

Buddhism as Orientalism on American Cultural Landscape: The Cinematic Orientalization of Tibetan (Tantric) Buddhism

Che-ming Yang

Associate Professor, Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, National Cheng Kung University,
Tainan, Taiwan

Correspondence: yang5692@mail.ncku.edu.tw, philyang2003@yahoo.com.tw

Accepted: November 16, 2010; Published: December 23, 2010

Abstract

In this paper I will just cite two American movies—*Little Buddha* and *Music and Lyrics*—to illustrate how (Tibetan) Buddhism (or Dharma) has long been misrepresented and Orientalized on American cultural landscape. Since its spread to the West in the 19th century, Buddhism has long been a target or source in the Westerners' creation of Orientalism in the arts or even mass media. In mass media, Buddhism (especially Tibetan Buddhism) has long been a source for commercial films (e.g. *The Little Buddha*, directed by Bertolucci in 1993). Some of them may have been an attempt to present Buddhism as some Oriental spiritual practice or an Oriental mysticism that looks appealing to the American/Western audience and thus satisfies the Westerners' exotic taste. Reasons of the Americanization or secularization of Buddhism may be caused by Buddhist diasporas that lead to the alienation and contestation of Dharma in a Christian context. Hence, misinterpretation is the way of understanding/interpreting a new culture. On the other hand, the misrepresentation is an inevitable phenomenon when an idea or object is translated into a foreign culture in which there is no equivalent to the idea/object. Since cinema is a main medium for public entertainment and commercial profit in the contemporary postmodern world, it could easily reflect the mass consensus of some cultural phenomenon. Hence, the misinterpretations or stereotypes of Buddhism revealed on the American cinema at least highlight the emerging need and popularity of the Dharma/Buddhism in western spiritual practice as well as its decline.

Keywords: Orientalism; Said; Bhabha; Buddhism; Dharma; Americanization; Misrepresentation; Orientalization; Cinema; *Little Buddha*; *Music and Lyrics*.

1. Introduction

Since its spread to the West in the nineteenth century, Buddhism has been frequently discussed and explored in the texts of philosophy, literature, and even mass media. Meanwhile, Buddhism was often (mis)represented as an exotic or **Oriental** philosophy or religion. To name but a few, the literary theorist Friedrich von Schlegel and the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer cultivated a great enthusiasm for Hindu-Buddhist notions. Besides mixing Buddhist ideas with Hindu ones, these two scholars also expressed some misinterpretations of the major tenets of the two Oriental religions/philosophy. On the American cultural landscape, three great 19th-century writers—Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman—were the pioneers that brought Indian mysticism to North America [1], especially Thoreau, who showed a great zeal for meditative solitude at Walden

Pond. In mass media, Buddhism (especially Tibetan Buddhism) has long been a source for commercial films (e.g. *The Little Buddha*, directed by Bertolucci in 1993). As a result, some of them may have been an attempt to present Buddhism as some Oriental spiritual practice or an Oriental mysticism that looks appealing to the American/Western audience and thus satisfies the Westerners' exotic taste.

Responding to the phenomenon of the Orientalization of Buddhism, some American Buddhist practitioners pointed out that the Buddhist way of spiritual cultivation is often adapted to fit the American cultural landscape. In an interview entitled "Is Buddhism Surviving America?" conducted by Amy Edelstein who worked for an American magazine *What Is Enlightenment*, Helen Tworkov, editor of *Tricycle* magazine, expressed her concern about the trend of *Americanization of Buddhism* on the American soil. In other words, America is "reshaping Buddhism according to its own secular and materialistic agenda." Moreover, a lot of Buddhist bestsellers are designed to be some spiritual fast food guidebooks that may offer some insight for those who are lost or feel empty on their journeys of life instead of being presented as a serious religious canon. As a result, Americanization and secularization of Buddhism (Dharma) pose a great threat to those who desire to pursue the right Buddhist way of spiritual life. Since the cultural productions are tremendous, this paper is aimed at surveying how Buddhism has been (mis)represented in mass media (with a focus on cinema) as a mysterious yet appealing Oriental philosophy or religion on the American cultural landscape since the 19th century. To be more specific, in this paper I will just cite two American movies—*Little Buddha* and *Music and Lyrics*—to illustrate how (Tibetan) Buddhism (or Dharma) has long been misrepresented and Orientalized on American cultural landscape. Above all, though the topic of this paper is inspired by Said's *Orientalism*, my approaches to the Americanization of Buddhism are not limited to Said's perspectives on the West's creation of an exotic "Other."

Though some critics argue that Said intentionally ignores some other Asian countries such as China, Japan, and South East Asia while privileging the Middle East in taking "the East"/the Orient and that he misleadingly claims that Orientalism prevails in the West for almost 2000 years (since the time of Homer), Said actually focuses on his discourse on re-examining the 19th-century literary discourse, which happens to correspond to my objective in this paper—revisiting the stereotypes or misrepresentation of some "essences" of Buddhist doctrine or practice originated during the West's (mainly the British and the French) colonial/imperial exploitation of Asia in the 19th century whereas continues to haunt the Western psyche up to the present. More importantly, Said argued that the former imperial/colonial powers— Britain and France—have been replaced by America:

My point is that Orientalism derives from a particular closeness experienced between Britain and France and the Orient, which until the early nineteenth century had really meant only India and the Bible lands. From the beginning of the nineteenth century until the end of World War II France and Britain dominated the Orient and Orientalism; since World War II America has dominated the Orient, and approaches it as France and Britain once did. [2]

Responding to Said's argument that the contemporary Orientalism is mainly dominated by America, this paper aims to highlight that Orientalization of (Tibetan) Buddhism in American Cinema.

To better illuminate the Americanization of Buddhism, I would like to give a brief survey of the history of how Buddhism prevailed in the West as follows:

Though Buddhism first came to the West in the nineteenth century, Buddhist practice in Europe and North America was only on a small scale until the late 1960s: "The 1960s was a time of both advance and confusion" [1]. After that, many seekers of Buddhism committed themselves to the spiritual journey in the East and returned to the West. During that time, Zen and Theravada Buddhism seemed to be the dominant Buddhist denominations in the West. But after the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950, following the Dalai Lama, many Tibetan monks and inhabitants continually fled to the West and thus spread the Tibetan (Tantric) Buddhism in the West. With the charisma and inspiring teaching of the Tibetan Buddhist superstar—the 14th Dalai Lama—prevailing in the West, Tibetan Buddhism has almost dominated the Westerners' conception of the Dharma while the Dalai Lama has been the synonym for Buddhism ever since.

Nevertheless, Tibetan Buddhism (with other names such as Vajrayana and Tantric Buddhism) combined the doctrines of both Hinayana and Mahayana Buddhism while also embracing Indian Tantra and the Tibetan folk religion (Bon) and thus contributing to its variety and sometimes esotericism in rituals and practice. Aside from the above-mentioned, Tibetan Buddhism shows great vitality in embracing the strengths of both Mahayana Buddhism and Hinduism (Yogi spiritual practice). Due to a big misunderstanding of Tibetan Buddhism, especially of the esoteric materials (e.g. the Yogi practice of the culminating sexual union between a male and female practitioners), many Western Buddhists and non-Buddhists take the esotericism and the misrepresentation of dharma for the "essence" of Buddhism. As I mentioned in the introduction of this paper, taking the American cultural production for example, several American movies happen to illustrate the misrepresentation of Buddhism or intentional Orientalization of Buddhism aimed at satisfying the Western audience's exotic taste for Oriental mysticism.

2. Orientalization of Buddhism in Bertolucci's *Little Buddha*

Firstly, I would like to illustrate the above-mentioned by analyzing Bertolucci's *Little Buddha*. This film is mainly a story about a quest of a group of Tibetan monks, led by Lama Norbu to seek out his reincarnated Buddhist teacher, Lama Dorje, with the juxtaposition of the Buddha's life story narrated from a book entitled *Little Buddha*. According to some film reviewers who knew little about Buddhism, the life story of the Buddha is presented to look like no more than the "Bible story" and fable that are focused on the portrayal of magic and the superhuman aspects of the Buddha. This seems to be a misunderstanding or misleading conception of how the Buddha reached the ultimate Nirvana, which is the biggest characteristic of Buddhism—to recognize the potentiality of every sentient being for becoming as enlightened as the Buddha had done:

Among the founders of religions, the Buddha . . . was the only teacher who did not claim to be other than a human being, pure and simple. Other teachers were either God, or his incarnations in different forms, or inspired by him. The Buddha was not only a human being; he claimed no inspiration from any god or external power either. He attributed all his realization, attainments and achievements to human endeavour and human intelligence. A man and only a man can become a Buddha. Every man has within himself the potentiality of becoming a Buddha, if he so wills it and endeavours. [3]

However, in *Little Buddha* Bertolucci seems to just focus on the supernatural power or the predestined events that the seekers

for the reincarnated teacher have to undergo.

In addition, the idea of *samsāra* (cycle of existence, reincarnation) is mystified by the director as long as its related idea of *karma*: in the opening scene of the movie, Lama Norbu narrates a story of how a goat teaches a Hindu high priest the value of no killing—one of the most important Buddhist precepts—when the goat is depicted as having the capability of a human being who speaks and laughs and then weeps again out of its joy for getting the chance to be reborn as a human being whereas having sympathy for the ignorance of the priest's capricious acts of slaughter. Though an impressive Buddhist parable, this story may seem to many non-Buddhists the equivalent of some magic Bible parables that contain too much magic/supernatural elements. Moreover, throughout the movie, the director seems to ignore the more important implications of *samsāra* and *karma*—they are not just equivalents to those of fatalism. For *samsāra* and *karma* are among the key ideas of the most important Buddhist doctrine—causation, which is the Buddhist view of universal law and reality. The director seems to assume some “everlasting” elements being reborn with the reincarnated lama.

For example, once challenged by Jesse's father with idea of reincarnation, Lama Norbu explained to him how *samsāra* worked by making an analogy of a tea cup in which the tea was compared to man's mind or spirit while the cup man's body. Lama Norbu then broke the cup and added that even when the cup had been broken (just like the aging and death of the human body), our mind still continues to exist by looking for another container for shelter just like the tea moving from one cup to another cup or place without change. Lama Norbu claimed that was what they Tibetans believed as reincarnation. Obviously, this scene is a misrepresentation of the idea of *samsāra* by considering our mind as changeless. In fact, the Buddhist conception of human mind is not eternal just like the body; that is, both of mind and body are no more than the contingent combination of ever-changing physical and mental energies or forces that are identified as the Five Aggregates, which constitute the so-called “being” and being is becoming just like life, which underlies the universal law of impermanence. Besides, in the movie, the director does not clarify the idea of *karma* as related to an endless network of cause, condition, and effect. Only when conditions are right, the effect can thus come into being. What he presents in the movie is that mostly the lamas follow their destiny or mission in seeking their reincarnated teacher.

What is worse, the director, by juxtaposing the life story of the Buddha in flashback scenes and the quest for the reincarnated teacher Lama Dorje—little Buddha—seems to deify the three children that are identified as separate manifestations of Dorje. In so doing, the director may be implying that they are the equivalents to the Buddha and thus simplifying/distorting the Tibetan belief in the reincarnation of some spiritual leaders.

Besides, near the end of the movie when Lama Norbu completes his mission in the quest and passes away, his spirit manifests itself above the three spiritual children during a ritual held to honor them. Lama Norbu delivers his final sermon to the children by reminding them of the importance of the Heart Sutra, which is being chanted in the ritual. Norbu chants the core part of the sutra when he says to the children that it is a beautiful *prayer*: “Form is emptiness, emptiness is form. Sariputra, no eye, no ear . . .” Then Jesse looks puzzled and questions his father by saying: “Lama Norbu just said no eye, no ear, no nose . . . no Jesse!” By so doing, the director not only mystifies again Tibetan Buddhist practitioners but also misinterprets or distorts the meaning of the Heart Sutra, which is the core and outline of Mahayana Buddhist philosophy and guidelines for

practicing the way leading to the cessation of dukkha (samsāra). In addition, the theme of the Heart Sutra is to illuminate the idea of emptiness (Sanskrit. Sunyata), which happens to form the backbone of the Dharma. It does not mean nothingness but impermanence. Every phenomenon, physical or mental, comes into being when the conditions are right and thus is subject to change when the conditions vary. Above all, the Heart Sutra is by no means a Buddhist **prayer**. Here, the director fails to mark this Buddhist spirit of impermanence by only hitting the superficial level of the Dharma illustrated in the Heart Sutra—supposedly the most famous and popular Tibetan (and Mahayana) Buddhist scripture.

3. Misrepresentation of Tibetan Buddhism in *Music and Lyric*

Likewise, in another American movie, *Music and Lyrics*, the same things happen but in a more serious and bizarre way—almost could be considered as a blasphemy to Buddhism. This movie is usually taken as a romantic comedy. Moreover, very few viewers seem to care much about its misrepresentations of Buddhism. The main story is about a washed-up 1980 pop star and composer Alex Fletcher, who is invited by a pop diva Cora to write and perform a duet song. Cora is an extremely erotic entertainer yet devotional Buddhist. In her studio, the interior design is full of Oriental or Buddhist atmosphere. Watching her erotic dance in shooting an MV for her new album on the side, Alex and his manager cannot help praising her for her seemingly devotedness to Buddhism. His manager says Cora seems to be very “spiritual” while Alex admires her exploration of religion. Besides, Cora claims to be inspired by a Hindu guru’s book entitled “Way Back into Love” recently after she broke up with her boyfriend. In addition, she decides to use the book’s title for the theme song of her new concert tour. Moreover, when shooting the MV of the “Buddha’s Delight,” the way she performs is highly erotic when she keeps dancing seductively and showing her orgasm, with her fellow dancers caressing her body. Meanwhile, her fellow dancers are dressed in lama robes while trifling erotically with her in the dance and bowing down to her as a goddess or Buddha figure. The lyrics of “Buddha’s Delight” are full of erotic description of her sexual orgasm and desire for sexual consummation with her true love, which she claims is her “Buddha’s Delight”:

I'm starting to believe, boy
That this was meant to be, boy
Cause I believe in karma
Boy, do you believe in karma?

So forget about your past life
Cause this could be our last life
We're gonna reach nirvana
Boy, we're gonna reach nirvana

Chorus

Each time you put your lips to mine
It's like a taste of Buddha's delight

I see the gates of paradise
 You're a taste of Buddha's delight
 Tell me all your fantasies tonight
 And I will make them happen
 Cause I'm not satisfied if I don't get my Buddha's delight

Om Shanti Shanti (2X)

Here, at least two things about the misrepresentation can be deciphered: One is the misreading of Tibetan Buddhism, especially the Tantric practice of sexual union between a male and female yogi practitioners, which is considered by most orthodox Buddhist monastic practitioners as an unorthodox or “perverted” way of spiritual practice, for the ecstasy caused by such yogi practice can never lead to the ultimate enlightenment and liberation from samsāra—Nirvana. However, in the song “Buddha’s Delight,” Cora keeps making expressions of such orgasm and believes such “Buddha Delight” could lead to the ultimate bliss of Nirvana. In addition, the song exposes a great misunderstanding of karma. The idea of karma in the lyrics does not, as what I mentioned earlier in this paper, mark the Buddhist philosophy of how causation functions as a networking of cause, condition, and effect. Rather, it reveals an overtone of fatalism by showing everything seems to be a result of destiny.

4. Misrepresentation of Buddhism as Cultural Translation

Nevertheless, we could see this “distortion” or “blasphemy” against Buddhism as a kind of *cultural translation* as Homi Bhabha puts it:

To blaspheme is not simply to sully the ineffability of the sacred name Blasphemy is not merely a *misrepresentation* [my emphasis] of the sacred by the secular; it is a moment when the subject-matter or the content of a cultural tradition is being overwhelmed, or alienated, in the act of *translation* [my emphasis]. Into the asserted authenticity or continuity of tradition, ‘secular’ blasphemy releases a temporality that reveals the contingencies, even the incommensurabilities, involved in the process of social transformation. [4]

5. Conclusion

Therefore, in Bhabha’s view, this kind of blasphemy is not necessarily a bad thing. Rather, citing Rushdie’s example in representing Koran in his novel, Bhabha argues that such cultural translation (blasphemy) may open up “a space of discursive contestation that places the authority of the Koran within a perspective of historical and cultural relativism” [4]. In other words, when Buddhist Diasporas lead to the alienation and contestation of Dharma in a Christian context, misinterpretation is the way of understanding/interpreting a new culture. Alternatively, we can just see it as an inevitable cultural phenomenon that occurs when an idea or object is being translated into a foreign culture, which has no equivalent to represent this idea/object. As a result, misrepresentation occurs. This is natural and does not matter much unless it is involved with some

spiritual matters. For in pursuit of spiritual liberation and enlightenment, the seeker has to find the right way of practicing it; therefore, the blasphemy may pose a great threat for those serious Dharma practitioners.

On the other hand, Bhabha argues, "it is the *medium* Rushdie uses to reinterpret the Koran that constitutes the crime. In the Muslim world, Samad argues, poetry is the traditional medium of censure" [4]. Likewise, in the contemporary postmodern world, cinema is a dominant cultural commodity/industry—a "cultural dominant" in postmodernism [5], for it combines at least three things: culture/art, commerce and technology. Unless ruled by an authoritarian regime, cinema is a main medium for public entertainment and commercial profit. Besides, it reflects the mass consensus of some cultural phenomenon. Hence, the misinterpretations or stereotypes of Buddhism revealed in the American cinema at least highlight the emerging need and popularity of the Dharma/Buddhism in western spiritual practice as well as its decline.

Competing Interests

The author declares that he has no competing interests.

References

- [1] Lowenstein T, 2000. *The vision of the Buddha*. London: Duncan Baird.
- [2] Said EW, 1979. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage.
- [3] Rahula WS, 1967. *What the Buddha taught*. London: Gordon Fraser.
- [4] Bhabha HK, 1994. *The location of culture*. London: Routledge.
- [5] Flaxman G, 2001. *Film studies*. *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism*. Ed. Victor E Taylor and Charles E Winquist. London: Routledge.