

Movie analysis: wo ai ni mommy essay



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Asian American film-making has a distinct flavour compared with mainstream films. One of its characteristics is its endeavour to highlight Asian sensibilities and sentiments to the unacquainted American audience. Bringing exposure to the differences and commonalities between Asian and mainstream American culture is another objective. Films such as *Shopping for Fangs* (1997), Rea Tajiri's *Strawberry Fields* (1997) and *Sunsets* (1997) by Eric Nakamura and Michael Idemoto are composed of a "sassy melange of cinematic styles". (Soe, 1997, p. 3) They derive many cinematic elements from early Asian American films, but also include "souped-up mise-en-scenes, techno soundtracks and ultra-hip young characters...the stories are ultimately about identity, cultural confusion and finding one's own voice and desires, all of which have been recurrent themes in Asian American films past and present." (Soe, 1997, p. 3) Thesis: In the case of *Wo Ai Ni Mommy*, we witness some of these cinematic elements, along with unique filmmaking style of the director Stephanie Wang-Breal.

Complex issues of loss, memory, family anomie and alienation are all integral parts of the Asian American film genre. In recent years though, Asian American filmmakers have produced an interesting body of work which are largely documentaries or experimental work. The new tribe of young directors, "linked by youth and their impressive technical skills, explores themes and issues common to Asian American films and videos from years past." (Soe, 1997, p. 3) And the movie titled *Wo Ai Ni Mommy* by Stephanie Wang-Breal should be studied in this backdrop. This 2010 documentary film narrates the experience of an American couple (Donna and Jeff Sadowsky) as they apply and adopt an orphaned Chinese child, who is given the name of

Faith Sadowsky by her new parents. The film captures the intricacies, challenges, losses and gains of adopting an older child from across continents. (Soe, 2010, p. 37)

Film-maker Stephanie Wang-Breal is the mastermind behind the project, as she plays an active role in the unfolding narrative. For example, Wang-Breal also doubles up as a translator between Faith and her new parents, as the former struggles to get acclimatized with new socio-cultural norms. Usually documentary filmmakers take a passive role in the process of film-making, in that they do not affect the audio/visual information being captured. But in the case of Wang-Breal, by virtue of being the only remaining link to Faith's Chinese heritage, also assumes the role of the young ward's confidante and interlocutor.

It should also be noted that Asian American filmmaking is not one homogenous concept, but rather consists of vastly diverse constituencies in which

“ recent immigrants, native-born citizens, community activists, documentarians, avant-garde artists, film students, Asiaphiles and cineastes all claim valid rights. The complexity of the Asian American community has always influenced and affected the work of its filmmakers. As this community becomes more diverse, it will require even greater skill and acuity to accurately reflect the ever-evolving state of Asian American media arts.”

(Soe, 1997, p. 3)

It has been an endeavor of early Asian American filmmakers to present their authentic ‘ voice’ in their works. This is certainly evident in *Wo Ai Ni Mommy*

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too, where director Stephanie Wang-Breal's original voice comes across to the audience. Within the limitations of a documentary project, the director manages to raise important issues facing adopted Chinese kids such as Faith. While Faith is obviously the protagonist of the film, her new parents Donna and Jeff are also given key coverage. Indeed Donna's early experiences with Faith were very challenging. But the later transformation of Faith into an English-speaking American kid is in large part due to the efforts of Donna. A large section of the total run-time is dedicated to the conflicts arising between the newly paired mother and daughter. In the beginning, Faith was mourning the loss of her foster family and the native culture in China. But Donna plays an instrumental role in helping the girl ride over her tantrums by consoling, cajoling and empathizing with her.

A place where Wang-Breal's style deviates from early Asian American filmmaking styles is that it does not play up notions of self-determination, self-articulation and collective spirit that were integral to earlier works. This is largely due to the fact that *Wo Ai Ni Mommy* is a documentary about family life and cohabitation devoid of political undertones. Nor does the film contain messages of political activism or a call for social change. If anything, the content and message is one of appreciation and celebration. Wang-Breal also goes beyond her role of being a 'fly on the wall' filmmaker and gets personally involved in the project. During the early days of Faith's American life, it was Wang-Breal who represented and offered the comfort of China to the bewildered girl. By talking to her in Chinese, she became the best friend in Faith's new home. Hence, *Wo Ai Ni Mommy's* theme is one of bringing

communities together by highlighting their common humanity as opposed to highlighting their disparities. (Sterritt, 2009, p. 61)

In conclusion, Stephanie Wang-Breal scores on several counts with her moving documentary film. Having been born and brought up in the United States herself, her approach and handling of the subject of child adoption is different from early Asian American filmmakers, who were perhaps first generation immigrants to the United States. In the end, what helps the film succeed is the filmmaker's strong identification with the character of Faith Sadowsky, as the stories of both have some parallels. Alongside this autobiographical element, the film includes all the drama and tension expected of an event such as adoption. Since Faith was an older child, believed to be about 6 years old at the time of adoption, the challenge for the Sadowskys become more challenging. But in the end, the child adapts wonderfully to the new atmosphere and starts expressing her talents and personality in full colors. This transformation not only adds to the 'feel-good' factor of the film, but also underscores the viability of cross-continental adoptions.

Finally, in the work of recent writers and filmmakers such as Wang-Breal, we can arrive at some interesting inferences about their styles. It increasingly appears that they are

“ following the course that earlier writers had set: each writer and filmmaker still seems concerned to recover lost history — communal, familial, and personal — in an attempt at self-understanding and self-definition. They are seeking to represent identities across the grain of common and still too

prevalent, hidebound old stereotypes. They are claiming agency and voice for the silent or silenced and spoken-for. May we all (Asians and non-Asian Americans) rejoice, enjoy, and benefit (intellectually and emotionally) from their spreading their wings and taking flight.” (Ling, 1995, p. 1)

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