

Huolong [Fire Dragon] PRC (1985)

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Usually thought of as a response to Bernardo Bertolucci's The Last Emperor (L'Ultimo Imperatore; 1987), this film actually predates Bertolucci's. Nevertheless, the Chinese directors had an idea of what Bertolucci was doing, since he filmed on-site in China. Huolong concentrates on the latter half of Pu Yi's life (what he calls in the film "Wo de hou bansheng"), instead of the first half ("Wo de qian bansheng," the Chinese title of Pu Yi's autobiography From Emperor to Citizen, and the main focus of Bertolucci's film).

Much of the story is told from the perspective of the women in Pu Yi's life: his concubine Fu Guiren (Lady Fu); the empress Wan Rong; and Li Shuqing, the Han Chinese nurse who became his wife after his release in 1959 from detention as a war criminal. Lady Fu witnesses empress Wan Rong's opium addiction, her desperate flight from Xijing (the capital of the Japanese puppet state Manzhouguo) at the end of the Second World War (she is carried in a chair by a motley group of servants and loyalists, from which she remembers her wedding and later the impotence of Pu Yi), and finally the former empress' humiliation at the hands of Communist jailers and ignoble death in prison.

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The focus is on the trials and tribulations of the wives, rather than the exotic splendor and romantic tragedy of Pu Yi's life (as with Bertolucci's film). Yet Pu Yi, after his release from prison and thought reform, is depicted in a not entirely unsympathetic way as an well-intentioned bumbler, both before (witness their introduction and courtship in a New China) and after their marriage (his attempts to help her with domestic chores, such as cooking, which he never masters).

Li Shuqing, portrayed by a beautiful actress, seems to love Pu Yi for himself, despite both his impotence and childishness. She calls him "Da Ge" (Elder Brother) and he calls her "Xiao Mei" (Little Sister). Their platonic relationship, which includes sledding on the lake behind the Forbidden City, is darkened by the gathering clouds of Mao's nation-wide political purge known as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1969). Pu Yi and Li Shuqing are denounced by Red Guards and told to slap each other, as Pu Yi had once directed his eunuchs to do. When he is reluctant to hit her, their leader knocks him down. They are saved by the timely deus ex machina arrival of soldiers of the People's Liberation Army, who inform the Red Guards the "The sofas and easy chairs here are all the property of the state, used for receiving foreign guests. Mr. Pu Yi has been designated as a person to be protected by Premier Zhou Enlai." Pu Yi is then taken away mysteriously in the night. We later learn that he and other important people are being sequestered at the order of Premier Zhou for their own protection, as the Cultural Revolution rages outside.

Taken sick, Pu Yi is hospitalized at Shoudu "Capital" (then

renamed Fandi or "Anti-Imperialism") Hospital. Lady Fu (who long ago divorced him, since she was unwilling to wait for his release from prison) and her sister-in-law arrive as Li Shuqing attends him. The sister-in-law says that while Pu Yi is being treated like a high Communist cadre in Beijing, her family in Dongbei has been persecuted for being "relatives of the former emperor," even though they never enjoyed imperial favor during the days when Pu Yi could have bestowed it. Pu Yi becomes distraught, repeating "That's wrong! That's wrong!" Feelings of intense guilt cause his condition to worsen. Li Shuqing then goes to the archives and locates a passage in the Qing code for Lady Fu and her sister-in-law, which states that only the relatives of the empress were considered imperial kinsmen, and never the extended families of concubines. Once again, she distinguishes herself as caring about other people. Pu Yi's condition worsens and he dies. She alone mourns him. In a scene aimed at the self-centered Manchu Lady Fu, talks about how her happiest days were when the two of them entered the Forbidden City as ordinary citizens and walked together, with him telling her stories about his past there. Perhaps Han Chinese Li Shuqing is Pu Yi's last loyal subject. We are shown the resting place of Pu Yi's ashes in Babaoshan, cemetery for high-level Communist cadres. A foreign tour group making its way through the former palace is told that Pu Yi made a bad emperor but a good citizen in the last part of his life. Pu Yi's official photo as the puppet emperor of Manzhouguo flashes on the screen, along with the explanation of his posthumous nickname "Huolong" [Fire Dragon]. All of the other emperors were buried in elaborate tombs, only Pu Yi was cremated, hence the name.

Questions for discussion:

1. What symbolism do you see in the film's title and the image of the "Fire Dragon."
2. What are the most significant similarities and contrasts with this treatment of the life of the last emperor (from Communist China) and Bertolucci's?
3. What differences do you notice in technique?
4. How would you compare and contrast the ending of the films?
5. Questions of cinematography aside, which film made the greater impact on you and why?