

Document Citation

Title	The last Emperor
Author(s)	Todd McCarthy
Source	<i>Variety</i>
Date	1987 Oct 07
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	16
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	The last Emperor, Bertolucci, Bernardo, 1987

Tokyo Fest Reviews

The Last Emperor (ITALIAN-HONG KONG-COLOR)

A Columbia Pictures (U.S.) release of a Jeremy Thomas presentation. Produced by Thomas. Directed by Bernardo Bertolucci. Stars John Lone, Joan Chen, Peter O'Toole. Screenplay, Mark Peploe, with Bertolucci; initial screenplay collaboration, Enzo Ungari. Camera (Technovision, Technicolor), Vittorio Storaro; editor, Gabriella Cristiani; music, Ryuichi Sakamoto, David Byrne, Cong Su; production design, Ferdinando Scarfiotti; art direction, Gianni Giovagnoni, Gianni Silvestri, Maria Teresa Barbasso; costume design, James Acheson; sound (Dolby), Ivan Sharrock; associate producers, Franco Giovale, Joyce Herlihy; assistant director, Gabriele Polverosi; casting, Joanna Merlin, Patricia Pao (Hong Kong), Ulrike Koch (China). Reviewed at the Tokyo Intl. Film Festival (closing night, non-competing), Oct. 4, 1987. Running time: 160 MINS.

Pu Yi John Lone
Wan Jung Joan Chen
Reginald Johnson (R.J.) Peter O'Toole
The Governor Ying Ruocheng
Chen Pao Shen Victor Wong
Big Li Dennis Dun
Amakasu Ryuichi Sakamoto
Eastern Jewel Maggie Han
Interrogator Ric Young
Won Hsiu Wu Jun Mei
Chang Cary Hiroyuki Tagawa
Ar Mo Jade Go
Yoshioka Fumihiko Ikeda
Also with: Richard Vuu (Pu Yi — 3 years),
Tijger Tsou (Pu Yi — 8 years), Wu Tao (Pu Yi — 15 years), Fan Guang (Pu Chieh — adult), Henry Kyi (Pu Chieh — 7 years), Alvin Riley 3d (Pu Chieh — 14 years).

Tokyo — A film of unique, quite unsurpassed visual splendor, "The Last Emperor" makes for a fascinating trip to another world, but for the most part also proves as remote and untouchable as its subject, the last imperial ruler of China. A prodigious production in every respect, Bernardo Bertolucci's first film in six years is an exquisitely painted mural of 20th century Chinese history as seen from the point of view of a hereditary leader who never knew his people. Shown in its world premiere as the closing night attraction at the second Tokyo Intl. Film Festival, picture will deservedly receive serious attention upon its release next month. Performance in debut engagements should be strong, but key to recoupment of its \$25,000,000 cost will lie in whether domestic audiences are seduced by its exotic qualities, or put off by its cold virtuosity.

The life story recounted here is an utterly singular one without possible equal. In 1908, the 3-year-old Pu Yi is installed as Lord of Ten Thousand Years, master of the most populous nation on earth. Shortly, he is forced to abdicate, but is kept on as a symbolic figure, educated by his English tutor and tended to by a court that includes 1,500 eunuchs and countless other manipulative advisers.

Technically considered a god, little Pu Yi can do anything he wishes except leave the great Forbidden City in Peking. Except for hearsay and what he learns in magazines, he is ignorant of the convulsions being experienced by his country; a prisoner in the most glorious gilded cage ever created.

Finally booted out by the new government, Pu Yi, by now in his late 20s, moves with his two wives to Tientsin and lives like a Western playboy, wearing tuxedos at elegant dances while gradually coming under the influence of the Japanese, who eventually install him as puppet emperor of Manchuria, home of his ancestors.

After World War II, he is imprisoned for 10 years by the communists, during which time he writes his memoirs, and ends his life

as a gardener and simple citizen in Mao's China.

This is a lot of ground to cover in a feature film, and doubly difficult to traverse since even the most basic facts of the history involved are unfamiliar to most Westerners. Unfortunately, screenwriter Mark Peploe, working with Bertolucci from initial work prepared by Enzo Ungari, has not entirely cracked the problem of how to seamlessly integrate necessary documentary data with personal dramatic material.

Script is full of dry dialog included merely to establish dates and events, as well as identifying exclamations such as, "The Japanese!" "The Russians!" "The Red Guard!" and so on.

While effective in presenting the stark contrasts between the decadent imperial court and the severity of communist times, the scenario's structure is quite conventional. The framing device of Pu Yi's detention in 1950 and subsequent memories and confessions to prison interrogators provides an easy jumping-off point for flashbacks to key points over the previous 42 years.

Given the extreme historical breadth of the story and the exceptionally lofty central character — and being a Westerner to boot — Bertolucci probably had little choice but to approach the subject from the outside. Film is an incredibly rich tapestry of events that in the foreground always features a figurehead, not a 3-dimensional person.

This does not at all prevent the picture from being constantly absorbing and tremendously interesting, but it will stand in the way of strong involvement for many mainstream viewers. The progression Bertolucci follows is that of a man who is always a prisoner — first of the imperial court, then of the Japanese and finally of the communists — but ultimately achieves his greatest freedom in normal life. One can sympathize with the little boy's desire to escape the ancient walls that describe his world, but that's as far as one's feelings for him can go.

Nevertheless, at every moment, the extraordinary aspects of both the story and the physical realization of it are astonishing to witness. For virtually the first 90 minutes, Bertolucci makes full use of the red-dominated splendor of the Forbidden City, which has never before been opened up for use in a Western film.

Many vivid images emerge, including little Pu Yi making eunuchs and a camel chase him through a courtyard, his attempted escape over the roof, and the adult emperor and his wives, dressed just right for a Southampton summer afternoon, playing tennis on a specially built court.

Middle section reverberates with strong echoes of the director's "The Conformist," as the emperor works out of an art deco office while his beautiful wife lethargically slips into opium addiction and a lesbian affair. The red flag waving in the concluding section will also remind viewers of "1900," but politically, Bertolucci is playing no favorites here, presenting everything, including Japanese treachery, in a straightforward manner.

Star of the production, other than China itself, is cinematographer Vittorio Storaro, whose widescreen lens goes gliding through the decades and innumerable settings with breathtaking grace and beauty. Opening prison scenes are drained

of almost all color, while initial sequences at court are burnished with a golden sepia before rich, full colors are allowed to take hold.

On the same ultra-refined level of accomplishment are Ferdinando Scarfiotti's amazing production design, James Acheson's no-expenses-spared costumes and the extremely resonant musical score of Ryuichi Sakamoto, David Byrne and Cong Su.

Actors all do good jobs within the somewhat confining nature of the conception of the roles, which does not allow for psychological or emotional exploration. John Lone, who plays Pu Yi from age 18 to 62, naturally dominates the picture with his carefully judged, unshowy delineation of a sometimes arrogant, often weak man. Joan Chen is exquisite and sad as his principal wife who almost literally fades away, and Peter O'Toole doesn't really have that much to do but act intelligently concerned for the emperor's well-being.

Finally, acknowledgement must be made of the enormously impressive job pulled off by Jeremy Thomas in organizing such an ambitious production. The independent British producer had to secure total Chinese cooperation with many unprecedented requirements, and then finance such an expensive undertaking without the upfront involvement of any major company.

In Tokyo, Thomas revealed that a 4-hour cut of the picture exists and will be made available for tv showing in either two or four installments if the feature proves successful.

—Cart.