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Review of Silver Screen Buddha: Buddhism in Asian and Western Film

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Silver Screen Buddha: Buddhism in Asian and Western Film

Abstract

This is a book review of *Silver Screen Buddha, Buddhism in Asian and Western Film* by Sharon A. Suh.

For anyone interested in the growing study of Buddhism and film, I recommend Sharon A. Suh's *Silver Screen Buddha: Buddhism in Asian and Western Film*. This is the third study in English related to this topic, all three of which have been published within the last year and a half. This attention corresponds to an increase in Buddhist film festivals, a rise in internet discussions and postings on the subject, and an expansion of university class offerings that deal with it. It has been said that 1998 marked the peak year for Hollywood releases with overt Buddhist themes, including *Kundan* and *Seven Years in Tibet*. However, now seems to be the heyday for academic study of the phenomena, with more books planned to be released soon.

Each of the three books does something different and thereby complements one another. Ronald S. Green's *Buddhism Goes to the Movies* (Routledge, 2013) is a discussion of key concepts and major traditions of Buddhism in a variety of films. However, it makes no claims that these movies justifiably can be called "Buddhist films." *Buddhism and American Cinema* edited by John Whalen-Bride and Gary Storhoff (SUNY Press, 2014) is a collection of essays mostly written by specialists in various academic fields, particularly English. Some of the contributions to the volume claim that we can identify certain movies as "Buddhist films" based on genre-defining elements, such as representations of *bardo*, one of the Buddhist versions of the in-between state that an individual allegedly experiences after death and before rebirth. Interestingly, editor John Whalen-Bride has written an excellent separate article titled "What is a Buddhist Movie" (in *Contemporary Buddhism: an Interdisciplinary Journal*, 31 Mar 2014) that debunks many of the assumptions of the contributors and that provides a potentially powerful tool for evaluating some of the claims of *Silver Screen Buddha* and future texts on the subject.

In Chapter 1 of *Silver Screen Buddha*, the Introduction, Suh defines a "Buddhist film" as one that fits one or more of the following criteria:

- contemplation and inquiry about the eradication of thirst or desire;
- the virtues and limitations of monastic life;
- inclusion of elements of a prototypical Buddhist *mise-en-scène* such as a monastery, hermitage, or lay community;
- exploration and application of Buddhist doctrines and philosophical concerns;
- offer of Buddhist interpretations of reality or a uniquely Buddhist solution to a social problem. (9)

While establishing such criteria may or, I would argue, may not be necessary to justify the choices of films she critiques, a look at Whalen-Bride's article suffices to problematize the definitions. To add a side note to that, the first of the criteria is not limited to Buddhism and may be subsumed under the fifth; the second needs the qualifier "Buddhist monastic life"; the third could include, for example, representations within what we might call "Christian films" by similar criteria or by Christian detractors; four and five are essentially the same.

Also in the introduction, Suh gives an account of the impetus behind writing the book, which may serve to explain the basis for analyzing each of the films she treats. This can be summarized as her reaction to seeing in representations of Buddhism in films a predominance of (1) orientalism, (2) misogyny, and (3) monastic biases including overemphasis on meditation and/or ascetic practice. As Suh writes, "That is to say that I have encountered too many baldheaded men speaking in broken English and espousing an illogical wisdom akin to the character of Mr. Miyagi in the *Karate Kid*" (14). Suh hopes instead to show the plurality of Buddhism by exposing how the reduction of the subject matter in the films she treats does a disservice to Buddhism, particularly in terms of Buddhist laywomen.

Chapter 2 is titled “Longing for Otherness through Buddhism.” The author explains that it describes “how the idea of a pure meditative Asian Buddhism was and continues to be mediated through the lens of race, which I argue has had a newly indelible mark on popular expectations and receptions of Buddhism in the West” (29). To begin this, she examines two early Hollywood films depicting Buddhism, D.W. Griffith’s silent film *Broken Blossoms* (1919) and Frank Capra’s *Lost Horizon* (1930). These films attempt to combat the rampant discrimination against Asian emigrants of the time by contrasting the stereotypical peaceful Asian Buddhist with violent tendencies of Europeans and Americans. According to Suh, unfortunately this involved a racialization of Buddhism that continues to inform a general misunderstanding of it. In particular, the films portray Buddhism as ill adaptive outside of Asia and as the other to capitalism. This imaging has further been applied by Americans to Asians in general. She also points out that the Buddhist message portrayed in the film has an obvious parallel to the Christian Golden Rule, as does that portrayed in *Lost Horizon*. While this may contradict her argument that the films are meant to show that Asian Buddhism is not applicable to the West, it does illustrate her point of limiting what Buddhism is to something the audience can easily understand. Further, when the Buddhist character in *Broken Blossoms* moves to London, he becomes an opium smoking shopkeeper. Thus, while in his country he is a peaceful Buddhist, abroad he embodies a “sneaky Asian,” a stereotype Griffith perpetuates. This image of racial malevolence is further fueled by the threat of interracial or cultural mixing, symbolized by the actual and potential relationship between the Buddhist, named only “Yellow Man” in the film, and a young girl named Lucy, whom he calls “White Lily.” Through Suh’s analysis we can see how *Lost Horizon* does something similar by positioning Asian Buddhists as spoilers to capitalism and western brutality while also portraying them as childlike to the point of being

incapable of governing themselves. This is a classical orientalist motif whereby both films support western superiority and provide a justification for the colonialism of the time.

Chapter 3 is titled “Zen Appetites: Consuming Religion and Otherness through Film.” In it Suh describes how more recent films that incorporate Buddhist motifs often portray an idealized, exoticized Buddhism that perpetuates the image of otherness. The Zen notion of a special transmission outside of words and letters in particular has provided grounds for this. Characterizing these as “Zen Buddhist films,” Suh says such movies are often related to “the spirit of rebellion made popular during the counterculture movement” (60). She examines three films that she believes continue the ideas established in *Broken Blossoms* and *Lost Horizon*. These are *The Big Lebowski* (1998), *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* (1999), and *Zen Noir* (2005). She explains, “There is a spirit of Zen hipness that permeates these films as the main characters easily adopt Buddhist identities that appeal because of the cultural heterodoxy they embody” (60). She points out that these are also raced and gendered portrayals. Suh spends some time criticizing the analysis of *The Big Lebowski* that appears in the book *The Dude and the Zen Master*, co-written by Jeff Bridges and Bernie Glassman. In short, her objection is that the representation of Bridges’ character “the Dude” as a Zen master characterizes that designation by frivolousness rather than attainment. One problem she sees with this abstraction is that it commodifies Zen, selling it for pop cultural consumption. I would have liked to have read that the Dude and the *Big Lewbowski* not only have nothing to do with Zen, which might be her argument, but also that it is not meant to, regardless of what the writers have said. Indeed, Jeff Bridges, who identifies with Buddhism, says as much later in an interview in *Shambhala Sun*, May 2013. Instead, the film commodifies and fetishizes the anti-war movement (among other things) by overtly portraying the Dude as an architect of *The Port Huron Statement*, not as a Zen

Buddhist. This effectively neutralizes the threat of dissent against the American military-industrial complex. Suh rightly points out that the interpretation of the Dude as a Zen master is more Glassman's than Bridges'. Even so, why classify the *Big Lebowski* as a "Buddhist film" at all?

Suh also analyzes *Ghost Dog* in terms of representations of Zen. However, since the predominant Japanese text with Buddhist themes that is cited throughout the film is the *Hagakure*, we might as easily say *Ghost Dog* has more to do with Pure Land Buddhism than Zen. For example, the author of the *Hagakure* writes that he would rather be reborn to serve his master than to reach nirvāṇa, a devotional idea that does not seem related to the Bodhisattva ethic of Zen, that is, postponing enlightenment in order to help another toward attainment. Suh relates the fact that Ghost Dog (Forest Whitaker's character) and his best friend cannot speak each other's language to Zen's special transmission outside words and its direct pointing to human nature (90). But the same could be said about Pure Land's insistence on naturalness without artifice as we see in *Departures*, which also applies to Ghost Dog's affinity for animals. One could also compare *Ghost Dog*'s use of pigeon symbolism (the caged and the free, etc.) to that found in *On the Waterfront*, which it references, in terms of Buddhism and Christianity respectively. Regardless of the Japanese Buddhist tradition depicted or the film's possible confusion of them, Suh insightfully ponders the effects of perpetuating the image of a magical martial artist Asian Buddhist in the form of an African American. She writes, "While the projection of his warrior Zen monk identity appeals to audiences taken in by the hipness of such hybridization, the appropriation and adaptation of the past into the present or, to put it differently, the other into the here, also freezes images of Asia, Asians, and Asian Americans into a reified construction of otherness" (73). Her treatment of the film *Zen Noir* is much shorter and

concludes that it too presents a picture of Zen as being timeless and illogical for American consumption. We could add that *Zen Noir* might also poke fun at the scandals associated with the San Francisco Zen Center such as abbot Reb Anderson's arrest connected to a murder investigation and the reported free sexuality of the Center.¹

Chapter 4 is titled "*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*:"² Women as Snares of Samsara." In it, Suh describes how many Buddhist texts portray women as temptresses whose alleged filthy nature is disguised by superficial beauty. She critiques Kim Ki-duk's film *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter...and Spring* (2003) for uncritically accepting this antiquated attitude of early Indian Buddhism (78). At this point, her approach seems to be as much a critique of institutional Buddhism as it is Kim's film. It should be pointed out that Kim himself has a Christian family background which could account for his portrayal of the profane female. The depiction of Buddhism in most of his films is, in fact, from a hybrid if not completely Christian perspective. Kim's *The Isle*, *Samaritan Girl*, *Amen* and *Pieta* illustrate his affinity for Christianity. Likewise, the isolation on the fictional island temple in *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter...and Spring* is informed more by the notion of individual responsibility for sin than Buddhist dependent co-arising and the shared quality of karma. This further problematizes the designation of this and other movies as "Buddhist films." The mixture of Buddhism and Christianity in Kim's films might also reflect Koreans' religious identification, 29% Christian and 22% Buddhist according to the last census, the largest population of Christians per capita in East Asia. Suh rightly points out that women in the film serve merely as mute sexual traps. But this goes beyond an acceptance of an antiquated form of Buddhism. It may well point to the misogyny inherent in the director, Christianity, and modern Korea. Regardless, again Suh is

¹ See *Shoes Outside the Door: Desire, Devotion, and Excess at San Francisco Zen Center* by Michael Downing. Washington DC: Counterpoint, 2001.

² The more things change, the more they stay the same.

correct in pointing out what is wrong with this is that it represents Buddhism in a selective and limiting way that precludes the possibility of there being women leaders as found in lay Buddhism.

Chapter 5 is titled “Come down from the Mountaintop: Engaged Buddhism in the World.” It treats two Korean films, Im Kwon-taek’s *Aje Aje Bara Aje* (1989) and to a lesser extent *Why Has Bodhidharma Left for the East* directed by Bae Young-kyun (1989). Through Suh’s analysis, both of these help us reimagine Buddhism through films in a way that is less limiting and more engaging in society. The protagonists in both films grapple with the tensions between monastic and lay Buddhist lives. Likewise, Soon Nyo’s sexuality in *Aje Aje Bara Aje* “symbolizes an engagement in the ordinary world and assists in her progress toward enlightenment” (98). Suh also uses this as evidence that in lay Buddhism “female bodies are not burdened by the historical preoccupation with their spiritually polluting effluvia, but rather are given new meaning as catalysts for enlightenment with and through their bodies” (103-4).

Chapter 6 is “The Ordinary as Extraordinary.” In it she deals with Yōjirō Takita’s 2008 Japanese film *Departures* (*Okuribito*). Suh likes this film in that it does not sensationalize Buddhism, does not present it as illogical, and does not relate it to meditation. Instead it is about compassion and social engagement of lay Buddhists related to Shin, Pure Land Buddhism. She continues to explore these themes in Chapter 7, “Film as Sūtra.” In that chapter she examines Chang Sun-woo’s 1993 Korean film *Hwa-om-kyung* (*The Avataṛsaka Sūtra*). Suh also applauds this film for drawing on Mahāyāna Buddhist teachings on Buddha-nature that claim “wisdom and truth can be found in all aspects of society—from beggars, wayward monks who drink and curse, prostitutes, prisoners, lovers, and other such bodhisattvas who appear in a myriad of forms in times of need” (138). One may wonder if Suh would consider a Theravada meditating monk

one of those forms. The chapter does a good job of explaining the role of women in the *Gandavyuha Sūtra* (a section within *The Avataṃsaka Sūtra*) and how this is related to the film. In so doing, it provides valuable supplementary reading alongside the film, giving important context that is not otherwise discernible through it alone but only hinted at in the title. Because of the title of the chapter, I would have liked to have read more about film as sūtra in terms of textuality, for example, the importance of seeing a sūtra (like seeing a movie) as it is recited, medium as message, etc., which would have fit the theme of the book well.

Chapter 8 drives home the main arguments of the book. It is titled “Re-visioning the Role of Lay Women in Buddhism.” The chapter describes the 2001 film *Samsara* directed by Pan Nalin. That film begins with what Suh has established as a stereotypical representation of an ascetic monk who attains Buddhist realization through meditation. However, the monk returns to secular life after having a series of wet dreams. According to Suh’s analysis, the film “opens up the possibility of an alternative view of Buddhism in which enlightenment can coexist in the ordinary world where lay women are not just snares of *samsara*, but mothers, wives, and lovers, whose everyday lives are viewed as potent sources for spiritual awakening” (161). This is the point of the book and the impetus behind its critique of the dominant portrayal of Buddhism in films.

Conclusion

Suh’s critique of orientalism, gender, and distorted aggrandizement of asceticism can be invaluable for students (even with the problems that arise from defining “Buddhist films”). It can help them understand representations of Buddhism in film and some of the wider implications of those representations. One thing that is clear throughout the book is that the author prefers

modernized lay Buddhism to traditional monastic Buddhism. In contrast, in the Korean films *Mandala* (1981) and *Aje Aje Bara Aje* (1989) director Im Kwon-taek values both sides. While Suh has a different agenda than Im, to expose the bias in films representing Buddhism, it is unclear if she finds any value in monastic Buddhism. Her approach and interest in lay Buddhism might be traceable to her PhD dissertation “Finding Selves and Asserting Identities in Koreatown: Buddhism, Gender and Subjectivity,” Harvard 2000. She is clearly an expert in this. Although I happen to agree with her sentiments, probably owing to our similar educations in modern liberal principles including harboring suspicions toward institutions, I could not escape the feeling that there may be a hint of sectarianism within the neutral academic covers of this book. Whether this is to be considered a good or bad thing, the book is well worth reading.