

The Forbidden Kingdom

DIRECTOR, ROB MINKOFF

LIONS GATE FILMS, INC.
DVD, 113 MINUTES., COLOR, 2008
ENGLISH/MANDARIN SUBTITLES

Reviewed by Elizabeth Parke

Promotional movie posters for *The Forbidden Kingdom* visually link two of the most recognized kung fu actors, Jet Li and Jackie Chan. Joined at the *J*, Jackie Chan's name runs horizontally while Jet Li's name drops vertically. The use of composite imagery in the film's marketing strategy is mirrored throughout the film. Using carefully chosen shooting locations—a bamboo forest, a Buddhist cave temple, the Gobi desert, a teahouse, and the well-know myth of the Monkey King—*The Forbidden Kingdom* presents the audience with a reductive view of 'China,' where these parts represent *all* of China.

While it is tempting to ignore such popular films in the classroom, this film can be used successfully to explore larger issues of how China is presented on the big screen as well as this film's relationship to youth culture. However, the composite nature of the film is exactly what makes it a useful tool for educators. This film can be used to begin discussions of how cultures, such as China's, are visualized within popular culture and how, as an audience member, one can deconstruct preconceived coding of Chinese culture presented in such a film.

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Poster for *The Forbidden Kingdom*.

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The film's narrative revolves around Jason (Michael Angarano), a native of South Boston, and avid fan of kung fu. Bullied into helping with a robbery of Lu Yan's pawnshop, Jason witnesses the shooting of Old Hop (Jackie Chan). In his effort to escape, he grabs a staff from the pawnshop and jumps off a rooftop, only to land in a small Chinese village temporarily located in what is presented visually as the mythic past. Quickly, both the audience and Jason's character are made aware of the prophecy of the seeker who will return the staff to the Monkey King. Training Jason for this task are none other than Jackie Chan, playing Lu Yan, and Jet Li, as the silent monk. As the two kung fu stars teach Jason, they begin their journey to return the staff to the Monkey King, who is imprisoned in the evil Jade Warlord's castle. After prolonged action scenes, the staff is returned, the Monkey King freed, the evil warlord vanquished. Finally, Jason is able to return to contemporary Boston as a kung fu master.



The Monkey King before he lost his staff to the evil Jade Warlord. A still photo from *The Forbidden Kingdom*. ©2008 Lionsgate and The Weinstein Company.

The film's popularity is just one example of the fever pitch to which all things Chinese reached in the summer of 2008. China's economic power, growing presence on the international stage, and most of all for 2008—as host of the Olympics—all contribute to the success of films such as *The Forbidden Kingdom*. Exploring the elements that make up



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Crossing the Gobi desert. A still photo from *The Forbidden Kingdom*.
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this film in its presentation of a “China” can help students to be more analytical in their viewing of such popular films. In particular, deconstructing the filming location helps students see how filmmakers play upon preconceived notions of a culture. Other popular films, such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, *Hero*, and *House of Flying Draggers* have rocketed martial arts costume dramas onto the world stage. These films present a particular slice of Chinese culture, which should be tempered with further knowledge. Bringing a film such as *The Forbidden Kingdom* into the classroom to be dissected and analyzed for its stereotypical visualization of China can be a fruitful exercise that will help educators to assist their students in thinking more deeply about the popular culture they are inevitably consuming. ■

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