

# Asian Cinema and the Social Imaginary

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There is growing interest by schools and universities in understanding Asian societies and cultures. One way of deepening this interest productively is through the imaginative use of cinema. Films can open a wonderful window onto Asian societies and cultures on the move. In this short essay, I wish to focus on one area that merits close consideration, namely, the relationship between Asian cinema and the social imaginary. The term “social imaginary” has been put into wide circulation in recent times by the eminent social philosopher Charles Taylor (2004). It is a concept that can be invoked profitably in studying cinema. However, to the best of my knowledge, so far, this concept has not been usefully pressed into service by scholars and educators of cinema.

As Taylor has remarked, the concept of the social imaginary encompasses something much wider and deeper than analytical schemes and intellectual categories that scholars make use of in discussing and dissecting social reality. He calls attention to the “ways in which they (people) imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations” (p. 23). Here Taylor is focusing very insistently on the existential and experiential dimensions of social living.

What is interesting to observe is that Taylor is not talking about social theory. This is because he is keen to direct attention to the complex ways in which ordinary people in society imagine the social context they inhabit. This is not articulated in terms of concepts and theories, it is expressed through narratives, images, myths and legends, and so on. Moreover, as Taylor reminds us, “theory is often the possession of a small minority whereas what is interesting in the social imaginary is that it is shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society” (p. 23). On the basis of these expectations, it is possible to describe the social imaginary as that mutual understanding that makes

possible common practices, and the sense of legitimacy that is broadly endorsed by the community.

As Taylor observes, “[o]ur social imaginary at any given time is complex. It incorporates a sense of normal expectations that we have of each other; the kind of common understanding that enables us to carry out collective practices which make up our social life. This incorporates some sense of how we fit together in carrying out the common practice” (p. 24). There is both a factual and a normative dimension associated with this understanding. Our sense of how things commonly function is connected with our notions of how they ought to function. Hence, notions of collective living, group identity, normative prescriptions for the good life—all shared social narratives—are vitally interconnected within the ambit of the social imaginary. In other words, the social imaginary focuses on the public imagination associated with a culture.

The concept of the social imaginary intersects in interesting and complex ways with ideas of modernity and nationhood. Similarly, Asian cinemas are shaped in terms of nationhood, and they continue to be understood in terms of nationhood. The idea of national cinema is at the heart of numerous discussions of Asian popular culture. The concept seeks to privilege and valorize notions of unity, stability, coherence, and continuity over time. It is connected with national myth-making and ideological production and the suppression and marginalization of alternative narratives of the nation. Therefore, a critical understanding of the concept of nationhood as it finds articulation in cinema can prove to be a fruitful way of understanding Asian societies. A deep engagement with the social imaginary referred to earlier can help us in this task.

If we follow this line of inquiry further, we shall see that a different and more informative approach to learning about or teaching Asian cinema and identity is to highlight the social imaginary rather than viewing films as examples of national cinemas. The category of national cinemas overlooks important political, cultural, and historical

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complexities. Therefore, by focusing on the idea of the social imaginary we can initiate more nuanced discussions of Asian cinema in the classroom.

Let us consider a few outstanding Asian films to pursue this line of inquiry further. Japan is normally regarded as a homogeneous society. This is, of course, not so. Oshima Nagisa is a filmmaker who has pointed this out very powerfully. His film, *Death by Hanging (Koshikei)* made in 1968 portrays the predicament of the Korean minority living in Japan. The film is constructed around a true story about a Korean student who had difficulty in securing a job because of widespread discrimination practiced against Koreans in Japan. While attending high school, the student killed two girls after raping them. He was caught and found guilty by a court of law. His appeals for clemency were rejected, and he was hanged four years after the terrible incident. Oshima was greatly interested in making the story into a film. He changed the plot with the aim of foregrounding some of the themes regarding minorities in Japan and the question of capital punishment that had preoccupied him for some time. Oshima began to speculate on the course of events that would have occurred had the young man not died by hanging.

*Death by Hanging*, in many ways, presents a mixture of realism and fantasy to focus on the predicament of Koreans in Japan. The Japanese flag is the pervasive motif, and the film deploys it to achieve satirical ends. R is the name of the Korean protagonist, and at one point, in response to the protestations of the protagonist, the prosecutor lets it be known that it is the nation of Japan that seeks to execute him. R violently repudiates the concept of nationhood. By introducing this scene to the story, Oshima directs attention to the plight of Koreans in Japan and barbarity of capital punishment. R's death by hanging, opens a discursive space that reconfigures the politics of erasure that operate in Japanese society to create a greater awareness of the complex strands of relationships that go to form the Japanese social imaginary. In other words, *Death by Hanging* has the effect of widening the social imaginary of the Japanese, as the wide-ranging discussions that followed the film show. Thus, Oshima's film can be used productively in class to stimulate discussion on the Japanese social imaginary.

Let us consider another film, this time from mainland China, *Sacrificed Youth (Qingchun Ji)*, made in 1985 by the Chinese film director Zhang Nuanxin. *Sacrificed Youth*

focuses on the question of ethnic minorities in an interesting way. The film tells the story of Li Chun, a young woman who grew up in the city, and during the Cultural Revolution, is dispatched to live in a rural area—the home area of the Dai ethnic minority. Like several of her friends, she was forced to go to the rural areas so that she could learn from the villagers. Initially Chun is shocked and repulsed by what she sees around her. Yet, gradually, she begins to develop a liking for the way of life of this minority group. As she comes to understand and appreciate the ways of the Dai, Chun begins to empathize with their zest for life and their love of nature. The Dai's emphasis on instinctual life is contrasted in her mind with the falsities and hypocrisies associated with city life.

Li Chun's experience of rural life opens new doors of perception, and she begins to acquire a deeper and more profound sense of her own personhood. Her pathway to self-discovery opens up against the backdrop of the Dai way of life and the values they place on community life. This film too, in its own way, succeeds in foregrounding the relationships among space, place, identity, and the problems of nationhood; the film reveals how China's vast geography and ethnic diversity challenges or complicates the nationalist narrative of a singular nation-state. In effect, *Sacrificed Youth* focuses on the hegemony of the Han majority in the construction of Chinese nationhood. As with Oshima Nagisa's *Death by Hanging*, Zhang Nuanxin's *Sacrificed Youth* serves to enlarge the respective social imaginaries of the two societies concerned.

The next film that I wish to consider is from India. India, unlike Japan, is clearly a multi-racial, multi-religious society. So, in spite of the hegemony exercised by the Hindu majority, the nationhood of India needs to be understood in relation to the dynamics existing between these diverse racial, religious, linguistic, and caste groups. Saeed Akhtar Mirza's *Don't Cry for Salim the Lame (Salim Langde Pe Mat Ro)* tells the story of a young Muslim, Salim, who is in search of his identity in a confused and confusing world. He lacks money and leads a life of crime. His heroes are the racketeers and smugglers who have succeeded in amassing great wealth. The world that he inhabits shows scant respect for moral values. It is a world marked by gangsterism, violence, and brutality.

Salim makes no effort to travel the path of moral rectitude, especially since the conditions surrounding his life

are hardly conducive to such a course of action. Mirza's film calls attention to the plight of the Muslim minority who live in urban areas in India. *Don't Cry for Salim the Lame* places issues of belonging, cultural citizenship, and identity in modern India in relation to the overpowering hegemonic discourse of a monolithic India and point out how a privileged meta-narrative of nationhood overwrites local narratives thereby marginalizing the cultural life of its minority groups.

The notion of space is pivotal to the meaning of *Don't Cry for Salim the Lame*. While the driving power of nationhood aims to construct a monolithic narrative of cultural space, the director of this film has tried to unsettle that activity by reconfiguring the manifold ways in which power relations are written on it. The way smugglers and racketeers relate to the generality of the public is interesting in this regard. Both 'inside' and 'outside' are the dominant tropes that organize the experience and fuel the argument of the film, and they have the effect of re-focusing attention on the interplay between identity and difference. Mirza has sought to demonstrate the fact that the tragedy of Salim is inseparable from his being a member of a religious minority. The film also serves to extend the range of the modern Indian social imaginary by highlighting the fissures and fault lines evident in a supposedly unified national narrative.

Ann Hui's *Song of the Exile* (1990) is a powerful film that broadens, in interesting ways, the outlook of the social imaginary typical of Hong Kong Chinese. This film tells the story of Hueyin, a twenty five year old filmmaker who comes to Hong Kong from England where she has been studying cinema. The immediate reason for her return to Hong Kong is to attend the wedding of her sister. While in Hong Kong, Hueyin and her mother, who is now widowed, decide to visit Japan. Hueyin's mother, Aiko, was born in Japan. The trip has the effect of deepening the relationship between Hueyin and her mother, who, up until the trip, were estranged. As the film ends, Hueyin decides to stay in Hong Kong and work at a television station. She pays a visit to mainland China in order to see her grandparents who are now quite old. The narrative consists of a series of carefully structured flashbacks and voice-overs.

A number of themes are intertwined in the narrative and aesthetic structure of the film and one deals with the idea of Hong Kong's perception of nationhood. We see the way that the film's representation of Hong Kong is reconfigured in relation to other spaces such as China, Macau, Japan,

England, and Manchuria. What the film stresses, then, is that the social imaginary of Hong Kong can only properly be understood in terms of the diverse changing relationships with these other cultural spaces. The entire film text of *Song of Exile* consists of a number of different languages such as Cantonese, Mandarin, Japanese, and English, investing it with a polyglot complexity that is closely connected to the theme of the film. Once again, the social imaginary, in this case of modern Hong Kong, is enlarged through cinematic representation.

The next film that I wish briefly to consider is the Taiwanese film, *A City of Sadness*, by Hou Hsiao-hsien (1989). The film won the prestigious Golden Lion Award for the best film at the Venice Film Festival. It proved to be a domestic box-office success as well. It can best be described as an expansive panorama of a Taiwan family during the turbulent years, from 1945 to 1949, in Taiwan's history. These are years that are vital to understanding of the emergence of the nation-state of Taiwan. Hou seeks to explore these turbulent times through the fortunes of one family consisting of an elderly widower, Ah-lun, and his four sons.

Lin Wen-heung, the eldest son, is a nightclub owner who engages in illegal trading and who dies a violent death. He is, in many ways, the one who is most in touch with the social realities of the emerging nation-state of Taiwan. Lin Wen-ching, the youngest son, is deaf and mute and remains detached from the crisis that has engulfed the family. Lin Wen-sun, the second son, is serving in the Japanese army in the Philippines and has not returned. Lin Wen-leng, the third son, was also recruited by the Japanese army as a translator, but the experience has left him mentally deranged. The interactions among these four characters serve to focus on an episode in Japanese history that official historians normally tend to ignore: the February 28, 1947 massacre of supporters of the Taiwan independence movement by a group aligned with the Guomindang troops. This very sensitive topic, has generated much debate in Taiwan. Hou has stated that he made the film,

[n]ot for the sake of opening up old wounds, but because it's vital that we face up to this incident if we are to understand where we come from and who we are as Taiwanese. The Chinese way has always been to cover over domestic scandals, to pretend they never happened, but I am not at all persuaded that that's a good thing. My own feel-

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ing is that problems must be acknowledged and discussed if we are ever to resolve them in our minds. (Viewer Guide: Hawaii International Film Festival, 1989)

*A City of Sadness* is an attempt to call into question the officially sanctioned stories that each nation tells itself. What engages Hou's deepest cinematic interests is not to present historical events as "official" moments in the formation of the nation. Hou's film widens the social imaginary of the Taiwanese by bringing to light facets of occluded history.

So far, I have been discussing films from East Asia and South Asia. I wish to conclude by focusing attention on two films from Southeast Asia. The first is a film from Thailand called *Butterfly and Flower* (*Peesua Lae Dokmai*) and was made by Euthana Mukdasnit in 1985. *Butterfly and Flower* won the top award at the Hawai'i International Film Festival. It tells the story of the desperate struggle of two teenagers to eke out a living in Thailand in the 1980s. Huyan is a bright student, but he gives up his ambition of getting an education because of poverty. He ends up in the dangerous business of smuggling rice across the Malaysian border and falls in love with a young girl named Mimpi. Having observed at close hand the risks of smuggling rice and the tragic fate that befell some of their friends, Huyan and Mimpi resolve to give up rice smuggling and grow flowers for commercial purposes instead. It is a simple and unpretentious story told with sincerity and cinematic competence.

Like the other films that I have discussed, *Butterfly and Flower* serves to expand the Thai social imaginary. Thailand is a preponderantly Buddhist country. However, this film deals with the lives of two young people from a Muslim background. Instead of Buddhist temples and saffron-clad monks, what we see of Thailand is represented by the iconography of mosques and calls to prayer. This in itself serves to highlight the complex social fabric of Thailand. The film does not explore the question of the plight of minorities in any significant way. However, when read against national cinema perspective, the film's text opens up a symbolic space in which we can attend to the question of the place of the Muslim minority in Thailand as well as the diffidence of the film industry in general to deal with this contentious issue.

The second film from Southeast Asia that I wish to discuss is a film from Malaysia called *Sepet* (2004). Yasmin Ahmad is a rare example of a Malaysian female filmmaker.

Her film has won many international awards. "Sepet" is a Malay slang word to describe the shape of Chinese eyes. The film deals with the emotional relationship between a Chinese boy and a Malay girl. Ah Loong (Jason) is a teen-aged boy who enjoys poetry and works in a stall that sells pirated Video Compact Discs (VCDs). One day, a Malay girl by the name of Orked comes to the stall looking for films by the well-known Japanese director, Takeshi Kaneshiro. They fall in love and the film deals with the problems that they experience as a result of coming from different ethnic backgrounds. The film, like *Butterfly and Flower*, is a simple story that is told with emotional honesty and cinematic lyricism. The emotional affair gains depth and definition through the ethnic tensions that exist in Malaysian society between the Malays and the Chinese. Once again, the complex social fabric and the diverse strands that go to form nationhood are highlighted in a way that serves to widen the social imaginary.

Each of these seven films, then, in their diverse ways, deal with the idea of the social imaginary. The social imaginary points to the common horizons of meaning prevalent in specific societies. These common horizons can reinforce and subvert the meanings of national cinemas. In each of the films, the aesthetic style, the concomitant representational strategies, and preferred visual registers enact the respective themes in interesting ways. They all focus on the public imagination as it emerges from and engages specific cultures. This social imaginary constitutes a useful point of entry into the historical meanings of a political culture. Pedagogically speaking, this is where the interest of these films lies. They can be shown in classrooms to initiate discussions of Asian societies and cultures. The emotional relationships represented by the characters in them, and how these characters are changed by the imperatives of historical events, become useful points of departure for classroom discussions.

As Clifford Geertz (1983) has reminded us, "culture" describes the webs of meanings that human beings weave around them. Thus, the Asian films that I have been discussing enable us to enter into those webs of meaning in a fruitful manner. The teacher, of course, has an important role to play in promoting interesting discussions of these films. All seven films help us to see the problems and complexities associated with understanding nationhood. The concept of the social imaginary that I invoked at the beginning of this

essay facilitates in the task of revealing the complex layers of meaning associated with the idea of the nation-state and the ways that they are represented in Asian films and by Asian filmmakers. The social imaginary calls attention to the diverse ways in which people make sense of their social life within the confines of a nation.

What is important to bear in mind in this regard is that the social imaginary not only represents national identity but that it also shows how creative filmmakers can use film to challenge those perceptions of national identity. As the social imaginary often conflicts with officially sanctioned views, it can be very helpful in classroom pedagogy. When screening Asian films in the classroom, one can make use of the idea of the social imaginary to go beyond the standard national cinema approach.

## REFERENCES

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