

# Red bell-bottoms in China

I didn't grow up with any real film culture, only propaganda films like *Lenin in October* – which I show in *The Monkey Kid* (a scene where the children gather to watch the Russian film) – and *Lenin in 1917*, or Albanian and Romanian-made propaganda films. Actually some of them had their moments. As a young child I really had nothing to compare them with, and at the time they made quite an impression. I was just like a sponge soaking up whatever cinematic images I could get access to. I remember one Albanian film called *The Footsteps*, that had one real kissing scene in it. It was really amazing to see actual body contact in a film like that. At that time in China, there was a lot of Maoist opera and cinema being produced. It was all basically propaganda, with a little artistic technique thrown in for embellishment.

In the two years between the end of the Cultural Revolution, in 1976, and the opening of the Beijing Film Academy in 1978, the whole country was suddenly opened up to foreign films. My father used to work for the Social Science Institute, and had special privileges in terms of access to foreign cinema. During those two years I went to the cinema almost every day. It wasn't always easy – you had to have special connections to get tickets, and sometimes we had to sneak around a bit to get into the theatres. But that didn't stop me.

## Other cultures, other countries

Seeing so many foreign films really opened my eyes to the reality of other cultures, other countries. I thought "Wow, life is so different outside of China." I realised that cinema had real power – it could change the way you think, it could even change your life. My dream was simply to continue seeing films. That's why I went to film school: I wanted to see as many films as possible.

Before 1976, film school had been like a kind of factory. There was a programme called "Workers, Peasants and Soldiers", where people were pulled from all walks of life and given basic training in film production. It didn't matter if you had talent or not. Once you were recommended by the head of your Working Unit, you would be sent to this programme, to become either a film-maker or an actor. But in 1978, when the Academy re-opened, there was actually a formal entrance exam. Out of 3000 students who applied, only 156 were chosen. It was quite prestigious to gain admission.

I went to the Beijing Film Academy from 1978 to 1982. It was a truly liberating experience for me. Before, everything had always been dictated to me – like the children in *The Monkey Kid*, the only things we learned in school were based around Mao's quotations. We weren't encouraged to think for ourselves. At film school, instead of subjecting us to long lectures about film, the first thing that our professors did was to show us films like *Breathless*, *The Red Desert*, *Blowup*, old-style Hollywood films like *Gone With The Wind* – lots of different films, so that we could build a sense of cinema visually, rather than "learning by rote". I was in heaven! I felt like I was using my senses and my intellect for

**Xiao-Yen Wang, director of 'The Monkey Kid' recalls the shock of such foreign films as 'The 400 Blows'**

the very first time.

My father thought that film school was a bad, corrupting influence on me. He thought that my mind was being polluted by foreign cinema and Western ideas. Even though the Cultural Revolution was over, there was still a lot of resistance to new ideas. One day, in my first year of film school, I came home in a pair of red bell-bottom trousers, quite tight-fitting, which I thought were the height of fashion – even though they were about ten years out of date (at the time it was hard to get anything that wasn't). All the neighbours stared – quite scandalised at the tight fit, very different to the standard, baggy Maoist trousers. My father was really angry about this. Of course he blamed the film school. But my mother was very encouraging. In fact she bought me the trousers. I guess that wearing them was a way of expressing myself – of standing out from thousands of people who all dressed the same.

My favourite course was "French New Wave Cinema". The one film that really impressed me was Truffaut's *The 400 Blows*. I was used to films having a beginning, a middle, a climax and an end. But the way Truffaut showed little details in the boys' lives – sitting in class, stretching in PE class – or the way the camera followed them one by one as they all disappeared around the corner, these made me realise that there were other possibilities besides that kind of film narrative. I remember the freeze-frame technique at the end – that goes in closer and closer to the image. That really made an impression on me. The boy had such a blank look on his face, almost no expression, his eyes staring into space. He seemed to me like such a victim of circumstance: it was his environment that caused him to do all those terrible things. He didn't want to be at the reform school – he was controlled by his parents, and by the society.

Perhaps I was relating to this character – a kid alone in the world – because of my own

childhood experience. [As intellectuals, Xiao-Yen's parents had been sent away during the Cultural Revolution, leaving her sister and her to fend for themselves.] I identified somehow with his situation. I remember the scenes where he tries to go out on his own, when he sleeps in the printing shop, and then breaks off a piece of ice to wash his face, and later when he steals the milk because he's hungry.

## Sense of risk

Or the scene when he tries to sell the typewriter. I loved the way Truffaut showed the boy sneaking into the building. When he looks down from the window, I remember the angle from which he was shot. The camera was shooting upwards towards his face. There is such a sense of risk in his undertaking – and then when he can't get enough money for the typewriter, and he decides to bring it back and gets caught – the drama of all that really impressed me. Also the scene where he sees his mother kiss her lover on the street – that was powerful. Or at the beginning of the film, where the boy is doing his homework, trying to be "good", but the mother is kind of pushing him away. That showed me how you could depict family life using just a few powerful details. There was no fancy camera technique or sudden movements – the scene was created from simple elements.

I had been used to big epic revolutionary cinema. *The 400 Blows* showed me the power of moving from the personal to the universal, made me realise that showing small details in individual lives could create cinema more powerful than those big propaganda films – and that cinema could be natural and real rather than false and manipulative. I think the beauty of cinema is its ability to transform everyday reality from individual lives into something larger on the screen, something universal that viewers can relate to their own lives. Even though my film *The Monkey Kid* was about a girl growing up in the Cultural Revolution, many people from the West, from other countries, have told me that they identified with the girl – and that many things in the film reminded them of their own childhood. When I hear that, I feel satisfied that I have achieved a certain goal as a film-maker.

When I used to watch the old revolutionary films, the characters were way beyond me – I couldn't relate to them. Even though when I watched those films I was really trying to be a good little Red Guard by imitating the characters on the screen, I didn't identify with them. When I first saw *The 400 Blows*, it took a while to "digest". Its images were powerful and have stayed with me for a long time. But at that time the distance between my own cultural reality and *The 400 Blows* was quite wide.

I literally grew up in revolutionary times. I was taught that speaking about personal feelings was a kind of egoism. Anything on a personal level was "wrong". At film school I realised that personal emotions could be used to affect others – not just big, idealistic, unreal stories.

Xiao-Yen Wang was interviewed by Hadan Dumas



Details of lives: Jean-Pierre Léaud in 'The 400 Blows'