



Left: Stella in her school cheerleading uniform. Right: Harry riding his bike. Source: Screen captures from *Mainland*. © Three Waters Productions LLC.

Mainland

DIRECTED BY MIAO WANG

PRODUCED BY MIAO WANG, VIOLET FENG,
ROBERT M. CHANG, AND DAMON SMITH

90 MINUTES, COLOR

THREE WATERS PRODUCTIONS, 2017

“An eye-opening cultural commentary”
—Huffington Post

Reviewed by Carol Stepanchuk

Stella (Xinyi) Zhu instantly engages with the camera: “Today is a very special day for me—I’m so happy to receive an offer from Fryeburg Academy—it’s my ideal school, my dream come true. . . I won’t let you down!”

Harry (Junru) He also received an offer from Fryeburg: “I feel very fortunate, so I prepared a song for everyone,” he says in Chinese. He turns from the camera and starts to play an original composition on a piano in a room filled with books, family pictures, and mementos.

How Stella and Harry, high school students from Shanghai and Guangzhou, fare as juniors and seniors in an elite American prep school is the subject of *Mainland*, a compassionate documentary that looks at the growing population of Chinese and foreign students in the US. An excellent addition to libraries and classrooms for student, teacher, and community viewing, this film invites discussion on a range of topics, including why students embark on study abroad, how classroom perspectives shift for both newcomers and locals, and what the long-term effects of global exchange mean for the future of education and building cultural empathy.

Fryeburg Academy is a prep school nestled in the hinterlands of southwestern Maine—one of the oldest schools in the US, with an alumni roster of politicians, celebrity chefs, writers, actors and storytellers. As described in the film, the school discovered the international market in the late 1990s when there was a decline of American boarders. A multicultural cohort at first offered welcome diversity to the student population but later became increasingly essential for the institution’s viability. After 2008, Chinese students took the international lead over Japanese and Korean students in foreign schools. Choosing to study abroad is viewed as a viable option (over three million Chinese students did not take the *gaokao* college entrance exam), and Fryeburg hopes to take advantage of the demand for foreign study, aiming to fill each grade with a cohort of twelve to fifteen Chinese students.

How Stella and Harry, high school students from Shanghai and Guangzhou, fare as juniors and seniors in an elite American prep school is the subject of Mainland, a compassionate documentary that looks at the growing population of Chinese and foreign students in the US.

For Stella and Harry, the children of affluent self-made business dealers, there really was no choice in opting out—not that they wanted to. Stella’s father sees those teenagers attending foreign high schools in America as becoming the future elite: “I want Stella to integrate with Americans.” Harry’s father has similar advice: “Your future workplace will likely be multinational—you might have to fly here and there for work to Europe or Africa—you will have to interact with all kinds of people.” Clearly, their own success was bolstered by China’s initial industrial and economic push. A foothold into prosperity and modernism was established by entrepreneurs like themselves, and they now are extending the ladder to their children, recognizing, however, that they will prosper in different ways because of new opportunities. Harry’s father tells Harry how much luckier he is than himself: “You visited Europe when you were eight—what you have seen of the outside world far exceeds what I saw going abroad in 1981 at age eighteen.”

What does that mean for Harry and Stella, who have aspirations that differ significantly from their parents’? Stella wants to be an artist or a teacher, and Harry would prefer to study musical composition over economics; still, neither will let their families down. Stella says that she will first find a career as a businesswoman, then find her way into teaching; Harry thinks of his grandfather, who was given US \$1,000 to travel abroad—he worked and earned his money, giving the \$1,000 back to his father in full. Harry will dutifully heed the words of his father, “A man’s ambitions dwell far and wide; you need to take a longer view.” But ultimately, he feels a strong obligation to do right by them, especially as the only grandson in the last three generations of his family.

BEGINNINGS

The movie opens with Stella whirling a tai chi staff—later, a brilliantly lit boat festooned in lights sails outward, recalling the popular Chinese proverb of sailing on the winds of good fortune.



Graduation day for Stella and Harry as they watch their classmates. Source: Screen captures from the *Mainland*. © Three Waters Productions LLC.

Mainland can be a steppingstone in high school and postsecondary classroom discussions on ways to broaden international student life and support an environment of empathy.

Director Miao Wang then takes us on a chronological tour of two years in Stella's and Harry's lives, from school interviews, reviews, and acceptance to Fryeburg; school and home life in China; across the ocean to the Portland International Jetport; and to the first view of the countryside in a small rural town in Maine. We watch, almost anxiously, those awkward days of settling into a new school and the flush of a new academic calendar filled with sports, classes, orchestra, cheerleading, and woodworking. We share in the beauty of the seasons and a summertime break in China, followed by the bustle of senior year—college applications (Ohio State, Penn State, Wheaton, Michigan State. . .), talent shows, prom, and graduation. We meet the admissions team, Stella's and Harry's families, other international students, teachers, the dorm mother delivering mail—the kaleidoscope of faces providing constantly shifting perspectives, meted out to keep our attention and interest. A second, more focused viewing, however, allows us to appreciate Stella and Harry as a study in contrasts.

Stella lights up the world—“she came in like a whirlwind, a house on fire,” comments one of the admissions officers. Stella uses English in front of the camera (she keeps Post-its of vocabulary words on her mirror); is highly independent, arriving alone at the airport; enjoys boys, dating, and cheerleading; and feels she thrived in the US because she didn't study. Harry, on the other hand, is quiet and thoughtful with a quirky sense of humor, and—unlike Stella—favors Chinese in front of the camera; he came to the US flanked by his parents and little sister. When it comes to sports like basketball and football, he falls by the sidelines (but plays soccer with enthusiasm—it's the fastest way to make friends, he says).

Through glimpses of China, we see what Stella and Harry have left behind—enormous cities for farmland in Maine, the security of quiet group classes for the challenge of exposing one's individualism, the safety in open-close book teaching styles for critical thinking and opinionated debate. Politics, class, and race become part of everyone's discussions—and Harry eventually researches a project on the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989.

We also notice moments of intense loneliness—a class film project by Chinese students helps unpack Asian stereotypes.

Over time, we see Stella and Harry question and consider what is true or false. Harry feels that America isn't as full of happiness as he originally thought—the closer you look, the worse it is. “Americans think that we have no freedom, but look at the spin in America,” he muses. “You can't tell what is real or fake.” As for happiness, Stella says that her dream is to become very successful and make a lot of money. For most Chinese, Stella claims, “They feel happy only after achieving a level of financial security, but now, I started having my own opinions.”

What's in store for Stella and Harry is not resolved by the movie's end. On graduation day, we leave a tearful Stella and an emotional Harry. Harry believes that there are three levels of a human being: at the first level, you don't understand yourself; by the second, you understand yourself; but when you finally reach the third level, you understand yourself and improve. Harry feels he's stuck in the second level and can't wait for the next stage. Stella's mother says that “the bird is now out of the cage.” We sense mixed feelings that border on protection, curiosity, and caution, yet an understanding that nothing can hold Stella back.

VIEWING

Mainland was first shown at this reviewer's graduate library to a mixed group of staff, librarians, parents, and students. The movie was especially relevant not only because of the large Chinese population at the university (over 2,000 students) but also because of the growing number of Chinese students entering public high schools in southeastern Michigan. A private international education company is placing Chinese high school students in nearby cities while also acting as an education consulting service. To better integrate these students with their new surroundings, the university's center for educational outreach has suggested connecting with a youth dialogue program and to consider offering STEM-based maker programs in Detroit that partner with the university's art and design school. The idea is to build relationships, a sense of community, and friendships.

Mainland can thus be a steppingstone in high school and postsecondary classroom discussions on ways to broaden international student life and support an environment of empathy. Social support and adaptability are increasingly important—engagement and personal connections are crucial conduits for success. While educational opportunities indeed are available, problems surrounding social language, academic expectations, and finances become more prevalent as high school students enter levels of higher education. The topics surrounding *Mainland* will also have relevance for discussions about immigrant populations in inner-city schools. These schools face diverse populations where new global conflicts create new crops of classes—and what works one year may not work at all the next. What all these student groups face, though, is similar: an unusual seesaw space where they try to balance teenage life in America with cultural traditions from their homeland.

DETAILS

Wang creates memorable panoramas and inviting closeups with a soundtrack that interweaves Harry He's original music and an original score (heartfelt and soothingly melancholy) by Stephen Ulrich. An educational screening kit with discussion guide is available, as well as invitations to the director for appearances at teaching events.

Wang has created other documentaries, including *Beijing Taxi* (feature-length), which would offer insightful comparisons of a city/country in transition as part of an overall screening of *Mainland* for students. ■

CAROL STEPANCHUK is Outreach and Academic Programs Coordinator for the University of Michigan Lieberthal–Rogel Center for Chinese Studies. She has over thirty years of experience in global arts with research interests in Chinese material culture and visual imagery. She has led numerous professional development workshops and campus community collaborations, and authored three books on Chinese culture for general audiences.