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Adam D. Frank

University of Central Arkansas, afrank@uca.edu

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Rethinking Asian Studies in the Interdisciplinary Honors Setting

ADAM D. FRANK

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL ARKANSAS

INTRODUCTION

In an interdisciplinary honors setting, especially at colleges and universities with minimal Asian studies offerings, teaching interdisciplinary Asian studies courses can present a particularly difficult challenge. The problem, as Charles Holcombe notes, is that “Asia is simply too enormous, spanning the better part of the entire Old World, and too diverse, to serve as a very meaningful label” (9). Unless students already have a background in Asian studies, have studied Asian languages and cultures, or are themselves from Asian countries, they often lack the basic, macro-level knowledge of geography, history, and politics necessary to address complex issues, particularly Orientalist stereotypes and jingoistic political rhetoric that the instructor may wish to address at the micro-level.

Teaching interdisciplinary Asian studies courses can also, however, present an exciting opportunity to address preconceptions about race, ethnicity, gender, and cultural personality for the very reason that they force us to re-think fundamental categories like “Asia” and “area” (Holmes; Cohen; Salter). In this article, I begin to address both the challenges and opportunities associated with infusing Asian studies into the honors curriculum through a review of three courses I have developed at the University of Central Arkansas (UCA) Honors College. In the second part of the article, I provide a sampling of resources available for faculty who wish to enhance their teaching of Asia either through individual study or through developing Asian studies at the institutional level. The latter discussion draws on my experience from 2007 to 2009 as a co-director of a U.S. Department of Education Title VI grant to develop Chinese language and area studies at UCA. In the institutional context, I will also touch upon UCA’s acquisition of a Confucius Institute, a primarily Chinese-government-funded program which, at UCA at least, has focused on facilitating Chinese language training in Arkansas public secondary schools. While UCA’s Asian studies programming is a work in progress, the university’s experience of essentially creating something from nothing—simply because faculty members have had a passion and interest in doing so—remains, I believe, a useful model for other institutions to enhance their own Asian studies offerings. In our honors college, a faculty line was created six years ago specifically to incorporate Asian studies and anthropology into the curriculum. The courses I describe in

this essay are among the half dozen Asian studies courses taught by honors college faculty as part of their regular teaching duties. In this case, therefore, neither outside funding nor course release is necessary.

CASE STUDIES: THREE HONORS ASIAN STUDIES COURSES

As the faculty member in Asian studies and anthropology at the University of Central Arkansas Honors College, I have developed half a dozen Asian studies courses over the last five years. I focus on three of these courses here as examples of specific attempts to inspire Honors students to “rethink” Asia through pedagogies that combine direct experience, fieldwork, and extensive reading from a critical standpoint. I make no claims about the relative success or failure of these experiments in pedagogy except to point out generally positive student and peer evaluations. The first course, “Asian Theatre,” is an honors sophomore-level performance studies and anthropology of performance course that uses various Asian theatre forms as opportunities to discuss the nature of performance, both on and off the stage. The course fulfills the university’s general education requirement in fine arts, as well as the honors college’s fourth semester (“Core IV”) requirement. The end product of the course is a publically performed “fusion” workshop production of a Shakespeare play, drawing on the various Asian performance styles the students have studied throughout the semester. The second course is “Chinese Humanities through Taijiquan,” a sophomore-level offering (also “Core IV”) that uses the Chinese martial art and exercise system of taijiquan (a.k.a. tai chi) as a vehicle for learning about Chinese philosophy, poetry, and visual arts. The third, taught at the junior seminar level, is “The Body and the Chinese State,” a course that uses the anthropology of the body as the basis for discussing such topics as the history of foot binding, Chinese clothing, ritual in imperial China, bowing, changing attitudes toward sex in China, martial arts, and contemporary Chinese sports. The course fulfills a seminar requirement in the honors minor in interdisciplinary studies. Students in this course conduct their own research from an “anthropology of the body” perspective. Below, I detail the development, organization, and implementation of each of these courses.

ASIAN THEATRE

The course on Asian theatre, which I have taught twice as the fourth semester arts component of our four-course freshmen-sophomore honors sequence, grew out of the Asian Studies Development Program/National Endowment for the Humanities faculty workshop “Asian Culture through Theatre” held at the University of Redlands in spring 2006. Combining lecture with performance workshops, the two-weekend seminar introduced faculty to Japanese, Indian, and Indonesian theatre forms and also provided an opportunity for participants to share ideas for application in the classroom. In online conversation with

workshop participants, I developed the course over the summer and fall of 2006 and taught it for the first time in spring 2007. Because of my own undergraduate and professional background in theatre and my graduate anthropology specialization in folklore and expressive culture, the course was a natural fit for a performance studies approach. We began in the first week with something both familiar and strange: a group reading of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (*King Lear* in the 2009 version of the course). By starting with a play so firmly identified with western theatre, we began the process of answering fundamental questions about the nature and cultural role of performance in different Asian theatre contexts. We continued this process throughout the term. Before moving into detailed discussion and viewing video of Asian theatre forms, we then spent the next several weeks reading in the fields of performance studies, anthropology of performance, and the anthropology of ritual. In 2007, our texts included Richard Schechner's *Performance Studies: An Introduction, Second Edition*, though I have since moved toward excerpting from that text and using Henry Bial's edited volume *The Performance Studies Reader, Second Edition*, as our primary introductory text for the course since Bial has coordinated his text with Schechner's. Foundational texts are supplemented with lecture and in-class exercises that require students to use a performance studies perspective to analyze specific performances or performative moments in their everyday lives.

The second third of the semester is devoted to in-depth exposure to Chinese, South Asian, Japanese, and Indonesian theatre forms. Excerpts from Brockett and Hildy's *History of the Theatre, 10th Edition*, anchor the broad factual details about each form, and details are filled in with readings and visual clips about each theatre form. Where texts are available, students continue the tradition of reading aloud as a group, a tradition they began with Shakespeare, and then view clips to see the relative role that text, music, movement, and other production elements play in a particular form. We specifically look at Beijing and *kunju* style Chinese opera; Japanese *noh*, *kabuki*, *kyōgen*, and *bunraku*; Indian *kathakali*; and Indonesian *wayang kulit*. During this middle third of the semester, I ask students to produce a performance studies field report based on a performance they have observed. It need not be an Asian style form, but students are required to view the performance through the lens of performance studies.

Integrated into the middle third of the semester is all the historical, political, and philosophical background material necessary for students to understand the origins of a particular theatre form, its transformations over time, and its place in contemporary contexts. I have found it helpful to emphasize in the syllabus and verbally throughout the semester that this course is not an Asian studies survey and that our goals are both modest and very specifically geared toward reshaping our visions of Asia through performance. I also share with them my feeling that such an arrangement is inadequate and perhaps, in this case, moves us dangerously close to orientalism. Since all of the students in our program have already read Edward Said's *Orientalism* in their freshman year,

the reference is not lost on them, and we continue the discussion of orientalism as we move into the practice-centered final third of the term.

This final third is devoted almost exclusively to creating a performance piece that retells our Shakespeare choice through a fusion of Asian and western performance styles. For the 2007 *Macbeth* (called “East Meets West: Fusion Macbeth”), students created a masked performance that drew from noh, kabuki, and Beijing style opera, and for the 2009 *King Lear* (entitled “Heads on Sticks”), students constructed life-size puppets and drew heavily on bunraku (a Japanese puppet theatre form) and Beijing opera. In both cases, students created music from “found instruments” e.g. pot lids, homemade clappers, paint bucket drums, and bells. During the rehearsal period, I conducted half-day mask-making (see Figures 1–3)—puppet-making in 2009—workshops with the students, who then continued to construct their performance materials until the final, public performance (see Figures 4–6). Each rehearsal, we spent a few minutes as a group discussing which performance styles might be appropriate to which scenes, and then students paired off or worked in small groups to create the scenes on their own. We shared the day’s work at the end of each class. In both cases, the final performances occurred in open, outdoor spaces so that the final “audience” consisted both of those who intentionally came to view the show and passersby who stopped to watch all or part of it. Each student wrote a final *post mortem* of our rehearsal process and performance, a paper that required a synthesis of their experience with the performance studies material we had been examining all semester. Students specifically dealt with the question of whether “faking” Asian theatre styles in their fusion production perpetuated or deflated stereotypes about Asia. In both versions of the course, the student consensus was that, by explicitly confronting stereotypes in the program notes and by being respectful of the performance traditions they drew upon, the productions tended to deflate stereotypes.

Final evaluations for the course reflected an initial skepticism that morphed into guarded acceptance for some, enthusiasm for others. Some students felt that we spent too much time on performance theory at the beginning of the term while others felt we did not spend enough. Although students knew they would create a performance going into the course, they expressed some concern about the shortness of the actual performance (about twenty minutes in both cases) in proportion to the amount of rehearsal time we put into it. Nonetheless, evaluations reflected an overall impression that student knowledge about Asian cultures had been enhanced through the focus on theatre and that the element of live performance had added a practical, memorable element to the course.

Figure 1: Honors students Sindy Gomes and Rivka Kuperman in early stages of mask-making workshop for Honors Asian Theatre's *Fusion Macbeth*



Figure 2: Honors Asian Theatre students applying plaster-of-Paris-saturated bandages in mask-making workshop



Figure 3: Honors students Josh Eaves and Aaron Kopf prepare breathing straws for mask making



Figure 4: Witches stir the bubbling cauldron in the Honors Asian Theatre workshop production of *Fusion Macbeth*



Figure 5: Lady Macbeth pressures Macbeth to take the dagger in the Honors Asian Theatre workshop production of *Fusion Macbeth*



Figure 6: Macbeth surrenders his crown in the Honors Asian Theatre workshop production *Fusion Macbeth*



CHINESE HUMANITIES THROUGH TAIJIQUAN

This course initially came into being as an experiment in connecting my research area as an anthropologist (Chinese martial arts and identity; see Frank 2006) with an introductory level course on Chinese arts and humanities that incorporates readings in philosophy, Chinese art history, and poetry. Students who take the course participate in weekly taijiquan lessons in conjunction with in-class discussion of course readings. Each student also participates in one of three groups that prepare a lecture and presentation on one of the three main topic areas. The goal is to use the study of a single Chinese art as a kind of lens through which to view broader Chinese cultural issues. (For a fuller treatment of experiential methods to teach about Asian religions, see Frank 2010.)

Since we begin the course with a four-week survey of Chinese philosophy and religion, we first address the art of taijiquan through our studies of Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. How, for example, do the beginning movements of taijiquan reflect Daoist cosmology? How does the social structure of training Chinese martial arts reflect and/or contradict the Confucian ideal? And how do Chinese arts like taijiquan serve as vehicles for Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism to operate side by side for a single individual? Collectively, these questions are geared toward interrogating the boundaries that a Judeo-Christian framework sometimes places between religious-philosophical traditions—in other words, getting the students to see how all three viewpoints can coexist within a single individual.

The course requirements include four primary texts. Patricia Buckley Ebreys's edited collection *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook, Third Edition*, chronologically ordered, provides a sufficient variety of excerpted history, philosophy, and literary texts to allow the course to flow in any number of directions. Burton Watson's *Chinese Lyricism: Shih Poetry from the Second to the Twelfth Centuries* is narrow in scope, but Watson has such a useful approach to translation and does such an excellent job of introducing the Tang poets Du Fu and Li Bai to the uninitiated undergraduate that I have kept the book as a required text for the course. For history and art history, I have combined Michael Sullivan's *The Arts of China, Fourth Edition* with Ebreys's *Cambridge Illustrated History of China* to provide much of the visual material necessary to make both the art and the history of China come alive, although either text is serviceable on its own. The students use these texts over the course of the four-week visual arts unit to develop literacy in Chinese landscape and portrait painting as well as ceramics and religious art. Supplementing the unit with a visit to a museum collection of Chinese art is ideal, if possible. For residents of Conway, Arkansas, that means a two-hour trip to Memphis to visit the small but interesting collection at the Belz Museum. The 2008 version of the class benefited as well from a visit by Dr. Stanley Murashige, Professor of Art History, Theory, and Criticism at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, who visited several classes and accompanied the students to the Belz Museum. Even without the added expertise, however (as was the case in the 2009 version of this

class), students develop a sometimes surprising degree of literacy in Chinese art, particularly landscape painting. Indeed, since much of Chinese landscape painting is concerned with multiple perspectives, the paintings themselves become a means of rethinking Asia, a process that emerges when the student group concentrating on art concludes the unit with a Jeopardy-style exercise in Chinese visual art.

The final unit for the course focuses mainly on Tang-period poetry. All students in the class are asked to compose a poem in the *shih* style, following Watson's technique of literal translation first, interpretive translation next. The students, of course, do not literally translate since (thus far) none of them is trained in classical Chinese. Rather, they learn about notions of ambiguity and imagery in Tang poetry by adopting a purposefully ambiguous technique in composing their own poetry. As with the previous two units, a student group focusing on poetry team-teaches a lesson, focusing in this case on introducing the class to the place of classical poetry in contemporary Chinese culture.

Students conclude the semester with a service project. In the past two versions of the course, we arranged for a one-hour "Taste of China" presentation at a local senior center. We performed taijiquan as a group and did a brief taijiquan workshop with audience members; then, the three student groups presented polished versions of their class presentations to the audience of senior citizens. After teaching the course twice, I have found that the service element keeps students focused and motivated on both practicing their taijiquan outside of class and making sure they have mastered the course material. They know going into the course that they will need to teach this material to a group of strangers, and regular reminders of this fact seem to focus their studies.

THE BODY AND THE CHINESE STATE

Taught as an honors junior seminar for the first time in the fall of 2009, this course draws on readings in the anthropology of the body, Chinese history, and the contemporary anthropology of China to look at the body itself as reflective of evolving Chinese conceptions of self, of state power and resistance to it, and of Chinese interaction with or reclusion from the international community at various points in history. We devote the first several weeks of the class to basic readings on ritual and on the anthropology of the body (Bell; Csordas; Young). Early on, I ask students to identify a public field site to conduct observations about bodily experience. Each student is also assigned a day to teach the class a skill or to introduce us to a practice. So as not to disadvantage students early in the semester who have not yet begun their field research, the in-class workshops need not be related to the field research. In the 2009 version of the course, students' fieldwork included men's soccer, coffee house culture, Ramadan in Little Rock, massage, cooking Shaanxi-style noodles, and painting. Student workshops included volleyball training, body language while dating, taking pulses and blood pressure readings, acting, and drawing. Together, the experiential and fieldwork elements of the class are intended to provide a

hands-on element to body theory, a challenging literature for undergraduates with minimal or no background in anthropology or cultural studies.

The remaining two thirds of the semester is book-centered, including David Palmer's *Qigong Fever*; Antonia Finane's *Changing Clothes in China: Fashion, History, and Nation*; Dorothy Ko's *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding*; Susan Brownell's *Training the Body for China: Sports in the Moral Order of the People's Republic of China*; and the Angela Zito/Tani Barlow-edited volume *Body, Subject, and Power in China*. In addition to submitting annotated bibliographies of each day's reading and completing their ethnographic research paper, students are required to write one additional paper on a practice-related China topic, which they share with the class on an assigned day. In the fall 2009 version of the course, this latter approach turned out to be an effective method for addressing basic information about China that had little room in the syllabus, including the history and theory of Chinese medicine, traditional attitudes about pregnancy and birth, and funerary customs. Student evaluations again reflected some frustration with attacking complex, detailed subject matter without much background on contemporary China and Chinese history (which I addressed, in this version of the course, almost exclusively through lecture at the beginning of each unit) while generally approving of the choice of books and the experiential elements of the class.

The methods I outline in the Asian studies courses above are by no means limited to China topics and, in my view, are applicable to many other types of courses that take "difference" as their central topic, such as our honors Core IV courses, which are linked with the theme "The Search for the Other." As experiments in interdisciplinary teaching, each course had its successes and its failures, each managed to move students toward new understandings of "Asia" as a category, and each drew on methods that could be applied to other interdisciplinary courses. In addition, as long as I accepted that these courses were not and could not replace introductory survey courses and emphasized that point to students, they in turn accepted the value of an interdisciplinary approach to the subject matter.

RESOURCES FOR ENHANCING INTERDISCIPLINARY HONORS-LEVEL ASIAN STUDIES

Several organizations, publications, training programs, and grant opportunities contribute to the enhancement of individual faculty members' expertise in Asian studies or to the enhancement of Asian studies offerings at the institutional level. The resources I describe below are not intended to comprise a comprehensive list; rather, they provide a starting place.

ORGANIZATIONS, PUBLICATIONS, AND TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

I will focus here on three entities that have been particularly effective in recent years in promoting the teaching of Asian studies at the undergraduate level. First, the Association of Asian Studies (AAS, <<http://www.aasianst.org>>), the largest academic organization in the U.S. focused on Asian studies, promotes K-undergraduate education through its publication *Education about Asia* (EAA). EAA is published three times a year and is often thematically organized (see, for example, essays Sharma in the 2001 issue on Indic teaching Indic traditions; Shultz in the 2002 issue on teaching about the Korean War; and Tong and Bagshaw in the 2002 issue on teaching about Asia through film). Each issue contains pedagogically oriented articles as well as resource lists, book reviews, and media reviews. EAA also occasionally provides publication opportunities for talented undergraduates, e.g. Redman's essay in 2002. Especially for university faculty who are new to teaching about Asia, the publication is an indispensable starting place for both designing courses and building a general store of knowledge about Asia. The AAS website's "links and resources" menu includes links to other Asian studies organizations (most of which have their own publications), to study programs, and to grants and fellowships. The "conferences" menu provides links to AAS's regional conferences as well as the national conference. The AAS's main academic publication, *The Journal of Asian Studies* (JAS) is also an excellent source of articles for honors syllabi.

The second organization, established in 1990, is the Asian Studies Development Program (ASDP, <<http://www.eastwestcenter.org/education/asian-studies-development-program/>>), located at the East-West Center, a Title VI National Resource Center on the campus of the University of Hawaii Manoa. Through workshops it sponsors at the East-West Center, through study tours to Asia, and through co-sponsored workshops at ASDP Regional Centers (of which there are nineteen), ASDP is tasked with enhancing Asian studies instruction at two-year and four-year colleges and universities. Attendance at ASDP's Hawaii workshops is competitive, with various levels of stipends and housing provided, but organizers are very interested in building new relationships with colleges (including community colleges) and universities that are in the process of building institutional knowledge about Asia. ASDP's annual conference and newsletter also provide outlets and information for faculty new to Asian studies. Unlike the AAS conferences, which are geared toward multidisciplinary Asian studies research, the ASDP conference provides ample opportunities to discuss pedagogy.

In addition to the national conference, ASDP's regional centers often hold their own symposia geared toward enhancing undergraduate teaching about Asia. My university, for example, held a symposium last year on "Asian Environments," focusing on environmental issues in China, South Asia, and Japan. The nineteen regional centers around the country provide a wide

selection of symposia throughout the year that attract experts from the East-West Center and from other centers of Asian studies scholarship around the country.

Finally, and very briefly, the University of Texas at Austin's South Asia Institute, while generally geared toward academic exchange at the graduate level and above, also runs a series of workshops for enhancing the study of South Asia at the undergraduate level (<<http://www.utexas.edu/cola/insts/southasia/>>); like the ASDP workshops, they are competitive and provide limited stipends, and, like the ASDP regional center workshops, they are geared toward the non-expert interested in designing a new course with South Asia content or adding to an existing course.

GRANT OPPORTUNITIES

In the last several years, the University of Central Arkansas has benefited from a series of successful grant and program proposals. Under the guidance of Raymond Frontain, UCA became a regional ASDP center in the late 1990s. Particularly interested in enhancing the study of South Asia at UCA, Frontain attended ASDP summer seminars with this emphasis in Hawaii and at UT Austin, subsequently designing several courses with Asian studies content. An outgrowth of Frontain's efforts was the establishment of an Asian studies minor at UCA under the direction of religious studies professor James Dietrich (currently under the direction of Japan historian David Neilson).

Then, in 2007, Hui Wu in the UCA Department of Writing and Rhetoric wrote two successful Asia-related grants. The first was a two-year U.S. Department of Education Title VI Undergraduate International Studies and Foreign Language Program (UISFL) grant to promote the teaching of Chinese language and area studies at the university. The grant funded ten faculty stipends for new course development, travel expenses for two faculty members each summer to lead a language immersion trip in Shanghai, visits by Chinese performing arts troupes to UCA's campus, and travel expenses for co-directors to attend an annual UISFL conference. The grant provided programmatic support for a newly hired tenure-track faculty member in Chinese language instruction, supported the existing minor through course development, and brought an interdisciplinary group of faculty members together around the same table to discuss the development of Asian studies on the campus. Several of these faculty members, in turn, helped organize the ASDP symposium on Asia and the environment.

Wu also wrote a successful grant to the Chinese government for the establishment of a Confucius Institute (CI) on UCA's campus. Funded by the Chinese government office responsible for training Chinese language teachers (<<http://english.hanban.edu.cn/kzxy.php>>, colloquially "Hanban"), several hundred Confucius Institutes have sprouted up around the world. Although their specific goals and programs differ from institute to institute, all CIs have the shared general mission of promoting the study of Chinese language and

culture. UCA's CI, for example, facilitated the brokering of an agreement between the Arkansas Education Department and Hanban to bring Chinese teachers from China to Arkansas to teach at the K-12 level (mainly secondary level). To date, approximately two dozen teachers have been placed in small and large communities around the state.

CIs do have their drawbacks. Application for a CI is complicated, and accepting funding from the Chinese government may not be palatable to some faculty members or institutions. Still, the CI can become the first step in creating a feeder system for Chinese language study at colleges and universities. If one is building an Asian studies program around China (which is not a necessary but certainly a popular choice), then a CI can offer vital support.

Finally, the U.S. Department of Education's Fulbright-Hays Seminars Abroad program <<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/iegpssap/sapfacts.html>> provides opportunities for faculty members to travel to Asia for intensive study of arts, humanities, and area studies. These grants are intended to provide study abroad opportunities for faculty with little or no experience in a country or region.

CONCLUSION

In taking a case-study approach to discussing the development of interdisciplinary Asian studies courses in an honors context, my intention has been to emphasize the value of Asian studies courses in rethinking Asia while pointing out some of the obstacles that both the Asian studies expert and non-expert might face in delivering interdisciplinary Asian studies courses to honors students with little or no background in the field. I have also noted a few resources, both for the individual faculty member and for the institution, that can enhance the teaching of Asian studies.

Teaching Asian studies as part of an interdisciplinary honors curriculum provides exciting opportunities for experimentation in course design, for including experiential methods, and for service projects. Perhaps most importantly, however, Asian studies courses in an honors context, like other successful honors courses, can have ramifications beyond the honors program or college in which they sit. Adapted for a general education curriculum or for a departmental elective, honors interdisciplinary Asian studies courses can inspire rethinking of Asia within the broader campus community.

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The author may be contacted at
afrank@uca.edu.

