

# THREE LETTERS FROM CHINA



GRADES 10-12  
CLASSROOM GUIDE

USING  
THIS GUIDE ▶

ABOUT  
THE FILM ▶

DISCUSSION  
QUESTIONS & ▶  
POST-VIEWING  
ACTIVITIES

MEDIA LITERACY  
RESOURCES ▶

SUPPLEMENTAL  
RESOURCES ▶

ARTICLES AND  
REVIEWS ▶

## TEACHING THE FILM:

**Three Letters from China** is a feature documentary that paints three different portraits of Chinese life through the individual stories of families and communities on a farm, in a village, and on a river by a large city. A class screening of **Three Letters from China** will encourage students to think deeply about Chinese cultural identity as well as the harsh economic realities many individuals face. The film is well suited for Asian studies, history, social science, or Mandarin language classes. Taught in conjunction with this guide, **Three Letters from China** will challenge students to think critically about Eastern cultural identity and socio-economic conditions and facilitate further research into related topics such as Chinese culture and history, globalization, and the importance of education.

All SFFS Youth Education materials are developed in alignment with California educational standards for media literacy. SFFS Youth Education welcomes feedback and questions on all printed study materials.

Please direct all comments and queries to Keith Zwölfer, Youth Education Manager:

San Francisco Film Society Youth Education  
39 Mesa Street, Suite 110 · The Presidio San Francisco, CA 94129-1025  
kzwolfer@sffs.org  
415.561.5040

**SAN FRANCISCO  
FILM SOCIETY.**



## USING THIS GUIDE

This study guide is intended to flexibly support educators in preparing for and following up on a class screening of **Three Letters from China**.

Support materials are intended to facilitate group discussion, individual and collaborative creative exercise, subject-based learning and access to resources for further investigation of material. Educators are encouraged to adapt and abridge the content as necessary to meet their unique learning objectives and circumstances.

## ABOUT THE FILM

In the final film of his Asian trilogy, Swiss director Luc Schaedler presents three diverse, intimate and well-crafted portraits of life in contemporary China, each segment presenting an evocative and penetrating study of a different region. In the north, an elderly couple tenaciously clings to their family farm long after everyone else in the village, while their son and his wife negotiate a harsh existence in one of many grim industrial zones. An ancient rice-growing village in lush Guangxi Province in the south still struggles to heal the deep wounds inflicted during the upheaval, devastation and brutality of the Cultural Revolution. The final segment is a captivating and unusual glimpse of life in the modern mega-city of Chongqing on the Yangtze River. On the surface, the three depictions are transfixing and exotic, yet the themes and struggles that arise are startlingly familiar: small farmers are unable to make a living, fishermen are running out of fish to catch and families worry about job security. Over tea in a simple Chongqing cafe, a man speaks passionately of the deepening divide between the rich and the poor, and the world seems to be shrinking as he speaks. —Gustavus Kundahl

Luc Schaedler (Switzerland, 2013)  
80 minutes, Mandarin with English subtitles,  
Grades 10-12

### Recommended Subject Areas:

Art/Media  
Social Studies  
History  
Asian Studies  
Mandarin Language

### Key concepts / buzzwords:

Chinese History  
Cultural Revolution  
Documentary  
Economics  
Globalization  
Mandarin  
Materialism  
Modern China  
One Child Law  
Poverty



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### PRE-VIEWING TOPICS AND DISCUSSION:

A class screening of **Three Letters from China** will encourage students to examine the relationship between China's history and the modern age and how past events influence current economic status, family dynamics and the common struggle to make ends meet. Because the film addresses issues that are central to a history or Asian studies curriculum, it is advisable to direct students' attention toward both of these subjects before watching the film.

Questions to consider:

- What was the Cultural Revolution and how did it impact Chinese citizens?
- What is China's one-child policy and why was it put into effect? How has it affected Chinese families? How will it affect marriage and family in the future?
- What do poverty and wealth look like in China? How does it differ from one region of the country to another?

### POST-VIEWING DISCUSSION:

#### Character and Story

1) Describe the farmer's son in the film's first segment.

What kind of a person is he?

- What are his family values?
- Where does he want his family to live? Why?
- What kind of work is he willing to do?
- How do he and his wife differ in their opinions?

- How does he feel toward his parents?

2) In the film's second segment, a man describes the Chinese Revolution in 1951 and talks about the Red Guards capturing landlords.

- Why does he make a point to say that this is all in the past?
- Can the people of his community truly move on from an atrocity of that nature?
- How has this event affected their society today?
- Why is it important is it to unite the community as one?

3) Describe the teenager and her family in the film's third segment.

- Does the girl want an education? Why or why not?
- Why does her father want her to go to school?
- How would an education change her socioeconomic status?
- Why does she choose to live alone in the city, while her parents remain on the river? How do their living situations differ?

#### Context

1) What are the differences between Northern and Southern China? What do these terms mean geographically? What do they mean culturally?

- Can Northern culture exist in the South?

What about Southern culture in the North?

2) What is the meaning of luxury and materialism?

- Are these global concepts, or are they a function of Western culture? Explain.

3) What happened during China's Cultural Revolution?

- What ideology did the Cultural Revolution establish

## WHAT HAPPENED DURING CHINA'S CULTURAL REVOLUTION?



and promote?

- What fractures existed in Chinese society before the Cultural Revolution and how did they set the stage for the violence and upheaval that occurred?
- What was the experience of young people during the Cultural Revolution?
- What is the legacy of this era in modern China?
- How did the Cultural Revolution change demographics and shape the consciousness of the generation who now govern and lead China?

4) What is the one-child law?

- Why did China institute a one-child law?
- What are some of the social and cultural repercussions of the one-child law?
- What additional pressures do children face when they don't have brothers and sisters?
- How do you think a society of only-children differs from a society like ours, where most people have siblings?
- Think about your family and friends: how would social life and family life be different if no one had brothers and sisters?

### Style and Message/Reading the Film for Media Literacy

1) Explain the term juxtaposition.

- Where do the filmmakers use visual juxtapositions, and what is the effect?
- What concepts or ideas are juxtaposed thematically in the narrative?

2) Using examples from the film, identify the visual cues of different socioeconomic backgrounds.

- What are the images that signify poverty and what do

they have in common?

- What images do you associate with ancient Chinese history and culture?
- What images connote modern China?

3) What is your reaction to the end of the film, when the girl talks about people asking her if she is a boy?

- How does this connect with her birth parents abandoning her?
- Do you think the filmmaker intended for you to draw these connections? Why or why not?

## WHAT IMAGES CONNOTE MODERN CHINA ?

### POST-VIEWING ACTIVITIES:

1 ) Write a review of **Three Letters from China** for an audience of your peers. Begin by summarizing the film and explaining its central message. Then analyze the effectiveness of the filmmaker's technique in conveying that message to the audience. Use specific examples.

- Would you recommend this film to a friend? Why or why not?

2) Write a letter to one of the protagonists asking follow-up questions about what they are up to now. Write the letter as if you are a filmmaker wanting to know more about his or her life. Use at least 5 questions in your letter.

3) Create an artwork inspired by the nature that you saw in the film. Write a short explanation of what your work means and how it relates to the central ideas presented in **Three Letters from China**.



### California Media Literacy Standards Addressed In This Lesson:

- **Grades 9 & 10:** Standard 1.14 Identify the aesthetic effects of a media presentation and evaluate the techniques used to create them (e.g., compare Shakespeare’s Henry V with Kenneth Branagh’s 1990 film version).
- **Grades 9 & 10:** Standard 1.2 Compare and contrast the ways in which media genres (e.g., televised news, news magazines, documentaries, online information) cover the same event.
- **Grades 11 & 12:** Standard 1.1 Recognize strategies used by the media to inform, persuade, entertain, and transmit culture (e.g., advertisements; perpetuation of stereotypes; use of visual representations, special effects, language); Standard 1.3 Interpret and evaluate the various ways in which events are presented and information is communicated by visual image makers (e.g., graphic artists, documentary filmmakers, illustrators, news photographers).

For more information about media literacy standards in your state, visit:

- MediaLiteracy.com: resources for advancing media education, United States Standards for media literacy education. <http://www.medialiteracy.com/standards.htm>
- Frank W Baker’s guide to State Standards Which Include Elements of Media Literacy. [http://frankwbaker.com/state\\_lit.htm](http://frankwbaker.com/state_lit.htm)

### Common Core Standards Addressed In This Lesson:

This lesson addresses the English and Language Arts standards for Reading Informational Texts grades 8-12. Additional specific standard applications are listed below:

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2 Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3 Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.3 Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.



## MEDIA LITERACY RESOURCES

### SCREENING WITH MEANING

We live in a world where technology mediates a large portion of human interaction and the exchange of information. Every projected image, every word published on a page or a website, and every sound from a speaker reaches its audience through the medium, through the language of the device. The ability to parse the vast array of media messages is an essential skill for young people, particularly in a mainstream commercial culture that targets youth as a vulnerable, impressionable segment of the American marketplace. Most students already have a keen understanding of the languages different media use and the techniques they employ to inspire particular emotions or reactions, but they often lack the skill or awareness to fully deconstruct the messages they continuously receive.

Analysis of a media message—or any piece of mass media content—can best be accomplished by first identifying its principal characteristics:

- (1) **Medium:** the physical means by which it is contained and/or delivered
- (2) **Author:** the person(s) responsible for its creation and dissemination
- (3) **Content:** the information, emotions, values or ideas it conveys
- (4) **Audience:** the target audience to whom it is delivered
- (5) **Purpose:** the objectives of its authors and the effects of its dissemination.

Students who can readily identify these five core characteristics will be equipped to understand the incentives at work behind media messages, as well as their potential consequences. Media literacy education empowers students to become responsible consumers, active citizens and critical thinkers.

### CORE CONCEPTS OF MEDIA ANALYSIS

<b>MEDIUM</b>	<p><b>All Media Is Constructed.</b></p> <p>How is the message delivered and in what format?                      What technologies are used to present the message?                      What visual and auditory elements are used?                      What expectations do you bring to the content, given its medium and format?</p>
<b>AUTHOR</b>	<p><b>All Media Is Constructed by Someone.</b></p> <p>Who is delivering the message?                      Who originally constructed the message?                      What expectations do you have of the content, given its author(s)?</p>
<b>CONTENT</b>	<p><b>All Media Is A Language.</b></p> <p>What is the subject of the media message?                      What information, values, emotions or ideas are conveyed by the media content?                      What tools does the author employ to engage the viewer and evoke a response?                      To what extent did the content meet your expectations, given the format/author?</p>
<b>AUDIENCE</b>	<p><b>All Media Messages Reach an Audience.</b></p> <p>Who receives the message?                      For whom is the message intended?                      What is the public reaction to the media content and/or its message?                      What is your reaction to the media content and/or its message?                      How might others perceive this message differently? Why?</p>
<b>PURPOSE</b>	<p><b>All Media Messages Are Constructed for a Reason.</b></p> <p>Why was the message constructed?                      Who benefits from dissemination of the message? How?                      To what extent does the message achieve its purpose?                      What effect does the message have on the audience it reaches, if any?</p>



## THE NON-FICTION FILM WHAT IS A DOCUMENTARY?

A documentary is a film whose goal is to capture truth, fact or reality as seen through the lens of the camera. But there are many kinds of documentaries, and not everyone's idea of truth is the same. The Scottish filmmaker John Grierson coined the term "documentary" in 1926 to describe American filmmaker Robert Flaherty's romanticized culture studies, but nonfiction filmmaking dates back to the earliest motion picture reels.

The definition of documentary expanded as filmmakers experimented with technology and the goals of nonfiction. Avant-garde documentarians, like Dziga Vertov in the 1920s, believed that the mechanical eye of the camera gave a truer image of reality than the human eye and pointed his lens at newly industrialized cities. Leni Reifenstahl's propaganda films from Nazi Germany used the nonfiction form to convey a political message, a slanted truth. The international cinema vérité or observational movements of the 1960s attempted to remove authorship from the documentary. The observational filmmaker hovered like a "fly on the wall" watching the world without commentary. Modern documentaries often seek to raise awareness about a social, environmental or political issue, guiding their audiences toward civic participation and activism.

While watching a documentary, it is important to remember the core concepts of media analysis: who made the film, for what audience and why? The nonfiction format can be deceptively subjective, as all filmmaking involves an inherent selection process: in the images that are shot, the music and narration that accompanies them and, most significantly, the way in which they are all edited together. Media literacy means always analyzing a documentary for its message and authorial intent.

## A BRIEF TIMELINE OF THE DOCUMENTARY

**1895** The Lumiere brothers developed the first motion picture film reels, capturing brief, unedited clips of life around them called "actualities" (e.g., *Train Arriving at the Station*)

**1900-1920** Travelogue or "Scenic" films became popular, showcasing exoticised images from around the globe.

**1926** John Grierson coined the term "documentary" to describe Robert Flaherty's romantic nonfiction film, *Moana*.

**1929** Dziga Vertov, with the Soviet Kino-Pravda movement, released the experimental nonfiction film, *Man With a Movie Camera*.

**1935** Leni Reifenstahl released *Triumph of the Will*, the infamous propaganda film that chronicled the 1934 Nazi Party Congress.

**1939** John Grierson collaborated with the Canadian government to form the National Film Board of Canada, with the initial goal of creating Allied propaganda in support of the war.

**1960s** The cinema vérité movement began in Europe, shortly followed by "direct cinema" in the U.S. Portable cameras and sync sound allowed filmmakers to capture intimate footage with minimal intervention.

**1968** The Argentine film, *La Hora de los Hornos (The Hour of the Furnaces)* opened the door to the activist cinema of the 1970s, which used film as a tool to counter capitalist and neo-colonial politics in Latin America.

**1988** The US Congress mandated that the US government support the creation of independent non-commercial media, and the Independent Television Service (ITVS) was founded.

**2000s** The widespread use of digital cameras and editing software made the documentary medium vastly more affordable to independent and amateur filmmakers. Video sharing sites such as YouTube and Vimeo allowed amateur filmmakers to broadcast their work.

**PRESENT DAY** The term "documentary" has come to encompass a wide range of nonfiction cinema. Contemporary filmmakers continue to push the boundaries of truth in film and to explore new avenues and applications for the medium.



## THE MAKING OF A DOCUMENTARY

### Idea, Issue, Story.

Even though they are nonfiction films, most modern documentaries structure their content around a traditional story arc, with a beginning, middle and end, as well as characters, and a conclusion, theme or thesis to impart to the audience. Documentary filmmakers begin their projects with an idea or an issue that they wish to explore more deeply. Through research and planning, they develop a comprehensive plan before they begin shooting.

### The Production Process.

To capture candid moments on film, modern documentary makers often leave the camera running, collecting far more footage than the final film requires. They may do this during interviews or in observational-style encounters with their subjects. To get increased access and an observational aesthetic, documentary makers often use handheld cameras and natural light, rather than staging a more formal filming environment.

### Post-Production and the Documentary.

Because a documentary film relies upon candid footage, a large part of the film's construction occurs in the editing room, where you work with what you've captured. A documentary editor will sift through long interviews just to find a few phrases that will summarize the film's message. To emphasize important points and build the story, some documentaries use a voiceover,

an interview or a scripted narrative that brings candid footage together into a coherent statement. An original score can work alongside the voiceover to unify the footage and shape the mood of the film. Audiences often underestimate the power of sound to generate an emotional response. Many documentaries also use charts, graphs and historical footage to add context and emphasize key points.

### Distribution.

Once a film is completed, the filmmaker needs to help it find its audience. Many documentaries are made independently on small budgets, but what's the point of all your work if no one hears your message? Some documentaries will be released in theaters around the country or get programmed on public or cable TV channels, but most documentary filmmakers will start by submitting their work to film festivals, in hopes of attracting distributors for the theater and television markets. Filmmakers may also make their films available online and use social media to reach their target audience.



## SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES

### The Film's Official Website:

<http://www.watermarksthefilm.ch/>

### Research Materials Relating to Shooting Locations in the Film

Map of China's Provinces: [http://www.maps-of-china.net/province\\_map.html](http://www.maps-of-china.net/province_map.html)

The Guardian: "Minqin County Swallowed by the Desert": <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/gallery/2009/may/18/desertification-china>

Gansu Province: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gansu>

Jiuxiancun (in Guangxi Province): <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guangxi>

Chongqing: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chongqing>

The Guardian: "Invisible City": <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/mar/15/china.china>

Yangtze River: <http://depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/geo/yangtze.htm>

### Chinese History:

China's Cultural Revolution, 1966-1969: not a dinner party (Google eBook) Michael Schoenhals: [http://books.google.com/books?id=uNeVJgUZseoC&dq=china's+cultural+revolution+images&source=gbs\\_navlinks\\_s](http://books.google.com/books?id=uNeVJgUZseoC&dq=china's+cultural+revolution+images&source=gbs_navlinks_s)

Only Hope: Coming of Age Under China's One-child Policy, by Vanessa Fong: [http://books.google.com/books?id=A0-la2vliXwC&dq=china+one+child+policy&source=gbs\\_navlinks\\_s](http://books.google.com/books?id=A0-la2vliXwC&dq=china+one+child+policy&source=gbs_navlinks_s)

Introduction to China's Cultural Revolution: <http://iis-db.stanford.edu/docs/115/CRintro.pdf>

Asia for Educators: a Collection of Resources from Columbia University: <http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/tps/1950.htm#aftermao>

Washington Post interactive feature on China's one-child policy: <http://apps.washingtonpost.com/g/page/world/a-history-of-chinas-one-child-policy/596/>

Time Magazine, a brief history of China's one-child policy: <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1912861,00.html>



## DIRECTORS STATEMENT

### Luc Schaedler



“Since the crushing of the democracy movement in 1989, I have followed the upheaval in China with equal parts amazement and irritation: the country looks like a huge construction site and seems to be involved in a precipitous search for itself. In this unstable present the protagonists are taking tentative but courageous steps into the future.”(Luc Schaedler)

**THE TOPIC OF THE FILM** During the research and filming in China I kept returning to a topic that had preoccupied me in my earlier films: namely, how people respond to external events, ruptures and life changes, and what this means to them in their daily lives. I took this question to heart in my new film and continued my search for answers. After *Made in Hong Kong* (1997) and *Angry Monk* (2005), the current film *Watermarks* (2013) also marks the end of my Asian Trilogy.

**MY RELATIONSHIP TO CHINA** My relationship with China began over 20 years ago. Since the crushing of the democracy movement in 1989, I have travelled

repeatedly through China. I have followed China’s economic development and the associated political and social upheavals with equal parts amazement and irritation. The social changes triggered by fast-paced economic development unsettled the people. They registered the growing pollution of the environment and water with concern. Entire landscapes as well as a part of their own family history and the cultural history of China were punctiliously ‘flooded’ by progress. My love-hate relationship with China is reflected in the ambivalence of many Chinese, who are simultaneously proud of and disconcerted by developments in their country. These are the contradictory feelings that I have attempted to capture in my film.

**THE COLLABORATION WITH MARKUS SCHIESSER** In the project Markus Schiesser was responsible for the interviews with the protagonists as well as sound. To complete the research (2009/2010) and filming (2011), we travelled together for months through China and shared in the everyday lives of the protagonists. Markus and I made a good team. His relationship to the people grew out of his quiet ease and the fact that he speaks fluent Chinese. This brought him a great deal of respect. He was simultaneously an insider and an outsider. I was the stranger, as well as being more extroverted and louder. I had to build my relationship with the people through non-verbal means, by gestures and looks. In a cultural and political situation which treats the spoken word with caution and relegates most things to the deeper level of trust, we complemented each other ideally. Markus Schiesser studied Sinology and ethnology in Zurich and China. For over 12 years he has lived and worked in Beijing and Shanghai. He is married to a Chinese woman. We have been friends since the Zurich youth riots of the early 1980s.



**OUR WORKING METHOD** Water is the visually binding element in the film. Like a river, it flows through the individual scenes, stories and interviews. In China it makes sense to comport oneself like water. Wherever it flows, one lets it go, and wherever it is dammed, one gives way to it and finds another route. In this sense, time and patience are very important factors. What appears to be obvious whenever one works with people in a film turns out to be doubly important in China, for cultural and political reasons. In China, if you want to get close to the people, you have to give yourself a lot of time. It is a complicated but not unpleasant ritual, during which you spend weeks building up trust, step by step: a first conversation, a second one, drinking tea, smoking, chatting, eating together, slowly getting to the point and always coming back to another toast. The first contact, and how you behave at that point, is crucial.

[Facebook.com/watermarksthefilm](https://www.facebook.com/watermarksthefilm)

[Youtube.com/gobetweenfilms](https://www.youtube.com/gobetweenfilms)