

TELECOM 2006 INTERNATIONAL NEW ZEALAND FILM FESTIVALS

Waves

The Diaries of Chinese International
Students in New Zealand
Director: Li Tao
2006
120 Minutes
New Zealand/China
Photography: Li Tao
Editors: Shane Loader, Li Tao
Additional photography: Shane Loader,
Havier Quilambaoni
Subtitles: Nicole Mony
In Mandarin and English, with English
subtitles
Beta-SP



With: Ken, Rose, Lin, Jane

Li Tao's documentary about four Chinese students in a New Zealand high school is dedicated to teenagers who travel between cultures. That's a big category in 2006 – and they could hardly hope for a lovelier, more helpful gift than her film. She renders their experience with great insight and tenderness, for the edification of those they've left behind in one country, and the enlightenment of those who don't quite know what to make of them in another. Li, formerly an international student at Victoria University herself, was their teacher, and the intimacy she achieves suggests that she and her camera became surrogate parent to her subjects. The delicacy of her attention to their woes and joys makes it clear how faithful to that role she remains.

Each of the four is given a chapter in which he or she is captured in a phase that represents a different aspect of the foreign student experience. Ken is seen at his loneliest; Rose at her most embracing of Kiwi freedoms; Lin at her most conflicted and uneasy; and the formidable Jane at her most triumphantly unassimilated. And yet we see that none of them is totally fixed in that particular phase. It's the sociable Rose who tells the most painful story of alienated foreignness. As we're watching Lin in chronic panic about the school ball, we can see Ken, whose loneliness in the film's first section might break your heart, embarking enthusiastically on dancing lessons.

Li's finely nuanced portrayal of cultural displacement takes in a great deal more besides: adolescent vulnerability and resilience, the interdependence of individual and social identity, the ethnic diversity of contemporary New Zealand. It is in fact one of the richest, most absorbing films you are likely to see this year.