

Review:

The Tongue Goes Through the Teeth: Teaching English in China

Pamela Toole, Director

Lotus Blossom Productions, 2000

Get Acquainted with TEFL in China

by Daniel B. Freeman

The Tongue Goes Through the Teeth, a documentary about teaching English in China, particularly in Beijing and Hong Kong, is an interesting and important film for anyone contemplating traveling far from home and teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). The film has four parts: the school, the classroom, the teachers and the students. It focuses on the private lives of actual classroom teachers who are living and teaching in China. They talk about themselves and what they hope to achieve and describe their adventures as ex-pats. There are teachers from the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. Some of the teachers are non-native English speakers from mainland China and Hong Kong. They all tell it like it is. Even viewers who know little about teaching English as a foreign language will enjoy this documentary. It has a certain charm and seems to come from the hearts of these personable people. It captures the adventure of teaching abroad and answers the questions of those who would use their Native Speaker qualifications for a chance to view other cultures and hear other languages English classes taught in Chinese schools by Chinese teachers are Confucian in that they are rigid. The classes are immense. The teachers give the information in Chinese with no conversation. The students become walking dictionaries who can't ask where the bathroom is but know how to say plunger in barely recognizable English. Hence the need for a communicative approach provided by native English speakers in their schools. Several of the people in the film are living and working in China today. They include Robert Toomey, who owns a school in Beijing called Robert's Education Center (REC). He hopes to open more schools and become the Berlitz of China. It looks as though he might make it.

Lucas teaches at REC. He is a happy-go-lucky Australian, very attractive with his casual style and his worn out baseball cap. He wants to stay in China for another year, maybe more, maybe less-whatever life serves up. His hat and his smile say it all.

Li Yanshee is a non-native English speaker who works at the Culture University in Beijing. She teaches English to diplomats, and although her command of English is good, it would be difficult for diplomats to learn enough from her to be fluent in English.

Brian, another non-native English speaker, is a very serious teacher, and one can see that he believes in what he does and thinks of himself as a future expert in EFL. He believes in teaching spoken conversational English. Jared is bright and sincere. He is teaching English in China in order to return to China in the future with an MBA and work in Chinese- American business ventures.

Jane teaches in Hong Kong. She has had experience in teaching English and culture. Jane also sings with a rock band in her spare time. She tells about life in Hong Kong, which is different from Beijing in that it is more modern and more crowded. It also has more indoor plumbing. The scenes of Hong Kong and Beijing are fascinating but too few. This documentary is particularly informative for untrained or novice teachers who wish to look at other cultures. It does not address the professionally trained EFL teacher and provides no new theories or teaching strategies. However, it does present an extremely interesting look at the teaching situation in China today and an opportunity for people who may be interested in teaching there to get a realistic picture of living and teaching in Beijing or Hong Kong.

Dr. Daniel B. Freeman is author/co-author of a number of ESL/EFL books including *Speaking of Survival* (Oxford University Press), *Longman Photo Dictionary* (Longman, Inc.), and *McGraw-Hill Connections Readers* (McGraw-Hill).