

FILM REVIEWS

Rebeka Goes to China

PRODUCED, DIRECTED, AND
EDITED BY LUCY KOSTELANETZ

DISTRIBUTED BY
THE MEDIA GUILD

11722 SORRENTO VALLEY ROAD
SUITE E
SAN DIEGO, CA 92121-1021

1992. 28 MINUTES

In August 1988, when her parents move to the foreign visitors' guest house at Zhongshan University to teach English to Chinese students, seven-year-old Rebeka accompanies them. Thus begins a ten-month adventure that few children could envision, a thorough immersion in Chinese culture including learning to read, write and speak some Mandarin. In June 1990, a year after her return to New York, Rebeka, answering questions from an off-screen narrator, reflects on her experiences and provides an illuminating context for inter-

the celebrations they enjoyed; that is, the many details of her daily life, all presented in accessible language with illustrative pictures.

Rebeka begins by acknowledging misimpressions of China that she held before her trip, such as believing needles would be stuck in her fingers for punishment. She then happily reports that reality contrasted dramatically with, and nullified, her fears. I suspect many of us who have visited China would echo that viewpoint (I would) and acknowledge the numerous misconceptions to which too

wrong-headed beliefs. Equally important, *Rebeka* provides the particulars of a China we seldom see, that of young children as they learn and play. Through a vast array of topics and her clearly enjoyable experiences, Rebeka encourages discovery of another culture.

Because of Rebeka's age and the video's low-key approach (we're never bombarded with statistics or academic lectures), *Rebeka Goes to China* will find in elementary and junior high school classes its best audience. To that end, producer/director/editor Lucy Kostelanetz keeps the focus on Rebeka and her friends. We never see her parents except in photos, nor should we. Rebeka's opinions and thoughts provide a refreshingly casual glimpse of China as she talks about routine topics: food, language, schoolwork, and play. On mastering the language, she explains that it took about four months to learn some Mandarin and six months to feel comfortable with it. But we see Rebeka having a good time with a girlfriend despite their language barrier. In another scene, Rebeka explains her Chinese name, and she talks about mischievous students pronouncing the word for their teacher so that it sounds like they're calling her "rat." Rebeka's Chinese classmates alternately show off for, or act embarrassed before, the camera. They play hopscotch, jump rope, and Rebeka teaches them musical chairs. They do exercises before going into class, and two girls sing "Happy Birthday" to Rebeka for her eighth birthday, first in English and then in Mandarin. In short, we watch Rebeka and her friends as energetic children of high spirits and good humor meeting across cultures.



Rebeka and her Chinese Friends.

grated video footage and still photographs. Through recollections presented in roughly chronological order, Rebeka describes her initial difficulties in an all-Chinese school on the Zhongshan University campus, the strict classroom environment she encountered, her ease in making friends, the games she and her friends played, and

many, perhaps unquestioningly, still subscribe. Significantly, then, *Rebeka Goes to China* offers first-hand observations that will help dispel some erroneous, contemporary ideas, ideas too seldom challenged. For students, it will open the topic of China to nonthreatening discussion given Rebeka's frank acknowledgment of her own

Video footage juxtaposed at appropriate points throughout *Rebeka* provides additional, illuminating information: candid street scenes with the ever-present bicyclists, a man repairing shoes while his customer waits, men gambling, various marketplace activities, an apartment house with clothes hung out, and so on. Ideally, I would have liked Rebeka's on-camera time shortened with her voice-over narration complemented by more unrehearsed, revealing scenes. For a young audience, there is too large a proportion of Rebeka just talking to the camera. Late in the program, politics becomes a topic, with Rebeka explaining her decision to become a young pioneer; that is, a member of the Communist party. Soon, however, the Party presence becomes a disruptive one. After Tiananmen Square, Rebeka's family is abruptly asked to, and must, leave.

Though never exactly thrilling to watch, *Rebeka* has a likable, low key manner as well as, at times, the unselfconscious, spontaneous silliness of the title character. Taking us along into formal and informal class exchanges, into courtyards and homes, and into the street, the viewer becomes a young student, too, learning about China as Rebeka does. What may surprise us most is the pleasure with which Rebeka engages her classmates and the genuine, uninhibited acceptance of Rebeka by them. In video footage of her friends shot after Rebeka has left for America, several apologize for not showing more gratitude to her and ask for forgiveness for not acceding to her requests for keepsakes when Rebeka had to leave. Their teacher's prompt, "She's our American friend. Don't say any-

thing bad," is quite revealing, but the children's warm-hearted responsiveness shines through nonetheless.

This video would best complement an entire unit on China, paired with some show-and-tell on food (which Rebeka says she really liked despite reservations about the Chinese eating dogs and cats and "any old bird"). Comparisons and contrasts between the Chinese and American schools, especially the strict code of conduct or the lack thereof, would easily involve students in listing similarities and differences. Transportation (bicycles versus cars), exercising, parties—all suggest numerous topics for discussion, supplemented by more pictures and videos as well as first-hand experience. Inclusion of any student's exposure or knowledge of non-American cultures would enrich the unit further. Finally, Rebeka observes that in one big world, "you think everything's the same wherever you live, but it's really not true." *Rebeka Goes to China* proves this and encourages students to see that, as Rebeka also notes, "China's really different" but learning about it is "like finding a treasure."

DIANE CARSON

DIANE CARSON is a Professor of Film Studies and Film Productions at St. Louis Community College at Meramec. She is a coordinator of their Asian Studies Curriculum Development Program.

[Rebeka Goes to China won a Bronze Apple Award at the National Educational Film & Video Festival.]

The Story of Qiu Ju

DIRECTED BY ZHANG YIMOU

CHINESE WITH ENGLISH SUBTITLES

DISTRIBUTED BY COLUMBIA TRISTAR HOME VIDEO

SONY PICTURES PLAZA
10202 WEST WASHINGTON BLVD.
CULVER CITY, CA 90232

1991, 100 MINUTES, COLOR

In *The Story of Qiu Ju*, Zhang Yimou has created a film that is useful in giving students an excellent picture of life in China today. The film can be used with students at any level from middle school through college, though its length suggests caution with lower grade students with limited attention spans.

Most students today are visually oriented; they more easily grasp material presented through images than through the written word. Our students have seen much television coverage of China. These images, though, are mainly of Beijing, Shanghai, and some of the major tourist attractions.

The Story of Qiu Ju allows the student to see another China, that inhabited by perhaps seventy per cent of the population. It is the China of the countryside and those towns and cities not on the tourist or media tracks. Set in northwest China, its images can be used to illustrate many features of Chinese society today. The story line, compelling in a Kafka-like way, easily holds the interest of students.

Gong Li gives a brilliant portrayal of the pregnant Qiu Ju, whose husband has been injured in an altercation with the village cadre. She wants jus-

tice, which can only be achieved by an apology from the cadre. When the nearest Public Security Bureau awards them medical costs and lost earnings, Qiu Ju sets out on a journey through the Chinese legal system.

The decision is appealed to the county town and to the district city with essentially the same result, though she is told of further steps she may take. When her lawsuit also results in the same verdict, she appeals to a higher court.

During her many trips, Qiu Ju's pregnancy moves to its final stage and she goes into labor during the Chinese New Year celebration. The midwife is unable to deliver the baby; the lives of both Qiu Ju and her child are in danger. Most of the villagers are away watching a local opera, and Qiu Ju's husband must appeal for help to the village cadre. Enough manpower is mobilized to take Qiu Ju to the hospital where she gives birth to a son.

In gratitude, Qiu Ju insists that the child's one-month birthday celebration cannot take place without the presence of the village cadre. As the festivities get under way, Qiu Ju learns that her last appeal has revealed that her husband's ribs were broken

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