

Ten Top Films for Teaching about China Today

Tanya Lee

AS it becomes increasingly essential to include China in the social studies curriculum, teachers are faced with the challenges of finding appropriate, high-quality resources, and, more fundamentally, of engaging students with a culture and a place far removed from their own.

Film and video can address both issues, and there is a wealth of resources available. I believe both feature (fictional) and documentary films can and should be used to help bring China to life in the classroom. Ashley Dugan, who teaches a Chinese literature class at Cascia Hall School in Tulsa, Oklahoma, uses film extensively. “Young people are responsive to film,” she says. “And when they identify with the characters in the films, the Chinese people cease being abstract and become individual human beings, like ourselves.”

Also, film is entertaining. “I personally find they want to know about the big world out there, as long as it is presented to them in an interesting way,” says Kim Fonder of Nimitz Middle School in Tulsa. “After they see a film, they want to know about Asia.”

The following recommendations come from my own experience as program director of the Asian Educational Media Service (AEMS) and editor of *AEMS News and Reviews*, a newsletter featuring film reviews specifically for educators. As I am not currently a classroom teacher, I also sought the advice of teachers around the country who use film in teaching about China.

China’s Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) is a period well suited to being illuminated by film. In addition to being critical for understanding the context of Chinese society today, an exploration of the Cultural Revolution is also an

opportunity to consider the nature of revolution, of ideological zealotry, and even of adolescent passions.

Zhang Yimou’s 1994 feature film *To Live* (Huo Zhe) is by far the most commonly used film to bring the Cultural Revolution and the tumultuous events of the Chinese Communist revolution to life—and with good reason. This classic follows the fates of one family from the 1940s to the 1980s, as they weather one round of revolution and change after another. Though their struggles and losses are heartrending, the film is not bleak, but speaks to the sheer will of ordinary people to survive, buoyed by a healthy sense of irony and even humor. “I love seeing my students, who whine at first about having to watch a film with English subtitles, laugh at jokes, cry at tragic events, and get wholly wrapped up in the lives of the characters,” says Erin Lynch, who teaches world history at Nathan Hale High School in Seattle.

Teachers may appreciate that this is a Chinese film, not an American interpretation of Chinese history (though it is important to note that it was banned in China for many years because of its portrayal of the Chinese government).

Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress (2002) is a semi-autobiographical film directed by Dai Sijie, based on his French-language novel by the same title, about two young intel-

lectuals sent to be “reeducated” in the countryside, who surreptitiously find ways to feed their passions for music and forbidden foreign literature.

Meredith Deaton, a teacher at Booker T. Washington in Tulsa with extensive experience working and traveling in East Asia, uses this film in her tenth- and eleventh-grade world literature class and finds it effective for helping students understand how a vast political and social movement like the Cultural Revolution can impact individual lives. She has her students compare the film with the novel and appreciates how the film “helps students picture the isolation and working conditions of exiles” during that period.

While using fictional works such as these can be enormously effective in stimulating empathy with survivors of the Cultural Revolution, a more analytical documentary can flesh out the context, and perhaps appeal to a different kind of learner. The best documentary film I have encountered on this topic is *Morning Sun*. Rather than providing a political history of the Cultural Revolution, the film is about the cultural and psychological influences on adolescents that led them to embrace the revolution and join the Red Guard. Rich use of historical footage of propaganda films and stage performances is overlaid with interviews with people who were teenagers at the time, and who are now able to reflect on their adolescent excesses and speculate about how they might have acted differently had they been born in a different era. Students today might ponder the same question.

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Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress. Directed by Dai Si Jie. 2002; Empire Pictures, 2005.

Children of China Series: (Directed by Andrew Fone and produced by Pearl River Productions, in Centerville, Mass.)
“Land of the Dragon,” 2006
“New Year in Ping Wei,” 2005
“One Day in Ping Wei,” 2004
“Return to Ping Wei,” 2007

China Blue. Directed by Micah X. Peled. Oley, Penn.: Bullfrog Films, 2005.

The Gate of Heavenly Peace. Directed by Carma Hinton and Richard Gordon. 1995; San Francisco, Calif.: Long Bow Group, 1996.

Morning Sun. Directed by Carma Hinton, Geremie R. Barme, Richard Gordon. 2003; San Francisco, Calif.: Long Bow Group, 2003.

Not One Less (Yige dou bu neng shao). Directed by Zhang Yimou. 1999; Culver City, Calif.: Columbia TriStar Home Video, 2000.

The Tank Man. Directed by Antony Thomas. 2006; Boston, Mass.: WBGH Educational Foundation, 2006. (Also available at www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tankman/view/)

To Live (Huo Zhe). Directed by Zhang Yimou. 1994; Santa Monica, Calif.: MGM Home Entertainment, 2003.

Two Million Minutes. Directed by Chad Heeter. 2007; Indianapolis, Ind.: Broken Pencil Productions, 2008.

Up the Yangtze. Directed by Yung Chang. 2008; New York, N.Y.: Zeitgeist Films, 2008.

The student democracy movement that exploded in the spring of 1989, and culminated in the confrontation at Tiananmen Square, is another seminal moment in recent Chinese history. Because open discussion of the event is still forbidden in China, unlike the Cultural Revolution, virtually all available media on the topic comes from non-Chinese sources.

The most comprehensive coverage of the 1989 student movement is the documentary film *The Gate of Heavenly Peace* (1996); it makes extensive use of film footage of the actual events and interviews with survivors. Diana Marston Wood, from the University of Pittsburgh, in her review for the AEMS newsletter, called it “simply one of the very best teaching tools I have ever used.” She said that it “drew students into a penetrating analysis of political change”—broadly, not just in China.

A more recent exploration of the incident, which focuses on the iconic photo of the young man who blocked a line of tanks, is the readily available PBS Frontline film *Tank Man*. But John Wells, a world history teacher at Broken Arrow High School in Broken Arrow, Oklahoma, cautions against using it alone. He found that the film’s strongly critical stance served to prejudice some students against China, since they lacked the balance of information on expanding freedoms and economic development since 1989. This is an important caveat on using any documentary or feature film: Does it provide enough balance and nuance to leave open the possibility for alternate interpretations?

In the twenty-first century, China’s economic growth has been the number-one story, and a wide range of films, particularly documentaries, explore the effects of these rapidly changing economic realities, with varying degrees of nuance.

China Blue is one of my favorites. This 2005 documentary follows the lives of two teenage girls who work in a sweatshop in southern China making blue jeans for retailers like Wal-Mart. We see them writing in their diaries, dating

boys, missing home, learning to dance—in short, acting like regular teenage girls. Although filmmaker Micah Peled’s position on sweatshops is clear by the end (he is categorically opposed), interviews with the factory owner, workers from other factories, foreign buyers, and the girls’ rural parents bring contextual depth to the issue. Students could discuss whether and how the workers can resist the boss’s demands; whether or not the girls and their families truly benefit from their factory work; and how it changes them and their future. Furthermore, the connection to American students’ own lives is easily traced through global commodity chains to the jeans they wear to class, leading to discussions on our own role in supporting this system—what effects do our actions and habits have on kids on the other side of the world?

An even more recent film, *Up the Yangtze*, similarly focuses on teenagers in China’s new workforce, but in a completely different context: a tour boat of the Three Gorges of the Yangtze River. Yu Shui, a 16-year-old girl from a very poor family, is told by her parents that they cannot afford for her to continue in school. She leaves home for the first time to work on a cruise boat washing dishes for foreign tourists. Meanwhile, “Jerry,” a middle-class, ambitious 19-year-old (and a so-called “Little Emperor,” or only child), gets a job on the same boat as a tour guide, hoping to get rich on American dollars. As the film tracks these two struggling to communicate with foreigners and make a living, it also follows Yu Shui’s parents’ loss of their humble home on the banks of the Yangtze River to the rising flood waters brought on by the Three Gorges Dam. In skillful interviews, the filmmaker draws out his subjects’ fears and anxieties as they cope with a world changing beyond recognition.

Education is also undergoing rapid change in twenty-first century China, and peering into the school life of children in other places can often capture students’ interest. Several teachers I

spoke with recommend Zhang Yimou's 1999 feature film *Not One Less*. Set in a poor, rural school where even chalk is a hoarded commodity, the film tells the story of a young teacher, barely educated herself, who is given responsibility for a classroom and must keep students from dropping out. Stubbornly, she pursues one truant all the way to the city. Their (mis)adventures highlight their lack of education and preparation for the wider world, but also bring them to the attention of the local media and ultimately generate support for their school.

For teacher John Wells, this is the most effective film for use in his East Asia history seminar; his students find the rural poverty "an eye opener," even though comparable poverty exists in their own town. "We end our discussion of the film with the idea that all of us have a social responsibility to recognize and alleviate poverty." This film is now a bit out of date, but there is no question that such rural poverty still exists in China.

For a more up-to-date view of the Chinese education system, and from the opposite end of the economic spectrum, *Two Million Minutes* is a possible choice. The film's premise is that in four years of high school, each student in the world has two million minutes available to him or her; how will they choose to use them? Two students each from top-rated high schools in China, India, and the United States are profiled and interviewed. The two Chinese students study almost incessantly, and when they are not studying, they are practicing dance and violin, or writing computer programs for fun; they live lives of material comfort and appear to be the center of their parents' worlds. The film seeks to jolt Americans into an awareness of the stiff competition we are facing on the global job market, and that is a topic worth exploring with high school students. But do the Chinese and Indian students actually use their two million minutes more effectively than the Americans? There is room for a great deal of debate here.

Nearly all the films I've mentioned are most suitable for high school use, though some could be extended to middle school (in particular, *China Blue* and *Not One Less*). For younger students there are fewer options. For students old enough to read simple subtitles, I highly recommend the *Children of China* series, an up-to-date set of four DVDs giving a child's perspective on life in China today.

The first, "One Day in Ping Wei," simply follows 10-year-old Twin-Twin through her daily life, at school and at home, in a rural village in Anhui Province. She narrates her own life in Mandarin Chinese, with easy-to-read subtitles (the Chinese is also quite easy to understand, for students who are studying Chinese language). The video footage is realistic and unglamorous, yet vivid, showing street traffic, the market, and other ordinary scenes of Chinese life. There are three follow up videos: "New Year in Ping Wei"; "Land of the Dragon"; and "Return to Ping Wei."

While this list describes some of the very best films for teaching about contemporary China, it only scratches the surface of an ever-growing body of video materials on China. Publications such as *Education About Asia*, a magazine published by the Association for Asian Studies, and the Asian Educational Media Service newsletter can keep you up to date with film reviews and pedagogical essays by experts. A search of the AEMS Media Database, accessible at www.aems.uiuc.edu, can also help you learn what's available. I hope that you and your students enjoy exploring China through film. 🌐

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Films on China for the Classroom: Evaluation Criteria

Ten films for teaching about China are recommended by teachers in the article written by Tanya Lee. Teachers who choose to view one or more of the films listed might use the following questions as a means of strengthening students' analytical skills. Some of the questions lend themselves to discussion prior to the film; others, during or following the film, depending upon teacher choice.

1. *What might be a reason for watching this film? Where does it fit into our study of China?*
2. *Who produced and directed the film? When and where was it produced? Was it produced for a particular audience? If so, for whom, and what message(s) are conveyed to that audience?*
3. *Taking into account the backgrounds of the producer and director, is the material presented from a "Western" point of view? A Chinese point of view? Another point of view? Are there any biases that are easy—or not so easy—to detect? What evidence would you use to support such a claim?*
4. *Does the film reflect the geographic and demographic diversity of China? Describe your impression of the country—using specifics from the film itself.*
5. *Is China presented as mysterious? Exotic? Quaint? What evidence is there to suggest that any of these descriptions apply? What evidence from the film might be used to assess the accuracy of this film's portrayal of China?*
6. *What are the major points about China's political, economic, or social systems that you learned from this film? What questions about China did it raise in your mind? What more would you want or need to know in order to better understand China and Chinese people?*

Students might use the responses to these questions to write a critical film review that assesses the authenticity and value of the film as a way to learn about China during the given time period. Alternatively, teachers might divide the class into groups to watch individual films and ask them to present synopses and analyses of the films, perhaps using short clips to illustrate particular themes.

—Patience Berkman