

Jackie Chan, Jaden Smith Are Kickin' it in Remake of 'The Karate Kid'

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Despite any resistance that must have been felt in remaking the quasi-classic 1984 film “The Karate Kid,” veteran Jackie Chan and Jaden Smith put their best kicking feet forward and spin some new cloth out of the old material. In resetting the location and putting in some surreal modern touches, this remake mostly succeeds.

Jaden Smith portrays Dre Parker, a fatherless kid from Detroit whose mother (Taraji P. Henson) is caught in the recession of the American auto industry and must relocate herself and Dre to another job in China. Dre is a fish of of water in the new land, and gets caught up in school politics when he becomes attracted to Meiying (Wenwen Han), which doesn't sit right with a gang of school bullies. Dre finds himself targeted, and despite standing up to them is regularly beaten up.

Seeking a way to protect himself, Dre hears that his apartment building's manager, Mr. Han (Jackie Chan), can teach him the mysterious self defense technique of Kung Fu. After initially resisting, Han agrees to instruct Dre after he saves him from another bully attack. There is a Kung Fu tournament coming up, and Han works out a deal for the bullies to stay away from Dre until the official battle.



High Style in Asia: Jackie Chan as Han and Jaden Smith as Dre in 'The Karate Kid'

Photo credit: Jasin Boland for © 2009 Columbia TriStar Marketing Group, Inc.

Han and Dre begin training, and the methods that Han uses are unorthodox, but are part of the traditions of Chinese martial arts. As mentor and student grow closer, the beautiful landscape of China serves as an appropriate backdrop to the lessons both of them have to learn.

It is the beautiful landscape of China that is a character in this remake, and this is one of the techniques used to create a distinct modern retelling. We get a glimpse of the populous areas of Beijing, the wide open vistas of the Great Wall and the more rural areas of the ancient country. The backdrop adds a flavor that separates it from the original story – set in America – and allows the filmmakers to showcase some incredible scenery.

Jackie Chan is a Hong Kong native, and obviously wants to honor that Chinese heritage through his Mr. Han persona. This again is a wholly separate character and cultural spin from Pat Morita's Mr. Miyagi in the original film, and Chan begins his self proclaimed "[Robert DeNiro](#)" phase [17] with a measured and suitable performance that doesn't go over the top. Even in a drunken stupor in the "revealing secrets" scene, he manages to evoke sympathy without seeming maudlin.

Jaden Smith, young son of Will and Jada Pinkett Smith, has a little more difficulty with his Dre characterization, for one thing having never experiencing one moment of middle class existence in his short life. His street tough portrayal is uneven, but as he gets into the martial arts his performance is more solid, because in student and training mode he exhibits more humility. As an actor he may have an overall longer journey, but as this character he gets there.



Fun in China: Wenwen Han as Meiying and Jaden Smith in 'The Karate Kid'
Photo credit: Jasin Boland for © 2009 Columbia TriStar Marketing Group, Inc.

Tantamount in this remake is establishing a modernity that distinguishes it as both set in China and the post millennium. The final tournament is a hoot, filmed in an arena that displays a video game-like instant reply system. Director Harold Zwart ["Pink Panther 2"] is unafraid to use the big board, mostly as comic relief. Dre's opponents are quite unusual as well, and some old shooting techniques from kung fu movies – no doubt aided by the on-set presence of Jackie Chan – also set this Karate Kid apart.

The length of the film is a little dodgy, and perhaps one more round of screenplay cuts could have tightened the narrative to get to the final tournament a little quicker. But this Karate Kid makes up for that by allowing a nice gradual bonding between Dre and Han, mostly by picking up the on the rhythms of the Chinese roots.

There is a very nice scene towards the end that illustrates these roots and China's contemporary influences, when Dre struggles with the language while Jackie Chan acts as his Cyrano, coaching from the sidelines. There is almost a symbolism there, with China becoming so much more important to commercial growth in the world. It is appropriate that these super-sized cultures do merge, and what better way to start than with The Karate...or in this case...Kung Fu Kid.

"The Karate Kid" opens everywhere June 11th. Featuring Jackie Chan, Jaden Smith, Taraji P. Henson and Wenwen Han, written by Christopher Murphey and directed by Harold Zwart. Rated "PG"

By [PATRICK McDONALD](#) [19]
Senior Staff Writer
HollywoodChicago.com



[18]

pat@hollywoodchicago.com [18]

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