

「末代皇帝」

"The Last Emperor" (USA/Italy 1987)

Directed by the famous Italian director Bernardo Bertolucci, filmed on sight in Beijing in 1980, starring John Lone (as Pu Yi), Joan Chen as Empress Wan Rong and Ying Ruo Cheng (a famous Manchu actor from the PRC) as the warden this film tells the life story of Aisin Gioro "Henry" Pu Yi (1906-1967), the last emperor of the Qing dynasty, who was enthroned at the age of three in 1908, deposed by the 1911 Revolution, but continued to retain his title and reside in the Forbidden City under the "Articles of Favorable Treatment" drawn up between Yuan Shikai, the dynasty's last military hope (who himself later became president and tried to make himself emperor of a new dynasty) and the forces of the Republic.

Beginning in 1950 when a train pulls into a newly-turned communist China from the Soviet Union with its most important passenger, the last emperor, brought back to his country to face imprisonment and "thought reform" as a war criminal. The last emperor, dressed as a civilian, sneaks off into a toilet where he tries to commit suicide by slashing his wrists. The warden discovers he is missing and saves him by forcing the door. As he bangs on it and calls: "Open the door!" there is a flashback to the day in 1908 when little Pu Yi was carried into the Forbidden City by very antique-looking Manchu horsemen, on order for the empress dowager, to be her personally-chosen successor. As the riders come through one of the courtyards, we are shown crowds and three women locked together in the cangue (a wooden collar). Lamaist monks chant an eerie sutra and blow moaning notes on long horns. The empress dowager Cixi addresses him through a veil of incense smoke and speaks in an almost ghost-like voice, dying as she speaks to him about the realities of palace life: "These men are not real men, they are eunuchs!" A dark jade ball is forced into her mouth and the lamaist monks begin skipping around merrily, banging drums and gongs.

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The next scene is his enthronement ceremony at which he becomes impatient. His father tries to comfort him by saying: "It will be finished soon." (Zhe jiu wan le), which is deemed inauspicious by the Lord Chamberlain because it suggests that with this enthronement, the dynasty will indeed be over.

There follows a scene of the three-year old emperor being entertained by the singing and dancing of eunuchs while sitting on a portable toilet. His feces are then picked up by a eunuch and quickly smelled by a physician, who makes a comment on his dietary needs. When a wet nurse tells him a story with the line "When the tree falls the monkeys scatter" (Shu dao husun san), we are switched back to the bathroom floor in 1950 with the former emperor asking: "Where am I?" as he is revived, and the warden replying gruffly: "In the People's Republic of China. You are a war criminal and must be judged."

Back in the palace in 1915, the emperor's younger brother Pu Jie

is brought to meet him. There is a scene in which Pu Yi, then ten, sucks the breast of his wet-nurse, a woman in her twenties, lovingly stroking her, as Manchu women, some of whom had been the consorts of previous emperors, look on through opera glasses from boats on a nearby man-made lake (voyeurism?/ fetishism?).

A quarrel breaks out between Pu Yi and Pu Jie over the fact that Pu Jie is wearing imperial yellow. Pu Jie then announces: "You're not the emperor any more, there's a new emperor and he has a motor car." Pu Yi orders a eunuch to drink a container full of ink to prove he is still emperor, but later he sees Yuan Shikai drive past on his way to perform sacrifices at the Temple of Heaven, which in the past only emperors did. The time frame then shifts back to the Communist prison in 1950 where the warden announces, in very Confucian rhetoric: "We believe people were born good. You will begin by writing your lives and confessing your crimes."

In May of 1919 Reginald Fleming Johnston, a former British diplomat in China, is appointed tutor to the emperor. On his way to the Forbidden City his car is delayed by the crowds of demonstrating students protesting the warlord government's signing of the Versailles Peace Treaty at the end of WWI, which awarded the former German colonies at Qingdao (Tsingtao) to the Japanese, even though China had also sided with the victorious allies in WWI. At the palace, Pu Yi tells him he would have sided with the student demonstrators against the warlord government which now attempts to suppress them.

Under Johnston's influence, Pu Yi learns to ride a bike and gets some exercise. He is then married to Wan Rong, a Manchu aristocrat who becomes empress, in the last imperial-style wedding ceremony. He also is given two concubines. Johnston urges him to expel the eunuchs from the Forbidden City after they start a fire to cover up their pilfering of various household treasures and art objects. A major scene occurs when the eunuchs demand their organs back, "so that they may be buried as whole men". They are expelled only with the aid of Republican troops.

One day in the mid-1920s the emperor and empress are interrupted at a tennis game by the troops of the pro-Kuomintang warlord Feng Yuxiang, who expels them from the Forbidden City. Pu Yi flees to Tianjin, the port city of Beijing, where he comes increasingly under Japanese control. He is angered by the news that the troops of Feng Yuxiang have robbed the Qing tombs and desecrated the body of Cixi, the old empress dowager. His ministers are divided over what he should do. One of them, Luo Zhenyu, argues that it is best to avoid any more involvement with the Japanese. Zheng Xiaoxu (Cheng Hsiao-hsü) argues that they are necessary as a means to restore the Qing dynasty. When Johnston leaves China, Pu Yi sends him off. Later Johnston writes that Pu Yi went to Manchukou to become "Chief Executive" of the Japanese-sponsored puppet government there in 1931. He is enthroned under the title of the Kang De (Healthy and Virtuous) Emperor in 1934, over the private objections of Wan Rong, who has turned to opium because Pu Yi

neglects her. After one of his concubines flees in Tianjin, Jin Dongbao ("Eastern Jewel"), a Manchu woman "cousin" to the imperial family shows up dressed in leather as an aviatrix and tries to volunteer for the position. Rejected by Pu Yi, she attempts to enter into a lesbian relationship with Wan Rong.

After a tour to Japan Pu Yi returns to Manchukuo to find that Prime Minister Zheng Xiaoxu has been removed by the Japanese and that his power has been taken over by the Japanese secret police chief, who poses at the head of the Manchukuo state film production company, and the Japanese commander of the Kanto Army. In order to provide him with an heir, the neglected Wan Rong has conceived a child with a Manchurian driver, but the child is killed by the Japanese and declared still-born ("I heard him cry", Wan Rong insists.)

During the course of the war, war crimes are committed by the Japanese and their collaborators throughout China. Wan Rong's opium habit increasingly debilitates her and she is taken to a sanatorium, from which she is not allowed to return until the end of the war, whereupon she spits at all the Japanese in the Palace at Xinjing. The head of the secret police shoots himself at a desk in its modernist throne room.

Captured by Soviet Russian troops in 1945, Pu Yi is returned to China in 1950 and imprisoned until 1959, when he was released as part of an amnesty. He is impressed by the character of the prison warden who is in charge of his thought reform process and tries to live as an ordinary citizen, marrying a Han Chinese woman nurse and working as a gardener under Communism. The frail Wan Rong has died in prison and his only remaining concubine divorced him.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1969), Pu Yi sees the warden being denounced by Red Guards and attempts to go to his aid, insisting: "He is a good man," but is pushed aside by a surly Red Guard leader. One day he buys a ticket to enter the Forbidden City as an ordinary Chinese tourist and approaches the throne in an empty throne room before being challenged by a little boy who has been left in charge of guarding the room while the adults who would normally guard it are swept up in the political upheaval outside. Pu Yi tells him he used to be the emperor and when the little boy shouts: "Prove it!" he pulls a cricket cage out from underneath the padded seat and produces a live cricket from within, to the amazement of the little guard. When the boy turns around, he has vanished.

The next scene, in the late 1970s, shows Western tourists being led in a pack through the throne room by a Chinese woman guide, whose megaphone plays "Yankee Doodle". She announces that Pu Yi died in 1967.

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questions for discussion

1. This was the first motion picture made in China by major Western film companies after the post-1978 thaw in relations. As such it may represent the greatest Western preoccupation with China, which, at least from the viewpoint of the narrator in Victor Segalen's novel René Leys, tend to focus on the private life of the emperor. What does this tell us about the limitations of Western interest and on what aspects do they focus?

2. In his autobiography From Emperor to Citizen, Pu Yi stated that he had been a puppet of others all his life, only being freed after his release from prison under communism. To what extent is this true and to what extent is it false?

3. Does Pu Yi's role in this film continue to make him a puppet today? If so, how?