

**WOMEN IN ASIA AND AFRICA:
AN INTERDISCIPLINARY HISTORY-BASED READINGS COURSE**

Joe Dunn
Converse College

My teaching is grounded in an international perspective and in student-centered active pedagogy. The goal is for students to assume responsibility for their own learning, and I use student peer modeling as a means to achieve that objective. I am convinced that the best learning environment provides students the opportunity to read extensively, to write about what they read, and to talk about their reading and written commentary. Most of my courses employ this pedagogy.¹ I have selected one course to describe how the process works. "Women in Asian and African Cultures" might be my favorite offering of all the myriad of courses that I teach, and it is one of the most highly rated among my students.

When I designed the course initially, I thought that focusing on women's role in world history and the impact of their respective cultures upon them was an appealing and "catchy" means of dealing with some major events and movements in the recent and contemporary past. This approach seemed particularly appropriate for the women's college environment in which I work. But what might have begun as "gimmick" to teach traditional historical events shifted rapidly to an emphasis on differing cultures, as seen through women's lives and eyes. The methodology now is truly multi-disciplinary. Most of the readings are first-person accounts, but subjects are also addressed through the disciplines of history, political science, sociology, anthropology, literature, religion, and journalism, which allow students to appreciate various disciplinary and methodological perspectives.

Moreover, I no longer perceive the course primarily for women but one equally relevant for both genders, and I teach the course as often in our coed graduate programs as I do at the all-women undergraduate level. Excepting some minor structural

¹A brief sample of some of the author's articles on student-active, peer modeling, and other teaching techniques include: "Teaching the Civil Rights Era: A Student-Active Approach," *The History Teacher* (August 2005), 455-468; "Peer Role Modeling: A Signature 'Way' for Excellence," *The Department Chair* (Fall 2004), 21-22; "First Person Sources in Teaching the Vietnam War," *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods* (Spring 2003), 29-36; "Teaching Islamic and Middle East Politics: The Model Arab League as a Learning Venue," *The Journal of Political Science* (Fall 2002), 121-129; "Circle the Chairs: Some Thoughts on Classroom Architectural Pedagogy," *The Department Chair* (Summer 2000), 15-16; "Finding Connie in the Rock," *The Teaching Professor* (May 1999), 4-5; "Reflections of a Recovering Lectureholic," *The National Teaching and Learning Forum*, 3:6 (1994), 1-3; "The Winning Teacher: Metaphors from Coaching," *The Teaching Professor* (November 1992), 1-2; "Briefing Teams in World Affairs Class," *College Teaching* (Spring 1992), 61-62; "The National Model League of Arab States," *The Political Science Teacher* (Winter 1990), 19; "Makers of the Modern World: A Comparative Approach to the Introductory History Course," *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods* (Spring 1988), 2-7.

differences between a daytime course for undergraduates and a one-night-per-week offering for the graduate-level teacher education program, the course, including approach, readings, and results, is the same. My comments in this essay, however, will focus more on the undergraduate offering.

The class reads and discusses a common book on selected cultures each week and in most weeks also views and discusses a film. The daytime course meets twice a week, usually Monday and Wednesday, in ninety-minute sessions. Monday is devoted to the book of the week and Wednesday to the film. Prior to the weekly discussions, students write approximately a two-page, single-spaced analysis and reaction to the book in their personal journals. Immediately following the class discussion, the participants write a one-page, single-spaced response, describing the impact of the discussions and their new understandings of the book and topic. These responses are usually the most interesting entries in their journals. Although we have some standard core ideas to consider weekly, the journal entries and the post-discussion responses are free-flowing personal reactions.

The heart of the course is the discussion. I use experienced students, senior-level majors in the department who have taken my courses, to be peer role models demonstrating how to proceed. For the graduate course, I engage undergraduate students who have already taken the course. I always have several students who volunteer to assist either because they enjoy the experience or they consider it valuable preparation and credentials for graduate school. Those who have done this kind of thing before know how to read a book analytically, what to look for, what to focus on, and what questions to ask about the book or film. They demonstrate how to articulate their thoughts, concerns, and perspectives to novice students. During the first weeks, I distribute the best journal entries for the class to read. Every year I am amazed by the quality of the discussion, how quickly first-time students begin to emulate their more experienced peers, and how much the younger students desire to become like their role models. Witnessing this growth process is one of the greatest joys of teaching. After many years of doing this, I still revel in how younger students develop and become the role models for the next generation to follow them. One of the indicators that the process works is that years later students speak about the specific mentors who shaped them.

I lead the discussions for the first couple of weeks, but then turn that task over to the students enrolled in the class. I start by designating one of the best veteran students to lead the day's discussion and in subsequent weeks work down to the less-experienced students. Each student leads at least one class session. The size of the class often dictates that students share the leadership role with a colleague. Not only do participants eagerly seize their opportunity to be center stage, but for the most part they do an excellent job of directing class discussion. If a question or issue that I want discussed does not surface, I retain the right to interject; however, once the class has taken ownership of the course, they do not want interference from me. I have been told to be quiet because they were doing fine.

Obviously the potential scope of this course is immense and the available bibliography is exhaustive. My prime theme is the conflict between "traditional" values reflected in non-Western cultures and Western modernity. Women in non-Western "traditional" cultures experience lives quite different from modern Western women. Although students know this superficially, they learn to appreciate it at a much deeper, sophisticated, and reflective level. I have no desire to glorify or condemn traditional cultures, only to understand varying value systems that contain both positive and negative elements. I make no pretense that the course is comprehensive. Within the huge expanse of Asia and Africa, past and present, what we treat is highly selective, partly according to my particular interests and partly to the "interesting factor" of the books available. I have a preference for multi-generational accounts that demonstrate change and continuity between the lives of grandmothers, mothers, and daughters.

The readings list changes continually. Former students send me titles and sometimes the actual books that they believe I should consider. Some books have become perennials in the "canon" and others make one-time appearances on the syllabus. At the end of each term the students grade and rank every book in the course. Although we sometimes differ on the merits of an individual work, I take these assessments quite seriously in my selections for the next offering. The following is the course reading list at this moment with a listing of other possible choices.

Week 1

The first content week begins with two short books. Chinua Achebe's novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1959), now a college campus classic, is only parenthetically about women, but it is invaluable for introducing the underlying themes of the course, including the impact of the modern Western world on a traditional culture. Achebe does not romanticize traditional culture. He emphasizes the faults of traditional values, such as the treatment of women, at the same time that he demonstrates the arrogance of modernity. The book introduces topics such as the role of food, honor, shame, and superstition that are repeated throughout the course. A quick and provocative read, the novel is perfect for getting students into the discussion mode.

The other introductory book is Kamala Markandaya's novel *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), a brief, poignant, evocative story about a traditional woman's life in India at the turn of the century. Beautifully written, the story is captivating, and students love it. It also treats the topics of food, honor, shame, family values, and the impact of modernization. As with *Things Fall Apart*, *Nectar in a Sieve* triggers excellent discussion that establishes habits that students will employ for the rest of the term.

Week 2

Pang-Mei Natasha Chang's *Bound Feet and Western Dress* (1966) pursues the same themes as the books in week one. This time the venue is China during the first decades of the twentieth century. As the title implies, the story of Chang's grandmother is an excellent microcosm of the challenges faced by women in a society caught

between traditional and modern value systems. Short, readable, and disturbing, the book gets good reviews from the students. An even better book on the subject of women's lives in China from the nineteenth through the twentieth centuries is Jung Chang's *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* (1994). Unfortunately, the massive volume is too long to read and digest in the format of this course. I believe in using entire books rather than excerpts in all my courses, particularly this one, but I do use *Wild Swans* in another course. During this week I also show the popular movie, *The Joy Luck Club* from Amy Tan's novel of the same name. It treats the same themes from the perspectives of a group of elderly Chinese women in the United States who in their earlier lives experienced the China of *Bound Feet* and *Wild Swans*. The tremendously sad and moving movie is one of the most popular sources in the entire course. I have considered employing Tan's novel, but I believe that Chang's book is a better source, and using both the book and the movie would be redundant.

Week 3

Bound Feet and Western Dress addresses the Chinese upper class. Denise Chong's story of her grandmother, *The Concubine's Daughter* (1996), treats the travails of a peasant woman during much the same time span. A more political work, it covers life both in China and in the Chinese diaspora, in this case the gold mining area of British Columbia, Canada. The heroine or anti-heroine is a true survivor who reflects the plight of a large percentage of women in diverse societies. Inevitably the two books on China are judged against each other. Students split over which they prefer, although *Bound Feet* usually receives the largest vote.

If I could include another book on China, I would select one on life under the Communists, probably during the Cultural Revolution. A larger literature is available on that subject, including Hong Ying's *Daughter of the River* (1997), Zhai Zhenhua's *Red Flower of China: An Autobiography* (1992), and Anchee Min's *Red Azalea* (1994). Of the three, *Daughter of the River*, the account of one woman's life during China's transformations from the Great Famine of the 1960s, through the Cultural Revolution, to Tiananmen Square, is the most comprehensive and best book.

Week 4

Through the story of her grandmother's life, Helie Lee's *Still Life With Rice* (1996) covers the tumultuous years of twentieth-century Korea in much the same way as do the earlier books on China. The themes of challenge to traditional values; survival of invasion, war, cruel political regimes, and devastatingly bad luck; courage and innovation to prevail; and family bonds are powerfully expressed in this book that annually rates as one of the favorites in the course. By this point the students recognize the themes, and discussions focus on continuities and differences in cultures and political situations.

Week 5

I used Le Ly Hayslip (with Jay Wurts), *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (1990), for the first time last year. It is a wrenching saga of a young Vietnamese woman caught amidst political revolution, contending military forces, and a dramatically changing culture during the years of American involvement in Vietnam. Although perhaps a bit long to finish in a week, the book is an emotional account that invokes empathy and passion. I also employ the commercial movie, *Heaven and Earth*, that is based on the book. Students watch it on their own time and we discuss the movie at the next class following the book discussion.

In previous years, I used Duong Thu Huong's *Paradise of the Blind* (1988), a wonderful novel by Vietnam's premier female novelist. Banned in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the story is a dark tale of a people caught in the miasma of the communist regime during and after the American war in Vietnam. In beautiful, expressive language, Huong focuses on her own family as she depicts the gradual destruction of traditional Vietnamese life through the impact of war, ideology, opportunism, and greed. Although I love the book, most students have a very different view. I finally conceded to their complaints and the novel's annual ranking at or near the bottom of the books that we read.

The best book on the changes in the life of a Vietnamese family is Duong Van Mai Elliott's epic, *The Sacred Willow: Four Generations in the Life of a Vietnamese Family* (1999), one of the finest books that I know in any field. Although the book is far too long for this course, I do use it as the central piece in my course on the Vietnam War.

Week 6

The Cambodian holocaust—the Khmer Rouge's attempted abolition of traditional Cambodian culture and the genocide of nearly two million people—is one of the great tragedies of recent history. Many excellent first-person accounts portray this horror that occurred between 1975 and 1978. Chanrithy Him's memoir as a young girl, *When Broken Glass Floats: Growing Up Under the Khmer Rouge* (2000), is riveting. Every year students rate it as one of the top two books. Equally powerful alternate choices are Loung Ung, *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers* (2000), her follow-up work, *Lucky Child: A Daughter of Cambodia Unites with the Sister She Left Behind* (2005), and Molyda Szymusiak, *The Stones Cry Out: A Cambodian Childhood, 1975-1980* (1996). Possibly because more contemporary displays of horror exist, such as "Hotel Rwanda" and "Sometimes in April" on the Rwanda massacres, the evocative movie *The Killing Fields*, shown during the week, is not as well-received by my students today as by those in the past. In recent years, students refer to *The Killing Fields* as "1980-ish." Unfortunately, I believe that they are unduly concerned by the dated music and cultural styles than by the substance that remains eternally valid.

Week 7

In week seven the focus shifts to the African continent. Mark Mathabane's family history, *African Women: Three Generations* (1994), was my original inspiration to do this course. When I read the book in the early 1990s as the South African regime was undergoing dramatic political change, I knew that this picture of apartheid at the grassroots level and the change and continuity in women's lives in a rapidly evolving Africa was a story that students needed to know. Although specifically about South African conditions, the book speaks about issues that are common to much of the Sub-Saharan continent. Students each year rank this book near the top, usually in the top three, of their favorites. Although the book has been in and out of print, used copies are available on-line, and students can order it directly from the author's website at <http://www.Mathabane.com>, where one finds the other engaging books by the young South African refugee. His autobiography, *Kaffir Boy* (1995), is a classic, and his latest book on his sister's life, *Mariam's Song* (2001), would be another valuable source in a course such as this.

During this week I show the brief half-hour documentary, *Selbe*, about the hard life of a typical poor Sengalese woman, but the film reflects the plight of women throughout much of the world. Selbe demonstrates the courage and determination to survive and to feed her children with virtually no assistance from her shiftless husband. She is sustained, however, by a community of women bonded by their common circumstances. Students like this film, and it helps them to visualize much of what they read about in the books on underdeveloped societies.

Week 8

Marjorie Shostak's *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman* (1981), a case study in cultural anthropology, is the most controversial book in the course. The book's portrait of the Central African bushman culture provides a perspective and a methodology different from any other reading in the course. Some students are shocked by the casual graphic sex in the book. The volume receives mixed reviews, but even those students who do not care for it admit that it has considerable value in the course. I usually employ the film, *Misei Women*, another anthropological study of a cattle culture like the !Kung in which women, who do all the work in the society, are valued in terms of how many cows they are worth.

Week 9

Virginia Lee Barnes and Janice Boddy's *Aman: The Story of a Somali Girl* (1994) is one of the most popular books in the course. The spirited and resourceful Aman is a survivor, a manipulator, and sometimes a brat, but the students react quite favorably to her. The book offers an interesting blend of the cultures of traditional Black Africa and the Arab world, and it is the first in a series of books that deal with different manifestations of Islamic societies. It is also the first time that the subject of Female Genital Mutilation is addressed in the course. I have considered using Fauziya

Kassindja (with Layli Miller Bashir), *Do They Hear You When You Cry* (1998), the story of a courageous young woman from Togo in East Africa, which focuses on FGM, forced marriage, and other common aspects of women's lives in traditional societies as well as the difficulties of being a political refugee. Unfortunately, the book is simply too long to include with all the other reading in the course.

Week 10

Mende Nazar and Damien Lewis, *Slave: My True Story* (2003), the sad plight of a young girl from the Nuba Mountains in southern Sudan, is a new addition to the course. It addresses two issues that demand wide attention: the continuing existence of slavery in various parts of the world and the cruel oppression, even attempted genocide, of the Black African tribes in southern Sudan. Among the number of new books on slavery in Sudan, the other best account is Francis Bok (with Edward Tivnan), *Escape From Slavery* (2003), which treats the plight of a young Dinka boy. Both books do an excellent job of depicting the traditional cultures of their respective peoples, but for this course on women, *Slave* is the appropriate source.

Starting with this week, I generally take a break from the films. The students are becoming somewhat exhausted by the heavy reading and film load. Also the topics overlap with my Islamic and Middle East course, in which I show several films, so I do not repeat them in this particular course. I usually give the students a day off during a couple of the weeks as compensation for the number of hours devoted to this course during the term.

Week 11

Michael Gorkin and Ragiq Othman, *Three Mothers, Three Daughters: Palestinian Women's Stories* (1996), the accounts of three different Palestinian families, is the other annual favorite book that shares the top evaluation each year with *When Broken Glass Floats*. Co-authored by an Israeli man and a Palestinian woman, the book is gripping, enlightening, and emotional. Our students particularly identify with the bonds and generational conflicts between mothers and daughters living three quite different manifestations of the Palestinian ordeal.

Week 12

Although the story told in Souad (with Marie-Therese Cuny), *Burned Alive: A Survivor of an "Honor Killing" Speaks Out* (2002), is from the Palestinian West Bank, the horror of honor killings within families, in this case the attempted immolation by her own brother, is not endemic to this place or culture. It is a phenomenon far too prevalent in societies in Africa, South Asia, the Middle East, and other areas. *Burned Alive* is a depressing tale that captures the threat and plight for millions of women worldwide. Although legitimate questions about the veracity of all aspects of the story and the issue of "recovered memories" must be considered when selecting this book,

the larger issue of an activity that is little known and understood should be addressed. This is one of the most emotional weeks in the course.

Week 13

Next we address what is undoubtedly the most misogynist regime in modern history, Taliban rule in Afghanistan. From the large and growing library of books about women under this regime, I use Zoya (with John Follain and Rita Cristofar), *Zoya's Story: An Afghan Woman's Struggle for Freedom* (2002). The book depicts the young woman's tragic life during the Soviet occupation, the post-Soviet *mujahideen* civil wars in which her parents were killed, and Taliban rule. After fleeing with her grandmother from Kabul to Pakistan, Zoya became active in the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan and she ventured back into her country to organize resistance against the regime. Students respond to the courage and commitment of the young heroine, and the book clarifies that the plight of women in Afghanistan is the product of cultural forces greater than merely those practiced by one particular regime, even if the Taliban were the most excessive expression.

Other worthy books include Cheryl Benard's *Veiled Courage: Inside the Afghan Women's Resistance* (2002), Latifa's *My Forbidden Face: Growing Up Under the Taliban* (2001), Salima and Hala's (as told to Batya Swift Yasgur) *Behind the Burqa: Our Life in Afghanistan and How We Escaped to Freedom* (2002), Sally Armstrong's *Veiled Threat: The Hidden Power of the Women of Afghanistan* (2002), and Harriet Logan's pictorial *Unveiled: Voices of Women in Afghanistan* (2002). Three personal travel journals by Western women who concentrated on the lives of Afghan women are also extremely valuable: Christina Lamb's *The Sewing Circles of Herat: A Personal Voyage Through Afghanistan* (2002), Asne Seierstad's, *The Bookseller of Kabul* (2003), and Ann Jones's, *Kabul in Winter: Life Without Peace in Afghanistan* (2006).

If forced to pick my favorite of the books that I don't use, it would be Seierstad's powerful personal account of the Kabul family with whom she lived in post-Taliban Afghanistan. The book demonstrates that even after liberation from the evil regime, women's lives remained deeply repressed. The single most engaging book on Afghanistan during this period is the national bestseller novel, Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2004). However, it is a moral tale that treats women's lives only tangentially, so it is not appropriate for this class. I do use it in another course where it receives enthusiastic reviews.

Osama, the first commercial movie made by an Afghan after liberation from the Taliban, is the best film that I show in the course. This story of a young girl who passed as a boy in order to work to keep the family from starvation and to allow her widowed mother to move outside her home is poignant, powerful, instructive, and visually stunning. It is a beautiful if exceedingly sad movie. Students praise the film effusively.

Week 14

The final week directly confronts a topic often touched upon in the course: women caught between two cultures. Iran affords a case study of women in the country and in the Iranian diaspora in limbo between a medieval and an ultra-modern world. The best book on the subject is Azar Nafisi's bestseller, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (1998). However, I use Azadeh Moaveni's popular *Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America and American in Iran* (2005), a lighter, quicker read that captures the incredible complexity of women's lives since the Revolution and the alienation of lost culture. Other good sources are Afshineh Latifi and Pablo F. Fenjves, *Even After All This Time: A Story of Love, Revolution, and Leaving Iran* (2005), Roya Hakakian, *Journey from the Land of No: A Childhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran* (2004), and Suzanne Pari's novel, *The Fortune Catcher* (1997). In past years I employed Jane Howard, *Inside Iran: Women's Lives* (2002), that surveys various types of Iranian women's experiences. The book worked well, but I chose to return to first-person accounts consistent with most of the sources in the course. Elaine Sciolino's elegant *Persian Mirrors: The Illusive Face of Iran* (2002) also treats various manifestations of women's lives, and Ericka Friedl's *Women of Deh Koh: Lives in an Iranian Village* (1991), a study of traditional village life prior to the Revolution, is a readable scholarly study worthy of consideration.

Final Remarks

The course covers only a limited segment of the societies and countries that could be considered. I understand that students receive only snapshots of cultures and particular time periods. I make it very clear on the syllabus and on the first day of class that the course does not pretend to offer any degree of comprehensiveness. Nevertheless, I believe that the merits of what we do cover have great value.

In previous years I employed Elisabeth Bumiller's *The Secrets of Mariko* (1996) that captures the sterility of the life of a contemporary middle-class Japanese woman. Although I found the book useful, the students hated it. They referred to the volume as the self-indulgent whining of a pathetic woman. I once used Bumiller's *May You Be the Mother of a Hundred Sons: A Journey Among the Women of India* (1991), but it was equally despised. The book suffers from excessive Western perspective and it devotes too much attention to topics such as "Bollywood," Indian soap operas, and other forms of popular culture that are not the most significant issues when attempting to display at least portions of the vast richness of the myriad of different Indian cultures. A number of other works on India are available, but for the moment, with the exception of the *Nectar in a Sieve*, Indian women are not represented in the course. Given the diversity of the Indian population and the worldwide impact of the people of the South Asian subcontinent, another book on Indian women would be a strong addition to the course.

In an attempt to touch as many different situations as possible, I have at various times used collective stories on women, such as Jan Goodwin, *Price of Honor: Muslim Women Lift the Veil of Silence on the Islamic World* (1994); Geraldine Brooks, *Nine*

Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women (1995); or Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, *In Search Islamic Feminism: One Woman's Global Journey* (1998). A book on women in Saudi Arabia would be a good addition. Her family connection has brought particular attention to Carmen Bin Ladin's *Inside the Kingdom: My Life in Saudi Arabia* (2004). Jean Sasson's trilogy, *Princess: A True Story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia* (2001), *Princess Sultana's Daughters* (2001), and *Princess Sultana's Circle* (2002), deals with the constricted and repressed lives of the wealthy female elite of the royal family. Sasson's *Mayada: Daughter of Iraq* (2004) or Zainab Salbi and Laurie Becklund's *Between Two Worlds: Escape from Tyranny: Growing Up in the Shadow of Saddam* (2005) are possible sources for a book on that troubled country.

I could list books for pages, but I will conclude by stating that the choices are endless and that a faculty member who wishes to pursue such a course could tailor it in any manner desired. Despite the heavy work load, students love this course. The greatest testimony is that evaluations every term proclaim that it should be two terms long to address more cultures. The course obviously has a lasting impact because former students send me the names of new books that they read.

However, the salient issue is not the content but the pedagogy. The course is what education should be. It puts students in charge of their own learning. They read, write, and discuss material to which they relate even though the cultures are far removed from their experience. They are engaged both as participants and managers of the daily class operations. This activity expands their parameters and their skill development. It provides opportunities for peer role model academic leadership. Students gain historical knowledge and, more importantly, historical consciousness and an international perspective. In sum, from my vantage point, the course has been a success.