Engaging a "Truly Foreign" Language and Culture: China through Chinese film

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In foreign language educational circles, languages such as French, German, and Spanish have been called "cognate" languages to English because of commonalities in their grammar, vocabulary, and writing systems. Conversely, languages such as Chinese Japanese, Korean, and Arabic have been called "truly foreign" for the American learner. Similarly, the Foreign Service Institute calls Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Arabic "Level IV" languages, with "Level I" (French, Italian, Spanish, etc.) being the easiest to learn and "Level IV" the hardest. ²

One level of challenge is that of the linguistic code itself. The English "I love you" is "Ich liebe dich" in German, "Je t'aime" in French, and "Te amo" in Spanish, all of which are relatively easy for the American student to learn to say and use, given the familiarity of the Latin alphabet. The Chinese version, "我爱你", is rather more impenetrable for the American learner. The difficulty is only partially mitigated by the provision of pinyin—a romanization system that indicates the pronunciation of characters. Thus, "我愛你" rendered in pinyin as "Wô ài nî" becomes a little less "foreign." However, the real challenge lies not at the level of the linguistic code, but at the level of deeper cultural meaning. Whereas "I love you" generally elicits a positive reaction in the West—ideally a response in kind from the love object and perhaps a sympathetic "awww" from bystanders—it would not be improbable for "我愛你" to draw a response of nausea from a Chinese audience, both from the intended recipient of the message and from third parties, something along the lines of "Ugh, that makes my skin crawl, my flesh creep" ("真肉麻"). In the Chinese context, the more circumspect "I LIKE you" ("我喜歡你") has all of the emotive power of "I love you." It indicates not an absence of passion or depth of feeling, but the presence of restraint through erudition and selfcultivation.

A scene from US-educated Taiwanese director Ang Lee's 1994 film Eat Drink Man Woman is illustrative. The elderly male lead, Chef Chu, bids goodbye to his much younger wife (both are Chinese; she is his daughter's best friend), as he leaves for the day. In romantic, modern (Western-inspired) fashion, she whispers to him, "我愛 你。" He says nothing to her in response, but merely smiles at her tolerantly and lovingly, and the scene ends. Arguably, the audience—at least the Asian audience, and with luck the Western audience as well-is to understand that, in this brief scene, each has expressed deep and abiding affection and acceptance of the other, in spite of their significant differences in age and therefore personal culture. The storyline has already established that cooking for and eating together with loved ones is the primary way Chef Chu expresses his devotion to his family. In fact, the film celebrates the primacy of food in Chinese culture. What need is there for words? Her action, on the other hand, foregrounds changes in Chinese society, and the influence of foreign (primarily Western) practices and ideas, including the outright expression, in words, of inner thoughts. Ultimately, the film can be read as an optimistic prediction that Chinese values can co-exist with changing cultures, and a blended society can indeed thrive.

The yawning gap between American and Chinese linguistic codes can potentially be bridged to a degree through the medium of film, because there is widespread familiarity with filmic language. Furthermore, film provides an opening to engage with Chinese culture, at the same time that bits of information about the linguistic code are being conveyed.

The United States College Board has published the following description about culture in its World Languages Framework, an outline of learning objectives focusing on foreign languages and culture:

Cultural perspectives underlie the ways in which people use languages for communication, and the patterns of behavior and products of a society; therefore, the (c)ulture standards demonstrate the interaction of perspectives, practices, and products. A language curriculum oriented to the standards integrates these aspects of culture throughout, as they are pertinent to communicating effectively within the culture and understanding cultural phenomena "from the inside."³

The word "culture" is commonly understood by educators and language specialists as "big-C" (or "civilizations") culture. It includes, for example, historical facts, philosophic concepts, and achievements in literature, music, theater, and the healing arts. Language specialists also pay attention to "small-c" culture, such as preparing ethnic foods like jiaozi (meat and vegetable dumplings), celebrating Chinese New Year, and learning Chinese crafts and martial arts. "Small-c" culture also focuses more particularly on the attitudes and perspectives that underlie social traditions. Attitudes and perspectives determine what, when, how, and to whom one speaks, how one holds oneself, what one does when and to whom, what one wears, how one lives, what decisions one makes for one's life course, etc. Becoming educated in a foreign language and about a foreign culture requires a level of control and understanding of the attitudes and perspectives of that culture, both to interpret the motivations of the interlocutor and to determine how best one should behave in that cultural environment.

We might proceed from the premise that something can be learned from every film produced by the target culture. This depends in part on one's approach to the viewing of the film. The distinction between extensive and intensive viewing is useful here. When we learn to read a written text in a foreign language, we can read it either *extensively* (reading quickly, for breadth) or *intensively* (reading closely, for depth). The same approaches can be applied to the viewing of films.

Extensive viewing is no challenge to the *YouTube* generation, who consume media as whales take in seawater—with familiarity, ease, and naturalness, in large volume, retaining only what they like and expelling the rest. Extensive viewing can involve the screening and viewing of entire films in class. Alternatively, students can be assigned to find and view specific films on their own time, or they can be encour-

aged to make their own selections within certain parameters. Follow-up might involve writing critiques, engaging in organized discussions, or producing a creative work as a response.

Take, for example, a "big-C" culture theme from Chinese history, such as the life of China's First Emperor, Ying Zheng, king of the state of Qin, the largest of the seven states of the region at the time. In 221 BCE, he finally vanquished the last of his adversaries, unified the region, and proclaimed the start of imperial China under his autocratic regime. The empire he founded lasted over two thousand years, although his own rule barely survived fourteen years. Students can obtain a glimpse of this turbulent, pivotal period in Chinese history from Chinese film. A class might prepare for such viewings by reading two excerpts from The Records of the Grand Historian, penned in the first century BCE by the court historian Sima Qian of the Han dynasty4. The first excerpt is the biography of Qin Shihuang in the Basic Annals section; the second, from the Memoirs section, is the famous tale of Jing Ke, who lost his life in a heroic but futile attempt to assassinate Ying Zheng. These accounts present the transmitted historical narrative in broad strokes. With this basic story as their point of departure, the students might be assigned to view one or all of the following three outstanding films, each of which interprets the Qin Shihuang legend, employing different approaches and highlighting different aspects of the story. The Emperor's Shadow (1996) by director Zhou Xiaowen focuses on the emotional life of the future emperor. He is portrayed as a man whose actions and impulses fill the screen with carnage during his ascension to absolute power, but who also harbors deep and hopeless human longings for the love and happiness of a daughter and a childhood friend. The Emperor and the Assassin (1993) by director Chen Kaige takes up the theme of courtly intrigue and the ruthlessness of the king of Qin. Hero (2002) by the director Zhang Yimou is an elegiac film that focuses on the motivation behind repeated assassination attempts against Ying Zheng. Hero explores the philosophic question of whether a noble end (unification of the empire and an end to constant warfare) justifies the sacrifice of individual lives.

A useful assignment is to divide the class into three groups and have each group view and present a critique of the film to the other students. Such a discussion offers new insights into how Chinese perceive their own past. Members of the two-thirds of the class that had not viewed two of the films under discussion may well find their interest piqued enough to watch what they had missed on their own time, thus enhancing the effects of an extensive viewing. Each film's recreation of ancient China, and the presentation of the extant myths and legends about the larger than life figure of the First Emperor in filmic narrative, offers the students a rich storehouse of information that is difficult to obtain in such relatively painless fashion from other sources. Film provides access to authentic material (produced by native speakers for native speakers) in a form that non-native speakers can access, with the assistance of the relatively minor encumbrance of subtitles.

Another theme that is explored in several films, in spite of continuing censorship by the Peoples Republic of China Film Bureau, concerns more recent events—the turmoil suffered during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). Two major works: To Live (1994) by Zhang Yimou and Farewell My Concubine (1993) by Chen Kaige, are sprawling epics that include damning depictions of the events of the Cultural Revolution—its suppression of traditional theatre and the rise of revolutionary opera, the harrowing forced, public "self-criticism" sessions that led to multiple suicides, and the general anarchy that is represented in a Red Guard-operated hospital where the doctors have all been imprisoned for "crimes against the people." The Blue Kite (1993) by Tian Zhuangzhuang is more low-key and less sensationalist—an exploration of the effects of the times on a woman, her three husbands (who all fall victim to political persecution), and her young son. Xiuxiu, the Sent-down Girl, (1998) directed by Joan Chen, explores the fate of a teenager from an intellectual family exiled to a life of herding in the wilderness of southwestern China. Jiang Wen's In the Heat of the Sun (1994) takes a different tack. It portrays the lives of adolescents left behind in the city by parents deported to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution. The children roam the streets because the schools have been closed. These films of the 1990s depict the experiences of members of the Chinese intellectual elite—the group that arguably suffered the most during that turbulent decade.

For a very different view of the Cultural Revolution, Breaking with Old Ideas (1975) by Li Wenhua is an official "propaganda" film that extols the ideals of the Chinese socialist revolution—ad nauseam. A twenty- to forty-minute excerpt is sufficient to convey the film's main lessons: socialist education must be practical, and must serve the

laboring masses; elitist tendencies must be struggled against relentlessly. Not that the film is without its rewards in terms of both insight and entertainment: there is a sardonically comic scene in which a professor drones on about "the function of a horse's tail." However, his students in the rural community that he serves have made it very clear they are not interested in horses—their livelihood comes from raising cows. One might draw a parallel to the US university classroom, in which spaced-out students text-message each other while the professor "covers" irrelevant topics that only he finds important and meaningful.

Chinese film offers endless opportunities for the extensive exploration of contemporary social issues. The challenge of educating China's rural majority is depicted in Zhang Yimou's Not One Less (1999). The beginnings of the "rule of law," and the philosophic challenges that this growth poses to traditional community-based mores, is considered in The Story of Qiu Ju (1992), also by the prolific director Zhang Yimou. The inherent absurdity of budding consumerism in a farming village is the focus in Ermo (1994) by Zhou Xiaowen. The hardships experienced by marginalized individuals in China's new, ruthlessly capitalistic urban centers are explored in Sun Zhou's Breaking the Silence (2000) and Zhang Yimou's Happy Times (2000). Blind Shaft (2003), by Li Yang, exposes the harshness of life and resultant amorality in life-choices among workers in the myriad illegal coal mines that feed China's voracious appetite for energy. Wang Xiaoshuai's The Drifters (2003) explores the mindset that motivates young, coastal Chinese to entrust their lives to racketeers, who promise them a new life, albeit illegal, in affluent cities in the U.S. and Canada.

Of course, students can tire of the relentless downbeat storylines of this socially responsible, "serious" cinema. Outside China, Chinese films are most popularly identified with the martial arts, such as kungfu and "bullet ballet" thrillers from Hong Kong. These films are primarily forms of commercial entertainment (like Hollywood, the Hong Kong movie industry has a primary focus on box office receipts), but they too can be instructive about traditional Chinese culture. The good generally win, or at least they die nobly and admirably; although the foregrounding of fraternal bonds of loyalty to comrades and community stands in marked contrast to the lone hero of such Western genre equivalents as action thrillers and westerns. Chinese movies

emphasize fraternal bonding and highlight harmonious relations within a group (family, school, work-unit)—a principal goal in the socialization of individuals from childhood onwards. These films offer a useful contrast to the theme of "To thy own self be true" that is more commonly encountered in the West.

Perspectives and attitudes—small "c" culture—can also be fruitfully examined through an intensive, rather than extensive, consideration of Chinese film. Zhang Yimou's To Live (1994) illustrates a fundamental principle of the Chinese perspective on life—that the individual exists within a web of interconnections, to membership of the family, the community, and the nation, just as they belong to the ebb and flow of fortune, of past, present, and future. To Live focuses primarily on two individuals, a husband (Fugui) and wife (Jiazhen) whose lives began in the early Republican period, when they were members of a large, wealthy, land-owning family. As the story develops, the nation falls into the civil war between the Republicans and Communists, which leads to the eventual victory of communism. Fugui and Jiazhen survive the process that forces them to reject a "bourgeois" past and embrace a proletarian future. However, in losing their family fortune they come to realize that, in this new world, the loss of material possessions is their good fortune. They live through the rigors of the Great Leap Forward and the tragedy of the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath. In this story-driven plot, the external context—personages, events, institutions are writ large, and the individuals, writ small. Their characters are not explored in any particular depth, and this has the effect of representing them as the "everyman" and "everywoman" of that period in Chinese history. Life brings them some modest highs, and some very deep lows, and through it all they personify the Chinese ideal of acceptance—that they can always make the best of life's vicissitudes. After all, if individuals are nodes in a massive, interconnected mesh. it serves the whole better if the parts do not agitate for specific needs and wants. To the degree that the whole is stable and harmonious, each of the parts attains peace and happiness as well.

An intensive consideration of film can also focus on a few selected scenes. Take, for example, how several brief scenes from *To Live* can be used to make a fundamental point about how the Chinese view the relationship between a husband and wife.

What constitutes happiness within the basic unit of family life? An early scene in To Live is telling. It is morning, and Fugui has returned home after yet another night of gambling. His dissolution is wasting away the family wealth. In the couple's spare but well-appointed bedroom, an elegantly attired Jiazhen wipes away a tear, gently urging her husband to give up gambling: "I want nothing more than a quiet life with you," she says. The lighting is flat and even, the camera is placed at a right angle to the couple, at eye level, in a medium shot. Besides sparse conversation, there is only silence. Fugui grunts, tries half-heartedly to pacify his wife, and falls asleep. The scene presents an overlay of normalcy—of low voices, placid faces, gentle movements, and a mise-en-scene that is markedly understated. On the other hand, we know that deep emotions of anxiety and resentment lie beneath the surface. Chiaroscuro lighting, an oblique angle of approach, either high or low camera angles, and emotive background music might have introduced perceptibly heightened level of emotion to this scene, but heightened emotions are unwanted. Happiness, in this Chinese context, is the absence of extreme emotion. Thus, it is more reliably represented in the use of flat lighting, through more conventional camera placement, and through Jiazhen's calm appeal for "a quiet life" with Fugui.

But Fugui's world falls apart as a result of his actions. He loses his family's wealth, his father dies in a fit of rage, and Jiazhen leaves with the couple's daughter. Fugui has to learn to survive as a pauper, caring for an aged and ailing mother. He endures a wretched winter. With the coming of spring, Jiazhen returns, bringing their daughter and a son who was born to the couple during their period of separation. In the scene in which they meet again, their smiles and the light in their eyes are the sole indications of joy at their reunion. They don't touch, and there are no verbal expressions of love. In a later scene, this time in impoverished surroundings, the lighting is low, and the camera is again at a right angle to Jiazhen and Fugui. They talk together in bed, in low voices, under their quilt. It is a medium-long shot; there is again silence except for a few quietly spoken words. Jianzhen, now poor but presumably happier (and reconciled to her new situation), repeats her earlier assertion: "I want nothing more than a quiet life with you."

The final scene in the film, after many dramatic and distressing upheavals, is a return to this quiet life: in another medium-long shot under flat, even lighting, the aging Jiazhen and Fugui prepare to eat a simple meal of noodles for their lunch. There is no conversation at all; the theme music of the film plays over the end credits. This is what serves for a happy ending in this deeply philosophic, self-reflective film.

By contrast, a scene from Zhou Xiaowen's Ermo illustrates how incongruous a Western desire for passion and excitement is, given the Chinese worldview. Ermo is an uneducated, presumably illiterate woman from a remote village in China's vast hinterland. She makes noodles to sell in town, hawking her goods with a vendor call that is incorporated into the film's signature tune. With the penetration of the modern world into China's rural hinterland, she decides she must buy a television set larger than that of her neighbor. Her quest takes her to a department store in the nearest city, to gawk at the sets displayed there. In two telling scenes, an American production has been dubbed into Chinese. One features a Caucasian couple. The man is lying on the woman. They are kissing passionately. The next scene shows the same couple in the shower, from the shoulders up. In between kisses, the woman says, "I want to be happy, really happy," to which her paramour replies, "Really? Then let's start now," and he kisses her with even greater passion. The department store audience giggles in embarrassment, while Ermo asks: "Why are the foreigners speaking Chinese?" Her response points at the gulf between the cultures involved: not only are the linguistic codes conspicuously different, even the action depicted is incomprehensible in this Chinese context. What does kissing have to do with happiness, anyway?

Ermo is a comedy, and urban Chinese audiences laugh uproariously at the protagonist's lack of understanding. But the underlying message of the film and its ending are not comic. Ermo experiments with Western-style consumerism and romantic passion (in an illicit affair), but ultimately she is physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually depleted. By the time the film ends, she stares lifelessly at a television screen that offers nothing but snow. The station has signed off. Happiness, the film suggests, lies in more old-fashioned ideals: communal harmony and simple daily tasks such as making noodles to sell in town. The haunting notes of Ermo's old vendor call, playing over the end credits, are a summons, like a muezzin's call to prayer.

Digging for the bedrock message in a film provides the greatest pay-off, but smaller bits of information are worth seeking out as well. How does conflict play itself out in Chinese society, for example? One sequence in *To Live* is informative.

I play a clip for my advanced Chinese language class, beginning with the point at which Fengxia—the mute, teenage daughter of Fugui and Jiazhen-steps outside her home into the alleyway, and bends over a wheelbarrow. A small group of neighborhood toughs, maybe eight years old, have fun at her expense by shooting small stones at her rump with a handmade slingshot. She grimaces in pain, but otherwise cannot protest. In the distance and out of sight, Fengxia's younger brother, Youqing, hears the boys laughing and the pellets pinging, and divines the situation. He rushes to his sister's defense, but is quickly overwhelmed. The following scene is set in the outdoor communal canteen, typical of the Great Leap Forward (a time when cooking utensils were collected to smelt into iron ore). Scores of neighbors are gathered over bowls of noodles for supper. Youqing orders a big bowl brimming over with noodles, spoons a large amount of hot chili pepper sauce over it, threads his way past his own family to where the chief tormentor of Fengxia sits, puts the bowl on a nearby table, moves a chair behind the bully, steps up on the chair, picks up the bowl of hot noodles and carefully tips it over the bully's close-shaven head. The boy starts bawling. His father leaps up and glares at Youqing, who stands silently in place with his arms by his sides. At this point I pause the film, and ask the students to write down their predictions of what the boy's father will say, and how the scene might proceed.

Typically, my students imagine something like the following scenario unfold:

Bully's father: What the hell??? How could you do something like this? You bastard, I'll break your bones!

Youqing: He started it! He shot stones at my sister; he was trying to hurt her. Go punish him!

Bully's father: I don't believe you, you little jerk! My son didn't do anything. It's your fault, and you're not going to get away with it. I'll show you what happens when you tangle with my boy.

Youqing: Dad!

Fugui: Don't you dare lay a hand on my son... everyone knows your kid is the neighborhood troublemaker. He must have done something to provoke this...

(The two men face off and come to blows. Neighbors pull them apart, but a feud between the two families has begun.) This prediction derives from an American sense of justice, with appropriate reward or punishment meted out for individual action. When I resume the film, my students are surprised at how the scene actually plays itself out, which is roughly as follows:

Bully's father: Youqing! How could you! Look at this mess, and all this hot sauce. If it gets in his eyes... it could cost his life! Who came up with this nonsense? Jiazhen! Fugui! Can't you control this kid of yours?

Fugui (placatingly): Fights between children, let's not bring adults into it. Neither Jiazhen nor I knew...

Bully's father: Who knows whether you knew or not? I don't believe a kid could come up with a prank like this. Who taught him what to do! He disturbed the peace of a communal dining hall. When you disturb the peace of a communal dining hall, you're striking a blow against the Great Leap Forward!

(Youqing has made his way back to his family, and sits silently next to his mother. Fugui is standing. Jiazhen and Fengxia sit silently, downcast, stricken.)

Fugui: Youqing! What did you do! Go apologize, and say you were wrong!

Youqing: I won't! Fugui: Go apologize! Youqing: I won't!

Fugui: I'll tell you one more time, go apologize! Now,

will you go?

Youging: I won't!

(Fugui takes off a shoe [made of cloth, with a hard sole], grabs up Youqing and starts beating him. He gets in several hard blows before Jiazhen and neighbors pull him away.)

Fugui: Don't hold me back! I'm going to beat him to death! (Scene ends.)

(Next scene: in the front room of the family's modest home. Jiazhen and Fugui are arguing.)

Jiazhen: How could you have beat Youqing like that!

Fugui: That guy said he was making a disturbance in the communal dining hall. I beat him for disobeying me, for causing trouble.

Jiazhen: Who was that guy? Was he the government? You can't just hit Youqing. Look at yourself. I couldn't even hold you back!

Fugui: You spoil him. You'll bring ruin on this family. If he does it again, I'll beat him again!

(Jiazhen goes out and drags Youqing into the room. He stands him in front of Fugui.)

Jiazhen: Go ahead, beat him here, in front of me.

(Fugui sits in sullen silence. Youqing stands silently.)

Jiazhen: Is Youqing your own flesh and blood, or some bastard child? Would I let this family go to ruin? The boys were bullying Fengxia. Youqing was only trying to defend her.

(Fugui looks downcast. He goes over to Youqing and tries to caress him.)

Fugui: Let Father make it better...

(Youqing flings his father's arm off. Fengxia enters the room with a tray and four bowls of noodles: two big ones that she sets up for her parents, and two small ones that she sets up for herself and her brother. She silently leads Youqing to sit with her.)

Jiazhen: Poor Fengxia; she gets bullied and can't even speak up for herself. Youqing adores her, and you heat him?

Fugui: Youqing, eat up. Afterwards, come hear my shadow-puppet performance, okay?

Jiazhen: (teasingly) No, Youqing doesn't want to go to any miserable shadow-puppet show.

(Fugui laughs.)

Next scene: At the puppet show, Jiazhen conspires with Youqing to offer Fugui a bowl of tea laced with vinegar and chili sauce. Fugui falls for the prank, chokes, and spits up the tea, then pretends to chase after the giggling Youqing while the whole community laughs uproariously.

This scene chronicles a dispute from inception to reconciliation. It depicts consideration of greater issues than personal joy and anger. The family's need to co-exist in the community takes precedence in Fugui's mind, over his imperative to do justice by his son. When he beat Youqing publicly, the community's sense of right and wrong is

satisfied. The family retreats to lick its wounds in private. Youqing is young, and has not yet learned to accept injustice in life. His mother caters to his needs. In conspiring with him against his father, she obtains a measure of justice for him for the beating he endured. His older sister on the other hand, symbolically mute, expresses no resentment against those who bully her. Having learned to accept her fate, she is characteristically sunny, both in this scene and throughout the film. She is representative of the millions who have suffered and have no voice to complain. It is left to her longsuffering mother to shed a tear on her behalf. The scene, and the movie as a whole, is a sympathetic narrative depicting the necessity and ability of the Chinese individual—and by extension the nation—to endure suffering, sometimes seemingly unbearable suffering, and to survive graciously in spite of it.

There are many scenes (see *Ermo* and Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* [1987], for example), in which disputes between two individuals do not remain private affairs, but quickly involve others as intermediaries. The point is that individuals are not just individuals; more importantly, they are members of units larger than themselves—they are sons, mothers, brothers, and neighbors. It is the maintenance of harmonious relationships among them that takes precedence over an individual's sense of what is just or unjust.

Intensive viewing of selected clips can allow a focus on many of the details of small "c" culture: how people greet each other and take leave; how they thank others and offer apologies; how much physical space is maintained between individuals who are conversing; and how they express affection, pleasure, and displeasure. A catalogue documenting these interactions is too large an endeavor to accomplish in this essay.

In summary, filmic language is universal, and can be used in the classroom to teach students about other cultures and to facilitate communication between audiences who otherwise do not share the same linguistic code. More importantly, film is an important and effective tool for students who are attempting to navigate the uncharted universe of a "truly foreign" culture.

FILMOGRAPHY

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ See Eleanor H. Jorden and A. Ronald Walton, "Truly Foreign Languages: Instructional Challenges," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* Vol. 490 No. 1 (1987): pp. 110-124.
- ² See table "Expected Levels of Speaking Proficiency in Languages Taught at the Foreign Service Institute" in Judith E. Liskin-Gasparro, ETS Oral Proficiency Testing Manual (Princeton, N.J.: Educational Testing Service, 1982).
- ³ World Languages Framework (2007). http://www.collegeboard.com
- ⁴ See Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian: Qin*, Translated by Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).