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Sharon A. Suh. *Silver Screen Buddha: Buddhism in Asian and Western Film.* New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015. 232 pp. $122.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4411-0536-3.

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Religion and film has emerged as a fertile area of research in recent years, drawing increasing attention from both religious and film studies. Publications on various aspects of the cinematic representation of spirituality have grown notably in quantity and quality. Whether theoretical or critical, they are predominantly concerned with Western religion, and specifically Christianity.

Given the heavily Western-oriented research trend in this field, Sharon A. Suh's *Silver Screen Buddha: Buddhism in Asian and Western Film* is a welcome development for those interested in the filmic portrayal of Eastern spirituality. In their collection of essays on Buddhism and American cinema, John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff state that "Buddhist film is important because it is a marker of the impact of Asian philosophy and religion on American culture."[1] Reflecting this point, studies of Buddhist elements in film avail themselves more readily now than before in both print and electronic forms. However, unlike journal articles, monographs only began to appear about a decade ago.[2] Hence, Suh's is a valuable addition to a handful of books that address the complex relationship between Buddhism and film.

The central issues investigated in *Silver Screen Buddha* are race and gender in Buddhist film. But what makes this book poignant and even provocative is the author's view of monasticism as a third powerful factor which, along with race and gender, is deeply responsible for the problematic of celluloid Buddhism. Throughout her book, Suh's critical voice targets the dominance of the mysterious ascetic monk as the prime icon of Buddhism on the silver screen. By contrast, the laity and women remain invisible although they constitute the main sustaining force for Buddhist institutions through their devotional practice. By uncovering their unduly "suppressed and obscured images," Suh stresses a great need to bring out "Buddhist plurality" in cinema (p. 11). More diverse images of ordinary practitioners, such as Asian and Asian American women, are proposed as more appropriate material for "reel" Buddhism modeled on "real" Buddhism.

Silver Screen Buddha consists of nine chapters. Chapter 1 gives an overview of the long tradition of idealizing and exoticizing the mysterious monk in Western and Asian cinema. This critique is followed by the author's definition of Buddhist film and its criteria. The final section of the introductory chapter offers a detailed criticism of "gendered and raced Buddhist orthodoxy" that has formed "exclusionary looking relations" in the discourse of Buddhist film (p. 14).

The seven chapters in the main body of the book offer the author's close readings of the "ar-

chetypal" films that raise pressing issues on race and gender in imaging and imagining Buddhist society (p. 24). Chapter 2 focuses on the two earliest films made in Hollywood: D. W. Griffith's ***Broken Blossoms*** (1919) and Frank Capra's ***Lost Horizon*** (1937). Both works, as Suh rightly points out, capitalize on the racial stereotype of Asians and Asian Americans as the "Yellow Peril."

Suh's deconstruction of Buddhist Orientalism continues in the following chapter on Zen, which she characterizes as "an ideal example of cultural iconoclasm" (p. 25). This chapter examines the three films that are commonly based on the Western fascination with the cultural as well as religious legacies of the Japanese Zen tradition: the Coen brothers' ***The Big Lebowski*** (1998), Jim Jarmusch's ***Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai*** (1999), and Marc Rosenbush's ***Zen Noir*** (2004).

In chapter 4, the book shifts to gender and sexuality in Buddhist film. The perception of women as an obstacle to enlightenment has a long history in Buddhist scriptures from the early days of this religion. The cinematic expression of the deeply rooted negative view of women is illustrated by the invalid girl whose monastic sojourn results in the distraction and disrobing of the young monk in Kim Ki-Duk's ***Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter … and Spring*** (2003).

The female sexual body receives a positive reinterpretation in chapter 5 in relation to socially integrated Buddhism. Suh's affirmation of female sexuality is carried out through her analysis of ***Aje Aje Bara Aje*** (***Come, Come, Come Upward***, 1989), a film by the veteran Korean director Im Kwon-Taek. Set in a Buddhist nunnery, Im's work contrasts different paths to awakening taken by a pair of nuns, one narrowly adhering to monastic precepts while the other, although forced to return to the secular world, practices compassion in her daily life. The latter's sexual involvements with men, according to Suh, should be understood as "the radical acts of somatic compassion" because they have the effect of awakening male spirituality (p. 26). Suh further argues that as a means of spiritual catalysis, the female body promotes the Buddhist's engagement in larger society. As a way of illustrating the importance of engaged Buddhism, the young monk Kibong's departure from his secluded mountaintop hermitage to the maelstrom of the mundane world is cited from Bae Yong-Kyun's ***Why Has Bodhi Dharma Left for the East?*** (1989).

The merit of everyday lay practice over rigorous monastic meditation is highlighted throughout the subsequent chapters. Chapter 6 discusses Yojiro Takita's ***Departures*** (2008). Influenced by Shin Buddhism, Takita's film "functions primarily as a filmic meditation on Buddhist concepts of presence, the interrelatedness of all phenomena and the expression of gratitude" (p. 120).

In chapter 7, Suh expounds the concept of Buddhist film as ***sutra*** using Chang Sun-Woo's ***Passage to Buddha*** (1993) as an example. Chang's cinematic adaptation of the last chapter of the ***Avataṃsaka Sutra*** enables the audience to "see film as a Buddhist text that envisions an integrated social world where the ordinary messiness of life is the most potent ground for enlightenment and spiritual transformation" (p. 27). Special attention is paid to the roles of the three female characters as ***kalyānamitra***s, including the temptress in the protagonist's ox-riding sequence.

Pan Nalin's ***Samsara*** (2001) is the central text in chapter 8. This film is scrutinized as a showcase of exposing the pitfalls of monasticism. The heroine, Pema, embodies the strengths of lay women who quietly put the Buddhist teachings into action through their quotidian lives despite the lack of societal recognition and respect for their spiritual capacities. In terms of inner strength and moral integrity, she excels her husband Tashi, an ex-monk who is shown to easily succumb to sexual lures even after years of solitary meditation in a cave. The couple are sharply contrasted in the last scene, in which the wife scolds her irresponsi-

ble husband who, disillusioned by worldly sufferings, attempts to escape back to monastic life.

The final, concluding chapter highlights Julia Kwan's *Eve and the Fire Horse* (2005) as an inspiring new type of Buddhist film, which, instead of reifying the lofty male monastic ideal, celebrates the vicissitudes of Asian American women's lives in their intimate family environment. Revolving around nine-year-old Eve and her houseguest, Kuan Yin (*Avalokiteśvara*), the film sketches the religious topography of a typical Chinese Canadian immigrant family in which Buddhism, Catholicism, and superstitions co-mingle. Suh suggests Kwan's validation of lay women's religiosity as a viable new direction for the Buddhist film genre. From Kwan's spotlight on racial and gender minorities, Suh concludes that film is a "spiritual technology" and a "skillful means" that enhances and enriches our perception of self, other, and the world.

Silver Screen Buddha provides a fresh insight into Buddhist film by demystifying the monk master. Although the author's sociological approach is rather conventional, her substitution of monasticism for class as an analytical category effectively debunks the Orientalist mystique at the core of the genre's attraction. Indeed, awe and authority accorded to male monastics in cinema echoes a hierarchical power structure operating in the four-fold community of Buddhists in real life. Film in turn tends to reinforce such an underlying religious "class" system in the internal dynamics of Buddhist society. Thus, the elevation of *Upāsikā* of Asian ethnicity in Suh's study forces the reader to ponder the fundamental function of film as a mirror held up to the institutional reality of the Buddhist religion in a social context.

The author's cogent ideological messages notwithstanding, *Silver Screen Buddha* suffers from a few drawbacks. Above all, the book concentrates on plot and character analysis, hardly dwelling on the formal properties of film as a medium. Suh's bent on narrative content at the expense of camera work in formulating the Buddhist film genre reverberates throughout her close readings of the selected films. According to Suh, a Buddhist film should incorporate 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 Buddhist interpretations of reality or a uniquely Buddhist solution to a social problem" (p. 9). Among the five items, only one concerns pictorial components of a film text.

Notably, not all the conditions above lucidly demarcate the generic contour of Buddhist films. For instance, the first one can be rephrased in general terms as existential angst and malaise, or more simply as one's soul-searching amid life's vagaries. This condition is not exclusively Buddhist; thus it is applicable to films on other spiritual traditions. By contrast, the last criterion, that is, offering a "Buddhist solution" is right on the mark. On the whole, Suh's broad and inclusive definition can risk losing a discriminating power in genre classification.

Another potentially problematic criterion involves *mise-en-scène.* Images of temple architecture, ritual objects, and monastics make up a quintessential Buddhist iconography. However, these images cannot be taken as the de facto markers of Buddhist film unless they are integrated with the semantic network of the text conducive to a religious message. This point is supported by many martial arts films that appropriate a Buddhist temple ground merely as a convenient spatial setting. Therefore, their qualification for the rubric of Buddhist film is questionable despite their "prototypical" monastic *mise-en-scène*. Martial arts movies revolve around skillfully choreographed fight scenes between good and evil forces. Even though the hero's meditation

scenes are inserted here and there, their thematic upshot is often veneered with moral clichés devoid of an authentic spiritual resonance.

Suh's extensive definition of Buddhist film accounts for oddities in her reading of Griffith's ***Broken Blossoms***. The problem is twofold. Firstly, as Suh herself admits, the brief temple scenes at the outset of the film weigh only slightly in developing the motif of romance between Cheng Huan and Lucy. The primary function of the opening sequence is to expose the naïve religious idealism that the male protagonist once held in China. As soon as the geographical setting is shifted to the inner city of London, Cheng's noble image as an aspiring missionary is nowhere to be seen; he is already reduced to a lethargic "Chink" immigrant. With his degenerate image, Buddhism virtually disappears from the diegesis, the small altar in his room serving as a flimsy reminder of his Asianness.

Suh's overstatement on the role of Buddhism in ***Broken Blossoms*** is further evidenced by her identification of Cheng as a "priest" but with no solid textual basis. The film does not provide any signs, linguistic or visual, of his monastic membership. The credit scene lists him simply as "Yellow Man." Besides, Cheng's outfit unequivocally signifies his lay status. His non-monastic identity is confirmed in his meeting with an elder monk prior to his departure from Shanghai. Unlike the master, Cheng is never shown in a monastic robe or with a shaven head. In Thomas Burke's "The Chink and the Child" (1916), the literary source of the film, Cheng is portrayed as a worthless drifter. It is Jane Iwamura who first claims that Cheng initiates the "genealogy of the Oriental Monk" in American popular culture.[3] He may be qualified as a monk figure due to his pure mind, but he is not an ordained monk per se.

In ***Silver Screen Buddha***, Buddhist film is described as an "emerging" genre (p. 9). This account needs a careful qualification. The genre may be a new phenomenon in American or Western cinema, but it is not in Asian film.[4] A pointed case is Korean Buddhist films which began to be made in the 1920s and quickly evolved into a distinct genre within the national cinema. The continued production, distribution, and consumption of Buddhist films throughout the history of Korean cinema warrant their existence as an independent genre. It was less than two decades ago that Korean Buddhist film was introduced to Western audiences, but its indisputable niche in the domestic film culture and market has nearly a century-long history.[5]

Of importance in addressing the above issues in Suh's book is that they in fact attest to a conundrum of taxonomy in film genres. As Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen remind us, genre terms are not precise, and the methods of categorization are not clear. Gangster films and westerns are based on their subject matters, whereas comedies and thrillers are grounded in effect in the spectator. In the meantime, stylistic trait is the decisive criterion for film noir.[6] Given this complexity, Suh's endeavor to define Buddhist film deserves a commendation. It is a timely call for a serious discussion on basic concepts and terms on Buddhist film. The necessity of this task can be glimpsed, for example, in the idiosyncratic phrase of "non-Buddhist Buddhist movie," which refers to a work that is not "about Buddhism" but is "structured around themes that resonate with Buddhist concerns."[7]

Silver Screen Buddha is a major step forward in the study of Buddhism and film. It contributes primarily to ethnic, racial, and feminist approaches to Buddhist film by tackling two interrelated issues: the fantasy about an enlightened Asian monk, and the chronic bias toward women practitioners as his feeble foils. The absence of jargon in Suh's writing makes the book easily accessible to a wide range of readers from novices to seasoned researchers in film and spirituality, and many other related fields.

Note

[1]. John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff, eds., ***Buddhism and American Cinema*** (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), 3.

[2]. In addition to Whalen-Bridge and Storhoff ***'s Buddhism and American Cinema***, the books on Buddhism and film include: Matthew Bortolini, ***The Dharma of Star Wars*** (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2005); Ronald Green, ***Buddhism Goes to the Movies*** (New York: Routledge, 2014); and Francisca Cho, ***Seeing Like the Buddha: Enlightenment through Film*** (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017).

[3]. Jane Iwamura, "The Oriental Monk in American Popular Culture," in ***Religion and Popular Culture in America***, ed. Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan, rev. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 28-31.

[4]. This phenomenon reflects what John Whalen-Bridge calls "a cinematic Buddha Boom" of the 1990s. John Whalen-Bridge, "Introduction: Some (Hollywood) Version of Enlightenment," in Whalen-Bridge and Storhoff, ***Buddhism and American Cinema***, 2.

[5]. Bae Yong-Kyun's ***Why Has Bodhi Dharma Left for the East?*** (1989) is the first Korean Buddhist film that was widely received in the West.

[6]. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, "Film Genres," in ***Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings***, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, 7th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 529.

[7]. Whalen-Bridge, "Introduction," 3.