

Jonathan Huoi Xung Lee



Jonathan H. X. Lee is currently a doctoral student in Religious Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara; his fields of interest and research are East Asian Religions, and American Religions: the Chinese Diaspora. He is also a project photographer and archivist for the Religious Pluralism in Southern California Project, and he is the author of several forthcoming articles on religion in Chinese and Vietnamese-American communities.

I will share with you my encounters with material culture as a student and as a graduate student instructor (GSI) in a classroom. There is tremendous potential in using material culture as a pedagogical instrument for teaching religion at the university level. This fact has been made real to me as an undergraduate, as a graduate student, and as a graduate student instructor.

While an MA student at the Graduate Theological Union (GTU), I was fortunate enough to be a graduate student instructor at the University of California, Berkeley in Asian-American Studies. In my first year teaching in Asian-American History, I brought in Ansel Adams's *Born Free and Equal*, a collection of his photographs depicting Japanese Americans in their daily life at Manzanar. I mentioned to my students that the book, published amidst wartime prejudice against Japanese Americans, received a negative reaction and was burned in public displays of anti-Japanese sentiment. In addition, I presented replicas of government documents ordering the internment of Japanese Americans, e.g. Executive Order 9066 and Civilian Exclusion Order No. 108, and I presented photo-postcards produced by Roger Shimomura, a Japanese-American artist who depicted his memories and representations of life in the camps.



My students engaged with the artifacts at once. They may have known the facts of internment, but these documents and images gave those historical facts an immediate reality. Through the artifacts, we were transported back in time and beyond the confines of our real surroundings. History was not in the past; it was in our classroom. I had wanted to provide students with tools to negotiate the past with the present, to provide them with a way to synthesize textbook information with lecture and discussion, and it worked.

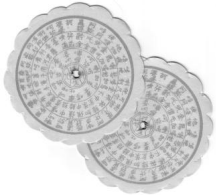
After this lesson, I took my students on a field trip to the Berkeley Buddhist Church on Channing Way, to show physical cultural changes and adaptation in Japanese Buddhism in America after World War II. I recall they were all “super-shocked” to find that the interior of the church looked exactly like a Protestant church, except that there was an image of the Buddha on the main altar instead of Jesus. The architectural display and traditional images in the Berkeley Buddhist Church provided me with a compelling narrative space in which to explain the role of Japanese Buddhism in the construction of Japanese-American community and in the (re)configurations of a Japanese-American identity.

While at GTU, I was often asked to lecture on Chinese ancestral veneration. Sometimes I offered to present a slideshow lecture on Chinese popular religion to provide my classmates with a way to experience the syncretistic expression of Chinese popular religion in Chinese culture. In my show-and-tell, I presented paper [funerary] goods, gold and silver spirit money, hell dollars, incense, ritual divination blocks, along with pictures of their use, all of which I passed around for everyone to examine. The Christian seminarians told me appreciatively that the slide show and artifacts gave them a better understanding of ancestral veneration, because it provided them a way of imagining it in fuller details in their own minds. The syncretistic nature of Chinese popular religion is difficult to teach because it is full of contradictions and tensions, but this unique tendency is expressed in religious rituals and is manifest in the material expression of cultural artifacts. One can see the syncretic elements working together in practical harmony.

The last experience I want to share with you concerns the impact of using material culture in my current academic research and studies. While at the GTU, Professors Nakasone and Yee took our class to San Francisco Chinatown to visit several temples. Because I have a long standing interest in the Chinese sea goddess widely known as Tianhou, or “the Empress of Heaven,” and I had heard that there was a Tianhou Temple in Chinatown, I asked Professor Yee to take us there. The temple was amazing. The smell of incense, the display of offerings, the multicolored shrines, the lanterns covering the entire ceiling, the images of Tianhou, Guanyin, and other deities, and the crowdedness of the room, all compelled us to ask questions. Why are there red lanterns covering the ceiling? Why is the image so dark? Who is this? Why are there so many images of Guanyin? Why does Guanyin have a mustache in this picture? Why? Why? Why? This was an example of active, three-dimensional, fully sensorial, experiential learning at its best.

This temple provided a truly unique, engaging, and powerful learning tool on both historical and contemporary Chinese religious life. Professor Yee explained the symbolic use of architectural space and how it communicates Chinese religious, philosophical, social, and moral values. We all gained invaluable insight that day at the Tianhou Temple. I came out of the experience with more questions than answers. These questions fueled my ongoing research interests, including

a project documenting the contemporary life of the Tianhou Temple. In the process of doing fieldwork at the Tianhou Temple, I discovered there was a second temple in San Francisco dedicated to Tianhou, who is also worshiped under an affectionate Taiwanese epithet, Mazu. Hence I started researching the Mazu Temple U.S.A., located several blocks away. It became the topic of my now-completed master's thesis, but I feel that I have only just begun to appreciate the temple's riches.



Using material culture as a pedagogical tool will be a key element in my future teaching. I have collected several artifacts in my travels: ritual implements, icons and other examples of religious art, pictures and videos of temples and monasteries, and clothing, in addition to taking many pictures of people engaged in rituals and worship. In Taiwan, I bought a paper model of a Walkman, and I collected temple booklets and merit cards; in Hong Kong I bought a pair of divination blocks and bamboo worshiping strips in a bamboo canister, with the thought of illustrating their use in a future classroom. In Cambodia, I bought a Theravada saffron robe with a begging bowl, and in Thailand, I bought a pictorial representation of the life of the Buddha. I continue to collect religious-cultural artifacts as I travel, but one need not travel abroad to buy these things, especially in California where ethnic communities thrive.

Teaching religion and learning religion requires more than memorizing facts about beliefs from a textbook. Images from art, material examples of religious rituals and other expressive practices — all provide important experiences in teaching and learning about religion as a lived experience. Religion is practiced. And I believe that the importance and sophistication of practice can only be fully taught and learned through the incorporation of material culture into the religious studies classroom.

Resources

Adams, Ansel. *Born Free and Equal: The Story of Loyal Japanese Americans, Manzanar Relocation Center, Inyo County, California* . Spotted Dog Press, 2002.