Honor 413:
Constructing identities in the east and west: A comparative analysis of popular culture in the US and China

*Syllabus Subject to Change*

**Supervising Instructors**

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**Course Description:**

This class is a two-week intensive study of the intersection of popular culture and identity construction in the US and China. The aim of this class is to assist students to become critically aware of the nature of popular culture and of the forces influencing it (both in the US and in China) so that they can be active and informed agents in evaluating and shaping their own ways of life. It starts from the premise that popular culture, far from being a frivolous or debased alternative to high culture, is in fact an important site of popular expression, social instruction, and cultural conflict, and thus deserves critical attention. We will examine theoretical texts from both the US and China that help us to “read” popular culture, even as we study specific forms of popular culture from the internet, television shows, movies, print advertising, commercials, and popular music. Throughout the course, we ground what we call “culture” in political, economic, and social contexts. We will pay special attention to the ways popular culture affects people’s daily lives, producing satisfaction, pleasure, anxiety, despair and conflict. As part of the course, there are several cultural activities, course-related fieldtrips, and travel excursions included. These active and co-curricular learning components serve to broaden the students’ understanding of Chinese culture and society, and provide a basis for comparative analysis of popular culture.

**General Education Student Learning Outcomes**

This is an Explorations course in Social and Behavioral Sciences. Completing this course will help you learn to do the following with greater depth: 1) explore and recognize basic terms, concepts, and domains of the social and behavioral sciences; 2) comprehend diverse theories and methods of the social and behavioral sciences; 3) identify human behavioral patterns across space and time and discuss their interrelatedness and distinctiveness; 4) enhance your understanding of the social world through the application of conceptual frameworks from the social and behavioral sciences to first-hand engagement with contemporary issues.

**Course Objectives**

By the end of this course students will:
1. Increase their understanding of how popular culture is socially constructed.
2. Identify key customs and values of the Chinese people and how they shape the mainstream cultural landscape and present day society.
3. Develop competency and skill in discourse analysis to analyze common sense knowledge within the US and China.
4. Develop a heightened awareness of the role of popular culture in constructing identities and shaping the lives of individuals within the US and China.
5. Acquire greater understanding of the intersection of gender, race, ethnicity, and other cultural dimensions.
6. Explore their personal attitudes and beliefs about popular culture and be more knowledgeable of the impact of popular culture on their own and other's lives.
7. Increase their sensitivity to men and women’s lived experiences, personal functioning and well-being within US and Chinese society.

**Required Reading**

*Constructing identities in the east and west electronic reader packet.* This packet will be available on Blackboard.

**The Learning Environment**

Course material will be addressed by way of readings, class discussions, guest speakers, and experiential activities. This class is conducted as a seminar; therefore, students and instructors will share responsibility for the learning experiences that take place throughout the course. Students will be required to participate in four 3-hour preparatory classes at SDSU before traveling to Shanghai. The two-week program begins in Shanghai on Monday, May 26th and ends in Beijing on Monday, June 9th.

**Mandatory Preparatory Class Meetings:**

In order to provide the theoretical context to the course, to ensure a good experience abroad, and to have more time “out and about” in China, there are 4 mandatory pre-departure classes at SDSU. The dates are as follows:

- Monday, March 17 2-5
- Monday, April 14, 2-5
- Monday, April 28, 2-5
- Monday, May 19, 2-5

**Mandatory SDSU College of Extended Studies Pre-departure Orientation:**
Every SDSU student who studies abroad must attend an orientation prior to departure. Again, participation in a pre-departure orientation is mandatory. Date of orientation TBA.

**Professional Behavior**

When traveling to China, you essentially become ambassadors and representatives of the American people and the Chinese people will perceive you in these terms. You are also ambassadors and representatives of SDSU. Thus, you are expected to demonstrate appropriate professional and ethical behavior at all times. To further clarify, appropriate conduct and participation includes the following:

- **Class Attendance and Participation:** Since this course will run as a discussion-based seminar, every student’s careful preparation, attendance and active participation is essential for its success. Attendance is required in all scheduled elements of this program, both in class (pre-trip and in China), and at on-site activities and functions during the study abroad. More importantly, we expect you to be actively and fully engaged in discussions, field visits, excursions, and so forth, prepared to ask questions and to meaningfully comment on speakers’ observations and instruction. This is not an insignificant element of the course. Please recognize that this will likely mean being reasonable about “night before” recreational activities during the study abroad, and making wise choices about your schedule. Get enough sleep, and be responsible about your intake of food and drink so that you can be at the top of your game the next day.

Participation will be assessed on the basis of the following criteria:

a. Were you there? **ATTENDANCE** is the first (minimum) step in participation...you can’t engage if you aren’t there.

b. How actively **INVOLVED** were you in class activities? This is an assessment of your effort and attitude during exercises, discussions, field visits, with speakers, and so forth. **That you are shy or naturally quiet is an entirely insufficient reason for lack of participation!**

c. To what extent did you make **POSITIVE CONTRIBUTIONS** in discussions, excursions, site visits, and so forth? Not only is action required for learning to take place; reflection on what went well and what did not is also a necessary part of personal and professional development. You can best help each other in these times of reflective learning by actively and honestly contributing your thoughts, observations, experiences, ideas, and conclusions. We all lose when any of us withholds meaningful input. **2 points will be deducted off your final grade for not attending, not being actively involved, or not making positive contributions in class discussions, excursions, site visits, and so forth.**

All assignments should be handed in **ON TIME.** Late work will negatively impact your grade in the course. **You will lose 2 points off your grade for every day an assignment is late.**
If you have special needs or require special accommodations to be able to participate fully in this course or to complete the objectives of this class, please talk to us regarding these accommodations, as early as possible.

Assignments

1. **Before departing**, you will be responsible for **reading and responding to several reading questions**. We will discuss the reading and reading questions during the three pre-departure classes, and during the two-week intensive course abroad. (21%) **DUE IN CLASS, April 14**

   These readings provide context and the framework for the overall content in the course. Make sure you read the articles in their entirety before you respond to the questions. Your response to every individual question should be approximately two-three typed paragraphs in length.

**What is social constructionism?**

1. You will need to know what it means to have a social constructionist view of knowledge. In your own words, describe a social constructionist view of knowledge and explain how your theory about how we know is different or similar to Burr's definition of knowledge?

2. Define essentialism and anti-essentialism and give an example of each.

**The decline and fall of personality**

3. Gergen writes about how technology and our changing society has impacted our sense of selves, and who we are and what we stand for. Describe at least 2 instances in your own life when you felt that you experienced a shift or change in yourself/person/beliefs as a result of our changing society.

**Where do you get your personality from?**

4. Burr comments, “Instead of people having single, unified and fixed selves, perhaps we are fragmented, having a multiplicity of potential selves which are not necessarily consistent with each other”. What are some examples of the possible benefits of having multiple selves?

**What is a discourse?**
5. What are prevailing or dominant discourses? In addition, describe examples of two dominant discourses that you are personally familiar with in your own life, or someone you know very well.

6. What are alternative discourses? In addition, describe examples of two alternative discourses that you are personally familiar with in your own life, or someone you know very well.

Identity construction on Facebook

7. Discuss (with examples) why you agree or disagree with the article’s assertion that Facebook is an environment where people express “hoped-for-possible selves”.

2. Before departing, you will be responsible for completing your Identity Reflection and Learning Goals (14%) DUE IN CLASS, APRIL 28

For this assignment, you must respond to the following prompts:

• In what ways do you think your lifestyle is “typically American?” or typical of another national group, or of both?

• What role(s) does popular culture play in your own identity and values?

• What are some words and phrases you have associated with China or the Chinese? (These may be from media, movies, books, or your own personal experience)

• In what ways do you imagine your life is most similar to AND different from a college-age Chinese person living in Shanghai?

• Your decision to participate in this challenging cross-cultural experience is a significant commitment. What do you hope to “get out of” the program? You should come up with 4 (personal and professional/academic) goals.

• How specifically do you plan to accomplish these goals? What do you imagine/anticipate doing that will help you meet them?

• What do you imagine the biggest challenges be in accomplishing these goals, and how do you imagine responding to these challenges?

3. During your time in Shanghai, you will contribute to a presentation on “The Impact of the Internet and new media on well-being and identity construction in the U.S.” that we will be giving to a group of Chinese college students. As part of
this presentation, you will be asked to discuss how your own identities are being constructed by new media such as Facebook, Youtube, Twitter, Tumblr and Pinterest. During one of our pre-departure classes, you will pair up with someone else in class, or form a small groups of up to 4 people, choose one of the media listed above, and organize your ‘talking points’ for the presentation. (10 %) DUE IN CLASS, May 29

4. During the time in Shanghai and Beijing, you will be responsible for writing and turning in Journal Reflections based on particular prompts. (28 %)

While abroad, you are required to respond to several prompts in a journal. These prompts are designed to keep you focused on what you are learning and experiencing, and to facilitate the comparative analysis paper due at the conclusion of the study abroad program. Your responses can be handwritten, but they must be clearly legible! If the instructors cannot easily read your responses, you will receive zero credit. Each entry should be approximately 2-3 pages in length.

Reflection #1 DUE SUNDAY MORNING, JUNE 1
Now that you have arrived, you should begin to observe your reactions to, and feelings about your living situation (dorm), the classes, the city, and your classmates. In this first journal entry, write about one thing about EACH of the following that met your expectations, AND one thing about EACH of the following that surprised you:

1. Living situation
2. Classes
3. Host city (Shanghai) and neighborhood
4. SDSU Classmates

What other things about your new environment have been particularly confusing, frustrating or otherwise uncomfortable? Explain in detail and using as many examples as possible.

What other things about your new environment have been particularly satisfying, pleasing or otherwise appealing? Explain in detail and using as many examples as possible.

Reflection #2 DUE IN CLASS, JUNE 3
At this point in your time abroad you should have made contact with local people. Describe three interactions that you have had in which Chinese and/or American cultural practices were discussed. What did your contacts say about Americans? What did you say/how did you react? How did these conversations make you feel? What are you learning that helps you understand the perception of Americans by local people? What are you learning that helps you understand your own perceptions of the local people?
Reflection #3 **DUE IN CLASS, JUNE 5**
Reflect on the learning goals you set prior to your departure (remember those learning goals?). Are these goals appropriate for your experience to date? What have you been doing to achieve these goals? How are the classes, and your excursions/fieldtrips helping you achieve your goals? How do you imagine your goals changing once home, based on your experiences abroad?

Reflection #4 **DUE SUNDAY MORNING, JUNE 8**
What has been the most profound learning you have made regarding China and/or the Chinese people since your arrival? What about the media and popular culture in China has surprised you the most? What do you imagine reporting back to your friends and family about the highlights of your trip?

5. **Within one month upon your return**, you will be responsible for creating a Powerpoint presentation, comparing and contrasting dominant images, pictures, posters, advertisements, human activities and human actions in city public spaces in Shanghai/Beijing, and San Diego. **DUE JULY 12**

Specifically capture 5 pictures in Shanghai/Beijing and 5 pictures in San Diego. The pictures must be in city contexts. The pictures must be dominant images (i.e., you’ve see the same type of images being repeated over and over again).

Make reflections on each of the images showing how some of the pictures in Shanghai/Beijing and San Diego are portraying the same messages while others are in stark contrast to one another.

Consider what these images are inviting people to participate in, what actions are people encouraged to perform and how these images may shape how people see themselves and how they want to present themselves to others. In addition, reflect on how these images will influence how others are invited to evaluate and assess how others are measuring up to some kind of standard. For example, in responding to these prompts you should, for each picture, discuss what the image says about, “Who I am,” “Who I could become,” “how will others judge me” or “how I will judge others.”

In the presentation, you need to make a case for how the images that you have selected are a commentary about ideas about the self and identity.

Use words from the literature for this course such as dominant discourse, constructed, and identity in your reflections to compare and contrast your observations.

To conclude your presentation, make some summary comments related to your presented images.
Grading

Students are not guaranteed or automatically entitled to A grades. Students earn a grade of A. A equals Outstanding Academic Achievement.

A Grade: 94-100% A
90-93% A-

A is outstanding achievement; available for only the highest accomplishment

B Grade: 87-89% B+
84-86% B
80-83% B-

B is praiseworthy performance; definitely above average

C Grade: 77-79% C+
74-76% C
70-73% C-

C is average; awarded for satisfactory performance

D Grade: 67-69% D+
64-66% D
60-63% D-

D is minimally passing; less than the typical undergraduate achievement

F Grade: Below 60%

F is failing