

Runyu (Martin) Li
Creative Project

*How Has COVID Influenced Trinity University's International Students from
Asian Countries?*

Intro

It is a creative project to produce a documentary. The documentary's primary audience is college students and staff members in the United States. This project will show film-related knowledge, editing skills, representation, documentary, and media content to convey cross-cultured information. The primary purpose of this project is to show American audiences the daily lives of international students from Asian countries and see the challenges and needs of international students.

Statement of Communication Challenge

The primary communication challenge of this project is to create a documentary that can represent international students from Asian countries and convey the message effectively to the target audiences. Because this documentary includes a lot of sensitive information, so the challenge includes getting interviewees' permission to show their faces on camera and protect their privacy.

Another challenge of the interviews is that because the pandemic is still bad right now, considering the health and safety of the interviewee and the interviewer, I also must consider the location of the interview and whether I need to wear a mask. After discussing with my advisor,

the solution we came up with was to find a more open shooting venue. After knowing that the COVID test results of both parties are negative, the interviewee will not be required to wear a mask. As an interviewer, I will maintain a safe social distance (6 feet) and wear a mask for filming.

Target Audience Analysis

The primary audience groups of the documentary are American university students, teachers, and staff. The documentary aims to allow American audiences to understand the pandemic's impact on international students from Asia. Through this documentary, American university staff can understand the needs and difficulties of international students and can better serve these students. The documentary will attract American professors and students by showing the campus culture-related content and the issues students care about, like online classes.

According to market research of learning from documentary audiences, 68% more audiences watched documentaries in 2013 compared to 2010 (De Rosa & Burgess, 2014). More documentaries are available online; documentaries have become easier to access for audiences to watch. The main ways people discover documentaries include articles or reviews, family and friends' recommendations, movie trailers, browsing on the Internet, and film listing. The market research also shows that 62% of the viewers will choose to watch the documentary online because they cannot see the documentaries any other way. The popular free online platforms include YouTube, NFB, and Vimeo. 32% of the viewers will choose paid online forms to watch the documentaries, including Netflix, iTunes, and Apple T.V. My documentary will be a 15-minute film, and it is for education purposes. I will post it on YouTube and Vimeo, free to

watch. I will contact Trinity University's campus newspaper, Trinitonian, academic departments, and TigerTV to spread the word to attract more audiences. I will also make an online trailer for around 30 seconds to 1 minute to attract the target audiences.

Project Goals

The project's primary goal is to create a 15-min documentary that can present the students' identities, challenges that international students face and target the audience well. This documentary will include two international students' journeys about backing to their home during the pandemic, their home life, and how they travel back to the United States.

I want my target audiences to understand the daily lives of some Asian students during the pandemic and understand cultural differences. Like "*Daughter from Danang*" (Dolgin, 2002), "*Search of General Tso*" (Durrenberger, 2018), and Netflix's documentary "*All in My Family*" (Wu, 2019), I want to interview and film the people around me so that audiences can more intuitively understand the daily life of a specific group of people. Like those documentaries, I will also use my voiceover to transition the story, connect the storylines, and compare diverse societies and cultures. I also want to show people's (interviewee's) reactions when facing culture shock, social changes, and different stages of life. I will try to make the two student interviewees represent the international students from Vietnam and China. The faculty interviewee can represent the perspective of American colleges' (Trinity University's) international office faculties. In addition, as Van Munster and Sylvest argued, the documentary can also let the audiences know more about international relations and different countries' policies (Van Munster

& Sylvest, 2015). I will use the individual's story to reflect a diverse group of people, cultures, the pandemic situations in other areas, and how different policies affected the pandemic.

Project Background

This project is all about representation. There have been many reports on the COVID situation in Asian countries and the situation of overseas students on the Internet and in American media. However, there are not too many direct reports on the impact of the pandemic on Asian students. There's also minimal information showing the daily life of the international students in their hometown. At the same time, due to the impact of the AAPI equality movement in 2020, more American audiences are willing to watch media content related to Asian culture. Netflix even made a series, films, specials, and documentaries to celebrate Asian American & Pacific Islander cultures (Low, 2021). This documentary intends to represent the unique perspective and experiences of Asian students to American audiences. International students from Asian countries are also members of the AAPI community. They also need to have their voices heard. A documentary telling their stories can help American university personnel, and policymakers better serve international students and change policymaking.

According to the transnational articulation programs of Chinese and Asian schools, international students can create value for the local professional field and market personnel's mobility (Dai, Musofer, 2020). However, after international students have experienced different cultures, they will form some "transborder habits," a mix of their traditional culture and the behaviors learned from the new culture (Xu, 2018). The international students would also keep or highlight their original national cultural spirit based on the situations. However, those

cross-cultural challenges that international students from Asia need to face have exacerbated during the pandemic. This documentary can let the audience understand the differences in the thinking and habits of international students. The documentary can also help policymakers formulate policies that align with international students' needs during the pandemic and help international students adapt to their original culture and development.

From my own experiences, I am an international student from China; I have not returned home for two years due to the epidemic and academic reasons. I also know the difficulties of many international students around me, such as paying for high-price tickets, the troublesome COVID accounting, testing and isolation, and the need to take online classes while experiencing jet lag and online classes. Therefore, I want to show this information to the audience and help them understand the reason behind it.

It is challenging for international students to study in the United States in 2020 and 2021 due to American study abroad programs' policies and school regulations. Many colleges and universities in the United States plan to implement offline teaching in the fall of 2021 fully and no longer provide online teaching services. According to a news report from Voice of America, as the COVID-19 intensifies, Chinese students in the United States face a dilemma: as more and more schools are closed, more and more Chinese students find themselves with nowhere to go (Yu, 2021). If they return to China, the travel ban will prevent them from returning to the United States. At the same time, Chinese students in the United States have to face a 14-day hotel quarantine after returning to China, which makes the trip back even harder.

Trinity University is one of the colleges that no longer provides remote classes for most students. According to a newsletter from Trinity University's President Anderson, Trinity

University will attempt to do in-person for students to learn and live on campus for 2021 (Anderson, 2021). Under such circumstances, many international students who cannot return to American schools must choose a gap year or consider other complicated flights to return to school in the United States. According to government VISA guidelines, new international students could not come to the United States this fall semester if they plan to pursue vocational studies (visa classified as M-1 non-immigrants) or academic studies (visa classified as F-1 non-immigrants) through fully online classes in the United States. However, new international students who cannot enter the United States due to travel restrictions, inability to obtain a visa, or health reasons may choose to take online courses, depending on their school. (Durrani, 2021) With these restrictions, the international students have to return to the U.S. campus in the 2021 fall semester. Otherwise, they could not keep studying at schools in the U.S. *USA TODAY* reported that with the progress of vaccination in the United States, many American colleges and universities would no longer provide online teaching and online courses since the fall of 2021 (Richards, 2021). These new policies have also led to many international students not being able to continue online learning in their home country but instead being forced to find a way to go back to school or choose a gap semester. According to EdSurge News, "Fall 2020 saw a whopping 91 percent decrease in new international student enrollment in U.S. academic programs. New international students enrolling in vocational programs dropped by 72 percent" (Tamez-Robledo, 2021).

Best Practices - Creative Process

Pre-Filming & Preparation Process

Documentary production mainly includes two stages: filming and editing. Due to COVID, the filming process of the documentary becomes a little tricky. To ensure the interviewee and interviewer's safety and comfort, the formats of the interviews need to be more flexible. Therefore, after I negotiated with some interviewees, I decided to do online interviews through ZOOM. At the same time, to obtain footage of the interviewees' daily life in their hometown, I asked the interviewees to take a self-film of their lives. Only through various shooting ways, as a producer, can I get enough footage to help me narrate the documentary's story.

According to the book *Documentary editing: Principles and practice*, successful editing of a documentary need a clear schedule, enough footage, and an organized storyboard (Bricca, 2017). So far, I have collected enough footage and made a clear timeline. The timeline is as follows:

April 2021 – September 2021

- *Ask International Students from Asian countries to film the footage from their hometown (Yushan, Vy)*

Week of August 28, 2021

- *Write and send out the confirmation emails to interviewees to agree to participate in the filming process (including showing face, name, and using the footage they filmed)*

Week of September 6, 2021

- *Write the interview questions for interviewees*
- *Ask the class instructor to view the interview questions*

Week of September 13, 2021

- *Send out the interview questions to interviewees*
- *Schedule the meeting time and determine the meeting ways with interviewees (zoom or in-person)*

Week of September 20, 2021 – Week of September 27, 2021

- *Borrow the film equipment from the Communication department*

- *Film the interviews*
 - *Yushan – September 21, 2021 (in person)*
 - *Vy – September 23, 2021 (zoom)*
 - *Dr.Laura – September 29, 2021 (zoom)*
- *Review the footage filmed by interviewees (rename the videos by their content)*

Week of October 11, 2021 - Week of October 18, 2021

- *Write the script and draw storyboards*

Week of October 25, 2021 – Week of November 8, 2021

- *Edit the video (first video edition)*

Week of November 15, 2021 – Week of November 22, 2021

- *Ask three Trinity faculty members to review the first edition of the documentary to give suggestions.*
- *Re-edit the documentary after professional review*

Week of November 29, 2021

- *Finalize the documentary*
- *Publish the documentary through Trinity's official school account*

Filming Process

Documentary makers have ethical responsibilities to their subjects (Maccarone, 2010). At the same time, it is also crucial for the filmmaker to associate the documentary's relationship with the public and deliver the information to the audience. To take the ethical responsibilities and reach the goals, I need to ensure interviewees' safety and comfort to share the information and ensure that my documentary can convey objective and adequate information. Therefore, I need to obtain the interviewee's consent for the interview shooting and write and use more objective interview questions. So, I sent out the emails and got permission to use the interviewees' footage and film the interview with them. The content of the email is as follows:

Subject: [Response Needed] Confirmation of participating in the filming process

Hi, [Interviewee's Name]

Again, thank you so much for participating in my documentary "How COVID influenced Trinity University's international students from Asian countries." Before the actual filming process, I need to confirm you agree with the following terms:

- *You agree that I can use the footage you filmed, and I will list you in the bibliography and/or references.*
- *You agree that I can use your real name, image, and personal information during the interview. If you feel uncomfortable about certain information you shared during the interview, the data won't appear in the final video.*
- *As the filmmaker, you know I won't show inappropriate scenes, including nudes, sexual assault, smoking, drinking, and drug-using scenes.*
- *You understand that this documentary will be used for educational purposes. With your agreement, I can use this documentary for my personal career, including my resume, job application, and other education degree applications.*

If you agree with the terms above, please respond to an email with "I agree." If you don't, please let me know which term(s) you don't agree with, so we can have further negotiations. Let me know if you have any questions.

Best,

At the same time, I prepared the interview questions for the students and faculty. I got some inspiration from a podcast made by the National Committee on U.S. China Relations. The podcast, "*Coronavirus Social Impact: Difficult Choices for Chinese International Students* | National Committee on the United States," features Dr. Yingyi Ma, an associate professor of

sociology and the director of Asian/Asian American Studies at Syracuse University (Ma, 2020).

This podcast mainly focuses on what factors influenced international students from China to make certain choices, like staying in the U.S. or returning to their hometown when the pandemic first started. Based on this podcast, I developed questions for international students about their life back in their hometown and their plan to study abroad. For the faculty, I asked how much they know about the international student's situations and the challenge for the school to manage the international students. Here are the interview questions:

For International Students from Asian Countries:

- How do you feel about the past year?
- How did you react when COVID first started?
- Why did you choose to return to your country (to your hometown)?
- How was your time at home?
- When are your happiest and saddest moments when you are at home?
- Do you know what kind of COVID prevention policy your country has? (Do you know some other countries' policies regarding COVID?)
- Do you like online classes? Why or why not?
- Did your journey back to the U.S. go smoothly?
- What do you think is the most significant impact of the pandemic on you?

Additional Questions:

- How do you feel once you get back to the United States?
- How's your travel back to school?
- Are there a lot of differences in the policy here compared with your hometown?
- How's your school life so far? Is everything as you expected?
- Is there anything else you want me to know?

For the Staff member from the Center of International Engagement (CIE) - International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS):

- Can you briefly introduce the situation of international students returning to school this year and last year?
- What are the main effects of COVID on international students?
- What do you think is the biggest challenge for the school during the epidemic?
- What are your expectations for the future?

When I did interviews, I asked additional questions to develop the individual storyline based on their answer.

Editing Process

After the interviews with the international students and Trinity's faculty members, I wrote a script and drew storyboards. Then I reorganized the footage by the theme and time. I edited the documentary based on the script and the order of the storyline.

In my documentary, I used the narrative method of interspersed stories, editing according to the timeline and topic. This narrative method means the documentary will present different stories back and forth, but these stories will still stick in particular narrative order (Bricca, 2017). The following is the script (voiceover) of my documentary and the selected content of the interview:

[Trailer/Beginning] *My name is Runyu Li; I am an international student from China. I am studying at Trinity University, a liberal art college in the United States. 2020 is quite a challenging year for most of us. Because of the pandemic, I haven't been home for more than two years. Due to the great change in the social environment, international students in the United States need to face various difficulties and make choices. However, I am not the main character of today's story. I want to show you the quarantine life of two Trinity international students from Asian countries.*

[Story 1 – part 1] *Yushan Liang is an international student from China. When the pandemic just happened, he chose to go back to his hometown. So, I wonder, what made him make that choice? [Respond of Yushan - How did you react when covid just started?]*

[Story 2 – part 1] *Like Yushan Liang, Vy Le, an international student from Vietnam, also chose to go back to her hometown in 2020's spring break. When I interviewed with her, because she was still in Vietnam, I had to video-call her through ZOOM. [Respond of Vy - Where are you, why you are there? Why are you still at your home?]*

[Story 1&2 – part 2] *Yushan and Vy both chose to return home when the pandemic just happened in the United States. Let's see how their life is in their hometown. [Respond of Yushan - The time at home; the Happiest and saddest moment at home] [Respond of Vy - Feel About the past year in general; the Happiest and saddest moment at home]*

[Story 1 – part 3] *Although it's really nice to stay with family, Yushan and Vy need to face various problems like taking remote classes and being in different time zones. [Respond of Yushan – feel about the online classes]*

[Story 2 – part 3] *For Vy, her biggest concern was if she could go back to school or not. [Respond of Vy – current Vietnam COVID policy, another international student from Vietnam's situation]*

[Sub Story] *According to the information provided by Trinity University's International Scholar Services department, most of Trinity University's international students have already returned to the campus for the fall 2021 semester. However, the Assistant Director of the Center for International Engagement, Dr. Laura Rodríguez Amaya, said the returning process for international students in 2021 is a little different from 2020. [Respond of Laura – the general situation for Trinity University's international students' status]*

[Story 2 – part 4] *In October 2021, Vietnam ended the lockdown, our interviewee, Vy, finally flew back to the United States, and I finally met her in person. [Respond of Vy – feeling back to school, wishes to other international students]*

Other Challenges

During the editing process, I made a terrible mistake. I lost an SD Card containing footage taken by a student about Asian countries and international airports. When there was no way to retrieve the original, I urgently contacted the photographer to apologize. Then, I contacted other interviewees and conducted further interviews to expand the content. At the same time, I shot more B Roll about Trinity University. I searched for proper video news related to the documentary content to make up for the missing video material from the SD Card. The whole process was excruciating, but fortunately, I still got my silver lining of hope. I acted in time to ensure that the documentary had sufficient content and was completed on time. This experience also gives me a warning. In the future, I will need to be more careful about the preservation of files, and the files must be backed up in time.

During the reviewing process, Trinity professors and faculty members gave me a lot of valuable suggestions. I learned that when I interview with my interviewees, I should be the one who guides what position that interviewee should stay on camera. Even during a zoom interview, I can also ask interviewees how they can look in front of the camera.

When I filmed some interviewees indoors, there were some background noises and echoes. So, during the editing process, I used Adobe Premiere's effects to adjust the volume and channel of the sounds. I also added denoise and dereverb to make the sounds sharper and clearer.

I have also learned that longer doesn't mean better. Even though I have a lot of great content, I wanted to show it to the audience. My advisor taught me that if I can't let the audiences stay focused on my content, I will lose more audiences if my documentary gets too long. So, I adjusted the content of my documentary a couple of times to make sure my documentary was in a good pace and the contents stayed with the theme.

Conclusion & Expectations

The length of the final documentary is 15 minutes, and students' interviewing content (A-Roll) and the footage in the Asian countries and Trinity University (B-Roll) are the central resources of the documentary. I asked three of Trinity's Communication department professors and faculty members to review my documentary and got approval. I have uploaded my documentary and the documentary trailer on Trinity University's TigerTV official YouTube channel. I used this documentary to join Broadcast Education Association (BEA) art festival documentary competition. Hopefully, this documentary can get Trinity University's faculty members' attention, change Trinity University's current school policies about online classes, and provide extra help for international students.

Although I lost a lot of footage by missing the S.D. card, with many adjustments and additional interviews, the documentary still has enough footage to show and has a great quality. In the future, if I produce similar media content, I will make sure to back up the media material, instruct the interviewee properly during the interview, and keep listening to the audiences' feedback and opinions.

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