

## FILM REVIEWS

benefit considerably from some previous exposure to modern China's history, and especially some familiarity at least with major events since 1949. The videos would therefore best fit as a series into an advanced secondary or, preferably, into a college course or adult discussion series concentrating on China or East Asia, although the series or individual episodes might fruitfully serve in a variety of courses in a number of specific social science disciplines as well.

The recent books, *China Wakes*, by Nicolas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn (Times Books, 1994), and *Mandate of Heaven*, by Orville Schell (Simon & Schuster, 1994), would make ideal complementary reading to accompany this series, since many of the changes and themes examined in these two insightful volumes are beautifully exemplified in the videos. Nicolas Kristof in fact appears in three of the four episodes as one of the foreign experts interviewed (although, unfortunately, his name is misspelled—with two f's—in the subtitles).

The only general drawback worth pointing out in a work otherwise so admirably put together is a tendency toward oversimplification and even exaggeration on some historical points, though this can perhaps be forgiven in a work striving to cover so much ground. Among the few factual errors detected is that Tianjin (mentioned in the third episode) is not a province, but a municipality. ■

Roland L. Higgins

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## Electric Shadows

DIRECTED BY HERVE COHEN AND RENAUD COHEN

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1993. 26 minutes. Color

Scholars of contemporary China are only now beginning to explore the role of the media in social, cultural, and political change in post-Mao China. This is the theme of the film *Electric Shadows*, set in the rural heartland of Sichuan province. Taking its title from the Chinese term for cinema, *dianying*, this well-crafted documentary follows a team of three itinerant film projectionists as

they travel by bicycle and foot from village to village. They carry with them a makeshift screen, a film and a slide projector, and the films selected by the cinema bureau of Xiuwen Commune, the educational *The Growing of Oranges*, and the popular martial arts classic *The Revenge of Mount Tai Shan*. We learn little of the history of this commune, for the focus is on the itinerant projectionists them-

selves. Earlier in the film—in one of the film's rare didactic moments—they pass a household where a group of people have gathered to watch television. We are asked to look at the television through the eyes of the projectionists, as though the television itself was a force against which they worked. The television set is quickly left behind, and the viewer is drawn into the drama of a profession now seemingly threatened by the arrival of this and other forms of popular cultural entertainment.

Images of village life and of the slow meandering of the film team through the countryside predominate. We watch county government bureaucrats sip tea and discuss the ideological content of Hong Kong films. In another scene, we watch the team push their bikes through a busy market town; in another, after they've



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climbed a steep hill to reach yet another village, we stop with them as they catch their breath. Voice-over narration is used only minimally in *Electric Shadows*. For example, we learn at the outset that the origins of traveling cinema in China date back to 1949, when the newly established communist state used film and projected slide images as an instrument of propaganda. The political function of these itinerant film teams has been greatly reduced under the reforms, in part because many feature films no longer contain explicit ideological messages, in part because the Communist Party is no longer paying the bill. Yet education, we are told, remains an essential part of the public film ritual. Before each screening, we see how slide images are used to inform the villagers of current governmental policies. Slogans in bold print appear on the screen: "It's forbidden to use electricity for fish and rat trapping." "Men must not marry before twenty-five and women before twenty-three." "One child per family." These are wonderful cinematic moments in the film. Through the use of wide camera pans and the occasional close-up, they provide the viewer with a realistic sense of the moment, as the villagers sit spellbound by the projected propaganda and yet seem eager for the real show to begin. Later in the film, the voice-over narration returns to inform us that rich peasants now hire the projectionists for festivals and private ceremonies, such as weddings. We witness the price negotiation for the rental of the films and soon join into the banquet festivities where (mostly) men are toasting each other and exchanging cigarettes.

Anyone who has traveled, lived, or worked in the Chinese countryside will recognize in these scenes something of the rhythm and ritual of rural life. This, of course, is the power and

appeal of this kind of realist documentary approach: the viewer is provided with an illusory sense of being there. But these scenes—the faces of adults and children watching a film at night, price negotiations, the exchange of cigarettes, and the arduous movement of a bicycle through hilly terrain—also provide possibilities for fruitful classroom discussion. One can raise issues about birth control policy and its effects; about bureaucratic modes of sociality; about the relationship between education and propaganda in the Chinese socialist and post-socialist context; and about the changing role of party ideological work under the reforms. The sparse ethnographic style of *Electric Shadows* can also provide debate on the filmmakers themselves: are they nostalgic about the passing of this form of itinerant film work? Does the film provide a critical perspective on television and other forms of media under the reforms? Should more information be provided about the historical role of film in political indoctrination and the ever-present issue of film censorship?

This is thus a useful film for courses examining social and cultural change in the People's Republic of China. It is especially appropriate for courses that look explicitly at the intersection between the media and the state. ■

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