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8. Globalizing the American Classroom with Hong Kong and Bollywood Cinemas

SATISH KOLLURI AND JOSEPH TSE-HEI LEE

Introduction

Today, the public in the United States is exposed to information from and about Asia on a daily basis. Stories from China tell of rapid economic transformation, human rights violations and an escalating trade war. Reports from India inform us of sectarian conflicts, grassroots democracy and business outsourcing. News from Northeast Asia focuses on the North Korean nuclear crisis. Reports from Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq remind us of the U.S. involvement in the Middle East that is still ridden with wars, political intrigue and ethnic conflicts. Most students in the United States are less likely than their Asian counterparts to understand the broader global implications of these events because they have little or no knowledge of the peoples and places of Asia, of the vast continent's diverse histories and cultures, and of its significance in world history and current affairs. Adding to this problem is the lack of scholarly attention to the importance of Asia in many universities' liberal arts core curricula: with all emphasis on non-Western subject matter notwithstanding, these curricula do not as a rule require specialized courses on East or South Asia. Promoting a dialogue on Asian subject matter across disciplines will thus be beneficial for both faculty and students in the increasingly globalized educational setting of the 21st century. Against this intellectual backdrop, Pace University in New York City has purposefully advanced Asian studies in its undergraduate curriculum, and one signature specialty of such efforts includes many interdisciplinary film-centered courses, designed to examine and theorize Asian feature films and documentaries in their global, national and local settings.

Beginning with an account of the origin, curriculum objectives and study outcomes of a team-taught class on the past and present of Hong Kong and Bollywood cinemas, this chapter argues that interdisciplinary teaching fosters a sense of cultural sensitivity and global interdependence, and facilitates a participatory intellectual environment between teachers and students. By assessing the meaning of global education in a seemingly internationalized, and yet antagonistic, world, we strive to highlight a series of learning strategies that are employed to both globalize and localize students' experience, and to transform participatory learning into an intellectual way of life, a continuous process of being curious and engaged, and a proactive approach toward self-and group-learning in a culturally diverse environment. Throughout this analysis, we define "participation" as creating an open and dynamic link between students and teachers as a mode of communication characterized by knowledge-sharing, empowerment, subject-to-subject learning, and peer-to-peer learning (through feedback and suggestions to research ideas presented by students for their final papers). For us as teachers, "participation" in class represents a paradigm of inter-subjectivity that relates to the process of intercultural communication as a social relationship that seeks to empower students to think critically about the subject matter.

Efforts to Globalize Asian Studies on Campus

Growing student and faculty interest at Pace University in the history and cultural politics of Asia was initially reflected in a longstanding 18-credit minor in East Asian Studies within the Department of History, which subsequently led to the creation of a new B.A. major in Global Asia Studies in 2013. Drawing on faculty expertise in History, Modern Languages, Literature, Economics, and Communication Studies, the Global Asia Studies major sets out to nurture a cross-cultural understanding of Asia and the world. It strives to train competent bilingual area specialists and professionals for graduate schools, government and international organizations, and employment in a globalized economy.

The Global Asia Studies major is an integral part of the undergraduate liberal arts core curriculum at Pace University. With an increasingly diverse student body, faculty interested in East and South Asian history have incorporated Asia-related topics into other academic and professional programs, such as Computer Science, Education, Environmental Studies, International Business Management, Psychology, Religion and Philosophy, and Women's Studies. Expanding Asian studies with a focus on historical, socio-economic,

political and ethical issues enables home-based students to see the value of a sturdy foundation in liberal arts studies.

For the purpose of discussion, the core global Asian cultures are defined as those of China, Japan, Korea and India, but areas such as Mongolia, Tibet and Inner Asia, though often considered peripheral, are included as well. The heartlands of Asia were the fertile ground for the development of world religions and philosophies including Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Shinto and shamanism. Wealth and prosperity in the past made the region an attractive destination for merchants, adventurers and missionaries from the Middle East, Europe and the Americas. Imperial China was once the leading civilization of the world; not only bigger than the Roman Empire but also far ahead intellectually of medieval Europe. Why did countries like China and India fall behind the West in modern times? How did different Asian countries struggle to catch up with the Western world throughout the 19th and 20th centuries? Why have certain countries in Asia, such as China, Japan, Taiwan and South Korea, undergone a rapid process of modernization, whereas other countries, like Pakistan, Afghanistan and Indonesia, are faced with poverty, ethnic conflicts, religious fundamentalism, and military coups? What “soft power” do Asian nations employ to interculturally engage with the world? What are the global implications of the current economic successes of East and South Asia for American students? What are the challenges and opportunities coming from Asia for the United States in this highly competitive and globalized century? The above questions find answers in innovative courses that are offered by faculty across disciplines, which include “Art History: Aspects of Asian Art,” “From Wall Street to the Great Wall,” “Tolstoy, Turks and Taliban: Russia’s Orient,” “Bible and Gun: Christianity in China since 1500,” “Non-Violent Activism in Modern Asia,” “The Sacred and the Secular in East Asia,” “Multiple Worlds In Literature: The Asian Diasporas,” “Introduction to Cultural Studies,” and “Wars in the Asia-Pacific,” to just name a few.

One unique feature of the Global Asia Studies program entails interdisciplinary film-centered courses that provide a unique opportunity to view and study rare Asian feature films and documentaries. An innovative pedagogy that integrates shared thematic and methodological issues across the curriculum, interdisciplinary teaching through films creates a participatory learning environment that allows students to apply knowledge, methodology and values to more than one academic discipline simultaneously. Inspired by an interdisciplinary course on the globalization of Hong Kong and Bollywood cinemas that we have taught at Pace University since 2005, this study explores the pedagogical opportunities and challenges of introducing to American

students the history, aesthetics, filmic values and practices of Hong Kong and Bollywood in both intercommunicative and inter-Asian contexts. To transcend the old East–West civilizational divide without becoming fully nativist, this analysis draws on the mission statement of the editorial collective of a Taiwan-based journal entitled *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* to investigate how forces of globalization “have opened up a unique moment for dialogues within Asia and internationally,” even though those forces have a different character and trajectory today. This is due to the reigniting of Cold War hostilities, the rapid development of right-wing populism and religious fundamentalism, as well as the emergence of China and India as global powers.

Given that Film Studies is an interdisciplinary enterprise in U.S. academia, we utilize the disciplinary interstices of Media and Communication Studies, History, Asian Studies and Modern Languages to nurture new ways of “looking” at diverse Asian cinemas, histories and cultural milieus. It is important to bear in mind the conceptual principle that films and film theories as “texts” themselves are essentially *comparative spaces* facilitated by “translation, intellectual critique and vernacular mediation” (Fan, 2015). To situate the Chinese film theory against Euro-American counterparts, our intervention fosters a new learning space for students to participate in genuinely transnational and transcultural education in a symptomatically borderless world.

By comparing the experiences of international Chinese and Indian students, obsessed with STEM education, with American home-based Honors students genuinely interested in liberal arts studies, we seek to problematize students’ presupposition of participating in and managing their own learning. For the sake of discussion, we define “home-based” as natives, not foreign. After all, it is for the first time that international students experience the American liberal arts curriculum in a comprehensive way when they step into our six-credit “Learning Community” class and engage in cerebral thinking about historical, ethical, sociocultural and political issues in today’s Hong Kong and India.

Why Design a Course on Hong Kong and Bollywood Cinemas?

A new core curriculum came into being at Pace University in 2013, requiring all undergraduates to complete at least two team-taught six-credit interdisciplinary “Learning Communities.” Some of the learning communities explore the importance of culture and media in the contemporary world. Against this background of curriculum reform, an interdisciplinary learning community is designed to address the interaction between transnational cultures and local identities within the context of contemporary Asian cinemas. The exports of

Hong Kong and Bollywood movies are second only to Hollywood, capturing Chinese, Indian, Arab and African audiences around the world.

In recent decades, Hong Kong's film industry has achieved worldwide recognition as its film techniques, styles, and even directors have become an integral part of Hollywood cinema. Because of the small size of the actual film market in Hong Kong, the industry had long ago set out to become an exporter for the Chinese audience across Asia, Europe, and the Americas. Hong Kong action movies, historical epics and art movies not only throw light on the media representations of past and present as event, experience and myth, but also reveal the interactions between global market system, transnational culture and local Cantonese identity. Yet, in an ironic way, as we mapped the content of the course, we consciously avoided reinforcing the stereotype of associating Hong Kong cinema with martial arts *à la* Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan, and instead chose to highlight critically and also commercially acclaimed cinema that could be labeled alternative, independent, or arthouse (Lee & Kolluri, Eds., 2016). As the base of the largest film industry in the world, Mumbai (formerly known as Bombay) is home to what Salman Rushdie described the "epico-mythico-tragico-comico-super-sexy-high-masala-art" of Hindi cinema. The Bollywood film industry provides a lens through which to put this city of sixteen million people into proper historical and cultural contexts. The sheer numbers of avid Bollywood consumers make these films some of the most powerful discourses within contemporary media culture (Khanna, 2019, pp. 348–351). Bollywood's simultaneous embrace of cosmopolitanism and provinciality as well as its complicity with global capital, in spite of its Indian nationalist rhetoric, highlight the dialectical relationships between nation and diaspora, and between modernity and tradition in contemporary India (Kolesnikov-Jessop, 2005, August 19). Following the same approach as we did with Hong Kong cinema, we chose to foreground the new wave cinema, within and without Bollywood that developed a much-needed realistic idiom, unlike the highly commercialized and fantasized Bollywood "masala" film genre that even Rushdie found difficult to describe.

This first ever interdisciplinary course on Hong Kong and Bollywood cinemas at an American university strives to accomplish the following tasks. Thematically, it investigates the shifting ideologies of these films over the last several decades. It addresses the issues of religion, sexuality, emotion, political economy, colonialism and nationalism that shape these movies. It also examines the extent to which popular Hong Kong and Bollywood movies conceptualize class and gender relations, transnational and local identities, all the while resorting to the language of national and ethnic unity of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Pedagogically, a comparative study of Hong Kong and Bollywood cinemas challenges students to interrogate the “structures of feelings” that begin with their reasons for taking the course and their sense of expectations from it. At the beginning of the semester we hold our ritual of asking international and home-based students to fill out a short questionnaire, which asks them: about the meaning of their names; to write briefly about their places of origin in a geographical and cultural sense; account for their majors and minors; name countries they have traveled to (if at all) and share narratives of culture shock if they experienced it; and list sources they follow to gather news about the world around them. Analyzing the students’ responses gives us a strong sense of representation of the international and home-based student body in the classroom, beyond the categories of race, gender, class and sexuality to also include their experiential narratives which partly define their identities.

As the course gets underway students learn to critically navigate categories such as national and local identities, patriotism, alienation, assimilation, memory, nostalgia, self-loathing and hybridity through film, and attempt to relate to them on a personal level in order to articulate the link between the “individual” and “structure.” It requires students to identify the common issues facing people in these two fast-changing globalized cities. It also helps students to gain a better understanding of the art of *guanxi* (i.e., personal connection understood as a form of social capital) and the philosophical categories of *dharma* and *karma* in both China and India, and to appreciate universal humanistic values such as decency, civility, idealism, self-reflection, loyalty, compassion, and empathy in both societies.

Each week, the class focuses on a particular issue and examines how Hong Kong and Bollywood directors have treated it in their films. The following are examples of broad themes under which we introduce students to different issues through the language of films: the Sociological Imagination of the Asian Family “At Home” and in the Diaspora; Race, Gender, Class and “Asian” Cultures of Parenting; Colonial Histories and Postcolonial Realities; the Corruption of Political Culture and the Politics of Democratic Engagement; the Underworld: Vigilantism, Violence and Victimhood; and Theorizing Love and Romance in Asian Cultural Spheres. Students are encouraged to analyze each movie as a text and to critique the relations between arts and events, history and memory, myths and interpretations, all from an interdisciplinary perspective. Besides submitting a final research paper on a well-defined topic as well as weekly film critiques that compare and contrast Hong Kong and Bollywood, students must participate in online discussions, classroom

presentations, and group debates to enhance their critical thinking and communication skills.

The Changing Profiles of Students

In the mid-2000s, we usually attracted many international Asian students, but the numbers whittled down after we converted the course to an honors section. We lost most of the STEM majors of Asian descent which was a telling trend, and the reasons for which will be unpacked in our discussion. Though our classes still retained a fair share of international diversity in terms of cultural representation, the numbers themselves began to reflect the actual diversity of the student body at Pace University, which is 70% Caucasian. In other words, our Asian cinema course attracted more American (Black and White) students than those of Asian and Asian American backgrounds. Predictably, the levels of participation in honors class discussions and sustained engagement with dense subject matter increased dramatically, and students' critiques and final papers were of a much higher quality.

As time has passed, we have compared and contrasted the styles and levels of participation in class, the quality of critiques, and the learning practices between a more internationally diverse classroom, with most students of Asian origin, and a less "globalized" classroom, with a preponderance of American students. Although our interdisciplinary class was initially open to all students, irrespective of their majors, as it satisfied their "diversity" requirements, we discovered that international Chinese and Indian students, who constituted the majority of the class, and were almost all majoring in business management, accounting and computer science, were not adequately prepared to write scholarly critiques and serious research essays for a film-based liberal arts course. This lack of humanistic preparation has to do more with the institutional mission and curricular objectives which led to a de-emphasis on critical thinking and writing skills in the humanities in their formative school years. Like it or not, the STEM disciplines were projected as more attractive and lucrative in countries like China and India, where, "the devaluation of liberal arts education simultaneously signifies, on the other side, the ever-increasing institutionalization of higher education that narrowly focuses on hard sciences and technology education and vocational training" (Kolluri, 2016, p. 132). To be fair to the international students in question, it was simply unthinkable for them to go against the grain (and their parents' wishes) in order to pursue a liberal arts degree in Journalism, Literature, Philosophy, History, Anthropology or Political Science, that may or may not have ensured gainful employment, contrary to the less utilitarian

and more independent approach among American students to choose their own majors. Despite the strong intercultural component of our film course, which these students could relate to intellectually and emotionally, their participation in class discussions did not meet the expectations of the faculty as reflected in their average grades. There were a number of challenges that we identified for this lack of participation and engaged learning.

First, some international students were not thoroughly familiar with the culture of lively discussion and free expression of opinions in the American classroom. At the beginning, they appeared to be quieter and less participatory than their American counterparts, and the absence of their perspective in group discussions might affect their overall performance in class. They would wait for others to speak, to not voice their thoughts for the fear of being wrong or inarticulate, leading to what Communication scholars label, “the spiral of silence” (Donsbach & Traugott, Eds., 2008). “As a micro-theory, the spiral of silence examines opinion expression, controlling for people’s predispositions—such as fear of isolation, and also demographic variables that have been shown to influence people’s willingness to publicly express opinions on issues” like parenting, democratic engagement, or religion (Donsbach & Traugott, Eds., 2008, p. 178). In our classroom, complicating demographic variables, like class, education, religion, and age, was the explicit acknowledgment and discussion of categories such as race, gender, and sexuality in a multicultural setting, to prepare them to be “worldly” in their consciousness, and how to be a better human as a fulfilment of the basic mission of our humanities-based learning community. These discussions did not always materialize of their own volition but because of their unfamiliarity with a critical vocabulary to analyze and relate to those academic categories that we all possess.

This leads us to our second point—that the level of academic preparedness in humanities from the elementary-high school levels did not adequately equip students for a satisfactory learning and participatory experience in a college-level interdisciplinary class. The fundamental tenets of humanities and liberal arts are critical thinking and reasoning, and these qualities either did not figure or barely made an appearance in their early intellectual formation within the specific context of being exposed to classes in humanities and social sciences, thanks to the hegemony of their curriculum, which, as they grew older, placed much emphasis on mathematics and hard sciences at the expense of the humanities. In other words, critical thinking and reasoning, creative learning, and problem solving appeared to belong more to the precise realms of mathematics and pure sciences than to the imprecise, messy, and contradictory nature of human existence.

Despite these pedagogical setbacks, we purposefully created opportunities for scholarly engagement between international and home-based students, and encouraged the former to share and utilize their cultural and linguistic assets in an educational setting. We suggest that the “Participatory Action Research” (PAR) school of thought is one that captures part of our pedagogical approach because even as it emphasizes social structures and processes (for instance, of parenting), without rejecting the value of preformed hypotheses about styles and cultures of parenting obtained universally, PAR produces what Whyte (Friesen, 1999) calls “creative surprises,” which are new ideas that spring up during the course of student participation on particular themes such as the “interpretive framework” of the parenting cultures, and the theorization of love and romance in Asian cinema. This approach attempts to enable the student to find a theoretical and experiential “voice” that expresses one’s cultural/linguistic assets, and leads to engagement with ideas and others in the classroom.

The willingness of several international students to share personal stories of upbringing not only enlightened the classroom discussion but also challenged the conventional stereotypes of Asian students as introverted, quiet and lacking academic preparation in humanities. Fascinated by the cinematic portrayal of hierarchical education and traditional parenting in Hong Kong, Singapore and India, a Chinese international student reflected on his upbringing at the Yale-in-China Academy, a former Christian mission school which was incorporated into a state-run, prestigious and competitive boarding school in Changsha, Hunan Province, and critiqued the authoritarian mode of his schooling experience in China. Translating his rigid daily schedule from Chinese into English, the student stated that he and his classmates woke up at 6 a.m., went for collective morning exercise, had breakfast together, attended mathematics and English classes till noon, took an hour-long lunch break, continued regular lessons till 4 p.m., and studied by themselves after dinner. His presentation was an eye-opening experience for home-based students, but our English, Indian, Thai and Singaporean students who graduated from prestigious private schools in their homelands immediately identified themselves with this Chinese student and began to share tales of their own schooling. On numerous occasions, popular mystery thrillers such as *Internal Affairs Trilogy* (2002–2003), *Kahaani (The Story)* (2012), and *Kahaani 2 (The Story 2)* (2016) touched on the Asian concepts of *guanxi*, *dharma*, and *karma* in relation to friendship and loyalty, piety and responsibility, this-worldly and otherworldly pursuits. Chinese and Indian students were encouraged to draw on their linguistic and cultural assets to dialogue with students of Jewish, Christian and Muslim backgrounds about

universal ethics that shaped the boundaries between sacred and profane, and that elevated our day-to-day existence in the modern world. It is through these autobiographical reflections that both international and home-based students exercise their agency, empower each other through dialogue, and evaluate the purpose of a meaningful college education.

Sometimes, reflective thinking is deeply intertwined with emotional pain, a second-generation Chinese-American English literature major, whose parents immigrated from Cantonese-speaking communities in Malaysia and Myanmar (Burma) to New York City, shared a moving story about the clash between her own intellectual aspirations and her parents' expectations. Though born in the United States, this student spent her formative years growing up in Malaysia and was embedded in rote-learning and memorization. Upon coming to New York City, she was caught between American appreciation for individual creativity and Chinese emphasis on conformity. In arts class, she found it hard to draw a self-portrait of herself as she would rather identify with her close friend, a blond-haired, blue-eyed girl, rather than expressing her Chineseness (Che, 2017, September 29). Against all the odds, she continued her academic pursuits and earned a doctoral degree in writing and rhetoric studies from the University of Utah. Delving into the problems facing Chinese-speaking students at American universities such as learning a new language, adjusting to an English-learning environment, and dealing with racism in language and classroom pedagogies, she strove to foster a more culturally inclusive English-writing classroom for international students (Che, 2018). She drew on the methodology of auto-ethnography to investigate how non-English speakers appropriated multi-linguistic skills to create what she called the "third places," alternative "in-between" spaces in the monolingual academy where people could subvert the dominant pedagogical practices and form new self-identities with other marginalized groups, while embracing their native roots and succeeding in the American university education (Che, 2019). Her intellectual journey prompted us to transform our film class into the "third places" where international and home-based students helped each other's acculturation into both global and local cultures, thereby fostering intercultural communication and liberal arts learning. It represented for us a "co-generative dialogue" that valued sharing of ideas and emotions, and emphasized the coming together of different types of knowledge and experiences to create newer frameworks of interpreting reality (Friesen, 1999, p. 288).

The convergence of knowledges and experiences through the viewing of thematically linked films was also an intellectually honest and empathetic exercise for all students because they found the emotional courage to share

personal stories with their peers in the classroom and through their written critiques of the films. Reflecting on the depictions of the ruthlessness of “Social Darwinism” in the highly competitive Asian education system or the cultural stereotyping of Asians and Asian Americans, a home-based Caucasian male student empathized with his Asian peers: “Raised in a liberal, loving household, my parents focused on support and love while encouraging success in school. I was never pushed to do incredibly well in school, but my natural tendency to make those around me happy created a sense of obligation to success for my parent’s sake. In that sense, I relate to individuals who are raised by Asian parents, and how they may feel as though failing makes them a disappointment to those that they care about.” At the same time, he self-reflected about what truly mattered to him while simultaneously critiquing the films: “I find an extreme disconnect when abusive nature is exhibited by the parents in both films. I could never imagine my parents doing something so mentally detrimental, and I could never imagine myself doing that to my own child.” In a similar context, analyzing the hierarchical and intensely competitive nature of Singaporean school education portrayed in *I Not Stupid* (2002), another home-based Caucasian female student acknowledged the prevalence of a similar environment in her school albeit with some crucial differences: “I went to a competitive magnet school in the D.C. area during my pre-teen years, and the competition there was fierce. Paralleling the three-tiered system in Singapore, my middle school had three discrete sections, with group one being the smartest. Now, the student’s scores were not announced publicly like they are in Asian schools, but we obviously could tell who belonged to which group. However, this grouping never led to the behavior displayed in *I Not Stupid* and *Stars on Earth* (2007).” Writing in a film critique, another Asian American female student problematized the “smart Asian student” stereotype that followed her constantly: “Some of my white, male peers would tell me that I am only smart because I am an Asian. This would infuriate me anytime I heard this because the statement limits my hard work and determination to assumptions made about my ethnicity. Being adopted from China by white parents, people are quick to make assumptions about me solely based on the orientation of my face. Ultimately, when I felt the tense atmosphere throughout these films, I related to them in a different way than most. I felt grateful to possess the ability to embrace my own identity.” These genuine responses constitute a sample of representations that reveal the diversity of thought processes, and the ways in which students think and reflect on issues close to their hearts when given an opportunity to do so.

Thematically, one historical topic that excited students most was that of democratic engagement as portrayed by contemporary Hong Kong and

Indian filmmakers. The most notable example was the strategy of nonviolent activism popularized by Mahatma Gandhi (1868–1948) as a mode of mass politics, mobilizing Indians of all stripes through strikes, civil disobedience and peaceful marches to oppose British colonialism, and continuing to play a major role in the Occupy Wall Street (2011), Taiwan’s Sunflower Movement (2014) and Hong Kong’s Umbrella Uprising (2014). For example, *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* (Keep At it, Munna Bhai!), a 2006 Bollywood comedy, features a 21st-century Mumbai gangster who rediscovered Gandhi’s philosophy on nonviolent activism and utilized Gandhism to help ordinary people deal with their day-to-day problems. *Rang De Basanti* (Color it Saffron), another 2006 Bollywood film, follows a group of students at the University of Delhi who became politicized as they participated in a documentary film on five early 20th-century Indian freedom fighters, including Bhagat Singh (1907–1931), a socialist calling for violent uprising against colonialists. Similarly, the independent Hong Kong film *Three Narrow Gates* (2008) started with an unresolved murder that brought several strangers, including a gambler, a policeman, a church pastor, a sex worker and a photojournalist together to fight injustice. Exploring rampant corruption and authoritarian governance in the postcolonial era, this upbeat drama offers a glimpse of hope in the self-mobilization of civil society (Lee, 2016a). Another internationally acclaimed film *Ten Years* (2015), a low-budget production comprised of five short films, presents a dystopian view of Hong Kong’s future in 2025 (Kolluri & Lee, 2018; Lee, 2016b, April 3). Clearly breaking from the old trend of cinematic escapism that once characterized the Hong Kong and Bollywood film industries, these political films introduce students to the narratives of peace thinkers and radical activists in modern Asia. The stories of Gandhi, Bhagat Singh, and Hong Kong’s Umbrella demonstrators such as Joshua Wong are shining examples of historical actors who utilized their gifts and talents to seek positive change. Their ideas and tactics give students a conceptual tool to reflect on sociopolitical conflicts and crises that they encounter on both a personal and global level. As the Umbrella Uprising unfolded in the fall of 2014, our students partnered with the Hong Kong, Peace and Justice, and Political Science student clubs at Pace University to organize multiple panels on the postcolonial politics of Hong Kong, the changing China-Hong Kong relations, and the use of social media in democratic transition. Therefore, the study of nonviolent activism through films is not just a scholastic exercise but can help students articulate a vision of peaceful and nonviolent society from a multicultural perspective. Rejecting the dehumanization of the “enemy” in contemporary political rhetoric, the most effective way for them to create a

culture of peace is to internalize the values of justice, compassion, and respect for others.

Conceptually, in our classes, we take into account the role of contingency in history. In classroom discussion, students are often asked about historical alternatives (i.e., events that could have happened but did not) (Lee, 2005). Good examples are these questions: What if India had remained a unified secular state after independence? What if the Hong Kong Umbrella activists had succeeded and transformed the postcolonial city into a laboratory of democratic exercise for China? In exploring these alternatives, students conduct independent research on other important topics, such as the conflicting visions between Gandhi, Nehru and Jinnah over the future of India, and the conflicts between Hong Kong Umbrella protesters and Chinese Communist leaders. Pedagogically, one may criticize such questions as “historical fantasies,” but it is a great intellectual exercise to explore the question of “what might have been” rather than taking history for granted. The question of “what if” in history creates a much deeper understanding of what actually happened in the past. After all, history without controversy is dead history. Controversies always challenge our received opinions and raise questions about the human experience in other times and places. Our task is to challenge students to appreciate the intrinsic value of critical thinking, and to become more globally conscious citizens rather than just be successful professionals.

Conclusion

This reflection on a team-taught course on the globalization of Hong Kong and Bollywood cinemas shows that interdisciplinary teaching fosters an outlook of cultural sensitivity and global interdependence, as well as supports a participatory and shared intellectual environment between students and teachers. Because of the opportunity for greater student participation and reflective inquiry, the cinematic materials covered in class create a dynamic learning environment that transforms students into active learners, and the PAR as a pedagogy enables this process in an intercultural setting because it brings together inquiring minds, who find out the complexity of the subject matter and the ways in which they can relate to certain filmic and historical characters in various Asian settings. Once placed in this context, students not only engage in an active dialogue with the great minds of the past, but also develop a more sophisticated understanding of the world, as opposed to a simplistic division of the globe into mutually hostile civilizations.

Generally speaking, liberal arts learning can be enriched with courses with international, cross-cultural and comparative foci, which allow for a

more fulfilled, well-rounded, and better-educated college graduate. Based on our experience and the findings presented above, three points are of crucial importance. First, cinema can be a very effective teaching tool if it is tied in with the academic discipline and subject matter of the course. Students are most likely to embrace cinematic and cross-cultural components if these elements are recognizably related to the subjects under study. In other words, the film-based course also becomes an exercise in “intercultural communication” that allows students to situate a film in a broader historical and cultural context, and become familiar with the sights and sounds of another language and culture that include verbal and non-verbal patterns of interpersonal communication in meaning-making.

Second, given the diverse profiles and expectations of students, assessment criteria need to be carefully implemented without compromising standards of academic performance. Scholarly expectations of the course should be clearly and repeatedly communicated to students, and students of various disciplinary backgrounds should be introduced to basic methodologies of film criticism, historical research and cultural theory. In addition to regular group projects, some more traditional pedagogical tools, such as film critiques and research papers should also be incorporated into the class. For example, as tools of assessment, critiques form “a moment of triangulation” to compare and contrast films from Hong Kong and India, while at the same time, at our suggestion, resist the temptation to analyze them from a predominantly American sensibility, so as to understand and appreciate the importance of an “inter-Asian” approach to film and cultural analysis.

Finally, there appears to be a lack of proper advisement in managing international students’ expectations and choosing relevant humanities courses to fulfill the requirements of an undergraduate degree as it pertains to their level of preparation. There has been too much emphasis on the instrumental value of STEM at the expense of humanities in their home countries, thereby impacting their critical thinking, independent learning and scholarly writing; skills necessary to perform well in liberal arts courses. While some international students would be well advised to take courses in “Public Speaking,” “Writing for the Discipline” and “Creative Writing” upon entering the university, educators should create “in-between” spaces for both international and home-based students to appreciate diverse linguistic and cultural assets, participate in the production and dissemination of knowledge, and enlighten one another in new ways.

To conclude, globalizing the liberal arts should be a two-way street. International and home-based students’ diverse expectations about university experience ought to be taken into account by educators who should challenge

students to unlearn their instrumental attitude toward education and relearn a new set of intellectual values and behavioral norms on a liberal arts campus. Only by doing so can educators revitalize the humanities and make the learning more meaningful and relevant to students personally.

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