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**Sharon A. Suh**

***Silver Screen Buddha:***

***Buddhism in Asian and Western Films***

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**Reviewer: Giulia Evolvi**

**(University of Colorado at Boulder, USA)**

“We know, as bell hooks reminds us, that film creates culture” (Suh, p13); furthermore, movies can mirror religious practices and beliefs. However, Suh argues in this book, movies can also contribute to the perpetuation of stereotypical images of gender, race, and religion. “Silver Screen Buddha” offers an analysis of several Buddhist movies, focusing on the following research questions:

What sorts of visions of Buddhism are on offer through film? What forms of Buddhism are obscured? Are there forms of Buddhism that actual Buddhists would recognize as their own tradition? If not, how might we recuperate forms of Buddhism that are truer to lived practices from the oversaturated images of masterful meditating monks found in the lively influential medium of film? Are there other images of Buddhists to be found that have yet to capture the popular imagination? How are we to account for the plurality of Buddhism when what we mostly get in the movies is limited to monks in meditation? (p.2)

Suh argues that, in the majority of Buddhist movies, Buddhism is portrayed as a set of ascetic and meditative practices that are the prerogatives of males. This orientalist perspective focuses on the exotification of Buddhist bodies and lifestyles. Buddhist representations affect the perception of Buddhism in relation to gender and race. On the one hand, Western movies tend to depict Asians as backwards and Buddhism as an illogical and timeless religion. On the other hand, women are often represented as “snares of Samsara”; they are unable to enlighten themselves and constitute a sexual temptation for the male practitioner. Cinema representations, therefore, fail to capture the plurality of lived forms of Buddhism.

“Silver Screen Buddha” analyzes movies that perpetuate stereotypical views of Buddhism. The American silent movie “Broken Blossom” (1919), directed by D.W. Griffith, is an example of how Asians are portrayed as “Yellow Men”, whose religion is culturally incompatible with the West. The Coen brothers’ “The Big Lebowski” (1998) and Marc Rosenbush’s “Zen Noir” (2004) are American movies that depict Westerners as better Buddhist practitioners than their Asian counterparts, creating a discourse of “white supremacy” in relation to Buddhism. An example of women as “snares of Samsara” can be found in Kim Ki-duk’s “Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter...and Spring” (2003). This South Korean movie considers sex as a necessary step in the spiritual development of monks; women are part of the enlightenment process but they cannot attain liberation themselves, nor do they present a complex identity.

However, Suh balances this account of stereotypical depictions of Buddhism with an analysis of movies that offer a more nuanced portrayal of lived Buddhism. The South Korean movie “Aje Aje Bara Aje” (“Come Come Come Upward”, 1989),

directed by Im Kwon-taek, presents women's sexuality as an example of somatic compassion that can lead to enlightenment. Similarly, Yojiro Takita's "Departures" (2008) describes the attainment of spirituality through everyday activities within the community. This Japanese movie stresses the life-affirming character of Buddhism and offers a non-monastic model of lived Buddhism.

Suh's book goes into detail describing movies' plots and offers rich insights into Buddhist doctrines; for example, the concept of women as "snares of Samsara" is contextualized with the description of the Buddhist practice of visualizing women as corpses to avoid temptations.

If a criticism has to be made, Suh could have taken a stronger theoretical approach, drawing more substantially from literature on the intersection of race, gender, and religion in media. The use of Mulvey's work in relation to gender representation gives an interesting perspective in relation to the concept of gaze, and the book would have benefited from more such contributions.

A strength of "Silver Screen Buddha" is certainly the heterogeneity of the sample of movies it analyzes. Suh explores movies from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century together with contemporary ones, and American movies together with Asian ones; furthermore, she not only elaborates a criticism of Buddhist representations, but she also offers an analysis of movies that realistically describe Buddhist practices and lifestyles. However, taking into account movies that are substantially different from each other could also present minor weaknesses, as explored in the following paragraphs of this review.

The book finds positive Buddhist representations mainly in Asian movies. Suh clearly tries to avoid a West-East dichotomy by including movies produced in different countries; however, it seems that Western movies fail to present Buddhism in a pluralistic and nuanced way. This could have been further discussed in the book: are all Western movies perpetuating the stereotype of the "Asian monk"? If yes, then why is this the case?

Suh indiscriminately takes into account movies that are openly Buddhist – such as Jang Sun-Woo's "Passage to Buddha" (1993), which refers to a Buddhist sutra – and movies that only marginally refer to Buddhism – such as "The Big Lebowski", whose main character has a vague Zen attitude. By analyzing movies that

do not primarily aim at portraying Buddhism, she risks excessively broadening her research and making it more difficult to critically compare movie representations.

Suh stresses the positive portrayal of Buddhism in movies such as “Aje Aje Bara Aje”, where enlightenment is found in everyday lived Buddhism. In doing so, Suh risks creating a dichotomy between monastic Buddhism and lay Buddhism, privileging only the representations of the latter. Indeed, the book lacks in descriptions of movies that portray monastic Buddhism in a realistic and positive way. A weakness of the volume is that the author, trying to break from stereotypical representations of Buddhism, overcorrects by undervaluing monastic representations. “Silver Screen Buddha” would have benefited from an analysis of the interplay of lay and monastic Buddhism aimed at understanding why certain stereotypes connected to monks are found in movies.

Certainly, a single book cannot exhaustively analyze the totality of Buddhist movies. Suh tries to include various examples of movies in order to cover different aspects of Buddhist portrayals and satisfactorily answer her research questions. “Silver Screen Buddha” provides a religious studies audience with a perspective on Buddhism that certainly opens up interesting avenues for further research in media and movies. Suh successfully describes Buddhism as a world religion that should not be limited to stereotypes of Buddhist monastic life. This important instance is clearly summarized in the introduction: “To associate Buddhism primarily with exotic Asian ascetic monks is to perpetuate a narrow band image of Buddhism that I am arguing we need to break from” (p.4). “Silver Screen Buddha” is indeed a precious academic work that has the potential to break from certain racial and gender stereotypes of Buddhism and could help both the fields of media studies and religious studies.