

The Sand Pebbles (USA); 1966; starring Steve McQueen (as Jake Holman), Candice Bergen (as the American teacher Shirley), Richard Attenborough (Frenchy), Richard Crenna (Captain Collins); directed by Robert Wise.

Set in 1926 during the "Nationalist Revolution" (what the Chinese sometimes call the "Second Revolution" or more properly the Bei-fa or "Northern Expedition" -- a military campaign involving the Nationalists and the Communists cooperating together against the northern warlord government), this film was made in America during the War in Vietnam, was highly acclaimed at the time and nominated for several Oscars.

It tells a story of the American (and Western) military presence in China during the mid-1920s, of Jake Holman, a well-intentioned non-commissioned officer from a poor background in the mid-west, of mission-based teacher Shirley and her first love, of the American sailor nicknamed "Frenchy" and his Chinese bride, whom he kidnaps from the auction block. The film ties this all in with the missionary effort in China against the backdrop of the Nationalist Revolution and the anti-imperialist struggle.

Aside from telling this story, the film served to explore the complicated emotions of its American audiences in the mid-1960s surrounding US involvement in a "land war" in Asia (i.e. Vietnam), as well as conflicting debates about what ought and ought not to be the proper role of the United States, a republic itself founded in rebellion against colonial power, in what was already "post-colonial" Asia during the 1960s.

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Suggested discussion questions:

1. Do you agree with the analysis that the film "The Sand Pebbles" uses China in the 1920s as a device to address the US military presence in Vietnam in the mid-1960s?
2. If it did so, how does this operate?
3. If by the 1920s the principal imperialist threat against China was posed by Japan, not the West, why was the fury of anti-imperialist sentiment often directed against Americans?

4. Are orientalist devices (i.e. imagery, cliches, ideas) at work in "The Sand Pebbles"? If so, where? Does it make more or less use of orientalist symbols than other American films of the same era, say "The World of Suzie Wong," for instance? If so, why do you think this might have been the case?

5. It may be postulated that both this film and the film "Fifty-five Days at Peking," made earlier in the 1960s, used Western military involvement as a device to examine the question of US military presence in Vietnam. How does "Fifty-five Days at Peking" conclude and what theme does the movie seem to convey? How is this at odds with the more ambiguous emotions in "The Sand Pebbles" and why? What does "The Sand Pebbles" seem to be suggesting as a conclusion and how is that different from "55 Days"? Why?

6. If we look at the treatment of the 1900 Boxer Rebellion and its aftermath in the film "55 Days at Peking" and compare it with the version provided by the Chinese poet Fan Zengxiang in the "First and Second Songs of Rainbow Cloud," which was translated by Dr. Kowallis under the title of his paper "Depravity's Rainbow," how different are these accounts and perspectives? Does the Chinese view of events, given that it is expressed in the stylized form of "classical-style" verse, differ markedly from the Western one? How?

7. How would you compare that perspective with that which we obtained from comparing the film "Taipan" with "Lin Zexu" earlier in the course?

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