shall focus upon introducing some of these Southeast Asian sources while, in the interest of brevity, limiting this discussion to the central and overlapping themes of colonialism and war.

By far the most iconic of Southeast Asia's anticolonial novels, Jose Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere* (2006), is stunning in its sweeping challenge to Spanish Colonialism. First published in 1887, this novel and its sequel, *El Filibusterismo* (2007), were originally written in Spanish by Rizal, perhaps the most prominent of the Filipino nationalists. This story exposes the corruption, ignorance, and venality of the Spanish colonial authorities and Spanish friars in the Philippines. By ridiculing and caricaturing the hypocrisies abounding in the colonial Philippines, *Noli Me Tangere* provides a peerless platform for evaluating Spanish colonialism and evolving nationalist sentiments from the inside out.

The injustice of the racial hierarchy of Dutch colonialism is the focus of the first volume in Pramoedya Ananta Toer's Buru Quartet.[3] *This Earth of Mankind* (Toer 1996) was narrated to Pramoedya's fellow political prisoners on Buru Island beginning in the early 1970s. This novel, too, provides a scathing critique of colonialism, in this case as it operated under Dutch rule in the Netherlands East Indies. In this tale, the main character, Minke, a Javanese youth of uncommon intellect and promise, is scorned by his classmates and limited in achieving his ambitions as a result of his race, while others of lesser ability find greater opportunity for happiness and success because of their European blood. When read alongside other, earlier primary sources, such as Raden Ayu Kartini's turn-of-the-nineteenth-century writings about Javanese society and the social plight of Javanese women, student understanding of the difficulties faced by the denizens of the Netherlands East Indies resonates with an even deeper poignancy (Kartini 1992).

Equally critical of French colonialism in Vietnam but far more satirical in their approaches to it are Vu Trong Phung's 1936 novel *Dumb Luck* (2002) and his 1934 reportage, *The Industry of Marrying Europeans* (2005). *Dumb Luck*, the story of the absurd ascent of a mendicant named Red-Haired Xuan through the social strata of colonial Hanoi, sheds light on the problems resulting from the abandonment of all things "traditional" in pursuit of western-style modernization. By offering a powerful critique, less of colonialism than of the people who fall prey to its influences, *Dumb Luck* preaches a subtle and nuanced message about the cultural and social threats made to Vietnamese society by French involvement in the region. *The Industry of Marrying Europeans*, using a combination of fiction and non-fiction, examines a similar phenomenon: the lives of Indochinese women who seek to improve their lots by marrying, even if temporarily, European men. The less farcical approach taken by *The Industry of Marrying Europeans* is particularly appropriate for students in survey classes, as its critique leaves a bit less to the imagination. These stories provide a fascinating and personal narrative backdrop to more political sources, such as those assembled in Truong Buu Lam's exceptional collection, *Colonialism Experienced: Vietnamese Writings on Colonialism*, 1900-1931 (2000).

In the category of cinema, when discussing the colonial era in Indochina, the main pitfall is the proliferation of assorted French films of varying virtue and veracity that depict

French recollections of the colonial. The most prominent of these is doubtless the 1992 film *Indochine*, which tells the story of a plantation-owning mother and her adopted Vietnamese daughter as they maneuver through a society being altered by rising anti-French sentiment and a growing tide of Vietnamese nationalism. As a representation of French fascination with the Indochinese exotic, this film can be quite useful in a classroom setting; it is a perfect example of Orientalism in film form. This bias makes *Indochine* a helpful springboard for upper-level discussions of the repeatedly-demonstrated French reluctance to relinquish their Asian colonies. However, there is also a stellar Vietnamese film that depicts the lives of Vietnamese peasants in the twilight of the colonial era, the 2004 production *Buffalo Boy*. This film, set in the late 1940s, tells the story of a teenage boy named Kim and his struggle to save the water buffalo, which are instrumental to the family's survival as subsistence farmers. This coming-of-age story is set against a backdrop of water and reflects the relentless impact of monsoonal floods upon a family terrorized by natural disaster and an oppressive French colonial government.

For greater insight into the changing lives in colonial and postcolonial Thailand, Kukrit Pramoj's novel *Four Reigns* (1999) paints a sweeping portrait of the life of an upper-class Siamese woman. Even though Siam itself was never colonized by a European power, this novel, beginning in the 1890s and continuing through World War II, still depicts the dramatic transitions of a single lifetime as the main character, Phloi, moves from her home to the king's palace, where she befriends the palace servants and courtiers, eventually marries and begins a family of her own, and watches her children embark upon their own lives. This "story of a life" takes dramatic twists and turns due to the impacts of events happening both in Asia and across the globe. Although the main character is a woman, and despite the sensitive treatment of women's powerlessness by the author, this novel is better used as a fictionalized social history of *fin de siècle* and wartime Siam/Thailand than as a representation of female voice.

Using a satirical approach more similar to *Dumb Luck* than to the more serious *Four Reigns*, Y. B. Mangunwijaya's novel *Durga Umayi* (2004) also tells the story of a Southeast Asian woman through several decades of dramatic postcolonial change. This story begins in the Netherlands East Indies in the 1930s and ends in Indonesia during the presidency of Suharto. Set against the backdrop of the radical transformations wrought by Indonesian nationalism, *Durga Umayi* faithfully, if surrealistically, depicts the chaos and capriciousness of life in the new Indonesia while remaining faithful to the magical world of Indonesian tradition. As an example of the postcolonial condition, this entertaining tale is well suited to upper division Asian and World History classes, especially if students are encouraged to persevere through the first chapter or two until they get a feel for the flow of the novel.

Another interesting twentieth-century Southeast Asian source comes from Ba Maw, the political leader and advocate for Burmese self-rule during the British colonial period. His memoir, *Breakthrough in Burma*, depicts the chaos, violence, and betrayal that characterized Burma during the late colonial era and the early years of World War II (Maw 1968). Although not explicitly an Asian voice, in his 1934 classic *Burmese Days* (2010), George Orwell offers a blistering insider's critique of British colonial rule that adroitly describes not just the nature of British colonial society, but also the price of speaking out against it. When assigned consecutively, even if in excerpts, *Breakthrough in Burma* and *Burmese Days* together provide an excellent framework for discussing the destabilizing influence of colonialism upon a colonized society.

In any discussion of the overlapping colonialisms of Western nations and Imperial Japan, Indonesian author Pramoedya Ananta Toer makes an excellent starting point. His

first major novel, *The Fugitive* (2000), tells the story of Hardo, a young soldier who has been involved in a failed revolt against the occupying Japanese. This story of betrayal and suffering under a second round of foreign occupation is brilliantly complemented by two sections of Pramoedya's memoir, *The Mute's Soliloquy* (1999). These chapters, entitled "Death in a Time of Change" and "Working for the Japanese," recall Pramoedya's own experiences as a young man living and working in an East Indies under Japanese occupation (Toer 1999, 153-91). Lee Kuan Yew, the first and longest-serving Prime Minister of the Republic of Singapore, tells a similar story in his autobiography, *The Singapore Story*, reflecting upon the arrival of the Japanese into the city-state and the impact that their presence had upon his life as a young boy (Yew 1999).

When addressing Southeast Asian history in America, it is impossible to discuss Southeast Asian sources without talking about the wars in Indochina. When teaching upper-level courses on Vietnam, I have had great success when presenting students with a combination of war memoirs. Seemingly innumerable sources address the Indochina wars from all aspects of the conflicts, but my favorite pairing is Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* (1996) and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (2009). In circles frequented by historians of Vietnam, Bao Ninh often meets with mixed reviews, in large part because of the rambling and disorganized nature of his story's plot. That being said, both narratives, by eschewing efforts to replicate faithfully the authors' wartime experiences, manage to convey the essence of that experience in a way that is far more powerful and affecting than a more dispassionate account could hope to achieve. There are also more traditional accounts of the Vietnamese experience during the wars of the 20th century. In particular, Nguyen Thi Dinh's *No Other Road to Take* (1976) is effective at helping American students understand why some Vietnamese civilians wanted to fight the French and the Americans. It is also quite useful as a springboard for a discussion about biases in sources, in large part because Nguyen Thi Dinh is so open and overt in her support for the communist cause in Vietnam. This memoir has the added benefit of female authorship, providing an account of women's wartime experience actually written by a woman. As a result, among Southeast Asian sources available to date, this memoir represents a unique voice.

Finally, for history teachers, the Vietnam War was the catalyst for another human catastrophe that is central to any discussion of modern global history. The Cambodian genocide has been illuminated by a multitude of primary source accounts of its human toll and tragedy. In particular, memoirs by survivors Chanrithy Him and Luong Ung tell equally chilling stories of the horror of life under the Khmer Rouge. Both accounts, Him's *When Broken Glass Floats* (2001) and Ung's *First They Killed My Father* (2006), provide an excellent counterpoint to class discussions about the political philosophies of the Khmer Rouge and, in putting faces to the Cambodian tragedy, color the statistics of the tragedy in almost unbearable ways.

The widely acclaimed 1984 film *The Killing Fields* graphically depicts the experiences of *New York Times* reporter Sidney Schanberg and his Cambodian translator Dith Pran during and after the Khmer Rouge conquest of Phnom Penh, but what fewer people realize is that the actor who played Dith Pran in the movie, a Cambodian doctor named Haing Ngor, was himself a survivor of Cambodia's Killing Fields. His memoir, *Survival in the Killing Fields* (2003), is more than 500 pages long, but excerpts of it brilliantly complement the movie for which its author won an Academy Award, due in part, no doubt, to his true understanding of Cambodia's tragedy.

Two further films on Cambodia deserve special attention. The first, *Rice People* (1994), is set in the crushing poverty of the rural countryside in post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia, where

rice farmers must deal with natural disasters, deadly snakes, and relentless disease in order to eke out a meager living in the rice paddies. The other film is a documentary in which two of the seven known survivors of Tuol Sleng, the most notorious of the Khmer Rouge detention facilities in which as many as 17,000 people were tortured and killed, return to the prison with their captors to revisit the experiences of their imprisonment. Entitled *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2003), the film is difficult to watch and even more difficult to explain to undergraduates without significant historic preparation and contextualization.

As discussed at the beginning of this essay, nowhere is the dearth of Asia-centered histories and sources felt more keenly than in the classroom. As a result of this paucity, western pedagogy over the past few decades has tended to fall back upon western accounts of Asia as the lens through which to imagine Asian history and culture. Fortunately, even though the list of accessible primary sources in translation has expanded at a glacial rate, the number of Asian primary sources in translation that are accessible to history teachers grows larger with every passing year and currently includes a wide variety of films, memoirs, and works of fiction addressing virtually any significant period of the Asian past. This relatively recent expansion in available sources represents a shifting of the historiographical tide, an evolution of which all globally-inclined historians should take notice. If one of the most difficult aspects of teaching Asian history to western students is students' lack of familiarity with the topics central to the course, then western students are best served by exposure to Asian sources that help them "reimage" Asia: by putting a face to distant places, different times, and foreign cultures; by replacing western stereotypes and political biases with Asian voices; and by empathizing with the personal experiences of those who lived through the events we study. This, I believe, is the future of successful Asian history pedagogy.

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## NOTES

1. This issue is certainly not new to pedagogical forums. For a dated, but particularly exhaustive, examination of issues of Western perceptions of Asia and pedagogical approaches to Asian history, see Yang (1980).
2. Translations of assorted ancient Chinese philosophical writings can be found in De Bary, Bloom, and Adler (2000).
3. The Buru Quartet consists of four books written by Indonesian author Pramoedya Ananta Toer: *This Earth of Mankind*, *Child of All Nations, Footsteps*, and *House of Glass*.

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