

a little wisdom

A Film by Yuqi Kang
Canada, Nepal, China
92 minutes

Title in Other Languages:

수도원 아이들 (Korean)

བྱིས་པའི་སྦྱིད་སྤྱུག (Tibetan)

小智慧 (Chinese)



A Little Wisdom is director Yuqi Kang's intimately observed portrait of orphaned monks living in an isolated monastery in Lumbini, Nepal. In the birthplace of the Buddha, we follow the daily routine of novice monk Hopakuli and his older brother Chorten, left by their mother at Karma Samtenling Monastery. Kang lived at the monastery for a year prior to filming Hopakuli, Chorten and the other young monks. *A Little Wisdom's* subtle rhythms and symbols evoke Buddhist teachings while showing the contradictions between Hopakuli's austere monastic upbringing and a child's natural fascination and longing for the world beyond Lumbini.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

My ambitions behind this film are driven by the need to tell Hopakuli's story. There are thousands of other stories just like his. I want the viewers to experience a journey of realization where they can reach their own conclusions. Leaving Hopakuli and the monastery, I felt as if I had left a piece of myself there. Lumbini as a place is not only a holy and sacred place, but it houses countless untold stories. I hope this film will help to bring awareness that the Buddhist community is no different than any other communities, and see the monks as real people with emotions just like us. As a practicing Buddhist, I attempt to embody the Buddha's teachings, and I apply it to my own process whether in filmmaking or drawing. The artistic intention of *A Little Wisdom* is recreating the emotional connection I had with the subject for the audience. Therefore, we try to avoid forced sentimentality by not using music or set up interviews to push the narrative forward. Instead, I utilize visuals, sound, and hidden symbols to convey the mood, the sense of reality and the emotional connections.

YUQI KANG - BIOGRAPHY

Yuqi Kang was born in Inner Mongolia, China. Growing up as an ethnic minority in China, art became the medium through which Yuqi began to confront and begin to articulate her lived experience. After completing a Bachelor Degree in Drawing at the Alberta College of Art and Design, Yuqi began a two-year journey traveling the world working as an art teacher. She then moved to New York and attended the Social Documentary Film Program at the School of Visual Arts. Upon graduation, she was awarded the Paula Rhodes Memorial Award for Exceptional Achievement in Social Documentary Film.

For Yuqi, filmmaking is a dialogical process that involves both observation and improvisation. Filmmaking is an extension of Yuqi's artistic practice and through her work she explores the questions of representation, human experience and cultural translation. *A Little Wisdom* is Yuqi Kang's feature directorial debut. Production began while she studied in the Social Documentary Film Department at the School of Visual Arts, New York. Her short documentary, *Last Days of Domino*, premiered at DOC NYC and was awarded Experimental Short Honorable Mention. Her short *Cities and Memory* premiered at the World Arts Film Festival and was awarded Best Experimental Short at the ACCOLADE competition and Honorable Mention at the Marine Media Contest.

LOCATION

Lumbini is the birthplace of Buddha and its surrounding areas have been sites of pilgrimage for centuries. The archaeological remains in Lumbini that were excavated in the last century not only reveal the exact location where Buddha was born but also provide testimony of pilgrimages dating back to the 3rd century BC. Periodic efforts have been made at both the national and international level to turn Lumbini into a major site for tourism and pilgrimage for Buddhists from around the world. However, this vision is yet to be fully realized, and many of the locations in the Greater Lumbini area are yet to undergo archaeological investigations and excavations.

Buddha was born as Prince Siddhartha Gautama of the Shakya Kingdom in the gardens of Lumbini in 623 BC. His journey in this world began in the gardens of Lumbini when his mother, Queen Mayadevi, was traveling from Tilaurakot, the capital of Shakya Kingdom, to her family home in Devdaha to give birth. It was here that the newborn infant took his first seven steps toward the East beginning a path to enlightenment which would change humankind. Later in his life, Buddha advised his followers to visit four sacred places relevant to his life, one of which is his birthplace.

The veracity of Lumbini as the birthplace of Lord Buddha is well supported by historical references that date back to 249 BC, when Emperor Asoka erected pillars with inscriptions in Lumbini, Gotihawa and Niglihawa, to commemorate his visits. The Inscriptions on the Asoka Pillar in Lumbini marks this location as the birthplace of Buddha. Other pilgrims and travelers throughout the centuries, most notably Seng-tsai and Fa-hsien (4th century AD) and Hsuan-tsang (7th century AD), made references to the temples, stupas and other structures in and around Lumbini in their writings. In 1896, archaeologist Anto Fuhrer rediscovered the Asoka Pillar in Lumbini. In 1997, UNESCO declared Lumbini to be a World Heritage Property.

THE TEAM

Maro Chermayeff (Producer) - Maro is partner in the Emmy and Peabody award winning company Show of Force and Founder and Chairman of the MFA program in social documentary at the School of Visual Arts.

Alan Berliner (Story Consultant) - Alan's uncanny ability to combine experimental cinema, artistic purpose and popular appeal in compelling film essays has made him one of America's most acclaimed independent filmmakers.

Donna Shepherd (Editing Consultant) - Donna is an award-winning editor whose work includes the Emmy-winning 10-part series *Carrier* for PBS, and the Emmy-winning Bravo series *Kathy Griffin*, as well as Emmy-winning and Peabody Award winning film *Marina Abramovic: The Artist is Present*.

Amitabh Joshi (Co-Producer, Cinematographer) - Amitabh is a Nepali American director and cinematographer. His first feature documentary *Tashi's Turbine* was awarded the Princess Grace JustFilms grant, the Shelley and Donald Rubin Foundation grant as well as the Center for Asian American Media Documentary Fund.

Riga Shakya (Co- Producer) - Riga is a translator/writer of contemporary Tibetan fiction and currently a PhD candidate in Tibetan History at Columbia University.

Paola Ochoa (Cinematographer, Sound) - Paola is a Colombian-born filmmaker. Her first directorial debut, *Sisters*, is currently in post-production and was selected her the work-in-process lab at the Vision du Reel Film Festival.

Martin Zaulich (Composer) - Martin is a Danish Composer and Sound Designer with vast experience in writing music for feature and documentary films. He also writes scores for computer games, theatre and contemporary dancing.

Drukmo Gyal Dakini (Original Music) - Drukmo was born in the Northeastern part of Tibet into Tibetan yogi family. Drukmo began perform publicly since 2008. She tours around the world and teaches Tibetan Mantra Healing. Her first album 'Purification Voice of Tibetan' was released in 2014 and she was featured on TEDx in 2016.

Q&A WITH YUQI KANG

Why did you want to make a film about the children who reside at this monastery in Lumbini?

In the summer of 2014, I traveled to Lumbini and lived among the monks for six months. In the beginning, I proposed to make a documentary film on Buddhism, the monks instead invited me to join them in their life and attend their daily practice. Over time, these little monks opened up to me. They become little brothers to me. I started to see another side of monastic life. The young boys' understanding of the world outside was influenced by TV, Facebook and other kind of stimuli despite being geographically isolated. They shared with me their doubts and fears of the future, their innocent desires for puppy love, and even their favorite tree to climb on inside the enormous Lumbini Garden. This experience with the monks shattered my previous romanticized understanding of monastic life, as the popular media often portrays the monks as happy-go-lucky and carefree. Hopakuli in some way had a special bond to me, as he and I shared somewhat similar traits as children. When he held onto my hand when I was about to leave Lumbini, I could only see this four-year-old child who was helplessly looking for affection and love. It was then I felt committed to creating work that delves into these kids' lives.

Was it difficult to get permission to make a film inside the monastery? Did you have any rules to follow?

At first when I proposed the idea of making a documentary, I was only granted permission to film their morning and evening practices twice. I edited the footage from the prayer secessions and showed it to the head monks. They in turn invited me to teach them classes during their free time. Slowly, I was granted permission to film in the halls. But I was never filming intensely, I wanted the monks to get familiar with me and the camera. I allowed Hopakuli and some of the boys to play with the camera. Surprisingly, a lot of them have a keen interest in filmmaking. They filmed each other, and began to share with me more and more their stories. It was difficult to communicate because of their English. Initially, we were told that the dinner hall and the bedrooms were off limits. However, as I spent more time filming and getting to know the head monk these restrictions were relaxed also. This was an exercise in building trust. The monastery allows pilgrims and tourists to stay in the buildings but the majority of them leave after a few weeks. A lot of the boys were used to having someone come into their lives and leave. I had to work hard to develop the trust between myself and the kids. It was just a matter of time until

they forgot I was there. By the end there really was no restrictions except for filming some of the more esoteric practices.

What are some of the challenges of filming young people as documentary subjects?

As a documentarian, I don't find it difficult to film with children. In fact, it's easier once your break through that initial phase of their fascination with the camera. The kids are so pleasant and innocent. The more challenging questions I struggled with was how I was representing these children on screen. Do they fully understand the ramifications of being in this film? I thought a lot about my responsibility as a filmmaker to the head monks. It is a great line that I always needed to carefully follow for myself. In addition, I found it very challenging to be the only adult supervision at times for these children. I had to navigate a role in which I wasn't their teacher but was still an adult. I wasn't going to be there permanently looking after them. It was difficult for me to not intervene in the fighting scenes. There were a few times when I did stop them when I thought things were getting a little out of hand, when I thought they were really going to hurt each other. But because these scenes were delicate situations, and I thought it to be important to capture the reality these children live every day I allowed these scenes to play out.

What are some examples of Buddhist symbolism in A Little Wisdom?

I crafted moments with natural elements such as the Sun, the Moon and the monkey and other wildlife from the area. They each represents different ideas in Buddhism. These elements are perhaps not obvious to non-Buddhists. I believe nature always can trigger a genuine emotion among all of us. When you are feeling hopeless the bright sun gives us warmth and meaning. The monkey, for example, represents the untrained mind, always moving and never stable. It's a symbol that has such a deep meaning in Buddhist practice. I find it fascinating that it physically manifests itself throughout the film. The kids are climbing the trees like monkeys and a real monkey attacks the monastery. That is just one example. I've also crafted a sense of cyclical change, nature is what frames everything in their lives. This is always what I have taken away from Buddhism, to cherish every life encounters and embrace the moments with gentle and open heart.

Has anything surprised you about the response to your film so far?

I worked on crafting this film to be emotionally accessible to all. We all were kids and have dealt with the problems these young monks confront. I've been surprised by the response from people speaking about their own experiences with brothers. Several audience members have come up to me to tell me about how the film reminded them of their siblings. It's surprising to get such varied responses on the fighting scenes. Some individuals find it to be extremely violent and unacceptable while others feel as though it's brotherly love. It's interesting to see such varied perspective on one scene or one incident.

CREDITS

Yuqi Kang – Director, Producer, Cinematographer, Editor, Sound Designer

Maro Chermayeff – Producer

Alan Berliner – Story Consultant

Donna Shepard – Editing Consultant

Amitabh Joshi – Co-Producer, Cinematographer

Riga Shakya – Co-producer

Paola Ochoa – Cinematographer, Sound Mixer

Drukmo Dakini – Original Music

Martin Zaulich – Original Music, Composer

TECHNICAL NOTES

Picture Format: Color

Aspect Ratio: 1.78

Shooting Format: 2K

Running Time: 1 hr. 31 min 32 sec.

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