

**WEEKLY DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR SAMURAI, COWBOY, SHAOLIN MONK**  
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**WEEK TWO: SHIJI**

1. One of the most common themes in Sima Qian's writing (both in his letter to Ren An and in his biographies of assassins) is the theme of self-sacrifice. What forms can self-sacrifice take? Why is it so important? For whom or what does one sacrifice oneself and why?
2. If histories tend to tell of events that change the course of history, Sima Qian's biography of the assassin Jing Ke (Ching K'o) is rather curious. After all if Jing Ke is famous for anything, it is for failing to change the course of history. Why do you think Sima Qian includes this biography nevertheless?
3. To whom or what do the assassins owe their loyalty? Why can this be a problem for the imperial state and why does Sima Qian appreciate them nevertheless?
4. What does Hardy mean when he calls the world of the First Emperor "bronze" and the world of Sima Qian "bamboo?" How do the biographies of the assassins fit into his theory about Sima Qian's history and its verdict on the rule of the First Emperor of China (i.e. Qin Shi Huangdi)

**WEEK THREE: HERO**

1. Wang Ban offers an elaborate theory about the sublime in his chapter, the role natural images play in the experience of the sublime, and the way such images are consequently related to the unfolding of history. How do natural images function in Zhang Yimou's film? (feel free to include any of the natural images you saw in the other clips on Tuesday).
2. Zhang Yimou's complicated plot constantly asks the viewer to ask which story is real and which a fabrication. How many of these stories are there and what other symbols can we find in Zhang's film that highlight the tension between illusion and reality? Finally, how are we to interpret Zhang's elaborate layering of fiction and reality, truth and deception?
3. Robert Eng ponders the question whether Zhang Yimou's movie is a "Paeon to Authoritarianism." What case does he make for arguing that it is a Paeon to authoritarianism, what case does he make against it? Apart from the question of authoritarianism, Eng also mentions how Zhang has been accused of turning from being an independent "artist" to a craftsman who pawns to commercial tastes. How does Eng connect an argument against the first (authoritarian charge against Zhang) to an argument

about the second (commercialism charge against Zhang)? Do you agree with Eng about the nature of Zhang Yimou's film or not?

#### **WEEK FOUR: FORTY-SEVEN RONIN, PART I**

1. The first six acts of the tale of the 47 ronin are filled with moments of coincidence, near occurrences, things that almost, but not quite, but then eventually still did happen. How do chance and fate operate in these scenes? Why is there a need for such coincidences?
2. The title of the play is "Kanadehon Chushingura," which literally means the "Character Practicing Book of Loyal Retainers." The implication is that the tale sets an example to be followed. What role do imitation, emulation, mimicry, and repetition play in the tale?
3. In the case of Sima Qian's assassins, we came across a host of figures who exchanged their lives for values they believed in. In Act 5 and 6, we once again see a whole series of exchanges. Can you create an economy of these exchanges? What is exchanged for what and why?
4. The text you read was originally written as a puppet play. How would a live performance change the experience of the text? Make sure you find specific moments in the text that illustrate these changes.
5. The "Chushingura" was one of the most popular Japanese plays in the eighteenth (and nineteenth) century. Why do you think the play was so popular during this time? Be sure to use elements both from the actual play as well as Ikegami's discussion.

#### **WEEK FIVE: FORTY-SEVEN RONIN, PART II**

1. The *Chushingura* clearly upholds the samurai and their spirit of sacrifice as a model for others to follow. To what degree and in what particular ways can other members of the community follow the samurai's example?
2. In Act 7, we see a constant play between surface meanings and deeper-held values. How many different levels and how many different forms of such quote-unquote deceit can we unravel in this scene?
3. In the play, and in particular Act 8, natural surroundings no longer appear to us as neutral surroundings. Instead places and natural surroundings become highly meaningful. How does this transformation work and what does it allow the author to do?
4. The text you read was originally written as a puppet play. How would a live performance change the experience of the text? Make sure you find specific moments in the text that illustrate these changes.

## **WEEK SIX: BUFFALO BILL, PART I**

1. In the story of his life, Buffalo Bill uses a variety of ways to draw in the reader and make him part of his community. Which methods and metaphors does he employ as a writer? What kind of community does he imagine, who are its members, who are not, and what are the rules of this community?
2. In his essay, Slotkin gives us a sense of how Buffalo Bill's Wild West functioned not only as a printed text, but also as a live spectacle. How do you imagine some of the differences between the text of the autobiography and the show?
3. Throughout the tale of his life, Buffalo Bill uses a host of wildly colorful names. How does Buffalo Bill use names and what functions do these names have?
4. In his essay on Buffalo Bill, Slotkin refers to the theme of survival of the fittest. By using the autobiography, explain how the theme of survival of the fittest is tied to Bill's notions of, for instance, race or capital? How does this theme of survival of the fittest lead to different kinds of contest? What are the rules of the games he plays and what is the effect of it being defined as a game?

## **WEEK SEVEN: BUFFALO BILL, PART II**

1. In the case of Chushingura, I asked you about the role of imitation and emulation in terms of the samurai. Here I will ask you about the role of imitation again. What role does imitation play in this movie, who imitates what and why. When is imitation good and when is it bad? How does race figure in the play of imitation in this film (here take Richard Abel's fictions of assimilation into consideration)? Finally, you might also (or instead) want to consider the readings from Buffalo Bill's autobiography in which imitation plays a role.
2. We have discussed the notion of illusion a couple of times by now. If we include into our discussion of illusion the role of technology and spectacle, what role does technology play in this film vis-a-vis authenticity? How are spectacle and technology related, both in the film and thinking about Kirsten Whissel (and less so Abel), how can we think about film itself as a medium of spectacle? Finally, if film is spectacle, what devices can be used to make this spectacle authentic and make history real?

## **WEEK EIGHT: YOJIMBO**

1. Yoshimoto's article does two things: he establishes some of the conventions of the "samurai film" before Kurosawa and then introduces ways in which Kurosawa changed some of these conventions in *The Seven Samurai*. How does Yojimbo rewrite the

*jidaigeki* clichés and can any of those rewritings be attributed to influence from either western films or gangster novels?

2. Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* is based a hard-boiled gangster/detective novel. What elements of the tale strike you as typical for a tale of gangsters and how are those elements incorporated into the genre of the samurai film?
3. Yoshimoto argues that Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* is highly realistic. At the same time, he also argues very hard that it is not necessarily a factual recounting of history. How does he make this argument, and how would the notion of realism and history apply to *Yojimbo*?
4. Both Yoshimoto and Yoshioka argue that the category of "samurai" is inappropriate, why do they argue this, and given that *Yojimbo* is based on a gangster novel and heavily influenced by Westerns, to what degree do you feel Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* is a samurai movie?

#### **WEEK NINE: A FISTFUL OF DOLLARS**

1. Clearly "A Fistful of Dollars" is more than simply inspired by "Yojimbo." How does Frayling, who obviously is a fan of Leone, deal with the derivative nature of "A Fistful of Dollars," and how is this defense tied to the defense of the derivative nature of the "Spaghetti Western" in general?
2. Frayling offers a few nice close-readings where he compares a scene from *Yojimbo* with the same scene as shot by Leone (for instance, the first moment of action where Mifune and Eastwood strike down the three, no four, fellows). Choose another such moment in the film, present a similar analysis (i.e. pay attention to the particular shots used by the director, not just the structure of the narrative), and most importantly, analyze how this changes the characters, the plot, motivation, moral coding of the film.
3. In translating "Yojimbo" to "A Fistful of Dollars," Leone changed a whole list of items. What are some of these items? Which items had to be changed as a result of the change in genre, which items were changed for other reasons?

#### **WEEK TEN: ONCE UPON A TIME IN AMERICA AND CHINA**

1. According to Hector Rodriguez, what different roles does the "festival" play in the Huang Feihong films? How does it mediate popular versus elite, regional versus national, legitimate entertainment and illegitimate violence? Can film be compared to a festival in certain ways?
2. Both Hector Rodriguez and Stephen Teo discuss the notion of the regional (local), the national, and the international (either in terms of diasporic, international, or transnational

terms). How do they use these terms differently, what aspects of film-making do they focus on to define these terms, and how do they imagine the different tensions between these different levels of political identity?

3. Explain Tan See Kam's notions of sinicist belligerence and melancholia in your own words and how do these terms help explain the notion of diasporic and national identity?

### **WEEK ELEVEN: BRUCE LEE AND FIST OF FURY**

In *Fist of Fury*, "teacher" (Huo Yuanjia) plays a crucial role even though he is not ever shown directly on screen. How is the teacher given presence on screen, how do you think his absence/presence works to create tension in the story? How do the various characters deal with the absence/presence of the father, in particular Bruce Lee, and how does his inability to cope with the loss of the father lead to his further character development. Finally, how does this absent/present father figure link to the theme of melancholia discussed in Tan See Kam's article on Chinese Diasporic Imaginations?

### **WEEK THIRTEEN: SHOGUN**

1. Do you get the sense that Clavell adores Japan, is horrified by Japan, or is an objective observer? What do you think may have prompted Clavell to write about Japan in this way, what cultural factors do you think allowed a reading audience to appreciate Japan in this way in the seventies and a viewing audience (of the mini-series) in the eighties?
2. Clavell uses a variety of different "voices" to give the reader a sense of what Japan was "really" like. How many different registers of writing can you distinguish, what kind of information does each voice provide, and how do they function to draw the reader in? Is there a potential tension between these different versions?
3. In the style of Clavell, write a brief passage of a samurai being ship-wrecked in the Wild West.
4. How does rumor and myth work in Clavell's writing and is there any sense in Clavell that his own work might function as yet another form of myth-making?