

Personality Japanese seen through Chinese eyes

By GREGORY TURK

Asahi Evening News

To many Chinese, the Japanese are barely people. Strong negative anti-Japanese sentiments in textbooks focusing on Japan's brutal repression in parts of China before and during World War II is all that most Chinese know about their island neighbors.

A Chinese exchange student who wants to study in Japan must first face a wall of opposition from friends and relatives full of anti-Japanese sentiment. Then, there is the constant yammer of people insisting that learning English is the only reason to study abroad.

Once arriving, many Chinese discover first-hand the notorious exclusionary attitude towards foreigners many Japanese still possess. And for people from developing countries like China, such discrimination is often more pronounced.

Despite all of this, the numbers of Chinese studying abroad in Japan have quadrupled in the last decade, far quicker than any other nationality. In 1998, Chinese made up nearly one half of Japan's 51,000 foreign students for the year.

Exchange students are the key to a badly needed understanding between the two former enemies, explains 35-year-old Zhang Liling (pronounced "jahng"), a former exchange student and creator of a 10-part documentary about Chinese students in Japan, examining the dreams they chase in coming here.

All-volunteer crew

"Our faces are similar, as are our cultural backgrounds, so you would think that we wouldn't have to put any effort into understanding each other. But in fact our peoples are quite different," says Zhang, now president of a Chinese-language satellite television station in Tokyo.

"Chinese people would come up to me and say, 'After seeing this film I think we ought to reevaluate our impressions of the Japanese.'"

Relying on an all-volunteer crew, the series, titled "Our Days As Students In Japan," was produced on a miniscule budget of only 70 million yen. Zhang narrates the Japanese and Chinese versions herself.

Episode one, which tells the story of a 6-year-old Chinese girl attending a Japanese school, will be broadcast to coincide with Children's Day, May 5, on Fuji Television.

No one is quite sure how Japanese viewers will react to the program that projected Zhang to superstardom after airing in her native country last year.

During a recent promotion tour through China's major cities for a best-selling book about the series, people of all ages lined up for hours to just to see her, Zhang recalls.

No doubt part of the interest in the series has to do with Zhang herself being a success story in a foreign country, something many Chinese dream of. There have been articles written about her in newspapers across the country, and TV news specials as well. But Zhang is perhaps proudest of a magazine advertising a pirated version of the documentary.

All of this came as a complete surprise to its sponsor, China Central Television (CCTV), which initially dismissed the project, Zhang says.

Genuine emotions

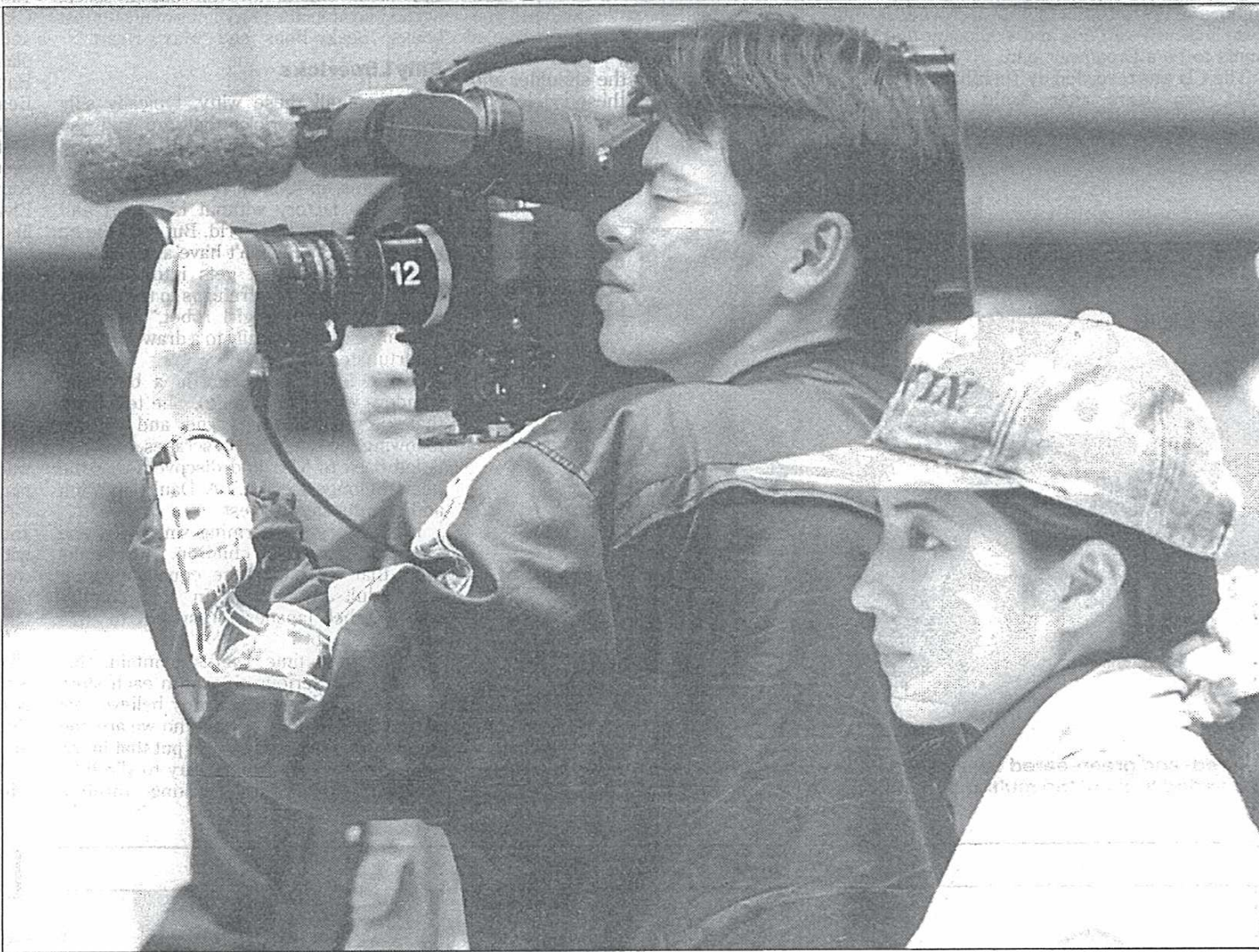
But perhaps it's not just the subject matter that is responsible for the response, but Zhang's strong vision. "I did it because I had genuine emotions for the subject," she says. "If I hadn't done something about the idea I would have gone crazy."

She began the project, first as simply a hobby, without any firm concept of what might result. "I told myself it didn't even matter where I set up my camera, an interesting story of someone's life would emerge," she says.

During the four years it took to make the film, more than 300 students of all ages were interviewed, with around 10 appearing in the finished work.

In selecting topics for the film, Zhang explains that she tried to capture different types of students. She even looks at ex-students, such as Ding Shangbiao, aged 42, who has not seen his wife or daughter in Shanghai for eight years. The former exchange student quit his school in Hokkaido to move to Tokyo, where he works two jobs in the hope of one day sending his daughter to the United States to study.

Originally from the southern seaboard province of Zhejiang, Zhang moved to Beijing where she studied acting. Then, in 1989, she decided to go abroad to study. "All I wanted was to see something other than China," she



ZHANG LILING

Director-narrator Zhang Liling, right, filming her documentary that has made her a celebrity in her homeland of China.

says. "Vietnam would have been fine, but after talking to a lot of people I came up with the idea that Japan was perhaps a little bit safer than other places."

She describes herself as having been in the "first wave" of Chinese to study abroad after

the 1980s reforms under Deng Xiaoping made it possible. Because of China's isolation during the Cultural Revolution in the '60s and '70s, members of her generation had a heightened curiosity about the world, she explains.

Without speaking a single word of Japanese, she arrived in Tokyo just days after the Tian'anmen Square Incident, as her country was facing again a brief period of international

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Tears on the way to bridging culture gap

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Su is usually an enthusiastic student and loves to participate in class—but not today. She is lost in a sea of words she cannot understand in a strange country she's been told she will live in for the next two years.

It is the first day at a Japanese school for the brave 6-year-old from Beijing, and Zhang Liling's cameras are there to record it for her Fuji TV documentary series.

Su sits at the back of the classroom in western Tokyo, quiet, attentive but with confusion written across her face.

At break time, students swarm around her, bubbling with curiosity over this new foreign face recently arrived with her mother, to be reunited with her father who has lived here for five years.

"Then the situation comes to a head," Zhang says on the film's soundtrack. "Tears start pouring down Su's face, and the more she wipes them away, the more they come."

Su runs from the room, straight into the arms of her waiting mother, who has been watching from the hall.

"Just watch the other students write for now," her mother tells her. "A little courage and you'll be fine."

Soon, Su is back at her desk.

When we next see Su on film, a year later, the traumas have been all but forgotten. She chatters away with her classmates as if she had lived all her life in Japan.

Then, when the cameras return again a year later, we see Su on her last day at school in Japan. Her classmates throw her a party, singing songs. From the school's windows her entire class watches her walk down the street and out of view—the last time they will likely ever see their foreign playmate.

"I am really unhappy. Now I have no one to walk home with," says Su's best friend Yuki, with a frown on her face.

Su's story will be aired on May 5, Children's Day, as the first part of the 10-hour Fuji TV documentary, "Our Days As Students In Japan."



FUJI TELEVISION

Six-year-old Su, from China, starts to cry on her first day at school in Tokyo after being overwhelmed by a language she can't understand at all.