

“Asian Gangsters” - Contemporary Crime Cinema
IGS 173a; Summer 2025
T, W, Th 1:50pm - 4:20pm
(Please Note: Dates on syllabus subject to change)

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Office Hours: Wednesdays 5-6 pm, only by appointment

Rabb 368

Course Narrative:

Parasite's historic Oscar victory in 2020 marked a turning point for international cinema, bringing long-overdue recognition to Asian filmmaking. However, the backlash from some quarters was immediate and fierce, with critics questioning the film's artistic value and yearning for a return to classic Hollywood productions. This reaction highlights the persistent underappreciation of Asian cinema, which is often overlooked in discussions of great filmmaking despite its rich history and cultural significance.

Asia boasts the world's largest population and diverse cultures, yet its cinematic output is frequently dismissed as secondary to European and American films. While subtitled European films are celebrated for their artistic merit, Asian films are often relegated to the fringes, described as "cutting-edge" but rarely "seminal" or "essential." This disparity is particularly striking given that Asian cinema has been producing groundbreaking works since the early 20th century, mirroring the evolution of filmmaking in Europe and the US.

Despite these obstacles, Asian directors have continued to push creative boundaries, exploring new forms and techniques to capture the complexities of their rapidly changing societies. They have navigated government censorship and cultural taboos with ingenuity, using film to chronicle the moral, social, and political challenges facing their communities. From circumventing China's strict guidelines to avoiding India's mob-driven censorship, Asian filmmakers have proven resourceful in their quest to tell authentic stories.

This course delves into contemporary crime films to explore the intricacies of modern Asian society and politics. Through the lens of film theory, cultural studies, and historical and sociological research, we will analyze how these films depict the harsh realities of contemporary Asia. As the world's largest and fastest-growing media market, Asian cinema offers a unique window into the human cost of rapid globalization and mass migration.

Our inquiry will address several key questions: How do Asian storytellers approach sensitive political and social themes, and how do they subvert genre conventions? What makes the crime genre particularly suitable for exploring these issues? How have Asian

filmmakers incorporated indigenous folklore and theatrical traditions, often in bold and unconventional ways? To what extent have Western motifs been adapted and domesticated? Additionally, we will investigate how Asian films confront ideas about race, ethnicity, and gender, and whether they challenge stereotypes or perpetuate them. By examining these questions, we hope to gain a deeper understanding of Asian self-perceptions of modernity and the role that cinema plays in shaping those perceptions.

Note: This course fulfills the university's digital literacy requirement.

Short Course Description:

In this course, we'll examine contemporary crime films to gain insights into modern Asian society and culture. We'll draw on diverse perspectives from film theory, cultural studies, history, and sociology to analyze the world's largest media market and its influence on Asia's rapidly evolving landscape.

Prerequisites:

This course does not require familiarity with the region or its history.

Learning Goals:

Some of the questions pertinent to this course will be:

- Develop a historical and comparative framework to understand contemporary Asian film
- To appraise the contribution of Asian films to global culture
- To scrutinize the self-image of societies as projected through film, especially notions of race, gender, and culture
- To examine the dissemination of Western social and political mores as normative
- To see the links between market forces and pop culture
- To examine crimes films as vehicles for social protest in “traditional” cultures

Digital Literacy Requirement

Students will discover and utilize appropriate digital tools, including software and databases. (See “Final Project” below)

Learning Goals:

- Develop the ability to discover, create, analyze, present, and reason about large sets of discipline-relevant data.
- Improve skills in evaluating the credibility of digital sources.
- Hone skills in solving disciplinary problems with scripting languages.

Texts

Readings will include chapters, articles, and excerpts from the books listed below and other sources. All material will be on LATTE.

Tereska Ciecko Anne (ed.), *Contemporary Asian Cinema*

Thomas Barker, *Indonesian Cinema after the New Order: Going Mainstream*

Steven T. Brown, *Japanese Horror and the Transnational Cinema of Sensations*
 Kim-mui E. Elaine Chan, *Hong Kong Dark Cinema*
 Paul Clark, *Reinventing China: A Generation and Its Films*
 Poshek Fu, *Between Shanghai and Hong Kong: The Politics of Chinese Cinemas*
 Jeffrey Goldstein, *Why We Watch: The Attractions of Violent Entertainment*
 Foster Hirsch, *The Dark Side of the Screen*
 E. Ann Kaplan, *Women in Film Noir*
 Nam Lee, *The Films of Bong Joon Ho*
 J. Tse-Hei Lee and S. Kolluri (eds.), *Hong Kong and Bollywood*
 Sangjoon Lee (ed.), *Rediscovering Korean Cinema*
 Aaron Han Joon Magnan-Park et al. (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Asian Cinema*
 James Naremore, *More than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts*
 Homer B. Pettet and R. Barton Palmer (ed.), *International Noir*
 Andre Spicer and Helen Hanson, *A Companion to Film Noir*
 Barbara Harriss-White and Lucia Michelutti (eds.), *The Wild East*
 Brian Yecies and Aegyung Shim, *The Changing Face of Korean Cinema: 1960 to 2015*

Articles

In *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *Newslaundry*, *Asian Affairs*, *Film Quarterly*,
Studies in European Cinema, *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, *International
 Centre Quarterly*, *Forbes*

Films

Hong Kong

Drug War (2012, dir. Johnnie To, Mandarin |Cantonese)
Election 2 (2006, dir. Johnnie To, Mandarin | Cantonese)
Election (2005, dir. Johnnie To, Mandarin | Cantonese)

China

A Touch of Sin (2013, dir. Zhanke Jia)
Ash is Purest White (2018, dir. Zhanke Jia)

Korea

Parasite (2019, dir. Bong Joon Ho, Korean)
Mother (2009, dir. Bon Joon Ho)
Memories of Murder (2003, dir. Bong Joon Ho, Korean)

Japan

Audition (2000, dir. Takashi Mike, Japanese)
Battle Royale (2000, dir. Kinji Fukasaku)

Indonesia

The Raid: Redemption (2011, dir. Gareth Evans)

Thailand

Buoyancy (2019, dir. Rodd Tathjen, Thai and Khmer)

India

Psycho Raman (2016, dir. Anurag Kashyap, Hindi)

Ugly (2013, dir. Anurag Kashyap, Hindi)

Gangs of Wasseypur (2012, dir. Anurag Kashyap, Hindi)

Turkey

Once Upon a Time in Anatolia (2011, dir. Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Turkish)

Three Monkeys (2008, dir. Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Turkish)

Important Note:

This course may include readings, media, and discussion around topics such as sexual assault, physical violence, and identity-based discrimination, which might be disturbing. I encourage you to care for your safety and well-being.

Class Participation

Though a series of introductory and explanatory lectures will be provided, the format of this course will encourage group participation. In addition, you are expected to participate in class discussions. The course material requires commitment and active learning on the part of the student. I will provide guidance during class and in discussion, but it is your responsibility to come to see me if you find the material daunting, or just plain incomprehensible.

Credit Hours

Success in this four-credit course is based on the expectation that students will spend a minimum of 9 hours of study time per week in preparation for class (readings, papers, discussion sections, preparation for exams, etc.) Students should be able to prepare readings, reflections, and participate in class.

Grading Criteria

Students will be graded on take home assignments, a mid-term, final project, and participation in class discussions. Students are expected to attend every session. Absences without prior notification or permission will result in a grade deduction from the participation part of the final grade.

Students will be assessed through a variety of written assignments, class participation, and a mid-term exam that develop critical reading and writing skills. These include:

Final Project: 35%

For this assignment, students will create and populate a database of contemporary Asian crime films and generate a visual representation of their dataset that uncovers intriguing patterns or tendencies. The chosen films should include at least 10 titles that showcase diverse geographical locations, genres, and themes. They will then utilize digital tools like Excel, Google Sheets, Microsoft PowerPoint, or Airtable to create an organized database. Additionally, students will use software such as Tableau, Power BI, or Flourish to design a visualization that effectively communicates their discoveries. Accompanying the visualization, students should provide explanations of their design decisions and how

they connect to their research objectives and results. This assignment fulfils the university's Digital Literacy requirement.

Mid-Term: 10%

The midterm is intended to test the student's familiarity with class lectures and course readings. It will consist of a series of short-answer questions.

Take home essays: 20%

The two take home assignments will comprise of an essay question each, drawing on class readings. 500 words each.

Participation: 15%

The constructive participation of all students is critical to the completion of this course. This includes meaningful engagement with the readings as well as joining in class discussions.

Reflection on Readings/Films: 20%

Over the course of the semester, students are required to turn in two critical commentaries—250 words each—reflecting on the readings/movies.

- * Students must complete all required coursework to receive a passing grade.
 - * All unexcused delays will be penalized.
 - * Questions regarding grades must be dealt with in person during office hours (or by appointment). I will not entertain grade related queries over e-mail or phone.
1. Technology: Your use of social media and other Internet aided pastimes distracts you, your classmates, and your professor. The usage of electronic devices, laptops and tablets is restricted to accessing class readings and note taking. If you believe that special circumstances merit an accommodation in your case, please see me.
 2. Academic Integrity: You are expected to be honest in all of your academic work. Please consult Brandeis University [Rights and Responsibilities](#) for all policies and procedures related to academic integrity. Students may be required to submit work to TurnItIn.com software to verify originality. Allegations of alleged academic dishonesty will be forwarded to the Director of Academic Integrity. Sanctions for academic dishonesty can include failing grades and/or suspension from the university. Citation and research assistance can be found at [LTS - Library guides](#).
 3. Communication: Announcements, changes, assignment guidelines, and accommodations for "snow days" will be communicated through LATTE. It is essential that you are enrolled for the course and have complete access to LATTE.

4. Sexual Assault, Dating Violence, Domestic Violence, Stalking, and Sexual and Racial Harassment
If you experience one of these, Sarah J. Berg at the Brandeis Office of Prevention Services can provide confidential assistance to you and let you know about other resources. Here is the link to a resource guide <http://www.brandeis.edu/sexual-misconduct-title-ix/resources/index.html>. Title IX Coordinator Elizabeth Herriott Tierney (etierney@brandeis.edu) (781)-736-4456) accepts reports. The Prevention, Advocacy & Resource Center (Usdan Student Center, Room G-108) can be reached at (781)-736-3372.
5. Student Accessibility Support: Brandeis seeks to welcome and include all students. If you are a student who needs accommodations as outlined in an accommodations letter, please talk with me and present your letter of accommodation as soon as you can. I want to support you. In order to provide test accommodations, I need the letter more than 48 hours in advance. I want to provide your accommodations but cannot do so retroactively. If you have questions about documenting a disability or requesting accommodations, please contact Student Accessibility Support (SAS) at 781.736.3470 or access@brandeis.edu.
6. Course Materials: If you are having difficulty purchasing course materials, please make an appointment with your Student Financial Services or Academic Services advisor to discuss possible funding options and/or textbook alternatives.
7. Financial Aid Information: Undergraduate students from SAS with financial need should contact Student Financial Services to discuss options available to purchase equipment and other technology and supply needs. GSAS students should contact Monique Howell in GSAS.
8. Classroom Health and Safety Measures: All students in this class are required to observe the university's policies on physical distancing and mask-wearing to support the health and safety of all classroom participants. Face coverings must be worn by all students and instructors in classes with in-person meetings. Students and faculty must also maintain the appropriate 6 feet of physical distance from one another when entering, exiting, or being in the classroom and continue to sit in seats assigned by the professor to assist the university in its contact-tracing efforts. All faculty and students must also clean their work areas before and after each class session, using the sanitizing wipes provided by the university. (All classrooms will also be professionally cleaned by Brandeis custodial staff multiple times per day)
9. Breaks: Class meetings of 90 minutes include a 10-minute break, while class meetings of 180 minutes include two breaks, at the instructor's discretion.

Class Recording Policy

In this course, audio and video recordings of class activities, including lectures, discussions, and conversations, are not permitted. This policy is in place to ensure that

both the instructor and students can engage in open and candid discussions without worrying about their words being taken out of context and shared publicly. This policy is in accordance with the Massachusetts two-party consent law and aims to create a comfortable and open learning environment for all students.

If you have a valid reason for needing to make audio or video recordings, please reach out to Student Accessibility Support (SAS). They can assist you in arranging for a qualified note-taker or other suitable accommodations to support your learning needs.

Week One: Introduction to Asian Cinema & Crime Cinema

* Tuesday: Instructor introduction, course introduction, and student introductions; “‘Asia’ and Asian Cinema” by Aaron Han Joon Magnan-Park, Gina Marchetti and See Kam Tan, in *The Palgrave Handbook of Asian Cinema*, 1-14; “Cinema and Development: Towards an Ideological History of Asian Cinema as “World Cinema” by Derek Hon-Kong Lam, in *The Palgrave Handbook of Asian Cinema*, 53-70.

* Wednesday: “Why Are We Entranced by Trashy Thrillers?” (Bruce Fleming, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 7 August 1998); “Why We Watch” by Jeffrey Goldstein, *Why We Watch: The Attractions of Violent Entertainment*; “The Other Side of the Street” in James Naremore, *More than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts*, 220-253

* Thursday: “Women in Film Noir” by Janey Place, in E. Ann Kaplan, *Women in Film Noir*, Chapter 3; Introduction to China: “Introduction,” and “Beyond the Fifth Generation” in Paul Clark, *Reinventing China: A Generation and Its Films*, 1-6 and 187-204

* Assignment 1: Take home essay (approx. 500 words) assigned

Week Two: China & Hong Kong

* Tuesday: “The Long Shot” by Evan Osnos (May 04, 2009) and “Confronting Violence in China” by Jiayang Fan (March 6, 2014), in *The New Yorker*; “Interview: Jia Zhangke” (Film Comment, March-April 2009); “Heard it Through The Grapevine: Jia Zhangke, *A Touch of Sin*” (Film Comment, September- October 2013); “Interview: Jia Zhangke, *A Touch of Sin*” (Film Comment, October 2, 2013); discuss *A Touch of Sin*

* Wednesday: Discuss *A Touch of Sin* (contd.) and *Ash is Purest White*; “Introduction” and “Film Noir, Crisis and Politics of Identity” in Kimmui E. Elaine Chan, *Hong Kong Dark Cinema: Film Noir, Re-conceptions, and Reflexivity*, 1-26 and 27-80

* Assignment 1 due

* Thursday: “Between Nationalism and Colonialism: Rewriting Hong Kong Cinema” in Poshek Fu, *Between Shanghai and Hong Kong: The Politics of Chinese Cinemas*, 51-92; “Transformation of Hong Kong Gangster Movies Before and After CEPA,” by Yau Shuk-Ting, Kinnia, in *Hong Kong and Bollywood: Globalization of Asian Cinemas*, 51-68; discuss *Election*

* Reflection 1 Assigned (250 words)

Week Three: Hong Kong, Japan & South Korea

* Tuesday: Discuss *Election 2* and *Drug War*

* Reflection 1 Due

* Wednesday: “From ‘Torture Porn,’ to ‘Spectacle Horror’ to ‘Cinema of Cruelty,’” “Miike’s Cinema of Outrage,” and “The Color of Cruelty in Audition” in Steven T. Brown, *Japanese Horror and the Transnational Cinema of Sensations*, 207-249; Discuss *Audition* and *Battle Royale*

* Thursday: Mid-Term; “Introduction: Introducing Planet ‘Hallyuwood’” in Brian Yecies and Aegyung Shim, *The Changing Face of Korean Cinema: 1960 to 2015*, 1-16; “Film Noir in Asia: Historicizing South Korean Crime Thrillers” by Nikki J.Y. Lee and Julian Stringer, in *A Companion to Film Noir*, 477-495

Week Four: South Korea, Indonesia, Thailand & Turkey

* Tuesday: “Introduction,” “Narratives of Failure,” “Monsters Within” and “Parasite – a New Beginning” in Nam Lee, *The Films of Bong Joon Ho*; 1-13, 63-89, 90-114, and 139-152; Discuss *Parasite*; “Rediscovering Korean Cinema” by Sangjoon Lee, in *Rediscovering Korean Cinema*, 1-33; discuss *Memories of Murder*

* Reflection 2 Assigned (250 words)

* Wednesday: Discuss *Memories of Murder* (contd.) and *Mother*; “Introduction: Indonesian Cinema after Authoritarianism” and “Friction: Society, Censorship, and Government Policy” in Thomas Barker, *Indonesian Cinema after the New Order: Going Mainstream*; “Amazing Thai Film” by Rachel Harrison, in *Asian Affairs*, vol. XXXVI, no. III, November 2005, 321-338; “Thailand: Revival in an Age of Globalization” by Anchalee Chaiworaporn and Adam Knee, in *Contemporary Asian Cinema: Popular Culture in a Global Frame*, 58-70; Discuss *The Raid: Redemption* and *Buoyancy*

* Final Project assigned

* Thursday: “Locating Turkish Cinema Between Populist Tendencies and Art Cinema” by Murat Akser, in *The Palgrave Handbook of Asian Cinema*, 151-170; “Nuri Bilge Ceylan: An Introduction and Interview” by Rob White, *Film Quarterly* [2011, 65(2): 64-

72]; “Conflicted selves: the humanist cinema of Nuri Bilge Ceylan” by James Harvey-Davitt, in *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, Volume 14, Issue 2, 2016, 249-267; Discuss *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*

- * Reflection 2 Due

- * Assignment 2: Take home essay (approx. 500 words) assigned

Week Five: Turkey & India

- * Tuesday: Discuss *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* and *Three Monkeys*; “Indian Cinema: Then and Now” by Partha Chatterjee, in *International Centre Quarterly*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (Autumn 2012), 45-53; “Bombay Noir” by Lalitha Gopalan, in *A Companion to Film Noir*, 496-511; “Indian Film Noir” by Corey K. Creekmur, in *International Noir*, 182-192; Discuss *Ugly* and *Psycho Raman*

- * Assignment 2 due

- * Final Project Draft due

- * Wednesday: “Bollywood's Affair with The Indian Mafia” by Ronak D. Desai, *Forbes*, 3rd March 2016; “Jharia’s century-old fire kept ablaze by crime and politics” by Smita Gupta, in *The Wild East: Criminal Political Economies in South Asia*, 68-91; “Interview with Anurag Kashyap,” *NDTV* (4th June 2020); Discuss *Gangs of Wasseyapur*

- * Thursday: Course wrap-up and review

- * Final Project Due