

MEDIA RESOURCES

Film Review

***The Monkey Kid:* A Personal Glimpse into the Cultural Revolution**

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Wang, Xiao-Yen (Director/Writer), *The Monkey Kid* (1995). San Francisco, Calif.: Beijing–San Francisco Film Group. Also released in France by Les Films du Paradoxe under the title, *La Mome Singe* (1997). 95 minutes. Mandarin Chinese with English subtitles.

The Monkey Kid, written and directed by Xiao-Yen Wang, is probably one of the best Chinese feature films ever made but few Americans have seen. Released in 1995 by the Beijing–San Francisco Film Group, the film “was an Official Selection at the 1995 Cannes International Film Festival and received the Grand Prize at the 1996 Aubervilliers International Children’s Film Festival, awards for Best Film and Best Director at the 1995 Danube Film Festival, Best Foreign Film at the 1995 Fort Lauderdale International Film Festival, the Young Jury Award at the 1996 International Women’s Film Festival at Créteil, and the Critic’s Prize at the Cinestival 97 at Marseille.” (<http://www.bsffilmgroup.com/mk/about.html>San) Despite its critical acclaim, *The Monkey Kid* was not available for distribution until December 2010.

The film is the autobiographical account of director Xiao-Yen Wang’s childhood in China during the Cultural Revolution, the great political upheaval that gripped Chinese society and politics from 1966–1976. Ms. Wang is not just a casual observer

of the times. She is an accomplished writer and director who graduated from the Beijing Film Academy in 1982. That same class of directors came to be called the famed Fifth Generation of Chinese filmmakers and included Chen Kaige (*Farewell My Concubine*, *The Emperor and the Assassin*) and Zhang Yimou (*Curse of the Golden Flower*, *Hero*, *House of Flying Daggers*, *Ju Dou*, *Raise the Red Lantern*, *Red Sorghum*, *The Story of Qiu Ju*, *To Live*). Ms. Wang has also written and directed two other films, *The Blank Point* (1991) and *I'm Seducible* (2006).

At first glance, *The Monkey Kid* may seem like a simple slice-of-life story about one family during the Cultural Revolution, but it is much more than that. This feature film shows just how much Maoist ideology affected everyone in China, especially mothers, fathers, and children. Every family felt the turmoil in some way. What makes this film about the Cultural Revolution different from all others is that it offers a way to understand revolutionary society from a child's perspective.

The story centers on a nine-year old girl from an intellectual family living in Beijing circa 1970. Intellectuals were both the lifeblood of the new China since 1949 and a despised political class. During Cultural Revolution, they were often associated with Mao's enemies within the Chinese Communist Party and thus became targets of political campaigns. Workers, peasants, and soldiers were the most important classes in this society.

The main character of the film is Shi-Wei. For much of the film, Shi-Wei and her sister, Shao-Qiong, are alone in the family's apartment. Her parents live apart in two different locations in rural China as part of the campaign to have intellectuals learn from the peasants. During the film, both the father and the mother return home for short periods of time. Otherwise, Shi-Wei and Shao-Qiong must take care of themselves. They do their homework, keep the apartment tidy, shop for vegetables from street vendors, and even cook the way their parents have taught them, without any adult supervision.

The film depicts Shi-Wei as a model child. She takes on a lot of the responsibility at home while her parents are away. She also does well in school and serves as a class leader. In

one scene of a school assembly, Shi-Wei reads the essay she wrote about how Chairman Mao's ideas inspired her to be a better person. Her teacher singles her out quite often to be a helper and to read aloud from the *Quotations from Chairman Mao*, their ideological textbook. Shi-Wei's childhood is a testament to the politics of the times. She sings revolutionary songs and plays revolutionary games. Chairman Mao would be proud.

Yet even Shi-Wei is not perfect. In one of the first scenes of the film, Shi-Wei arrives at school late because she and her friends were playing in the snow. Other students would have been punished, but Shi-Wei counts on the fact that she is a "teacher's pet." Shi-Wei just whispers some excuse to the teacher and all is forgiven. Later in the film, when Shi-Wei's father returns home for a short visit, he brings a big box of chocolates for everyone to share. Her father tells Shi-Wei only to have a few chocolates each day, but she sneaks into her father's dresser where he keeps the chocolate and eats her fill on the same day; as a result, Shi-Wei ends up with a stomachache and there were few chocolates for anyone else. Finally, Shi-Wei is so tempted by some dried persimmons she wanted from a fruit stall near her home that she stretches out her hand to take one when the vendor is not looking. Her mother intervenes just in time and takes Shi-Wei home, but both parents are quite hard on her for such a moral lapse.

Shi-Wei and her sister must also deal firsthand with the fact that their parents' class background as intellectuals affects them, too. Someone sets Shao-Qiong's hair on fire. A group of bullies in the neighborhood call Shi-Wei derisive names, throw rocks at her, and chase after her. Shi-Wei is not intimidated easily, however. She is tough and determined yet still a happy child at heart. This attitude seems to be due to her mother.

The mother is clearly the hero of this film. She teaches her young daughters how to steel themselves against political attacks by telling them stories from ancient Chinese history and literature and even offers ways for the girls to defend themselves when necessary. She also tries to give them some small measures of normalcy in a highly charged political age. One of the first

things the mother does when she returns home is to make new, colorful, padded jackets (mián ū) for her daughters. Shi-Wei calls her jacket “pretty” even though style is not supposed to matter in Maoist China.

At a time when Western influences, especially classical music, were rejected on ideological grounds, the mother somehow acquires a record of Bizet’s opera, *Carmen*, and plays it very softly for her daughters and their friends. She wants the girls to experience the beauty of the music. She even encourages Shi-Wei to climb a tree the way she did when she was a child and to ride her bicycle in the rain just for the pure joy of it. The mother teaches Shi-Wei to enjoy her childhood and be a “monkey kid,” a term which may refer to the freedom a monkey has to do what comes naturally. Such an attitude would have been incredibly risky, but it is indicative of the type of small acts of individuality that must have occurred to help people endure food rationing, family separations, and fears of political reprisals.

The Monkey Kid is not a new film, but educators should not be afraid to use it in the classroom. It is especially helpful for illustrating the many ways in which Mao’s cult of personality dominated this era. It offers a view of the Cultural Revolution that is both compelling and entertaining. I have used the film with great success in both undergraduate and graduate classes on modern China. Students report that more than any other film about the Cultural Revolution, *The Monkey Kid* stays with them long after its showing in class because of the story line, the acting of the children, and the effective direction. The film always generates much discussion about class divisions, ideological education, and mass mobilization.

I highly recommend the film for high school and college audiences.

“The Monkey Kid” is now available through the director’s studio (Beijing-San Francisco Film Group, P.O. Box 14017, San Francisco, CA 94114. Telephone: 415-626-6786. Email: info@bsffilmgroup.com) at a reduced rate (under \$30 plus shipping) for educational institutions.