



● Movie posters grace the Provincial Auditorium in Lanzhou

Photos: Kevin Tierney

Saturday night at the movies : Lanzhou, China

by Kevin Tierney

Introductions have a way of sounding pretentious, but in this case one seems unavoidable because a sense of context for what follows is necessary.

I have been in China for three months and speak very little of the language. Trying to cover Chinese film from Lanzhou – situated in a direct line, halfway between Beijing (Peking) and Lhasa – can be compared to trying to cover Canadian film from Sudbury, or the Hollywood scene from Pittsburgh. (If I were to describe Lanzhou's air, these comparisons would seem far less peculiar.) Nevertheless, Lanzhou has cinemas – lots of them – and I've been greatly assisted by my friend, colleague and interpreter, Mr. Gao Hailong: if ever the cliché, 'without him little of this would have been possible' was apt, it is now. Anyone who has spent any time in this country will, I'm sure, understand how important such friends can be.

Finally, it is my purpose here to sound provincial. What the West needs least is the voice of yet another expert, someone who comes here, looks around for awhile and then writes home, summing up not only the 'China of today,' but CHINA, a country that has existed for five-thousand years and shows every sign of maintaining its record of longevity, in spite of all we have written and will, no doubt, continue to write.

When I leave my apartment building at 7:45 p.m. for the university auditorium, accompanied by my interpreter, I am struck by two different sensations: one is the darkness – no stars in Lanzhou

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and very few street lights in the compound which houses most university employees; the second is the bustle – a quiet kind of quickstep shuffle. This is not only my first chance to see a Chinese Film in China, but it's the first time I've been out at night since we arrived here a week ago.

Approaching the gates which divide the compound from the campus, I am struck by the weird combination of features: the buildings are mostly Soviet-style, uninspired, Stalinist PLAIN – they are to architecture what 'sensible shoes' are to fashion; but the physical layout is *Father Knows Best* – tree-lined walk to the clock-towered library and all. A 60-watt bulb hanging naked outside the guard-house allows me to see what I've been hearing: people coming from every direction, moving through the darkness with a hush of suppressed excitement. The sound is broken only by the noise of sunflower seeds being eaten: bite, crush, spit and the crunch of the rejects underfoot. Sunflower seeds are to China what popcorn, gum and chocolate bars are to the West.

Everywhere I look people are walking in the same direction and their movement forces us to quicken our pace: men, women, children: all ages, shapes, sizes and descriptions – Saturday night at the movies in Lanzhou. A whole lot more than *The Drifters* had in mind.

Outside the auditorium the queues are long but orderly. The auditorium seats 1200 and tickets were on sale this morning for a couple of hours: good films take even less time to sell out. Because this is a 'Unit' auditorium (a Unit is the place of work but also the fundamental structure of this society),

which serves, among other purposes, as a cinema with both 16 and 35 mm facilities, the admission price is half what it would be in a 'commercial cinema' – one 'jiao' instead of two (i.e. 6 1/2 or 13 cents). In principle, tickets for unit film screenings are available only to the workers of that unit, but everybody's got friends. Films are shown in this auditorium on an average of twice per week, Wednesdays and Saturdays. People know if there's a movie by the posters on the community bulletin board situated outside the student cafeteria: same day advertizing, i.e., they tell you in the morning what will be screened that night.

Inside people are rushing about matching seat numbers to those on their tickets: there is no such thing as non-reserved seating in the unit auditoria or the commercial houses. Before the film begins a series of slides are projected, all of them urging better behavior: no talking, no spitting (an unfortunate habit that can make walking to class at 8 a.m. an excruciatingly painful experience), no smoking, etc. People try, but it's hard to break old habits.

When the film begins, so does my interpreter, and I feel badly for the people seated near us, for they have to listen to his valiant efforts at simultaneous translation. (He has since taken my advice and now only translates what makes the audience laugh and information he feels is essential.) Fifteen minutes into the film I tell him not to bother. The dialogue, however insightful and poetic it may be (it isn't), cannot possibly salvage anything from this waste of celluloid: set in pre-Liberation China, it's half kitschy American cow-girl (two pistols slung crossways across the breasts down

to the hips); half Hong Kong Kung Fu (complete with speeded-up editing and reverse action that has her jumping up mountains). I promise myself to forget the translated title, and I succeed; but I haven't been able to forget what got the biggest laugh from the viewers – who are, after all, the source of my real interest... Our heroine rides her white horse to the hideout of an ex-member of her gang. When she is converted from Robin Hood to People's Liberation Army revolutionary, this sort-of-bad-guy (he's not really *the* bad guy – that title is saved for Annie Oakley's lover who, of course, shows his real reactionary colors before the end of the film) says he wants to be a real thief – rob from the rich and give to himself. She challenges him to a dual of knives (choreographed in Chinese martial arts style) and he agrees, setting the stakes: if I win, he says, you will be my wife. Her response is given in close-up: if you lose, you will be my son.

The lights come on and my interpreter shakes his head, 'Silly film'. Silly, yes. But what the hell else is there to do in Lanzhou on Saturday night – or any other night for that matter? We make our way to the exists, just two of the 70 MILLION PEOPLE who will have seen a movie in China today.

Numbers. As overwhelming as that statistic is, it is but one of the many in this country available to us daily. From a report on a recently held Conference on Films, I read the following: "... according to the Film Bureau, China's film attendance was well above 10 billion in 1981." 'Well above'? How much more than 10 billion is 'well above'? People here are well aware of the effect their numbers have on us. Some of my colleagues delight in giving me theirs and asking for ours: the idea that the combined populations of Shanghai and Beijing are more than the population of Canada is

especially amusing considering that Canada is physically larger than China—a fact that everyone I speak to mentions. One must know one's place in the world, and isn't it more interesting to think of oneself as being part of 25% of the world, rather than living in just another country?

One of the reasons for such large movie attendance is that the films run all day and the better part of the evening: 8 a.m. starting, until the last screening around 9:30 p.m. If the film is a 'big hit', additional screenings may be added at 2 or 3 a.m.: a light social comedy before breakfast at 6? Such things have been known to happen in Lanzhou. Starting times are scheduled this way for a number of reasons, including a desire to accommodate those who work shifts. They, too, should be able to see films. Then there is the problem of the unemployed—what should they do all day—and the cinema provides at least a temporary source of escape from a difficult problem.

While the admission price for a film may seem ridiculously low to us, it is not so here, where every penny continues to count. In the commercial cinemas, of which Lanzhou has 30, the price is 13 cents for what is called a 'common film' and 16 cents for a 'wide screen film'. At least that's the official price established by the Film Bureau in Beijing. In reality, however, people are currently being charged more to see a new 'story' film (as features are known) due to a quietly capitalist-like trick that is loaded with all sorts of irony: I have paid as high as 19 and even 25 cents to see a new film and when I asked why the price was so high I was told because this film would be shown with some other films. How interesting. To me, perhaps, but not to the people I was with. They asked if they could pay less and skip the first films—which they knew would be documentaries—but were told no, they had to pay for the whole evening. "Not only do we have to watch science films that we do not like, but we have to pay more to do it:" a sentiment that was later confirmed as widespread by a representative of the provincial film office. Scientific and cultural films are added to the bill along with new features because the authorities feel these films are important and should be seen by the people. The people's version doesn't quite seem to match: "This is the way they can charge us more."

Distribution in China is controlled by a national agency headquartered in Beijing. In each province there is a provincial distribution office and it re-



● The box office rush

ceives the assigned number of prints for their area from the national office. A small province, such as this one, usually receives two or three copies, but that can fall to one or rise to five. Upon receipt of the copies, the provincial office will decide which of its districts should receive a copy and when, etc. In Gansu province the capital city of Lanzhou is considered as one district, but also as the most important of the 13 in the province; thus it usually gets at least one copy of all the new films (and often these copies are bicycled from one theatre to another with staggered starting times). But as the leaders of the provincial film office go out of their way to tell me, 'not all the time.' Fair is fair.

Each month the Gansu province film distribution office receives approximately 10 new films. This had been happening since 1978. Of these 10, three may be foreign films, but these would be new only in the sense of being new to this country. (I've only seen one—a Fernandel piece of racist fluff that was remarkable to some of the audience only because it contained a couple of rather mild belly-dancing sequences, which in China are close to *Caligula*.) How these films are chosen, and why, is difficult to understand. It probably has more to do with purchase price than either of the two loftier considerations, politics and art.

What is most pleasant is the fairness with which distribution is handled. Films open nationally, which means that just because Lanzhou is far away

from major urban centres, it is not made to wait, nor are the other regions. Thus, at approximately the same time as a new film plays Beijing, it is playing in the provinces.

The film community, like much of the artistic and cultural life here, cannot be understood only in terms of its present production figures. These do not begin to tell the story of the recent political past, nor do they reflect just how phoenix-like a phenomenon the present is, re-born out of the ashes known as the Cultural Revolution. Prior to 1966, during the first 17 years of the People's Republic, 600 features were produced. During the next 10-year period—which most people here refer to as 'the so-called cultural revolution'—only 109 films were made, and most of these, no longer in circulation, were filmed variations on the themes of the infamous eight 'revolutionary operas' insisted upon by Jiang Qing (Mao's wife and one of the Gang of Four). During this period studios were closed; actors, writers, directors, producers and millions of others were sent to the countryside to be 're-educated' and some didn't survive. With the demise of the Gang of Four production didn't resume, so much as start all over again, and the figures dating from this time are quite remarkable: between 1977 and 1981, 300 films were produced, and in 1981, 90 new films were made, a figure that is likely to be surpassed this year.

During all of its life, the People's Republic has recognized the potential

of cinema as a form of propaganda and it comes as no shock to foreign eyes to see this manifested on the screen. Perhaps it was exposure to the films of Leni Riefenstahl at too tender an age, but the very word 'propaganda' has an unnerving effect on me. When I am told that an interview with the Provincial Film Office has been arranged and that one of the 'leaders' (this is the Chinese equivalent for boss) is from the propaganda office, I feel a reaction coming on. I am not quite sure what to expect but when I see him, he isn't it. A slightly built man in his early forties, he is dressed much like everyone else and does not wear swastika arm bands or big red stars.

"Yes, film is propaganda," he says, and then proceeds to describe his view of it, as well as his specific function as the head of the propaganda department. Of the former, he says all films have their aims and the aim of good films should be to educate the people, i.e., first, knowledge; second, patriotism; and third, behavior. A good film must also be art, it must entertain the people. "We are trying to merge Art and Education, but the results aren't always successful." As for his department's specific functions, they begin when a new film is received. The film is previewed and they then go about 'calling on people to see the film; helping the people understanding the film'. "After the people have seen the film, they can be educated."

Listening to him describe these functions, I am struck by how much he sounds like a marketing man interested in finding the right 'target' audience and mounting campaigns to get people to see the 'product'. These campaigns take the form of posters (a major source of communication here is the wall poster); newspapers (his office publishes a bi-weekly film magazine); and preview screenings for leaders of large units who are then encouraged to show the film in their units.

A good example of this process would be the most recent film to cause a great deal of discussion and attention, *The Herdsman*. It also happens to be the best film I've seen here.

Based on a well known short story, *Body and Soul*, it was shot on location in southern Gansu province. Briefly, it tells the story, mostly in flashback, of a reunion between a father and son who have been separated for 30 years. The father went off to America when the boy was very young and while everything has gone well for him in his new adopted country (he returns a 'major capitalist'), life has been hard on the son. Not only

● The parking lot filling up as the attendant hands out stubs (on right)



has he been raised an orphan (his mother dies shortly after the father's departure), but he has been forced to pay for the sins of his father which have left him a legacy known in China as 'bad class background'. During the Cultural Revolution (an era that accounts for much of today's films) the son is branded a 'rightist' and forced out of his job as a school teacher. He is exiled to the new territories of China (the northwest) where he chooses to try and find a new life rather than kill himself. His work and his attitude soon ingratiate him among the local people and he becomes a member of their tight-knit community. He marries, has a child and when the Gang of Four are exposed he is reinstated as a full citizen and given his old job back. At this point the father returns from America for the first time. He wants to take the son back with him to America as his principal heir. It's a difficult decision for the son who, despite everything, continues to love his father. But ultimately he chooses to remain in China.

The allegorical possibilities are obviously as is the ultimate message, a timely one considering the present open door to the West policy. Because of its message the film is being recommended to all, but particularly to the young, for whom the lure of the West may become stronger and stronger. The propaganda department works out a strategy to get the film seen as widely as possible. It controls the commercial cinemas so that is no problem, but unit screenings are for many people their primary source of film viewing. Thus, all the appropriate unit leaders are invited to see the film and encouraged to book it into their respective units. The magazine devotes much space to interviews with the director, cinematographer, leading players, etc; and reviews of the film are published. Discussion of the film is encouraged at every level from the secondary schools to the places of work. It's a 'hot property'.

What is fascinating about this film to these foreign eyes is that in communicating its message of rejecting Western materialism, it employs both the film language and mythology of the 'new world', America. When the young hero decides against suicide the director begins to show us why, in the way he shoots these new open spaces, the free running herds of horses, this expanse full of possibilities and new beginnings. It's enough to bring a tear to John Ford's eye. Instead of pursuing this, though, the film opts for a patriotic leap of faith that is not confusing to me so much as it is distancing: I know little of such leaps and what I do know of them makes me uneasy. It manages, as well, to portray a world much closer to the real one than other Chinese films I've seen. Gone are the simple heroes and villains who must be all good and all bad. There is an exchange of gifts at the end of the film between the father and the son which is not only moving but symbolic: at this juncture compromise is possible.

Of course it is propaganda. But for 80% or more of its running time, there is no denying that its director, Xie Jin, one of the best known directors at work in China, is a world class director who displays remarkable sensitivity in following the dictum that blankets all artistic activity here: art must serve the people.

Propaganda. Art. Education. Are these three compatible? In films like *The Herdsman*, yes. But for every *Herdsman* there are six or seven other failures, as



there are failures of a different nature in every country where filmmaking is active. But what the leadership thinks of as propaganda or education, and what we might like to think of as art, do not necessarily take into account what local filmgoers seem to be most interested in, entertainment. It is difficult to have a 'serious' discussion of a film with either the students or the teachers of this and probably most universities, because their idea of film is so alien to that. (The idea that people actually 'teach' film borders on the proposterous.) It is equally difficult to discuss the politics of a film, or film in general. (I may be totally wrong about why this is so, and should I discover that I am, I will write a letter to the editor and *mea culpa* my way back to credibility.) In almost every conversation in English or in translation (but always unofficial), I detect an almost apolitical tone. Surprising to think that the people we consider to be among the most politicized in the world are the least interested in discussing such a topic. Or is it? A sign of reluctance to discuss this with a foreigner? This should never be discounted, but even those who have spoken freely in other situations display similar tendencies of disinterest. Too much politics? A real possibility; so much so that people

seem to have learned to separate national politics from their daily lives in order to survive the most tumultuous political history yet recorded: in 40 years they have gone from war to civil war, revolution, liberation, development, the Russians, the 100 Flowers Campaign, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, the death of the embodiment of the revolution, the Gang of Four, the four modernizations and the open door to the West—not counting other political shakeups that we don't even know about. Just reading the list is enough to make the eyeballs spin. To do no more than cope, a filtration system would have to be at work. It is this filtration system that changes propaganda to entertainment and like everywhere else in the world, there is good and bad entertainment. Like audiences everywhere else, people respond accordingly: they stay home, go to another movie, or line up at o'clock in the morning to see THE film that everyone's talking about.

Although more and more people are now buying televisions, and more and more money is being spent on television productions, movies remain the most important source of entertainment in Lanzhou and elsewhere. I have been to four or five different cinemas on many

different occasions and I have yet to attend a screening that was not sold out. (Even parking is a problem: lots, tickets and attendants—but waiting for the traffic to clear, bicycle or car, is a universal phenomenon, indeed.) Many people ask me about foreign films and clearly more of these would be welcome. The future seems bright for Chinese feature films, and should the present political situation remain stable even better films will be produced. A recent retrospective of 135 Chinese features dating from the '20s to the present is a most promising omen, for it shows that the authorities are interested in more film exchanges with the West: but even more importantly, they are interested in their own film history (an industry did, after all, exist before liberation).

As for me, I like going to the movies, here and everywhere else. Of the 12 films I've seen, one was very good, another quite good but not nearly as ambitious, while the other 10 run the range from dreadful to ho-hum. Not a bad average. Besides, like my friends say, what else is there to do in Lanzhou on Saturday night?