

# Showcasing life abroad

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**A recent documentary that touches on issues faced by teens from China studying in Kiwi schools is gaining some attention.**

**W**HEN Chinese student Jane arrived in Wellington, New Zealand (NZ), she did not reset her watch to the local time.

It may have seemed like the most obvious thing one would do upon arriving in another country, but the teen refused to do it because she was homesick, and wanted to be reminded of her family and friends back home.

"I miss home very much," said the high school student of Szechuan, mingling with only fellow Chinese students — who, like her, were pining for home.

Many of them also use the computer to chat with their friends in China.

Jane is one of the four main characters in a documentary produced by Chinese filmmaker Li Tao, who has created a buzz in schools in the country and the film industry after it was first screened in New Zealand.

Simple yet captivating, *Waves: The Diaries of Chinese International Students in New Zealand* followed the lives of Jane and three other Chinese students — Ken, Lin and Rose — who had to learn to cope with culture shock, the language barrier and being homesick, while living away from home.

"They are 16 to 18-year-olds whose families have the means to send them overseas for a high school education — an emerging trend among middle-class families in China," said Tao in an interview with *StarEducation*.

Her documentary was screened at UCSC University's first International Education Conference held during her recent trip to Malaysia. The documentary was also submitted as an entry at the 2006 New Zealand International Film Festival and the 2007 New Zealand World Cinema Showcase.

## Study abroad

According to authors Rosalind Young and Steven Young, who presented a paper on problems faced by Chinese students in New Zealand, the country's international education market was worth NZ\$1.8bil (RM4.17bil) in 2002, which was then at its peak and the fourth largest industry in the nation.

In China, high school students are required to sit for the National College Entrance Examination, commonly known as *Gao Kao*, to gain admission into top local universities or colleges.

Many find the exam extremely tough since they have to compete with high-achieving students from all over the country.

Hence, as soon as the *Gao Kao* fever hits China, Chinese parents would go all out to ensure their children score well in the test — or, in some cases, even help them avoid it at all costs.

This is when the option of an overseas education comes in, for those who can afford it.

"It is a very difficult test, so some parents would rather choose to send their children away (so that they don't have to sit for the test)," said Tao.

Another common reason, said Tao, is that some parents feel it would be easier for teenagers to be more proficient in the English language compared to adult learners. Many also see this as a means of migrating to the country.

Tao's strong interest in international education prompted her to produce the two-hour documentary aimed at exploring the learning curve of *xiao liu xue sheng*, a special term coined to describe students who leave China to study overseas while they are teens.

"The documentary is not about whether it is better to live overseas. It aims to present the journey and issues faced by the young students truthfully," said Tao, who is an associate professor at Fudan University, China.

While working as an international student adviser at the school where Jane studied, Tao conducted a research on Chinese teenagers studying in New Zealand, and how living abroad at such a young age could affect their attitude and social behaviour.

Her interest grew even stronger in 2003 when the mainstream media in China slammed and labelled the teens as "trash", following several incidents involving drugs, gambling, and even murder among under-aged students studying overseas.

Such incidents happen, Tao said, because parents do not know what their children go through while they are abroad.

The school teachers may also lack under-



Tao's documentary presents the issues faced by young students living overseas.

standing and experience when dealing with international students' needs and problems.

"As a result, the teenagers feel that they are trapped because they are not being accepted or understood," she said.

For Tao, growing up in a military family has not deterred her from pursuing her passion for literature. In fact, it was her father, who was in charge of cultural affairs, who encouraged her to pursue a career in writing.

"It was one of his dreams to see me become a writer. He would make me recite Chinese poems and encourage me to write."

"Life in the military was very simple so there was a lot of time for me to learn, study and develop my writing skill," she said.

Tao graduated with a degree in Chinese literature from Zhejiang Teacher's University before she joined the Wenzhou TV centre as a broadcast journalist and documentary producer.

She then moved to Wellington to pursue her postgraduate diploma of arts in film studies and teachers training qualification.

## The privileged lot

Jane was among the privileged lot in China. Money was the last thing that she had to worry about when she was studying in Wellington.

She is among the new generation of children who were born after the one-child policy came into effect in the late 1970s, a government initiative to curtail population growth.

With only one child to care for, China's middle-class families could afford to provide their only child with the best things in life: best school, private tuition and, eventually, an overseas education.

Some send their children as young as 16 overseas to pursue their high school education and then to universities for higher studies.

This is all done in hope of grooming them to *chen long* or, in English, literally, rise to become a "dragon" — a symbol of success and power in Chinese culture — and make the family and ancestors proud.

Tao was glad that she was able to gain Jane's trust while making the documentary.

"As a filmmaker, I have to approach my subjects and encourage them to open up to me."

"It's about how much the people you're filming trust you to reveal intimate information about themselves. It's a challenge for documentary filmmaker," said Tao.

"A good documentary can help people understand more about themselves. The parents of the four teenagers were very touched when they saw the documentary," she added.