

## FILM REVIEWS

Ronald Levaco, a member of the Department of Cinema at San Francisco State University, spent over six years producing his autobiographical video, *Round Eyes in the Middle Kingdom*. He has assimilated his father Ben's extraordinary black-and-white movies and still shots of pre-Revolutionary China with historical footage and with interviews Ronald conducted in the 1990s with Israel Epstein. "Eppy," Ben's boyhood friend in Tianjin, became a revolutionary and remained in China in 1949 when the Levacos emigrated to the United States.

From beginning to end, the video is as much about immigration to the United States as it is about China. The Levaco family originated in Russia. According to Ronald, his father "saw China as a refuge on his way to the United States." Ben found employment in Tianjin with a Chicago-based firm. The family lived in opulence in the foreign concessions while awaiting their American passage, a voyage delayed until 1949 by the Japanese invasion of China.

The Levacos ultimately reach Chicago. Ronald matriculates at an unnamed American college where he becomes involved in "the protests of the sixties." He tells the viewer that "those of us who struggled against the administration for reforms identified ourselves with revolutionaries. But I wasn't able to submit to the rigid leadership even of the student movement I worked in and supported. Instead, I threaded my

## Round Eyes in the Middle Kingdom

A FILM BY RONALD LEVACO

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1995, 52 MINUTES  
VHS VIDEO, COLOR AND BLACK-AND-WHITE FOOTAGE  
PLUS BLACK-AND-WHITE STILL SHOTS.

own path through a California college strike."

As part of his quest to define his American social consciousness, he then examines his Chinese roots. Much of the video is devoted to Epstein's life, because "Eppy and my dad lived in such different Chinas. I needed . . . to reconcile our unforgettable dream life in the concessions with the other China, the China we round eyes were willing to ignore and leave and Eppy wasn't . . . Ever since my *amah* (Chinese nanny) took me through the passage into the Chinese world, I think I've always longed for Epstein's 'I' within the 'we.'"

It is unclear what conclusions Ronald has drawn about social activism based on the glimpse into Chinese life given to him by his *amah* and by his comparison of the careers of his father and Epstein. Epstein suffered greatly in the Cultural Revolution but remains unbittered toward China. Is Ronald therefore more or less committed as an activist? Is he, like the Soviet Communists, disdainful of Maoism as "a social-

ist revolution gone awry?" Has he rejected socialism altogether? Since the viewer is left in the dark as to why Ronald became disenchanted with aspects of social activism in the 1960s, it is even harder to discern what he has learned by his more recent investigation of family history.

While this beautifully photographed documentary may have great sentimental significance for the Levaco family, it has limited utility in the social science classroom. The viewer is teased and then left guessing as to the resolution of Ronald's personal quest. Epstein's story, including his imprisonment during the Cultural Revolution, has been told elsewhere. His piece, "On Being a Jew in China," delineates the cultural richness, diversity, and pathos of Jewish life in pre-revolutionary China: the Yiddish newspaper in Harbin for which his father wrote; the multiple ideologies within the Jewish community, ranging from Epstein's Bolshevism to varieties of Zionism and religiosity; the ever-present danger of anti-Semitism emanating from Czarist Russian

sympathizers in Tianjin, Shanghai and the Manchurian railway cities.

The Epsteins, and presumably the Levacos, were present in China during the notorious anti-Semitic kidnapping and murder of the Russian-Jewish pianist Simon Kasse in Harbin in the 1930s and the Hailar pogrom of 1945. Yet these aspects of Chinese Jewish life do not appear in Ronald Levaco's account, wherein the only images we have of Jews in China are as rich capitalists or revolutionaries. Epstein's much more comprehensive portrait was presented in 1992 as a lecture at Harvard University. It was published in Israel in 1995 in the *Bulletin* of the Igud Yotzei Sin and in my book, *The Jews of China* (Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1999).

Most importantly from a pedagogical point of view, the complex historical questions of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, for Marxists and non-Marxists, for Westerners and Chinese, as suggested above, are only glossed over in this video. Those questions are analyzed in the extensive and readily available publications of Roderick MacFarquhar, Stuart Schram, Merle Goldman, Christina Gilmartin, and others. Those four scholars in particular have made those issues their life work. ■

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