



The Chinese Film Industry

A group of people representing the motion picture industry recently returned from 13 days in China. The trip, sponsored by Special Tours for Special People, was led by Schuyler Chapin, Dean of the Columbia School of the Arts. Among the participants were Steve Allen and Jayne Meadows; screenwriter ("Roots") Ernest Kinoy; Edward Schuman, a film importer and distributor; producer-director Irvin S. Yeaworth; stunt-woman Lila Finn; actor James Cranna; James Devaney, a film and television packager; DP Tom Ackerman; key grip Ted Rhodes; and Mark Petersson; a freelance cameraman and independent filmmaker.

Although many of the travelers feared at the outset that they would be allowed to see only what the Chinese wished them to see — showpiece studios and sets courteously displayed and explained by robots spouting party dogma and vital production statistics—the reality couldn't have been different! They moved freely through the Chinese sets, stages, and studios; talked with ordinary grips as well as administrative officials; and returned with not only insights into China's film industry, but definite impressions as to what our two industries could exchange for one another's benefit.

In the following articles Ted Rhodes and Mark Petersson describe what they saw in China and why they feel this land of 900 million people, rich in artistic tradition but shut off from progress for so many years, may become an important factor to the American media as well as a vibrant cinema in its own right.

The Chinese Film Industry: Observations

By TED RHODES

We took off from LAX February 3rd into a rare, clear winter sky, not knowing what we would find when we landed in the People's Republic of China. We had been told the Chinese wanted another film-culture exchange, so we had taken up the call—partly out of curiosity about the 900 million people sealed off from us for nearly 30 years; and partly out of plain self interest: the filmmaker's never-ending search for a new project. Few of us had any knowledge of Chinese history—let alone the state of their film industry—aside from a vague idea that some political films might have been produced during the Cultural Revolution of their turbulent 60's. How archaic their equipment and methods would turn out to be was anybody's guess.

Two nights later we were standing on a main Beijing (Peking) street surrounded by hundreds of bicycles and a few cars, the cyclists busily ringing their bells and the drivers honking their horns to warn pedestrians and one another—because everyone was driving around in the darkness without lights! We had indeed come to a different world, unlike anything I had known before.

Fortunately or not, depending on your outlook, this "differentness" may not last much longer. "Modernization"

is the watchword of today's China. And we certainly found some signs of modern civilization there already. The brown haze hanging in the air over Beijing was no mystery to those of us from New York and particularly LA. And when we walked on to a stage at Beijing Film Studio, one of several large film studios there, it was almost like being back at Producers in Hollywood.

Granted the Chinese catwalks are a little more rickety, the lights a little older, with arcs and incandescents mixed in the permanents above. But it is a set all the same. And this is confirmed by the presence of an Arri 35BL and Angenieux 20-120. The Chinese have other cameras, including the Eclair Cameflex, and several Chinese-made brands: Shanghai equivalents to the Mitchell NC and BNC, a Chinese "Hoping" camera, and their own high-speed camera, which they described as "not so good." But they rely mainly upon the BL.

As for their favorite film stock? Eastman, of course. Although they manufacture their own color stock, for major projects they prefer to shoot imported 5254, and have started using more and more 5247. If there are in-house labs, they were not shown to us.

One of the most characteristic features of Chinese films is the lighting. SERFS, BIG RIVER FLOWING, THE WIND AND THE WAVE, etc., all have

Western equipment in use at the Beijing Studio.





1941 Chungking street scene, recreated on the largest stage of the Beijing Film Studio.

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the dramatic, theatrical look of our films (and probably theirs) of 40 years ago: meticulously crafted, but often either exaggerated or artificially motivated. Their cinematographers are not unaware of this, refer to themselves as "backward," and inquired at length about the "naturalism" of our films. They have seen CONVOY and FUTUREWORLD, which along with MODERN TIMES are playing to packed houses in Beijing, Shanghai, and other cities (the sold-out screenings start each day at 5:30 am!). Yet although they want to push in this direction of naturalism, they are cautious.

Equipment is not one of their problems. The Chinese-made lights, similar to our old incandescent fresnels, are adequate. And though we saw no evidence of C-stands and light control media in Beijing, all kinds of flags and silks were flying on the Shanghai sets (not to mention all the laundry flying above the Shanghai streets). We also saw sheets of star-foam used for bounce light fill.

Interestingly, the main complaint of directors as well as camerapeople was the lack of sophistication of their audiences. Chinese audiences have had far less exposure to film than their American counterparts. In Guangzhou (Canton) film officials asked us about their favorite actors: Ramon Novarro, John Gilbert, Ingrid Bergman, Wallace Beery, Tracy, Hepburn, and Garbo. And these were film officials asking!

Out in the countryside there is even less familiarity with contemporary cinema: what little they see there is usually bicycled in by a mobile projectionist—a person pedalling 65 pounds of projector, generator, screen, and 8.75mm film (35mm split 4 ways).

Outside of the cities, slow-paced episodic storytelling is still the chief form of entertainment.

Slow-pacing is not, however, the norm for production schedules. Although BIG RIVER FLOWING took over a year to shoot, it is an exception. We were told most feature films are shot MOS in 2-3 months, 6 days a week, 18-20 "angles" a day. The films tend to be long; but a feature is often cut and dubbed with sound in a matter of weeks. In a year, a Chinese cameraman (or camerawoman—of which there are 4 in all of China) might do two to three features. Some 60 features are scheduled to be shot this year.

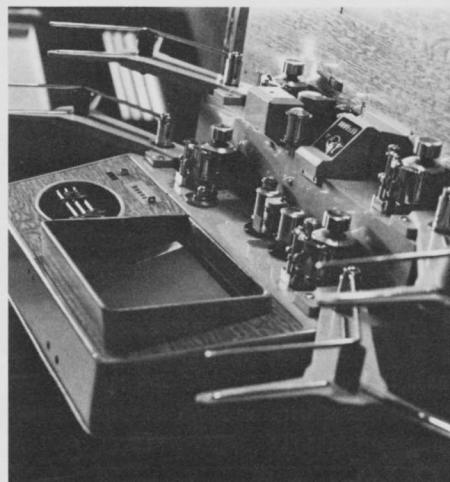
Feature film budgets, we were told, start around \$150,000. At the Beijing Studio, THE SWEET CAREER was being brought in at around \$270,000—"a small budget," according to cameraman/director Zhu Jin Ming. BIG RIVER FLOWING, one of their biggest films, was made 10 years ago for \$670,000. The budget for FROM A SLAVE TO A GENERAL, a 3½-hour, 2-part epic and certainly the most ambitious project we saw being filmed, is reportedly running around \$1.3 million. All films, both educational and feature, are shot in 35 and released in either 35, 16, or 8.75.

The major studios in China are in Beijing, Shanghai, Quanzhou, and Changchun, but there is really only one producer, the government (the Minister of Culture). Similarly, all domestic and foreign distribution is handled by one distributor, the government (AKA the Beijing Film Corporation). Film financing is explained as a matter of "pulling money from one pocket and placing it in another."

Although budgets have no relation to



Chinese equipment in use at various studios included camera, camera crane and editing table.



box-office draw, the talk of the directors and "producers" had a familiar ring: budget/time problems, the director vs. the writer, the need for better films, and the search for a good story. Scripts in China come from two sources: professional staff writers, who are required to turn out two screenplays every three years; and a huge pool of unsolicited, amateur scripts from thousands of people in all walks of life all around the country.

Screenwriters, actors, and directors earn from \$10-\$240 per month; workers (technicians), \$32-\$86; "producers" (administrators), \$28-\$333.

As was to be expected, we found some striking differences between Chinese and American filmmaking. One of the biggest was best expressed by a Shanghai cameraman: "A Chinese filmmaker gains no financial reward for a good film, but also reaps little criticism for a bad one!" Another was that there is no competition between motion pictures and television: a new film will often be broadcast on television and premiere at a movie house simultaneously.

And while their acting, like their lighting, is at present highly stylized and artificial, and their storytelling slow-paced, this may soon change. Cameraman Sun Shi-lin and Director Wang Yin seem to be moving in new directions already. We saw the dailies from their *FROM A SLAVE TO A GENERAL*, and there was definite evidence of greater subtlety in the acting and lighting as well as a faster tempo in the narrative.

We also saw evidence of distinct strengths, notably in set building and animation. Detailed, elaborate sets, like the Chungking street scene, can be built in a week. And this involvement with intricate detail achieves a particularly high level in their work with inks, puppets, and paper cut-outs, although the Fine Arts Studio in Shanghai is their only animation facility.

Nonetheless we found them anxious to learn all they can and as soon as possible from the rest of the world. They are aware of many of the American film magazines, particularly *Filmmakers Monthly* and the *SMPTE Journal*. They are also dedicated. Many filmmakers (and ballet dancers and musicians and interpreters and ...) were sent to the fields to do physical labor and "toil" for a number of years during the Cultural Revolution. Now back at their studios, they have taken up their work where they left off.



Checking focus on a set at the Shanghai Film Studio.

PHOTO: MICHAEL WALCH

In their eagerness to learn, our hosts bombarded us with questions on every aspect of our industry: "What is the size of your crews?" . . . "Are many of your film workers graduates of film schools?" . . . "Is videotape used to shoot feature films?" . . . "What is Ingrid Bergman doing these days?" Special effects people wanted to know about air bags, break-away walls, car crashes, and our stunt actors. ("We find your stuntpeople more real, more natural than our members of the fire brigade," exclaimed cameraman Ku Yun Lin, revealing to us one of their sources for stuntmen.)

And there were more questions. They asked us how we made our lighting "so true to life." There were highly technical questions about computerization, front and rear projection, bounce light, blue screen, and the Steadicam system they recently ordered. They asked about women in film; and they wanted to know if "Hollywood" was a person.

After our return to the States, as I gathered my thoughts about the trip, checking my notes and looking over the stills, I found myself comparing the experience to a location shoot: so much ground to cover, so little time to set up. Yet for all we brought back from those 13 days in that fascinating, little-known country, I have a feeling we left something more there—information which will bear fruit in reality. And perhaps when we return, we will find the Chinese film industry has changed for our having been there.

"Chinese films all have the dramatic theatrical look of our films (and probably theirs) of 40 years ago: meticulously crafted, but often either exaggerated or artificially motivated."