

Religion and Film and Hong Kong

RLG290Y LEC3001 (Summer 2025)

Professor Ken Derry

University of Toronto Summer Abroad Program

COURSE INSTRUCTOR

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Class meetings: Monday to Thursday 9:00–10:30am (ish)
Office Hours: After class meetings Monday to Thursday

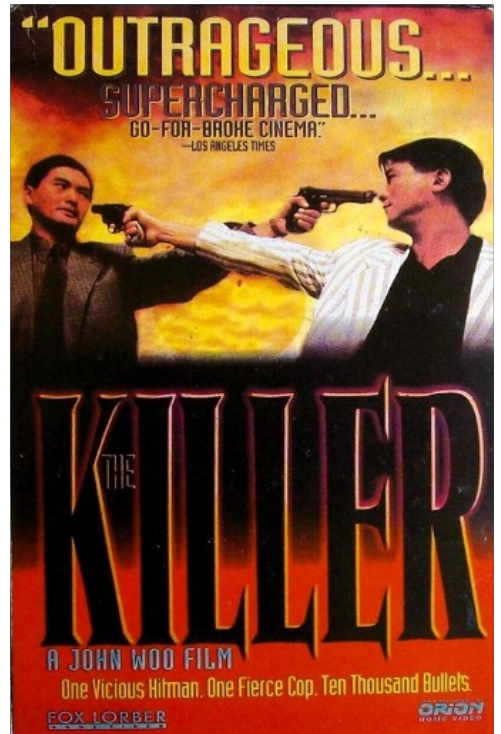
WELCOME!

Welcome to RLG290Y! I hope you enjoy the course and find it interesting — and at least a little bit surprising.

My name is Dr. Ken Derry. I've been teaching with the Summer Abroad program since 2012 and it's one of the things I enjoy most about my job at UofT. This syllabus contains crucial information about the course you will need. Please read it! (Please!)

If you ever need help, or want to talk about course ideas, or just feel like saying hi, please don't hesitate to speak with me. We can talk after class during office hours, or you can make an appointment to see me.

I look forward to a great course together!



SUPPORT AND ACCOMMODATION

All of us face many challenges in our lives, some more than most. These can involve family issues, financial pressures, or ongoing problems with our physical or mental health. Throughout this course I will do my best to support you in whatever ways you need. I encourage you to contact me if you have questions or require any kind of help. I'm not going to judge you or think less of you in any way. I hope that you will extend the same consideration to me as we struggle together.

Please note!!

- When you ask for help, you do not owe me any personal information at all, whatever your circumstances. This includes information about your health (mental or physical).
- That said, you are always welcome to talk to me about whatever you may be going through, if you want to do this.
- If I am unable help you for whatever reason, I will likely know someone who can.

Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. If you have a disability/health consideration that may require accommodations, please contact the instructor and/or [Accessibility Services](#) as soon as possible. There are also many UofT student services that can assist you, including your college registrar's office and/or dean of students' office, [Student Life](#), and the [Health and Wellness Centre](#).



COURSE DESCRIPTION

For decades, Hong Kong had the third-largest film industry in the world. Hong Kong productions, particularly action movies, have had an incredible impact on world cinema. This course will offer a unique look at Hong Kong films through the lens of the academic study of religion. We will start by showing how several different theories of religion – such as rites of passage, or conceptions of the “sacred” – can be used to understand popular Hollywood movies like *Mean Girls*. We will then apply these theories to half a dozen popular and influential Hong Kong films. Whether you are new to Hong Kong cinema or you are a long-time fan, this course will show you a new way to think about these amazing movies!

CONTENT WARNING

At times this term we will be watching and discussing violent films that may be quite upsetting to some students. If you suspect that specific material is likely to be emotionally challenging for you, you are always welcome to discuss the issue with me at any time. I also encourage you to speak to a counsellor if you think this would be helpful, whether you arrange this privately or make an appointment with someone at the UofT [Health and Wellness Centre](#).

HOW THIS COURSE WORKS

This course is entirely online. Everything you need will be available through the course Quercus site:

- Daily checklists
- Daily class meetings (the Zoom link will be posted in Quercus)
- Recorded lecture videos (as you’ll see, these are different from the daily class meetings)
- All important announcements
- Assignment instructions and submission
- Assignment feedback and grades
- Links to course readings, videos, and other resources
- Term tests

Class meetings are run by me (Ken) and are for all students in RLG101H. **Attendance is mandatory.**

Recorded lectures vs. class meetings: The recorded lectures on Quercus will offer detailed explanations of key points from the readings. The class meetings will repeat some of these points, but the main idea of the meetings is to *apply* ideas from the readings to the films. We will think together about their meaning and application, and you can ask questions. **Please note that attendance at EVERY online class meeting is MANDATORY in the Summer Abroad program.**

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REQUIRED READINGS AND FILMS

All required readings for this course will be provided to you electronically through Quercus. You must also **watch a total of 10 films**. All films and main readings are listed in the Course Schedule below. You can watch several movies free online, but you may have to pay a fee for some. The first three films we discuss are Hollywood productions, to give you practice using theories of religion to understand movies. The next seven films are Hong Kong features of various genres made between 1989 and 2024.

On average you will be asked to read about 30 pages of academic material each class for the first two weeks. You may find some of the material challenging in different ways. **These are the main texts for the course, and it is crucial that you understand them.** I strongly encourage you to read (and re-read!) closely and carefully, taking notes as you go, identifying the key ideas that each text discusses and considering how these ideas relate to the films we are watching. The readings should leave you with many questions, which I hope that you will raise in class. Remember that I am here to help you understand all the material!

In week 3 of the course, we will talk about the history of Hong Kong, including film and religion. For the final week of the course, all students will give one group presentations on a Hong Kong film you have chosen from the list in the Course Schedule. Details on how and when to make your choice will be sent to you in a course announcement through Quercus.

When watching each film, make notes on anything that happens that seems interesting (or confusing) to you for any reason at all. These notes will help you remember key points of the movie, and connect it to the ideas about religion you are learning. You should also do your best to indicate the approximate TIME in the film when something happens that you noted. This will help you later: if you need to go back and re-watch something, you can find it easily. One reason it's important to make these notes is that you will be asked to write about each film on the term tests.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this course, students should be able to:

- Summarize and present key information about the history of Hong Kong, and the history of Hong Kong cinema;
- Summarize, interpret, present, and critically evaluate several arguments, assumptions, abstract concepts, methodologies, and theoretical approaches related to the study of religion;
- Critically apply several theories, concepts, and methods within the study of religion to a variety of films, including Hong Kong films;
- Explain how ostensibly “non-religious” materials can be understood in arguably “religious” terms;
- Formulate coherent lines of argument;
- Express information, arguments, and analyses accurately and with clarity in writing;
- Explain various methodological and theoretical reasons for uncertainty, ambiguity and limits to knowledge within the study of religion and film.



GRADING REQUIREMENTS

The grading requirements for RLG290Y are as follows:

1. Class participation	10%
2. Online participation	10%
3. Critical reflection (due June 26; optional 2nd attempt due July 5)	10%
4. Test 1 (June 19)	10%
5. Test 2 (July 3)	10%
6. Group presentation (June 30 / July 1 / July 2).....	20%
7. Final project (July 10)	30%

1. Online participation (10%)

You are invited to contribute 10 comments (of at least 125 words each) to the course discussion forum. Specific topics will be indicated. **Comments are due by 11:59pm on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday each week.** These are not formal writing exercises. I encourage you to write in the manner you are most comfortable, and to speak your mind. In other words, **write what you really think** (really!), and use your own writing “voice” to do it. Comments may begin a discussion or reply to someone else’s post. The point is to offer your own perspective on the course materials, or to raise a question (related to the course materials) that interests you.

You will not be graded on the content of your submissions; as long as you have offered a reasonable contribution you will receive one point for each comment (up to a possible total of ten points). You will have 12 opportunities to submit a comment, but you only need to do ten to receive full marks.

2. Class participation (10%)

Class participation is based on your contributions to our daily zoom discussions. These contributions may be verbal (if you use your mic) or through the chat (you never have to use your mic if you don’t want to). Please see the section on **class attendance** below for penalties to your participation mark if you are not fully present during class time.

3. Critical reflection (10%)

For this assignment, you will be required to identify and reflect on at least one thing you learned in this course that you found particularly interesting or meaningful. After receiving your grade you may choose to submit a revised version of this reflection. The final mark you receive on this assignment will be the higher of the two reflection grades.

5. Test 1 (10%)

This test will cover all course materials (readings, films, discussions, recorded lectures) from the first two weeks of the course. It will take place online through Quercus.

6. Test 2 (10%)

This test will cover all course materials (readings, films, discussions, recorded lectures) from the last two weeks of the course. It will take place online through Quercus.

7. Group presentation (20%)

You will put yourself into a group by selecting one of the six Hong Kong films we discuss during the final week of the course. Each group will present over zoom **information** about their film, and an **analysis** of it.

8. Final project (20%)

This assignment may be done individually or as a group. You must create a website that provides an overview of the Hong Kong film you presented to the class. Your overview must take into account the instructor’s feedback on your group presentation. Once again your work must be comprised of both **information** (supported by documentation) and **analysis** (supported by data and reasoned argument).

CLASS ATTENDANCE

Attending EVERY daily zoom class meeting is **mandatory** in a Summer Abroad course. If you miss even one class, I am required to report your absence to Woodsworth College. **If you miss more than one class without a documented reason, Woodsworth may remove you from the course.**

To be counted as “present,” you must be logged into the zoom meeting the entire time. You must also respond to all **zoom polls** that I post during each meeting. If you need to step away from your computer for a few minutes, send me a message immediately when you leave and then let me know when you are back.

As much as possible, **I ask that you put your camera on during class discussions** at least some of the time, as I have found this helps us better connect with one another. However, I do understand that some people may have good reasons for not using their camera. If that’s the case, **send me an email stating that you will not be using your camera** (you do not have to tell me why).

You will not receive marks for class attendance. But you will lose one class participation mark for each class meeting when:

- You are more than 10 minutes late logging in.
- You log out before the class ends.
- You do not respond to all of the zoom polls.
- You do not put your camera on (and you have not emailed me about this).

LATE ASSIGNMENTS

The main reason for having late penalties is to provide you with incentive to complete your work on schedule. If you fall behind in your course work, that can create all kinds of other problems for you, especially in an intensive four-week course.

Here are the late penalties for RLG290Y:

- Your reflection will be penalized 1 mark (out of 10) per day late.
- Your final group project will be penalized 1 mark (out of 30) per day late. The project will not be accepted at all if it is more than seven days late.
- No online participation comments will be accepted late. You have 12 chances to submit 10 comments, so if you miss two of them you can still potentially get 10/10 on these.
- If you do not appear for your group presentation, and you do not have an acceptable documented reason for your absence, you will receive a grade of zero.
- If you miss a test, and you do not have an acceptable documented reason for this, you will receive a grade of zero.

What to do if you are struggling to complete your **reflection** or your **final group project** by the deadline: **If you need help or more time, please [send me an email](#).** I promise to work with you and support you. Send this email within a week of the deadline, so that we can do our best to get everything sorted out as quickly as possible.





RE-GRADING

If you have any questions about a grade on an assignment, or you do not think that the grade reflects the academic quality of your work, I encourage you to contact me to discuss your concerns. You are also welcome to ask me to re-mark the assignment. You must submit this request to me by email **within four days** of receiving the grade. Your request must clearly explain why you think the grade should be higher. In your explanation, please make specific reference to the assignment grading rubric and instructions, and address my written comments on your work.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

All assignments must be submitted through the course Quercus site. Normally, students will be required to submit their assignments to UofT's plagiarism detection tool for a review of textual similarity and detection of possible plagiarism. In doing so, students will allow their work to be included as source documents in the tool's reference database, where they will be used solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism. The terms that apply to the University's use of this tool are described on the [Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation](#) web site. Students who do not wish to submit their assignments to the plagiarism detection tool must email the course instructor at least one week before the assignment deadline.

Academic integrity is essential to the pursuit of learning and scholarship in a university, and to ensuring that a degree from UofT is a strong signal of each student's individual academic achievement. As a result, the University treats cases of cheating and plagiarism very seriously. The University of Toronto's [Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters](#) outlines the behaviours that constitute academic dishonesty and the processes for addressing academic offences. Potential academic offences include, but are not limited to:

- Accessing unauthorized resources (search engines, chat rooms, Reddit, etc.) for assessments.
- Using any source (e.g., a website) without identifying that source using approved methods of citation.
- Working collaboratively with others on assessments that are expected to be completed individually.
- **Using generative AI** (e.g., chatGPT) for any part of any assignment, including research and writing.

All suspected cases of academic dishonesty will be investigated following procedures outlined in the [Code](#). If you have questions or concerns about what constitutes appropriate academic behaviour or appropriate research and citation methods, you are expected to seek out information on academic integrity from your instructor or from other [institutional resources](#).

Citations: A critical part of academic work is correctly identifying the sources of all information you provide, as well as the sources of any ideas that are not your own. If you neglect to provide required citations, or the citations you do provide are incorrect, **you may end up with a grade of 0 on your assignment**.

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GRADE DEFINITIONS

These are the official grade definitions of the University of Toronto Mississauga. Student work in RLG101H will be assessed in accordance with these standards.

Percentage	Letter Grade	Grade Definition	
90-100	A+	Excellent	Strong evidence of original thinking; good organization; capacity to analyze and synthesize; superior grasp of subject matter with sound critical evaluations; evidence of extensive knowledge base.
85-89	A		
80-84	A-		
77-79	B+	Good	Evidence of grasp of subject matter, some evidence of critical capacity and analytic ability; reasonable understanding of relevant issues; evidence of familiarity with literature.
73-76	B		
70-72	B-		
67-69	C+	Adequate	Student who is profiting from his/her university experience; understanding of the subject matter; ability to develop solutions to simple problems in the material.
63-66	C		
60-62	C-		
57-59	D+	Marginal	Some evidence of familiarity with subject matter and some evidence that critical and analytic skills have been developed.
53-56	D		
50-52	D-		
0-49	F	Inadequate	Little evidence of even superficial understanding of subject matter; weakness in critical and analytic skills; with limited or irrelevant use of literature.

WRITING SUPPORT

There is a lot of writing support available to you at UofT! Here are some key sources of help:

- The main [UofT writing support website](#)
- [College writing centres](#)
- [Writing advice](#)
- ["How Not to Plagiarize"](#) and other advice on documentation and methods of integrating sources
- [Writing Plus workshops](#), a campus-wide series of academic skills workshops
- [English Language Learning program \(ELL\)](#), for students whose first language is not English and as well as native English speakers seeking to improve their language ability

COMMUNICATION POLICY

Aside from class discussions, the primary way in which I will communicate course information to you will be through emails and announcements sent through the course Quercus site. **All students are therefore responsible for checking their UofT (@mail.utoronto) email address on a regular and frequent basis.**

When you send an email to me, please do so **ONLY** through Quercus or your @mail.utoronto.ca address. Emails can be used to send along information and opinions and to ask **simple, quick questions**. You can usually expect a reply from me within **two**



business days. I may check email on weekends occasionally, but I also reserve the right not to do so. Once in a while, I try to do things that are *not* related to teaching. ☺

If you want to discuss any of the course materials or assignments in detail, please do so **in person** with me. You are welcome to speak to me after class during office hours. You are also always welcome to make an appointment with me (just send me an email).

RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

I believe that every person involved in a course — students, instructors, and TAs — has the right to certain expectations in a university course. Usually the most successful classes are those in which **we respect each other, and understand our mutual responsibilities.**

One of our most important collective responsibilities is to create a space that is inclusive and welcomes discussion. **Discrimination, harassment, and hate speech will not be tolerated.** If you have any questions, comments, or concerns please immediately alert someone who can provide you with assistance. For further information on this policy, please see the official [UofT Statement on Equity, Diversity, and Excellence](#).

In addition to the above points, please consider the following “manifesto” for all of us in RLG290Y:

- We have the responsibility for sharing in and contributing to the learning process;
- We have the right to voice an opinion that is based on a self-chosen value system;
- We have the right to dissent or differ from the instructor, TAs, and from others in class;
- We have the right to a course environment that is free from hostility or intimidation;
- We have the right to a curriculum that is inclusive of race, class, gender, and sexual identity.



COURSE SCHEDULE

Date	Topic	Readings
June 9	Introduction	Reading: course syllabus Film: For the Birds (2000) – 3 min; rating: G
June 10	Christ-figures	Reading: Baugh, <i>Imaging the Divine</i> (excerpt) Film: Iron Man (2008) – 126 min; rating: PG-13
June 11	Superheroes	Reading: Jewett and Lawrence, <i>Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil</i> (excerpt) Film: Iron Man (2008) – 126 min; rating: PG-13
June 12	Society and the sacred	Reading: Paden, “As Society, So Religion” Film: Mean Girls (2004) – 97 min; rating: PG-13
June 16	Rites of passage	Reading: Grimes, <i>Deeply into the Bone</i> (excerpt) Film: Mean Girls (2004) – 97 min; rating: PG-13
June 17	Myth + Parable	Reading: Crossan, “The Ways of Story” Film: Moana (2016) – 107 min; rating: PG
June 18	Boundaries	Reading: Prince, “Dread, Taboo, and the Thing” Film: Moana (2016) – 107 min; rating: PG
June 19	Review + Test	No readings or films
June 23	History of HK	Reading: Wikipedia, “ History of Hong Kong ” Video: “ History of Hong Kong ”
June 24	Religion in HK	Reading: Wikipedia, “ Religion in Hong Kong ”
June 25	HK film	Reading: Wikipedia, “ Cinema of Hong Kong ” Video:
June 26	Guest filmmaker!	Film: 29 + 1 (2017) – 111 min; no rating Assignment: Critical Reflection due
June 30	Presentations	Films: 1. The Killer (1989) – 111 min; rating: R 2. The Heroic Trio (1993) – 88 min; rating: R
July 1	Presentations	Films: 1. Chungking Express (1994) – 102 min; rating: PG-13 2. Shaolin Soccer (2001) – 87 min; rating: PG-13
July 2	Presentations	Films: 1. Better Days (2019) – 135 min; no rating 2. Twilight of the Warriors: Walled In (2024) – 126 min; rating: R
July 3	Review + Test	No readings or films