

All Weak-kneed and Bureaucratic Thinking—OUT!

*Joris Ivens interviewed by Martin Even**

In 1949 the People's Republic of China took over, without any changes, the set-up inherited from the Chiang Kai-shek period and the period of Japanese occupation and semi-colonialism. The studios and cinemas were nationalised.

How was Chinese cinema organised at this time?

Chinese cinema first saw the light of day in Yen-an in 1938. The revolutionary film-makers went into battle against the Japanese and Chiang Kai-shek armed with their cameras. These films were shown after the take-over in 1949 in cinemas which up till then had only shown American films. The Central Studio for Documentaries and Newsreels in Peking was established in 1953 by these film-makers from the liberated zones who constituted a minority. There they were joined by a younger generation, now in their thirties and forties, who had taken up the struggle just before or just after Liberation, and technicians and film-makers from the Kuomintang studios. The studio in Peking, like those in Canton, Shanghai, Shenyang and Sian, is a large one. Each studio has several departments, for fiction films, newsreels, documentaries and animation. Before the Cultural Revolution each section functioned in isolation with its own rigid administrative hierarchy.

The Peking studio for documentaries and newsreels, which is the one I know best, was established in 1953 and as in many other industries, administration and production were modelled on Soviet lines. For instance, a system of production bonuses was instituted. This

meant that producers working on a foreign language copy of a film earned a bonus on every reel, in addition to their salary. This resulted in producers losing sight of the real purpose of their work and concentrating instead on quantity and market value.

Producers and editors were only interested in their own social success and prestige. Their high standard of living and their exclusive clique existence away from the problems of the masses cut them off from 90 per cent of the population.

Liu Shao-chi was all in favour of this state of affairs—the re-appearance of a new privileged class was the pre-requisite to ousting the working class from power. With the Mayor of Peking, Peng Chen, he saw to it that the studios produced films to enhance their reputation. Under the management of this 'bourgeois high command' three of the four full-length films produced in 1962 were works inspired by them. These dealt with ancient architecture, the imperial city of Peking, and the life of a famous actor in the Peking Opera. Only one dealt with the then crucial problem of the Sino-Indian conflict. Shorts were affected in the same way: *A Rainbow in Mankind*, *The Four Seasons*, *A Study of Lights* . . . The studios were required

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He recently returned to the People's Republic of China with Marceline Loidan. He talks here of the new departure taken by Chinese cinema during the Cultural Revolution.

(By Courtesy of *Le Monde*)

to produce films specifically for export, such as *Dance of the Fish*, *The Tea House*, *Why Tortoises Sulk*.

These examples show just how real was the struggle up to the Cultural Revolution. While these films were being made, others, on workers and peasants and the struggle of the Chinese people, were just not made.

All this, and the producers and editors, the 'gentlemen' film-makers, came under criticism during the Cultural Revolution. Under their orders the workers were not able to have their say. The 'gentlemen' were only interested in working for their own prestige. Art was their own property and their films were made for their own pleasure and without a thought for workers, peasants and soldiers. Like the workers and peasants, the studio workers could only handle tools and not the pen. Ninety per cent of them kept quiet. Before the Cultural Revolution a producer was never seen carrying a reel of film. One of them whom I've known for a number of years said to me: 'During the Cultural Revolution I came in for a good deal of criticism and it did me a lot of good. I came down from my pedestal. Still, in 1936 at the age of 16, I became involved in the struggle and with my camera took part in quite a few battles against the Japanese and Chiang Kai-shek. After 1949 I just rested on my laurels. I thought that that was it! The responsibilities I took on seemed to me richly deserved. I was attracted by ideas of the good life and gradually I let myself be influenced and drawn along. I had forgotten the fundamental question—Who is to be served through Art—the workers and peasants or the bourgeoisie? Now I'm living my young days again.'

In film studios, as in the universities and factories, everything has been turned upside down. The masses have helped the cadres transform their thinking about the world and to rid themselves of their selfish attitudes. It's been possible to re-educate most of them.

In the Peking studio for documentaries and newsreels a revolutionary committee was formed in 1968. It is made up of studio and laboratory workers, technicians and cadres, representatives nominated by the masses, and removable by them. This is the triple union, put into practice everywhere by the Cultural Revolution. The administrative structures have been simplified. The committee is at one and the same time an administrative and political organ. The

separation between State and Party has been done away with. The other triple union is one of generations—the youngsters, adults and older generations all work together.

With these new structures, how is a film made?

The political, ideological, and economic problems which have to be met in the struggle for the building of socialism are gone over. The theme of a film is chosen for its educational and instructional value at a given moment of the political struggle in China. It is never just a question of working up enthusiasm but of explaining mistakes and set-backs and learning the appropriate lessons from them. Recently for instance a film has been made with a philosophical theme—the application of a dialectical approach to the preservation of tomatoes.

Three main principles guide the film-makers in their work. Firstly, autonomy and responsibility. Once created the film team should be autonomous. In a way it becomes a political unit, a responsible political body. All weak-kneed and bureaucratic thinking must be got rid of. A team should be able to decide to go here, rather than there, even to stop shooting. Chou En-lai himself has told film-makers to adopt a courageous attacking posture and to take up the challenge of responsibility. Secondly, work is done collectively. Now, a team is made up of producer and technicians, but everyone, without exception, participates in planning and producing the film. At the studio, all the workers, even the ones in the canteen, add their bit.

The producer is there but he is not a bit like a producer over here. Of course his job is to provide an overall view of the film at any given moment, just as it is over here, but with the difference that he has to take into account everybody's viewpoint. Not only must he have an overall picture of the film but above all, and ever present in his mind, he must have an overall picture of the political struggle which is going on at that time. Finally, he is accountable, in every sense of the word, to the film team, to the studio workers and studio management, and, most importantly of all, to prospective audiences, for the film.

A film is not the property of the producer. The scenario and production of a film are not products of his mind alone, or of his personal

preferences and intuitions. The film is made in close collaboration with those who are going to be filmed, the workers and peasants. For the film on the preservation of tomatoes the film team went to live with the workers at the relevant vegetable distribution centre, living with them in the true sense of the word, helping with transportation, unloading, cooking, housework . . . Shooting lasted a long time. Each scene shot with the workers was shown to them, discussed, shot a second time and so on. As the woman producer told us, the film was made completely under the guidance of the workers.

A further result of all these changes is that important modifications have been made in procedural technique. Previously teams were over-manned and the strict demarcation of technical jobs required narrow specialisations. Only 35 mm film was used. Everything was very cumbersome and bureaucratic. Today the film teams are small and a start has been made in using synchronous 16 mm film. Big changes have taken place in studio administration. The five managerial posts which gave absolute power to the general manager, the administrative manager, the technical manager, the production manager and chief editor have been done away with, along with a hundred other posts filled by section heads, and the thirty departments under their orders. Today the leading group is made up of five people, each assisted by three others

from the departments of production, administration, political affairs, and finance.

Before the Cultural Revolution one man alone decided on what was to be done with a film. Today a group of cadres, operators, workers and producers, elected by the studio workers, judge the quality of a film and decide on future films. This group is accountable both to the workers and the leading group.

The leading group considers the point of view, not necessarily unanimous, of this group and puts it to the studio workers as a whole. On the basis of the view expressed by all the workers the leading group then makes a decision on the film.

How are the films distributed?

All the cinemas are open. Tickets are very cheap, only a fifth of a *yuan*. During my last trip they were showing Vietnamese, Korean and Palestinian films. Two or three thousand copies are made on 35 mm, 16 mm, and even 8 mm. The films are distributed throughout the country, in towns and villages and mountainous regions. Mobile teams are moving about from place to place all the time. Sometimes they even use a bicycle to drive the generator.

But don't think they are satisfied with the system and think of leaving it as it is. They are aware of its shortcomings. For them, this is only the first step. . . .

A Doctor on the Ulan Chap Grassland

Chen Li-hua, a midwife of the Tientsin Central Maternity Hospital, came with her family to the Ulan Chap Grassland in Inner Mongolia and settled in the Tumuerhai area in August 1970. When she first went to work in the local hospital, she had many difficulties. She was not accustomed to the life there, and there was a language barrier. The hospital leadership and poor and lower-middle herdsmen took good care of her and her family. She was determined to implement Chairman Mao's proletarian line in medical and health work and serve the local people well.

After having saved a child late one night, Chen Li-hua was asked to see another woman who had been in difficult labour for three days. Chen found that the baby was dead and she had to take measures to save the mother. The child was removed, but the mother was in a coma because of hemorrhage and exhaustion. Chen gave her injections and blood and saline transfusions. When the patient regained consciousness on the afternoon of the second day, she found Chen had stayed at her side right through.

At this time, some one said that a poor herdsman was running a high fever after childbirth and was in critical condition. Chen, already very tired, offered to go and treat her. Comrades around urged her to rest, but she refused. She took up her medical kit and left.

It was snowing heavily and every step forward was difficult. When Chen Li-hua came to the patient's home, it was late at night. The patient was in a coma. Emergency treatment and nursing saved the patient. She took Chen's hands in hers and said with gratitude: 'You are really a good doctor sent by Chairman Mao!'