Tianran

Ruiqi Liu

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TIANRAN
By
Ruiqi Liu

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS IMAGINE ARTS/FILM SCHOOL OF FILM AND ANIMATION COLLEGE OF IMAGINE ARTS AND SCIENCES

ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY ROCHESTER, NEW YORK MAY 2015

Committee Approval

__________________________________________________________
Skip Battaglia, MFA Thesis Chair
Professor
School of Film and Animation

__________________________________________________________
Cathleen Ashworth, Committee Member
Associate Professor
School of Film and Animation

__________________________________________________________
Hanzhang Shen, Committee Member
New York City based Documentary Director
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PREFACE

I still remember my first RIT film production class, when Professor Peter Kiwitt, asked us to introduce ourselves and tell the class what we want to do in the film industry. “I want to make a documentary and tell other peoples’ story.” I said.

Three years later, in May 2014, I finished my first documentary *TIANRAN* and had a wonderful screening at RIT with hundreds in attendance. It was the best moment in my life. The experience of making this documentary will remain precious and will affect me in my future projects.

Making this documentary was a roller-coaster ride. From choosing three subjects out of five with great stories, to finally picking just one, Tianran Qian, and considering her story into a 26-minute documentary wasn’t an easy task. Looking for crew, planning shoots with my cinematographer, and then later deciding to be the one behind the camera – all these added to the experience. I should’ve been better prepared and organized with my choice of subjects, but I know that flexibility to the development of a documentary is important. During the process, so many unexpected things happened. You never know what your subject is actually thinking, if they are being truly open with you, or if they are
comfortable being on camera. All these last minute decisions were extremely tough to make. _TIANRAN_ attempts to tell the story of a Chinese student’s experience in the United States, the biggest challenge making this film was overcoming language and culture differences.

I feel lucky and blessed to have finally finished this documentary and I am happy with the final screening. I am extremely grateful to my subjects, even though most of them, unfortunately, could not be included in the final version of the documentary. Without their support, trust and understanding, this documentary would not have its final concept and effects, let alone be made. I want to thank Tianran, who wholly included me in her life and revealed her true self in front of the camera. I also want to thank Christina Wairegi, one of my cinematographers. Even though I decided not to have her continue working on my documentary, working with Christina was a really relaxed and happy experience. I learned a lot from her being my cinematographer. I want to thank Alex Espinoza, my editor, whose generous help made this film possible. She spent most of her spare time with me in the edit suite. We were joking that the suite was where our friendship started. I also want to thank Cody Webb, who tried his best to help me solve my production problems. We were at school till 4am for the last final exporting. As one of my producers, he stood by his responsibilities till the end and made sure everything
was right. I want to thank my committee members. Cathleen Ashworth, I apologized that I brought her on board until the last minute. But without those conversations with her, I couldn’t have found a proper way to continue the story. And another member in my committee, Hanzhang Shen, whose encouragement and inspiration built my confidence in making a documentary to tell people’s stories.

Lastly, I want to thank my thesis advisor Skip Battaglia. Skip gave me a lot space to be creative in this documentary, while leading me in the right direction. To me, Skip is not just my professor but like family in the Untied States. His concern for international students is highly appreciated and definitely makes us feel at home.

Thank you again to all these people. Because of all your guidance, TIANRAN was made. And because of all my advisors, I know I have to keep working hard to be a documentary director.
ABSTRACT

Tianran Qian, is a 27-year-old New York University student majoring in Interactive Communications (ITP).

She is from a wealthy and renowned family in Hangzhou, China. Tianran’s parents got divorced when she was eight years old. Her father was busy running his business; so she grew up with her grandfather. Tianran’s grandfather was a respected poet in China and he told Tianran that she was the only heir in her generation with an ability to understand and practice traditional Chinese culture. With the guidance and influence of her grandfather, she got into traditional Chinese culture and wanted to find a way to share it with the world. Tianran comes to the United States to pursue her dream.

She tries hard to keep up with her studies and also take care of herself in New York City where she lives thousands miles away from home. Twenty-four hours of a day is never enough for her. She keeps busy all day with schoolwork, but also involves herself in a lot of Chinese culture organizations and its events. Tianran knows she can fulfill her grandfather’s mission only by working hard. In the documentary, we see her looking fabulous in a Chinese cheongsam on stage hosting a Chinese opera in New York City, but
we also see her in the subway looking exhausted – all proof of how hard she works.

It is Christmas time in New York City. The city is decorated with beautiful warm lights and Christmas trees. The strong holiday season atmosphere makes Tianran really miss her family in China. She comes back to her 34th street Manhattan apartment at midnight from school and dials her dad’s FaceTime number. The bad Internet connection makes this call difficult. She calls her dad several times; however, she can only hear him busy talking business with his employees over the phone. Finally, her dad hangs up, Tianran cries.

The next morning as usual, she dresses up nicely as usual and heads to another place to pursue her dreams.
**ORIGIN**

It was in 2009, I visited a college in Coventry, Great Britain. I was invited to have dinner with some Chinese students from China. I remembered that when I asked them a question about if they had foreign friends. “No, not necessary.” They said to me. “But how do you practice and improve your English?” I asked. “We could look up online or check dictionary as long as we could finish the final paper.”

There are many essays that focus on Chinese Students in the US and England who are spending money, driving luxury cars, and having fun at foreign universities. Those students’ show up behavior draws a lot attention among Chinese. On the one hand, parents are proud to send their children to study abroad but on the other hand they are worried about if some other students would distract their children.

On March 23rd 2011, I checked my inbox and saw an email from Rochester Institute of Technology, School of Film and Animation. I opened the email feeling uneasy. I know it is time for me to explore the other side of the world and to find out if it’s true from what I heard in China.
I left home for the United States in the summer of 2011. It was a start to an exciting but unfamiliar journey for me.

The first three months was difficult; English became the biggest challenge in my life. I could not understand some of the lessons from the classes and I had to work three times harder than then English speaking students’ to finish my reading and finish my homework. This obstacle just made me more insecure and unconfident. I became quiet. Even though I spoke to my parents almost everyday but I couldn’t tell them about my concerns how sad it made me. They always asked if I were friends with any of the American students or if my English was improving.

I knew I had to do something to stop being shy and stop over thinking how the American students reacted when I spoke English. However, I just couldn’t. It was not only from being self conscious, but also because of pressure from my Chinese friends. Some of them would keep telling me there was no need to become friends with Americans because we’re from different cultural backgrounds and being friends with them would be superficial. I didn’t know how they came to this conclusion, but for some time it really stopped me from taking that step. I felt really depressed and I thought I let my parents
In January 2012, I was sent to the hospital and was told I needed an appendicitis surgery. Doctors kept coming to check on me and asked if I had family here who could come see me. I said no and I was sent to the operating room alone. After the surgery, I started thinking of dropping out of school and going back to China to my family.

But, Tina’s visit totally changed my life. Tina Chapman DaCosta is one of my classmates and also a professor at RIT. I am the same age as her children. At the time she visited me, we weren’t even familiar with each other. That was definitely a great time for us to talk and get to know each other. We became close friends after that day. I feel at ease talking to her, her personality and optimism have really encouraged me to keep going. I started to feel that the language and cultural differences were not major hurdles and we create our own hurdles. I started working at the school with American students and got to know more about the American students, gradually, it became natural to be with them. Now, I have some American friends from school that I still keep in touch with. And, Tina is now my ‘American mom’.
This is just a story about me. I was lucky to have someone in the US to lead me in the right direction and also to have a supportive family in China who constantly encourage me.

With the development in China’s economy, more and more families send their children to the United States. Another trend is that the incoming students are from a younger age group. For me, it is a great opportunity to be pursuing an MFA degree, while broadening my horizon. I have met students who are doing well here by themselves, but I have also met some who get lost. I didn’t even expect an American life like this when I came three years ago.

After living here for almost four years, I’ve heard many stories of Chinese students. Every time I went back to China, I was always asked to share my thoughts and experiences in the US with my parents’ friends and their children. I enjoyed sharing my story and hoped they could find their path with my inputs. As a filmmaker, I realize that I can use my camera to tell these stories and share those positive stories with parents in China and also with prospective students from China. Hopefully it would help them get ready and be prepared for the new life here, even if it’s thousands of miles away from home.
PRE-PRODUCTION

RESEARCH

It is important to try to have an open mind during a documentary’s pre-production. I wanted to gather every potential story angle before the final editing process started. I knew I was going to tell our stories, but I want to know more about what others needed to know from us.

I went back to China in July 2013 and interviewed some people from different backgrounds and asked about their opinions on the topic of studying abroad.
Hangjiang Zhou is 32 years old and has a five-year-old son. He said the trend of studying abroad started during his generation. He wanted to go but he failed his English test and his family could not afford the English school in the US for him. He regretted it, but said he would send his son to the US as soon as possible. He also mentioned his friends living in the US, who felt lonely from time to time but didn’t want to come back to China because they wanted to pursue bigger opportunities. Hangjiang told me he didn’t understand their decision to stay because China had more opportunities, even if you pursued a higher degree in the US. He also said that you shouldn’t sacrifice the time you have to spend with your family by living far away.
Xiaofan Yao is the director of the WEB International English School in Hangzhou, China. She introduced English classes at WEB and told me the age group of students is getting lower, 12-20. The English classes at WEB are more focused on private class with teachers from English-speaking countries. Although the tuition is about $2000 for three months, it’s still the most popular English school in China because of the private classes and the reputation of its foreign teachers. It is big investment for parents to send their children to developed English-speaking countries.
Ethan, a WEB English teacher from Canada, said he found that Chinese students didn’t like the ‘discussion’ part of the class. They didn’t want to talk about their opinions because they were not sure if a personal opinion was right. He encourages his students to talk about anything they want and tells them there is no one correct answer.
Jiyu Wang, 21, just received an offer letter from Michigan University and is moving to the US in August 2015. She is curious about everything American and said she wanted to make new friends even though she’s been told that it wasn’t easy to hang out with American students. She said she wanted to try.
Yu Chen (51), his son Jiayang Chen is pursuing his bachelor’s degree at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in the US. Yu said he has seen changes in his son; Jiayang is more outgoing and confident now. But, he said his son didn’t want to be friends with American students because Jiayang thinks the cultural difference set them apart and he didn’t know what the other students were talking about.

**LOOKING FOR DOCUMENTARY SUBJECTS**

Since I didn’t want to focus on only one student and include students of different ages and backgrounds. I planned as below.
1. An Incoming Student

I kept contacting incoming students during the summer. However, no one wanted to be on camera except for one, Fu Jiang. He came to RIT for a master’s degree in Imaging Science with a full scholarship. He said he wanted to be one of my documentary subjects and said I could follow and shoot him for his first three weeks here.

2. A Student Who Has Been In The US For More Than Four Years.

Rice Fan is a friend of mine. I remember the first time I met her she told me I was the second Chinese friend she had at RIT. She speaks fluent English and unlike most of the Chinese students, she has American roommates and works at school with American students, too. She said she didn’t feel any different with Chinese or American students. Because of the environment she’s in, she has met more American students than Chinese. She loves being friends with them because they are funny, creative and easy-going. It helps a lot with her English, too.

3. A Student Who Is Extraordinarily Outstanding.

A friend introduced me to Tianran Qian. Tianran and I became good friends really quickly and she took me everywhere in New York City. That was the first time that I saw how splendid and colorful life in NYC was. It’s fast paced and it never stops. Tianran
told me she loved the pace and if she didn’t keep up with it, she’d fall behind. She took me to the Chinese Opera Society, where I saw another aspect of Chinese culture.

All these students were considered to be studies in my early documentary design.

**BUDGET**

I started a Kickstarter fundraiser at the beginning of the production. However, it didn’t work out. After changes in my crew and subjects, I decided to give up on Kickstarter. I was trying to lower the budget by using equipment I already had and renting from the school’s equipment facility. I also tried to make transportation easier and cheaper. My parents supported me for most of this film’s expense and I had some money, which I made by working at school. Below is my budget plan. In red is the cost over the budget plan and green is lower. I planned on $3272, but the film finally cost around $1386.

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Actual Total: $3386 (Include $2000 dollars round trip tickets between flying from China and America.)

At the end, the spending tapered -- I took the Greyhound bus to New York City most of the time. Tianran offered me her place to stay, which helped me save so much money on hotels. Since I didn’t have a crew, there was no need for me to prepare meals. I invited every person in my documentary, my subjects and friends, who came to help me for dinners. That is the expense I put as contingency, which is actually about $500 in total.

CREW

Director of Photography: Christina Wairegi and Runze Zhou

Co-Producer: Cody Webb

Editor: Alex Espinoza

Colorist: Runze Zhou

Title Designer: Junran Mo

Composer: Theresa Chen

EQUIPMENT PACKAGE
Considering it was a documentary and it would be happening mostly in public areas, I decided to use my Panasonic Lumix GH2 camera. It is really nice cameras with HD video capture capabilities. It has a wide range of ISO, which allowed me to use it in different environments without having a lot of light. The best thing about this camera is its lightweight and portability. As I was shooting in different public locations, I didn’t want to cause trouble by using a huge professional camera, which might attract too much attention. I could also carry it around steady and handheld, saving me a lot of time from setting up the tripod, which would’ve resulted in losing valuable shooting moments.

I also bought a Tascam audio recorder and a Takstar on-camera microphone. The Tascam audio recorder worked well when I filmed interviews with my subjects. I used the Takstar microphone when I followed my subjects in moving shots.

I have two lenses with my GH2 cameras. One is the 14-140mm lens with f/4.5-8.8. It is a nice lens for documentary shooting, but not good in low light situations. And the other one is a 20mm f/1.7 lens. It is a compact, pan-style prime lens designed for Panasonic LUMIX digital cameras. I like this lens because its fast f/1.7 maximum aperture offers great low-light performance, which makes up for the lack in 14-140mm lens.
LANGUAGE

I wanted this documentary in Chinese, not only because the main characters and audience are Chinese, but also because expressing themselves in Chinese would be easier for the subjects.
PRODUCTION PROCESS

PRODUCTION IN ROCHESTER

1. Fu Jiang

On August 30, 2013, Runze and I started our first day of shooting. We drove to the airport to pick up incoming student Fu Jiang. We picked him up and dropped him to his friend’s apartment. Since his apartment was not ready yet, he had to stay with his friend for a couple of days and sleep on the floor. We had a chat with him and got to know his plans for next few days. We also got to know him a little better from the conversation. We documented his first day in the US.

Image 7: Interviewing with Fu Jiang.
On September 7, 2013, I went back to Fu’s place with my cinematographer Chris. We had Fu talking about his first week.

With Chris not understanding Chinese and Fu talking in Chinese, the result of the shoot didn’t meet my expectation. Fu was shy in front of the camera this time and Chris couldn’t follow Fu’s movement properly. Most of the shots are wide angle, which didn’t satisfy me.

After the second day of shooting, I spoke to Fu several times to schedule our next shoot. But, it never worked out. Fu’s schedule and mine hardly matched and I realized that it was different from short film shooting, as I could not schedule ahead. I would’ve had to be on standby or stay with Fu for a few days. My crew couldn’t make it and my schedule didn’t allow me to do this. Unfortunately, after several attempts with Fu, I came to terms with dropping him as a subject. He finally told me that he didn’t like being on camera and what we were doing would affect his life in school.

I decided to look for another subject. Several days later, I was introduced to Barney Cao, a first-year graduate student. He was living with three other Chinese men in a townhouse
near the school. I had a meeting with him and spoke about the shooting process. He showed interest in the project.

2. Kerui (Barney) Cao

![Image 8: Interviewing with Barney.](image)

I documented Barney from September 2013 to February 2015. I saw him learning and adjusting himself to a country and I also saw him struggling about his future, whether he should go back to China or stay in the US.
3. Rice Fan

I have Rice in this documentary because I wanted to show more of Rice’s life with her American friends. However, it became difficult keeping up with her. I only met her three times during the production.

*Image 9: With Rice Fan and her classmate in the studio.*
PRODUCTION IN NYC

1. Tianran Qian

I set my schedule for New York City to meet Tianran. Because Tianran mentioned to me that she was not comfortable in front of camera with someone else, also Chris Wairegi didn’t have time to go to the city during that time, so I went there alone with some equipment. I wanted to make everything simple and easier so Tianran wouldn’t feel too much pressure.

Image 10: Tianran interns at BBC Worldwide.

Since we are close friends, she let me stay with her and that definitely helped me a lot for
the shoot. I was able to film everything – from when she woke up in the morning to
before she went to bed. I didn’t ask her for her daily schedule, but all I wanted was my
camera and microphone to follow her wherever she went. She was comfortable with the
camera. I asked her to think of the camera as me, so she could talk to the camera
whenever she wanted. I followed her for three days. Her life is busy but colorful. In order
to capture beautiful images, I had Tianran wear brightly colored outfits, which happened
to match perfectly with the New York City setting.

Image 11: Tianran hosts for the Chinese opera show.

I followed Tianran to her class at NYU, to the Chinese Opera Society’s annual concert, to
BBC worldwide and also we went to Columbia University for the casting of Chinese
New Year’s concert’s host. I kept my camera rolling as long as I could. It was an exciting journey for me too. I got the chance to experience the fast pace in New York City. I was trying to capture everything from Tianran and everyone she met during the shoot.

Tianran’s conversation with her friends also would tell the audience more about her personality. Sometimes she would introduce Manhattan for me in front of the camera and sometimes she just kept quiet looking outside through the window. I gave Tianran a proper space but also told her that she could talk to me whenever she wanted.

After several days shooting, she became more comfortable with me following her with camera. And it was the day she finished her final presentation at the United Nations Children’s Fund for one of her class. She did some Christmas gift shopping for her family after the presentation. She was really tired when she got home at night. However she tried to keep awake and gave her dad a call.

She asked me to keep filming during the FaceTime call. After several attempts, the phone call finally went through. However she could only hear her dad talking business with his employees over the phone. Finally, her dad hung up the phone and it made her extremely upset. She started to read the chatting history for me. It was all from Tianran’s side, no
response from her dad. She cried after about one minute silence. I didn’t know she was about to cry, I put the camera down and wanted to give her a hug, but she pushed me away and asked me to keep filming. I really appreciate Tianran’s devotion to this documentary. She revealed herself in this documentary without hiding anything.

Image 12: Tianran cries after talking with her Dad.

I had a conversation with Tianran at one of the shooting days. It was in a small conference room at BBC worldwide where Tianran did her internship. I set my camera on the top on a mini tripod and placed them on the table. Tianran was sitting in front of me. I had a pre-conversation with her in order to give her some time to prepare her questions.
And here are some questions I had for her for warm-up.

1. When did you come to the US? And Why?
2. What was your first impression in NYC?
3. What are the differences between your lives here with your life in Hangzhou, China?
4. What do you usually do besides school?
5. What is your plan after graduation?

As she answered those basic questions, I noticed that she didn’t attend events with foreign friends during the shoot. And she talked a lot about Chinese Culture in the United
States. I followed up with some more questions.

1. What is your relationship with students from other countries? Any difficulties, like cultural difference or languages?

2. What is your relationship with you Dad? Where is the money come from for your study? What are your dad’s thoughts about sending you to the United States? What about your mother? Do you talk to her a lot?

3. How did you get to know the Chinese Opera Society and why do you want to be part of it? What does the Chinese culture mean to you?

4. What is your goal and what is your plan to archive it?

5. Why do you keep your schedule that busy?

We had an about an hour conversation. It helped me get to know her more about and it also helped me to structure the story for editing process.

2. Challenge

I had a lot of concerns before I started shooting in New York City. It was a shooting process with no script, no location scouting and no communication with the main subjects. I was also worried about shooting by myself. How do I carry the equipment and how to capture some important moment as soon as possible? And the biggest concern is am I
going to get trouble of shooting in the public areas in New York City?

Most of the concerns were unnecessary. The light equipment for shooting had really reduced attention from the public. I tried to get closer to Tianran as possible in order to capture the audio unless it was at a private environment so that I could put the microphone on the camera.

I tried to set the camera manually at first, however because of the changing of the locations, there was not enough time for me to adjust the camera. So it ends up with auto mode for the most of the time.

I had camera rolling as long as I could and I asked for permission if necessary. I remember there was one time when Tianran went to her neighbor’s apartment; I was asked to turn off the camera by her neighbor. Her neighbor is a family from China. Because they have a hard life in the US, so they don’t want this to be exposed to other people. So I turned off the camera.

I was lucky that I didn’t meet extreme situations for shooting in the city, but I lost some important talk and it made several audio issues during the editing process. The wireless
microphone is a must have investment, which I would definitely purchase for feature documentary shooting.

And another thing I need to practice is to be prepared to control the environment even in a short period of time. Giving myself at least three minutes to observe the environment is necessary. Checking the lighting in the room, finding a proper shooting angle and trying to get a sense of what is happening and what is going to happen in the environment. Then I could turn the camera on and get fully immersed into this environment with my subject. Keep calm and never panic.

I love solo shooting but sometimes it would be nicer to have another cinematographer with me. Taking some time to find a cinematographer who has the same passion and who you can trust to work with you. Two cameras shooting would give more choices and help capture interesting perspective for the story.
I started looking for an editor in the summer of 2013. I planned to have a Chinese editor at first, but it didn’t work out because the Chinese editor was in China at that time. I wanted to have an editor who I could sit and talk with during editing sessions.

I was fortune to meet Alex Espinoza during the 2014 winter trip to Los Angeles. I shared my documentary with her. She said she was interested in it and wanted to edit it. I wasn’t sure at the beginning because Alex doesn’t understand Chinese, but she dedicated time for us to edit together. I knew I needed to trust her.

We started working in February. On the first day, we went over all the footage I had and I gave her a brief background introduction to each subject. I had so many subjects and we realized it was difficult to put their stories together in a 26-minute long documentary. We decided to start with the character we liked the most and were the most confident about.

Of course, Tianran, was where we started. First of all, I watched the footage of the
interview of Tianran and wrote down a brief notes for Alex. I listed the questions and Tianran’s answers. Then Alex and I discussed the details of the interview. I realized then that the cultural difference was going to play a positive and significant role during the editing process. Alex’s perspective helped highlight the more interesting bits, which would get people’s attention. For example, the first impression from Tianran of NYC and the performance of Chinese opera would draw audiences’ attention. However Tianran being at school and taking the internship job are not necessary to cover since it is a common situation for students of studying and working at the same time during college. At the same time, I took the responsibility to make sure we had the parts that the Chinese audience would like. I respected her suggestions.

After we locked down the interview topics, we went over each day’s footage together. We started to organize footage with each interview topic and have them in the same category. We finally decide to stay on these topics:

1. What are you doing here now? How is everything so far?
2. What are those changes to you since you came here?
3. What is your first impression of NYC?
4. How did you get to the Chinese Opera Society in NYC? Why is that so important to
you? What effects does the Chinese Culture bring to you?

5. Why are you here in the US? What do you study?

6. How is your family in China?

We finally cut the piece down to about 30 minutes. We had a really wonderful time in the editing suite. With Alex’s proficient editing skills, we finished Tianran’s piece with a rough cut in just three days.

Another thing I want to mention is the storytelling part of Tianran’s piece. We know that telling the truth is what a documentary is all about, but in order to bring out the best in the character, we decided to reorganize the order of some of the stories. For example, the last scene of Tianran going to the Chinese calligraphy class – we could’ve ended it with her crying in her bedroom with the bustling New York holiday festivities outside, but I wanted to leave the audience with a positive feeling. So we decided to bring that calligraphy class forward, which was actually a few days after Tianran spoke with her dad. But I think that worked.

Then, we had a new problem: we liked Tianran’s story a lot and we felt that this was her documentary, but what about others. Should we just cut them all? We didn’t want to do
that at first and we were still trying to organize Barney and Rice’s stories. We went over footage, which Christina Wairegi shot. Alex and I didn’t really like those shots. Some of the shots were over exposed since Christina didn’t operating the camera well. Some of the shots were not in the right frame, which couldn’t draw audience attention. It was difficult for Christina to shoot with Chinese speaking subjects; she could not react immediately to what the subjects said. The difference of the pacing and lacking of the stories finally told us to cut them out. It was a hard decision, but it was the right decision.

Tianran’s story is complete and gives audience space to think about. It covers the most contents of the main idea “Life in a place where is thousand miles away from home.” And it was well explained.

**COLOR CORRECTION**

As a documentary, I shot most of the scenes on the auto mode. What we need to do first is to even the tone of the whole film and adjusting the brightness to make it looks not too bright or too dark. Because I want to bring the authenticity to the audience. But, this one happens to focus on a girl in this colorful, crazy city, so do most parts of the film; we adjust the contrast and increase saturation to get a vivid look of the images. It helped to blend Tianran well with the colorful modern city.
Image 14: Contrast increased to have a vivid look of Tianran walking in the city.

At the ending part, we brought the tone warmer to convey emotional information to the audience.

Image 15: Tone warmer to convey emotional information.
SOUND MIXING

The issue with sound recording finally showed its true face. Because of the quality of the on-camera microphone and its proximity to the body, it picked up all the operation noise from the camera. This taught me to test all equipment before shoots and try to use the best equipment possible.

The mixing project started late and we sent the file to Chris Vial. For some technical reason, the frames were dropped and we weren’t able to retransfer on the last day before submission. Alex and I decided to adjust the audio in Premiere Pro; it had an unprofessional touch and was also done in a rush.

MUSIC COMPOSING

An Eastman School of Music student Theresa Chen, who majors in Jazz Studies, made the film score. She is an international student from Taiwan who has experience scoring for dramas in Taiwan. I went to her apartment and showed her my final project. I told her the three places where I needed music and we thought piano would be the best for this documentary. Since Tianran was singing ‘New York State of Mind’ (by Billy Joel) at the end, I wanted to have a final score that felt a little jazzy. We decided to record the music a week later. She played the piano while watching the documentary. After practicing and
improvising for 30 minutes, we found the three pieces that fit perfectly for the
documentary.

**TITLE DESIGN**

Junran Mo, a Chinese animation student, designed the title for me. We decided to have
Chinese calligraphy as the title because it’s a documentary about Chinese students in the
United States.

*Image 16: Tianran (天然) in Chinese characters design.*
I want to thank all my committee members again: advisor Skip Battagia; professor Cat Ashworth and documentary filmmaker Hanzhang Shen from New York City.

As my advisor, Skip Battaglia never pushed me or asked me to make changes in the film. His support gave me a lot of space to be creative and find the best way to tell the story. I remember when Skip explained the good thing about having three characters in a documentary. I liked that idea a lot. Even though I didn’t have it in this piece, I will use that concept in my future documentaries. Thank you, Skip, for the kindness and support throughout this documentary.

To my other committee members Cat Ashworth and Hangzhang, I apologize again for bringing Cat on board at the last minute. But, my conversation with Cat really gave me a direction in finishing this film. As another committee member based in NY, Hangzhang Shen spent hours talking to me over the phone. She also helped me shoot the New York City street scene when I was in Rochester.
I was really nervous to watch my documentary at a screening for the first time you can never know what your film actually looks like until it’s shown on a big screen with hundreds of people watching. The music at the beginning was too loud. The audio issue was still there and I realized that the subtitles went too fast for people to follow. Also, some of the shots were too shaky and the credits at the end were too long.

I walked on stage and stood there with my legs shaking. I was excited but nervous to hear the audience’s comments. At that moment, my brain stopped working and I could hardly understand the questions.

I remember when Professor Peter Kiwitt said, “It was nothing…” I was shocked and I wanted to disappear on the spot. Then, he continued: “…It was not about a Chinese student. You made it more about life and I was really moved.” I smiled and felt relief.

Thanks to my producer Cody, who wrote down all the comments for me to read after the screening.

“We are in a Ruiqi state of mind and that is a beautiful place to be.” That’s what Tina
said in her statement. I am so grateful to have Tina reviewing my documentary. Because of what Tina said, I feel confident about being a documentary filmmaker.
AFTERWORD

I’m grateful to the three years at RIT School of Film and Animation, where I was able to learn and practice everything I wanted during school. I told my friends that film school is not only a place to learn filmmaking but also a place to learn how to be a good person and to survive in the real world.

I learned so much while making this documentary, like the importance of pre-productions and communicating with your crew. We were taught so much in our classes, but we never really experienced it until we worked on our documentaries. I’m sad my friendship with my cinematographer Christina Wairegi couldn’t go further. We could’ve made this a good documentary if we had more serious production meetings and were honest with each other. I still feel bad that I cut the other characters’ out, even though they said they were okay with it. I am keeping all these materials because I know I am going to keep telling stories of international students to friends, family and people all over the world.

I moved to New York City in August 2014. The high cost of living has forced me to pause my freelance documentary making plans and take up a full-time job. I was lucky to have found a full-time position as a production assistant at Artnet News. Most of the time, I’m on the run to shoot interviews with artists or editing interviews at the office. Even
though I’m now working in the art industry, everything I learned at RIT is still with me and has a great effect on me. The professional filmmakers’ rules are fresh in my mind.

Lastly, I want to take a step back and talk about documentary filmmaking. As we know, telling a good story, finding an interesting subject who is passionate about what you are doing and narrating a completed perspective story are the three most important elements of a documentary. I was lucky to have Tianran Qian as an interesting character in my documentary, but I have to say another important factor in documentary making, which I didn’t do well, is the little push (insistence) from the director. If I’d insisted on filming Fu, there might’ve been another story to be revealed to the audience. I have to admit that during Fu’s filming, I thought of giving up; so when Fu finally decided to drop out, I didn’t even persuade him. We didn’t even have a thorough conversation about making this decision. Also, with Tianran, Rice and Barney’s stories, if I had kept trying, there might’ve been some potential connection between them that could have created a different story.

Going back to my original plans, I was thinking about making a documentary revealing life in the United Stated for people in China. When TIANRAN came out, it revealed more than just the life of an international student. The research and attempts with other people
during the beginning will bring a lot of valuable perspective in my future works. The process of making documentaries is definitely a way of learning, discovering and accumulating experience.

As filmmaker Peter Davis said:

“I looked at all kind of films, and I did every kind of research you can imagine, talking, reading books, watching other films and then most of all thinking. I was able really to think about what I felt, how to express it and I did a lot of worrying. On all the films I’ve made I have never celebrate after a day of shooting. I start worrying and after shooting, no matter how good it is, I always think ‘well jeez, sorry we did that’ but what didn’t we get, what do we still have to get while we’re here or in this situation or at this school or in this firehouse, wherever I happen to be filming. Always worry, that’s just advice to a filmmaker. I never feel reassured until the film is over, mixed and released. Reassurance is not something that I as a filmmaker have felt or as a writer, until the whole things is over.”

Keep worrying till it’s released – this is what I need to keep in mind. Nowadays, we are too focused on finishing something instead of really spending time to find and solve problems. As I said before, I was lucky to finish this documentary with a good story,
good characters and a skilled editor. But if I could spend more time on it, there might be
more thinking or a different perspective I could reveal. They all take time and patience.
I got this precious opportunity to practice and to get to know more about myself thanks to
film school; not only about things which I can do, but also those that I couldn’t do or
things I didn’t do enough. Now, it’s time to start another story.
APPENDIX

APPENDIX 1: THESIS PROPOSAL

Ruiqi Liu

MFA Thesis proposal

School of Film and Animation

Rochester Institute of Technology

“Untitled”

A documentary, approximately 26 minutes.

Approved for submission by:

___________________________________________

Skip Battaglia, Professor, Chair

School of Film and Animation
“Untitled “

A documentary in both Mandarin and English about Chinese international students’ real life in the US.

Rationale:

With the development of China’s economy, more and more parents send their children to go aboard to study. America, UK, Canada and Australia, these developed countries are parents’ first choice.

From my research, the total number of students who go aboard is only 39,000 in 2010, however, in 2011, this number is reaching 339,700. The number is still increasing. Until now, there are more than 1,200,000 Chinese students studying in about 100 different countries and 44% are in the US.

Another vivid trend is that the age of students who go abroad to study are getting younger and younger. More and more are high school students, some of whom
which are around 15 years old.

For me, it is a really great opportunity to come to the US to attempt my MFA degree. It is one of my family’s dreams to send me here. From what I know, most of the international students from China have the same background as me. Parents work really hard and save money in order to send us here. Most of the parents not even come to the US before. It is a trend in nowadays in China that sending your kids to the US is the proud thing for parents.

Parents spend that much of money to send children here and expect them to get better education in the US. However, not everyone is ready for the life here. For their parents, they even don’t really know about their children’s real life here. Some students who are really mature, they know what they want and need, however there are still a lot of students are not clear with that. This is not because they don’t want to; it is because they are not ready before they make the decision. From my one year life here in the US, I would definitely say the life here is different from what I thought before I came.

I want to tell our real story to the parents and students in China and also share the
international student’s life to Americans.

**Treatment:**

My documentary centers upon four different Chinese students who study in the US but from four different backgrounds.

1. A new student who is coming to RIT in fall semester.

I will look for a Chinese student who gets admission to RIT in fall semester and record his/her life in the first three or fours months here in RIT. From my experience, for the first couple month, everything is unknown but full of fun. You leave your parents and come to the US to study for the first time; it is a beginning for you to be independent. You are excited to make friends and experience different culture. However, when the third or fourth month comes, things get change. Pressures come to you: from parents, friends, language and school work. This is the time you need to find a way to adjust yourself, as it is the hardest time for an international student.
I will be back to China during August and contact one of the students who is coming to RIT. I will meet him and also talk to his parents. Hopefully, I will get the chance to take the same flight with him and spend more time to talk and record his entire precious first moments in the US.

2. Tianran Qian, a first year grad student in NYU.

The other student in my documentary will be a first year grad student in NYU, who is already in the US for two years and also a close friend with me. Her name is Tianran Qian.

At the time I met her, she was a student in Polytechnic Institute of New York University. She shared a lot of her experience of working and meeting with people. She also took me to participate in different social activities. I was surprised by her ability and ambition. I remembered that she took some of the classes from NYU Tisch and she told me that there is one day she will get the chance to transfer to Tisch. She is such a positive and happy girl in my eyes at first time I met her.

One year later when I met her, she already transferred to NYU Tisch School of arts to
study Interaction Communications. She is busy with her work, taking big pressure with competing with other students. But she is still working in different organizations after school. She makes her life full of work. She is a volunteer in Consulate General of China in NYC and also working in the New York Chinese Opera Society. She is also a girl is really interested in the traditional Chinese culture and she has the passionate to introduce it to Americans. So far, she already did some of her school project with putting the traditional Chinese culture into High-tech knowledge in media and communication. I went to a big screening event with her, who shows the project that ITP students make. She told me that she is going to take this course and hopefully she can show something next year the same time to the audience, into which she will put the traditional Chinese culture in. I am impressed by her passion, because nowadays, not that many Chinese international student come to America with clear of goals.

I realize she has changed a little bit from what I saw her last time. She put more pressure on herself, I asked her where was the happy girl I met last year, she told me that might comes from too much work and too many thoughts that are not only from school but also from her boyfriend, roommates and parents. She grows alone since she realized some of her friends come to her just for advantages. She is sad because
her parents are not paying a lot of attention to her, even the day when she got the internship from BBC and she tried to contact her father and share these great things with him. However her father didn’t respond until five days later.

From recoding her life, I want not only focus on her efforts on spreading Chinese culture in the US but also tell the audience the difficulty she meets and get the attention from the parents in China.

3. Yuwen Wang, a first year RIT grad photo student.

She is a student who studies in the US with most of her tuition loans from the bank.

As I know, most of the students who come to the US are from middle-class families in China. It is a large amount of money that parents need to pay to afford their children to study in the US. However, Yuwen Wang, loans the tuition from the bank. She insists on coming to the US to study photography regardless her parents against. She studies hard meanwhile she teaches English online every early weekends morning to students in China by Skype. Since she has to work and make money for herself, she cannot spend money like most of the Chinese students do such as
shopping, eating in a restaurant and travelling in the US. Sometimes, it is good for her to just focus on study. However, sometimes it just makes her put more pressure on herself day and day. Her life is really simple, school and her apartment. She hasn’t been to any parties with her American classmates.

There are a lot of students like her, they work really hard but never attend any activities after school. I don’t really support that. Since we come here in a different country, the experience with American students and American life is really necessary to us. It is a great opportunity for you to learn. However, since more and more Chinese students come to the US, they become a group and stay together, which is not a bad thing, but sometimes it just misleading some of the Chinese students and stop them to experience the American life and culture.

I will be with her for a month and record her real life. I won’t say anything to judge her life but I want the audience to think about her life here in the US.
4. Mingshan Fan, a junior photo student in RIT.

It is her fifth year here in the US. When I met her, I was shocked that she told me I was the second Chinese friend she made since she came to the US. She has a really great relationship with a lot of American students. Since nowadays, more and more Chinese students spend time, she is quite different from others. From a lot of Chinese students I have talked to, most of them are willing to make friends with Americans, however they never try but just listen to some other students comments.

This is not a good trend for these students, which make them dare to experience this different culture; In other words, this is not good for their future work and life. But Mingshan, it is not that she doesn’t want to be with Chinese students, but she told me that she want to see more and more Chinese students be with American friends together not only be in a small group with Chinese students and speak Chinese. From her life, I want her to show how she is with American students and share her experience with new coming students from China.
Work Process:

I will go back to China during the summer to interview some students who are preparing to come to the US and some parents who decide to send their children to the US or who already send their children here.

When I come back to the US, I will be in Rochester to record the new students first couple months of life here and also Yuwen and Mingsha’s life in the US. I will also spend some days in NYC with my friend Tianran Qian to record her life in NYC. I will participate the events she is in and meet different people she meets.

I will also interview some of Americans to let them share their thoughts and experience with Chinese students.

Audience:

I want to make this documentary as a start of my future business plan. From what I researched, there is not an independent documentary company in China. However, with the increasing number of students from China coming to the US, there is a huge
number of audience want to know about the international students life here in the US. By doing this, I want to tell their stories and share them to people in China and also for parents who has the idea to send their children to the foreign countries to get to know if they are ready.

**Timeline**

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<td>• Do research on these Chinese students;</td>
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<td>• Contact more Chinese students in the US;</td>
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<td>• Record Yuwen’s summer life in the US.</td>
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<td>July</td>
<td>• Go back to China and contact crew;</td>
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<td>August</td>
<td>• Interview with parents and students in China;</td>
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<td>• Start shooting with the new student who is coming to the US for the first time.</td>
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| Fall 2013     | September  | • Go back to the US and contact crew  
|              | October    | • Meet with crew;  
|              | November   | • Record the new student’s life in the US;  
|              |            | • Record Tianran’s life in NYC for a couple days;  
|              |            | • Interview with Mingshan.  
| Winter 2013-2014 | December  | • Record students lives;  
|              | January    | • Interview with American students and teachers;  
|              | January    | • Meet with advisors;  
|              | February   | • Work on subtitles;  
|              |            | • Contact composer.  

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| February | • Meet with advisors;  
• Sync;  
• Edit and work on subtitles;  
• Shooting. |
| March | • Composing;  
• Editing;  
• Animating;  
• Shooting. |
| April | • Picture lock;  
• Sound mixing;  
• Color correction;  
• Meet advisors. |
| May | • Meet advisors;  
• Final adjustment. |
| May | • Screening. |
# Budget

**Title:** *Untitled*  
**Producer:** Ruiqi Liu  

**Running Time:** appx. 26 minutes  
**Director:** Ruiqi Liu  

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**500  Production Equipment**

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Subtotal: $2085 (exclude flight to China)
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**Total: $2398**
APPENDIX 2: TINA CHAPMAN DACOSTA’S STATEMENT

She is in a NY State of mind wrapped in Chinese Culture.

It is about a young college student living away from home. Preparing her self-chosen field of media communications, making her mark, and missing her family.

However, it’s also about an immigrant, a Chinese woman living abroad. She’s learning a greater appreciation for her culture. Missing what she doesn’t have anymore. How often we miss the water once the well runs dry.

If the intended audience is Chinese parents considering sending their children to America, some adjustments should be made, such as increasing the volume. There is time when it’s difficult to hear Tianran. Using a larger font size for the captions would also help parents, whose hearing and eyesight seem to diminish after having children.

However, this film shows us a glimpse, an intimate glimpse of a daughter and father relationship. We see young Tianran, busy at work, confident in her chosen field, and strengthened by her culture. Then we see Tianran, daddy’s little girl, as she calls her
father on her cell phone. The camera sits with her, in a CU, as we see her experience a sine wave of emotions, from anticipation, to excitement, to delight, to feeling on the top of world and special as she discovers her father has chosen to give his attention to her and will deal with on other business. But then we ride down the emotional curve when she realizes she was wrong. Her father's "business" is something else, not her, and he abruptly ends the call. She falls from delight to disbelief, to disappointment, and then to hurt. But Tianran is a tough New Yorker now, strengthened by her culture, so she recovers, by wrapping her in supportive language, "I know he loves me in his heart," "I shouldn't act this way," "I am not this weak."

Ruiqi made good decisions to present these scenes in this order. It tells us Tianran's story, of striving to be a professional communicator, but struggling with her own communications with her father. She also is struggling with her own communications with her father. She also deals with age-old edges of being called "sweetie" by her co-host, and the challenges of catching a cab in NY.

In the end, she reminds us all of Mary Tyler Moore, or any TV show with a young woman trying to make her mark in a big city and falling in love with its freedom and possibilities.

The cinematography is beautiful. The bold colors of Chinese red against white lights and white washed walls.
There is a constant flow, a feeling of movement, from the opening shots of moving times square traffic, the speeding subway, to moving with Tianran to the Opera House, to NYU, down the streets of NY, the moving silk fabrics of the Chinese costumes, the ballet dancer, and finally Tianran dancing with her umbrella. We feel the freedom she feels, the constant hustle and bustle, and we see the search for joy and happiness in her eyes.

We are in a Ruiqi State of Mind and that's a beautiful place to be.