INTRODUCTION

This world is the movie of what everything is, it is one movie, made of the same stuff throughout, belonging to nobody, which is what everything is.


If ancient Buddhists had the medium of film, might they have used it instead of or in addition to mandala? Put another way, why use mandala when you have film? Can film serve the same purposes as mandala? Mandala drawings of Buddhas and _Bodhisattva_ have been used for centuries for contemplating the attributes of those figures, attributes such as wisdom and compassion. A practitioner might sit in meditation in front of the mandala, using it as a tool of visualization in hopes of incorporating those ideal traits of wisdom and compassion into his or her own life. Do certain films fill this role today? Why or why not?

About his film _Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?_, director Young-Kyun Bae said, “I would like the audience to see the film without preconceived knowledge or ideas.” Is this either possible or desirable? Doing so might require a Buddhist way of film viewing, a mindful method of suspending judgment and letting sounds and images flow over us. The implication is that if we can learn to do this while viewing films, we can learn to apply the skill to daily life. Bae also said he hoped to build a temple through his film. Can sacred space be created cinematically?

In the documentary _Life as Cinema_, Khyentse Norbu, director of _The Cup_ (1999), _Travellers and Magicians_ (2003), and _Vara: A Blessing_ (2012) speaks extensively of the Buddhist potential of film. Tibetan Buddhist masters have bestowed upon Norbu the title “_Rinpoche_,” given to respected monks in their tradition. Even
before hearing his explanations, we might wonder why a venerable Rinpoche would make movies. Theoretically, a Tibetan Buddhist’s primary social task is to save all sentient beings from suffering the cycles of rebirth. A Bodhisattva, a Buddhist dedicated to awakening self and others, does this through skill-in-means, that is, by thinking of and putting in practice innovated ways to bring the Dharma (the teaching of the Buddha) to people according to their situations and abilities. Traditionally, one way of doing this is by using mandala to illustrate the Dharma. Certainly the technological situation in most of the world today is drastically different from when mandala were first drawn and the director understands this. Norbu Rinpoche says, “Illusion is what we see as something that is fake, something not permanent, something not solid, something that is not true. And reality is the opposite. But from the Buddhist point of view, everything is fake, everything is illusion, everything is dependent.” He continues, “This idea I have, life as cinema, is that one’s life is a movie, film, cinema. There’re actors, there’re producers, they’re all there, the drama, all the romance, everything that’s in cinema. And, the very idea, the very purpose of spiritual practice is so you can have control over how to direct our story [. . .] Most of the time we can’t because we are always pulled apart by our passions, our aggressions, and these emotions, they write the story for us [. . .] All of this is directed by you, produced by you, and you are also the actor. And you are also the audience. You’re just not clever enough to be a good critic. So you’re always stuck with your own show thinking that what you have produced is good or real, you’re convinced. That’s how the power of life is, just like cinema. If you know that, then a certain kind of confidence and courage will come.” From this perspective, it seems that film may have the power to make the audience realize that life is as illusionary as scenes on the screen. If so, viewing film can be seen as a type of religious practice.

The idea that drama can serve as Buddhist skill-in-means to lure the viewers, unaware, toward awakening, is an old one. The famous Japanese Nō theater playwright and theorist Zeami (c. 1363–c. 1443 CE) wrote at length about it. According to Zeami, drama had been used in this way at the time of the Buddha. When the Buddha held up a flower and only the monk Kāśyapa, smiling, thereby received his mind-to-mind transmission of the Dharma, this exemplified the perfect skill actors must develop. Zeami taught that actors must conceal their minds even from themselves in order to display the flower to the audience. Later, Zeami said, Prince Shōtoku (574–622) imported Buddhist drama into Japan as a way of propagating the Dharma. Throughout Asia over the centuries, plays, novels and poems have been extensively created to inspire in people Buddhist sentiments such as the realization of the transience of nature and life, and the eternal in the momentary. Buddhism and film continues this tradition. Can a director use symbolic expressions to evoke realization in the viewer like the Buddha with the flower? Is it possible for a film-maker to achieve a mind-to-screen-to-mind transmission of the Dharma? If so, the film-maker is a Bodhisattva and the viewer a practitioner, at least potentially.
The development of representations of Buddhism in film has not been free of controversies. Whereas in America and Europe Buddhism currently appears to be an alternative to conventional ways, in Asia it typically is a conservative tradition with all that goes with that, including censorship. Thai Buddhists called for a ban on the film *Angulimala* (2003) directed by Sutape Tunnirut, for distorting Buddhist teachings and glorifying violence. As a result, it was blocked from being released by government censors until some of the violent scenes were removed. Afterwards the monk Phra Phisan Dhammavadhi, deemed it acceptable and the banned was lifted.5

In 2006, the Thai Censorship Board objected to director Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s depictions of a Buddhist monk playing guitar in movie *Syndromes and a Century*. They felt the portrayal was undignified. Apichatpong refused to make the cuts and withdrew his film from release in Thailand, although it had been shown in other countries. As a result, some artists petitioned the Board and the country subsequently revisited the rating system. Likewise, the release of the Thai film *In the Shadow of the Naga* (*Nak prok*, directed by Nasorn Panungkasiri) was delayed due to protests by Buddhists. The film depicts three criminals who become Buddhist monks in order to recover stolen goods buried beneath a temple. It was completed in 2008 and finally released in 2010.

Buddhist conservatism is not restricted to Asia. In America the release of the film *Hollywood Buddha* (completed in 2003), directed by Philippe Caland, was cancelled by the director because of protest by Buddhists in California. The film tells the story of Philippe, bankrupted film-maker on the verge of eviction. Philippe seeks the advice of a Buddhist master, who persuades him to purchase an expensive sculpture of a Buddha. The pre-release movie poster depicts Philippe, played by the director, sitting on the head of the large Buddha sculpture. Buddhist protesters found this out and the anticipated content of the film objectionable. It is interesting to note that such conservatism exists alongside Buddhist stories about masters who ripped up scriptures, chopped up the master’s chair, and destroyed images of the Buddha so that practitioners would not become attached to them. Hence the Zen proverb: If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him.

Such mixed messages in the history of Buddhism add to the complexity of analyzing Buddhist content in films and likely makes a single model impossible. It is equally difficult to develop a Buddhist analysis of film. Some might guess any Buddhist analysis of film would begin and end by saying desire and ignorance surrounds every aspect of the affair, film-making, representation, and spectatorship alike. This widespread understanding of Buddhism is, however, grossly mistaken. In its 2,500-year history, across vast borders and diverse political situations, Buddhism has developed deep analyses in areas we today call sociological, psychological, and phenomenological. On the one hand, through many historical changes, the basic formula of the Buddha’s **Four Noble Truths** and the **Eightfold Path** remains intact, beginning with the assumption that life is filled with dissatisfaction. On the other hand, historical emphasis on one or another aspect of the Four Noble Truths
and the Eightfold Path, and the degree of detail some traditions of Buddhism have
developed to account for each of these has greatly complicated matters.

In today’s world, is there relevance to the idea that life is pervasive dissatisfaction
as the Buddha’s first Noble Truth states? Dissatisfaction translates the Pāli language
word dukkha, usually rendered into English as “suffering.” In the modern world
of plumbing and refrigerators, young people in countries where the majority has
traditionally been Buddhist, now ask, “How is all life suffering? I have a new sports
car.” We are surprised to see in the film The Cup young Tibetan monks scheme to
obtain a satellite dish in order to watch World Cup soccer. Many Asian monastics
defrock upon immigration to America. Why be a monk in the land of plenty? But
dukkha also expresses uneasiness in life we may not readily equate with suffering.
This is the feeling we get from perpetually desiring things we don’t have and want-
ing to rid ourselves of things we have but dislike. Maybe this is basic to humanity,
compelling us to act, expand, reproduce, and innovate. But, it is also manipulated
to drive a market economy capable of manufacturing “needs” for profit. No matter
how much you have bought, you may not stop buying or the economy will col-
lapse. Likewise, we are all given the parental advice from family and society, “Never
settle.” Doesn’t this mean never be satisfied? In such a world dukkha is far from
lost. We should not wonder when during the 2008 Olympics Ara Abrahamian of
Sweden placed his bronze medal on the wrestling mat in protest of being judged
only third best in the world. This and the things upsetting each of us take place
at the same time wars rage, people are being raped and brutalized, and the basic
conditions of sickness and death remain ever present.

Living in perpetual dissatisfaction is called ignorance in many Buddhist writings.
Ignorance translates the Sanskrit word avidyā. It is the opposite of knowing, vidyā,
which has the Sanskrit root vid. The Latin and Greek words video share this root,
likely from a common Indo-European source. Vidyā may also be used to mean
meditation (Sanskrit: dhyāna). It is interesting that this term, basic to Buddhist awak-
ening, has entered our language in the word “video,” relating to the topic of our
study. More interesting is whether vidyā is possible through video. Professor Robert
Sharf at UC-Berkeley taught a film series course called “Seeing Through the Screen,
Buddhism and Film.” The course outline says the course will, “as the double enten-
dre of its title suggests, be looking at Buddhism through film, and film through
Buddhism—using the medium of film to explore various themes and issues in the
study.”6 We can imagine other senses to this title. One is seeing beyond the film to
reality as it is or as Buddhists say it is, sometimes called “thusness” or “suchness”
(Sanskrit: tathātā) in translations of Buddhist texts. For some Buddhists, this would
be vidyā. But again, is it possible by viewing film to see through the screen in that
sense, the screen of ignorance causing pervasive dissatisfaction or suffering? A similar
possibility was forwarded by Francisca Cho, who suggests “a nonliterary approach to
film by seeing it as a form of religious practice.”7

As we watch these films and study their Buddhist content, we might ask who
exactly is the subject seated before the screen, involved in an activity which has
been described as everything from passive absorption to active production? How are we linked to screen, narrative, and character? A Zen teacher once told a student,

> If you really want to know your true nature you must orient yourself toward the source of delusive thoughts and get to the bottom of it. When you hear a voice, do not focus on the thing that you are hearing but, instead, return to the source of your own hearing. If you practice in this way with all things you will definitely clarify your true nature.8

Some time ago, ethno-methodologists engaged in activities such as viewing film, to study the social components of those behaviors. Perhaps a Buddhist viewing, if such is possible, would be somewhat similar. Whether we actually try this or not as progressing though this book, it is interesting to note the possibilities.

**Notes**

3. From *Life as Cinema*, included in the special features on the DVD release of *The Cup*.
7. Francisca Cho, “Buddhism, Film, and Religious Knowing: Challenging the Literary Approach to Film,” in *Teaching Religion and Film*, p. 117.
Since the Middle Ages, some European writers have used “the East” or “the Orient” to revolt against rationalism. Their stories tell of adventurers in search of magical knowledge no longer found in Europe. Asian religions came to be used as philosophies of unity against what writers viewed as the fragmentation of existence produced by science and technology. Nineteenth-century Europe saw a renewed interest in this. William Butler Yeats and others used mystical images of Asia in reaction against positivism. In America, before the Civil War, the works of Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson show Buddhist influence. Thoreau made the first translation of part of the Lotus Sūtra into English and was clearly interested in Buddhism. A few decades later, Asian religions were introduced to larger audiences in America under the sponsorship of various international-oriented groups interested in representing religions in certain ways. In 1875, the Theosophical Society was founded in New York City to promote their beliefs in spirituality largely pieced together from Asian traditions including Buddhism. It was founded by Helena Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott among others. Madame Blavatsky was a Russian psychic who had immigrated to America. Henry Steel Olcott was a US military colonel interested in mysticism. The two moved to India where Colonel Olcott became possibly the first American convert to Buddhism. He went on to become a hero in Sri Lanka’s struggle for independence from Britain by defending Buddhism against strong attacks from Christian missionaries. Today there is a major street named after him in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

In 1893, the World’s Parliament of Religions took place in Chicago. At the time, Swami Vivekananda impressed crowds by speaking about philosophical issues related to Hinduism. Japanese Buddhists and representatives of other Asian religions, funded in part by Colonel Olcott, also made impressions on those attending as reported in news media. These events of the 1870s–1880s led to curiosity and
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study, spurring what is seen today as a worldwide revival of Buddhism in the early twentieth century. At that time, the content of films began to change from simple projections of scenery, rightly called “motion pictures,” to edited story narrations. An impact of the spread of limited information on Buddhism can be seen in a number of films shown over the next few decades. These films in turn likely influenced public opinion about Asian religions, spanning new writings and more films. Asian Buddhists in this period were typically portrayed in films by non-Asian actors and based on stereotypes. Likewise, Buddhist ideas and practices were typically molded to further the plot of the film in disregard for historical accuracy. Similar misrepresentations in novels and nonfiction have been described as examples of “orientalism,” an expression analogous to racism.

A silent film called *Buddha* was made in America by an unknown director and cast in 1913. It was shown as half of a “split-reel,” a silent film term meaning two short films on one real. It played together with *A Little Hero*, a comedy.¹ This may have been the first film made about Buddhism, although this is not certain. A few years later, *The Soul of Buddha* was made based not on Buddhism but sensationalized representations of a temple dancer popular in news stories. In 1917, a Dutch exotic dancer with the Indonesian stage name Mata Hari was put to death by a firing squad in Paris for allegedly selling secrets to Germany during World War I. She studied Indonesian dance and married a Dutch army officer. Affairs and scandals surrounding her life and death were popular themes in news and tabloids. *The Soul of Buddha* is a 1918 silent film that is currently considered lost. It was directed by J. Gordon Edwards (1867–1925), a Canadian-born director, producer, and a writer. The film starred Theda Bara, who allegedly wrote the story and starred in it as a dancing Buddhist priestess.² The story follows a Javanese girl Bava, whose name is obviously close to the actress’s name Bara. Bava’s mother, fearing for the chastity of her flirtatious daughter, sends her to a Buddhist temple so that she might dedicate herself to sacred dance.

However, Bava runs away with a British officer stationed in Java, and then moves with him to Scotland. The temple priest vows to kill her for her betrayal of Buddhism. The couple bears a child and the priest kills the baby. Later, Bava visits a cabaret and the desire to dance is renewed in her. Seeing her dance, a theatrical company offers her a contract. Now in her new life, Bava has an affair. When her husband learns of this he kills himself in her dressing room. In order to receive guests without interruptions, the cool-hearted Bava hides his body and then goes to dance. On stage, one of the Buddha statues seems to come to life and kills her with a knife. The statue turns out to be the Buddhist priest in disguise. About this film, a *New York Times* reviewer wrote, “None of this made much sense, but Bara melodramas were never strong on character motivation or logic. *The Soul of a Buddha* was filmed in the dead of winter at Fort Lee, New Jersey, a paper mache temple and the palisades standing in—uneasily—for tropical Java.”³ The association with Mata Hari must have seemed perfect for Theda Bara, who built a screen image of herself as a classic femme fatale, the seductive and dangerous female.
In India, there is a tradition of offering dancing women to the deity of a Hindu temple. These women are known as devadasi, a Sanskrit term meaning “female servant of a deity.” Devadasi are sometimes degraded to prostitution at temples. This is not a part of Buddhism and the tradition may have arisen as a sentence to former Buddhist nuns at the time of the fall of Buddhism in India during the sixth century CE. There are also children temple dancers in Bali, Indonesia. Today, such a film would likely meet with protests by people offended by the misrepresentation of Buddhism as an evil, cult-like religion.

In 1919, the renowned film director D.W. Griffith (1875–1948) represented Buddhism in a more positive light. His protagonist in Broken Blossoms is a Buddhist who has come to England from China to spread the Dharma. The sentiment expressed in the film is that although English speakers at the time looked upon Asia as barbaric, in face of World War I this should be reassessed. A similar idea had been stated on the third day of the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago when Japanese Buddhists spoke. Hirai Kinza (1859–1916), a lay delegate and Confucian scholar, took up the issue of how Asians were being treated in America, for example, they were not being allowed to attend school in San Francisco. He asked what should be thought of American Christianity “when there are men who go in procession hoisting lanterns marked ‘Japs must go’? If
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such be Christian ethics, we are perfectly satisfied to be heathen.” “Loud applause followed many of his declarations,” reported the *Chicago Herald*, “which grew as the delegates were exposed to a thousand cries of ‘Shame!’ as he pointed out the wrongs which his countrypeople had suffered through the practices of false Christianity.”

D.W. Griffith is considered among the pioneers of the film industry, perhaps the most influential directors of the early era. He is known to have developed such cinematic devices as the close-up shot to convey the psychological state of a character. Griffith’s films often present certain archetypes, likely related to his own experiences and beliefs. Among these is the poor country boy struggling to survive in the harsh city. This reappears in his films as a retelling of his own story not tied to any time or country. His second archetype is the defenseless girl, a symbol of purity in the world plagued with evil. In the cold city, the wayward boy is only warmed by romantic love for the pure girl. His films also depict an ideal view of lone struggles against overwhelming injustice. These themes form the basis of *Broken Blossoms* (D.W. Griffith, USA, 1919).

*Broken Blossoms* begins with the male protagonist in a Buddhist temple in China. The intertitles, text displayed between scenes, only refer to him as “Yellow Man,” although the part is played by American actor Richard Barthelmess. While the depictions of Buddhism in the Chinese temple are limited, there is a clear attempt at accuracy, in contrast to *The Soul of Buddha*. In the temple, a Buddhist is shown using prayer beads. Others bow before an altar. A master in the temple gives Yellow Man advice about taking “the lessons of the gentle Buddha” to “the barbarous Anglo-Saxons, sons of turmoil and strife.” Once in England, however, he soon loses his naïve idealism about this task as he struggles with the realities of harsh city life. He becomes a shopkeeper in a depressed part of town and seems to find some consolation for his disappointment in opium dens. Meanwhile, a teenager named Lucy wanders through the streets after being abused by her father, a boisterous and often drunken boxer. Yellow Man sees her searching for tinfoil to sell for flowers and immediately recognizes a spark of human purity in her. When a man called Evil Eyes attempts to take advantage of the impoverished child, Yellow Man prevents it. Two Christians with religious pamphlets also come to the district. One tells Yellow Man, “My brother leaves for China tomorrow to convert heathens.” The perception that Asians are heathens is clearly contrasted with Yellow Man’s humanity and the boxer’s brutality. However, there is a subtle message that the Christians’ naïve arrogance is the same as that formerly displayed by Yellow Man in his idealism about Buddhist missionary work. That is, rather than nationality and wealth, it is something more basic to humanity that makes a person good. Likewise, religion does not make a person holy, love does.

Later, after Lucy is again brutalized by her drunken father, she limps out of the house and down the street, incidentally falling unconscious into the doorway of Yellow Man’s store. He takes her upstairs so that she might recover, watching over her closely. At first we are unsure of his intent towards the helpless girl, especially knowing he has smoked opium. He draws slowly near her for a closer look
Broken Blossoms and Lost Horizon 5

(see Figure 1.2). We see extreme close-ups of his squinting eyes and her fearful ones. Then we are told through the intertitles, “his love remains a pure and holy thing.” The titles also say the room is “prepared as for a princess” and he gives her “a magical robe treasured from an olden day.” He sits in front of a Buddhist shrine in the room. A striking contrast is made between the room’s delicate decorations and the dilapidated environment of the streets and Lucy’s house, analogous to their purity compared to the corruption of the outside world. The simple kindness of each seems to transform the other into greater people. Yellow Man has found the principles he has lost in the city and Lucy has gained the flowers she sought. He fondly calls her White Blossom; clearly both have bloomed.

Tragically their happiness is short lived. Lucy’s father is informed by a shop patron that his daughter is living with a foreigner. Enraged, the father goes to the shop while Yellow Man is out. He yells at his daughter, “You! With a dirty Chink?” He rips the robe and destroys a chair as she runs out into the river mist. Her father catches her outside and drags her home. Yellow Man returns to the shop to find the robe discarded. He falls to the floor in anguish and learns from the gloating Evil Eyes what has happened. Yellow Man grabs a gun and heads outside into the river mist. The foggy black and white scene partially concealing the man with the gun foreshadows what will later be classic images in film noir.

In a memorable scene in cinematic history, at home Lucy locks herself in a closet, which her father proceeds to break through with an axe. He pulls Lucy...
through the splintered door and beats her fatally. Viewers, upon first seeing this, reported becoming nauseated and physically ill. She dies on her bed just as Yellow Man enters her room through a window. When her father sees him he raises the axe but Yellow Man shoots him repeatedly. We see a man informing the police of the development. The police officers have been reading the news of war, remarking, “Better than last week—Only forty thousand casualties.” This again points to the barbarism of Europe. Yellow Man carries Lucy’s body to his room, puts flowers on her and lights incense at the Buddhist shrine. He raises a Buddhist scripture to his head in an authentic fashion, and rings a bell. He then kills himself. The final scene shows the Buddhist temple in China. Buddhists ring the temple bell and more ships sail between Europe and Asia. Part of the message seems to be that relationships of purity and love among individuals are not allowed to develop because social prejudices based on religion and nationality.

In 1923, Indian director Dadasaheb Phalke made a documentary called *Buddha Dev (Lord Buddha)*. In 1925, another silent film dramatizing the life of the Buddha was released, *The Light of Asia* (Hindi title: *Prem Sanyas*). This movie was made by the German film-maker Franz Osten. The script was based on the book *The Light of Asia* by the British poet Sir Edwin Arnold, distributed by the Theosophical Society in 1891. The film was a greater success in Europe than in India. It gives a somewhat romantic picture of the life of Buddha.

*Broken Blossoms* made the point to contrast individual good across political borders at the time of World War I. In 1940, the year before the United States entered World War II, *Broken Blossoms* was remade as the first film of director John Brahm (a.k.a. Has Brahm). John Brahm later went on to direct many television shows, such as *Twilight Zone* and *The Outer Limits*, which is interesting in that *Broken Blossoms* is also a fantasy of sorts. The following year, 1937, Frank Capra (1897–1991) directed *Lost Horizon*. Capra is another seminal director in film history, perhaps most popularly known for making *It’s a Wonderful Life* with James Stewart. *Lost Horizon*, adapted from James Hilton’s best-selling 1933 novel by that name, centers around Shangri-la, likely a literary adaptation of the mythical kingdom of Shambhala in Tibetan Buddhism. Madame Blavatsky of the Theosophical Society had earlier claimed that her undisclosed Tibetan Lama teacher had shown here the secret location of Shambhala. Similar to *It’s a Wonderful Life*, *Lost Horizon* is about the search for what is really important in life, an issue Capra and others likely considered crucial just after the stock market crash and World War I. In both films, it does not matter that the entire story seems like an impossible fantasy. In fact, the aspect of escapism from the daily news played a part in the popularity of both films. But it is also important that the stories are consciously recognized as fantasies by the viewers. This underscores the value of the dreams and aspirations of humankind above lust and greed that the films present as driving society. An offshoot of this is that Buddhism is presented in *Lost Horizon* in a fantastic way that perpetuates Orientalism to this day.
The opening intertitles of *Lost Horizon*, shown as pages turned in a book, prepare us for the film’s theme of universal human ideals.

In these days of war and rumors of war haven’t you ever dreamed of a place where there was peace and security, where living was not a struggle but a lasting delight? Of course you have. So has every man since time began. Always the same dreams. Sometimes he calls it Utopia, sometimes the Fountain of Youth, sometimes merely that little chicken farm.

In this way, a part of Tibetan Buddhism is removed from its historical context and presented as universal. “War and rumors of war” is a quote from Jesus found in Matthew 24:6–7. This Universalist message is repeated when later we learn the founder of the Tibetan monastery is a Catholic priest.

The story begins in 1935 and continues to around the time of the film’s showing, 1937. Near China’s border with Tibet there is a British diplomat named Robert Conway (Ronald Colman) helping to evacuate Europeans and Americans by airplanes during a frantic local revolt. Conway boards a plane along with his younger brother George (John Howard). Onboard are also an American swindler and fugitive named Henry Mitchell (Thomas Mitchell) who had cost investors a great deal during the stock market crash, a narrow-minded British paleontologist called “Lovey” (Edward Everett Horton), and Gloria Stone (Isabel Jewell), an American woman soured by doctors’ prognoses that she only has a short time to live. In the air we get a feel for Conway’s personality when he laments that 10,000 Chinese deaths do not count in terms of his government report. After some time, the passengers realize they have been kidnapped by a Mongolian pilot and are traveling towards Tibet rather than Shanghai. The plane runs out of fuel and crashes in the Himalayas, killing the pilot. Gloria laughs at the others for now being faced with imminent death, like her. The motif of ever-present mortality, at the heart of Buddhism, runs throughout the film.

Just as they are thinking there is no way out of the frozen wilderness, a group of Tibetans arrive, led by a soft-spoken Chinese man named Chang, played by English actor H.B. Warner. The Tibetans provide heavy clothing and lead them to a portal where they behold Shangri-la, a warm and lush valley strangely protected from the surrounding cold by high mountains. From this mysterious vista a magnificent building can be seen, appearing somewhat like the Potala Palace, the traditional chief residence the Dalai Lama in Lhasa, Tibet (see Figures 1.3[a] and 1.3[b]). We are told it is a Lamasery, a Tibetan monastery, actually constructed by Columbia Pictures in a backlot of the studio in Los Angeles.

Inside the palace there are Buddha images and people dressed in robes. The visitors are treated to a delicious meal served to them by people who appear to represent the colonial ideal of benevolent natives. Throughout the film, the Europeans live in idle luxury as the natives work happily. “Lovey” complains that the place is too mysterious and Robert becomes anxious to leave. Conway, on the other hand;
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FIGURE 1.3(a)  Screenshot of first glimpse of Shangri-la in *Lost Horizon*

FIGURE 1.3(b)  Potala Palace in Lhasa
comments, “I think I’m going to like it here.” He asks Chang, “What religion do you practice here?” Chang replies,

   To put it simply, I should say that our general belief was in moderation. We preach the virtue of avoiding excesses of every kind, even including excess of virtue itself . . . We find in the valley it makes for greater happiness among the natives. We rule with moderate strictness and in return we are satisfied with moderate obedience. As a result, our people are moderately honest, moderately chaste, and somewhat more than moderately happy.

This reply may remind us of the Dalai Lama’s well-known ecumenical quote, “Loving Kindness is my religion,” which is often seen on buttons and bumper stickers today.

   Buddhism is known as the Middle Path because it teaches the avoidance of excesses. However, Conway believes that a native Asian element cannot be responsible for the magnificence of Shangri-la. Instead, he suspects there is a “shrewd, guiding intelligence somewhere” who has somehow orchestrated the very “simple and naive” life of the valley. Inquiring, he learns that indeed the community was formed in 1713 by a Belgian priest named Father Perrault. Father Perrault was “the first European to find this place and a very great man, indeed.” He built Shangri-la, taught the natives, and began collecting treasures of civilization in order to preserve them from the apocalypses he saw for the world in the future. In this way, though the film appears to be about Tibetan paradise created by putting Buddhist principles into practice, the story turns instead to Christianity and the European culture for its guiding force, again Orientalism.

   Soon Conway learns of many miraculous features of Shangri-la. In the paradise free from the struggles of the world, people live hundreds of years and remain healthy. Chang explains, “Age is a limit we impose upon ourselves.” Conway also falls in love with Sondra (Jane Wyatt), another European there who plays an Eve-like character, swimming nude in a mountain pool and conversing with a squirrel. Conway is introduced to Father Perrault, the High Lama of Shangri-la who is miraculously still alive. Father Perrault explains that Conway had been kidnapped because Sondra selected him, perhaps to be the next High Lama and her mate. “She has read your books and has a profound admiration for you,” Perrault says. This sounds like a not so veiled personal fantasy of the writer, James Hilton.

   The stay in Shangri-la has a profound effect on most of the visitors. Conway decides to give up his successful life as a statesman and pursue something that will truly benefit humankind: the preservation of Shangri-la. “Lovey” loses the stiffness of his personality and becomes a kind teacher to the local children. Henry repents of his evil ways as a Wall Street bear and returns to his youthful profession as a plumber for Shangri-la. Gloria seems to be recovering from her illness and has grown attached to Henry. In short, all the characters’ previous woes have been overcome in paradise. However, George has met a Russian girl named Maria and
the two refuse to stay in Shangri-la. The High Lama warns that Maria cannot leave because outside of Shangri-la she will become her natural old age and die. Although her part is minor in the film, Maria plays a role somewhat like Mara in Buddhism. She is the temptress who lies, saying the High Lama is deceitful, in order to lure George back to the mundane world. Using rational argument and Maria as a witness, George convinces Conway to honor national loyalty and family love above the irrational feelings for a higher good in his heart. This is also a dilemma faced by Buddhist monks, as featured in the film *Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?*, and aspirants of many religions.

Conway, George, and Maria leave Shangri-la with a group of cruel traders from outside. After several days of grueling travel, Maria becomes exhausted and falls face down in the snow. When George calls to the traders to wait for them, the group instead fire guns at the three. As if illustrating Buddhist karmic retribution, the gunfire causes an avalanche, killing the traders. Afterwards, they discover Maria has become very old and died. Horrified, George loses his sanity and jumps to his death. Conway continues on and eventually meets a search party sent to find him. However, the ordeal has caused him to lose his memory of Shangri-la. On the voyage back to England, he remembers everything; he tells his story and then jumps ship. The searchers track him back to the Himalayas, but are unable to follow him any further and Conway returns to Shangri-la. In the end, a British statesman is telling the story and we see Conway rediscovering Shangri-la, seen through a wooden gate frame resembling a Buddhist *torana*, a gateway marking the entry to a sacred space. The title of the film, *Lost Horizon*, indicates the spiritual values and potentials modern people have misplaced in blind pursuit of worldly gain, illustrated by Conway metaphorically losing Shangri-la.

After World War II, Tibet appeared more prominently in the American news. In 1950, China invaded Tibet, proceeding afterwards to destroy centuries of Tibetan art, scriptures, temples, and monks. In 1959, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, left his country in secrecy and set up the Tibetan Government-in-Exile in Dharamsala, India. Under his guidance, Tibetan teachers preserved their country's culture and religion in universities in America. In 1973, the Dalai Lama came to America for the first time. By 1987, at the request of the Dalai Lama, Tibet House was formed in New York by composer Philip Glass, actor Richard Gere, and Robert Thurman, father of actress Uma Thurman. In 1989, the Dalai Lama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and American interest in Tibetan Buddhism gained momentum. In 1997 its popularity reached a new peak in America. That year the Dalai Lama toured Washington, meeting separately with President Clinton and Vice-President Gore and the film *Seven Years in Tibet* was released starring Brad Pitt. Also in 1997, Director Martin Scorsese released *Kundun*, a dramatization of the early life of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama. Philip Glass created the musical score for the film. An October 1997 edition of *Time* magazine explored “America’s Fascination with Buddhism.”
On June 27, 1998 President Clinton and Chinese President Jiang held a joint press conference in Beijing. At that time Mr. Clinton mentioned the ongoing conflict between China and Tibet. In response, Mr. Jiang said,

But still, I have a question. That is, during my visit to the United States last year, and also during my previous visit to other European countries, I found that although the education and the science and the technology have developed to a very high level and the people are now enjoying modern civilization, still quite a number of them have a belief in Lamaism. So this is a question that I’m still studying and still looking into. I want to find out the reason why.

In reply Clinton said, “I have spent time with the Dalai Lama, I believe him to be an honest man, and I believe if he had a conversation with President Jiang, they would like each other very much.”

Removed from America’s and Europe’s romantic, Orientalist cinematic and literary history of representing Tibet, the Chinese President appeared baffled at the fascination. Neither Kundun nor Seven Years in Tibet expose the historical realities according to a Chinese perspective, such as Tibet’s feudal social and economic inequities, its reliance on shamanic magic for medicine in face of widespread disease, the internal violence among rival Tibetan Buddhist sects, etc. Instead, the films rely on the box office pulling power of Brad Pitt, Martin Scorsese, Yo Yo Ma, Philip Glass and other superstars to once again present a romanticized vision. One critic points out, “This selective oversight will be enough to put these movies in a continuum with Lost Horizon.”

According to the High Lama in Lost Horizon, when people of the world are finished crashing against one another in lust and greed, they will turn to Shangri-la that preserves the best in humanity with the one simple rule: “Be kind.” This reminds us of the Buddhist Metta Sutta, Discourse on Loving Kindness that teaches we should open our hearts to the positions of others. Maybe film and other modern methods propagate at least a part of that message even if in an altered form. The film The Cup uses World Cup soccer for this purpose. Meanwhile, at social gatherings and over the internet, Tibetan monks in America sell incense, prayer beads, and bumper stickers that reiterate the Dalai Lama’s words, “Loving Kindness is My Religion.”

Perhaps along these same lines is Mr. Clinton’s rather amazing statement assuming the dispositions of the two leading individuals hold the key to resolving world conflict in disregard for such issues as China’s desire for Tibet’s natural resources. Whether we chalk this up to naiveté, idealism, or correct insight, it seems to be the same approach preached by the High Lama in Lost Horizon, the very one sold to Americans in the image of magical Tibet. Will film imagery continue to influence the way America treats Tibet politically? If so, it could well determine the fate of that country.
Further Reading and Viewing


Broken Blossoms can be viewed in its entirety on Google Videos: http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=5636171007327735796.13

Notes

1 The Selig Polyscope Company, Incorporated, production; distributed by The General Film Company, Incorporated. Released February 14, 1913.
2 According to a website dedicated to the actress Theda Bara which is no longer available.
5 Rick Fields, How the Swans Came to the Lake, A Narrative History of Buddhism in America, p. 124–5.
6 Charles Affron, Lillian Gish, Her Legend, Her Life, p. 129.
7 H.B. Warner also played in a silent film version of Paradise Lost, which has a somewhat similar theme. In addition, he played the lead role in Cecil B. DeMille’s silent classic Jesus Christ.
8 Father Perrault seems to be a strange caricature of the Dalai Lama, who would have been the 13th Dalai Lama Thubten Gyatso (1876–1933) at the time of the film and book. We are reminded of the masonic conspiracy theory that sees the leaders of all major religious as being secretly connected to the same secret European society that is controlling the world.
9 Officially called the Central Tibetan Administration of His Holiness the Dalai Lama.
11 William Elison, “From the Himalayas to Hollywood: The Legacy of Lost Horizon.”
12 Lost Horizon was remade as a musical in 1973, directed by Charles Jarrott. The book was also made into a Broadway musical in 1956 and a drama for BBC radio that has been rebroadcasted a number of times, including March 2012.
13 Accessed 8/25/12.