

FILM REVIEWS

Sunrise Over Tiananmen Square

A FILM BY SHUI-BO WANG

A NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA PRODUCTION

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Photo courtesy of First Run/Icarus Films

Through its use of creative media, including ample use of propaganda art, Wang conveys his youthful idealism and loyalty without overtly discussing their inherent contradiction with actual events.

This thirty-minute film presents a vividly artistic and highly personal view of China, especially during the period 1960 through 1989. Truly unique is the fascinating mix of graphics which the filmmaker, Shui-Bo Wang, utilizes to convey impressions of his life. Wang mixes cartoon animation with both black-and-white still photos and colorful propaganda pictures. He never uses video clips; instead, Wang himself manipulates still images to convey the movement he wishes. For instance, he shows a sketch of a reading youth and, while describing how much he, Wang, loved to read, scenes from the books move across the picture above the reading boy's head. This image is quickly replaced by the drawing of a heap of books, gradually consumed by a voracious and increasingly red fire.

Wang uses these images to describe the year 1966 when the Cultural Revolution was moving into its initial anti-intellectual phase. Another unusual example occurs when Wang describes the home of his

youth. He says that his family had a pair of goldfish and shows a black-and-white drawing of the home's interior which includes the colorful fish within a bowl. Then he adds that his parents had to get rid of the fish because they were "considered bourgeois." On screen you see the fish swimming across the living room and out of the picture. This video is filled with numerous juxtapositions of mixed media.

Wang's personal story is similar to many widely read accounts published during the last two decades, e.g., *Wild Swans* and *Son of the Revolution*. He comes from a solid Communist family. His grandfather joined the party during the 1920s, became a "high ranking official" after 1949, and divorced his traditional bound-footed wife in order to marry a big-footed Communist comrade. In addition to these impeccable credentials Wang's mother, a government official, was blessed with a "beauty mole like Mao Zedong," and his father served the government as a water conservation



Photo courtesy of First Run/Icarus Films

engineer. Since the filmmaker, Wang, strives to convey events through the eyes of a growing boy, he provides little judgment concerning confusing political events and seems to maintain loyalty to the Communist leadership. Therefore, unlike other biographical accounts where growing doubt is discussed, many questions occur to the viewer of this film.

- How could a young boy love Mao and the party when the books he loved were destroyed?
- How could he continue to love Mao and the party when he was accused of defacing Mao's name?
- How could he continue to love Mao and the party when his father was accused of being an enemy of the people and attempted suicide?

Wang admits to recognizing some Chinese shortcomings during the war with Vietnam during 1979 but says that he only seriously questioned China in 1985 at the age of twenty-five. While it may be rather frustrating for the viewer that the questions above are not answered, I think that omission constitutes a major strength of the film. It may help students accept the reality that many Chinese have thus far been able to maintain loyalty to Mao throughout the tumultuous political movements of recent decades. Through its use of creative media, including ample use of propaganda art, Wang conveys his youthful idealism and loyalty without overtly discussing their inherent contradiction with actual events.



Photo courtesy of First Run/Icarus Films

How can one effectively use this film with students? It should not be shown as an introduction to China after 1949. Prior to viewing *Sunrise Over Tiananmen Square*, students need to understand the basic events of Chinese history from 1950 to the present. Students should have seriously considered the issues involved in understanding how Mao Zedong and the Communist Party were able to motivate and manipulate so many people throughout a thirty-year period of conflicting political movements.

Because of Wang's effective blend of animation and still photography, viewers can gain added depth for analysis of the above issue. I think this film will be most effective with college and upper-level high school students. It does leave us with more questions than answers, which may be a

good thing for many students and teachers. The very best use of this film would be in combination with one of the many good biographies set in China of the last forty years. This video account provides less analysis and reflection, but compensates with emotive and vivid images. ■



Shui-Bo Wang. Photo courtesy of First Run/Icarus Films Web site: www.frif.com

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