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The Last Emperor

After the Revolution

Bernardo Bertolucci prepares to shoot a film in the Forbidden City about China's last emperor, who became a model comrade.

By DON RANVAUD

Bernardo Bertolucci has embarked on the cinematic adventure of a lifetime by filming the story of P'u-yi—better known as the last emperor of China—who spent years as a political prisoner and later became a “model citizen” under Mao Zedong. The seeds for the twenty-five-million-dollar project, based on P'u-yi's autobiography, *From Emperor to Citizen*, were planted three years ago at the Venice Film Festival when the Chinese extended an official invitation to the director of *Before the Revolution*, *The Conformist*, *Last Tango in Paris*, and *1900*.

“A few years previously, a friend had discreetly placed on my desk the two yellow volumes of P'u-yi's autobiography,” Bertolucci recalls. “I put them to one side at first, feeling a little curious and a little suspicious, too. My impressions of China as a child were drawn from Jules Verne's evocative landscapes and the vicious or comic stereotypes of Western popular culture. Then, around 1968, when China became the focus of heated political debate, I took my distance from friends like Godard, who promoted what appeared to me a helplessly Utopian image of their revolution. I tended to see it as a magnificent *mise-en-scène* in the hands of a wonderful director called Mao Zedong, with a youthful, exciting cast of millions.”

He remained uncertain about pro-Chinese ideologies throughout the Cultural Revolution, which he felt was haunted by “the ghosts of freedom and guilty pleasures,” but was nonetheless fascinated by the intricacies of the aesthetic games being played. “My personal, cultural background is not religious at all, and I was irritated by the semi-spiritual aspect of the French pro-



China's last emperor, a man who was “kidnapped and held to ransom by history.”

Chinese, until in 1975 I studied photographs and documents about the peasants' struggles while researching *1900*. The Boss's trial [in *1900*], for instance, was very much influenced by Chinese iconography, and the ending [of the film] makes more than a passing reference to the debris of revolutionary China's choreographies.”

By the time he finally decided to read P'u-yi's autobiography, Bertolucci was disillusioned with the state of both Ital-

ian cinema and life: “The great pain felt by Pasolini when he wrote against the flattening out of culture, the loss of identity of young people, and the insidious takeover of our lives by an uncontrollable consumerism has become part and parcel of daily existence. There is nothing in today's world that inspires me, there is nothing I like or feel strongly for.”

To some extent, reading the fairy tale that was P'u-yi's life is a temporary es-

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P'u-yi ascended the throne at age three.

cape from that "parcel of daily existence." P'u-yi (Xuan Tong)—the tenth and last emperor of the Ch'ing Dynasty (1644–1912)—was born in 1905. At the age of three he ascended the throne, where he remained until his abdication in 1912 following the proclamation of the Republic. However, he was allowed to remain in the Forbidden City in Beijing (Peking) and continued to rule over his court and some twelve hundred eunuchs. In 1924, at the age of nineteen, he was expelled from the Forbidden City by the warlords and took refuge in the northeast city of Tianjin. There he became a man of total leisure and contemplated visiting the West, which had always fascinated him because of the influence of his tutor, Reginald Fleming Johnston, who was probably working for the British secret service.

By 1934 the Japanese army had conquered most of northern China, and P'u-yi became the puppet emperor of the Manchurian state. In 1945 he was captured by the Soviet army and kept prisoner in Siberia with a small entourage until 1950 (one year after the Communist revolution), when Stalin agreed to return him to China as a war criminal. After spending nine years in a Communist prison and undergoing a process of re-education, P'u-yi was freed by Mao, who also supplied him with a job in the botanical gardens of the capital city. He died of cancer in 1967 at age sixty-two, just as the Cultural Revolution was gaining momentum.

To Bertolucci, P'u-yi's saga was perfect raw material for a film. Somewhat to his surprise, the Chinese authorities shared his enthusiasm, despite the many contradictions of P'u-yi's life and the fact that it would be the first fiction film about modern China to be directed by a foreigner. They did not object to the direct involvement of P'u-yi's brother, Pu-jie, as a consultant, and expedited arrangements for an initial, and three subsequent, location expeditions. And they agreed to provide studio backup, production services, and extras in China.

Nevertheless, there were many intricate details to work out. An early sticking point was the special dispensation to film in the Forbidden City. Then there were the linguistic difficulties. Telegrams indicating approval of the script, for instance, were transmitted Chinese-style—"Glad reading how man who became a dragon turned back into a man. Congratulations"—and had to be sent back with a plea to insert the word "approval" so the film's London backers could be persuaded to part with their money. By the same token, the Euro-

peans started to talk a secret language among themselves, borrowing aphorisms right, left, and center: "It doesn't matter if the cat is black or white as long as it catches mice" (Den Xiao Ping) might be used to comfort a producer when a backer dropped out, and "Four thousand years for a bowl of rice" (Mao) could be longhand for "lunch break."


"I learnt a lot through these negotiations," Bertolucci recalls. "For instance, never directly tackle anything that is uncomfortable. Learn to philosophize 'around' issues so that problems seen from a distance disappear by the time you arrive at them. I spent a great deal of time in the Forbidden City, trying to get closer to its mysteries. The mazelike 'Chinese box' motif [of the city] is connected with the belief that spirits are unable to zigzag, and often you see bridges built in a curious manner to (politely) keep ghosts from running amok all around you. Cinematically, it's a formidable challenge which forces me to unlearn everything I know about filmmaking because the architectural motifs and the colors are constantly repeated and replayed." He adds, "In the Forbidden City, I was convinced of Jean-Marie Straub's contention that it is film that chooses you and not the other way around, as most people would like to see it."

Between trips to China, Bertolucci traveled to the world's Chinatowns looking for actors. In the spring of 1985, he met John Lone (*Year of the Dragon's* Chinatown gang leader), whom he chose for P'u-yi. "He has an ageless, expressive face which seemed wholly appropriate from the start, though undoubtedly the film will show how much his talents can be fruitfully stretched," Bertolucci says. "I also became fascinated by his personal history, dumped as he was with the Peking Opera in Hong Kong at the age of eight and having to stand on his head at 5:30 every morning in a manner never even envisaged in the orphanages of Dickens's times." Also in the cast are Joan Chen (*Dim Sum*) for the role of Wan Jung, the empress; Ying Ruo Chen (featured in Arthur Miller's Chinese version of *Death of a Salesman*) as the keeper of the prison in which P'u-yi is re-educated; and Victor Wong (*Chan Is Missing, Dim Sum*) as his first Chinese tutor, Chen Pao-Shen. "I think it's going to be exhilarating to bring to China so many Chinese actors who had never seen their country of origin and watch their reactions to it as we make our film," Bertolucci says. (As for P'u-yi's best-known contemporaries, he has not felt the need to look for replicas of Stalin and Mao.)

Most significant for a Western audience, perhaps, is the casting of Peter O'Toole as Reginald Johnston, P'u-yi's British tutor. Johnston's influence on P'u-yi up through his acceptance of the "puppet empire" of Manchuria in 1937 was very strong, and the part is a demanding one. The fifty-four-year-old O'Toole has immersed himself so deeply in his role that many are predicting a return to the legendary technique the actor displayed in such films as *Lawrence of Arabia*, *Becket*, and *Lord Jim*.

Bertolucci sees the relationship between P'u-yi and his Communist re-educator and keeper as the core of the film. "On the one side stands a man who recognizes he cannot change and is reluctant to take part in this process; on the other is a Communist idealist still rooted in Confucianism who firmly believes that all men are fundamentally good and in that assumption lies the path to true freedom. The film will open on the train that is carrying P'u-yi and the prisoners of war back to China from Siberia. P'u-yi is convinced he will be executed and is preparing himself for the worst. Then, through the years in jail and his attempts to change, we move into a Chinese-box motif of flashbacks recounting the salient moments of his extraordinary existence."

The director knows that he is making a film about China from a European point of view. Nevertheless, he has immersed himself in Chinese culture, ensuring that the mistakes he makes will not be the result of ignorance or a cavalier attitude to history. When Bertolucci talks about Citizen P'u-yi (whom Mao once jokingly referred to as "my predecessor"), he seems serene and confident—joyful confirmation that one of the world's greatest directors is back in the forbidden playground of the cinema with a Manchurian vengeance:

"I've come to regard P'u-yi as a character kidnapped and held to ransom by history. He feels cheated, impotent, and forgotten. Yet, taking stock of his life in the Communist prison allows him to become the model citizen which is, after all, what he had been taught an emperor must be. But from another point of view, he can also be seen as a chrysalis who turns into a butterfly with large delicate wings, tripping ever so lightly on the water so as to never be swallowed up. He looks in the eyes of his re-educator and both are thinking the same thing: Has he changed? Has he really changed?" 

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