

FILM REVIEWS

China Yellow, China Blue

Part I: The Time of Troubles
Part II: The People's Republic of China

DIRECTED BY AHMED LALLEM

FIRST RUN/ICARUS FILMS
153 WAVERLY PLACE
NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10014, 1998

52 MINUTES EACH

There is one reason and only one reason to use this film: the extraordinary film footage that it contains. Relying almost exclusively on documentary films and official newsreels, filmmaker Ahmed Lalleem, with co-production support from France 3 and Pdj Films, chronicled one hundred years of modern Chinese history. Rather than using talking heads, stills, or film clips, this two-part film is a compilation of movie images of the century, which lends it a particularly powerful immediacy and demonstrates the tremendous impact of witnessing historical figures moving in real time.

In *China Yellow, China Blue* we see

- the reformers of 1898 pleading their cause
- students in the streets in 1919
- the Communist-supported strikers demonstrating in the 1927 prelude to the KMT massacre
- Japanese troops marching into the Forbidden City in 1937
- citizens trying to maneuver in flooded cities after the Yellow River dikes were breached in 1937

- American director John Ford's color films of Chinese soldiers training under General Stillwell
- a youthful Mao showing off his quarters in Yanan
- monks in Tibet being chased and beaten
- the Last Emperor Pu Yi publicly confessing his wartime complicity with the Japanese
- rural commune members toiling at immense public works projects whose scale defies the imagination
- Zhou Enlai dressed in ethnic clothing dancing with minority peoples
- Zhou Enlai leading Red Guards in singing Mao songs in another scene
- Red Guards mobbed into Tiananmen Square and hurling Buddhist statues down temple steps
- images of a feisty Deng Xiaoping heralding the end to incessant campaigns
- the reappearance of a China that is back to business, which the film stresses involves building both military and economic power.

Surprisingly, the images from the first half are more powerful, perhaps because we are more familiar with live television coverage of postwar events and accustomed to still photographs of earlier times. The film's necessary reliance on official films and newsreels for most of the post-1949 era also skews viewers' impressions, even with the narrator's caveat that "purges [and other difficulties] are not reflected in these films." In any case, to this viewer, the first half is clearly more visually arresting than the second.

Unfortunately, the script (at least its English version) is no match for the images. We have become accustomed to fluid voices perfect for the part but which err on the Chinese pronunciation. This narrator, however, incorrectly pronounces both Chinese and English: "agrarian" becomes "agragrian," and names like Jiang, Ju, and Zhou

REACH
YOUR
SPECIALIZED
ASIAN
STUDIES
AUDIENCE

AAS MAILING LABELS

CHOOSE FROM THE FOLLOWING:

- **The AAS Membership List**—approximately 8,500 scholars, students, and others interested in East, South, and Southeast Asia.
- **The "Subscriber List"**—2,500 libraries and other organizations that purchase publications from the Association for Asian Studies.
- **List of Asian Studies Programs, Centers, and Institutes** in universities in the U.S. and around the world (over 1,000 addresses)

CHARGES:

\$1.00/1,000 for cheshire labels, and \$1.20/1,000 for pressure-sensitive.

Specialized selections possible

Please contact our Labels Coordinator, Anne Arizala.

Association for Asian Studies, Inc., 1021 E. Huron Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48104-115A
Tel: 734-665-2490; Fax: 734-665-3801; E-Mail: labels@aasianst.org

—turn the sound off and have students produce a time line themselves, identifying the events in the film and interpreting their significance.

Otherwise, I would suggest waiting until the filmmakers of *China Yellow*, *China Blue* produce a significantly revised English version.

are pronounced differently each time we hear them. However, these are mere quibbles.

Most egregious is the interpretive framework the filmmaker has imposed on those powerful moving images. *China Yellow*, *China Blue* refers to shifting sets of dichotomies: traditional/modern, indigenous/foreign (read Western), inward focused/outward looking, past/present, backward/progressive, China of the interior/China of the coast, rural/urban. Aside from questions about the choice of colors (the soil of north China is yellow, but why is the urban coast blue?), these polarities are problematic throughout the first half, “The Time of Troubles,” providing what is all too often stereotypic and orientalized views of modern Chinese history. China and its culture are old and static (peasants on the North China plain joined with views—again!—of bound feet); the Western-influenced coast is cultured and modern (jazz singing in “dear old Shanghai”). Chinese traditions are violent and virulent (images of executions again and again, this time drawn out and in motion rather than the standard poised knife or already severed head); Westerners bring progress and enlightenment (Stillwell and his troops, Western banks and businesses on Shanghai’s Bund).

Worse yet is that these dualities are not maintained throughout the film. By 1949, China yellow and China blue are joined by a jolt of red, and China Red becomes the dominant metaphor. The filmmaker, however, drops the color imagery entirely, and the second part of the film, “The People’s Republic of China,” turns into a catalogue of campaigns, factional fighting, cold war politics, and the story of a wary China securing its frontiers in all directions—West with Tibet, North against the USSR, East towards Taiwan and Korea, South to Indochina. Even odder, to this reviewer, is that in spite of the film’s 1998 date, there is only a nod to the extraordinary changes since the mid-1980s and almost nothing of the changes of the early 1990s which allowed for a spurt of economic growth and international investment in China Blue, creating anew the wide gap between the interior and the coastal cities that played so prominent a role in the first half of the film. The filmmaker races preemptorily through the Deng era, summing up its record with the broad brush of “bureaucratic capitalism,” with China’s political hierarchy left largely intact and its future open to speculation, part of a China whose “destiny nobody knows.”

My last concern is with the film’s English language version. I have not seen the French version, but translating and transforming

a film from one language to another should be done completely, not just piecemeal. Key maps and other visuals kept in the original French are not helpful to English-reading viewers. Furthermore, I would assume that many of the visuals were accompanied by sound tracks which are sorely missed, replaced by only the narrator’s voice. As with so much else about this film, the promise and potential of the visuals is diminished by what were presumably cost-cutting measures.

Yet the film does contain stunning images, many of which are unavailable elsewhere, and there are few films which so succinctly cover the century’s events. If you elect to use it for these reasons alone, I would suggest turning off the sound and narrating it yourself. Or, do what I experimented with—turn the sound off and have students produce a time line themselves, identifying the events in the film and interpreting their significance. Otherwise, I would suggest waiting until the filmmakers of *China Yellow*, *China Blue* produce a significantly revised English version. ■

SUE GRONEWOLD, in the History Department at Kean University, teaches courses in Chinese, Asian, and Women’s History. Her book, *Beautiful Merchandise: Prostitution in China, 1870–1936*, was published by Haworth Press, and she is completing a manuscript on the *Door of Hope*, a rescue mission in Shanghai and then Taipei from 1900–76.

10 of China's best-loved traditional melodies rendered in western jazz idiom. Songs include Nanniwan, Yi Meng Mountain, Sanshilipu Village, Embroidered Pouch, Kangding Village Lovesong, Little Cabbage and others. Instrumentation: piano, guitar, saxophone, flute, acoustic bass, trombone, trumpet, drums, and vocals sung in both English and Chinese. Lyrics printed in English, Chinese and Pinyin.

"an ambitious project that works as intended...songs are Chinese folk classics, melodies remain intact, but the execution is pure jazz..."
- San Antonio Express-News

"an Epicurean delight to the ears...beautifully interprets thematic folksongs through the universal language of melodious instrumentation"
- San Antonio Current

"glides from English to Chinese with a buttery smoothness that belies years of commitment to both the jazz idiom and the Mandarin tongue... the sound achieved is an organic creation, fertilized by years of living in China, of listening to and singing jazz tunes."
- virtualchina.com



To order CD, please remit US\$17.00 for each copy to:
Bridges East West • P.O. Box 954 • San Antonio, Texas, USA 78294-0954
Bank and/or personal checks or money orders accepted. Mailing and handling costs included.