

WHY WOULD AN AMERICAN PRISONER OF WAR (POW) CHOOSE TO SWITCH SIDES IN WARTIME?

What factors would explain such a decision? In his recently released film, director Shuibo Wang attempts to answer these and many other questions. In his thought-provoking documentary, *They Chose China*, Wang forces the film's view-

ers to take a long, hard look at their own biases and assumptions regarding the Cold War, American society, and the United Nations' "police action" in Korea.

The film highlights the actions of a handful of American soldiers captured by Chinese forces during the Korean War. As part of the cease-fire agreement, POWs on both sides were allowed to choose the country of their repatriation. Twenty-one Americans decided to live in the People's Republic of China rather than return to their homes in the United States. Although they represented only a tiny fraction of the total POW population, their decisions dumbfounded most Americans.

Rather than provide an overview of all twenty-one POWs, the documentary focuses on the lives of David Hawkins, Clarence Adams, and James Veneris. Hawkins is perhaps the most typical and the most predictable. Only sixteen years old when he enlisted in the army, Hawkins was undoubtedly idealistic and impressionable. Proudly wearing the label of "peace fighter," he spoke out against alleged American imperialism and aggression. Nevertheless, after remaining in China for only three years, he asked to return to the United States. Of the three main subjects, Hawkins is the only one still alive. His recollections are moving and heartfelt.

Whereas Hawkins was idealistic, Clarence Adams was realistic. As a young black man growing up in Memphis, Adams was well aware of pervasive racism then present in American society. By contrast, China offered him a new life in what he hoped would be a more tolerant culture. Yet,

THEY CHOSE CHINA

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like Hawkins, Adams eventually returned to his home country, accompanied by his Chinese wife and children. Suffering under the label of "turn-coat," Adams spent the remainder of his life operating a chop-suey restaurant in Memphis, while his children grew up resentful of continuing racism in America.

UNLIKE HAWKINS AND ADAMS, JAMES VENERIS remained in China for the rest of his

life. He married, had children, worked in a factory, died, and was buried in his adopted homeland. He firmly rejected the militarism that he considered to be embedded in American society, consciously refashioning himself as a cultural hybrid. Of all the POWs, Veneris is the most intriguing.

Before showing the film to my students, I separated them into small groups and asked them to discuss several questions such as: Why would an American GI switch sides during war? What characteristics, attributes, or experiences would influence such a decision? If you could speak to one of these individuals, what questions would you ask him? I had them write down their answers and submit them. Then, after the film ended, we addressed these same questions as a class. Some of their pre-viewing answers were quite prescient. Others were fanciful and implausible. Regardless, the post-viewing discussion demonstrated that, for most students, the film raised and answered many questions they had not previously considered.

THIS FILM WILL BE IMMENSELY BENEFICIAL FOR EDUCATORS teaching about Chinese history, communism, 1950s America, or international relations. Shuibo Wang has created a challenging and thought-provoking film that will force students to reevaluate many of their assumptions about both China and America. ■



Clarence Adams and his family.
Source: National Film Board of Canada ©2006



A young James Veneris and his wife.
Source: National Film Board of Canada ©2006



James Veneris and his wife later in their lives.
Source: National Film Board of Canada ©2006

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