

Alan G. Chalk Guides to Japanese Films

Lesson 13: The Harp of Burma (The Burmese Harp)

Reading: *The Harp of Burma*, 1946 novel, Takeyama

Films: *The Burmese Harp*, 1956, Ichikawa, or *The Harp of Burma* (animated), 1986, Ishiguro

Suggested grades: 9-12 and college

Themes:

1. The final days of the Asia-Pacific War, the problem for the Japanese military to accept defeat and surrender, and to believe in the possibility of the regeneration of Japan from the ashes of war;
2. The dilemma for the Japanese individual who must choose between his identity and friendship with the group and his discovery of a new identity and spiritual mission in Buddhism, a choice which will require his remaining in Burma; and
3. The moral power of music as an international, humanizing language.

The story:

Although the story takes place amidst the chaos and aftermath of war, the hatred, brutality, and suffering of men in war are present only in one battle scene and in the unburied corpses of Japanese soldiers scattered throughout the jungles, fields, and river banks of Burma. The focus of the story is on the soldiers of "the Singing Company," as they are known. They are tired of the war, tired of running, hiding, killing, and being killed, yet they have maintained their morale and their sense of humanity by singing songs from various countries: France, Italy, Germany, and England, as well as Japan. While many of the men carry homemade musical instruments, Corporal Mizushima's homemade Burmese harp is the soul of the group. Although he has had no formal training in music, he is a natural talent, arranging pieces for the men and accompanying their singing. *The Harp of Burma* is finally his story, his struggle as a soldier and then as a disguised Buddhist monk to understand the causes of war and of human suffering.

While the novel and film run parallel up to the surrender of the "Singing Company," the two separate from this point, presenting different time structures. The novel's focus on the soldiers' prisoner-of-war experiences at Mudon makes the disappearance of Mizushima a mystery. What happened to him when he went to the mountain to persuade the resisting company to surrender? Did he die? Or is the strange reappearing Buddhist monk who resembles him in reality Mizushima as a disguised deserter? It is not until the final section of the novel, in a letter from Mizushima, that we learn what has happened to him and why he has chosen to become an itinerant monk. In the film, Mizushima's story is interwoven with the company's. While this eliminates the mystery,

at least for the viewer, it makes Mizushima's physical and spiritual journey the center of the film.

Teaching:

An interesting approach is to show the class the first 20 minutes of the film, without directive remarks except to identify it as a Japanese film about the end of World War II. It would be helpful but not necessary at this time to locate Burma on a map of Asia. A natural break is at the end of the scene in which the Japanese and British soldiers, instead of killing one another, end up singing in Japanese and English, "Home Sweet Home" and the narrator informs us that the war had ended three days earlier.

Although the film and novel are parallel to this point, they do not follow the same chronology. Therefore, it is preferable to teach the entire novel by slowly bringing out the various themes, and then follow it with the remainder of the film while students are working on related assignments.

The film offers a rich visual experience which can be studied and interpreted. Images abound: the Burmese plains, a mountain valley, the dense jungle, a river flat-all hiding the unburied dead; marching feet-the soldiers and Mizushima as a wanderer-all on some pilgrimage through life; the Burmese, the temples, images of the Buddha, funeral rituals, the large uncut ruby which comes to represent the spirits of the Japanese war dead. The experience is of Mizushima's pilgrimage through and gradual transcendence of the condition of suffering and death. Its tone is of Buddhist awareness and acceptance. The Burmese live in this Buddhistic framework. The war and death are the illusory faces of life, but an enduring eternal spirit resides within all things. As we follow Mizushima's pilgrimage, we see his transformation from soldier to the holiest of monks. At first he is a fraud, a soldier in a stolen robe. Still the Burmese bow in respect for him; it is as if they recognize his spiritual transformation. At the end of the film, as his friends read his letter on shipboard on their way back to Japan, we cut to the final image of Mizushima, a lonely figure on his endless spiritual pilgrimage across the "blood red" dust and rocks of Burma.

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