

Young strangers

ShanghaiDaily 26th January 2007

It's tough being a teenager anywhere, but being a Chinese teenager far from home in New Zealand is especially difficult. A remarkable Chinese documentary captures students' enthusiasm, pain and confusion - and their search for identity. It airs in English and Chinese next month, writes Chen Qing.



Teenagers don't have to travel thousands of miles from home to experience conflict, pain, elation, and search for personal and cultural identity. But for young Chinese students overseas, all these things, especially confusion and discovery, are etched deeply in their lives.

Last year, an independent documentary film about overseas Chinese students, "Waves," received high praise at the New Zealand International Film Festival.

It will be aired on February 20 in English and Chinese on the Shanghai Documentary Channel.

The producer of the documentary, Tao Li, says it is not only a story of a teacher (herself), and her students, but also a report "dedicated to teenagers travelling between cultures."

Through this film, people from different cultures can better understand the struggles of the teenagers from a different culture trying to adjust to a Western society.

"The film is wonderfully realized, at times heart-breaking and joyful, and always easy to relate to," said a senior reporter of "Close Up" at TVNZ, New Zealand's main television station.

"This film is undeniable proof that as different as we all are, we are the same."

"Waves" - named after a Chinese song in the film - is comprised of four half-hour episodes, "Alien Land," "School," "Self," and "Beijing Time."

The story unfolds at Hutt Valley High School in Wellington, New Zealand.

Ken celebrated his first Father's Day with his home-stay father and was thrilled to get his first job at a restaurant. Rose, a traditional hard-working student, was finally able to relax and embrace the differences in her new environment through her personal revolution.

Lin dealt with her first school dance and the universal teenage angst over being a young woman. Jane set her watch to Beijing time, dedicating her love to her friends back home and to her Chinese homeland.

Rose is an example of learning to adjust. At first, Rose only knew how to take directions and didn't know what she really wanted or felt. She didn't know how to express herself. When the teacher told her to sit down, she automatically sat - right in the teacher's chair. But she finally learned to be herself.

"I don't want to be a numb person who knows only about homework," Rose says in the film. "I want to pursue the things I want. I dance whenever I feel like it."

"Originality, creativity and diversity cannot be missed in education," says Tao, speaking of New Zealand. "Imagination is very important to students."

Every year, thousands of Chinese students fly to every corner of the world to study.

New Zealand has 80,000 overseas students, about a third of them Chinese. Of the Chinese, more than half are under 18, says Tao.

In 2002, Tao went to Victoria University in Wellington and studied film.

She has previous experience in television, and a sensitive heart. She decided to investigate the experience of Chinese teenagers, high school students, 16 to 18 years old.

"They are the generation of the one-child family," she says. "Their struggles, joys and tears reflect the spirit of a new generation. I want to record it truthfully."

During her studies, Tao made a video called "Black July," portraying Chinese students working their hearts out to pass the national college entrance examination every year in July. (The examination has been moved to June since 2003 to avoid the hot weather.) It plays a major role in determining college entrance and one's future.

Her professor, Russell Campbell, a famous independent film director, called it "unbelievable and traumatic" and suggested Tao pursue the subject of Chinese students.

"So I started my 'Waves' project, and I wanted to make it a bridge between East and West. I want to show a new China and its people to the world. I also want to bring information and insight to China, my homeland," says Tao.

Homesickness is a common topic for teenagers far away. "But this generation of young overseas Chinese students is more open, independent and confident," says Tao.

In "Waves," Tao tells Shanghai Daily that China's overseas students are now going through the stage of finding their cultural identity.

They are different from their forefathers: the overseas students during the May 4th Movement were China's elite who had strong ideas; the emigration wave in the 1980s and early 1990s was pursuing a green card.

These days Chinese overseas students are dealing with issues of cultural identity, says Tao.

Tao started her research in 2002 as a teacher at Hutt Valley High School. Her perspective became that of an insider and she became close to the hearts of her students.

One New Zealand film critic describes the documentary: "The intimacy Tao achieves suggests that her camera became surrogate parent and confidant to her subjects. The delicacy of her attention to their woes and joys makes it clear that she remains in her role faithfully."

Zhang Yuanyuan, Chinese Ambassador to New Zealand, calls it "full of humanitarian connotation." He says it not only helps New Zealand to better understand "these outsider Chinese students," but also advances the cultural and educational exchange between the two countries.

Tao, now teaching at Shanghai Institute of Visual Art affiliated to Fudan University, spent three years investigating, shooting and editing. She filmed more than 100 hours.

A quiet young woman who loves reading, Tao says the film took her into a colourful world.

"Resonating with the figures in my stories means that I am no longer alone. I want to bring New Zealand's new thinking to local Chinese students," Tao says.

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Created: 2007-1-26 22:02:56, Updated: 2007-1-27

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