

AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES FIELD STAFF

"ART OF MASS CHARACTER" - MOTION PICTURES IN COMMUNIST CHINA

A Letter From A, Doak **Barnett**

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Moviegoers interested in the fairer sex have a variety of films to choose from in Hong Kong this week.

At the Lee Theatre, Jane Russell dances in **technicolor** and 3-D; the movie is called "**The French Line.**" The "**giant wide**" Cinemascope screen at the Oriental Theatre is dominated by Marilyn Monroe, Betty Grable and Lauren **Bacall** who demonstrate, also in **technicolor**, "**How To Marry a Millionaire.**" The Star Theatre outdoes the others by showing a film starring ten young women, but its current attraction, called "**Woman Locomotive Driver,**" is strictly black-and-white and two-dimensional,

"**Woman Locomotive Driver,**" imported from the Chinese **Communist** mainland, might well have been given another title by its Shanghai producers. Either "**The Party Line**" or "**How To Become A Locomotive Driver**" would have been appropriate. It is doubtful, however, if a change of title alone could add much in the way of color or dimension to the moralistic political propaganda of the story itself.

The story of "**Woman Locomotive Driver**" is representative of the general run of films now being produced in **Communist** China. Hailed as "**a heroic story of New China's first women locomotive drivers,**" it attempts to fulfill the aims of **China's** reorganized movie industry, as defined by leaders in Peking.

"**Our cinema,**" stated an editorial of the Peking People's Daily early this year, "**has in the main followed Comrade Mao Tse-tung's** guidance on literature and art. It reflects the life and struggle of the laboring people, manifests their noble spirit and quality, and correctly explains the purpose of life to the **people.**" **Entertainment** is subordinated to "**education,**" and art is sacrificed to politics and morals.

Mao Tse-tung defined the basic purpose of all Chinese **Communist** literature and art over ten years ago, in a speech made during 1942. This purpose, he said, is to "become a constructive part of the whole revolutionary **machine**" and to be "**a powerful weapon for uniting and educating the people and for crushing and destroying the enemy.**"

During the past four years, the political arbiters of art and morals in **Communist China** have **attempted energetically to remould** the motion picture industry into a **political "weapon"** of their **"revolutionary machine."** Rigid standards of orthodoxy for themes, plots and characters have been defined, and production has been brought under the quota system. Fitting the creative talents of **artists** and entertainers into a tight political strait **jacket** is not without its difficulties, however, and the movie industry in China has undergone a steady decline as a result of stifling controls. Official reports indicate that despite the importance placed upon films as a major propaganda medium, the motion picture industry in **Communist China** now encounters difficulty producing a dozen or so movies such as **"Woman Locomotive Driver"** each year,

Morals - But "No Plot." Two years ago a close friend and I wrote a story outline for a motion **picture** and after considerable effort induced a producer to read it. We waited eagerly while the **man** went over the story and then sat back to hear his reaction. When it came, we were momentarily stunned; the producer **summed** up his reaction in two words: **"no plot."** He was exaggerating, but he was essentially correct,

Since seeing **Woman Locomotive Driver,"** however, I have become less defensive about the shortcomings of the plot of our **story.** The script-writers of **"Woman Locomotive Driver"** seem to have **made** almost no effort to develop a plot. Their story simply takes a situation and elaborates it in a series of incidents,

The story of **"Woman Locomotive Driver"** describes how several young Chinese volunteers were trained to become the first women locomotive engineers in China. The setting is a technical school established in Dairen, during 1949, by the Chinese **Communis**t with the help of Soviet advisors.

The principal heroine of the story is a girl named Sun, who is not very bright but is admirably eager and hard-working and aspires to be a labor model. She is one of ten girls taking the training course. Another one of the ten, named **Fung**, is the closest **thing** to a villain in the piece; she is extremely bright but is proud and self-centered.

The other main characters are all administrators or teachers **in** the school: Lu, an old-time railway man whose job is to teach the girls how to shovel coal; **"little Chiang,"** a **smiling** young railway worker who assists in the teaching; Kao, a technical **instructor** on locomotives; Sedov, Soviet advisor at the school; and the Communist Party school administrator.

The story begins with the girls trying to learn how to shovel coal. They are awkward, and Lu, the old-timer, is convinced that **woman's** place is in the home - or at least not in locomotive cabs. Sun and several of her classmates are in danger of **flunking** coal-shovelling, but **"little Chiang"** comes to the rescue. Late at

night, **Chiang** teaches Sun the technique of shovelling, and Sun, elated, wakes up two of her friends and teaches them.

The next crisis occurs when the girls start studying the workings of a locomotive. Kao, the technician, explains locomotives to the class, but all the girls except Fung are mystified. Although Kao is discouraged, the Soviet advisor, Sedov, hits upon a solution. Sedov proposes that they build a simple mechanical model of a locomotive, and he and Kao stay up all night working on it, so that it will be ready for class the following day.

The mechanical model helps a great deal, and almost all the girls learn enough to pass their examination. But not Sun; she flunks. Kao, although sympathetic, advises her to try some other work, and Sun is crushed. She broods on her cot in the barracks and stares at pictures of labor heroines on the wall. Finally, she determines not to give up.

The Party administrator of the school, who sits with a portrait of Mao Tse-tung behind him and a bust of Mao at his side, listens to Sun's plea for another chance and is moved. Her attitude of struggling to overcome all difficulties is the right approach, he says, and Sun is given another chance.

During the next month Sedov and all the girls, except Fung, pitch in and help Sun. Then comes her make-up exam. Everyone gathers around to watch, tensely, as Sun works over a model locomotive. A clock ticks off the minutes, and for a while it looks as if Sun will fail again. But at the last moment she is able to repair the model, and everyone cheers. This is really the emotional climax of the film.

From classwork, the girls graduate to field training on locomotives of the Dairen-Port Arthur line. They start as firemen, and Lu is in charge. Lu's skepticism about women is at first confirmed when Fung, the brightest girl in the group, is careless, wastes coal and delays the locomotive by her slow oiling, but he begins to change his attitude when he sees how hard-working and conscientious Sun is.

Finally, the girls take, and pass, exams in solo runs as locomotive engineers. A huge celebration, which coincides with New Year, follows, and there is dancing, singing and congratulations all around. The ten girls show their gratitude to Sedov by presenting him with a group picture, but he tells them that he deserves no personal thanks, that he is merely a representative of the Soviet Union and its aid to the Chinese people. The party ends when Fung and Sun challenge each other to labor competition.

The dramatic high point of the movie comes when the girls make their first actual run between Dairen and Port Arthur. Fung is at the throttle, and she sets a fast pace. It is too fast,

and too careless. When a **peasant's** cart, which has broken down on the tracks, looms up, she is paralyzed and **can't** move, but Sun steps into the breach. The train is stopped (while the audience cheers wildly), the cart is moved, and the train moves on.

The picture ends with the **girls'** formal **graduation** ceremony. They line up, holding bouquets of flowers, in front of three festooned locomotives bearing portraits of Mao. Then they scramble onto the locomotives and move off under a hail of flowers. The sides of the locomotives are emblazoned with large placards bearing inscriptions such as "**Oppose aggression.**"

This brief story outline indicates the barren simplicity of the theme, The actual production, however, shows some skill. The photography is quite **good**, and the acting acceptable. The characters are extremely **shallow** stereotypes, but at times they seem human, and the girls do not entirely lack feminine charm, The deadly earnestness is relieved at two or three points by light touches of humor.

"**Woman Locomotive Driver**," however, is basically neither art nor entertainment. It is a political morality **play**, designed to teach the audience some of the standards and values propagated by the Chinese **Communist** regime. Perhaps the most important ideas which it glorifies are: the equality of women, the dignity of labor (particularly manual **labor**), and the importance of struggling to overcome difficulties. It also glorifies machines, Soviet advisors, and model workers, Criticism is directed at self-centeredness, **carelessness**, and conservative clinging to old ideas, while hard work, simple life, **perseverance** and patience are praised. Determination and group **cooperation** are elevated above individual brilliance. These are all values which the Chinese Communists believe are essential if the Party and State are to carry out their program of collectivism.

It is interesting that although the stars of "**Woman Locomotive Driver**" are ten young women, there is not one trace of romance in the film. Romance is not considered important in a society dedicated to "**socialist industrialization.**"

The Ghost of A Beggar Named Wu Hsun. The Chinese Communist motion picture industry which produced this film is currently undergoing a serious crisis due to the intimidation and stifling of creative talent caused by stringent political controls. Last December the Peking **regime's** Government Administration (cabinet) held a meeting to discuss the crisis, and in January it released a document admitting that a "**serious** shortage of film **scripts**" has created a situation in which "**both** the quantity and quality of the films presently produced are inadequate to cope with the demand of the broad **masses.**"

The main cause of this situation has been the effect upon the Chinese Communist **movie** industry of the furore over a **film** called "**The Story of Wu Hsun**" in 1951.

"The Story of Wu Hsun" was a movie produced in 1950 by some of **China's** leading film artists. It had its premiere in Shanghai on the last day of 1950 and received wide praise. By April, however, Party-controlled organs began to criticize the movie, and by May a tremendous campaign of **"ideological education"** centered on the movie had begun. This campaign lasted for over a month, during which time the Chinese Communist press devoted primary attention to the film, and many magazines published special issues on the case,

"The Story of Wu Hsun" was about an **actual 19th-century** figure in China **who** started as a beggar, decided to devote his life to establishing schools for poor children, and adopted **"begging to set up a school"** as a personal slogan. **Eventually,** through begging and **moneylending** he became a landlord and was able to set up several schools. He was well known **and** widely admired in China.

The film produced in 1950 portrayed Wu Hsun in a very favorable light, but before the 1951 campaign against the film was completed, Wu Hsun had been thoroughly **denounced** in **Communist** China as a feudalistic moneylender and landlord, a nonproletarian rogue who depended **upon** support from wealthy gentry and officials, and a nonrevolutionary **"capitulationist."** The producers of **"The Story of Wu Hsun"** were bitterly **chastised** for their ideological **backwardness** in producing a favorable movie about him.

The effects of this campaign **upon** the motion picture industry in **Communist** China were paralyzing, and the ghost of Wu Hsun still hangs over film-writers in China.

"Centralized Examination" and Declining Production. During the past three years, political control of movies produced in Communist China has been steadily tightened, and a **Government** Administration Council directive of January this year prescribes a detailed system of complete Party and Government control.

Top responsibility for planning and supervising the motion picture industry in China rests with the Cinema Bureau of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, and this agency coordinates the work of several other organizations. The planning of stories, and the organization of writers to produce specific scripts, is done by the Cinema Bureau, with the help of the Union of Chinese Writers and local Federations of Literary **and** Art Circles. A general four-year plan has already been outlined, and this is filled in with specific one-year plans which are more detailed.

During the planning of stories and the organization of script-writing, assistance and guidance is obtained from relevant government departments, the Political Department of the army, the trade unions and the Youth Corps, whose advice is necessary **to** ensure that the films will be **"a vigorous propaganda medium,"**

After scripts are completed, the Cinema Bureau gives them a "**strict preliminary examination**" and then passes them on to the Ministry of Cultural Affairs for further "**examination and approval.**" Only then can shooting begin.

During the actual production process, the Cinema Bureau must subject the shooting to "**strict** scrutiny, so as to ensure that no major revision will be needed when the film is **completed.**" Final approval must be given by the Bureau before any film is released.

In addition to this step-by-step control, exercised by **government** agencies, the Communist Party maintains an additional censorship check. The annual plan for film stories, and "**the** scripts or shooting programs of films of major political significance," must be submitted to the Propaganda Department of the **Communist** Party for examination.

It is not surprising that centralized political control of this sort plus planning of stories and supervision of scripts have discouraged creativeness on the part of **the** movie industry in China.

"**The** crucial problem of present film work," says a recent editorial in the Peking People's Daily, "**is** to increase the **number** of feature films and to elevate **their** quality. During the past four years, the production state of our film enterprise has been unsatisfactory. **Work** had to be partially suspended by the film studios because there were no films to shoot. Many directors and actors and actresses had for prolonged periods no chance to show themselves, while the audience complained of the small number of new **films.**"

The exact output of feature films in **Communist** China during recent years is obscure, due to conflicting official claims, but it is clear that the figure is remarkably low. According to one recent statement, only 15 **features** were completed in all of mainland China during 1952, and last year the total dropped to ten. Production plans for this year call for only 13 feature films. (As a basis for comparison, the tiny colony of Hong Kong alone produced 188 feature films in the Chinese language last year.)

Film Fare in 1953. The ten feature movies produced in **Communist** China during 1953 were not the total fare presented to Chinese audiences. They were supplemented by numerous Soviet-bloc films, dubbed with Chinese subtitles, and a few newsreels, documentaries and other shorts put out by the Chinese themselves.

Over 40 Russian and satellite films were dubbed and circulated through China during 1953 alone, and the total during the past four years has been over 200 - several times the number of Chinese movies produced and shown during the same period. These Soviet-bloc **films** have taken over the entire **market** for

foreign films in China, since **"nonprogressive"** Western movies have been banned.

The production of various types of shorts and features in Communist China during 1953 included ten full-length and 16 short documentaries, a weekly Chinese newsreel and semiweekly international newsreel, and ten scientific-education films. All of these were even more frankly **"educational"** than features such as **"Woman Locomotive Driver."** The newsreels were produced as **"visual political essays,"** and the scientific-education films, called **"visual popular talks,"** were about subjects such as child-birth, exercise and health, train operation, eclipses, water conservancy, insect pests, zoological gardens, splenic fever, food and nourishment, and science and technique. The ten full-length documentaries included **"Stalin Will Live Forever in Our Hearts," "Resist America and Aid Korea,"** and **"The Great Land Reform."** The closest approach to pure entertainment was in **"Ballads and Dances"** and **"Puppet Show of South Fukien."**

This is all that was provided to over 750 movie theatres and roughly 2,000 mobile projection teams throughout China during 1953. It was pretty meagre fare,

"Organized Creation" and Production Plans, Last month, the Chinese **Communists'** 4th National Cultural Work Conference was held in Peking, and it placed great emphasis on **"the importance of organizing creation in the fields of cinema and drama."** Apparently, the political authorities are finding it necessary to apply pressure on writers in order to fulfill even the limited production quotas specified for the years **immediately** ahead.

The current four-year plan for the motion picture industry, announced by the Government Administration Council early this year, sets surprisingly low goals for movie producers during the remainder of **China's** much-publicized Five Year Plan. The annual quota is 12 to 15 full-length features (plus a few special features for villagers, children, etc.), 10 full-length documentaries, over 20 short documentaries, 15 scientific-education films, and a weekly newsreel. The plan also specified that every year Soviet-bloc films and **"progressive films of the capitalist countries"** dubbed in Chinese should be **"equal in number to the Chinese films produced."**

The content of the films already planned is very similar to the morality play pattern so well illustrated by **"Woman Locomotive Driver."** The 13 features announced for this year, for example, include themes described as follows: **"a film about the heroic struggle of the North Shensi peasants during the liberation war," "a film using the invention of a steel press worker to show how the working class employ their originality to strive for industrial automatization," "a film using the episode of how a worker became a leadership cadre to reflect the advanced ideology of the working class"** and **"a film about the correct enforcement of the nationality policy by the cadres of a certain Tibetan**

nationality area in the Southwest to unite the various classes and strata and to annihilate the bandits and special **agents.**"

Numerous meetings of writers, directors, actors and actresses have recently been held and, according to the Chinese Communist press, "the ideological and professional level of the film cadres and their creative ardor have been enhanced and film **production** work is now capable of being carried out in a planned manner."

"The People's Film Enterprise." The Chinese Communists call their movie industry the "**People's Film Enterprise.**" They do not mean by this, however, either that the public should be able to dictate the **films** produced or that artists should be given free rein for their creative talents. "The film," they say, "**is** an important **medium** for educating the people in **patriotism** and **socialism.**" In short, the ruling Communist elite, who have established themselves as the dictators of art and morals, as well as politics and economics, determine what they think is good for the public and force the artists to produce "according to plan."

Despite claims of "**enhanced** creative ardor," the strangulating effect of political controls on artistic creativeness is clearly indicated by **current** crisis in the Chinese Communist movie industry and the "**serious** shortage of film **scripts.**"

It seems likely, also, that movie audiences in China are far from satisfied with the unrelieved political **propaganda** to which they are now constantly exposed. Official statistics **indicate** that movie audiences in **Communist** China have steadily risen, but this is probably more of a tribute to the **Communists'** development of mobile projection units and the organization of group attendance at movies that it is to the appeal of the films offered to the public.

This week in Hong Kong, where Chinese moviegoers still have much to choose from, numerous locally-produced films are drawing far larger crowds than "**Woman Locomotive Driver.**" Jane Russell, in a foreign language, also is attracting more admirers than Sun, and even "**Julius Caesar**" is doing fairly well. There is no doubt that a large majority of **Hong Kong** Chinese, whether interested in the creating or the viewing end of motion pictures, would definitely vote for the "**tyranny** of the box **office**" in preference to the tyranny of the political commissar. It is probable that most of their compatriots in Communist China would too.

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