



In the footsteps of Lao She: a Griffith Film School study tour of Beijing.

12 undergrads, 2 academics, Beijing for 10 days -what's that got to do with animation?

By Peter Moyes, Margaret McVeigh & Ellie Goggin



Not much at the outset...

Meeting a baker's dozen of disheveled animation students and beleaguered colleague at Beijing international airport, 1AM—not a great sight. Wall-eyed and punch-drunk.

Driving one and half hours to who knows where, for what knows what in the way of lodgings. Along highways, through roadworks, barren poorly-lit strange-to-us landscapes. Not a great start. The view through that smeared bus window: perhaps an opening pov to a very grisly movie with a not happy ending. Arrive at lodgings: student dorms. flights and flights and flights of stairs with broken bags and sinking hearts, all by the light of one sad phone. Upstairs and one inch mattresses (why not just make them 2 or 3 or 4?—bugger the expense!).



Animation research:
'this is fabulous!'
'Strange, well yes, but fantastic!'

Daylight and the oddest most alien place. An art district waiting to happen. Huge modern galleries. No people. Electricity towers. Lonely Street Art. Industrial. Antonioni's *Red Desert*. The odd vegetable patch. Eschallots, carrots underground?. And the waft of sewerage. Like seams of malcontent. Dust everywhere. Smog. The sun—you can stare at the sun! (Stars -what stars...). And yet ... the collective assessment of our predicament, of our site for Animation research: 'this is fabulous!' 'Strange, well yes, but fantastic!'

Food for the animators (eccentric) soul, grit for our 'toon poetry. And so yes, what did the ensuing experiences have to do with animation studies: why, everything of course!

Animation is turning very long bus-trips into call and response comedy routines, into who's on first and look at that (!), into panicked toilet breaks behind Chinese shrubbery at railway crossings, into riding the riffs of our drivers tootling horn weaving between the worst gridlock this passenger has enjoyed.



animation is turning
very long bus trips
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routines ...

Amid Beijing life and colour of all hue, shape and movement. Humanity writ simple, and in your face. And the bicycles and bobbing babies and impossible towers of recycled cardboard, and scooters and tuks tuks and cars, all honking, all creeping along inch by inch and somehow not bothered by it all—my god to compare our short and fussy western fuses..



Animation is ... life and
colour of all hue, shape
and movement

And then meandering through industrial suburbs half *Mad Max*, part Bosch, mostly Fellini, and bizarrely inspiring. The human canvas: old and young gathered around small stoves, part working part hanging out, beating on metal, murdering laundry, taking relief behind a car in repair. Difficult not to feel like the classic voyeur: separate, nose-y, observing. Yet were it not for such keen observations, the ubiquitous 'half-shirt' would have passed us by. a rare gem. Glints of sun on choppy water.



a recurrent sartorial theme ...

The half-shirt phenomenon deserves an earnest aside. One most savvy of our animation cohort clocked a recurrent sartorial theme—animation is observation, remember. Across the megatropolis of Beijing (and

who knows how far this trend has trended), mostly middle-aged men, not confined to the plump variety, hitching their shirts past the midriff to expose the splendour of their abdomens. many. perhaps unnoticeable to the less animated eye, but bringing much joy in their spotting every 100 metres or so of human carnival. Intense intra-bus speculation followed: practical? cultural? ... vanity? blithe indifference? .. or legacy of some breast-plate gear circa umm.. Ming dynasty (?). Inquiries were made of course and it came down to the warm weather and not wanting for full removal of the shirt for not wanting flagrant exposition of the nipple. an odd compromise. And so another style is born where necessity meets cultural norms –albeit a dubious modesty. Our bevy threatened to introduce this practice back home but I doubt it favour will be found with your hirsute western pot belly.



animation carnival ...
animation is ...
burlesque... animation
is shooting hoops...

Animation is carnival. Animation is burlesque. Animation is humour, spirit, fun. Animation is drawing from life, of course. Stories from life. Fun out of life. Spin. Bullshit. Relatable. Animation is team-work, and shooting hoops with the locals, even if it ends in bitter and damning defeat: China 753, a very out of condition (surprise!) off their game (did we ever have one?) Australia 5—no talent but truckloads of pluck.

And now back on familiar turf, something animated might be produced (the study tour's stated objective) but that's beside the point, and to my mind,

not the true purpose. Much broader inspiration has taken place—colour, movement, life has been observed, sounds, bus horns, new food—mulled over and digested, and inevitably, to find expression in unexpected and myriad ways.. all animated.



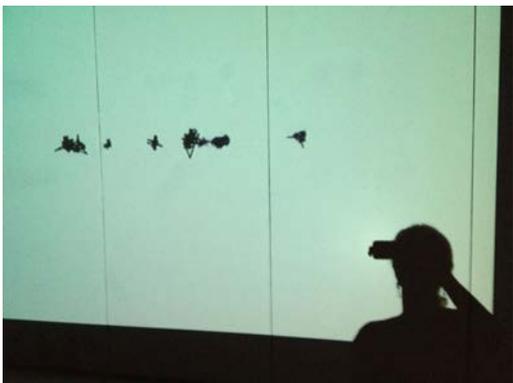
...life observed, mulled over and digested...

And importantly, we have a bus driver back in China who loves us—amazing what a carton of ciggies can do.

By Peter Moyes

I was there as the script person ...

We arrive at a building in SongZhuang, the “Silicon Valley of Culture” 2.10am 3 July 2015 to start our journey to create animated stories inspired by the world of Lao She’s 1940’s Chinese novel, *Rickshaw*.



I was there as the script person who knew about words to teach screenwriting to animation students who knew about images.

If we were to think what we learnt through the lenses of academia and the impetus of Internationalisation—the student outcome of graduating as a global citizen and standing in the shoes of those from another culture—in this case *in* another culture—they graduated first class. If we were to consider what they learnt about the process of creativity and inspiration, their journals and final project proposals also stand testament.

As lecturers I believe Peter and I taught our students so much. But what about us? What did we learn from the other side of the pedagogical paradigm?

They taught us so much.

Our students taught me what it is like to see the world through the eyes of the animator. To see the world in pure images. Not images conjured by words but images that don't need words. Images that are the story. They taught me what it was like to become a family of sorts in a foreign country —two academics and twelve students who each day set forth in our quest to unravel the contrasts of what is present day Beijing.



saw China—a land of contrasts.



We nearly saw it all ...

We saw it all. All the places that still exist today that the hero, Hsiang Tzu, traversed in Lao She's novel, *Rickshaw*. The Drum Tower. The Bell Tower. The Forbidden City. The hutongs. But didn't bargain with the knock down pace of the developer's hammer and the drive to modernity and refurbishment ...

Well we nearly saw it all.

But we saw so much more. We

So little coffee?

So much art. So much architecture.... So much culture. So much education. So many people. So many trees. So much peace amongst the bustle of an overflowing city with its overflowing roads. So little coffee.

But the search of the journeyman is not without result. So often the same story. Good things in your own back yard. Happy Trees Art Cafe. And Coffee. Just around the corner.



Words and wondering. Pitching sessions. This is what we were here for...

So to our Creativity Workshop. Unpacking Lao She's China. Building a Maggie's nest of images and ideas. Words and wondering. Pitching sessions. This is what we were here for. We were in Zhang Zhong and we were reflecting, writing, drawing, collaborating in one of the many seemingly deserted art galleries near our student digs.

What was going on inside their heads? I could not wait to find out. And what I did I shall treasure for the rest of my life.

For many this trip was a trip of firsts. The first time on a plane. Ever! The first time in a foreign country. The first time away from home and the things that make a home—a pet dog, a washing machine, a mattress, a hot shower. But after the first few days faded we made a home. A home not to be too sexist where the boys were boys and the girls were girls.

What was that bit about eyeliner and vogue and the crumpled back pack?

My girls showed me how to be sharp—to put on eyeliner with a credit card, to look like they (not me) had stepped out of Vogue everyday from a crumpled backpack.

Peter's boys taught me that gentleman are not a dying breed. They bought us bulk water and carried it up all those stairs. Made sure the girls had a boy in each group whenever we split up. And they played a mean game of



cards as we sat around the table at nights. Chatting, writing, sampling Chinese beers, sharing photos, food, jokes, drawing, always drawing...

Frozen time ...

They taught me that time to be still and time to be together is precious. Frozen time in our Antonioni suburb on the outskirts of Beijing. Captive time in our hours and hours in the bus with our ever calm and happy bus driver. Bustling time in our expeditions on the underground to get to somewhere we hoped we were going. Time to bond. Time to joke. Time to reflect. Time to draw. Time to observe.

Time to write.

By Margaret McVeigh

And this is what Ellie wrote...

“I’ve been to the Great wall of China.



But what that actually means to me is so much more than you can imagine.



When I say that, about a million experiences, stories, feelings and thoughts rush back to me...

So when I say “I’ve been to the Great Wall of China” what I am really saying is all of this:

I went there, I conquered it, I made it my own. I climbed up, higher and higher, past watchtowers and struggling tourists, alone and alive.

I traversed the huge highway-like entryway alone and purchased my ticket after getting stuck in the line without a ticket and vaulting awkwardly over the metal barriers.

I made a friend, shared the climb and took a selfie with her, and not a single word was spoken. I saw the world stretched out below me, and saw with it all the possibilities life had, and how small and insignificant all problems are in the face of it all.

I huffed and puffed my way up stairs that were almost vertical in some places. I made it to the end of the Southern Wall and back on two Chinese Weetbix, some ill suited Strawberry-Almond milk and two sesame crackers (and consequently fainted on the bus ride home).



I could see the magic in this ancient place ...

I could see the magic in this ancient place; the wonder, the inspiration. I drew my hand slowly across hundreds of years of worn stone everywhere I could, noticing the nicks and rounded edges, the carvings and vandalised initials everywhere.

I looked to the horizon amongst the green mountains, shrouded quietly in mist, and breathed in the air so fresh and cold it lit my lungs from the inside, and froze the tips of my ears.

I could see Hiccup the Viking and his Dragon Toothless soaring high above. I looked over the side of the wall into the deep green forests and I could see Hobbits running, and Orcs darting through the trees in tight pursuit. I

looked into the trees and could see forest Pokemon living and thriving in their natural habitat. Heck, I could also see Doctor's Who's TARDIS parked innocently on one of the watchtowers, and ancient Chinese warriors circling it wearily, spears pointed in a neat circle.

I out climbed everyone, and experienced the Great Wall completely alone in some areas. If I stopped and just experienced, I could see ghost warriors and sentinels alike prowling the wall, eating supper together, and keeping a vigilant watch.

I made it to the top of the world and I stood there, covered in sweat, freezing, shaking, and I shone.

That's what it felt like to me; that's what it WAS to me. And it was all possible because I took a chance. I leapt past my usual inhibitions and excuses, and went for it.

"I don't have the time. There is so much work I have to do. My skills are no where near good enough, I need all the time in the world to practise, I need to save money, I am not a social person, I'm not really interested in going to China...." were all thoughts that ran through my head when Peter Moyes, Animation Program Director at The Griffith Film School, and a friend, stood in front of my cohort sometime in April 2015 and announced the beginning of some project with China; the "Rickshaw" Project.

As such, normally such thoughts would take over. But apparently China would pay for our flights, give us accommodation and provide most meals. If that wasn't enough, it was also worth 10 credit points. After internally playing musical chairs for a couple of days, I sent an email of interest to Peter; though as it would happen my internet cut out and it looked like the email did not send, so I jumped off the chair. China? Who really needed that! I had so much stuff I needed to do here....

When the internet connected again a few minutes later, it had sent, and my musical chairs were stolen. Resigned, I applied, did a five minute presentation, and we were all scooped up anyway. Cue a few months of furious preparation. Visa, new passport, reading the Rickshaw book, meetings, insurance, packing, freaking out. And then we were there.

And while the Great Wall was the immediate highlight for me, there were so many other places and experiences I had in China that will always hold a special place in my heart.

For example, on the first day me and Gerry bought some fruit from an old Lady's stall, ate it (delicious) and later fretted intensely about Hepatitis B. I butt-slid down the actual vertical steps leading up to the Drum Tower while my wonderful friends filmed from below. I bought a rainbow umbrella hat at the Forbidden City and looked fabulous as I explored it.



I bought a rainbow umbrella hat at the Forbidden City and looked fabulous as I explored it.

I hunted for Coffee with my Animation buddies through the crisscrossing streets of Beijing, often finding success in rare little coffee shops. I lay on the roof at night and counted nine jets going in completely different directions, heading to and fro from the horizons that bled light, no matter how dark. I won an Amazing Race-like challenge, with small teams breaking into taxis and rushing to get to the train station... I jumped from our taxi and ran, closely followed by opposing runner Trudi from the taxi behind us. It was a mad, bloodlust filled dash, with me emerging victorious. I drank so much Mango juice. I had coffee dates with my lecturers in our beautiful accommodation district, and felt so hip. I found the old airstrip part of the 798 district, and later found the Art of Iron Man 2. And I bartered! I bartered like there was no tomorrow.

And I bartered! I bartered like there was no tomorrow...

So when I look back on all of this, my experiences, my emotions, my friends, my photobombs and I think... I know now, despite my anti-social nature, my extreme anxious personality with money, my lack of interest in getting myself out there and my laziness ...

... that applying to enter a program I knew next to nothing about that was during my precious holiday time in the peak "you should be doing University work" time, it was all incredibly, irrevocably, completely and unarguably...



...worth it".

By Ellie Goggin



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