China Through the Lens: Teaching Chinese Language and Culture Through Film

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Abstract

Foreign language (FL) acquisition requires not only the development of target language skills, but also a cultural understanding of the region and its people. While this article addresses the development of an advanced Chinese language and culture course using film, the principles illustrated can be adapted for use in other advanced-level FL courses. Teaching language and culture using authentic film materials provides students with a variety of pedagogical learning opportunities. It not only encourages students to immerse themselves in the authentic language and culture of the area, but also motivates them to research the historical, political, and societal aspects of the period. This learning process stimulates critical thinking skills, requires students to compare and contrast the familiar with the unfamiliar, and enhances language and culture proficiencies through the use of the target language.

Key words: *Language, Culture, Film, Instructional Methodologies, Motivation*

Background

Foreign language (FL) acquisition requires not only the development of enhanced linguistic skills, but also a cultural understanding of the target language region. This includes a recognition of the historical, political, and societal issues that have influenced and shaped the country. Studies have shown that traditional textbook-centric advanced-level FL instructional methodologies may not be as effective in stimulating student language learning motivation or in enhancing their cultural awareness as other forms of media (Bien, 2011; Chen, A. M., 2009; Kitajima & Lyman-Hager, 1998; Sundquist, 2010). As Kern (2008) suggests, traditional textbook-derived classroom activities tend to "validate students' personal experience and provide language practice, but do little to expand students' understanding of things outside of their own cultural world" (p. 369).

To overcome these perceived limitations, FL instructors may experiment with a variety of media, from music to literature to film. Through these resources, students may be immersed in the language and culture of the target language region and in the values, perspectives, and motivations of its people (Hughes & LeLoup, 2018; Zhang, L., 2011; Zhang, P., 2013). This article introduces FL instructors to a creative alternative to textbook-only second language acquisition instructional methodologies.

Film can be an effective instrument to reach a new generation of language learners (Bueno, 2009; Chen, A. M., 2009; Garn, 2012; Harrison, 2009; Sturm, 2012;

Zhang, L., 2011). Since the advent of the Video Age, visual learning has come to be considered more conducive to the new generation of language learners (Altman, 1989). Film not only provides students with authentic FL and foreign culture interactions, it also offers students a vivid visual introduction to cultural and historical backgrounds with which they may be unfamiliar (Bien, 2011; Bueno, 2009; Garn, 2012; Sturm, 2012; Sundquist, 2010). The visual and verbal contextual cues not only deepen their understanding of the culture, but also broaden their vocabulary and increase their listening comprehension and verbal communication skills (Bien, 2011). Through the use of authentic target language films, students are provided with a multidimensional language teaching tool that infuses a distinct cultural and historical background into the language learning process (Garn, 2012; Zhang, L., 2011). Furthermore, film introduces the students to a variety of language levels, regional dialects, and colloquialisms, and provides them with visual cues to augment the language comprehension process (Sturm, 2012). Finally, the use of film in the classroom enables FL instructors to create an entertaining, fun, and captivating student-centered learning environment, as well as to promote challenging language learning opportunities that encourage students to engage in critical thinking and reflection (Chen, L., 2011; Diaz, 2016).

The use of film and film segments in the classroom enables instructors to address the twin goals of advanced FL learning. The first goal–increasing students' FL skill proficiencies in reading, writing, listening and speaking–is facilitated by exposing students to authentic language usage. The second goal–enhancing students' cultural awareness–is achieved by introducing films that verbally and visually depict the reality of target region society and culture during various historical eras, as well as illustrate the social and political influences during the period that led to change (Bien, 2011; Bueno, 2009; Dema & Moeller, 2012; Zhang, L., 2011).

"China through the lens" is designed for advanced (fourth-year) Chinese language students or those with equivalent proficiencies. In it, students gain an understanding of the Chinese societal perspectives unique to each film, which provides them with historical context and cultural insight, and they have an opportunity to experience authentic language usage within the defined parameters of the movie. Authentic film materials also provide students with a more in-depth awareness of how China's social, economic, and political developments have impacted the lives of its people (Kramsch, 2004). By employing cinematic images to bolster vocabulary, readings, and classroom discussions, students gain a more significant insight into the fundamental essence that is China (Wood, 1995). Rather than simply learning a language, students are introduced to the cultural, historical, and societal dynamics that have enabled China to endure for over 5,000 years. To effectively communicate in Chinese, learning the fundamentals of the language is half the battle; understanding the culture and history behind the language is the other half (ACTFL, 2015; Diaz, 2016).

Literature Review

Many second language research studies have found that teaching FL and culture through film is an efficient and effective method to enhance language and culture competence (Bueno, 2009; Ning, 2009; Sturm, 2012; Zhang, D. & Yu, 2008). Chen (2009) suggests that students are better able to wholly acquire language skills

by employing the contextual clues derived from video. Kramsch (2004) posits that "if…language is seen as social practice, culture becomes the very core of language teaching. Cultural awareness must then be viewed both as enabling language proficiency and as being the outcome of reflection on language proficiency" (p. 8). Kitajima and Lyman-Hager (1998) suggest that film can play a valuable role in the language learning process by helping students grasp primary themes, discern the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary, and expand their linguistic range by assessing and applying the situational context. They also propose that films and film segments can serve "as an advance organizer for language learning activities" (p. 40). In addition, Harrison (2009) argues that the groundwork for developing cultural competence can be nurtured by the intensive study of FL films in the classroom because it places the language in context, provides students with more in-depth understanding of critical periods of time within the target nation's history, increases the desire to participate in study abroad programs, and may even generate interest in further study of the target language.

Film provides a unique link to the target language and culture because it is visual, it is authentic, it is readily available, and because to students in the digital age, accustomed as they are to a multimedia environment, it is extremely attractive (Sturm, 2012). Wood (1995) contends that the key characteristic of films is that they visually and verbally depict reality. Films can therefore "focus student attention more powerfully than other texts" so they "can be part of the process of leading students to a discernment of cultural reality" while "raising a viewer's sense of linguistic and paralinguistic authenticity" (pp. 13-15). Kitajima & Lyman-Hager (1998) suggest that "theoretical and applied linguistics lend strong support for video as a provider of cultural, social and linguistic data sources in which the importance of context is all pervasive" (p. 44). Sundquist (2010) maintains that FL courses taught using film might actually enable language learners to "move beyond the subject matter covered in their textbooks to gain insight into intercultural similarities and differences" (p. 130). According to Zoreda (2005), popular culture is a unique by-product of its society. "In the particular case of film, society sees a reflection of its image-identity on screen, and subsequently, film continually shapes that collective identity" (p. 63). Garn (2012) also suggests that "advanced 'content' courses in the language, specifically, cinema and language courses…provide a unique window onto another culture that will help our students enormously in their motivation, knowledge, and language proficiency" (p. 40). Furthermore, Ning (2009) suggests that "The yawning gap between American and Chinese linguistic codes can potentially be bridged to a degree through the medium of film, because there is a widespread familiarity with filmic language" (p. 29).

"Language competence cannot develop without cultural competence," suggests L. Zhang (2011, p. 202). Unfortunately, she notes, "Chinese culture instruction in the language classroom tends to center on Chinese products and their origins – such as moon cakes, red envelopes, and festivals – that do not delve into a deeper layer of Chinese ways of thinking or their mentality, values, and ideology" (p. 204). And Dema and Moeller (2012) argue that by expanding "the definition of culture to include how a specific culture behaves and interacts" instructors are able to better focus the teaching of culture in classrooms on the "underlying values, attitudes, and beliefs, rather than simply learning about cultural products and practices" (p. 79).

Chen points out that "[a]nother issue language instructors face is that language itself does not exist in a vacuum; there are cultural factors, social norms and expressions as well as all the varied nuances of meaning and structure"(Chen, A. M., 2009, p. 2). Zhang (2011) further suggests that the authenticity of spoken discourse and the rich visual and cultural elements from film clips are essential for teaching cultural perspectives. The study of FL films in the classroom can provide easier access to second language and culture acquisition and enhance students' confidence in their ability to learn the language (Kitajima & Lyman-Hager, 1998; Kramsch, 2004; Sundquist, 2010; Wood, 1995).

Course Development

There are several important stages for planning and executing the film course. The first key element is to determine the content and theme of the course being developed. The second step is to clearly define the target audience and the requisite language proficiency required. The next important step in the process is the selection of language- and culture-appropriate films for use in the course. The final aspect of planning the course is developing appropriate target language assignments, such as reading and translating film synopses; pondering and writing reflective essays; researching, preparing, and delivering individual or group oral presentations; discussing the film with the instructor and classmates; and actually watching and listening to the movie.

Rationale for Content-Based Instruction

Using a content-based instructional (CBI) approach, which is well-supported by second language acquisition research, was the first decision made for the course (Cammarata, 2009; Channa & Soomro, 2015; Corrales & Maloof, 2011; Heinz, 2010; Kong, 2009). "Rather than concentrate on decontextualized language bits and pieces, a focus on cultural content–specifically historical and political occurrences" (Hughes & LeLoup, 2018, p. 46) as represented in the films of each period– was determined (Abrudan, 2016; Heinz, 2010; Met, 1999; Rodgers, 2014; Stryker & Leaver, 1997). Hughes and LeLoup (2018) also suggest that theme-based courses are not only conceived to facilitate FL instruction but also tend to incorporate a theme around which the course curriculum is developed. Themes may be selected for a number of reasons, including their ability to contribute to the enhancement of the student's cultural and linguistic proficiency (ACTFL, 2015; Diaz, 2016; Heinz, 2010; Hughes & LeLoup, 2018; Kern, 2008). *"China through the lens"* is a language-driven (Channa & Soomro, 2015, p. 4) content-based cinematic curriculum that weaves a fascinating tapestry from essential elements of China's culture, history, society, and especially, language.

Film Selection

"*China through the lens*" is a student-centered advanced Chinese language and culture course, not a film or cinematography course. As such, the focus of the film selection is not on the cinematography, the music, the lighting, the camera angles, or the perspective of the filmmaker. Instead, the emphasis is on the authentic spoken discourse and the vivid visual and cultural contextual features associated with the

film that can enhance the students' language and culture learning process. Sturm (2012) and L. Zhang (2011) concur that movies in the classroom model authentic language discourse, introduce the target culture, and provide learners with the opportunity to communicate within a realistic context.

There are many methods for selecting representative films, including by genres, styles, chronological periods of time in Chinese history, country of origin (China, Hong Kong, or Taiwan, etc.), or by specific film makers or directors, among others. Regardless of the selection method employed, it is necessary to ensure that each film be representative of its time, and that it provide a clear connection between the film and the language and culture it represents. Some course developers prefer to focus on a single film for the entire semester (Bien, 2011; Harrison, 2009); others develop their courses using two or more films from a specific genre (Garn, 2012). This particular course is designed specifically for advanced (fourth-year) Chinese language students, including students with equivalent proficiencies. In developing the curriculum, the author selected six critically acclaimed films representative of specific historical periods of time, although that number may be adjusted based on institutional circumstances. The goal, however, is to make the most effective use of that time to give students exposure to the broad spectrum of authentic target language material available in each cinematic presentation.

Each selected film is chosen for its specific authentic discourse, unique dialogue, and method of using Mandarin, and each is evaluated with respect to its historical context and its influence on or description of the Chinese society and culture of the period. Because the course is an advanced FL class, it is essential to pay particular attention to the language in the film. As Bien (2011) suggests, "it should be in modern standard Chinese with a minimum of, if any, regional dialects;" and, "the situations in the film should be realistic, natural, and reveal something about Chinese society and behavior…" (p. 160). This will facilitate student comprehension of film-specific words, grammar patterns, and general dialogue, while at the same time introducing the students to the manner of speech employed during the timeframe depicted.

The genre of each film is also very important as it exposes students to a variety of film types, depicting different time periods, and employing different styles of filmmaking. Some films are biographical, while others may be comedies, dramas, or tragedies. Some films are contemporary, while others may focus attention on the cultural and societal aspects and traditions of ancient China. Some films may address the use or misuse of military power, while other films may focus on the uncertainties of love.

A brief description and selection rationale for each of the six films follows:

"*The Emperor and the Assassin*" (荆轲刺秦王) (Chen, K., 1998), was selected for this course because of its powerful portrayal of the historical conditions and the political intrigue surrounding the king's efforts to unite China and establish its first dynasty. Directed by Chen Kaige, a well-known 5th-generation Chinese filmmaker, this film provides students with important insights into a seminal moment in Chinese history–the conclusion of the Warring States period and the establishment of a united China. It also depicts the challenging circumstances of the times that resulted in significant sacrifice by both nobles and peasants and strained individual and na-

tional loyalties. Students gain insight into some of the difficult choices people were often forced to make that were sometimes in conflict with their individual value systems. Its vivid imagery also provides a rich tapestry of cultural and societal customs and traditions during the period, and the classical language usage, manner of speech, and abundant unfamiliar vocabulary offer numerous opportunities for student language growth and development. In addition, students were encouraged to critically examine the "Just War" concept, and draw conclusions as to the value of a unified China versus the maintenance of individual small kingdoms.

"Painted Skin" (画皮) (Chan, 2008) is based in part on the Pu Songling's Qing Dynasty classic short story of the same name (Pu, 2006), and was chosen because it exposes students to the importance of the vernacular literature of the period. Through this film, students are introduced to examples of Chinese fiction that deal with humans interacting with the supernatural, and the existence and mystical activities of gods, ghosts, spirits, and other creatures (Zeitlin, 1993). And, because the students have access to the original story in Chinese, as well as through an English translation, they are able to compare and contrast similarities and differences between the film and the written moral tales.

"Forever Enthralled" (梅兰芳) (Chen, K., 2008) introduces students to a another Chinese film genre, the biographic film, also directed by Chen Kaige, about the life of Mei Lanfang, the legendary Beijing Opera artist. The purpose for selecting this film was to expose the students to the Beijing Opera, the essence of historical Chinese art, and one of China's "national treasures" and most revered forms of artistic expression. The language employed in this film is also unique in that it incorporates a great deal of vocabulary and style and provides students with a descriptive understanding of this specific artistic form.

"The Assembly" (集结号) (Feng, 2007) provides students with an interesting, albeit, controversial perspective of both the Chinese Civil War and the Korean War. Students gain insight into Chinese military life by observing the hardships and sacrifices required of both soldiers and commoners during the period. They also gain a greater appreciation for the importance and significance of the role of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA), and are exposed to the language of revolutionary slogans of the era used to motivate both soldiers and citizenry.

"To Live" (活着) (Zhang, Y., 1994) gives students awareness of the life and death circumstances and conditions of ordinary Chinese people from 1945's Chinese Civil War to the Great Leap Forward, and on through the aftermath of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. It is also an excellent representation from the 5th-generation filmmaker, Zhang Yimou. During this portion of the course, students gain insight into the development of political movements during Mao's regime, and their impact on the lives of ordinary people. Students are also challenged to compare and contrast the way of life depicted in the movie with that of the United States during the same time periods. Focused on the travails of a specific family, students are exposed to intimate conversations discussing family circumstances, celebratory activities, tragic events, and political movements.

"If You are the One" (非诚勿扰) (Feng, 2008) introduces students to societal developments in modern-day China. This film uses Chinese humor and contemporary language to explore the gradual societal developments that have influenced

modern Chinese dating, love and marriage, and other associated societal phenomena during the 1990s. It also demonstrates to students how Chinese attitudes towards dating are changing, especially among the younger generation, and how that shift is influencing current Chinese societal norms. Students are encouraged to compare their own dating challenges and experiences with those portrayed on screen.

Curriculum Design and Course Delivery

The course curriculum is designed to help students make the connection between their language and culture learning processes and how changes in the political and societal environments may influence or facilitate developments in both the language and the culture. Throughout the semester, as students are introduced to each new film, they are provided with background information on the nature of the film, its directors, and actors. They are also introduced to various cinematic genres and their associated terminologies. Insight into the cultural and historical events associated with the film is also provided to broaden student awareness.

The course syllabus identifies the films to be studied, provides a short synopsis of each film in the target language, and includes a list of approximately 60 new vocabulary words, grammar patterns, and phrases that students are expected to learn on their own and to use in classroom discussions, presentations, and assessments. Students are also given on-line access to a university server from which to preview and review each film and film segment on their own time. The instructor may also provide additional input and insight into each film by employing personal experiences, news reports, and other resources to address the political, cultural, or historical circumstances that influenced each film's production. Throughout the course, and among all student and instructor interactions, emphasis was placed on the use of the target language at all times.

Many advanced FL film courses are created using textbooks specifically designed around a specific film, or around a specific film genre (Bien, 2011; Garn, 2012). While there are benefits that come with this approach, such as standardized language proficiency levels, vocabulary lists, culture notes and explanations, grammar and vocabulary exercises, and homework assignments, *"China through the lens"* was developed using the selected films as the primary source material. The advantage of this approach is that the language level can be adjusted to target the language proficiencies of the students in the class, vocabulary lists can be designed with specific film segment discourses and cultural illustrations in mind, and grammar, vocabulary, cultural assessments, and homework assignments can be addressed to buttress identified language learning concerns. More importantly, this student-centered approach encourages the instructor to engage in authentic target language discourse about the films' linguistic elements, cultural aspects, and political or societal activities that the students find interesting or where they desire greater insight and clarity.

As each new film is presented, the instructor describes the synopsis to the students in the target language. The students' initial challenge is to translate the written film synopsis from the target language to English. This assignment facilitates the identification and memorization of new lesson-specific vocabulary, demonstrates appropriate usage of new grammar patterns, and enables them to acquire a basic understanding of the film's setting, the primary characters, and the general storyline.

As class time is limited, with no more than six 53-minute class periods per film each semester, the students are instructed to watch the entire film on their own as homework, as well as to review the specific film segments that the instructor employs to address the primary language and culture learning objectives in each lesson.

The careful selection of these specific film segments is also an essential element of the advanced language course. Each segment must adequately represent the linguistic and cultural elements being introduced and later assessed. These segments should also highlight the appropriate historical and societal contexts to the students to enable them to better comprehend the storyline and the target language, as well as to gain a greater appreciation for the unique cultural characteristics of the period. For example, in "*To Live*," a segment is selected in which Fengxia was about to give birth to a baby. While in the hospital, she experienced difficulties, but because the experienced doctors had been sent to the re-education camps, Fengxia was attended to by Red Guards, students, and inexperienced medical interns, and she ultimately dies from a hemorrhage. This clip illustrates how although it was the educated class that was criticized and put down during the Cultural Revolution, the common people also suffered.

Some film course developers, such as L. Zhang (2011) and P. Zhang (2013), suggest limiting the length of each film segment used in class to no more than three minutes. However, in developing *"China through the lens,"* the author chose to create longer segments to more fully immerse the students in the authentic discourse of the period and in the rich visual and contextual aspects of the film that help to illustrate the specific cultural and historical elements being highlighted.

As each film segment is played, the students engage in active listening, seeking to comprehend the general storyline, identify new vocabulary and grammar points, and recognize the historical and cultural significance of the period. Students are also expected to discuss the overall film, as well as each selected film segment, with their instructor and their classmates in the target language. Altman (1989) advises instructors to be cognizant of student comprehension levels at all times, and to frequently assess those comprehension levels. In the process, students are challenged to stretch their target language comprehension levels somewhat beyond their limitations. These routine language assessments may require the instructor to stop after each film segment to explain certain language and culture elements on order provide greater insight and contextual clarity. Students are challenged to interact with their classmates and instructor in the target language, comprehend the conversation, and respond accordingly using the new ideas and concepts introduced in the lesson and reinforced during the assessments. Thus, their target language proficiency is gradually enhanced.

This assessment process is also a student-centered activity, requiring individual students to continually seek to progress from basic levels of language and culture knowledge, understanding, and application, to higher proficiency levels involving analysis, synthesis, and creativity (Zhang, P., 2013, p. 80). This proficiency development is assessed through oral and written assignments. For example, students are given an oral assignment to discuss, in a one-on-one setting with the instructor; topics such as 1940s China, the Chinese Civil War, The Great Leap Forward, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, weddings and other celebratory events during the period, or a comparison between US and China in the 1960s, among others. Students

choose their topic of interest and are encouraged to use the new vocabulary and sentence structure associated with each respective film. Each student will meet with the instructor for a 20-30 minute discussion block, and then follow up their discussion with a target language essay describing specific aspects of the depicted events in the film that most deeply affected or impressed them. They are assessed on accurate language usage, their expressed depth of understanding of the event described, and the critical thinking displayed as they apply the lessons learned to their own perspective and circumstances.

"China through the lens" encourages this proficiency development by requiring students to continually review basic lesson-specific vocabulary, grammar, culture, and content. In addition, students are required to use the target language to explain why characters act in certain ways or make specific decisions. They are invited to consider historical backgrounds, societal issues, and character motivations to ascertain meaning and arrive at conclusions. In addition, they are tasked with reflecting on each film, and expressing, through research presentations and essay composition, their thoughts and feelings on the film, the cultural understanding they gained, and what aspect of the film provided the greatest insight or caused them to consider how they might respond in similar circumstances.

Course Reflections

The key to encouraging effective research presentations is to give students just enough guidance to inspire their curiosity, and then allow them to explore their chosen research topic. Small groups (2-3 students) conduct research on each assigned target language film using one of the five or six instructor-provided topical prompts, or another approved topic of their own choosing. These student research projects cover a variety of thought-provoking topics. For example, suggested presentation topics for "*The Assembly*" include: an introduction of the Chinese military, the great movement to resist America and assist Korea from the Chinese perspective, the Korean War from the US perspective, modern Chinese war, including the Anti-Japanese War (WWII), the Sino-Vietnamese War, the Chinese Civil War, and an analysis of the development of the Chinese military. Other examples of student presentations from the movie, "*To Live*" (活着), include the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, a comparison of the types of weddings held during the period to those conducted in contemporary Chinese society, the popularity of Chinese puppet shows during the period, and the prevalence of gambling, opium-smoking, and other vices at that time. In addition, for each film, students are also assigned to compare and contrast the depicted Chinese cultural, social, and historical events and consequences with situations and events in the United States, thereby engaging in a critical thinking process designed to facilitate greater student understanding and awareness of societal developments in both cultures.

Student enthusiasm and motivation is very high, particularly when the group chooses their own topic. Each group prepares their topical research study, and each member of the group presents a portion of the study to their classmates using the target language. These presentations address the background of the film, its cultural and historical context, and the political and social issues evident during the period. Following each presentation, the group leads the class in a target language discussion

of their research and findings, responding to questions and comments from the class and the instructor. Through this process, students validate their language and culture proficiencies as they demonstrate a more in-depth understanding of the historical, political, and social constructs of period represented, and an awareness of why and how the people responded the way they did. These presentations frequently generate rather in-depth discussions about China and its growth and development, as well as about parallel or contrasting issues elsewhere in the world during the same time period.

The students' reflective essay assignments also displayed some very impressive Chinese language and culture learning. Students were assigned to write a short essay in the target language about which aspects of the movie most impressed them and how they felt the historical and political events of the time had influenced the people. This reflection opportunity enabled them to more fully internalize what they had learned. It also provided them the opportunity to employ the new vocabulary words and grammar patterns they had been exposed to, and encouraged them to stretch their language abilities to express their thoughts and feelings on paper.

A representative student reflection (观后感) of the movie, "*The Assembly*," *(*集结号*)* suggests (all comments in Chinese taken directly from individual student essays; all English translations by the author): "战争永远会是一个残酷的现实，但是《集结号》把战争的残忍描绘的十分感人" (Wars are forever the cruel reality; however, the movie, The Assembly, depicted the cruelties of the war in a very touching manner). He also notes that "有一些战争是不可避免的; 但是我们只能希望战争的结果可以大于战争的后果" (some wars may not be easily avoided; however, we only hope that the results can be more significant than the consequences). He continues his essay by acknowledging that "人的生命是很脆弱的，作为领导我不能把人的生命当作一个数据必须无条件的保护生命" (People's lives are fragile. As a leader, I cannot treat people's lives as a simple number, I must protect them unconditionally). He then concludes his assignment by expressing hope that "我希望我以后可以从多个角度考虑后果，选出最合理的方案" (in the future, I will consider issues from different angles and their impact, and make the most rational decisions).

Another representative student reflection about the film, "*If You are the One*," *(*非诚勿扰*)* proposes that "这部电影最大的亮点就是真实，贴切和不做作" (some of the biggest highlights of this movie were its authenticity, its appropriateness, and its unpretentiousness). This student also felt that "这部电影描述了中国社会当代上的一些新的问题" (this movie portrayed some new issues in contemporary China). For example, "越来越多的人在网上交友，婚外孕，和婚外恋" (more and more people using online dating, out of wedlock pregnancies, and extra marital affairs).

These examples of students' written reflections are typical of the language level and contemplative expression submitted by other students in the course, and demonstrate remarkable student insight and understanding of the films. They also display an impressive use of the target language to express their thoughts and ideas, and a cultural awareness of the events occurring within China that led to changes in the existing political and social structures of the times. The students were also able to employ excellent critical thinking skills to relate to each film's content, and to consider how the lessons and events observed may apply in their own lives. Mihaly

(2008) suggests that the opportunity to reflect on these cultural components actually strengthens student critical thinking skills. And Diaz (2016) points out that encouraging students to develop critical thinking skills is useful because it "is a competency that is transferable to other disciplines because the essence of the skill rests in how you approach an issue or problem, rather than something that is issue or problem-specific" (p. 439).

An additional interesting observation involved the students' response to the films themselves. Some students enjoyed the classical period films and the culture and history portrayed in them. Other students gravitated to the films about more contemporary life and love, and were able to relate very well to the situations depicted. However, almost all of the students appeared to be captivated by the war movies, and many commented on the fact that regardless of nationality, culture, or language, soldiers in every era fought, sacrificed, and even died for the greater good of their community and their nation, just as our soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines have done.

Finally, following each film, students are given a comprehensive graded assessment to evaluate the linguistic and cultural insights gained through the study of the film. This graded assessment, like other course assignments, is a two-part process comprised of both oral and written components. Students meet individually with the instructor and discuss the film's historical and cultural aspects, as well as which parts of the film most resonate with the student. Following the interview, students are given a multi-question target language exam (Appendix) in which they demonstrate critical thinking skills and elaborate on their impressions of the specific film, and compare and contrast elements of the film with their own societal and cultural experiences.

Conclusion

Harrison (2009) suggests that studying FLs through film encourages students to "learn to look at language as a vehicle instead of an obstacle, gaining more confidence in their language abilities: the film, therefore, becomes the gateway to language and culture" (p. 92). This film course has been taught three times and has received significant constructive feedback from the students each year. Students have expressed their enjoyment of the course, not only for their language improvement, but also for the cultural perspective it provided them. Students also found value in the authentic materials that led to their using listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills to understand and explain the storyline. The films reviewed also broadened their perspective and expanded their understanding of Chinese culture and civilization throughout the segmented historical periods of time that were studied. Their cultural presentations were a real highlight because they had the opportunity to research and summarize the background and topics of particular interest to them.

One of the major advantages of learning language and culture through film, according to course participants, is that students were able to rely on the vivid imagery and the actions of the characters to intelligently make sense contextually of the meaning of the plot. Although the students frequently struggled with understanding every word or every phrase in a film or in a film segment, they were able to employ the visual cues to follow the story and to better comprehend the language itself. Another advantage to using film is that the students can use their own time to watch the movie

again and again, individually, and as a group, to gain a better understanding of its nuances. They did note, however, that they recommend replacing "*Forever Enthralled*" (梅兰芳) with a more relatable contemporary film. "*Forever Enthralled*" was not well-received by students during the course, primarily because they found that the pervasive use of a strong Beijing accent made the language difficult to understand, and because of the artistic nature of the biographical film. Based on this feedback, a different film, *"Caught in the Web"* (搜索) (Chen, K., 2013), also directed by Chen Kaige, has been selected for inclusion in the next iteration of the course. This film, which deals with contemporary Chinese social and ethical considerations as the destructive effects of a viral video influences the characters' personal and professional lives, should be very interesting and relatable to fourth-year Chinese language students.

Student feedback also resulted in the development of a follow-on cinema course curriculum that focuses exclusively on contemporary Chinese films that are more reflective of current Chinese societal issues. Numerous students expressed interest in viewing and researching films depicting contemporary China so that the similarities and differences could be compared and contrasted with challenges young people face in the United States today.

These film courses are by no means simply a compendium of movie watching activities. They involve sophisticated research, the development of polished presentations, the study of more refined language structure and usage, the ability to succinctly summarize the film plot and storyline, and the application of critical thinking skills. In addition, they are taught entirely in the target language, require students to use all of their acquired FL listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills to process information, and then incorporate the new language concepts acquired into their daily language usage during discussions, presentations, and assessments.

Teaching FL and culture through film is a continual process of evaluation and refinement. The course itself does not generate a specific end-state, but rather becomes a valuable tool towards developing greater student cultural and linguistic proficiency and understanding.

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Appendix

电影"活着"观后测试题

姓名：

* 请自己单独做题，并正确表明参考资料的来源。请不要与他人交流。

一. 请用以下电影"活着"中的词组造句 （**15** 分）：

1. 怀疑：

2. 肯定：

3. 对付：

4. 总之：

5. 厉害：

二. 请翻译电影中的这些台词 （**30** 分）：

1. "按政策政府要分那院房。他不交，把那院房烧了，这不，成了反革命破坏。"

2. "十五年赶上英国，超过美国不在话下。"

3. "鸡长大了就变成了鹅；鹅长大了就变成了羊；羊长大了就变成了牛；牛以后呢？

    牛以后就是共产主义了。"

4. "你把礼物给他退回去。他的东西咱不要。"

5. "他是走资派。 昨天开了他的批评大会。"

6. "馒头长大了就不骑牛了，就坐火车，坐飞机。"

三. 请回答下列"活着"这个电影中的问题（**30分**）：

1. 很多人觉得这个电影令人悲伤难过。 你觉得呢？你最喜欢电影中的那一段？为什么？

2. 在这个电影中，龙二赌博赢了福贵的祖传宅子。后来他被枪毙了。为什么？

3. 福贵和家珍在大跃进时期的工作是什么？凤霞怎么成了哑巴了？

4. 医院的医生为什么没能挽救凤霞的生命？

5. 春生后来到福贵家要把他自己的钱都给福贵和家珍。为什么？他为什么想死？

四. 请根据电影"活着"中的历史背景，回答下列问题（**25分**）：

1. 2017年中国政府把抗日战争改成14年。这是为什么？

2. 请简单讲述一下中国解放战争的起因和结果。

3. 请简单陈述一下什么是"大跃进"和"文化大革命"？

4. 这个电影中的很重要的一部分是大跃进和文化大革命。

5. 请你试着比较一下60年代中国和美国的文化和政治运动。