



**Gang LIU (Ph.D.)**  
Associate Teaching Professor

Modern Languages  
Dietrich College of Humanities and  
Social Sciences



Carnegie Mellon University

# New Visions of China

## through Documentary Films and Cross-Cultural Peer Learning

Discover China through documentary films.

Learn Chinese language through cross-cultural communication and peer-learning.

Explore Chinese society and culture through technology-enhanced projects.

### Description and Goals

Students who study Chinese language and culture often aspire to discover a “real China.” While the existence of this so-called “reality” and its ultimate discovery are still in question, there are indeed some art forms, in which China is presented or represented in a less embellished, dramatized, stereotyped, albeit no less complex and intriguing, way. This poster showcases a Chinese documentary film/language course that I designed and taught in 2015. The course adopted an unprecedented teaching method by pairing Chinese language learners with native Chinese speakers and asking them to collaborate on various technology-enhanced projects. Through watching and analyzing Chinese documentary films, discussing current Chinese social/cultural issues, and cross-cultural peer learning/collaboration, this course helped students develop in-depth knowledge of contemporary Chinese society in the closest proximity to its bare “reality.”

Students are expected to develop these skills/knowledge by semester-end:

- **In-depth knowledge of important social/cultural issues in modern China.**
- **Strong critical thinking and analytical skills.**
- **Significantly enhanced language and intercultural communication skills used to comprehend, analyze, and discuss complex topics in Chinese (For non-native speakers) .**

### Survey Findings

The course has **4 Chinese native speakers, 3 heritage speakers and 4 non-native speakers**. I conducted monthly surveys about various aspects of the course. Here are some interesting findings.

- **100% of students think that documentary films provide a better way to understand Chinese society/culture than feature films (movies).**
- **92.3% of students think the mixture of Chinese native and non-native speakers in one class improves language learning. 100% think that this mixture promotes cultural exchange.**
- 100% of **native speakers** think that they learned more about Chinese society and culture from the insights of the non-native and heritage speakers. 0% felt uncomfortable due to non-native or heritage speakers' inadequate language skills. 25% sometimes felt impatient when non-native and heritage speakers tried to express themselves. 50% think that non-native and heritage speakers were sometimes intimidated by the presence of native Chinese speakers in class.
- 100% of **heritage speakers** think that they gained insights about Chinese culture and/or significantly improved their language skills through working with native and/or non-native speakers. 33.3% sometimes felt intimidated by the presence of native Chinese speakers in class (66.7% think non-native speakers were intimidated). 33.3% sometimes felt uncomfortable due to non-native speakers' inadequate language skills. 0% sometimes felt impatient when non-native speakers tried to express themselves
- 100% of **non-native speakers** think that they gained more insights about Chinese culture and significantly improved their language skills through working with native and heritage speakers. 50% felt intimidated by the presence of native speakers in class. 25% felt native and heritage speakers showed impatience when they tried to express themselves in class.

## Assignments and Projects

- **Short Summary:** A short summary of one of the required readings written in both Chinese and English.
- **Short Response:** A short response to the instructor's question, written in student's less proficient language (Chinese or English).
- **Discussion Question:** A discussion question related to the reading, film, or topic of the class, written in both Chinese and English.
- A course **survey** in English.



In lieu of homework, students were asked to submit weekly **pre-class reflections** via Blackboard. A typical pre-class reflection consisted of two of more of the topics listed above. The pre-class reflection prepared students well (both linguistically and culturally) and for classroom discussions.



- The rise of China and its impacts
- Environmental issues in China
- The urban-rural gap in China
- The living conditions of the marginal people
- The life of foreigners in China
- Love and marriage in China
- Educations in China

For mid-semester project, students were paired up to work collaboratively on a **website project** (on one of topics above) about Chinese society/culture using Weebly. The pairing options were native & heritage, heritage & non-native, or native & non-native, in order to promote intercultural communication.



- Do they really know Chinese culture?
- China in the eyes of overseas Chinese students
- South China sea and Western media.
- Life of CMU varsity diver.
- CMU on a Friday night.
- A journal of ballroom dancing
- A journey of world folk tales

For final project, students were asked to create a short **documentary film** on any subject they are interested in. All narrations in the film were in Chinese. The dialogues were in Chinese or English. Above are some selected topics of the students' films.



**Dietrich College**  
**Modern Languages**

**Course builder and primary instructor:** Gang Liu (gangliu@andrew.cmu.edu)  
Baker Hall 139A, 412-2686014  
**Guest Instructors:** Sihui Ke & Haixia Wang.