



# Looking China Youth film project: untold stories a small handbook on documentary or how to shooting successfully in unknown circumstances

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**Abstract** Theoretical and practical work in the education of students of film and television directing are important and somehow go hand in hand. The choice of the topic, the director's attitude, the question of the concept, are themes that are thought about more and more as the level of knowledge and understanding increases. What happens when a student faces with an unexpected challenge, with an unknown topic, in a new environment? How much education, and how much coping, intuitiveness, talent, are important for making the decisions?

**Keywords** Theory · Practice · Knowledge · Impressions · Attitude · Concept

## Our students: theory and practice

In the process of educating a film director, in addition to theoretical learning and lectures, the practical work of students is very important. Their exercises are designed according to the curriculum, according to which the student mastering certain tasks gradually learns film directing directly, experiencing and feeling what he listens to in the lectures. These exercises are a real challenge and are extremely important for students.

Students attach great importance to the exercises, which is understandable, and work a lot on their exam films. It is important for them that the films are good, successful, that they try and learn the teaching units that are covered. Over time, during four years of undergraduate studies, they hone and build their author's language and their cinematic poetics.

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Students often find theme for their practical exams in their environment. Which is understandable. Movies, it must be admitted, often resemble each other. Students mostly deal with stories of growing up, maturing, misunderstandings, first loves, partings, abandonments. They think about the things that what worries them, trying to understand the world in which they live.

During their schooling, they make films from different genres. They are shooting a feature film, which is the most difficult task. Then they also work in the field that attracts them the most, documentary film, because it has a completely different approach and directorial procedures. They also make films from the field of television directing, whose volume, variety of genres, and complexity scare them a little.

During the semester, students have enough time to prepare, write scripts, organize locations, shoot and edit material. Due to their insecurity, sometimes laziness, too much thinking, inexperience, being burdened by the final result, fear of failure, they are very often late, do not finish complete films, submit works they are not satisfied with.

### ***Looking China*-basic data**



*Looking China* is an international cooperation project, organized by professors, doctoral students, assistants, students of Beijing Normal University, and other Chinese faculties, managed by the Huilin Foundation.

The project involves the arrival of a large number of students from around the world to China, divided into groups, who, in different parts and regions of China, shoot documentaries about Chinese reality, traditions, culture, habits, thus promoting Chinese values, culture and influence.

The project involves a large number of people, perfect organization, commitment, love and devotion, devotion and interest in the films that are shot during the workshop. From the first steps in China, the landing and the first meetings, everything was organized in a minute, not leaving too much free time for questions and doubts, at least in those first days of meeting with distant and unknown worlds.

*Looking China* is an ideal platform for release, imagination, for overcoming insecurity, for freedom and creativity, for the experience of fast work, in conditions that

cannot always be controlled, in the circumstances we get to know during filming. Students return from China tired, exhausted, but satisfied, happy, relieved of fear, aware that they have made efforts that they would never have done in conditions of relaxation and comfort. And that, which is very important for them, they achieved certain results.

## Moving the student

One of the biggest fears that students have is the fear of going in front of the public with their own work. That burden can be insurmountable, bind hands, and tangle thoughts. We, who work with students both theoretically and practically, fight with all our might to liberate, move, relieve, and relax the student.



For this purpose, we also use various tricks, we show them films by authors who are either very old, or who have made two or more films in the same year. My repertoire includes Clint Eastwood, who at the age of 91 writes, directs and stars in the film *Cry, Macho*. Then the Japanese director Ryusuke Hamaguchi, who in the same year writes scripts and directs the magnificent films *Drive My Car* and *Wheel of Fortune and Fantasy*, for which he won two major awards at two important European film festivals, Berlin and Cannes. There is also Claire Denis, who wrote and directed two feature films this year—*Both Sides of the Blade* and *Stars at Noon*.

Screenings and conversations have a healing effect on students, but decisions and steps must be taken by themselves, to embark on a filming adventure that, like any adventure, has an uncertain course, unpredictable paths, and an unknown end. Of course, the direction of that path, and the concept, is determined by the student himself, with the cooperation and mentoring of his professor.

The concept is very important, it depends a lot on the script and above all the director's idea, it is the most important directorial decision and in some way it is related to the recognizable author's style. In *Son of Saul* and *Sunset*, Laszlo Nemes insists on close-ups, his actor is always in focus; Terrence Malick insists on a moving camera and wide-angle optics.

The concept is, in a way, preparation, Pre-visualization. It gives security, does not agree to compromise. We can agree on everything and we can compromise on everything, but when we determine the concept, the director's approach, it determines the level to which the student can deviate in realizing his directorial idea.

That is why it is important for them to know the theme they will be dealing with, to feel friendly and good in its environment, to have confidence in themselves, but also in the story they want to tell.

## **Our students and *Looking China*—meeting**

The first encounter with the *Looking China* program was surprising for our students. But our friendship lasted for a long time, for years, it developed and changed, and there was enough space for friendship to develop, strengthen, and become mutually important and significant.

*Looking China* is an intensive and dynamic program, which lasts three weeks, during which the film students have to choose the theme of their films, get to know it, shoot it, edit it, and show it to the audience. All that, at our Faculty, what students do during the whole semester, which lasting several months, here they finish in about 17 days.

Of course, they are not left to their own. From slow and indecisive young people, they become fighters and lions, dynamic, fast, uncompromising. I myself am surprised with how much enthusiasm and energy they approach the tasks, often facing them for the first time on the day of shooting. It suddenly becomes a challenge for them that they want to face and that they need to deal with. To become winners.

## **Positive consequences**

Cooperation with the *Looking China* brought a number of benefits to our students. Through many years of working together, and analyzing and summarizing all the results, certain rules were changed and the workshop naturally developed with improvements. One of the important things is leaving enough time for students to prepare for a long journey and creative work in an unknown environment. The organization and timetable of the *Looking China* project are very well thought out, and almost ideal.

## **Themes**

Before arriving in China, students are offered a range of themes to choose from. There are not too many of those themes, there are only slightly more than the number of students who come. In numbers, that ratio would be 1:1,3. The ideal and right number that enables the choice would be 1 : 2, but it is clear that the possibilities are limited, that it is not easy to find so many themes. The offered topics have already been defined, that is, they have already been organized in some way. For the

themes that they are offered, contacts have already been made and consents have been largely secured, both for the spaces of shooting and for the people who will be filmed. Students are offered not only the titles and names of the themes, but also more extensive views, newspaper captions or recordings, if available, and numerous links that direct us to a better acquaintance with the themes.

Students are then given a certain amount of time to familiarize themselves with the themes and choose one. That term is not long. On the contrary, it is extremely short. There, perhaps, is the greatest stress for *Looking China* participants. Themes are assigned according to the system, whoever chooses first is his/her. Sometimes it happens that the student doesn't have the opportunity to look at the email right away, so when he turns on, a good part of the themes, the best ones, are already reserved. The main complaint of students is that, often, this procedure is not fair. It is impossible, unfortunately, for two students to choose the same theme, although I am sure that two completely different films would be created. If you offer a group to make a film on the theme of LOVE, ten authors would make ten completely different films, only a few of which would really deal with the theme of love.

That's why, as a professor, I inform the participants of my group in advance at what moment I will offer them themes, asking them if they are free then, waiting for the moment when everyone can, at the same moment, access their emails. It happened to me once, that a student protested that she had few topics left, because she was on a plane on a trip when I sent the themes. Her rebellion was sincere, from the heart, and it lasted a long time. It was also understandable, because every student wants to make the best and most successful film possible. We solved it, finally, with the authority of the professor, but it is not good that the authority solve these things. Therefore, today, I am asking for everyone's written consent that, at the time I offer, they will be able to read what *Looking China* has to offer.

## The importance of the first impression

The time that I offer for an answer is very, very short. Just a few minutes. Students do not have time to open the provided links. They have enough time to decide based on the title and short content, which are sometimes very telling, provocative, inspiring. This is how one exercises and in practice confirms something that is the basic lesson of the first year of study, at all film academies of the world, the **importance of the first impression**. It is usually unmistakable, and when we first read something that may be our future work of art, the impression we get will remain unchanged until the very end. And when we try to run away from it, we always end up coming back to it. That impression that something is strong, witty, poetic, relaxed, rich, poor, reduced, playful, imaginative, we usually write it down somewhere on the side, as a reminder. When we get confused, or in doubt, we usually read what we wrote down, and that word, or words, puts us back on track, on the right way. They become the basis and foundation of the concept of our future directing process.

Sometimes, in documentary, the speed of reaction is important. If we don't decide, if we don't pick up the camera, if we don't push the button, if the red light doesn't light up, the event may pass, we may not record it. What happens only once,

we cannot return, repeat, there are events that do not repeat themselves. We must be ready, with the lens pointed, we must wait for the event, not the event for us.

If it happens that students send the same theme at the same time, it is decided who pressed the enter key first. If there is no winner there, the lottery decides.

In 2016, Nikolaus Geyrhalter, an Austrian director who has directed and produced several dozen documentaries, shot the film *Homo Sapiens*. Although this movie has the word *Homo Sapiens* in its title, there are no people in it at all. The film talks about spaces, abandoned, devastated, which were actually destroyed by *Homo Sapiens*. His carelessness, negligence, laziness. The film abounds with ugly shots, broken, burned, altered architectural features, but it is, in a way, surprisingly and stunningly beautiful and honest. It is beautiful and powerful, eternal, actually the idea of the film. That everything touched by the human hand can be both beautiful and ugly, it depends on commitment, on the time you dedicate to something, it depends on love.



## What after selecting the theme

Then, when the theme is chosen, students are faced with wishes, hopes, expectations, dreams, and what is in reality, what the topic really offers.

It's always like that in documentary, reality is brutally honest. A lie does not exist, it only helps and encourages to get to the true reality as soon as possible. Students, I must admit, prepare for the shooting thoroughly. They read everything

they can find, think about the director's approach, whether the topic offers enough for an author's documentary, or whether everything will remain at the level of reportage.

I spend time with the students studying together with them all available material. However, I don't have answers to the many questions they ask me, because I also don't know the space where we will shoot, the conditions, the circumstances, the actors.

It is not a rare case that we get a completely different impression about a theme that we hear or read about when we meet it directly. And then we make the final decision, whether we will make a film about it or not. Many times, the story turns out to offer less than it first seemed.

An experienced documentary filmmaker knows that. I have given up more than once, or found stories where they didn't seem to exist. On one occasion, I read about a grandmother who lives in a house destroyed by an earthquake, with holes in the walls, which the local government didn't rebuild. I went there with the cinematographer, and found a completely different situation. It turned out that they tried several times to rebuild her house, but that the grandmother, for reasons known only to her, refused to do so.

## Author's attitude

The documentary maker can keep to stay silent, he can not say something, but he cannot say the wrong thing, or to lie. There is no such thing as an independent, objective documentary. Every documentary film is a subjective, personal reflection of the existing reality, precisely because it was made by the hand and mind of a certain author. And for a documentary film, the most important thing is not what he will say, but what he will **leave out of the film**. In filmmaking, there is always a selection of reality. But, if in a feature film it is of an aesthetic character, in a documentary it is exclusively the **author's attitude**. By choosing what to say, what to show, and what not to, the documentary maker observes the world from his own point of view, thereby conveying his own author's attitude.

A documentary film must satisfy that basic informative pattern, describing the event and answering the basic questions that also relate to journalism - **who, what, where, when and how** - but if it also answers the question **why**, that answer, described above, hides the director's an attitude, which does not have to be objective, and with which we do not always have to agree. **Why** is someone, or me, making this film? What do I want to say by it? Why am I interested in a certain topic? What do I think about it? Why and how do I want to convey that opinion and attitude of the spectators? Why I have a camera, and why the spectator is looking at it must be seen in my shots!

I try to talk about it also with my students, but at that first stage of just getting to know each other, it's still too early. We're just trying to see if the story is visually appealing enough, if there's any conflict, any dramatic plot, or if it's boring, or interesting in any way, if a certain narrative flow can be predicted.

*Looking China* is a fast and dynamic program in which, once a theme is chosen, there is not much time to give up on it and look for something else. I mean, it is not wise to do it. You will surely fall into deadline.

In all this time, and I have been a mentor on more than thirty films, this has only happened to me once. Students from Romania, in a remote location to which they had to travel by train, decided that the story of local brandy production was not interesting enough for a 10-minute film. I mean, that everything that has to be said about it, is said in just a few minutes. And the factory was almost closed, in a state of rest, because the process of making brandy is finished, the plants from which it is made have long been used, they no longer succeed.

The students returned to the base dissatisfied, unfinished work. Looking for another topic, they wasted too much time. And then they chose what has been filmed countless times, a general place, which is always interesting to foreigners, but probably not a little to the Chinese themselves. They made a film about street food. The problem with that subject is that it is much more interesting live than on film. And what, if you don't have a main character, some of his problems, his pain, with an endless series of similar shots, you only get a postcard.

## Matter of concept

It would be said, then, that students in the *Looking China* program, choosing a topic, must have a bit of luck. It's not like that. In constant conversations, study, familiarization with the story, locations, and today all this is possible on the Internet, we try to foresee all the circumstances, to find more angles, more ways of observing the same story.

What students learn is that no story is boring, unimportant, redundant. It is important from which angle you approach the story, how you observe it. In each one, you can find something interesting and instructive to watch. With such an attitude, it rarely happens that a student does not find an approach and a thread that will connect the events before him into a solid, compact story.



Students, under my influence, usually don't make too firm concepts for stories that they have yet to experience live. Hard concepts could be overwhelming. If they



are not achievable, the student can waste a lot of unnecessary energy trying to realize the imagined concept, insensitive to the challenges and favorable circumstances that the theme, from another angle, may offer. A student, like any author, must remain open and flexible, for all unexpected possibilities, paths and directions the film can suddenly take. Film is a living matter, open, twisting and shaping like living dough, and the author and the work he creates must be in an organic cooperation. They must move together, following each other's steps. Their movements must be synchronized.

## Main character

From past experience, what happened were the little things that we expected, and that we have successfully solved before. They mainly related to a certain closure of the characters, or the spaces in which it was supposed to be filmed. For example, some characters behaved differently when the camera was turned on. They would become more closed, and they would become uncomfortable. This is very often in documentaries. There is an exercise that, before filming, to meetings and conversations, to preparations, we bring the equipment, turn on the camera, shoot with it, give those who appear in the film to shoot, to play, so that the actors can relax as much as possible and get used to the presence sometimes unpleasant techniques.

In a fast-paced program like *Looking China*, there was no time for that. If the actor start to behave differently, we would resort to other tricks. We would allow the actor not to speak directly to the camera, because that would constrain him, scare him, but we would record him imperceptibly, hiddenly, while performing his daily tasks, or those tasks related to the theme of the film, and later we would record only his voice, and that voice would planted under the picture, the so-called voice over.

There were other problems as well. When the actors did not want to let us film in their houses, again due to fear and discomfort due to the presence of the technology, so we had to stay outside with the camera the whole time, filming the actor only at his workplace, as a security guard who maintains a magnificent park in the center of the city. Even then, that film would have turned out well, because the spectator does not know that there should have been another intimate line of that story, if the director had not constantly lamented, not paying enough attention to what was in front of her, what she had left, constantly lamenting for what will not be in the film.

## The art of the possible

Documentary is, to a large extent, the **art of the possible**. Adapting, adverse circumstances constantly hitting, constant changes, getting the most out of the minimum.

For example, in the grandiose, modern concert hall, a true architectural wonder in the city of Harbin, we were not allowed to film inside, in the hall, during the performance of the concert, probably due to copyright protection. We could only film in the corridors, in front of the hall, and outside. The lady director imagined her work, to the greatest extent, in the concert hall, wanting to accompany one of the authors

during the performance of the artistic act. It was an insurmountable obstacle for her. I thought that the architecture of that building was perhaps even more interesting than the concerts themselves, and that a musical piece could be created with simple shooting of architectural details. Grandiose like the building itself. The details that line up, and there are as many of them as you want, lead, in one musical accompaniment, in the finale, to broad plans, the total, the building itself, in a musical crescendo, climax.

Unfortunately, in this case I'm only a professor, a mentor, not an author, so it was more of humming in a thin voice, not singing at the top of my lungs. And we changed the subject.

### **The importance of the main character**

As far as I remember, those were the only cases when students differed in what they imagined and what they encountered. In all other cases, the agreement between what was expected and what was obtained was at a high level. Back then, the films and stories simply breathed together with the authors, which was also seen during the filming itself. You can somehow feel the atmosphere of a good work in the making.

In those works in which the student authors recognized that it was important to single out the **main characters**, those films had more chances for success. Big topics are always discussed through small individuals. As a rule, a film should have one main character. If there is none, if we shoot everything and anything, then the film becomes amateur, it loses the main thread, the bond, something like glue, which will meaningfully connect all the shots into one inseparable movie.

Big themes like renunciation, falling in love, sadness, self-sacrifice, sacrifice, loyalty are the easiest to tell through individual heroes. Then their pains, their feelings, can, as a metaphor, rise to the pains, emotions, hopes, of all of us. It will be difficult to show the story of loneliness by shooting people standing on the street, alone, without anyone anywhere. They may or may not be lonely. Maybe they just stopped to look at their phone on the way to work. Or they are waiting for someone who is late. Or they came earlier to the appointed place. So they went and bought two movie tickets. But if we have a woman, face and face, name and surname, who has been living for a long time with her elderly dog, whose end is nearing, whom she takes to the vet. If it is a dog whose legs fail, which he holds in his arms for a long time, carries him through the city, rides with him on the merry-go-round, cries and hides his tears in his fur, so that the dog does not see, then the story of loneliness will acquire a cosmic character, it will begin to make us as far as we are concerned, she will become close to us.

We can tell the story of the river by riding a boat and filming the buildings, and what is seen with the camera while boating. It will remain the ride, the river and the buildings, it seems to me without much emotion. But if we film a boatman, who has two more days until retirement, and who has spent his whole life on that river, watching the city change, or if we film an elderly woman who crosses the bridge over the river every day, carrying eggs to the market, both in the heat and

in the rain, and on the old wooden and new concrete thresholds, then the story about the river and the city will be more interesting, more lively, more vibrant.

The best films have remained just like that. And these are examples from films that they are finished. One of the most successful films made during the *Looking China* was about a young Chinese gymnast, still a little girl, who has fantastic technique and great potential. And it was actually a story of sacrifice, dedication, value, constant, persistent work and practice. It is now not only a story about that particular girl, but also about things that are deeply rooted and written in Chinese tradition and culture.

We have always tried to find the main character, to start from the individual, telling a positive story about the general, collective, universal.

Robert Flaherty shot *Nanook from the North* twice. The first time he did not find Nanuk, he filmed a distant people and their customs, not singling out anyone in particular. When he returned, he had an abundance of material, but nothing tied that material together. There was no excitement, no drama. Fortunately for him, somewhat unfortunately, all his film material, and film is an easily flammable material, was burnt due to carelessness. Flaherty barely made it out alive. He felt it as the finger of fate, as God's providence.

Recovered and over-indebted, with the support of his wife, he returned to the North. But smarter this time. He found Nanuk, a brave hunter, from the Inaurit tribe. Filming him and his family, Flaherty talked about the difficult life of a people trying to survive, about the struggle but also the emotions in the relationship with the family, with the children, about the arrival of the unknown, white people, who bring the benefits of civilization like gunpowder and guns, Nanuk hunted exclusively with harpoons, but also the sins and bad sides of progress, alcohol.



Flaherty parted ways with Nanook, saying that soon the whole world would know Nanook, and the harsh conditions in which his people live. So it was. The film experienced extreme popularity, and Nanook became a global personality, on the streets of European cities the wind carried ice cream wrappers with Nanook's image.

In the moments when film was just being created, and when there was no formal education for dealing with that work, Flaherty, as someone who dealt exclusively with documentary, wrote the first important lesson in dramaturgy - **the introduction of the main character**.

## Hospitality, connection

Coming to China is a great excitement for our students. The hosts made an effort to overcome all geographical, temporal and cultural differences as easily as possible. Their welcome at the airport is always warm and full of laughter. Immediate, and it seems like we've known each other forever.

The organization of the program itself is perfect. Foreign students get help from Chinese students, which is really necessary for them, because that's the only way they manage to adapt and later find their way in the process of fulfilling the tasks for which they came to China, filming documentaries that promote Chinese reality, tradition and culture.

I have witnessed how a certain tightness and distance of foreign students collapses very quickly, already after a few hours spent with kind and devoted hosts. Their commitment, positive energy, desire to help make the films as good as possible, really influence the directors to dedicate themselves perhaps even more than they initially wanted.

That team spirit, joint work, solidarity, are important for the *Looking China*. Practically, all the time, from the first days of socializing, which are relaxed and dedicated to getting to know each other, through visiting the locations, filming, editing, designing and making posters, and the final ceremonial projection and closing of the event, the students are not separated and each one individually contributes shooting films.

The school I come from is a classic film school, where the professions are separate. There are several groups with curricula that educate producers, editors, directors of photography, screenwriters. In the *Looking China* program, all these professions are combined into one personality. The author is a complete filmmaker. He must also know the creative aspect of the film, screenwriting, drama, directing, but also the technical aspect. He must have the technical skills to shoot a film with a camera and edit it on a computer. In the modern world, even in the film industry, these professions are really merging today. Young people, using modern technologies, have long been familiar with shooting and image processing.

Finally, in evaluating and assessing the success of the *Looking China* project, the film's technically flawless appearance is not given exclusive importance. Of course, before arriving, the students put their signature on a document confirming that they will make the films in certain time period, of a certain duration, and in certain, specified technical standards. But, the time that students, professors, mentors, devote to the story, are more related to the creative power and penetration of the film, its clarity, the emotion it creates, the content and the message it conveys.

Many students, having chosen a theme, enter into a real conflict with it, trying to come out as winners. On one occasion, the theme offered was Snake Island. It is a remote island inhabited by snakes. The only people are keepers and scientists who are only there to provide these snakes with natural conditions of survival, so that civilization does not destroy them. I thought to myself, who would sign up for this topic. No one. But the first application that came in was for Snake Island. It was sent by a redheaded student from Britain who was in a group I mentored.

Impressive memories. I thought that the director of the film would shoot those snakes somehow from afar, from a boat, with narrow optics, but no, he lived on the island for a few days, spending time with them. When I visited him, it was a real adventure. We rode speedboats for several hours. He somehow looked, with a beard and a cap, as if he really belonged there, that he had been there all his life. There were snakes everywhere, and one had to be careful. I remember, when I sat down on a bench to rest, how the guard came to me and quickly lifted me up, because the snakes could sneak up behind me.

The film, in the end, turned out to be more of a reportage than an engaging documentary. The reason for this may be that the author did not originally study directing, but sound. The subject itself did not offer anything provocative, did not problematize anything, but only recorded the human need to preserve untouched nature, which the film faithfully conveyed.

When I asked the director why he chose that topic, why he hurried, he answered that he does not like snakes at all, that he is afraid of them. The choice of topic was an attempt to conquer his fears, to face with them. So, it was really a real fight.

And his arrival at *Looking China* was also a battle. On one occasion, he admitted to me that he is actually afraid of people, and that he signed up for the program in order to win, to overcome his fear. I hope that the program, which is really hyperactive and full of contacts and communication, helped him in that.

Although doubts, conflicts with oneself and with the team, insecurity often arise in creativity, I don't remember this happening during the filming on *Looking China*. The reason for this may lay in the extremely precise hourly schedule, in which every minute is planned. There is not too much free time for thinking, the time is only for shooting, pure documentary carries, becomes life itself. Another reason is that, there is a positive, relaxing atmosphere all the time. And creativity in a good atmosphere is always doomed to success.

On the other hand, a certain rivalry is sometimes created between the teams. Not the one that holds us back, but the positive one, the one that forces us to be better than others. That rivalry in that mutual comparison of films uses all that is good, creating a real, necessary competition. Without comparison, and even some competition, there is no real assessment of quality.

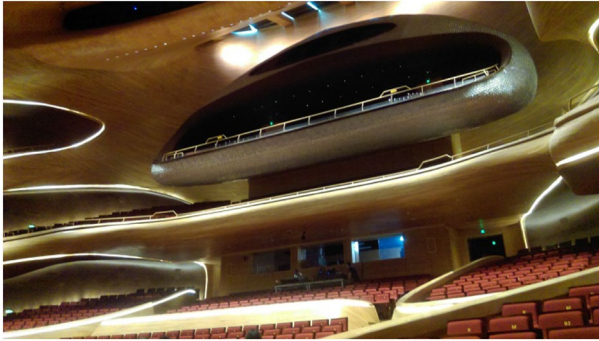
*Looking China* does not make any rankings during the event, they do it much later, the expert committee evaluates and ranks the first places. But the students themselves, during the festive screening, do not have any evaluation of which work is better and which is worse. Simply, all films are equally important, they are the successful result of great efforts. And everyone is deservedly there, with applause.

Of course, the aesthetic criteria of each spectator, especially the more expert one, make a difference. The best films select themselves. In each group, out of ten films, one to two are always impressive and memorable documentaries.

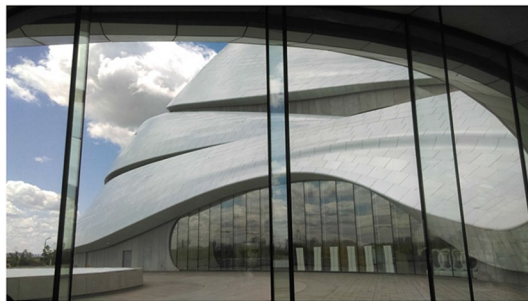
But friendship, loyalty, joint work and joint solving of a series of complex problems, which inextricably connect foreign and Chinese students, will certainly remain longer than the films. And the diversity, impressiveness of the Chinese way of life and Chinese culture, remain forever in hearts and souls, with a constant longing to return to them again.

## Examples, movies

Some examples of themes for films from our last stay in China as part of the *Looking China* project, in Harbin. I already mentioned some of it in the previous part of the text.



Anica from Belgrade was the first to pick a topic—the National Theatre in Harbin—just minutes after I presented my offer. It is an architectural marvel of unbelievable shapes and materials that attracted other students as well, causing real rebellion among them, and even an initiative to assign two students to the same theme. At the end, the film about the National Theatre hasn't even been made. The theatre manager did not allow any shooting inside the theatre building, only from the outside. Anica quickly switched to a new topic, she learned about the life in campus and was attracted by the exercises and physical activities of girls in the campus. During this period of every year, sport games are held at the stadium, and the good organization, the discipline and large number of students-participants is something most of us have seen for the first time. Initially fascinated, Anica understood that she needs to expand her theme, so she created a woman diary, personal impressions of meetings with a far away and unknown world.



A similar thing happened to Dorel, a student from Romania. His theme was an alcohol factory, a national drink of this region, located around 300 km from

Harbin. Unfortunately, when Dorel got there, it emerged that the factory owner did not want any filming of the manufacturing process, perhaps fearing for good reason that the recipe of the beverage might be revealed. Dorel returned and made the restaurant story, about the efforts and hard work of the owner, about the location in the oldcity, the food as way of socializing, the unbreakable bond between the culture of food and the Chinese way of life.

Ligija from Romania also did a film on the restaurant. However, regardless of their similar themes, they made completely different films. The restaurant Ligija made the film about is ran by the fourth generation of owners from the same family.

Mendi from Albania took the main touristic thoroughfare of Harbin, the Central Street, as his topic.

Tamara, a student from Serbia, took the ice hockey arena as her theme.

Jovana's theme was the bridge, initially a railway bridge, it is now a pedestrian attraction and, next to it, they made another bridge for high-speed trains.

Vidan was tasked to make a film about the old, baroque part of town, and he decided to focus on people, not buildings.

Milos, a student of the final year of film and television production in Belgrade, made a film about Sun Island, a huge and popular excursion area.

Sara, a student from Montenegro, managed to connect the past and present of Harbin. Her main character was a bookstore with an unusual name—Gogol.

Filip, a student from Croatia, focussed on a vast park—a real forest in the city centre.

The *Looking China* project connects different cultures through a universal language - the language of film. Friendships made on that occasion remain forever, regardless of physical distances. It is nice to know that somewhere out there, there are people that we made friends with through films, whose feelings and thoughts are similar to ours.

Sometimes, this is even more important than the films created during the *Looking China* event.

The group that I mentored worked hard to make documentary films of highest possible quality. They were there with their cameras at the heart of events, they lived with the protagonists of their films; they filmed a reality that was unaware of the presence of their camera.

This is how very serious and mature director films have emerged. Shooting over a short period of time, in an unknown surrounding, to a predefined theme, without lengthy preparation, was a real challenge for young professionals.

The enormous energy and commitment of the *Looking China* representatives, their hospitality, care and desire for success, their devotion, persistence and strength of students-volunteers from China, contributed to the success of our group and of the manifestation.

As a project that is meticulously well-conceived and organized, I hope that it will last for many years to come.



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