



# “Looking China” and “Understanding China”: the third pole culture and learning to be human

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**Abstract** In order to put the theory of "Third Pole Film Culture" into practice, and to strengthen cross-cultural communication between China, the United States and Europe in the area of film production, the Academy for International Communication of Chinese Culture has established an interesting and creative film making project entitled “Looking China Youth Film Project”. The present article describes and evaluates the intercultural implications of this project, which connects young people from different parts of the world creating thereby global relations that can be seen as a new hope for innovative intercultural syntheses that can offer us a solid common foundation of a new global ethics, which is more needed now than ever before. The paper concludes that the Third Pole Looking China Young Film project offers a lot of new opportunities to explore and experience the vast arena of intercultural and global human learning.

**Keywords** Third Pole Film Culture · Chinese culture · Intercultural dialogue · Film production

## Introduction

According to Professor Huang Huilin, the Dean of the Academy for International Communication of Chinese Culture, the European and the American cultures can be called the “two poles” of world culture. However, she also points out that due to its outstanding and magnificent tradition that was developed over thousands of years, Chinese culture can doubtless represent a “Third Pole” of global culture. It is

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beyond question that China's great contributions to the humankind deserve a visible place in its history and contemporaneity.

The same holds true for the global film culture, for film is one of the most important transferors and manifestations of different cultural heritages, reflecting the typical patterns of manifold different cultural areas, their languages and habits.

Hence, Huang Huilin's "Third Pole" paradigm also represents a theoretical vision and educational strategy for such a future development of the film production that could and should include the Chinese film culture. In this context, professor Huang wrote:

The vision derives from our understanding of the comprehensive revitalization and development of the Chinese film culture in the new century and reveals a timely necessity for Chinese films to confront the challenges of globalization. (Huang 2014, 2)

### Looking China youth film project

In order to put the theory of "Third Pole Film Culture" into practice, and to strengthen cross-cultural communication between China, the United States and Europe in the area of film production, the Academy for International Communication of Chinese Culture has established an interesting and creative film making project entitled "Looking China Youth Film Project". From its very beginning in 2010, the project has every year until now enhanced the possibilities for many talented young foreign directors to get to know, to understand and to spread their views of Chinese culture, and at the same time expand the horizons of Chinese students, and strengthen their international horizon.

Every year, many young directors from all over the world are given the unique opportunity to visit China and to produce a movie about their own vision of this modern country and its ancient Middle Kingdom heritage. "Looking China" enables them to express their vision and their comprehension of China, Chinese people, Chinese culture, and Chinese way of life in an artistic form. This is a very effective way of spreading knowledge about China beyond its boundaries and also of transferring genuine emotions regarding this country to other countries and into the hearts of their people.

This aspect is even more important if we consider that "Looking China" is an intercultural project which is aimed at empowering young individuals to view the world from multiple perspectives. It works for a world where differences are welcomed as learning opportunities and where intercultural understanding develops naturally through intentional cross-cultural interactions. It is designed with a goal of enriching societies by initiating transcultural dialogues and enhancing diverse thinking skills.

All this helps Chinese and foreign students to grow social skills such as critical thinking and intercultural empathy, and enables them to communicate across cultural differences. The project supports initiating different, but honest views in order to strengthen a Culture of Dialogue on universities all over the world.

## The self and the other in intercultural dialogue

It doubtless holds true that the many beautiful and genuinely impressive products of the “Looking China” project pertain to the subjective minds of their authors. They transfer their own view of Chinese culture and society, and their own understanding of its people and its history.

We may therefore ask ourselves whether these subjective views, or these subjective understandings that are manifested in the films of these young scenographers and directors can truly contribute to a better global understanding of the country and its culture.

We must not forget that films are a form of direct perception. This includes enjoyment, attentional and affective experiences, but these elements can also lead to a critical distance of the contents seen on the screen.

In the last decades of the 20th and even to a greater extent, during the twenty-first century, the scope of the research on human consciousness and perception theory was dominated by the theories of the body and neurology. However, in this regard, not much work has been done on the conscious experience of the film (Tan 2018, 10), especially in case the films in question are embedded into the realm of intercultural interactions.

As I have been working a lot on the questions regarding the methodology of intercultural and transcultural research, I am well aware of the fact that the confrontation and understanding of the so-called Non-Western cultural traditions is always linked to the problem of differences in language, tradition, history and socialization processes (Silius 2020, 257). The interpretation of various aspects and elements of different cultures is namely always linked to the geographic, political and economic positions of the interpreter as well as the subject of interpretation (Rošker 2021, 18).

Therefore, the very idea of providing young international film students an opportunity to create a film on China in China is a big step towards surpassing such fixed position and arriving in a more “objective” realm which allows students to eliminate many unconscious prejudices and bigotries regarding this culture, which for them, has hitherto been unknown, exotic and sometimes even mysterious. In this way, the young film project Looking China has clearly shown that “Western epistemology” represents only one of many different forms of historically transmitted social models for the perception and interpretation of reality.

For young people, surpassing boundaries between different languages, cultures, and traditions, and becoming able to eliminate their culturally determined, ingrown and often deep seated prejudices against the Other, always has a great educational value. Therefore, the Third Pole Looking China Young Film project offers a lot of new opportunities to explore and experience the vast arena of intercultural and global human learning.

## Learning to be human

I have watched many films that have been made in the scope of this project, and one of the deepest impressions they have left in my heart was the impression that these young directors have—in many different ways, but always genuinely and sincerely—tried to show to their intercultural audiences what it means to be human in China.

In traditional Chinese ethics and also in contemporary Chinese humanities, the notion of “Learning to be Human” (*Xue zuoren* 學做人) is of utmost importance. This phrase does not only emphasize the idea of becoming human as a purpose of learning, but rather focuses on a simple description of the process, based upon a statement often and commonly used by the Chinese people when relating to or proposing a form of personal and moral fulfilment. It is therefore by no means coincidental that this notion plays a central role in the Chinese social and cultural education. And as already mentioned, it permeates in a subtle and often latent manner the great majority of narratives that represent the basis of the movies made in the Looking China Young film project. In one way or another, most of them reflect the traditional Chinese emphasis on such education.

In China, the notion of education is namely understood in its wider social connotations. As it is shown in most of the films that have been produced in the framework of this project, the Chinese society always emphasizes the value of such an education in regard to the questions of human-becoming. In this view, which is basically defined by Confucian orientations and perspectives, the ontology of humanness, i.e. of that which distinguishes human beings from animals, (*ren xing* 人性) is not limited to direct and one-dimensional activities of tangible, concrete social practice, even though such practice is a fundamental and continuously evolving root of human existence. In such a view, the social relationships of everyday life lead to the formation and development of reason and emotion in individuals, but also to the construction of their language, logical thought, and feelings. These abstract and ideational entities are retroactively influencing, changing and reshaping the material environments and relations in which people live. Without them, there would be no progress and no evolution of the humankind.

Human practice and interpersonal relations which constitute societies have manifold different images, but they always have to be learned, and as we all know, learning is a crucial aim of any education. And because this learning of social practice and social relations is simultaneously always linked to both, our reason and our emotions, all genuine education—including the one obtained through making and watching films—allows for the shaping of ontologically fundamental psychology (*xinli cheng benti* 心理成本體). In this view, the human inwardness becomes a crucial field for investigating deepest levels of reality and existence. Most of the films made by these young directors in and about China, reflect on this important issue.

Hence, it becomes clear that such views of reality—and especially of reality that pertains to a certain—in this case the Chinese—culture could not be maintained or developed without education. The latter is also crucial in the various particular (i.e. culturally and situationally conditioned) methods of shaping moral values. In my view, these are diverse and cannot be judged and even less universalized. And yet,

we have to remain aware of the specific requirements of the times and spaces in which we live.

## Conclusion

Especially in the current times of the great pandemic of COVID-19, we have to be aware of the necessity of preserving the values of the Confucian relational ethics, but also of the European Enlightenment values, because they all can—each in their own way—contribute to an enhancement of interpersonal responsibility and social cooperation.

In this context, it is important to expose that the making and spreading of such intercultural movies enhances our common humanness. And it is precisely this humanness that enables us to live and to feel our mutual relations in a responsible and emphatic, harmonious way. But it is also the same humanness that makes possible the realization of our free will, through which we can achieve new possibilities of active participation in the shaping of our realities by our autonomous decisions. But in order to understand the genuine grounds of such decisions, we might envisage for a moment the idea that humanness is not something self-evident because becoming human has to be earned, and, more importantly, learned.

This is why I think that intercultural projects such as *Looking China* are of utmost importance. In an artistic and creative manner, they connect young people from different parts of the world creating thereby global relations that can be seen as a new hope, a hope for innovative intercultural syntheses that can offer us a solid common foundation of a new global ethics, which is more needed now than ever before.

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