

## ESSAY FILM REVIEWS

## China Rises

A FOUR-PART DOCUMENTARY INTERNATIONAL CO-PRODUCTION OF THE CANADIAN BROADCASTING CORPORATION (CBC), *THE NEW YORK TIMES*, DISCOVERY TIMES, ZDF—GERMANY TELEVISION, FRANCE 5, AND BRITAIN'S S4-C.

DVD, 4 EPISODES: "FOOD IS HEAVEN," "PARTY GAMES," "GETTING RICH," AND "CITY OF DREAMS" (44:30 EACH), HIGH DEFINITION, COLOR, 2006

DISTRIBUTED BY THE DISCOVERY TIMES CHANNEL.

OFFICIAL CHINA RISES WEB SITES: [www.cbc.ca/chinarises](http://www.cbc.ca/chinarises)  
[www.nytimes.com/specials/chinarises/intro/index.html](http://www.nytimes.com/specials/chinarises/intro/index.html)

REVIEWED BY JAMES A. WINSHIP

**C**hina Rises represents an extraordinary international collaboration that pooled the resources of documentary makers in the United States, Canada, Germany, France, and the United Kingdom to accomplish a project literally and figuratively too large for any to complete alone. The result is an exquisitely photographed and thoughtfully scripted introduction to the "new" new China in the era of economic reform. This documentary portrait of China refuses to get trapped in stereotypes—for every economic "winner" profiled, also profiled is an economic "loser;" for every booming urban center there is a rural contrast; for every industrial success story there are cautionaries about industrial accidents and environmental carelessness; for every young person there is an encounter with generations of family; and for every male portrayed there is a parallel female profile.

The power of this documentary series is that it refuses to be seduced by a simplistic vision of what twenty-first century China is or isn't. In best dialectic fashion, the documentary seeks truth from facts and constantly presents the viewer with the dramatic contrasts and insistent conundrums that are modern day China. Perhaps better than any other video I have seen, this series introduces viewers to the contradictions that make up the reality of present day China. At the same time, it carefully avoids the pitfalls common to China documentaries. It does not orientalize or romanticize pre-Liberation China, though it respects China's past. It does not lionize or demonize the contributions of Mao Zedong, though it recognizes Mao's continuing importance as an icon of China's modern identity. Neither does it succumb to the economic boosterism that portrays Deng's economic reform program as salvation history, and the socialist market economy as an unmitigated success.

Deng Xiaoping's era of economic reform, originally announced in 1978, produced a remarkable transformation of large segments of the Chinese economy, but rapid economic growth comes with a price. While cities have remade themselves in the image of high rise architecture and commercial malls, much of the countryside has been left behind. While industrialization has succeeded in making China the low-cost producer of many products, human and environmental

costs are often overlooked. While a new middle class living consumer-oriented lives has emerged, the cost of a socialist market economy has frequently been rampant corruption, large-scale layoffs from the state owned industries, and the hollowing out of village economies. Left behind are the very old and the very young, the commercialization of education, the destruction of urban neighborhoods given over to land speculators, and the abandonment to invisibility of the people who depended most on the "iron rice bowl" promises of the Maoist vision—flawed and authoritarian though it was.

Perhaps the greatest strength of this documentary series is its ability to put human faces, concrete living situations, and diverse locales on China's economic miracle and its consequences. Each episode introduces different cities—Beijing, Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Chongqing, and different rural locales—Anhui Province, the loess plateau, the Sichuan countryside, Guizhou, and the sands of Xinjiang. Each episode is told primarily through the personal life of individual winners and losers in China's race to development. Their stories intersect around a central theme. "Party Games," for instance, focuses around China's successful Olympic bid, which brings together China's drive to prosperity with its renascent nationalism. It is the Olympics that ties together the lives of Ai Weiwei (a successful modern artist who designed the Olympic stadium and was the son of a celebrated poet of the revolutionary era who was sent to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution), Xiao Sha (a young gymnast recruited from her home in Guizhou to train with the national team in Beijing to enhance China's medal chances), and migrant workers (drawn to the capital because of Olympic site construction jobs). Also linked by the Olympics are Bo Han (a Peking University student ardently striving to be selected for Communist Party membership), an enterprising computer whiz (who promotes printers that produce Olympic souvenir tickets), and the female township mayor (who successfully converted rice paddies to high value-added commercial flower plots, got a paved road to link her villages to the city, and won a contract to provide flowers to the Olympic Games).

At the risk of sounding too much like an old-time movie publicist, if students see only one set of images of contemporary China, *China Rises* should be it. Each of the four episodes is a perfect classroom length, just under 45 minutes. The DVD format allows teachers to break each episode into smaller segments for classroom discussion or repeated viewing. One of the great strengths of this series is that it is appropriate for a wide range of viewers, certainly from the middle school classroom through university level courses and adult education. The companion Web sites offer an abundance of background material on the making of each episode, some useful graphics, and links to more detailed background materials in the *New York Times* and CBC archives. High school and college-level courses can easily use the issues raised in each episode to generate a series of individual research projects, student presentations, and intensive classroom discussions.

While viewing all four episodes offers students the most comprehensive picture of China undergoing rapid modernization, any one episode is quite capable of standing on its own. Each episode provides a partial yet balanced picture of a part of Chinese life. "City of Dreams" focuses exclusively on Shanghai, but reminds viewers that behind the futuristic architecture and neon lights there is the

destruction of neighborhoods and the displacement of people and their livelihoods. "Party Games" raises key questions about the evolving nature of the Communist Party in China and its efforts to remake its image and function, while retaining tight control over the non-economic aspects of Chinese life, underscoring that even while township elections are permitted, young people with aspirations still seek to join the party as a career boost. "Getting Rich" focuses on the emerging middle class and the spread of wealth to provincial cities, but it provides abundant evidence of the largest rural to urban migration in world history, and the shattered dreams that are the underside of the labor pool in China's explosive coastal cities. "Food Is Heaven" shows the incredible culinary diversity on display in Guangzhou's central market, and emphasizes the central role of food in Chinese life. It reminds viewers that such a deep appreciation for food is born from the experience of scarcity, and that China's new urban sprawl comes at the expense of some of China's richest and most productive farm land.

Overall *China Rises* is such a superb and pedagogically useful production that it seems churlish to criticize. The script, while tightly written, clearly does have a critical analytic agenda that seeks to penetrate beneath the surface of Chinese appearances to get at deeper truths. Thus, the opening description of the migrant workers at the Olympic stadium site observes, "In their faces you can see the glimmer of too many false dawns, on their shoulders the burden of too many false isms." The writing is not heavy-handed, but it is pointed. Unpacking the rhetorical framework of the narration could be a productive classroom exercise. The episode devoted to food, after noting earlier that China is trying to feed twenty percent of the world's population with only seven percent of the world's arable land, ends by asking the portentous question: "Can the ancient, indomitable will of the Chinese people save the heaven that is food?" Chinese agriculture requires twice the amount of chemical pesticides and fertilizer used in the United States, is watered with industrial waste water rather than night soil, and has given a whole new meaning to the term "heavy metal" as mercury and cadmium make their way into the food chain.

There are aspects of Chinese life where the series could have paid greater attention—religion, schools, and more of daily family life come immediately to mind. But, to notice what more could have been included takes nothing away from the extraordinary quality of what has been included. This is a first-rate production that comes closer to capturing the complex realities of the almost cliché Chinese "economic miracle" than anything I have seen. I wonder what has happened to the outtakes? ■

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## U.S.-CHINA TEACHERS EXCHANGE PROGRAM

The National Committee on United States-China Relations is now seeking applications for an exchange program for teachers in American and Chinese schools. This is an unusual opportunity for schools and districts wishing to begin or to strengthen Chinese language and culture programs and for teachers wishing to live and teach in China.

Now in its eleventh year, the program has placed American teachers from across the country in "key" secondary schools throughout China—in Beijing; Dalian (Liaoning); Hefei (Anhui); Hohhot (Inner Mongolia); Luoyang (Henan); Suzhou, Changzhou, Yangzhou, Nanjing (Jiangsu); and Chengdu (Sichuan). We anticipate that many of the same schools on the Chinese side will participate in the next year of the program.

The American teachers in China teach English as a foreign language. The Chinese teachers, all of whom teach English as a foreign language in China, will be prepared to teach Chinese history, language, and culture and/or English as a second language at participating American schools. The National Committee sponsors orientation programs for participating teachers in the U.S. and China during the summer before the exchange year.

The National Committee pays the salary of visiting Chinese teachers and the transportation of American teachers. Participating American teachers will receive partial salary replacement from the National Committee and host Chinese schools during their exchange year.

For more information and an application package, please write to the Teachers Exchange Program, National Committee on United States-China Relations, 71 West 23rd Street, New York, NY 10010.

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