

# Exploring Intercultural Communication and CFL Teaching Through Film: An Action Research Study

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## Abstract

This action research study explores the integration of film as a medium for teaching intercultural communication as well as Chinese language and culture. Conducted during the Spring 2019 semester in a Chinese Film Studies course in a Chinese program at an American university, the study aimed to enhance students' intercultural competence while improving their Chinese language proficiency and cultural understanding. This paper introduces the course rationale, film selection, material planning, assignment design, and student feedback and comments. Results showed that film was an effective pedagogical tool, helping students gain a deeper understanding of cultural differences, develop intercultural competence, and enhance language skills. Student feedback indicated strong engagement with the course components, with films making abstract intercultural concepts more accessible and promoting lively discussions. This study contributes to the body of research advocating the use of films in language and culture education, demonstrating their value in fostering cultural understanding and language acquisition in a cohesive, interactive manner. The teaching practice described herein can be applied to other foreign language classrooms and general education classrooms as well.

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## 1 Introduction

It has been widely acknowledged that the goal of foreign language education needs to move beyond the linguistic level and incorporate culture, so that learners can become effective intercultural communicators and citizens who act appropriately in authentic target-culture settings and participate actively as intercultural members of society (Byram, 1997, 2008; Byram & Golubeva, 2020). Consequently, intercultural communication is a subject area that all foreign language learners need to learn in order to achieve this goal. In this study, I adopt Edward Hall's (1976) iceberg model of culture: visible culture (e.g., places, artifacts, clothes, etc.) vs. invisible culture (e.g., values, norms, beliefs, etc.). Visible culture is above the water and relatively easy to access and learn, whereas invisible culture is below the water and harder to get at and understand. Ting-Toomey and Chung (2021) explain what the study of intercultural communication entails: "It is about the study of communication that involves, at least in part, cultural group membership differences. It is about acquiring the necessary knowledge and dynamic skills to manage such differences appropriately and effectively. It is also about developing a creative mindset to see things from different angles without rigid prejudgment" (p. 4). Scholars have been making efforts to investigate different behavior patterns and the underlying norms and values in various cultures. Likewise, instructors have been experimenting with different methods to teach relevant cultures and intercultural communication to language learners.

Research has shown that film is one of the most effective tools to teach language, culture, and intercultural communication (Bostanci, 2022; Chao, 2013; Hoinbala, 2022; Mallinger & Rossy, 2003; Pandey & Ardichvili, 2015; Pegrum, 2008; Yilmaz, 2020) because it exposes students to powerful and authentic experiences not simulated in classrooms, arouses students' interest in otherwise dry theories and concepts, and encourages animated discussions and critical reflections. In addition, in recent decades, there has been a strong call for courses that connect language and content such as literature, culture, and film in foreign language classrooms (Coyle et al., 2010; Geisler et al., 2007; Malmström & Zhou, 2025; Pfeiffer, 2008; Pratt et al., 2008; Snow et al., 1989; Yu, 2008). Drawing upon these insights, this project aims to introduce an action research study through a film course in a Chinese program for learners of Chinese as a foreign language at an American university, which used intercultural communication as the main theme and film as the thread. It connects Chinese language, culture, and the content areas—intercultural communication and film. The research questions explored are:

- What are the benefits of using film as a thread to teach intercultural communication and Chinese language and culture simultaneously?
- Is it effective?

In the following sections, I will first review the relevant literature, followed by the methodology of the study. Then I will explain the action research cycles in this study in detail, including the course materials, design, as well as reflections and further actions taken. Finally, the results of student feedback will be reported, followed by a reflection on future teaching.

## 2 Literature review

### 2.1 Using films to teach language, culture, and intercultural communication

Scholars have noted that films facilitate the decoding of various cultures, enhance understanding of cultural differences, and provide deeper insights into cultural theories and frameworks (Bhawuk & Brislin, 2000; Cardon, 2010; Mallinger & Rossy, 2003; Tidwell, 2001). Research also indicates that films are effective in teaching various concepts through concrete examples and scenarios (Alexander & Waxman, 2000; Bumpus, 2005; Cardon, 2010; Pandey, 2012). Furthermore, films have been extensively employed in foreign language education (Sánchez-Auñón et al., 2023), demonstrating positive effects on various aspects of language learning, including vocabulary acquisition (e.g., Adrefiza et al., 2024; Alharthi, 2020; Bostanci, 2022), pragmatic development (e.g., Basol & Kartal, 2019; Jurkovic, 2016), listening comprehension (e.g., Hayati & Mohmedi, 2011; Qiu, 2017), and overall language skills (e.g., Hoinbala, 2022; King, 2002; Yilmaz, 2020). For example, Chao (2013) explored the role of films in intercultural learning for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in Taiwan. Analyzing learner diaries from 52 students enrolled in an intercultural course that utilized foreign films, the study found that films positively influenced the development of intercultural competence, enhancing students' motivation, attitudes, knowledge, and awareness. The study recommended prioritizing intercultural learning in English as a Foreign Language programs, with films serving as an effective tool for this purpose. In a different context, Tognozzi (2023) demonstrated that incorporating films into intermediate and advanced Italian language courses was helpful for improving students' language fluency and increasing their cultural knowledge and sensitivity. Adrefiza et al. (2024) showed students' positive perceptions of using films to help with their English vocabulary acquisition. Roslim et al. (2021), through a study of 77 university undergraduates, also demonstrated learners' positive perceptions of using films in English language learning, particularly in terms of improving their vocabulary, oral skills, and motivation, as well as decreasing their anxiety.

According to Cardon (2010), one of the primary advantages of utilizing films as an educational tool at the university level is their ability to entertain and engage students while simultaneously fostering interest in diverse cultures. Films are a widely recognized medium among students, making them an effective means of stimulating interest in subjects that may otherwise be perceived as less engaging (Champoux, 1999) and providing meaningful education (Yulastuti et al., 2021). This makes them effective and versatile teaching materials (Zahmatkesh & Fakhri Alamdari, 2021). By exposing students to impactful and unique experiences not typically encountered in the classroom, films can evoke strong emotional responses and encourage dynamic discussions. These discussions often prompt individuals to reevaluate their beliefs and self-perceptions, particularly when emotionally charged scenes are involved.

In addition, various methods for incorporating films into educational settings have been explored. Champoux (1999) suggested using films as a basis for case discussions, experiential exercises, and for analyzing metaphors, satire, symbolism, and cultural nuances, including differing perceptions of time and space. Instructors can adopt multiple strategies, such as screening entire films or selected scenes before or after discussions, and presenting different films on the same topic to encourage diverse perspectives. Tognozzi (2023) demonstrated using film clips for different language and cultural tasks. Additionally, films can be assigned for outside viewing, followed by written analyses that connect to course concepts (Fontenot & Fontenot, 2008; Pandey, 2012). One important aspect, however, is that the films chosen should align with the learning objectives (Hestiana & Anita, 2022).

### 2.2 Content and language integrated learning (CLIL)

Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, there has been a growing emphasis on integrating language and content in foreign language classrooms, which led to the development of the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach (Cantoni-Harvey, 1987; Coyle, 1994, 1999, 2007; Llinares & McCabe, 2023; Mohan, 1986; Snow et al., 1989). Scholars and instructors have since explored CLIL in various classroom settings, including language, math, and science (Hao et al., 2023; Leal, 2016; Llinares & Nikula, 2024; Ouazizi, 2016). CLIL is defined as an educational method that uses a second or foreign language to teach content subjects, with the aim of benefiting both language and content acquisition (Coyle et al., 2010; Marsh, 2002). While there are different ways to implement CLIL, the 4C model (content, communication, cognition, and culture) is commonly used to signal effective implementation. It promotes the development of knowledge, skills, content understanding, language proficiency, cognitive processing, critical thinking, and cultural awareness within a structured curriculum (Coyle, 2006; Coyle et al., 2010).

Despite some inherent limitations and structural challenges associated with the CLIL approach (Harrop, 2012), extensive research has shown that it offers numerous benefits. For example, Lasagabaster (2009) found that using the target language to teach content significantly improved students' attitudes toward language learning, providing meaningful contexts and exposure to authentic language use. Lo and Murphy (2010) showed that students in CLIL immersion programs outperformed those in regular language programs in vocabulary acquisition, both in breadth and speed. Similarly, Admiraal et al. (2006) demonstrated that CLIL positively impacted students' oral production and reading comprehension, while Coyle et al. (2009) reported increased intercultural awareness and understanding among students. Garzón-Díaz (2021) found that students gave positive evaluations of CLIL, which helped increase their cultural awareness in learning science and fostered scientific citizenship. Sakellariou and Papadopoulos (2020) demonstrated

that CLIL was beneficial for students' language and cognitive development and contributed to their positive attitude toward “plurilingualism.”

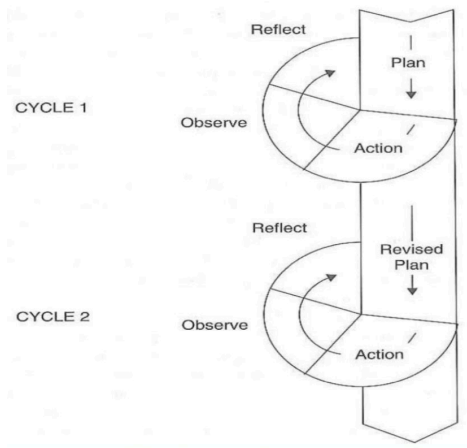
The core principle of CLIL lies in its dual focus on both content and language, without requiring a fixed proportion between the two. However, some scholars have cautioned that simply combining content and language does not necessarily lead to development in both areas. In fact, it can sometimes compromise language accuracy (Cenoz et al., 2013). Therefore, careful course design is essential for successful implementation (Filice, 2020), and instructor scaffolding plays an important role as well (Mahan, 2022). Nevertheless, this flexibility allows educators to explore innovative pedagogical strategies and experiments. This study aligns with this experimental approach by applying CLIL within a content course in a foreign language program.

In addition, many scholars and educators have critically pointed out an ongoing issue in foreign language programs at American universities: the “divide” between “language” and “content” courses (e.g., Geisler et al., 2007; Pratt et al., 2008). The former typically focus on target language instruction, while the latter often concentrate on literature and culture taught in English. For example, the Modern Language Association (MLA) report (Geisler et al., 2007), the MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages position paper (Pratt et al., 2008), and commentaries by scholars such as Pfeiffer (2008) and Yu (2008) all highlighted this divide between “language” and “content” in foreign language programs and curricula, calling for structural and curricular reform. This study offers insights and empirical evidence in support of this proposal.

### 2.3 Action research

Action research (AR) has been an important and effective means of professional development and classroom practice in general education and language education since the 1990s (Elliot, 1991; Wallace, 1998). The key concepts are the “reflective cycle” and the “teacher as researcher,” encompassing a variety of goals and areas of focus. Burns (2010), in a guide on AR for English language teaching practitioners, described AR as a systematic, self-reflective, and critical approach to understanding one's teaching context. In AR, teachers act as investigators of their own teaching while actively participating in it. The focus of action research is purposeful intervention aimed at addressing identified problems in teaching, with the ultimate goal of fostering positive changes in instructional practices. These changes are informed by systematically gathered, reliable data from teaching experiences.

The steps of action research typically include identifying a problem, planning, taking action, observing and collecting data, and analyzing the data, followed by reflection (e.g., Mertler, 2024; Parsons & Brown, 2002). Although different scholars may label these stages slightly differently, the underlying principle remains the same: action research is cyclical in nature, with each cycle informing the next. This study follows the classic four-step spiral model of action research (Burns, 2010; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988) (Figure 1).



**Fig. 1. Four-step action research spiral**

Mertler (2009, 2024) and McMillan (2022) highlighted addressing a specific problem as one of the main objectives of AR. Mertler explained that AR can involve experimenting with new teaching methods, evaluating their effectiveness, and refining them based on classroom observations. Mertler and Charles (2008) further suggested that AR can be employed to tap into students' interests and learning preferences, enhance the efficacy of self-directed learning, and create more meaningful and engaging educational experiences. Mertler (2024) also stressed that the core of action research lies in systematically gathering information and engaging in active reflection, all aimed at enhancing the teaching process.

In summary, AR begins with identifying a problem in teaching or exploring a new instructional approach. This is followed by careful planning of lessons and teaching strategies. As teaching unfolds, instructors observe their own methods and student reactions, systematically collecting data. Based on this feedback, instructors reflect regularly and continuously improve their teaching practices. As a result, teachers take on the roles of investigators, reflectors, participants, and researchers in AR, making it a “learning by doing” process within a reflective research cycle.

In the following sections, I will first report the methodology of the study, followed by a detailed description of the action research cycles conducted. The results of the study will then be presented. The final sections will include the conclusion and a discussion of future directions.

### 3 Methodology

The goal of this study was to address student needs observed by the author over many years of teaching Chinese at an American university. Specifically, these needs include a lack of opportunities to learn intercultural communication and the less visible aspects of Chinese culture, as well as the absence of Chinese language integration in content-based courses, which are typically taught entirely in English. Through action research, this study aimed to meet these needs by incorporating the Chinese language into an elective film course, focusing on intercultural communication and the invisible dimensions of Chinese culture. This represented the first attempt to teach the course in this manner.

#### 3.1 Setting, participants, and course objectives

The course examined in this study, *Chinese Film Studies*, was offered in the spring of 2019 with 12 students enrolled. It was an elective content course that met twice a week with a prerequisite of two years of Chinese language study. Among the students, five had completed two years of Chinese and were concurrently enrolled in second-semester, third-year Chinese. Another five had completed three years of study and were concurrently enrolled in second-semester, fourth-year Chinese. The remaining two were heritage learners. As a result, the students in the course had low- to high-intermediate levels of Chinese proficiency.

To address the student needs mentioned above, the course had the following objectives:

1. To utilize film as a medium to help students understand intercultural communication concepts and theories;
2. To expose students to the less visible aspects of Chinese culture;
3. To improve students' Chinese language proficiency, particularly in areas related to film and culture; and
4. To encourage students to apply this knowledge to real-life examples, film analysis, and personal reflections.

The rationale for this approach is illustrated in the following figure:

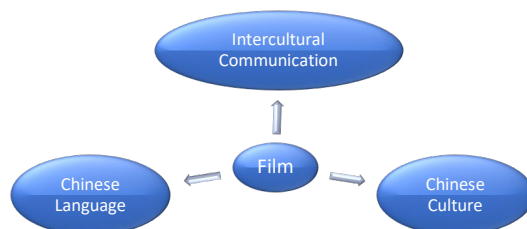


Fig. 2. Course rationale

#### 3.2 Research design

The author undertook two action research cycles, during which she documented each phase of planning and classroom implementation, making modifications based on observations and reflections. Each cycle followed the four-step action research model (Burns, 2010; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988): plan, act, observe, and reflect.

##### Cycle 1 (Weeks 1–7):

- *Plan*: Based on the course objectives, the author selected textbooks and films and designed class activities and tasks.
- *Act*: The author implemented the designed syllabus.
- *Observe*: The author observed students' reactions and performance in class activities and tasks.
- *Reflect*: The author reflected on the collected data, which informed Cycle 2.

##### Cycle 2 (Weeks 8–15):

- *Revise the Plan*: Based on the course objectives and reflections from Cycle 1 and mid-term survey data, the author made modifications to the original plan for the second half of the semester.
- *Act*: The author implemented the revised plan.
- *Observe*: The author observed students' reactions and performance.
- *Reflect*: The author reflected on the collected data.

Details of each step are described in Section 4.

### 3.3 Data collection and analysis

Since this was an action research project, the author served as both instructor and researcher. This dual role had advantages and disadvantages. A key advantage was the opportunity to directly observe students' reactions and outcomes, allowing for immediate reflection and adjustment. However, being "inside the picture" could limit objectivity, and students might hesitate to give honest feedback out of concern for grades or power dynamics with the instructor. Additionally, the author might unconsciously interpret data more favorably. To mitigate these biases, three measures were taken: (1) maintaining transparency about the study's purpose and emphasizing students' role in helping to improve teaching practices, (2) collecting data from multiple sources to enable triangulation, and (3) fostering an open and relaxed classroom atmosphere to encourage students' honest feedback.

Based on the bias mitigation measures described above, the author informed students at the beginning of the semester that the course also functioned as an experiment in improving teaching practices, and that they would play an active role in this process. Data for the study were collected from multiple sources. First, the instructor kept observation notes documenting lesson implementation, reflections on what worked or did not, students' reactions to various activities, and interpretations of those reactions. Second, midway through the semester (at the end of Week 7), an informal survey was conducted through in-class discussions lasting approximately 50 minutes, with full participation from all students. The discussions, held in English, consisted of two stages. In the first stage, students were divided into two groups to freely share their ideas on given topics, with additional comments encouraged. This approach was chosen over a written formative survey because, by this point, the instructor had established an open and relaxed classroom atmosphere. Group discussions also allowed students to build on one another's ideas, generating more comprehensive and candid feedback than brief written responses might have provided. Indeed, students expressed both positive comments and frustrations, such as challenges with target language use, which will be discussed later.

The instructor emphasized that the discussion's purpose was to improve the course for the remainder of the semester. During this time, she visited each group and participated in their exchanges. In the second stage, each group reported its main discussion points to the whole class, allowing others (including the instructor) to add input. This process served as a collective reflection on the first half of the semester. The discussion topics were open-ended and included the following:

1. How do you like the films and readings so far and why?
2. How do you like the Chinese language components of the course so far and why?

The instructor took detailed notes on all student feedback, which were used for reflections that informed course modifications in the second half of the semester.

Finally, at the end of the semester, a formal survey (see Appendix 1) was administered via Qualtrics to anonymously collect students' overall feedback on the course. Students were instructed to participate voluntarily and complete the survey at home. A total of 12 responses were received, indicating full participation.

Both the mid-term and final survey data were combined and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework of thematic analysis: familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. After carefully reviewing all survey responses, initial coding of the meanings was conducted, which later developed into themes. Observation notes and class assessment results were used to triangulate the analysis.

## 4 Action research cycles in the study

This section details how the author applied the four steps of action research cycles to explore the use of film in teaching intercultural communication while integrating Chinese language and culture—particularly the less visible aspects of Chinese culture. The main principles and approaches used to achieve the course objectives are also explained.

Due to the nature of action research, teaching practice and research are closely intertwined. The themes reflected in the data collected, such as the observation notes and mid-term informal survey, which informed Cycle 2, are also presented in the following sections, as they are part of the action research cycles. Themes from both surveys will be presented in the Results section.

### 4.1 Plan (Cycle 1)

#### 4.1.1 Textbook selection

The principles for selecting textbooks were: (1) the intercultural communication textbook should cover essential intercultural communication concepts and theories with interesting and concrete examples in a student-friendly manner, and (2) the Chinese culture textbook(s) should be written from an intercultural communication perspective and depict less visible aspects of culture. With these criteria in mind, the following textbooks were selected:

- Ting-Toomey, S., & Chung, L. C. (2012). *Understanding Intercultural Communication* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Gao, G., & Ting-Toomey, S. (1998). *Communicating Effectively with the Chinese*. Sage Publications.
- Hu, W., & Grove, C. L. (1999). *Encountering the Chinese: A Guide for Americans*. Intercultural Press.

### 4.1.2 Film selection

The criteria for selecting films were as follows:

1. They reflect intercultural communication concepts.
2. They reflect Chinese and American cultures.
3. The language is in either English or Chinese (ideally with subtitles).
4. The films have high ratings.
5. They cater to students' interests.

With these criteria in mind, the following films were selected:

- *Pushing Hands* by Ang Lee (a story of a father visiting his son in the U.S. and the conflicts between him and his daughter-in-law).
- *The Wedding Banquet* by Ang Lee (a story of a homosexual American-Chinese man, his American boyfriend, his parents visiting him, and his pretend wife to fool his parents).
- *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman* by Ang Lee (a story of a father and his three daughters connected through their dinner table).
- *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* by Wayne Wang (a story of a retired father visiting his daughter in the U.S. after she has lived there for a long time).
- *The Joy Luck Club* by Wayne Wang (four complex stories of Chinese immigrant mothers in the U.S. and their American-born daughters).
- *Saving Face* by Alice Wu (a story of a lesbian daughter and her mother in the U.S., both struggling with their own secrets for the sake of face).
- *Iron and Silk* by Shirley Sun (based on a true story of an American, Mark, who went to China to teach English, and his experiences there).
- *The Gua Sha Treatment* by Xiaolong Zheng (a story of a Chinese-American family whose life is dramatically altered by a misunderstanding of the traditional Gua Sha treatment in the U.S.).
- *A Grandson from America* by Jiangtao Qu (a heartwarming story of a Chinese grandfather and his American grandson).
- *Hua Mulan (Mulan: The Rise of a Warrior) (2009)* by Jingle Ma and *Mulan I (Disney) (1998)* by Barry Cook and Tony Bancroft (two film versions of the same Chinese legendary story, Hua Mulan, produced in mainland China and the U.S. respectively)
- *The Dialogue* (a cross-cultural documentary by Crossing Borders Education and co-produced by Michigan State University, following four Chinese and four American university students as they travel together through Hong Kong and Southwest China, exploring one other's backgrounds and learning cross-cultural communication skills).

Each film was matched with intercultural concepts or theories and readings, accompanied by weekly or biweekly assignments (Table 1). The first couple of weeks were very important because they set the tone and provided the overall framework for the course. In the first week, when introducing the syllabus, the course rationale, structure, and expectations were explained clearly. General intercultural communication concepts were also introduced through activities and discussions. The second week focused on Chinese cultural concepts. In the following weeks, specific themes such as face, modesty, implicitness, identity, culture shock, and nonverbal communication were explored.

### 4.1.3 Tasks

When designing the tasks, the following principles were considered:

1. Class time was not used for lecturing or film watching, but for guiding students to understand the readings and films through activities and discussions. Therefore, students were expected to complete the weekly film viewing and assigned readings before coming to class.
2. Since this was the first attempt to incorporate the target language (Chinese) into instruction, a gradual approach was adopted regarding the instructional language. Approximately 85% of the instruction was in English, and 15% was in Chinese. Out of 100 minutes of class time, approximately 85–90 minutes were primarily in English for brief summaries of the readings, student group discussions, and class activities. Each set of discussion questions contained one or two questions that required students to speak in Chinese. The remaining 10–15 minutes were conducted in Chinese, focusing on relevant cultural concepts, language use, and a recap of the day.
3. Students were given opportunities to use the target language (Chinese) and interact with native Chinese speakers by partnering with students from the university's English Language Center for two intercultural group projects toward the end of the semester. They were required to meet at least once for each project, with each meeting lasting at least one hour. The partner pairings remained the same for both projects.
4. Students were given opportunities to synthesize learned knowledge and apply it to critical analysis of and reflections on films, cultures, and real-life examples.

Based on these principles, the following tasks and activities as well as relevant assessment categories were designed throughout the semester:

- **Class discussions:** Weekly discussions were designed for students to discuss the readings and film viewed during that week. The discussions were expected to be conducted in both Chinese and English. In each class, a discussion sheet with 3–6 questions addressing the film content and weekly readings was provided to the students (see Appendix 2 for a sample). The first one or two questions were posed in Chinese, prompting students to discuss and articulate ideas in Chinese for those questions.
- **An individual presentation:** Students were expected to deliver an individual presentation on a self-chosen topic under the overarching topic, “Globalization and Intercultural Communication.” The assessment criteria included integration of theories from readings and research, content richness and quality, coherence, argumentation, and timing/presentation manner/fluency. Students who elected to present in Chinese were assessed on an additional category—pronunciation, grammar, and word usage. Each category carried equal weight in the grading process and applied to all the following tasks unless otherwise specified.
- **Two short plays:** Students were expected to adapt and act out, in groups, a film episode from the films already viewed. They could modify the plot and characters as they wished. The language requirement was Chinese. Assessment categories included preparation, pronunciation and intonation, grammar and word usage, content, and fluency, timing, and delivery.
- **Two structured debates:** Students were divided into two large groups, each with two opposing teams. For each of the two debate topics, there would be two debates. Assessment was based on both group and individual grading. Group evaluation criteria included preparation, coordination, expression of ideas, and rebuttal of opposing ideas. Individual evaluation criteria included application of theories and concepts, content quality, participation, comprehension, expression and rebuttal, as well as fluency, timing, and debate manners.
- **Intercultural Group Project 1:** The purpose of this project was to provide students with an opportunity to apply intercultural communication theories and Chinese cultural concepts to film analysis. The procedure was as follows: First, students watched two film versions of the Chinese legendary story, *Hua Mulan*. One version was produced in mainland China, and the other was produced by Disney. Then, each student met with a Chinese student partner from the university’s English Language Center to discuss the two films. Afterward, they met with their class group members to discuss both films, incorporating insights from their discussions with their Chinese partners, and created a PowerPoint report. Finally, they presented their findings as a group in class.
- **Intercultural Group Project 2:** The goal of this project was to give students an opportunity to apply intercultural communication theories and concepts to real-life experiences. The procedure was as follows: students selected an intercultural communication or Chinese cultural concept or theme, prepared interview questions as a group, and then interviewed native Chinese speakers (five interviews per student). They interviewed their assigned partners as well as other native Chinese speakers, either through their partners’ connections or their own Chinese-speaking friends. Afterwards, they met with their group members to combine and analyze the data they had collected, creating a PowerPoint report. Finally, they presented their findings and reflections as a group in class. It was essentially a mini-research study. Assessment of these two intercultural project presentations included use of references from readings, content quality, coherence, strength of argumentation, and adherence to length, format, and style requirements.

**Table 1. Class schedule**

Weeks	Film	Content/Themes	Readings	Tasks
WK1		Syllabus	Ting-Toomey & Chung (2012), chapters 1 and 6	
		Intercultural communication (IC) Concepts; Why IC? IC flexibility	Gao & Ting-Toomey (1998), chapter 1 Hu & Grove (1999), chapter 1	
WK2	<i>Eat, Drink, Man, Woman</i>	General Chinese cultural concepts	Gao & Ting-Toomey (1998), chapter 2 Hu & Grove (1999), chapter 7	
WK3	<i>A Thousand Years of Good Prayers</i>	Modesty, implicitness	Gao & Ting-Toomey (1998), chapter 3	
			Hu & Grove (1999), chapter 6 Zhong et al. (2004)	
WK4	<i>Saving Face</i>	Face conflict and negotiation	Gao & Ting-Toomey (1998), chapter 4 Hu & Grove (1999), chapter 9	Short play 1

WK5	<i>The Wedding Banquet</i>		Gao (1998) Ting-Toomey (2005)	
WK6	<i>Iron and Silk</i>	Culture shock; ingroup/outgroup	Ting-Toomey & Chung (2012), chapters 5 & 8	Short play 2
WK7	<i>A Grandson from America</i>	Negotiated Chineseness; identity	Ting-Toomey & Chung (2012), chapter 4 Han (2017)	Debate 1
WK8				Individual presentation
WK9	<i>Pushing Hands</i>	Intercultural conflict; nonverbal communication	Ting-Toomey & Chung (2012) chapters 7 & 9	
WK10	<i>The Gua Sha Treatment</i>		Han (2015, 2018) Wang & Sun (2014)	Debate 2
WK11	<i>Hua Mulan</i>		Xu & Tian (2013)	
WK12	<i>Mulan I (Disney)</i>			Intercultural project 1
WK13	<i>The Joy Luck Club</i>	Conflict style; identity	Ting-Toomey & Chung (2012) chapters 11 & 12	
WK14	<i>The Dialogue</i>		Cai & Fink (2002) Ting-Toomey & Oetzel (2001) chapter 6	
WK15				Intercultural project 2

#### 4.2 Act and observe (Cycle 1)

There were 15 weeks in total in the semester. In the first seven weeks, the students conducted class discussions on topics such as why study intercultural communication, intercultural flexibility, Chinese cultural concepts, modesty, ingroup/outgroup, face, culture shock, and identity from the three textbooks, four research papers, and six films. Overall, the observation notes showed that they were very active in these discussions, frequently referencing the concepts and theories from the readings and film episodes. For the first couple of discussion questions requiring Chinese language practice each time, they were able to predominantly speak in Chinese, with occasional code-switching during discussions. Students with only two years of Chinese learning sometimes struggled to express their ideas in Chinese. In general, all the discussions often became quite lively.

Additionally, the students performed two short plays, with each group choosing different film episodes to adapt and act out. All of the plays were conducted in Chinese, and each group added their creative modifications to the original films. The observation notes and assessment results showed that all the students participated actively and all the groups performed in Chinese successfully.

Another activity completed in the first half of the semester was the first debate on the topic “Cultural differences are surmountable and cultural conflicts are/are not evitable.” There were four teams, resulting in two debates, each with a pro and a con team. The topic remained the same for both debate groups. The observation notes and assessments indicated that all students carefully prepared their arguments and researched various resources, including the textbook chapters they had studied. They expressed thoughtful ideas and informed opinions, successfully refuting their opposing teams with relevant examples. However, during the second round of the debate, some audience members appeared distracted. The reasons for this might have been as follows: first, they had already finished their debate and lost interest and focus; second, the debate topic was the same, which may have made it less engaging than expected.

#### 4.3 Reflect (Cycle 1)

During the reflection stage, both the students and the instructor had the opportunity to reflect—students on their learning and the instructor’s teaching, and the instructor on how the plan’s implementation was received by the students. This reflection informed the further planning and action stages. The informal mid-term survey served as a tool for reflection in Cycle 1. The discussions with the students extended beyond the topics covered. The general themes that emerged from them were as follows, and the final report of both mid-term and final surveys will be presented in Section 5.

Overall, students expressed strong enthusiasm for the first half of the course, particularly the films, readings, and discussions. All students indicated that the films significantly aided their understanding of the concepts presented in the readings because the films provided real-life scenarios that vividly represented the concepts while simultaneously demonstrating their nuances. In addition, many students expressed appreciation for the opportunities to practice Chinese language skills through film viewing, class discussions, listening to the instructor, and completing short play assignments. They mentioned that using Chinese to discuss intercultural communication and Chinese culture made the communication more meaningful and made Chinese learning more enjoyable. Additionally, students valued the discussions, noting that engaging with their peers deepened their understanding of the readings, the films, and Chinese culture.

However, a couple of students reported challenges in articulating their ideas in Chinese. For example, one student mentioned that her classmates’ Chinese was at a higher level, and sometimes it took her longer to figure out how to express her thoughts. This feedback was especially important, as it reflected the diverse proficiency levels present in the class, which included students with varying backgrounds in Chinese language study as well as heritage speakers.

#### **4.4 Revise the plan (Cycle 2)**

Based on their feedback, I conducted a critical reflection on the first half of the course. This process allowed me to draw on both my own observations and student insights to implement several modifications in Cycle 2.

To accommodate differences in language proficiency, several adjustments were implemented. Students were given the option to use either English or Chinese for their individual presentations in the second half of the semester. Additionally, they were allowed to choose their preferred language when collaborating with their Chinese native speaker partners for the final two intercultural projects. These changes aimed to create a more inclusive environment that supported all students in expressing their ideas effectively.

To enhance interaction and expose students to a broader range of perspectives, group configurations were modified for the projects in the second half of the semester. This change was intended to prevent stagnation and encourage students to engage with new ideas and experiences.

Regarding the class debates, using the same topic for two groups led to a sense of repetition. To address this, different debate topics were assigned to the two groups for the second round of debates. This change aimed to provide students with the opportunity to apply a wider array of concepts and theories, while also introducing additional film examples. The goal was to enrich the overall learning experience and make the debates more engaging for both the debaters and the audience.

#### **4.5 Further act and observe (Cycle 2)**

In the remaining eight weeks, the students conducted discussions on topics such as negotiated Chineseness, intercultural conflict style and management, and identity from the three textbooks, six research papers and book chapters, and three films. In general, the students continued to conduct lively discussions of the concepts and theories as well as the films every week.

In addition, they conducted the second round of debates on two topics: "When in Rome, do as the Romans do is/is not always right" and "Cultural shocks are/are not beneficial." The observation notes showed students' improvement from the first debate. Because the topics were different for the two debates, they were more engaged, and students' interest was successfully sustained, and they were also exposed to different content and resources.

Students' individual presentations went very well, and each of them picked a topic under the overarching theme "Globalization and Intercultural Communication." Example topics included music, advertisement, clothes, language, and food. They were able to use the learned intercultural communication theories and concepts to analyze and compare different phenomena and experiences under those topics. In terms of the language of presentation, five students used Chinese and seven used English. Observation notes and assessment results indicated that they were able to apply the concepts and theories from the readings to their chosen topics in a critical, creative, and thoughtful manner. Students who presented in Chinese were able to articulate complicated ideas and apply intercultural concepts and theories in their target language.

The intercultural group projects were highly successful. Students reviewed and discussed many important intercultural concepts through the *Mulan* project such as individualism vs. collectivism and filial piety. In Disney's *Mulan*, the protagonist disguises herself as a man to join the army, and the film focuses more on her self-discovery, whereas China's *Hua Mulan* emphasizes the concept of filial piety more. Throughout the two projects, students had a valuable experience working with native Chinese speakers during their interviews. For example, in the second intercultural project, students were required to interview five individuals. Their native speaker partners assisted them in connecting with other native speakers to accomplish this task. All the interviews were conducted in Chinese. Afterward, students reported back to their class groups, and their preparation was informed by the interview results. Their interest in the Chinese language, culture, and intercultural communication was significantly enhanced, as demonstrated by their lively discussions and the high quality of their presentations. These presentations included engaging analyses of the interview results, and the topics included indirectness, filial piety, and communication styles, among many others.

By the end of the semester, a formal survey was used to collect student feedback on the entire course, which revealed overwhelmingly positive responses. This demonstrated that the course objectives were met and answered the research questions positively in that it was beneficial and effective to use film to teach intercultural communication and Chinese language and culture simultaneously.

## **5 Results**

The thematic analysis of both the mid-term and final surveys produced four themes, namely, deeper understanding of cultural differences, development of intercultural awareness and competence, enhancement of language proficiency, and engagement with course components. While these themes were present in the mid-term responses, students elaborated on them much more in the final survey and showed more excitement in their responses. Each theme highlights the benefits of using film in this context and demonstrates its overall effectiveness.

### **5.1 Deeper understanding of cultural differences**

All the students expressed their appreciation for using film in the course to deepen their understanding of intercultural communication as well as Chinese and American cultural differences. For example, one student commented, "It was eye-opening. Just to truly realize the differences in cultures and dig deep and to find out why Chinese culture is the way it is. And the movies

really help capitalize on that.” Another student said, “The difference between being brought up as an American and being brought up as Chinese and the different values each culture holds are so interesting.”

Two students pointed out that films helped them explore cultural nuances more effectively than traditional Chinese courses. One student remarked, “I like the course a lot. It differs from the other CHS classes because it goes deeper into Chinese culture versus American culture. That really isn't touched upon in the other Chinese courses.” Another student noted, “I truly enjoyed this class. I learned so much about Chinese culture that I had never known before.”

To illustrate, *The Gua Sha Treatment* depicts a Chinese grandfather whose *gua sha* treatment for his grandson's fever leads to family turmoil when a social worker mistakes the red marks on the child's back for evidence of abuse, prompting the involvement of child protection services and legal proceedings. After watching the film, students were able to identify, discuss, and gain a deeper understanding of key intercultural concepts. These included intercultural conflict (e.g., stemming from the misunderstanding of the *gua sha* marks), cultural values (e.g., reflected in differing views of medicine), and ethnocentrism (e.g., illustrated by the American legal and social systems judging another culture's practice by their own standards).

The film served as an effective medium for exploring both visible and invisible aspects of culture, enabling students to connect visually and emotionally with the concepts and making the learning experience more relatable. By watching films that depicted cross-cultural interactions, students observed intercultural communication in realistic contexts, reinforcing ideas from readings and class discussions. Consequently, they were able to grasp intercultural communication concepts more effectively than through traditional lectures or textbook-based instruction.

### **5.2 Development of intercultural awareness and competence**

A central goal of the course was to foster intercultural awareness and competence—skills essential for navigating and understanding the complexities of intercultural communication. This encompasses not only the ability to understand cultural differences but also the ability to reflect on one's own culture. Film analysis played a pivotal role in this development, offering students a lens through which to analyze real-world cultural interactions. Five students mentioned self-reflection as one of their takeaways from the course. For example, one student reflected, “I gained a lot of background and knowledge on why the experiences I have had in the past were the way that they were. It also gave me a more in-depth level of cultural competency.” Another student commented, “Understanding Chinese perspectives regarding filial piety, saving face, etc., and how it contrasts with American culture and points of view... I have been able to put my own attitude, behaviors, and sense of self into perspective and realize that not everyone conducts themselves like Americans do.”

Ting-Toomey and Chung (2021) define intercultural competence as “the intentional integration of culture-sensitive knowledge, open-minded attitude, and adaptive communication skills in an intercultural encounter” (p. 362). To effectively demonstrate adaptive skills, one must first acquire relevant knowledge and develop appropriate awareness and attitudes. For instance, after watching *Pushing Hands*, a film in which a Chinese father immigrates to the United States to live with his son, American daughter-in-law, and grandson, students discussed and reflected on the Chinese cultural concepts of filial piety and family, as well as parent-child relationships in both cultures. The grandfather's daily conflicts with his daughter-in-law and his son's dilemma between filial duty and marital harmony prompted meaningful discussions on cultural values and generational expectations.

In subsequent intercultural group projects, several students chose to explore topics such as filial piety and Chinese cultural values, conducting thoughtful and critical interviews and analyses that incorporated examples from the films and their own experiences. The use of films enabled students to engage with intercultural communication concepts dynamically, encouraging reflection on their own cultural assumptions and attitudes. This reflective process deepened their understanding of invisible cultural elements. By comparing their own values with those portrayed in the films, students developed a more nuanced understanding of intercultural dynamics and a greater awareness of how differing cultural frameworks shape communication.

### **5.3 Enhancement of language proficiency**

A notable theme emerging from student feedback was the enhancement of language proficiency, which significantly contributed to the course's effectiveness. Seven students reported improvements in their listening comprehension and vocabulary, attributing these advancements directly to the films integrated into the curriculum. One student stated, “I find my listening comprehension and vocabulary improved through watching the Chinese films. It is also fun to discuss the film in Chinese and learn the relevant expressions.” This indicates that the films provided not just entertainment, but also practical language learning opportunities. Furthermore, students appreciated how the instructor introduced cultural concepts and film episodes in Chinese. One student remarked, “I like how the instructor introduced the cultural concepts and film episodes in Chinese. It is a good way to learn the language and culture at the same time.”

The films themselves served as a rich resource for language acquisition. By exploring the scenes and cultural references during viewing and doing projects, students were able to grasp the nuances of the language. Engaging in discussions about the films and conducting presentations and plays in Chinese allowed them to practice speaking and listening in a supportive setting, further solidifying their language skills.

### **5.4 Engagement with course components**

Among all the components of the course, readings, films, intercultural group projects, class discussions received the highest

ratings from the students, followed by debates and the individual presentation. However, feedback on the short play assignment was mixed, with some students expressing less enthusiasm for this component compared to the more film-focused activities.

Four students mentioned that pairing the films with group discussions and collaborative projects helped them understand the course material more deeply. One student remarked, "I love the course. Super interesting concepts of intercultural communication. Movies are fun to watch, related to the readings we do. The projects really help us think deeper and reflect on the readings and films." Another student commented on the interactions with the native speakers: "Having opportunities to talk to native speakers boosted my interest in Chinese learning and understanding of the course readings. Interviewing Chinese people was fun!"

The projects encouraged deeper analysis and allowed students to explore how intercultural communication plays out in both fictional film settings and real-life scenarios and experiences such as interactions and interviews with Chinese native speakers. This process helped them internalize the concepts and understand the films in a more meaningful way.

## 6 Discussion

The feedback from students demonstrated that film is an effective tool for teaching intercultural communication and Chinese language and culture at the same time. The visual and narrative nature of films makes abstract intercultural concepts more accessible and engaging, fostering deeper cultural understanding and enhancing students' cultural competence. As mentioned earlier, careful course design is essential when integrating language and content, including the design of class activities and tasks. The interactive course components in this study, such as discussions, debates, and group projects, provided opportunities for students to actively apply what they learned, making the use of films not only beneficial but also highly effective. Films also proved to be a powerful medium for language learning, making the process both enjoyable and impactful.

This study corroborates the findings of previous studies regarding the effectiveness of using film as a teaching tool. For example, Cardon (2010) and Buti and Ansyah (2024) highlighted films' ability to spark student interest in diverse cultures, while Champoux (1999) and Esmail and Matthews-Roper (2022) pointed out that films engage students by evoking strong emotional reactions, stimulating discussions, and prompting self-reflection and reassessment of personal beliefs. In line with these findings, the use of films in this course significantly enhanced students' intercultural awareness and competence. They began to reflect more deeply on their own and other cultures, developed open-mindedness, and adopted more understanding attitudes toward cultural differences and similarities. Moreover, they learned to avoid making hasty generalizations and fostered a deeper appreciation for cultural behaviors that differ from their own. These findings mirror those of previous studies (Chao, 2013; Padjen Đurić, 2025; Wardhany, 2022), which demonstrated that films can significantly enhance intercultural competence, including students' attitudes, knowledge, and awareness. Some students expressed that they would share what they learned with others and apply key concepts such as understanding, patience, and a willingness to learn in their future lives, contributing to a more culturally aware and harmonious world.

However, it is important to note that instructors must remind students that films are artistic representations created for dramatic effect and may contain stereotyping or cultural bias. Guiding students to recognize and thoughtfully assess such portrayals is itself a crucial aspect of cultivating intercultural competence.

Films also provided concrete examples and scenarios that helped students better understand the texts they read, enhancing their grasp of intercultural concepts and theories. This aligns with research that has emphasized that films offer vivid scenarios that help teach complex concepts (e.g., Alexander & Waxman, 2000; Bumpus, 2005; Cromarty et al., 2023; Pandey, 2012). In this course, films made classroom discussions more engaging, allowing students to draw connections between their personal experiences and the course material, creating life-to-text, text-to-text, and life-to-life connections.

Another contribution of this study is the finding that, with careful planning, implementation, and instructor scaffolding, language and content can be successfully integrated and should be considered in foreign language curricula. As mentioned earlier, in North American universities, a persistent issue in foreign language programs is the "divide" between language courses that focus on language teaching and are taught by language instructors, and content courses that focus on culture and literature and are typically taught in English by tenure-track faculty. This issue is actually not limited to North America but is observed worldwide. For example, Malmström and Zhou (2025), in their review of 19 empirical studies on collaboration between subject teachers and language specialists in English-medium instruction in higher education, showed that while such collaborations do occur, they face significant challenges including difficulties in defining shared teaching objectives, unclear divisions of responsibility, unequal power dynamics, and insufficient institutional support as well as time constraints. This study offers an example of how language and content can, and should, interact and collaborate to enhance students' learning experiences and outcomes.

## 7 Reflections and conclusion

Reflecting on future teaching, several modifications could be made to enhance the effectiveness of the course. First, careful consideration of students' language proficiency levels, group compositions, and topic variety is crucial when designing tasks. I would also revise the short play activity by allowing students to create their own plays and pairing them with native Chinese speakers to foster more authentic intercultural experiences. A class of students with mixed proficiency levels can be very challenging. Strategies to address this include grouping students by similar levels and providing lower-level students with additional language support, such as vocabulary lists, summary guides, and level-appropriate prompts and hints. Differentiating assignments by proficiency level is also an option. For example, lower-level students might focus on summarizing a movie or reading, while higher-level students might critically analyze a movie or write a persuasive essay on a topic. In sum, there are many effective ways to integrate language learning and teaching into a content course that accommodate different learning needs.

Additionally, certain film episodes could be revisited to facilitate deeper discussions on specific concepts or to support further language learning. Nobuhara and Yoshimuta (2018) emphasized the value of revisiting key scenes to reinforce comprehension and learning. Encouraging students to identify potential biases or stereotypes embedded in films is also beneficial for developing intercultural awareness, competence, and critical thinking skills. Pairing students with native Chinese speakers from the beginning of the semester could provide additional opportunities for intercultural interaction, enhancing both language acquisition and cultural competence. Such interactions may foster a deeper understanding of “invisible culture” and gradually increase the use of Chinese in class, helping students strengthen their language proficiency over time.

In addition, exploring technological tools, such as interactive subtitles to enhance language comprehension and VR headsets to immerse students in authentic cultural settings, could further improve learning outcomes. While using films offers many benefits for teaching and learning culture, it also presents challenges that require careful planning and adjustments. Bird and Godwin (2006) cautioned about the unpredictable relationship between media and audience response, particularly in fields like anthropology, where films might inadvertently reinforce ethnocentrism if not properly framed. To mitigate these risks, their recommendations for using films in classrooms—such as framing the films, addressing potential stereotypes, anticipating student reactions, maintaining attention through pauses, and encouraging post-film discussions—are critical for future course design.

Finally, with modifications and careful planning, the teaching practice presented in this study can be applied to other foreign language classrooms as well as general education classrooms. Given the need for foreign language learners and all students in higher education to acquire intercultural communication skills and an understanding of different cultures (AITaher, 2020; Brown & Lee, 2025; Kuffuor et al., 2024) in order to become effective communicators and intercultural citizens in this global village, film can serve as a powerful tool to spark students' interest in these topics and provoke thoughtful, critical discussions. Understanding cultures beyond the visible “whats” and “hows,” such as tangible crafts, behaviors, and scenes from different countries, and delving into the invisible “whys” behind various behavioral norms, is essential for every learner. This understanding is critical for learners' development, as they will be the future citizens and leaders of the world.

In conclusion, while the use of films in the classroom has numerous benefits, thoughtful planning, careful adjustments, and proactive strategies are necessary to maximize their educational potential. Lastly, I recognize that the findings of this study are primarily based on students' subjective feedback. Future research could include assessments of language and cultural proficiency improvements, such as pre- and post-course language tests or intercultural competence scales, to provide more robust evidence. However, as this is an action research study, the main focus is on addressing a problem identified through this new course offering. Students' feedback remains a key factor because the success of the course largely depends on whether they find it engaging and rewarding.

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**About the Author**

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Final survey

1. What is your general feedback about the course?
2. What have you gained the most from this course?
3. Which part of the course do you like best? Why?
4. Which part of the course do you like least? Why?
5. What are your comments about the components of this course: readings, films, intercultural group projects, class discussions, debates, individual presentation, short plays?

### Appendix 2. Sample discussion sheet

讨论问题  
*The Gua Sha Treatment* 《刮痧》

Please prepare the following questions for in-class discussion.

1. Who are the main characters in this film? What do they do? What are their relationships? (in Chinese) 这部电影里的主要人物是谁? 他们的工作是什么? 他们之间的关系是什么? (用中文)
2. Please tell the main idea of the film in Chinese.  
请用中文讲一下这部电影的主要内容。
3. Please use the concepts related to conflict styles in the reading “Understanding Intercultural Communication” (pp. 179—202) to explain the conflicts shown in the film *The Gua Sha Treatment*.
4. Do you agree with the analysis in Han (2015, 2018) and Wang and Sun (2014)? Please explain.
5. Have you ever experienced any intercultural conflicts? What happened? You're also welcome to share relevant experiences you've heard or read about.