



MAINELAND

A FILM BY MIAO WANG



SXSW Documentary Feature Competition (**WINNER - Special Jury Award**)
Independent Film Festival of Boston (**WINNER - Special Jury Award**)
Maryland Film Festival

FORMAT

90 min | HD | Color | Stereo
Mandarin Chinese and English
2017 | China/USA
A Three Waters Production

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SHORT SYNOPSIS

Filmed over three years in China and the U.S., MAINELAND is a multi-layered coming-of-age tale that follows two affluent and cosmopolitan teenagers as they settle into a boarding school in blue-collar rural Maine. Part of the enormous wave of “parachute students” from China enrolling in U.S. private schools, bubbly, fun-loving Stella and introspective Harry come seeking a Western-style education, escape from the dreaded Chinese college entrance exam, and the promise of a Hollywood-style U.S. high school experience. As Stella and Harry’s fuzzy visions of the American dream slowly gain more clarity, they ruminate on their experiences of alienation, culture clash, and personal identity, sharing new understandings and poignant discourses on home and country.

LONG SYNOPSIS

With China’s ascendance, there has been an exponential surge of study-abroad students — Chinese students now account for over one-third to one-half of international secondary school students. Many are children of the new Chinese wealthy elite, whose parents found success in China’s economic rise of the last decades.

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The journey begins with illuminating interviews and admission panel reviews in Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen. The admissions officer interviews a colorful variety of students. Stella and Harry, our main protagonists, are accepted for the Fall 2012 semester at Fryeburg Academy, Maine, along with a gregarious cast of characters who weave throughout the film. Stella and Harry’s family and school life in China stands in contrast to their new lives in Maine. For three years, the film observes their normal teenage malaise, angst and frivolity, and their very different attempts at adapting to an American high school culture and education as they transition from a metropolitan Chinese to a rural American lifestyle.

Stella is outgoing and boisterous. Her American dream is of cute boys and a High School Musical–style school experience. Her parents expect her to take over the family manufacturing enterprise – but she wants to teach. Just before arriving in Maine, the life she knew shattered. Her parents divorced. Her mansion in Shanghai was emptied. Stella dives head first into her new social life in America. In China, dating is not allowed in high school; in America, Stella has many rotating boyfriends. She becomes a cheerleader and performs seductive dances during talent shows. Her mother is appalled listening to Stella’s stories back home.

Harry is reflective and philosophical. He seeks a Western-style schooling that encourages critical thinking. Like many Chinese boys his age, he has a videogame habit. Harry’s family urges him to retain traditional Chinese values. In a class in Maine, he researches the Tiananmen Square Massacre for the first time, and his findings enlighten him about both China and America.

Through lyrical cinematography that transports us from China to the U.S., MAINELAND captures a new crop of future Chinese elites as they try to find their place between the collectivist society they come from and the individualist culture they come to embrace. As Stella and Harry’s fuzzy visions of the American dream slowly gain more clarity, they ruminate on their experiences of alienation, culture clash, and personal identity, sharing new understandings and poignant discourses on home and country.

MAINELAND

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

In my non-fiction filmmaking I seek the balance between pushing boundaries of the form through poetic and lyrical story telling, and illuminating the larger context of contemporary social issues. MAINELAND is part two of a trilogy of films (BEIJING TAXI was the first) looking at the changing sociocultural environment of contemporary China as well as engendering mutual understandings in U.S. / China relations. With the exponential surge of Chinese studying in high schools in the US – a 1000% increase in five years' time – this film can impact the discourse of this social phenomenon.

This is a relevant story for both myself and our generation. I grew up in Beijing, and at age 13, I immigrated to the US with my parents. The next five years were very difficult but formative years. Crossing continents from one culture into another at that age is the single most important turning point for anyone who has gone through this experience. My transnational identity provides a perspective that reveals the nuances and humor of both cultures. It also shaped me into a firm believer in the value of cultural and educational exchange as a fundamental basis for inspiring and building a better understanding between people of different nations. We live in an increasingly globalized and often troubled world. My interest as a filmmaker lies within making films that can help to bridge cultures.

I have been intrigued by the Chinese obsession with education. The emphasis on education is not a new phenomenon in China, but with stiff competition in "the New China," a college education seems like a minimum requirement for any decent job opportunity. More importantly, as China looks to its next decades of growth beyond simply cheap labor and manufacturing, they are eyeing the American educational system as the best example of how to produce creative and innovative thinkers who will take China to the next level, and lift China into a true developed nation. There's a rapidly growing elite class in urban China (which has the second-largest number of millionaires in the world) who want to find the best education for their children, and they have a lot of resources to pour into their (typically) one child. Private tutors, exam prep agencies, afterschool and weekend classes, summer camps, and study-abroad info sessions all compete to advertise their services in this new landscape. Everyone with means in China plans to study overseas, as long as they can find a school that will accept them. Often, this might also mean students end up in a school in a small town in the middle of nowhere in America – far from the images of American cities they are accustomed to seeing in the media.

In 2011, Fryeburg Academy invited me to screen BEIJING TAXI on their campus. Upon arrival, I realized that Fryeburg (one of the oldest private schools in the US) has an international student body of 160, and that one-third or more are Chinese. The American teachers and the staff at the school remarked how little they understand of the Chinese students, aside from admiration for how respectful they are towards elders and teachers, and how studiously they study and care obsessively about their grades. Sitting in the cafeteria during lunchtime, I noticed large groups of Chinese students gathered around a couple of tables. A couple of them told me – "If I knew there were so many Chinese students in the school, I wouldn't have come." I became fascinated by the thought of these Chinese students studying in small-town Maine newly arrived from a megalopolis, often setting foot in the US for the first time. More and more schools in America are now faced with an increasingly large body of Chinese students. Many of these schools are similarly stymied by how to integrate this new student body into their classrooms and school life.

MAINELAND questions the expectations that Chinese families and the students themselves have about America, the discrepancies they experience, and the conflict that arises as a result. The film also raises some important questions: does studying abroad necessarily guarantee a better life for them? Some may integrate into American society; some may never make any non-Chinese friends, while some may return to China sometime after college as government or business leaders. How will an overseas perspective change a new generation of young Chinese and what may be that lasting impact be on the future of China and the world? Could they perhaps eventually become part of a bridge across the cultural divide? These are questions I hope to leave with the audience at the end of the film.



TOPIC SUMMARY

Recent U.S. diplomatic remarks and media headlines emphasize “a global expectation that no major issue can be solved without the active engagement of the United States and China working in concert together.” Similar to previous generations, the focus is also on the next generation: “China’s youth will determine the future of their country – and likely that of the world,” proclaimed Time Magazine.

MAINELAND began focusing on these recent topics in 2011 from the personal journey of Chinese youth attending high school in rural Maine. According to The New York Times Magazine (“The Parachute Generation,” Feb. 2, 2017): “Roughly 370,000 students from the mainland are enrolled in American high schools and universities, six times more than a decade ago. Their financial impact — \$11.4 billion was contributed to the American economy in 2015, according to the Department of Commerce — has turned education into one of America’s top “exports” to China.” This new generation of study-abroad students represents a vastly different demographic in the history of Chinese immigration to America and the rest of the developed world.

The key drivers of study-abroad Chinese students include:

- Gaokao – the Chinese national college entrance exam – is the single factor that often determines a student’s future. There is increasing dissatisfaction with the failing qualities of the Chinese educational system and frustration with an academic environment that focuses on rote learning and fails to foster creative thinking. The Chinese have high expectations and perceptions about the quality of the American educational system.
- They are hoping for an advantage in a competitive job market made more so by a domestic surge in college graduates. Since the 1990s, China has doubled its number of higher education institutions. More than 60 percent of high school graduates now attend a university, up from 20 percent in the 1980s. But this surge has left millions of diploma-wielding young people unable to land white-collar work.
- There is overwhelming public distrust in some fundamentals such as food and water safety and air quality that extends deep concern for the rising middle class, beyond the undeniable economic rise - prompting them to seek a safer and higher quality of life elsewhere for their children.
- There is a lack of security about political stability, property and financial ownership in China for the wealthier class. The affluent are actively moving their savings abroad, as well as investing in real estate abroad.
- The parents want to expose their children to greater opportunities and a more international perspective in a globalized world.
- China, with a population of nearly 1.4 billion, added 1 million new millionaires in 2014 and trails only the U.S. in terms of most U.S.-dollar millionaires.
- The number of super-rich has grown faster on the mainland than anywhere else. By mid 2015, China had 9,555 ultra-high-net-worth individuals worth more than US\$50 million each, a 24 per cent rise from the year before.

In China, this study-abroad group is often publicly perceived as youth who are escaping the Gaokao to have an easier life in school abroad. Most parents and youth also have no preconceived conceptions or expectations about the process of entering an American school at an earlier age, unaccompanied by parental care. The youth rapidly discover that there are many other challenges they have to face, aside from integration and cultural adaptation. As depicted in MAINELAND, the American education system challenges students in a different way and their culture and relationship with China complicates this experience.



STYLE AND POINT OF VIEW

Shot on cinematic HD on location in Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Hong Kong, and Fryeburg, Maine, **MAINE-LAND** juxtaposes the bustling cityscapes of a fast developing China with the quiet small town landscapes of Maine and a slice of Main street America in recession. The crowded streets of the Chinese cities and frenzy of development has a more handheld and gritty feel. The soundscape is layered and rich. There is a sense of dizzying claustrophobia. The colors of China are more saturated and rich, through a hazy filter of the omnipresent smog that fills each city sky in China. Each frame seems to not be able to contain enough, with elements and action on the fringe and falling outside the frame. The style in Maine is somewhat different. The shots are more static and expansive. Each tableau of the town and surrounding environment shows more negative space. The color palette is predominantly blue, green, gray, and (snow) white in the winter. The sound of nature and quietness is heightened in the soundscape of Maine.

The film paints a lyrical portrait of adolescents searching, adjusting, and straddling different worlds, internal and external conflicts. Verité and candid moments interplay with moments of visual poetry. Many of the interviews are filmed over the shoulder, often when the students are speaking to someone – the admissions officer, the teacher, the parents. Much of the film is about perceptions, often distorted perceptions. The shooting style will accentuate perceptions and point of view – mostly from the POV of the students. In the foreground and tight in the frame is the POV of the Chinese students, a close up of their face, expressions, or the back of their head, and layered or intercut in the background is be China and Maine seen and experienced from their perspective.

FILMMAKER BIOS

Miao Wang (Director / Producer / Co-Editor) is an award-winning filmmaker who focuses on creative and cinematic documentaries that inspire cultural understanding and a humanist perspective of the world. Her critically-acclaimed documentary films *Beijing Taxi* (feature-length) and *Yellow Ox Mountain* have screened at over 70 international festivals and institutions such as SXSW and the Guggenheim Museum, with US theatrical release, and broadcast nationwide. *Beijing Taxi* is digitally distributed by Sundance Artist Services. She directed *Made by China in America*, a documentary short in Morgan Spurlock's acclaimed *We The Economy* series. Wang is a recipient of grants and fellowship from the Sundance Institute, the Jerome Foundation, New York State Council on the Arts, the Tribeca Film Institute, Tribeca All Access, IFP Filmmaker's Lab, Independent Film Week, Women Make Movies, and the Flaherty Film Seminar.

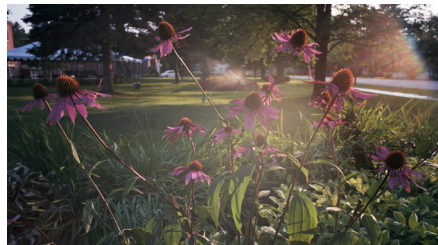
Violet Du Feng (Producer) is an Emmy Award winning film producer and director involved mostly in non-fiction projects. Her recent films, including *Please Remember Me* and *Nanking*, have been showed around different film festivals in China and abroad including Sundance Film Festival, Tribeca Intl. Film Festival and the Golden Horse Film Festival. She worked as a TV producer for five years before learning filmmaking at UC Berkeley's Graduate school of Journalism. She has extensive producing credits for Shanghai Television, CNN, and BBC.

Damon G. Smith (Producer) is a story architect, film producer, and co-founding partner at Cinelan, the award-winning digital-first media company. He was the curator and supervising producer of two high-profile short-film series, *We The Economy* and *Focus Forward*, which screened at over 90 film festivals worldwide, and has authored more than 200 articles for outlets such as *The Boston Globe*, *Time Out New York*, and *Filmmaker Magazine*. Currently he is creative producer on a new feature-length film, Kirsten Johnson's *Lord of Obstacles*, filming in 2017/2018.

Robert Chang (Producer) is a New York-based filmmaker. He has been a producer on award-winning feature films that have premiered at Sundance and SXSW including *Advantageous* (Sundance 2015 Jury Prize Winner), *Beijing Taxi* (SXSW 2010), *Half-Life* (Sundance 2008), and *Nae-boo-soon-hwan-seon "Inner Circle Line"* (SXSW 2006 Jury Prize Winner) as well as *Made By China in America* (2014), a documentary short in Morgan Spurlock's acclaimed *We The Economy* series. He also has experience as a board director, venture capital investor, and executive. He is a graduate of the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy, University of Chicago, and the Yale School of Management.

Sean Price Williams (Director of Photography) has become one of the most sought-after cinematographers working in independent film today. His films have been featured in high profile film festivals around the world, including SXSW, Sundance, Cannes, CineVegas, Tribeca, Hot Docs, Silverdocs, and Full Frame. He has photographed award-winning films including *Frownland* (Ronald Bronstein, 2007), *Beetle Queen Conquers Tokyo* (Jessica Oreck, 2009), *Beijing Taxi* (Miao Wang, 2010), *Kate Plays Christine* (Robert Greene, 2016), *Heaven Knows What* (Sadie Brothers, 2015), *Queen of Earth* (Alex Ross Perry, 2015), *Listen Up Philip* (Alex Ross Perry, 2013), and *Kati with an I* (Robert Greene, 2014). He spent many years working with legendary documentarian Al Maysles and was assistant cameraman on films including Martin Scorsese's *Shine a Light*.

Elizabeth Rao (Editor) is a film editor and producer based in New York. She got her start as an Assistant Editor on the Paramount remake of Nancy Meyers' *What Women Want*, following the film from production through post-production. She associate produced as well as assisted in the edit of *In Transit*, the last documentary by filmmaker Albert Maysles, a film exploring the American dream through encounters on a cross country train journey aboard the Amtrak Empire Builder. She recently produced fiction feature film, *Movie No.1*, directed by Josephine Decker and starring Molly Parker (*House of Cards*) and Miranda July. *Movie No.1* is now in post-production, with supervising editor Marie-Hélène Dozo (*The Unknown Girl*, *Kid With a Bike*, *Stop the Pounding Heart*). Liz is a graduate of the Academy Program of FAMU film school in Prague, and Yale University. In both her documentary and fiction work, she looks for projects that uncover new subjects and new voices. Ones that explore uncharted territories in unexpected ways.



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