

Natural life and social life

David Walsh reviews *The Adopted Son* (Beshkempir), directed by Aktan Abdykalykov

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The Adopted Son (Beshkempir), directed by Aktan Abdykalykov, written by Abdykalykov, Avtandil Adikulov and Marat Sarulu

The Adopted Son is an intelligently made film about a boy growing up in a village in Kyrgyzstan. The director, Aktan Abdykalykov, making his first feature film, shows us someone making the transition from childhood pranks to adult concerns.

The boy, Beshkempir (Mirlan Abdykalykov), joins with his friends in raiding a beehive, stealing chicken eggs, spying on an obese, bare-breasted woman, sculpting a female form in the sand and rehearsing sex with it. He helps a friend, a movie projectionist, court a girl. He nearly misses out on a trip to an outdoor film showing because he's afraid to ask his father for money; his tender-hearted grandmother gives it to him instead. The crowd of villagers watches what is obviously an Indian musical, complete with a belly-dancing heroine.

A conflict develops between Beshkempir and his best friend over a girl they both like, Aynura. The other boy, who has received a few blows in a fight, suddenly blurts out, "You're an orphan and a foundling!" When asked, the grandmother denies this is so. But the feud between the two friends worsens and the other boy's mother, a malicious gossip, reveals all in front of Beshkempir: he is not his parents' natural child. His stern father hits him for having created this embarrassing situation. "Hit me instead," his wife says.

The distraught boy runs away and joins some fishermen, only returning upon the news of his grandmother's serious illness. In fact she dies before he gets home, and her funeral is the occasion for reconciliation. His father tells him simply, "You were adopted. We couldn't have any children." It is a custom in this region apparently for a large family to offer a

baby to a childless couple. Beshkempir and his friend embrace. The boy gets to pronounce his grandmother's testament to the assembled village: If she had any debts, I will pay them; if anyone was in debt to her, I void it. In the end, he borrows the projectionist's bicycle and begins courting Aynura with seriousness.

This is the first post-Soviet feature film produced in Kyrgyzstan and it is a creditable starting point. For whatever combination of historical reasons, some of the more serious films from the former USSR are coming from the Asian republics, such as Kazakhstan.

To many readers, Kyrgyzstan itself perhaps needs an introduction. It is a small Central Asian republic, bordered by China, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and dominated physically by towering mountains that reach altitudes as high as 24,000 feet (7400 meters). The majority of its citizens are descendants of the nomadic Mongol herders who had settled the area by the sixteenth century. The tsarist empire had annexed and colonized the region by 1876. It became the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic, under Stalin, in 1936; the country's political leadership declared independence from the USSR in the aftermath of the failure of the August 1991 coup attempt. The size of Minnesota, Kyrgyzstan has a population of some four and a half million people, 57 percent of whom are Kyrgyz, 21 percent Russian and Ukrainian and 13 percent Uzbek; most are Sunni Muslims.

Abdykalykov was born in 1957 in the village of Kountouou in Kyrgyzstan. He attended the Kyrgyzstan Art Institute and subsequently worked as a set designer. He directed a short film, *A Dog Was Running*, which won the Grand Prize at the Baku film festival. He has also produced several shorts and features.

The Adopted Son --shot primarily in black-and-white,

but with patches of color--is simply, but not primitively, made. Abdykalykov pays attention to detail. Nature and natural processes preoccupy him and the villagers. Human life here is apparently life directly in nature. Swaying trees, a trapped bird, angry bees, a cow nursing a calf, a winding stream, the moon--these images count for nearly as much as shots of human faces. Although the faces represent one of the film's strengths. They say a good deal--about labor, suffering, hope, friendship, love.

I say "apparently life directly in nature," because, of course, mankind's interchanges with nature are always mediated through social relations, no matter how elementary the level of economic life. Abdykalykov shows us tree-lined lanes and flowering plants, but also, because he is honest, huts where entire families share a single room, pre-capitalist relations in which women are little more than beasts of burden and the continued hold of superstition and ritual. What does he want us to make of this, if anything?

My suspicion would be that the director, like most every artist in the former Soviet Union, identifies or chooses to identify any hint of social analysis with Stalinist "Socialist Realism." This helps explain why the village and its ways are celebrated more or less uncritically. The imperfections and cruelties, one is led to conclude, are themselves part of nature's way. *The Adopted Son* is reminiscent of Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Gabbeh*, which is too much of a cultural travelogue, in my view, and not one of the latter's strongest films.

All cultures and peoples deserve respect and serious treatment. Abdykalykov has fulfilled that obligation. Equally, however, all human situations deserve to be criticized. Kyrgyzstan is a tiny, remote republic, with hardly any natural resources. A visitors' guide to the country, after acknowledging its physical beauty, notes that away from the main cities "transport is limited, fuel overpriced, roads unpoliced and there is a growing crime rate, fuelled by alcohol and desperate poverty." Does this come as a surprise?

Abdykalykov is not obliged, of course, to deal directly or indirectly with those conditions. But the suggestion that somehow life is unfolding as it should, in accordance with the eternal laws of the natural world, in this deprived and destitute region of the world strikes me as less than helpful. To the extent that the

director is a little bit too tolerant or accepting, it dulls and weakens his art. Everyone deserves respect, but they need the truth too.



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