

**Film Review: China Diary (1989) Produced and Directed by Jinhua Yang; Photography by Zhang Xukui. 57 minutes Color Video: Sale \$445; Rent \$75**

**Gregory A. Ruf  
Columbia University**

Jinhua Yang's *China Diary* (1989) is a pre-Tian'anmen documentary of the ambiguous feelings which trouble a young film student upon her first return to China since leaving for Los Angeles in the early 1980s. Extraordinary changes have taken place during her absence, and her film records not only some of these transformations, but their material and ideological ramifications. "The Socialist Revolution has still not realized its promise to end China's poverty," Yang charges in her opening. "Forty years should have been long enough." *China Diary* is, in many ways, just that: a personal record of her attempts to reconcile the images which confront her now with the emotions and memories haunting her from the past.

Unexpectedly overwhelmed by these changes, Yang is seized by the ubiquitous question, 'Whiter China?' After first getting her hair done at the hairdressing salon/home of a renowned private entrepreneur on Beijing's Gold Fish Lane, she abruptly postpones plans to return home to visit her family, and instead sets out in search for a greater 'Truth' concerning the social conditions developing in her country. "I want to erase the image of our poor peasants from my mind," she confesses as during a two hour drive into the greater Shanghai countryside. She calls on a successful shiwan yuan hu or 100,000 yuan (\$25,000) household of a 'peasant entrepreneur.' He has decorated his home with replica Louis XIV furniture, but has doubts about the security of his good fortune. His pre-1984 income of 1,000-2,000 was not, he jokes, even enough to buy cigarettes. Evidently he has a taste for imported 555s.

"I don't know what to make of this new economic success," she reflects. "It is creating a gap between the rich and the poor. The equality between people is disappearing. The question is, if this gap widens too quickly, what will be the outcome?" The question, as events were to forcefully remind us, is considerably more complex than that.

For a broader feel of the effects of the post-Mao reforms, Yang returns to the remote village to which she was 'sent down' as a youth in 1973 during the Cultural Revolution. It was here in the rugged mountains of Henan that she "for the first time became familiar with the lives of China's peasants." Her former host mother invites her back to their home, and tells her of the great changes which have

transpired in the last eleven years. Some of these have been profound. A (dirt) road now links this isolated community with the outside world, although the river must still be forded as there is not yet a bridge. Women no longer have to tiao buckets of water with a shoulder pole from the village well, as each home now has running water. Today, there is grain to eat, as well as more diversity in the diet. And now, we observe, people keep their homes padlocked when they venture out.

*China Diary* delivers strong images of a culture embroiled in the turmoil of social change. Yang is clearly not alone in struggling with the ill-ease this process has generated in her. Similar sentiments are expressed in exchanges between strangers at "English Corner" in Beijing's Purple Bamboo Park, or even 'ritualized' in the once illicit songs now sung nightly at "kala-OK" bars, patronized mainly by daiye youths still "awaiting employment" assignments from the government. We watch uncomfortably as young women, skimpily clad in bathing suits, smile with nervous embarrassment as they 'audition' before a panel of judges (including Yang herself), in what is little more than a beauty contest sponsored by the state airline to select models for an upcoming promotional campaign.

The most provocative sequence in the film, however, focuses on a labor strike at a privately-contracted automobile radiator factory in industrial Shenyang. Workers are striking because their bonuses have been withheld on the grounds the enterprise has failed to turn a profit and instead has posted a 28,000 loss. The 'contracting' manager listens politely to their complaints but remains intransigent: he'll guarantee their base salaries, but there will be no bonuses (which sometimes can be upwards of twice some base wages and on which many working class families have come to depend) until the workers meet their production targets. The workers protest they should not be held responsible. They were neither 'slow' nor 'lazy,' but simply lacked sufficient influx of work with which to occupy themselves. Management, in effect, had failed to efficiently regulate the supply and flow of materials. Yet it is the line workers who pay the price and shoulder the burden. This irony is not lost on the factory's Party branch secretary, who points out that under the terms of the contract signed by the private 'leaser,' the contractor alone is responsible for

any losses. "You owe us an explanation," his employees demand. Indeed he does.

The frustration of an increasingly disempowered labor force is echoed by a senior worker with fifteen years experience on the production line. Although her work is far superior in quality to that of her junior colleagues, that resource is left untapped, even penalized, by the imposition of an inflexible fixed base-salary, piece-meal bonus wage system on junior and senior workers alike. "Because of my experience, the quality of my work is better," she explains. "But quality takes time, and the slower I work, the less I earn. There is so much waste in production now, all because people cannot afford to do quality work." Ironically, private contracting was initiated to reduce waste and promote efficiency.

The film concludes with the metaphoric image of the outer battlements of Beijing's Forbidden City. "The wall of the Imperial Palace is very tall," Yang reflects. "I hope that our people will soon be able to see more of the sky beyond." Admirable sentiments. But one is struck by the chill of her own conclusions. I cannot evaluate the change as good or bad, she confesses in resignation. Despite the wealth of information available to the observer in each scene, and the articulate testimony of so many people, Yang's reluctance or inability to confront her own judgments on this permanent revolution is the film's greatest shortcoming. The ultimate confrontation of all, Yang's personal homecoming to her own family, is not included in this social text, much to this reviewer's disappointment.

China Diary is not a sophisticated social analysis, but nor does it make any pretense of being so. Artistically it is well done, the photography, at times, excellent. Although the translations are, generally speaking, accurate, some stylistic editorial decisions have been made, opting to focus on faithful but abridged subtitles, rather than precise but lengthy and visually cumbersome full-text translations. Regrettably, however, Yang's narrative voice-over occasionally cuts off respondents at some very interesting moments in the conversation.

Produced in the "tradition" of baogao wenxue, 'reportage' or investigative literary journalism, the value of the film exceeds its limitations. Depending on the orientation of the course, China Diary could be perfectly suitable for classroom use. Although there is little sense of the differential impact reforms have had in various regions of the country, a phenomenon which has the potential to generate deep lines of schism in coming years, its bias

towards foreign-oriented urban seaboard areas may serve to make the film more easily accessible to college students in the United States. Nevertheless, as much of the film's eloquence is linked to its innocence, whether deliberate or unconscious, an informed instructor may be required to draw out some of the film's more powerful and salient critical observations.

The "opening" of China in the post-Mao era has clearly drawn the culture deeper into the global economy. The "Westernization" of the country has perhaps been too over-eagerly applauded or acclaimed by the popular American media. This film urges us to give substantive consideration to the profound impact which current processes of change and reaction are having on that society, or the extent of the consequences for years to come. Tian'anmen was neither a starting point nor an ending point for anything, except so many lives. Even one was one too many.

"Every time a contradiction is resolved," Yang observes, "A new one is created." Her evocation of Mao is pertinent and poignant, for the continuing revolution in social relations of production and reproduction in China remains far from being adequately understood or appreciated. Nothing is permanent or inevitable but change. The point, Marx reminded us over a hundred years ago, is not just to understand the world, but to change it.