

ASIA IN WESTERN FICTION AND TRAVEL WRITING

Kyoto Consortium for Japanese Studies
Spring 2019

Tuesday-Thursday 2:55-4:25 p.m

Mark Lincicome
Email: ml3837@columbia.edu

OBJECTIVES AND CONTENT

This course examines and compares descriptions of Asia and portrayals of three Asian societies found in English-language novels, short stories and travelogues published since the mid-nineteenth century. Novels, short stories and travelogues can be valuable resources for the study of history. Since they often enjoy a wide audience, these works are influential in shaping popular perceptions. At the same time, they reflect the author's particular perceptions of her/his own society, of foreign societies, and of the times in which she/he lives. This course combines a study of fiction and travel writing set in Japan, China and India with a look at the particular historical contexts in which they were produced.

The course assumes no prior study of Asia. It has four goals: (1) To introduce students to the study of Asian history and to the modern history of Western encounters with Asia; (2) To identify the major features of Western literary portrayals of Asia produced since the mid-nineteenth century. Do these descriptions change over time? Do they vary depending upon the country being described? Do individual authors emphasize certain characteristics over others? (3) To seek historical explanations for these portrayals. What prompted these writers to feature Asia so prominently in their work? How did they perceive the relationship between Asia and the West at the time they wrote, and why? What was the source of their knowledge of Asia (e.g., travel, employment in colonial administration, military duty, missionary work, etc.), and how did their particular experiences there shape their opinions of Asia? (4) To assess the accuracy of these literary portrayals of Asia and their potential value for the study of history. How much should historians, or the casual reader, rely on fiction and travel writing for insights into foreign cultures? Or do they really tell us more about the authors themselves and their own societies?

FORMAT

The course is divided into four sections. Section I features introductory background lectures that give an historical overview of Western and Asian encounters since the time of Marco Polo. Particular attention will be given to the societies that will be highlighted in Sections II through IV (India, China, Japan). Other class meetings during the semester will feature student-led discussions.

REQUIREMENTS

One Essay Paper (5-6 pages) on an assigned topic
Five short (2-3 pages each) Reaction Papers on five different assigned readings
Two Discussion Papers (3-4 pages) on two different assigned readings
Personal Travelogue

SAMPLE ASSIGNED FICTION AND TRAVELOGUES

- a. Isabella Bird, excerpts from *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan* (1881)
- b. Pearl Buck, *Three Daughters of Madame Liang* (1969)
- c. Michael Crichton, *Rising Sun* (1992)
- d. E.M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (1924)
- e. Will Ferguson, *Hitching Rides with Buddha* (2006)
- f. short stories by Rudyard Kipling (1885-1890)
- g. William Plomer, selections from *Paper Houses* (1931)
- h. Bayard Taylor, excerpts from *A Visit to India, China and Japan, in the Year 1853* (1855)
- i. Laurens van der Post, *A Bar of Shadow* (1954)