

BUDDHIST ASIA: TRADITIONS, TRANSITIONS, AND TRANSFORMATIONS

“EAST ASIAN BUDDHISM IN FILM”

Prepared by Michael Schainfeld, UH Philosophy Graduate Student

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Filmography

* Films with an asterisk are available at the UH Manoa Sinclair Library Audio Visual Center.

Feature Films

Chinese Buddhism:

Avalokiteshvara (Zhang Xin, 2013)

Avalokiteshvara is a dramatization of how Mount Putuo came to be identified with the holy place of the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. Set during the Tang Dynasty, a young Japanese monk by the name of Hui'e is sent on a royal mission to bring back a fabled Avalokiteshvara ceramic statue. The fabled statue was originally produced at the request of Prince Guang's mother to bless and protect her son from assassination by the cruel ruling Tang emperor. The porcelain maker Yu Xiufeng fails to produce the ceramic statue of the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara until one day, after discovering an orphan baby girl whom he takes in, he is finally able to complete the statue.

Since the completion of the statue coincides with Little Lotus' arrival, everyone assumes that she is the human incarnation of the legendary bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. She grows up to be a beautiful and compassionate young woman who has compassion for everyone she meets, because her father told her that anyone she meets might be her real father and mother.

God Man Dog (Singing Chen, Taiwan, 2008)

God Man Dog is a drama about the unlikely blessings that life affords people from all walks of life in moments of despair. A middle class wife struggles with post-partum depression after the death of her newborn. A truck driver provides shelter to deserted god statues, yet can't afford to repair his prosthetic leg. An indigenous alcoholic farmer delivers fresh peaches from the countryside to the capital, yet finds himself less valued than his produce. An athlete struggles to escape from the mundanity of her life. A car accident caused by a dog brings their lives in contact with one another, forcing them to reflect about the pain and suffering of others.

Monkey King at Spider Cave (Larry Reed & Cheng Chia-yin, USA, 2009)

Monkey King at Spider Cave follows a Buddhist master and his animal disciples in their journey to India, amid the dangers of mythical demons and monsters, to bring sacred Buddhist scriptures to China. Inspired by the 16th century epic *Journey to the West*, the film is a spectacular display of tradition and innovation set in the form of shadow-theater.

The 36th Chamber of Shaolin (Liu Chia-Liang, 1978)

The 36th Chamber of Shaolin is a fictionalized rendering of San Te, a legendary Shaolin martial arts student who trained under the guidance of General Chi Shan. The film centers around Liu Yude, a young revolutionary bent on seeking vengeance against the town's Manchu oppressors. After narrowly escaping death after a failed plot, Yude heads for the Shaolin Temple to learn kung fu. Yude quickly ascends the ranks to become overseer of one of the temple's 35 chambers. The film reveals the highly ritualized way of life in the historic Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism temple.

Japanese Buddhism:

**Departures* (Yōjirō Takita, Japan, 2008)

Departures explores the complex rituals and attitudes surrounding death in Japan. The film centers around the life of Daigo, a young talented cellist who suddenly finds himself out of work after his orchestra is disbanded. Pressed for money, he and his wife decide to move back to his small hometown. After responding to a classified ad for a company listed as "Departures," Daigo finds out that instead of selling travel packages, he will be preparing bodies of the recently deceased for their passage to the afterlife. Daigo accepts the position and through the experience comes to gain a deep appreciation for life.

**The Taste of Tea* (Katsuhito Ishii, Japan, 2004)

The Taste of Tea is a bizarre comedic portrait of a family struggling to come to grips with temporality, place, people, and the sheer unpredictability and contingency of their lives. Each member of the family struggles with an object of attachment. For the eight year-old Sachiko, it is an oversize version of herself. For her older brother Hajime, it is a heavy heart. For their mother Yoshiko, it is success. The rest of the family is fraught with similarly trivial concerns, except for grandpa, who, despite his own idiosyncrasies, is eagerly set on trying to make the most of life.

**After Life* (Hirokazu Koreeda, Japan, 1998)

After Life is a thoughtful reflection on death and memory. The plot of the film is straightforward. Following death, twenty-two souls arrive at a portal on their way to the afterlife, where they are told to choose a single memory that will accompany them for eternity. In producing the film, the director interviewed 500 people from different backgrounds about what memory their selected memory. Through creative cinematic effects, the film shows how such memories are distorted, enhanced, and exaggerated, and that it is this subjective re-creation of one's memory that the main characters value most.

**Ugetsu* (Kenji Mizoguchi, 1953)

Ugetsu is a classic about the failure to appreciate what one had until it is gone. The film is based on a collection of ghost stories called *Ugetsu Monogatari* ("Tales of Moonlight and Rain") by Ueda Akinari (1734-1809). Set in medieval Japan around a village potter named Genjuro whose insatiable appetite for profit leads him to abandon his wife and son for a beautiful aristocratic woman whom he later comes to find out is a ghost. When he returns home to the family he has forsaken, he finds that his wife and child are gone. Though killed by invading soldiers, his wife is brought back to life for one last reunion with Genjuro. In the morning, he awakes to find himself once again all alone in an empty house. Only then does he realize the value of what he squandered while off chasing ghosts.

**Enlightenment Guaranteed* (Doris Dörrie, Germany, 2000)

Enlightenment Guaranteed is a hilarious comedy about two mismatched brothers suffering from midlife crises who travel to Japan for a retreat at a Zen monastery in order to sort out their lives. Along the way, they face a nightmare of troubles, through which they experience firsthand the core teachings of Buddhism.

**Late Spring* (Yasujiro Ozu, 1949)

Late Spring is the first in a series of films that focus on the family and the natural stages of life as children grow and move away from their parents, both physically and emotionally. Set during the American occupation of post-war Japan, the film is a poignant story of an aging widower and his unmarried daughter who sacrifice their own happiness for the sake of the other. Shukichi deceives his daughter into getting married at the insistence of her aunt Masa in order to do what he believes is right. The film belongs to a genre of Japanese films known as "shomingeki" (or "family drama"), which deals with the ordinary lives of working class and middle class families in modern times.

**Tokyo Story* (Yasujiro Ozu, 1953)

Tokyo Story continues the "life as a dream" theme and the Buddhist aesthetic of "mono no aware," or awareness of the evanescent nature of things and the gentle sadness at their passing mixed with a longer-lasting sadness about this being the nature of reality. The film follows an elderly couple who travel from their small seaside village to post-war Tokyo to visit their adult children. Their doctor son and hairdresser daughter are too busy to make time for them, so the weight of keeping them company falls upon the widow of their younger son.

**Maborosi* (Hirokazu Kore-eda, 1997)

Maborosi is a poetic reflection on life and death and evokes the Japanese aesthetic concept of “yugen,” or the dark, deep, gentle, mysterious inner beauty of the world. The film revolves around a young woman’s husband, who without apparent reason commits suicide, leaving his wife to make sense of what would lead her husband to do such a thing. In Japanese folklore, *Maborosi* refers to a mysterious, beautiful light that lures sailors out at sea to their deaths.

The Mourning Forest (Naomi Kawase, Japan, 2007)

The Mourning Forest is a deeply sentimental film about loss, love, and life that intertwines the lives of two characters struggling to come to terms with the loss of loved ones, a nurse who is in mourning over the death of her son and an elderly widower suffering from dementia who is in search of some connection to his deceased wife.

**Book of the Dead* (Kihachirō Kawamoto, Japan, 2005)

Book of the Dead is an animation film that emphasizes the Buddhist teaching of caring for the deceased. Set in the Tara Period (circa 750 CE) during the arrival of Buddhism from China, the film centers on the relationship formed between Iratsume, a young noblewoman with a passion for the newly introduced religion, and the spirit of the executed Prince Ōtsu, a lost soul caught between this world and the next.

**Dreams* (Akira Kurosawa, Japan, 1990)

Dreams is a cinematic journey through director Akira Kurosawa’s dreams -- from childhood, to adulthood, and old age; from past, present, and the future; and across winter, summer, spring, and autumn – in a series of eight visually stunning and symbolic vignettes that, when viewed as a whole, creates a beautiful mosaic with an important message.

Korean Buddhism:

Why has Bodhidharma left for the East? (Young-Kyun Bae, Korea, 1989)

Why has Bodhidharma left for the East? is a cinematic koan about the interconnectedness of existence and the experience of enlightenment through the renunciation of worldly desires. The plot revolves around an aging monk, his student, and an orphaned child, who live together in a remote mountain Zen monastery. The master and orphaned child try to pass their wisdom on to the young student, but he is uncomprehending, stuck between his attachments to his life in the city and the path to inner peace.

**A Little Monk* (Kyung-jung Joo, Korea, 2002)

A Little Monk takes a lighter approach to the relationship between Buddhist teachings and religious feelings. In the film, three generations of monks living in a Buddhist monastery have their own wish. For the youngest monk, it is to have a mother. For the older one, it is to have a girlfriend. As for the master, it is to be untroubled by the wishes of his younger students. One day, their wishes come to life. A woman who lost her son wants to adopt the youngest monk. The older monk decides to quit the monastery to find a girlfriend. But things don’t work out as they expected, leaving them with the sense that the grass is not always greener on the other side.

Passage to Buddha (Chang Sun-Woo, Korea, 1993)

Passage to Buddha is a modern rendition of the Avatamsaka Sutra, which is about the various interdependent things that make the cosmos what it is and the path to enlightenment. In the film, a young boy named Seon Jae, who mourns over the loss of his father, sets out to find his mother. Along the way, he encounters a range of different characters, each of whom impart on him a different Buddhist teaching that comes to shape his thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about the world in a powerful and transformative way. It soon becomes clear that he is less on a journey to find his mother than spiritual enlightenment.

**Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter and ... Spring* (Kim Ki-Duk, Korea, 2003)

Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter and ... Spring is a simple, but nonetheless moving story about a Buddhist monk as he passes through the seasons of his life from childhood to old age. The presence of Buddhist symbols and iconography mark the significance of the character's actions to reflect underlying Buddhist themes throughout the film. Each of the seasons corresponds to a different season in the life of the young student and his older master. The film raises deep questions about how we should strive to live our lives and the unexpected consequences that our actions can have years later.

Mandala (Im Kwon-taek, Korea, 1981)

Mandala is a deeply spiritual film about two monks and the crises that come to define their quest for inner peace. In terms of lifestyle, the two characters could not be more different. Po-bun is puritanical in outlook and habit, obstinately opposed to worldly pleasures. Ji-san is hedonistic in every way, his uncontrollable desires for the flesh all-consuming. The film is considered a modern version of the story of Wonhyo, a prominent Buddhist monk from the 7th century who left the monastery to become a lay teacher.

Beyond the Mountain (Chung Ji-young, 1991)

Beyond the Mountain is both an exercise in learning to let go of one's clinging desires and a love story. Chim-hae is a young and handsome initiate who is about to be ordained a monk, and Myo-heun is a similarly attractive novice training to be a nun. The two are the objects of the other's desire, and the tension between their religious commitments and their natural feelings plays in their various secret rendezvous. The film ends not in peace, but with the sobering realization that life is a constant struggle. We may at times lose our way, and this may end in tragedy. But we may also find our way back or come to see that losing our way in fact saved us, redirecting us to where we should be.

Hi! Dharma! (Park Cheol-kwan, 2001)

Hi! Dharma! is an action comedy about a group of Jopok gangsters who take refuge in a Buddhist monastery. The monks and gangsters engage in a series of contests through which they come to learn more about the lifestyles of each other. (Note: Keep in mind that the jokes are culturally-specific, so some degree of background knowledge about Korean culture and Buddhism is required in order to find them humorous.)

Buddhist Nuns:

Come, Come, Come Upward (Kwon-Taek Im, Korea, 1989)

Come, Come, Come Upward explores the lives of two Korean Buddhist nuns as they struggle to find salvation amid the hardships of religious life. For Sun Nyog, a novice who lacks discipline, it is the struggle to maintain her dignity amidst the other monks in the monastery after she is raped by an alcoholic whose life she earlier saved. For Jin Song, a grim ascetic who is well regarded in the temple, it is the inner struggle she faces after being raped by an old monk while away at a retreat. Sun Nyog later returns to the monastery and tends to the dying Jin Song in an unconditional act of compassion that testifies to her spiritual maturity.

Buddhist Biographical Films:

Zen (Banmei Takahashi, Japan, 2009)

Zen is a deep, compelling, and moving biography of Dōgen, the great 13th century Zen Buddhist master. Set in the Kamakura era, a time of great social and political upheaval, the film follows Dōgen in his spiritual journey to China to seek a solution to the classical Buddhist problem of the paradox of enlightenment and in his return to spread the true teachings of the Buddha.

**A Zen Life: D.T. Suzuki* (Michael Goldberg, America, 2006)

A Zen Life: D.T. Suzuki is an intimate portrayal of the life and teachings of Zen master Daisetz Teitaro (“D.T.”) Suzuki. The film includes thematic segments on a wide range of topics viewed through the lens of D.T. Suzuki’s teachings. Such topics include satori (“enlightenment”), East and West, Christianity and Buddhism, “self-power” and “other-power”, Zen: philosophy or religion, Zen and psychoanalysis, Zen and the arts, and life and death.

Shinran-sama: His Wish and Light (Soshite Hikari, Japan, 2008)

Shinran-sama: His Wish and Light is a Japanese anime that commemorates the life and teachings of Shinran Shonin, the founder of the Jodo Shinshu School of Pure Land Buddhism. The film is in Japanese, but contains English subtitles.

Master of Zen (Brandy Yuen, Hong Kong, 1994)

Master of Zen is a film based on the legends surrounding the life of Bodhidharma, the Buddhist monk credited with bringing Buddhism to China as well as the founder of Shaolin Kungfu. As a young prince in India, he renounces future rights to his father’s throne and becomes a wandering monk. During his sojourn, he travels east to China to spread the teachings of Buddha. While there, he retreats to a cave to direct his focus on meditation. Before his death at the age of 150, he passes his teachings onto his disciple.

Documentaries

General Introduction:

Samsara (Ron Fricke, USA, 2011)

Samsara, which is Sankrit for “the ever turning wheel of life,” is a non-verbal, non-narrative film described by the director as a “guided meditation on the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.” Shot in 25 countries, the film captures in vivid detail ordinary and extraordinary images of human civilization and the natural world, illuminating the intimate links between the human life cycle and the rhythmic patterns of nature.

Wisdom and Compassion: A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life (James Zito, 2003)

Compassion and Wisdom combines interviews with many of the world's leading Buddhist teachers and scholars with rare and often never before seen footage of Buddhist architecture, painting and sculpture in India, Nepal, Japan and the United States. It is a thought provoking documentary examining the bodhisattva path and its main components—compassion and wisdom—and the relevance of the bodhisattva ideal to current issues such as pollution of the environment, stress, the care and treatment of the dying and other ways in which Buddhist ideas can have a bearing on modern issues.

Chinese Buddhism:

One Mind (Edward A. Burger, China, 2016)

One Mind explores the state of mind and way of life cultivated at Zhenru (“True Suchness”) Monastery in China’s Jiangxi province. The film details the tradition’s 1200 year-old lineage through a look at the monk’s daily practices – tilling the land, picking tea leaves, sawing bamboo, and working the kitchen fire – in mindful awareness that is meant to conjure the experience of “one mind” in the mind of the viewer.

**Amongst White Clouds* (Edward A. Burger, China, 2005)

Amongst White Clouds is a heartfelt look into the lives of those living in solitude in China’s Zhongnan mountain range. Inspired in part by Bill Porter’s *Road to Heaven: Encounters with Chinese Hermits*, this film offers viewers a rare look into the hidden tradition of China’s Buddhist monks from the view of one of few foreigners to have lived and studied with them.

Alms (Edward A. Burger, China, 2010)

Alms is a moving portrait at a rural mountain Ch’an (Zen) Buddhist monastery in southern China, led by the community’s lead cook, who introduces viewers to the traditional practices of crop cultivation, food preparation, and ritual offerings. This short film captures in intimate detail the Buddhist ethos of meditation in practice and harmony with the environment.

Hermits (He Shiping, Fu Peng, and Zhou Chengyu, China, 2014)

Hermits follows renowned American translator Bill Porter (aka Red Pine) among the Buddhist and Daoist hermit monks and nuns who live and practice in caves and huts in the Zhongnan mountains of China. The film explores the hidden world of these solitary practitioners, engages with them in playful conversation, and shares their insights with viewers.

The Great Pilgrim (Jin Tiemu, China, 2009)

The Great Pilgrim chronicles the legendary journey of Tang Dynasty Chinese monk Xuanzang, whose pilgrimage took him to India, where he studied for several years at the famous Nalanda University, before returning with many essential Buddhist texts and teachings. Founder of the Faxiang school of Buddhism, his translation of *The Heart Sutra* is still widely used today.

**To the Land of Bliss* (Wen-jie Qin, USA, 2002)

To the Land of Bliss is an intimate depiction of the Chinese Pure Land Buddhist approach to living and dying. The film was shot during the filmmaker-anthropologist’s return to Sichuan

Province to research the revival of Buddhism in the post-Mao era. While conducting research on the sacred mountain of Emei, a prominent local monk by the name of Jue-Chang who has recently passed away is celebrated by members of the community in a death ritual by fire to mark his release from this life and his departure to a paradise known as the Pure Land of Amita Buddha.

Japanese Buddhism:

**The Zen Mind* (Jon Braeley, USA, 2006)

The Zen Mind is a travelogue across Japan to see how the practice of Zen nowadays. The film moves from the bustling streets of Tokyo to the quiet mountains of Kyoto to explore the various types of Zen centers, the practitioners who attend them and the reasons why they do, the practices they engage in, and the misconceptions surrounding Zen. Included are interviews and demonstrations of meditation and daily practices.

KanZeOn (Neil Cantwell and Tim Grabham, UK, Japan, 2011)

KanZeOn is a visually and musically stunning film that weaves together elements from sound, song, story, ritual, performance, nature, tradition, and Japanese Buddhism. Kanzeon, or Kannon, is the Japanese name for the Bodhisattva of Compassion, and can also mean “to see sounds.”

Zen and War (Alexander Oey, Netherlands, 2009)

Zen and War chronicles the participation of Zen Buddhist monks in the early 20th century, beginning with Japan’s colonization of Taiwan and continuing up through World War II. Shodo Harada Roshi and other contemporary Zen Buddhist masters attempt to explain how their predecessors could become involved in Japanese militarism. The film is a cautionary tale of how even peaceful wisdom traditions can be co-opted by extremist ideologies. (Note: For a balanced perspective, this film should be shown alongside others that depict acts of social resistance among those within the Zen Buddhist tradition at the time.)

**Shugendo Now* (Jean-Marc Abela and Mark Patrick McGuire, Japan, Canada, 2010)

Shugendo Now is a rare and bold journey into the world of Shugendo (“The Way of Power”), a unique school of Japanese asceticism that combines elements of Shintoism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Drawing on the inspiration and teachings of the 7th century mystic En no Ozunu, a venerated bodhisattva, practitioners expose themselves to demanding rituals in remote mountain locations and are actively committed to protecting the natural environment.

Walking with Kūkai (Patrick van Boeckel, Japan/Netherlands, 2010)

Walking with Kūkai traces the famous pilgrimage of the 8th century Japanese esoteric Buddhist master to China where he studied under Master Huiguo and received initiation into the esoteric Buddhist tradition. Upon his return to Japan, he founded the Shingon (“True Word”) school of Buddhism. Centuries later, over a hundred thousand people each year make 1100 km. journey across 88 temples on Shikoko island in living memory of Kūkai.

Korean Buddhism:

**Cloud Path: Journey of a Wandering Monk* (Han’guk Kukche Kyoryu Chaedan, 2000s)

Cloud Path: Journey of a Wandering Monk follows the path of Hyongak (Paul Muenzen), an American-born Zen monk and student of Korean Zen master Seung Sahn, as he embarks on a traditional pilgrimage through South Korea. The film includes introductory information about Korean Buddhism, traditional Korean culture, and a personal account of his spiritual path (from Catholicism) to becoming a Buddhist monk.

On the Road (Lee Chang-jae, Korea, 2013)

On the Road takes viewers on a journey through the pristine Korean countryside as a young nun prepares for ordainment. Through her interaction with the more senior nuns, the young woman gives viewers a rare and in-depth glimpse into monastic life in a thousand year old Buddhist nunnery today.

Socially Engaged Buddhism:

**Dhamma Brothers* (Andrew Kukura and Jenny Phillips, USA, 2008)

Dhamma Brothers explores the rehabilitative effect that an ancient meditation program can have on the inmate population of an overcrowded maximum-security prison in Alabama. The film takes viewers into the first maximum-security prison in North America to hold an extended Vipassana retreat, a physically and emotionally demanding course of silent meditation that lasts for ten days, to show the dramatic effects that it can have on those inmates who take part in it.

Painting Peace (Babeth Van Loo, Netherlands, 2014)

Painting Peace follows the incredible life of Kazuaki Tanahashi, an eighty-year-old Japanese Zen teacher, translator, artist, and activist. The film depicts the Buddhist ethic of compassion, teachings from the 13th century founder of Soto school of Zen in Japan, Dōgen, and Tanahashi's art as a religio-aesthetic expression of the Zen Buddhist way of life.

Tzu Chi: Doing Good in the World (Babeth Van Loo, Netherlands, 2017)

Tzu Chi is a Taiwanese non-profit organization responsible for the management of hospitals, schools, recycling services, and humanitarian aid relief. The organization falls under the leadership of Master Cheng Yen, a Buddhist nun whose early work distributing health services to victims in post-war Taiwan is a living example of Tzu's commitment to a socially engaged and compassionate life.

Online Resources

[The Buddhist Film Foundation](#)

The world's leading resource for Buddhistic cinema

[“Buddhism on the Big and Small Screen”](#)

Research Report from the Pluralism Project at Harvard University

[Buddhist Broadcasting Foundation](#) (BOS): based in the Netherlands with lots of documentary material available for streaming.

[The Buddha](#) (a film by David Grubin): PBS website with streaming version and additional educational resources.

[Interview](#) with Professors William Whittington and Vicki Callahan on Buddhism, Film and Social Justice.

[Film and Religion](#)

A site committed to exploring the educative potentials of film within the interdisciplinary field of religious studies.

[Common Folk Films](#)

Edward Burger's site: includes information about his ongoing oeuvre.