

## “Disciplines and Narratives: Introducing Asian Studies in the Undergraduate Curriculum”

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This presentation is about the course Introduction to Asian Studies (ASIA 200) which we have been teaching at IUP to about 30 students each Spring for the last 15 years or so. Most of them are double majors and think they know (or will take a class) on what it means to be an historian or a sociologist and what career paths are open for people like that.<sup>1</sup> This class is intended to provide a version of this for budding Asianists. By Asianists I mean both the handful of our students who will go on to graduate work and/or a professional career directly related to Asia and the larger group who will go on to be people who are interested in Asia, know more about it than 98% of other Americans (almost all our students are Americans) and explain Asia to others. This of course presents the problem of defining Asian Studies and its disciplinary method.<sup>2</sup> In our case there is no Asian Studies as a department with separate lines. We are a program made of faculty from different disciplines hired for disciplinary reasons and teaching classes for because their home department wants them to.<sup>3</sup> There is no need for the class to teach them methods of research or writing that they will use in their later Asian Studies classes, since this is the only ASIA class they will take, with everything else being an Asia-centered class in a traditional discipline. If pressed, I suppose I would define what I want for our student Asianists is for them to be comfortable with different geographical regions of Asia and with different disciplinary approaches. To some extent this is just a good thing, but it is also a necessity, since we don't have the class offerings to let them focus on Chinese Anthropology (or China) and they are going to have to be generalists by default. This is not that different from being a faculty Asianist, who is almost always has a broader remit than their more traditional disciplinary colleagues.

Like any class, you need to start from where (most) of the students are and move them towards where you want them to be. Most of them come in identifying with the culture they are doing language work on, and with limited exposure to academic writing and scholarly discursive habits. Ideally, I would like them to reach the point where they been introduced to various

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<sup>1</sup> In theory there should be some stuff about career paths (and summer language study and study abroad) in the class, but since I am also the adviser for all these students I do that in the advising sessions.

<sup>2</sup> Area Studies programs are being consolidated all over the world, for reasons that we are assured have nothing to do with budget cuts, Smith, Conner. “The Problem with Area Studies.” *The Daily Californian*, March 18, 2016. <https://www.dailycal.org/2016/03/18/ias-weekender/>. This is also part of a wider re-thinking of the Area Studies approach. See Stremmelaar, Josine, and Paul Van Der Velde, eds. *What about Asia?: Revisiting Asian Studies*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006. While I personally agree with many of the criticisms of the old Cold War Area studies approach, I do think there is room for an Area Studies built around the importance of language study.

<sup>3</sup> The number of faculty and disciplines has declined over time as our University reorients itself around STEM. We still have faculty in History, Religious Studies, Political Science and Anthropology, and in the Fall of 2021 will be offering instruction in either 1 or 4 Asian languages. (Language instruction is still up in the air as of April 2021). We cover all of geographic Asia (and the whole Middle East) in order to have enough classes to make up a major.

geographic regions of Asia and various disciplinary traditions, and an ability to deal with more complex academic works.<sup>4</sup>

The class has evolved somewhat over time. Ideally it is a class that any faculty could teach (and enjoy teaching) although in fact only one faculty member has taught it.<sup>5</sup> The class is divided into units, each usually built around a central text and a particular region and discipline. So History/China, Literature/India, etc. (I have posted all the syllabi here ) As my thinking about the class has evolved, it has increasingly been centered around narratives and disciplines. Narratives are the types of reading they are used to, self-contained stories about people that follow a plot and that they can identify with. Disciplinary writing is the type of things they will find in academic writing, analytical texts that are part of a larger scholarly conversation. Ideally both types of texts should be both educational and enjoyable.

### **Units and the organization of the class**

The class is divided into 4-6 units.<sup>6</sup> Units are usually centered around a book. As one of my undergraduate professors told me, students will forget your name, the classes they took, and the papers they wrote, but they are likely to remember every real book they actually read even years later. Books for this class are always something available as a cheap paperback or, now, as free e-books via our library. One of the purposes of the class is to pick out 4-5 books and a couple films to use to present Asia Asian Studies to the students. One of the benefits of teaching the class is that there are always lots of options, so if something is too expensive or too difficult there is always something else. In some versions of the class I pair the main book in the unit up with a couple articles or short pieces that deal with a related topic in a different region.<sup>7</sup> Each unit is always about a geographical area and a disciplinary tradition, since I want to both reach the students where they are (some of them come in thinking of themselves as Japan people or Korea people, although they usually do not think in terms of disciplines) and encourage them to expand their awareness.<sup>8</sup> Each unit usually starts with a one class lecture to get the students enough background to understand the discipline and period, but most of the unit will be centered on the book and any associated readings

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<sup>4</sup> The course has a number of other goals. One is to serve as a “global and multicultural class” (The IUP nomenclature. Formerly called Non-Western, all students must take one Global and Multicultural class). The course also counts as writing intensive, (a designation in the process of being eliminated) and as a Liberal Studies Elective. By its nature this is an easy class to fit into a lot of requirement categories, and this both helps with enrollment and attracts potential new Asianists. Another goal is to create a sense of community and purpose among our majors.

<sup>5</sup> The goal was to avoid creating the type of class that nobody wants to teach and nobody wants to take. This seems to have worked out.

<sup>6</sup> The units are not connected, although the texts are supposed to be progressively more difficult. I used to have a final essay where students compared two of the units, but this tended not to work well. Organizing a class like this is actually a bit weird for me, since history classes are usually chronological.

<sup>7</sup> As an example, for one literature unit we did a published autobiography and some autobiographical snippets from other authors.

Goodyear, Sara Suleri. *Meatless Days*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

Ge Hong Autobiography- Ge Hong was a medieval Chinese alchemist

Fukuzawa Yukichi Autobiography-Student ways at Ogata School

Mohandas Gandhi Autobiography -At the High School through Playing the English Gentleman.

This was the semester that *Meatless Days* did not work, well (as opposed to the semester it worked great). In practice this approach tends to be more reading than most of them want to do, but a few students will do the short readings and pick the paper topic comparing them.

<sup>8</sup> This is also partially a matter of self-defense. Our Asian Studies program includes courses all of geographical Asia, in part because we need to do so in order to have enough classes There should be some Japan content so that Japan students (those taking Japanese for their language requirement) will get some of what they came for, but will also perhaps come to accept the idea that they can learn about things outside Japan.

## How students navigate the class

The class is designed so that each unit is built around a somewhat more difficult text, so in theory they are moving in a more academic direction throughout. How they engage with each unit is different, however. Each unit has various small writing/reading assignments associated with it.<sup>9</sup> Thus, students have to engage with all the units. The major assignments, however, are the film presentation and writing short papers on two of the 4-5 books, so students can choose which units they want to engage with most deeply. Ideally this would be the two units that they find most interesting, for whatever reason (they like Japan, they like Anthropology, they know nothing about India, etc.) but in practice a lot of them will end up doing the final two papers because they procrastinated. Still, ideally the class is built as a choose your own adventure sort of thing, where students can choose their level of engagement with different units. I do it this way in part because while there are students at all levels in the class, most of them are first or second year students, and getting them to engage with 5 books and a film is a lot to ask. It also has the advantage of working with the natural tendency of students (or anyone else) to have more interest in some things than others. This is not (say) a Nursing class where every student needs to be proficient in everything introduced, and there is no point in going beyond proficiency. Ideally it is something of an exploratory class, where students are both introduced to things that they in the future will not pay much attention to<sup>10</sup> and get an early chance to dig into something that will be important to them.

## Always start with journalism

The first unit is always journalism, which usually means a set of long-form journalistic pieces pasted together by the author to make a book. This is the simplest version of one of the main purposes of the class, which is to help them think about the different texts they read and how to understand them. Most of them come in assuming that the things on the syllabus are all same and there is no need to think about how to read academic work by an anthropologist vs. how to read bad journalism. I start with journalism in part because it is accessible and in part because I have a couple of good readings to start this with.<sup>11</sup> Luyendijk explains where the words you read come from, the nature of wire services, how things get re-used, and how editorial expectations shape “objective reporting”.<sup>12</sup> Klein helps place Asian Studies in the context of imperial power and helps the students understand their own subject position and a bit about the history of the field, while also using the word orientalism.<sup>13</sup>

The journalism book, whatever it is, is usually on some current issue that students will already know at least something about, since it is always more difficult to get them into something that they have no familiarity with at all. These books are also usually intended to be accessible to a general audience. I generally find that the books that work best are those aimed at a foreign audience (Indian journalists writing for an Indian audience is not ideal) and also ideally it would be long-form journalism on social issues rather than specific political events, and ideally something that students may identify with. A good example is Greenfeld, Karl Taro. *Speed Tribes: Days and*

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<sup>9</sup> Now usually discussions/responses on D2L, our LMS. This is all part of the Quiz grade, and although I don't make this entirely clear to the students, these are basically ungraded assignments.

<sup>10</sup> Or avoid like the plague.

<sup>11</sup> -“Journalism for Beginners” and “No News” from Luyendijk, Joris. *People Like Us: Misrepresenting the Middle East*. Soft Skull Press, 2006

-“How to be an American Abroad” from Klein, Christina. *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

One is a popular text that helps them to think about the writing about Asia that they are possibly familiar with and one is an academic text that will introduce them to types of writing that they are less familiar with.

<sup>12</sup> Literally every time I have done this class the first answer to the question -Where do you get your news? is “the internet” or possibly “Google”. Teaching them to think about the nature of the texts they are reading is one of the points of the class.

<sup>13</sup> The chapter centers on James Mitchener as a guide to Asia for Americans.

*Night's with Japan's Next Generation*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1995. although it is now quite dated.<sup>14</sup> The most important aspect of the journalism unit is that these pieces tend to be looking at some issue in Asia through narratives about individuals. Narratives are the type of reading they are used to and good journalists are trying to create accessible narratives that will tell readers with little background something important about Asia. Journalism is also the best place to fit in a mini-research project where the students research and present on some aspect of contemporary Asia.<sup>15</sup>

### **Narratives- Novels/memoirs and/or graphic novels i.e. things taught in the English department**

I usually have a unit or two on longer narratives. Students like to identify with books and characters, and I have come to accept this. This is the type of reading they are used to, and it is usually pretty easy to get this to work, and it fits into the discipline of English/Literature, and these things are also a big part of how Asians understand their own culture.<sup>16</sup> Most importantly, they are also a good way to get them into more academic forms of reading. Most of them have read a few novels and these are the types of texts they are used to working with. I tend to look for less contemporary works, since we will get plenty of that elsewhere, and ideally I would like a novel or memoir that gives them a bit of history as well. *Persopolis* is a good choice, since it is a memoir that does a lot of Iranian history and because I can give them some bits of Scott McCloud to help them understand how to read a comic.<sup>17</sup> Historical fiction along the lines of Amitav Ghosh also works well. As with the film section, part of the point is to help them look at a form of writing they think they know in a more academic way, and even the manga fans have not done much on the visual language of comics.

### **Film Unit**

This to some extent links to the novels/graphic novels above. We usually watch two films together, and then students do a presentation on an Asian film of their choosing.<sup>18</sup> Here again, part of the purpose is to teach them to treat things as more than entertainment, and I do introduce them to a bit of stuff about how to watch and think about film.<sup>19</sup> This is one of the most important units, in part because they usually enjoy doing the film presentation and because this is the unit where it is easiest to get them to approach something they thought they were familiar with in a new way. *Paradise Now* <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0445620/> and *A Taxing Woman's Return* <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0095597/> work well as joint films, with one being good on a "serious issue" and the other being a comedy that deals with a lot of social issues.

### **The academic units**

The final one or two units involve reading academic monographs. These tend to be from History or Anthropology, although I have also used things from Sociology, Political Science and

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<sup>14</sup> Not that I particularly care about it being dated, since the point of the unit is not to understand contemporary Asia, but to understand something using journalistic sources. Books like Kapur, Akash. *India Becoming: A Portrait of Life in Modern India*. Riverhead Books, 2013. also work well, since these sort of "transformation of Asia over the last 20 years" books raise the same sorts of issues no matter which country they focus on.

<sup>15</sup> One nice thing about Covid is that instead of taking up a week or two watching presentations they can record them on Zoom and then I watch them all and students watch 5 or so and respond to them.

<sup>16</sup> It also gives me a chance to try and convince students that not all books are novels, which is a personal hobby horse/hopeless crusade.

<sup>17</sup> McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. Reprint edition. New York: William Morrow Paperbacks, 1994.

<sup>18</sup> One is always a comedy, since to the extent they have seen any Asian films at all they often assume that all Asian films are about poverty and oppression.

<sup>19</sup> Usually a few things from *Every Frame a Painting* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=doaQC-S8de8> and a few other things.

Philosophy, as well as academic works that don't fit well into any category.<sup>20</sup> This is always the most important part of the class, since getting them to the point where they can read and understand academic texts is one of my chief goals. This usually involves at least one lecture on what the discipline is, (what type of questions do Anthropologists ask, how do they do research, etc.) and some introduction to the nature of academic publishing and academic works as part of a scholarly conversation.

I usually try to pick books that are reasonably accessible, which tends to pull me in the direction of History and Anthropology, since there is usually not a lot of accessible Asian Studies content in other fields.<sup>21</sup> These are usually books we have to take chapter by chapter, and the units most likely to have some shorter readings attached.

One difficulty with these units is that they come at the end of the semester, when students may be running out of steam already, and at least some of the students who have "chosen" to write their papers about these units through procrastination. These are also fairly difficult books which is intentional. Any college student should be able to deal with a personal memoir, but a scholarly monograph that "jumps around a lot"<sup>22</sup> and is full of pretentious words<sup>23</sup> is more difficult. Anthropology often works well here, if you can find a book with ethnographic narratives to draw them in and some good academic points to make.

Three examples show the difficulties in choosing texts. Constable's *Maid to Order in Hong Kong* has worked well.<sup>24</sup> Besides being an accessible book that covers both "China" and "Southeast Asia" it deals with a lot of important issues about gender, migration and labor relations.<sup>25</sup> That said, the book is fairly straightforward in that it is dealing with workers at the bottom of the social scale, an issue that students are likely to have encountered before. The book also works well because it is pretty clearly based on ethnographic research and she talks about her research processes, so I (and the Anthropology majors in class) can lead a discussion of what Anthropology is. The issue of migrant labor is also one that it is easy to find short readings on in other countries or other disciplines.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> They are also likely to be about East Asia, since that is the area that almost all of our students do language work and where almost all of our coursework is. It also what I know best, so if I push the "easier" texts (novels, journalism etc.) off into India or the Middle East or Southeast Asia the students will be doing the "difficult" texts in an area they may have more background on and where I can help them more.

<sup>21</sup> This is not to say there are no books in those fields, but if you look for China books in Sociology (defined as written by a person who teaches in a Sociology department or tagged Sociology on the back cover of the paperback) you will find a lot fewer options that you do in History and Anthropology.

<sup>22</sup> "Jumps around a lot" is a common complaint, which usually means that the book is not organized as a chronological narrative (the type of text they are used to) and of course learning to deal with things like this is the whole point of the class. The set-up lectures/readings are more important in this unit, since most of the students really need to understand the goals of the book, and reading the introduction will usually not do that for them, in part because the introduction to most of these books is the least accessible part, since it is placing the book in scholarly context for an audience of scholars.

This is also the place to work with them on how to read a monograph, a version of which they may also get in a disciplinary class. If they are History/Asian Studies majors they may have to hear me talk about it twice.

<sup>23</sup> This is also the most likely place to get complaints about vocabulary and incomprehensible writing, which should be dealt with through a mix of encouraging students to look up terms (Wikipedia is your friend!) and work on parsing sentences and also by not picking the wrong books.

<sup>24</sup> Constable, Nicole. *Maid to Order in Hong Kong: Stories of Migrant Workers* 2nd ed. Cornell University Press, 2007.

<sup>25</sup> Also Nicole Constable teaches at the University of Pittsburgh and one semester I got some money and had her come out and talk to the class. In the post Covid world it may be possible to make this a regular feature via zoom.

<sup>26</sup> This is a good book to pair with the film *Blind Shaft* <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0351299/>

Oppenheim's *Kyōngju Things*, which deals with the creation of a "culture city" in Korea has also worked well.<sup>27</sup> This is more complex book in that it deals with issues like cultural heritage politics that students have probably not been exposed to before. It also straddles disciplinary boundaries in ways Constable does not. Ideally at least one of the books should be an "Asian Studies" book that draws enough on different disciplinary traditions that you have to check the author's C.V. to see what they got their degree in. It also has the advantage of being a Korea book, and our Korean language students always want more Korea content.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, these are issues that you can find all over Asia, so it is easy to assign readings/do things that deal with these issues elsewhere.<sup>29</sup>

One book that worked well in the past but which I did not use in this Covid semester (Spring 2021) was Nylan's *The Chinese Pleasure Book*, which deals with Chinese philosophers' ideas about the Good Life.<sup>30</sup> While this is a pre-modern book (which I usually shy away from) and in some respects a hard read, it worked well.<sup>31</sup> I was concerned (correctly, I think) that it would have been very difficult to set this book up and get students into it in the current Covid situation. In the future I may have to find a way around that, but I think I made the right choice in not using it this semester. I suppose the ideal combination would be one "works out of the box" monograph like Constable and one book that needs more context, like Oppenheim or Nylan.

### **How well does the course work?**

Pretty well. It usually fills, and only partly with Asian Studies majors and minors. I assume some of the non-majors are attracted in part by the boxes the class checks, but that is fine, and most of them seem to enjoy it and learn something from it. We do recruit some Asian Studies students from this class, and get some minors to majors conversions, which are both nice. I think the students who come to the class as Asian Studies majors get a good deal out of it, but it is harder to be sure since given the size of our program I will usually see them in several classes and it is hard for me (and them) to separate what happened where.<sup>32</sup>

I certainly like teaching it, since it lets me do a lot of issues and texts that I otherwise would not be able to teach about.<sup>33</sup> More than any other class I teach this is one where if it does not work

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<sup>27</sup> Oppenheim, Robert. *Kyōngju Things: Assembling Place*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008.

<sup>28</sup> Which I am fine with giving them. There should be more Korea (and Japan and China) in our curriculum and I like to set up the class so as to both give them what they want and encourage them to think beyond the language they identify with. Our administration is simplifying things by de-emphasizing and perhaps eliminating Korean and Japanese language instruction, so this may become a moot point in the near future.

<sup>29</sup> To some extent this one also works because I can fill in the gaps. Oppenheim does not really talk much about how what he is looking at fits into larger East Asian discussions of Public History and creating a past, but since I am a historian I can do that pretty easily.

<sup>30</sup> Nylan, Michael. *The Chinese Pleasure Book*. New York: Zone Books, 2018. This is a bit of an odd choice, since while it is an academic book I would not call it a monograph.

<sup>31</sup> It helped that the sections were pretty self-contained, and if a student bounced off one this did not mean they would necessarily have trouble with the next. Some of them ended up focusing more on, say, stories about their own friendships rather than classical Chinese ideas about friendships, but that was o.k. with me.

In coming up with paper topics it is good to have a few prompts that students can do based only on the parts of the book that worked for them, as well as a few that make be comparative or draw on other readings, so that students can write about the book in whatever way works best for them. I have posted a set of paper prompts from various versions of the class.

<sup>32</sup> The class is part of our university mandated Academic Assessment process. This process has, unsurprisingly, proven to be no use at all in helping me to think about or improve the class.

<sup>33</sup> I am an inveterate book-switcher, so I have taught a lot of books. One old list is here <https://tinyurl.com/39e5emzj> I usually do a blog post on my syllabus thoughts each semester <https://www.froginawell.net/frog/?s=syllabus> I have posted the draft of this presentation and all the

out I can change everything around next semester, since the ultimate purpose of the class is to give students an enjoyable and educational but inevitably partial and patchy view of Asia and Asian Studies. How could it possibly go wrong?