

Now, Where Exactly Are the Dragons?

Editorial

Although film production started in China as early as 1905, with *DINGJUN SHAN* (*DINGJUN MOUNTAIN*, Ren Jingfeng, CN 1905), the East Asian media landscape largely remained *terra incognita* for Western audiences for almost five more decades. Little of the remarkable output of its film industry was acknowledged. This changed in the 1950s: whereas Chinese cinema was restricted by censorship after 1930 and politically instrumentalized from the early 1950s onwards, Japanese productions, which largely followed US-American standards, found their way into Western cinemas. During the 1960s, the dependency on Western cultural criteria began to loosen, and all over Asia a self-confident media industry delivered an astonishing independent output with regard to form and content. And since the 1990s, South Korea has entered the stage with an ever-growing and lively film industry that has gained international acclaim.

Nowadays, the film industry is a vibrant element of East Asian popular culture that in the last decades has become increasingly important on a global level. Japanese and recently also South Korean and Chinese films and TV series have a growing and worldwide audience, not least because of easier access through streaming services. The fact that in 2020 the Korean film *KISAENGCH'UNG* (*PARASITE*, Bong Jun-ho, 2019) became the first ever non-English language film to receive the prestigious Academy Award for Best Picture is a vibrant sign of the development of this film industry and its growing importance on a global level. The many film productions provide a multifaceted arena for highly diverse content that spans nearly all aspects of the cultural developments in the countries. Religion has always played a major role in these contexts in various ways and in accordance with the highly diversified religious landscape of East Asia.

When we wrote the call for papers for this issue, we set out boldly into seas that had not previously been sailed by this journal. On a basic level, we asked for contributions on aspects of the multifaceted relationship between

religion and movies or TV series in East Asia. We were interested in how religion and religious traditions are portrayed in East Asian films, in what way characters and plots are guided by religious patterns and ideas, how religious iconography is used and referred to in the films, and to what extent films mirror recent changes in the religious landscape of East Asia.

(Too) little did we think about the definition of “East Asia” in our context. Admittedly, this may have been due to our expecting to receive just a handful of submissions. Reality has taught us an important lesson: expect the unexpected. For the first time, the JRFM had almost 20 submissions of articles, most of which were absolutely worth publishing (after a minor or, in a few cases, major brush-ups in the review process). We therefore had to select carefully, given the limited number of pages in our journal (the determining factor being the print version). Selection criteria included academic quality, regional distribution, significance for contemporary culture and relevance to the theme of the call for papers. Finally, we ended up with six articles on the specific topic and two for the open section.

The major aim was to give a dynamic and broad picture of the manifold varieties of the topic at the center of this issue – religion and religious themes in East Asian film and media productions – in regard to the country of origin of productions, but also in relation to genre and quality. Consequently, this issue brings together contributions on Japanese, Chinese and Korean films and includes one additional peek into South Asia, thereby presenting independent filmmakers and highly renowned classics as well as specimens of manga and anime, the cyberpunk genre, or on highly successful streaming series. We are aware that this is only a limited sample, but it provides at least a taste of a vast array of topics awaiting scholarly investigation.

We decided to start this issue with a contribution by Teng-Kuan Ng, a scholar of Religious Studies at the Singapore Management University. He illustrates the correlations between religious themes in Japanese traditions and societal developments during the post-World War II era through two seminal Japanese films (*SANSHO DAYU*, Kenji Mizoguchi, JP 1954, and *ONIBABA*, Kaneto Shindo, JP 1964). In exploring the critical as well as the constructive potentials of cinematic folklore, Ng’s approach is positioned somewhat in contrast to the mainstream of previous analytical perspectives. In both films women play a central role. This unusual configuration for Japanese society in the 1950s and 1960s allows the directors to conceive transformative models. In the wake of the lost war, the collective pain of socio-cultural dislocation, atomic destruction and traumatic violence (e.g. among victims

of imperial militarism and sex slavery) generated existential strategies amongst which “religious idealism and earthy realism” (Ng) are not mutually exclusive but complementary. Myths are powerful imaginaries that can bring these options together.

The contribution by Malte Frey, expert on media-specific visual analysis of anime at the University of Fine Arts in Münster, Germany, stems from the context of Japanese culture as well, albeit with a completely different focus. In his article “Cyber-Transcendence and Immanence as a Religio-Spiritual Phenomenon in Cyberpunk Anime”, Frey approaches Japanese cyberpunk culture using the example of the anime *KŌKAKU KIDŌTAI* (*GHOST IN THE SHELL*, Mamoru Oshii, JP 1995). Visual fiction rooted within the cultural environment of Japan is rich with cyberpunk narratives, especially within the medium of anime. Cyberpunk emerged within the Western culture of US-American literature and film with novels like William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1984) and movies like *BLADE RUNNER* (Ridley Scott, US 1982). However, US-Cyberpunk had huge impact in Japan due to the genre’s japanoid imaginary. Since then and even before, a wide variety of visual cyberpunk narratives has been and continues to be published in Japan in the form of anime. This article argues that Japanese cyberpunk fictions contain religious elements and suggest a transcendent sphere invoked by technology, which the author labels “cyber-transcendence”.

The article by Rehuél Nikolai Soriano, scholar of myths and archetypes at Luzon University, Philippines, deals with a specimen of the manga and anime production which forms an influential layer of the popular publication market particularly in Japan. The *Baki* series, originating with the manga *Baki, the Grappler* (*Gurappurā Baki*, 1991–1999) by Keisuke Itagaki, developed into a major franchise and became a cultural phenomenon with a substantial global fan base. It is known for its intense and sometimes highly violent fight scenes and its focus on martial arts, but it also explores a wide range of themes related to spirituality, religion, culture and society, including topics such as the quest for enlightenment and deep reflections on the nature of the human being and the cause of its existence. All that is closely intertwined with the East Asian martial arts tradition that has always been entangled with various religious and spiritual features that derive mostly from a Buddhist, Daoist or Shinto background. The author diligently explains and explores some key themes of the *Baki* series (focusing on the anime version) such as the importance of some spiritual figures (the “mythical Oni” or the “monster Mara”), which he contextualizes in the wider religious tradition

of Japan. By doing so he is able to isolate telling aspects of the manga series that were previously unexplored.

Another giant in the East Asian and, proportionally, the global media market is South Korea. In his contribution, Franz Winter, professor for religious studies at the University of Graz, Austria, introduces a recent major Korean streaming series which immediately became an impressive international success on its release in November 2021 (continuing the phenomenal triumph of the series *SQUID GAME* in the same year). The series *JIOK* (*HELLBOUND*, Yŏn Sang-ho, KR 2021) – the Korean *jiok* means, literally, *hell* – offers an intense and provocative plot which revolves around the mysterious appearance of fierce monstrous creatures in contemporary South Korea who arrive out of nowhere and kill people in a most brutal and bloody way. This unexplained supernatural act is linked to the misdeeds of those who are punished in this heinous manner and therefore connects to general topics such as guilt and sin (of individuals, but also within society in general). The contribution looks principally at the portrayal of a (new) religious movement which plays a crucial role in the series, seeking to interpret its description and the conduct of its main actors within the broader socio-religious and cultural history of East Asia.

As mentioned at the beginning of this introduction, China was the home of East Asian film pioneers. This volume would therefore be incomplete without a comprehensive contribution on a specific topic from that area. Jing Li, doctoral candidate at Stony Brook University, USA, draws on the work of one of the most interesting younger directors of contemporary China, Gan Xiaó'er, whose films deal with Christianity and the daily lives of Christians, mainly in rural China. With this specific focus, Gan has produced a rather unique *œuvre* and gained an international reputation as an eminent independent filmmaker. He became known with his debut film, *SHANQING SHUIXIU* (*THE ONLY SONS*, 2002), which describes the desperate situation of poor rural farmers and their horrible living conditions caused by the current post-socialist economic situation. Against this background, the story of a Christian preacher unfolds, who, arriving in the small village, introduces a totally new mode of thinking to the protagonist (which eventually will prove not to have helped him). This particular focus on Christianity was even more important in Gan's next film, *JU ZI CHENTU* (*RAISED FROM DUST*, 2007), which presents an intimate portrayal of lives of Christians in rural China. As this film was made without official permits and has value, in fact, as a documentary, it provides unique insight. The rather positive evaluation of Christian-

ity is somewhat problematized with Gan's third feature film, ZAI QIDAI ZHI ZHONG (WAITING FOR GOD, 2012), where he draws on Simone Weil's critical stance towards the supposed "sense of coercion" in the Christian tradition. Altogether Gan is introduced as an engaged filmmaker highly interested in Christianity on an intellectual level, which is mirrored in aesthetic aspects of his films, as this contribution diligently explores.

In this section, the final article discusses a region where some of the religious traditions of East Asia have their historical roots: the Indian subcontinent, which boasts an impressive cultural, religious and social diversity. The primary mode of cinema as far as Europe (and likely beyond) is concerned remains the commercially influential "Bollywood". But other forms delve deeply into the tensions arising from diversity, particularly in relation to linguistic minorities and narratives in indigenous and regional cultures. Sreeram Gopalkrishnan and Lekshmi Sreeram demonstrate this in their analysis of the film THIRUVILAYADAL (THE DIVINE PLAY, Akkamappettai Paramasivan Nagarajan, IN 1965), exposing its linguistic underpinnings with respect to the Tamil language and Hindu gods. In the realm of Indian devotional cinema, a recurring template contains a fusion of theophanic interventions, bhakti (devotion) rituals and didactic storytelling. THIRUVILAYADAL, a Tamil-language film, has traditionally been lauded as a celebration of the deity Shiva. Yet the movie ingeniously challenges the darshan (act of viewing) principle inherent in Hindu devotional films. Despite the film's outward portrayal as a tribute to mythic Hindu gods, its subtext humbles celestial beings to a supplicative stance before a cornerstone of identity in the post-independence Dravidianist Tamil state, namely the Tamil language. In the context of the growing rigidity within contemporary Hindu religious convictions in India, a nuanced comprehension of THIRUVILAYADAL assumes particular significance.

Open Section

In the Open Section, we are happy to feature two scholars who offer unusual approaches to the religious dimensions of media that are a substantial part of our everyday: music and video games.

Fritz Treiber, musician and Senior Scientist at the University of Graz, Austria, has an admitted personal weakness for metal music. Observing that in public perceptions heavy metal music sometimes is connoted with satanism, Treiber analyzes two independent movies to show how their narratives

portray the devil utilizing rock music to manipulate people. He points out that the genre-specific exploration of topics such as evil, murder, suicide and so forth is a strategy for coping with everyday life. Interestingly, he concludes that although the devil is nowadays more or less obsolete in heavy metal music, he still plays a significant role in contemporary movies and series.

Frank Bosman, Senior Researcher at Tilburg University, the Netherlands, discusses four games which are based on a religious topic. Nowadays, computer games openly featuring a Christian, particularly biblical, setting are typically not what one would classify as blockbusters. Yet these games can grant deeper insight into the socio-religious contexts of the society they were created for and also shed light on changed perceptions of holy texts. Bosman discusses four games that are based on one of the most impressive biblical stories: the story of Noah and his Ark, also known as the Deluge, according to Genesis 6–8. The author provides an analysis and overall comparison of the four games in terms of theology and religious studies. His intriguing results suggest a certain timidity towards the role of God and also towards the “horror of the original story” (Bosman), which is one of the main points of the biblical account, thus changing (and maybe pruning back) its power significantly.

For the concluding review section, we have selected four intriguing contributions, authored by established scholars, each focusing on a media product that is both innovative and inspirational. For the first time, we include here a dance performance review, marking a stimulating expansion of our established perspective on the theme of media.

The process of creating this issue was not exactly relaxed. But this challenge is faced by every publication that tries to cover different cultures, different styles, different languages and, of course, different approaches to the topic of religion. The editors would like to express their gratitude to Br. Nikodemus Glöbl OFM, Martin Wildberger and, most of all, Natalie Fritz for their essential support. Rona Johnston has done an excellent job as always, even though the copyediting process was not only more challenging but also more voluminous than usual. It would be impossible to publish this journal without all this background work.

Please feel welcome to respond, provide comments and, naturally, craft articles regarding any aspects that you, our esteemed scholarly reader, believe to be crucial if we are to uncover those elusive dragons that we are only just beginning to glimpse.

Filmography

BLADE RUNNER (Ridley Scott, US 1982).

DINGJUN SHAN (DINGJUN MOUNTAIN, Ren Jingfeng, CN 1905).

JIOK (HELLBOUND, Yŏn Sang-ho, KR 2021).

JU ZI CHENTU (RAISED FROM DUST, Gan Xiao'er, CN 2007).

KISAENGCH'UNG (PARASITE, Bong Jun-ho, 2019).

KŌKAKU KIDŌTAI (GHOST IN THE SHELL, Mamoru Oshii, JP 1995).

OJING-ŏ GEIM (SQUID GAME, Hwang Tong-hyŏk, KR 2021).

ONIBABA (Kaneto Shindo, JP 1964).

SANSHO DAYU (Kenji Mizoguchi, JP 1954).

SHANQING SHUIXIU (THE ONLY SONS, Gan Xiao'er, CN 2002).

THIRUVILAYADAL (THE DIVINE PLAY, Akkamappettai Paramasivan Nagarajan, IN 1965).

ZAI QIDAI ZHI ZHONG (WAITING FOR GOD, Gan Xiao'er, CN 2012).