

THE
NEW CHINA
 DOCUMENTARIES

by Kevin Tierney

On a recent visit to New York we found ourselves in a 52nd Street Chinese restaurant. Two members of our group spoke fluent Chinese with Taiwanese accents, and before the soup had arrived they and the waiter were discussing the relative merits of unifying the island with the People's Republic. Further into the conversation our friends pointed to us and told the waiter we were going to China. His face started to beam. When he heard we were Canadians, the smile broadened even further: "The doctor, the doctor," he said. "Bethune?" I replied. "Yes, yes, Canada is the number one friend of China in the world."

Well, there may be some truth to that, and if anybody is trying to validate our waiter's assessment of Canadian/Chinese relations, it's the National Film Board, where the People's Republic appears to have become the new fron-



ship. It took almost two more years for a second official visit (1975) but by then culture and friendship had taken second place to commerce and distribution. On this particular visit the Board was represented by Janis Stoddart and Paul Courtice who handled distribution in Asia. They met with China Film Corp. employees to follow up on NFB films which had already been purchased through the Canadian embassy in London. The problems encountered then continue to frustrate even today. "Because we're a government agency, we get to see the people who work for the government department - which accepts free films from embassies, etc. - and they won't introduce us to the people who do the buying," Courtice explains.

"We feel that some small progress was made, but only time will tell whether our productions will ever be widely seen by what is potentially the world's largest audience."

- André Lamy, National Film Board



● Masters on their own land, the people work together on a North China Commune

tier. For example, what other topic could have spawned seven documentaries in the last two years alone, and led to official visits to China by the last three film commissioners, plus exchanges of all sorts?

Relations between the NFB and China go back even further than the existence of the People's Republic. Norman McLaren spent time there during the 'tran-

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sition' period between the departure of Chiang Kai-shek and the coming to power of Mao Tse-tung. Grant McLean shot a film in 1946 about war-torn China (a copy of which was presented to the China Film Development Corporation during an official visit in 1977 - and they were most impressed).

The more recent history of the NFB and China, however, begins in 1973 with Sidney Newman's visit. Newman, who was then the commissioner of the NFB, was the first person to introduce the idea of a film exchange between the two countries in order to promote friend-



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The next visit to China was led by André Lamy in 1977, the second commissioner to make the trek. "The purpose of the visit was threefold: 1) to gain public exposure for NFB films in China; 2) to obtain permission for an NFB crew to make two or three documentaries in China, and 3) to make a contribution to the continuation of good relations between Canada and China. We feel we were successful in this latter objective, and we were definitely successful in the matter of getting permission to film. As for the first objective, distribution of NFB films in China, we feel that some small progress was made, but only time will tell whether our productions will ever be widely seen by what is potentially the world's largest audience." (*Report on a Visit to the People's Republic of China by a Delegation from the National Film Board* by André Lamy).

The key phrase is, of course, "the world's largest audience," and it was certainly this point that the present commissioner, James Domville, had uppermost in his mind in 1980 when he went to China.

Reflecting both the changes in China's own sense of itself, as well as our domestic situation within the film industry, Domville invited along Claude Godbout, then president of l'Association des producteurs de films du Québec, and Pat Ferns, the president of the Canadian Film and Television Association. This was the first time official representation from the private sector had been present, and according to Fern's report, it was at least a step in the right direction: "While the tangible benefits in the short term may not be all that great, I felt it was an important initiative for the film commissioner to include private sector representatives on what in the past have been exclusively NFB delegations."

The "tangible benefits" relate to the sale of Canadian-made feature films and television shows. The current Chinese policy towards foreign film purchases is to buy selected and pre-screened films for anywhere from \$15,000 to \$35,000, claiming both theatrical and TV rights. (There is one TV for every 800 Chinese. Not exactly big box office.) Domville, however, keeps trying to convince Canadian producers of the importance of just getting the Canadian product into the country, as an investment in the future when it may be possible to receive royalties. Consider the possibilities of widespread distribution at even a penny a head! The NFB might look forward to selling its own films for cost recovery purposes, while the private sector could collect an awful lot of pennies.

But in a private sector that can hardly cope with a short term that seems to be getting shorter all the time, now is not the most auspicious moment to be trying to interest Canadian producers in the long term - to say nothing of the long distance. Still, Domville's enthusiasm for the idea remains strong. Clearly, he's been bitten: after two visits, he's already hoping for a third and he speaks of China in terms usually reserved for very special places. Under his stewardship Canadians have shot films in China and Chinese crew shot four documentaries here. There will soon be a four-city tour of Chinese-made features that will be screened for the public, and to reciprocate, China will host a Canadian film week probably in the spring of 1983. Future plans call for an exchange of animation artists as well as other exchanges for purposes of exploring com-

mon ground in everything from film archives to distribution.

Domville admits that the process is a long and often tedious one - even by NFB standards the Chinese bureaucracy appears overwhelming - "... but the potential benefits of such efforts make it all worthwhile." The immediate repercussions of official delegation visits, and other signals coming from China, if never completely clear, do point to an even brighter future - at least in terms of 'cultural exchanges' if not sales. (In fact, according to Paul Courtice, NFB film sales are down from those of 1979, but he attributes that to the 'hard currency' problems the over-extended Chinese are presently facing.)

The most obvious benefit of all these diplomatic and official overtures are the films about China that have been produced in the last few years. In each case, the films came as a direct result of the NFB commissioners' visits. Newman's visit in 1973 paved the way for *Glimpses of China*, directed by Marcel Carrière. As its title suggests, the film reflects the excitement felt by one of the first crews given access to China's big cities and model institutions. Les Rose followed the University of British Columbia

hockey team, the Thunderbirds, on their visit and produced *Thunderbirds in China*.

Subsequent to André Lamy's visit and part of the China-Canada exchange program of film crews, Tony Ianzelo and Boyce Richardson obtained permission to go and live in China for an extended period of time and they produced three films: *China - A Land Transformed*, a half-hour documentary, remains an interesting document about an exemplary commune. Although full of the Maoist myth, it offers an interesting comparison between pre-1949 China and what has come to be called the 'middle Mao period'.

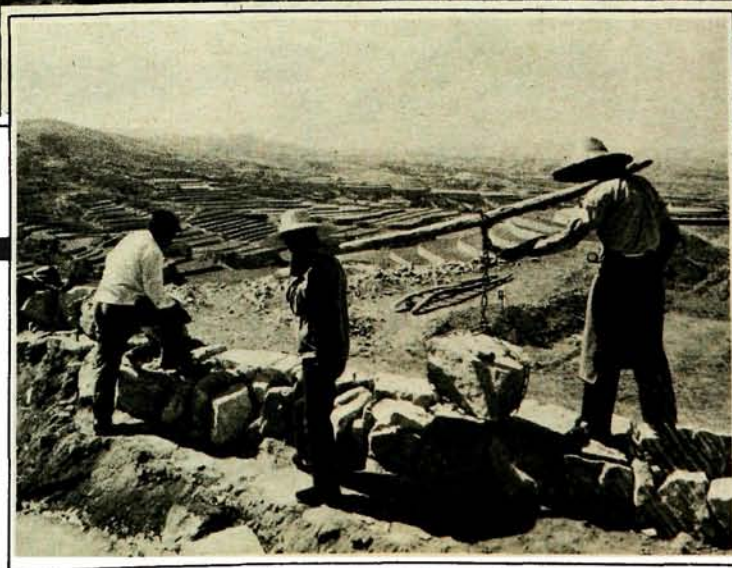
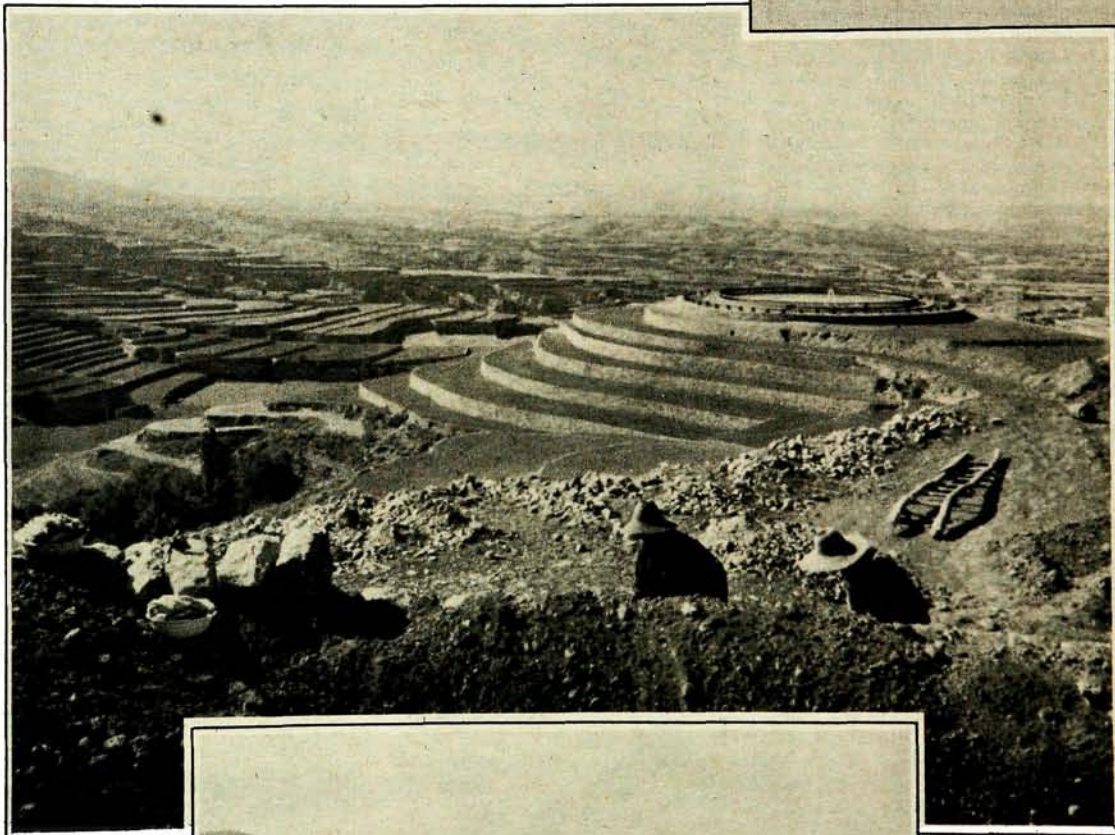
North China Commune (an edited version of this film was done for television and re-titled *Wuxing People's Commune*) and *North China Factory* were the other products of that stay in China but are of more interest today as historical documents. Long-time China visitor and observer, Paul Courtice remarks, "If you see a film about China more than a month after it's shot, it's out of date." Ironically, one of the world's oldest civilizations is for today's filmmakers elusive and everchanging. Add to this the cliché of inscrutability, and

The times they are a-changin'

About a month before Christmas we received a RUSH telex from the Central Broadcasting Administration saying essentially, "We've got money and we want to buy films." The request came to us through Cultural Affairs in Ottawa. They, in turn, asked the CBC, the private sector (through the CFDC), and us. We sent *Mon Oncle Antoine*; *First Winter*; *One Man*; *J.A. Martin, photographe*; and *Drylanders*.

But what's interesting is the reason for the Chinese request. They have just started advertising on TV to encourage consumerism among the peasantry. The peasantry, however, weren't buying in response: they didn't like the programming so they didn't watch the ads. As a result we get to sell them *Mon Oncle Antoine*, not because the Chinese are dying to see a Québécois film, but because the state wants people to watch the five minutes of commercials during each broadcasting hour. I still don't know if they actually bought anything."

Paul Courtice, NFB Representative - Pacific and Northeast Asia.



● The terraced hills, the timeless labour in China, *A Land Transformed*

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you really have to hope for beautiful images, because the content is at best an approximation of a given moment in the history of a country that continues to reel from the implications of the phrase, 'change for the sake of change'.

The most recent NFB films on China were shot in late 1979 and premiered as a trilogy at the 1981 Festival du nouveau cinéma in Montreal. Collectively, they are called *Guy Dao - On The Way*, but each film has been designed to be viewed on its own. Part I, *Station On The Yangtze*, introduces us to the train station in Wuchang, a city of four million people in central China. But instead of a traditional approach, that of the studied and tightly structured documentary narrated from the reflected past-tense (e.g. We were then taken to.... etc.), there is a strong sense of the present tense. The camera serves as a visual narrator, looking relentlessly at everything it can, while simultaneously trying to maintain a low profile. Interviews abound: anyone willing to speak is spoken to and every single word of the exchange, including repetitions, is recorded and translated. (Prints of the original versions of these films can be obtained from NFB libraries.)

Dufaux works hard at humanizing his subject matter by focusing on individuals and following the drama, or lack of it, in their everyday lives; thus avoiding that traditional pitfall of Westerners looking at China and treating people as masses. We come to understand a great deal more about Chinese life by watching a railway employee's retirement party, and then seeing his daughter's initiation into the job as her father's replacement, than we would learn from some kind of pseudo-sociological reading of relations between the generations in China. The pace of the film is closely aligned to the pace of the daily life it's trying to capture, and one senses - in all of these films - a conscious attempt to dispel romantic and exciting notions about China in

favour of looking at things that are extremely ordinary.

Part II is called *Round Trip to Beijing* and is exactly that: a three-day return trip from Wuchang to Beijing (1200 km each way). Here, too, we watch people - Team no. 6, a group of women employed to serve the passengers' needs as sort of conductor/stewardesses (they punch tickets, pass out playing cards and comic books at the beginning of each trip, and lead the passengers in the mandatory daily exercise routine). Ultimately, this is the least successful of the three films for we're never quite sure where the director's interest lies: is it with the train itself, the notion of mobility within China, or the young train employee we follow home once back in Wuchang, where she's asked about her savings account and her TV set?

The most ambitious film is the last, *Some Chinese Women Told Us*. Watching the first two films, one is struck by the number of women employees involved in all aspects of running the station and the trains. This prepares us for the third film. The style remains consistent. There is a feeling that the crew hung around until they heard of something interesting about to happen - in this case a wedding, and a working wife's visit to her soldier husband, whom she sees two or three times a year - and then went off to film it.

Basically, it is the story of seven women

"Anyone willing to speak is spoken to and every single word of exchange... recorded..."

● Workers at the end of their day in a North China Factory

who work together loading and unloading trains. We see them at work during the night shift, at home in their dormitory, and marching to work single file. Although they all appear to be speaking freely, nobody ever says anything that goes against current policies. For example, everyone talks about their roles in precisely the same way - "Our duty is to serve the people and the state"; and in response to questions about children, absolutely everyone says that one is enough.

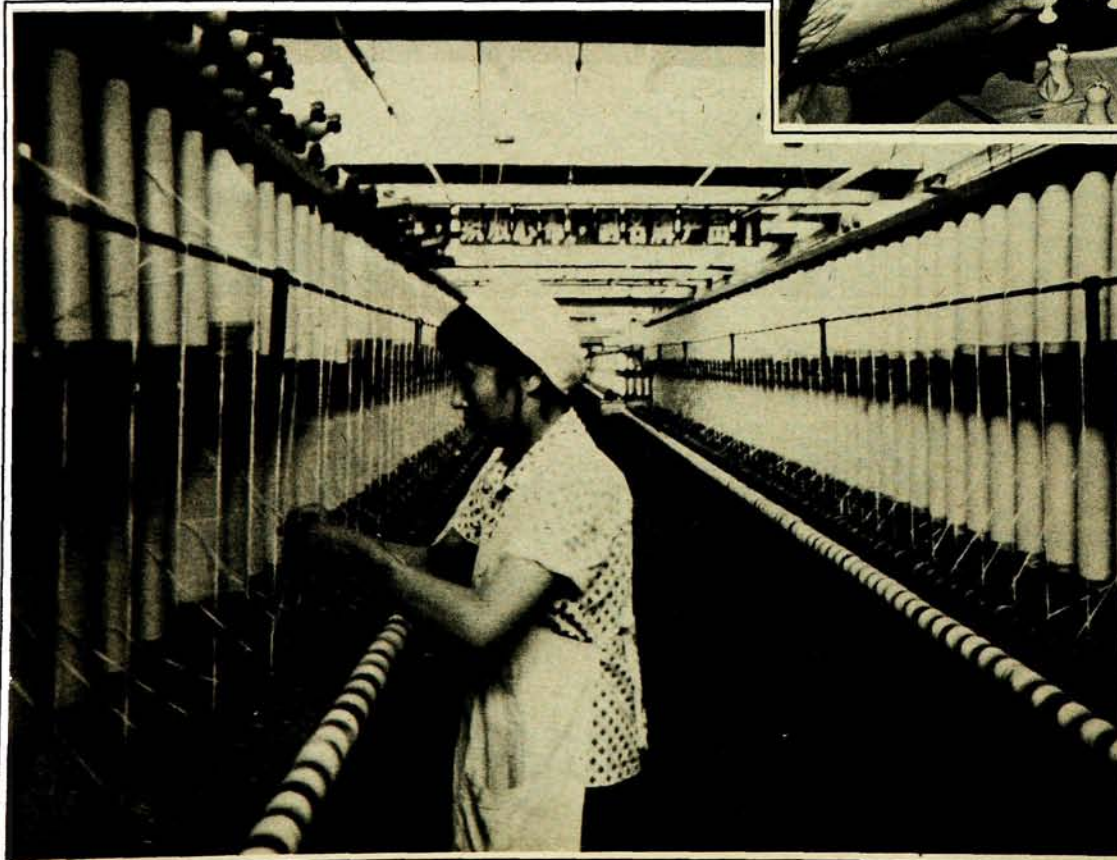
The tone of all three films is that of the intelligent and inquisitive tourist, who is interested in everything and unafraid to ask questions. Those hoping for investigative reporting, however, should look elsewhere. Only in the last few moments of the final part of the trilogy are we exposed to anything like 'hard questions' - Where did you learn your ideology? Where did you learn to put serving others ahead of your own ambitions? A young woman is asked in a quiet one-to-one interview. She has a great deal of difficulty understanding the question, and her obvious discomfort is affecting. But instead of being grateful for the kind of question I thought I'd been waiting to hear for more than

three hours, I was offended by the almost aggressive nature of it. That was when I realized how well Georges Dufaux had succeeded in taking me 'on the way' to understanding a little more about China and the subtleties of a wonderful style of documentary filmmaking which reaffirms that it is still possible to show and not to tell.

Finally, it would be unfair to conclude a discussion of the NFB and China without mentioning Tom Radford's excellent film, *China Mission - The Chester Ronning Story*, produced by the NFB's Prairie Region in co-operation with the Alberta Department of Education. It would be equally unfair to treat this film as yet another NFB film on China.

For anyone interested in any or all of the following, this film is a must-see: Canada, heroes, 20th-century politics, the-stuff-that-makes-the-west-the-west, missionaries, diplomacy, education, How-to-age-with-grace-and-dignity, history, socialism, even the history of photography and filmmaking. And believe it or not, the context for all of this is a mission in China.

China Mission is simultaneously a biography and the autobiography of



Chester Ronning. Born the son of a Norwegian father and an American mother in his parents' mission in China, Ronning's life was full of the stuff of which heroes are made: horse-breaker, homesteader, diplomat, politician and teacher. Using archive material, documentary footage and Ronning's personal mementos, Radford has woven a portrait of the man and his time. In that sense *China Mission* is a beautifully filmed history course, full of humanity but never sentimental or nostalgic.

In its quieter moments, as we move through the sepia-toned stills, to black-and-white shots, to film, and finally to color, we discover that we are watching a love story. The love story of a gentle man who will never outgrow his boyhood memories and dreams, who feels committed to leaving the world a better place in which to live, and who keeps a large part of himself reserved for the first world he knew, China. Thus, it is touching and amusing to see him visiting his old friend Chou En-Lai in 1971 and inviting him to Alberta for some "good old-fashioned Chinese food."

When Ronning quotes an old Chinese proverb we are reminded of why Radford's film, and those of Dufaux are important: "Live until you're old. Learn until you're old."