

# **Film Review**

## **Wo Ai Ni Mommy**

**Directed by Stephanie Wang-Breal (2009)**  
*Reviewed by Michele Rabkin*

*Wo Ai Ni Mommy* ("I love you, Mommy") is a powerful but never didactic film. Stephanie Wang-Breal follows the Sadowsky family from Long Island to China and back again as they adopt Fang Sui Yong, an eight-year-old girl. Without a voiceover, Wang-Breal quietly presents events as they unfold and allows viewers to draw their own conclusions. Or pose their own questions. Many will come away pondering the painful dilemmas created by adoption, as they watch a young girl bear the enormous losses that the system imposes on her—losses it seems even those who love her most have difficulty comprehending.

Language and communication are ongoing themes. Even the filmmaker gets drawn in, since Wang-Breal speaks both English and Chinese. Whenever she is present, she is called upon to translate. A few weeks after her arrival in the U.S., Sui Yong melts down and cries out, "I want to go back to China. I don't want to live here anymore. I am so unhappy." Wang-Breal asks, "do you want me to translate that?" When she does, Donna Sadowsky tries to reassure her daughter that things will get easier over time. Wang-Breal translates these words, then adds more of her own. In the face of such a distressed child, she abandons her disengaged journalistic stance and joins in the campaign to convince Sui Yong that everything will be all right.

At one point, as Sui Yong's English is improving, her mother begins the typical parental warning "Now, you have a choice..." The girl interrupts, "I don't have a choice." The moment passes quickly, but her words resonate. Sui Yong's story is shaped by the choices that were made for her. One is forced to ask if they were, indeed, in her best interest.

At the film's start, the Sadowksys have two biological sons and a three-year-old daughter, Darah, adopted from China. Because Darah wishes to remain the youngest, the Sadowksys plan to adopt an older girl. Already one wonders to what extent the needs of the older child are being taken into consideration.

Tensions build during the first encounter between Donna and Sui Yong. We watch as Donna anxiously attempts to bond with her new daughter, who appears stunned. With the benefit of sub-titles, we learn that the girl's smiling social worker is essentially bullying her into acting happy and warning her that she should not contact her foster family.

Despite this warning, Sui Yong does contact her foster family, and they arrange to meet. Reunited with them, Sui Yong lights up. Watching her play with her "Guangzhou sister," one wonders why this happy family cannot remain intact. The foster parents struggle to explain, saying that despite their love for Sui Yong, better opportunities await her overseas, and that abnormalities in her hands and feet would make life difficult for her in China.

Even before Donna and Sui Yong leave China, the difficulties that lie ahead can be seen. When Donna wants to drill her on English, Sui Yong flops back on the bed, saying in Chinese, "This is so hard. This is really tough." The viewer's heart goes out to the child who, in the midst of tremendous disruption, must also learn a whole new language. Donna, who speaks no Chinese, appears impatient with Sui Yong's refusal to cooperate. Ironically, upon returning home, Donna exhales, "I'm so glad to be back where everyone speaks English!"

In the U.S, Sui Yong studies Chinese, but without any opportunities to speak it regularly, her fluency rapidly diminishes, and soon a translator is needed in order for her to communicate with her foster family. Gradually her allegiance shifts to her adoptive family, and we see how this is both a gain and a loss. As Sui Yong explains that her family celebrates Hanukah rather than Christmas, Donna seems to be both laughing and crying as she recognizes the cultural distance her daughter has been asked to travel in the last year.

Transformations, subtle and not-so-subtle, occur over the course of the film. The Sadowskys contact Amanda Baden, a transracial adoption specialist, and begin tentatively exploring issues of race and racism. When the father muses, "maybe when she looks in the mirror she sees a little white girl, just like all her friends," the purposefully self-contained expression on the face of Baden (who is herself Chinese) seems like a perfect metaphor for the careful, non-judgmental tone of *Wo Ai Ni Mommy*.

A model of resilience, by the film's end Sui Yong (now called Faith) seems happy, healthy, and well on her way to complete assimilation. So, were her foster parents and adoptive parents (and various adoption officials) right when they decided that Sui Yong would be better off in the United States? How do we (and she) weigh the gains versus the losses? How will the choices that were made for her shape who she grows up to become? These are some of the questions we are left to ponder at the end of this provocative film. Sometimes heart-warming, often heart-wrenching, we highly recommend *Wo Ai Ni Mommy*, especially to adoptive parents, for the insight and empathy it has to offer.

The world premier of "Wo Ai Ni Mommy" at the 2010 San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival (where it won Best Documentary Feature) was co-sponsored by Pact. Its television premier was on PBS in August 2010. For more details, see [www.pbs.org/pov/](http://www.pbs.org/pov/).