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**Lowell Student Speaker Series**  
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***"Finding China through Film"***

Orientalism. The Asian peace sign. Made in China. We often use these stereotypes to describe a country and a population we assume to understand, rarely delving further when characterizing the culture or attempting to understand it as a whole. But is this really wise? You might wonder why I believe studying China is of such importance. Over the past thirty years, China has catapulted to the forefront of international politics – a player in every major issue from the energy crisis to the economy. To be frank, many predict that quite soon China will be the top global superpower. Just recently, it even dropped the dollar as its currency when trading with Russia. With it ever growing, *ever increasing its ownership of US debt*, it is becoming ever more critical to understand these individuals on a deeper level than our superficial awareness. I do not mean just the government – this aspect is of course important as well, but we must first explore the culture, the PEOPLE – the essence. This is where the business opportunities lie and their negotiations are as much about manners and respect as about hard facts. These misconceptions and lack of interest present a problem for America's place in the world – we need an understanding of China to interact with its people. The Chinese have studied, and in some aspects, embraced Western culture – shouldn't we do the same?

The first question we must ask is: From what has the Chinese population garnered the greater part of its perception of Western culture? Film – movies. It isn't our government's propaganda that has made such an impression, but the stories we create

about ourselves. With the opportunity to do the same readily available, we must seize it. Film, unlike any other medium of expression, offers a tangible manifestation of the problems and anxiety a particular culture is grappling with. Written accounts of history can only take us so far. Imagery presents an intimate picture of reality and opinion. The director crafts every shot to ensure a meaningful addition to the greater story. Chinese films in particular represent native individuals struggling to make sense of their history and the significant issues confronting the national identity. Essentially, there exists no better way for us to discern what the Chinese people think and feel about themselves. Instead of reading a biased article from the Wall Street Journal about the nation's economic gains, watching a film presents us with the opportunity to *engage* our senses and truly experience the agony and triumph these people endure... just as we do – Film can humanize this impenetrable mass for us. As opposed to words that simply tell us what to think, images allow – nay encourage – us to glean our own interpretation. If the film happens to be government propaganda, we are able to grasp the viewpoint the Communist party forces on the population. If the film is a retelling of the Cultural Revolution, we gain the ability to empathize with the family unit, constantly beaten down by ideological constraints. The Chinese culture is far more nuanced than we superficially comprehend. For example, as films show us, it is not just Confucianism, but this *new* – broken – fusion of ancient practices that now influence the people. Though we often forget when solely considering national interests, this is still a base issue of people interacting with other people. Hence, we must really strive to understand the Chinese on a raw, human level.

We Americans of course have our own way of representing this foreign entity.

However, we continuously fall into the trap of focusing on our own nation as opposed to presenting a transparent view of the Chinese culture. Film represents an extraordinary opportunity to learn about the culture and motivations of this nation that is both mysterious and threatening to the uneducated individual. We cannot truly understand them as people until we comprehend how they view themselves. Studying singular aspects such as its economy or energy policy is only useful when we understand the cultural and ideological constraints that motivate these international decisions. Unlike reading a book or even visiting the country, film allows us to feel what they feel – to discern the impact of the successes and horrors spurred by the past sixty turbulent years of their history. *These* aspects stimulate the actions and decisions of the modern nation. If we fail to understand their identity or reasons for their policies, how can we possibly hope to make capable decisions about China? We cannot. Film, an untapped resource, allows us to experience the emotional encounters, strategic decisions, historical influences and cultural constructs that determine China's path. It shows us the picture of a nation.

So, I appeal to you to put your preconceived notions aside and open your mind to the emotion and struggles of these individuals so different from us, and yet so similar. You may even learn something about yourself.