

◀ vision of the natural and social landscape in the poorest areas of Shanxi province. And I wasn't surprised to hear that when Tian Zhuangzhuang accepted to direct *Li Lianying*, what got him interested in the project was a long walk he took one hot summer's night inside the walls of the Forbidden City.

My trip ends in Taiwan, where meetings have been arranged for me with Chiu Fu-sheng and Hou Hsiao-hsien. The latter – credited 'executive producer' for his work on the screenplay of *Raise the Red Lantern* – receives me in his headquarters, a traditional tea house, decorated with potteries and scrolls, where most of his screenplays are written. Hou's cinema is a highly collaborative process and involves endless discussions with friends until the small hours. This is how the repressed history of Taiwan has been kept, communicated, exchanged (most of Hou's films are compilations of true stories of people he knows).

In 1986, to play the grandfather in *Dust in the Wind*, Hou cast the eighty-two-year-old Li Tien-lu. This was Li's first cinematic role (he went on to appear in *Daughter of the Nile* and *A City of Sadness*), but he is an internationally known master puppeteer and a 'Taiwanese national treasure'. Hou's new project, *In the Hands of a Puppet Master* – also produced by ERA International – will tell Li's story from his birth in 1910 until 1945, the end of the Japanese occupation of Taiwan. Hou wants to shoot the film in mainland China's Fujian province, whose landscape is very similar to that of Taiwan but less industrialised, and will go to Japan for administrative buildings that no longer exist in Taiwan.

Uncertain identities

A similar search had delayed the shooting of Edward Yang's new film, *A Brighter Summer Day*, still in production during my visit. A former engineer who has spent eleven years in the US, Yang is concerned with alienation, displacement, uncertain identities. His *Taipei Story* was a "love song" to a city he had left and found again, but which is losing its soul through rapid Westernisation. "I had first picked the locations, the buildings, before thinking of the texture, the details, and finally the characters of the story", says Yang. His creative process was slightly different in *A Brighter Summer Day* and the film is being produced through his own company, Yang and Gang, and filmed in a multiplicity of locations. But the production itself is embedded in a poetics of space.

Sites and buildings have been destroyed in the three Chinas – in the mainland, during the Cultural Revolution; in Hong Kong, through non-stop real estate development; in Taiwan, through swift social change. Space is subtly taken away from those who inhabit it, to be redistributed according to new rules. What disappears in the process is the possibility to remember, to give expression to hidden wounds. Yet cinema has the power to capture, deconstruct, magnify space during the fleeting duration of an image. Maybe it is one of its functions in contemporary China: to give back space to those who have lost it.

28 Sight and Sound

The minister is tightening his grip on Chinese film, reports Tony Rayns

Screening China

● It's always a mistake to take a narrow, short-term view of any matter relating to China's Communist government. Policies come and go as the political careers of their proponents wax and wane, and the unending power struggles within the Politburo rarely have immediate and visible effects.

Right now, in the wake of the Beijing massacre of 4 June 1989, the gap between government and people is uncommonly wide. The government pretends that everything is "stable" and calls for a return to Maoist values and principles; the people ignore their government. The only individuals who are vulnerable to government pressures in this situation are those who need to function in a public arena – like film-makers and other artists. They are getting it in the neck. The pressures on them will last no longer than the pitiable bureaucrats who are doing the pressing, but that's no consolation to anyone in the short term.

The senior bureaucrat currently responsible for China's cinema is Ai Zhisheng, Minister for Radio, Film and Television. Since March, he has been aided in his campaign against "bourgeois liberal" tendencies in the film industry by a Vice-Minister with special responsibility for film: one Tian Congming, whose training for the job included stints in the 'autonomous regions' of Tibet and Inner Mongolia.

Under them stands the Film Bureau, currently headed by Teng Jinxian, former director of the Emei Film Studio in Sichuan. And under the Film Bureau stand the heads of the country's fourteen major film studios, who decide which films to make and vet the results before sending them to Beijing for censorship. This pyramid structure amounts to an effective system of control.

Minister Ai (who has no known knowledge of or enthusiasm for cinema) was appointed to his post by ex-Politburo member Hu Qili, who fell from power along with Zhao Ziyang after the events of June 1989. The fall of Hu Qili evidently left Minister Ai with his back unprotected.

It is doubtless impertinent to speculate about the minister's actions without asking him to explain himself, but it seems clear to an outsider that his various bans and acts of interference in creative matters are designed first and foremost to safeguard his own position. The minister is clearly anxious to avoid any possible accusation of ideological laxity. In his zeal to promote a Maoist hard line, he is effortlessly

making China look ridiculous in the eyes of the international film world.

Recent months have seen a series of increasingly absurd and tunnel-visioned decisions from the ministry. First, there was the unexplained withdrawal of Wu Ziniu's film *The Big Mill* from competition in the Berlin and Singapore film festivals; the film is a China-Hong Kong co-production, but the Hong Kong producer Ma Fung-Kwok was given no say in the matter. Then there was the ham-fisted attempt to get Zhang Yimou's *Ju Dou* withdrawn from consideration for the Oscar for the Best Foreign Film; when this succeeded in provoking a massive counter-attack from the Directors Guild (a *New York Times* article signed by Steven Spielberg and Kathleen Kennedy, a letter of protest signed by Woody Allen, Oliver Stone, Martin Scorsese et al.), the minister forced Teng Jinxian and Hu Jian of the China Film Corporation to make self-criticisms for exposing China to embarrassment.

Despite the setback over *Ju Dou*, Minister Ai continues to exercise his political muscle. He brought sustained pressure on Du Youling, the Taiwanese producer of Ann Hui's *My American Grandson*, to cut the film before allowing it to be screened anywhere – despite the fact that China has no financial interest in the film and contributed nothing to it but location facilities in Shanghai. He has also turned his sights on Zhang Yimou's *Raise the Red Lantern*, banning it in China and threatening to disrupt its overseas distribution. Meanwhile the list of banned domestic productions grows by the week: Li Shaohong's *Bloody Morning*, Zhou Xiaowen's *Black Mountain Road*, Zhang Yuan's *Mama*, Xia Gang's *Half Flame, Half Brine*, Zhang Liang's *A Woman's Street...* Even the children's film *Childhood in Ruijin* is now banned, allegedly because the inhabitants of Ruijin claim that it shows them to be "backward".

The latest developments appear to end the one production possibility that represented a ray of hope for China's beleaguered film-makers: the possibility of finding financial support outside China. There have been co-productions between China and Hong Kong for many years, but the Hong Kong companies involved have always been pro-China enterprises – hence, easily kept in line politically. The 80s saw China opening up as a location for non-Chinese productions like Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* and Spielberg's *Empire of the Sun*. But the last two years have seen an entirely new phenomenon: the making of purely Chinese films with non-Chinese backing.

The first such was Zhang Yimou's *Ju Dou*, wholly financed by Japan's Tokuma Group. This was followed by Chen Kaige's *Life on a String* (produced by Don Ranvaud, a Briton, with principal finance from the UK, Japan and Germany) and Zhang Yimou's *Raise the Red Lantern*. All three have been post-produced outside

The list of banned domestic productions grows by the week



Under threat: Zhou Xiaowen's 'Black Mountain Road', the object of the minister's harsh disapproval

China, which has put their original negatives beyond the reach of Minister Ai. He can ban Zhang Yimou's films in China, but he could do little to impede their international circulation. It is this loophole that is now to be closed.

Of course, Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou are exceptional in that their relatively high profile internationally has given them access to financial backing from overseas. Most of their friends and contemporaries in China have no choice but to struggle on as best they can under Minister Ai's thumb.

A few have voted with their feet. Wu Tianming, erstwhile head of Xi'an Film Studio and 'godfather' to the Chinese new wave, is raising the backing for a low-budget independent feature in San Francisco; Peng Xiaolian (whose film about the writer Ba Jin was cancelled in mid-production after the 1989 massacre) is studying in New York; Huang Jianxin, director of *The Black Cannon Incident*, is researching in Australia; and Zhang Zeming, director of *Swan Song*, is living in London. Whether these people turn out to be exiles or merely short-term emigrés, they are now in exactly the same position as other independent film-makers in their host countries: fighting for a share of a diminishing financial pie. A growing number of emigré Chinese film students are also in this position: Zhang Tielin in London, Dai Sijie in Paris and many others.

China's Fifth Generation directors (basically, the class that graduated from the Beijing Film Academy in 1982, plus others of a similar age and orientation) came in for a disproportionate amount of attention from the Film Bureau from the moment they began making films – despite the fact that much of their work was barely distributed in China itself.

The Chinese Communist Party is not the only authoritarian regime in the world that

devotes more energy to harassing its cutting-edge artists than it does to tackling larger and vastly more far-reaching political and economic woes. (In China, those woes include the bankruptcy of the film studios, the antiquated distribution system and the massive rise of video piracy.) But China's authorities have been particularly perverse in giving a hard time to the very film-makers who have done most to boost China's image in foreign eyes.

Minister Ai's record in this respect has been exactly what one would expect from a Communist Party apparatchik. He has taken no action whatsoever against the 100-odd mediocre commercial movies released since the massacre, but has systematically jumped on anything that displays glimmers of creativity. The banned films include at least two of the most interesting made in China in the last year. *Bloody Morning* (distantly related to Gabriel Garcia Marquez' *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*) is widely regarded in film circles as the best movie of 1990, while *Mama* (a wholly unsentimental account of a single mother's trials in raising a retarded son) is a remarkably innovative debut by twenty-seven-year-old director Zhang Yuan.

Wu Ziniu's *The Big Mill* was widely shown in China last year, and so in this case the ban applies only to showings overseas. The film shows a forlorn and unappreciated old communist remembering his bloody past as a guerrilla in the 30s, and contains some of Wu's most striking images. Perhaps it's because *The Big Mill* slipped through the net in China that the minister came down hard on Zhou Xiaowen's

The high level of official support for 'Jiao Yulu' has backfired in China

generally (but not thematically) similar *Black Mountain Road*.

The recent interference with the Hong Kong-Taiwan co-production *My American Grandson* is especially revealing. Ann Hui's film centres on the relationship between a retired Shanghai teacher and his spoiled American-Chinese brat of a grandson; the culture-gap between them proves harder to bridge than the generation-gap, but the film ends on a sentimental note of reconciliation. Minister Ai evidently loathes the film as a whole, but took offence at two sequences in particular. In the first, the kid refuses to use the squalid toilet in his grandfather's shared apartment and is hurried to the nearest public toilet, only to find a queue outside. In the second, set in school, the kid ridicules a teacher's class on the "model student" Lai Ning, who lost his life fighting a fire in a state-owned forest; the kid points out that Lai Ning would have been more sensible to fetch adult help than to plunge into the flames himself. To his shame, producer Du Youling agreed to cut both these sequences from the print screened on the closing night of the Hong Kong Film Festival.

What exactly was Minister Ai objecting to? To the revelation that Shanghai's toilet facilities belong to a bygone age, and to the notion that the Communist equivalent of holy writ might be held up to question. One wonders which meant more to him, the toilets or the "model student"? The producer's excuse for succumbing to the pressure to make the cuts was that he wished to maintain good relations with China because he hoped to shoot more films there in the future. Presumably his next production will be a biography of the "model student" Lai Ning.

Meanwhile Minister Ai is solidly behind the current film *Jiao Yulu*, directed by Wang Jixing, in which the title character is another exemplary communist martyr: the selfless Party secretary in an appallingly backward rural commune of the 60s. This is the kind of film that the minister would like to see representing China at foreign film festivals. Amusingly, the high level of official support for the film has backfired in China. Thousands of patrons (many of them instructed to attend screenings by their work units) have bought and sent tickets to the authorities, urging them to learn from Jiao Yulu's example.

To the outsider, it seems genuinely astonishing that China is ready to go on scoring own-goals like this, at a time when the country is so desperate to regain international standing. Communist governments' attempts to manipulate facts and to pressure artists into conformity always excite international attention, and always provoke sympathy for the artists in question. You'd think they would have learned by now. Minister Ai, of course, will find more scapegoats to blame for causing "embarrassment" to China, and the short-term policies he is pursuing will remain in force until he is removed from his post and the political tide turns back in favour of China's reformists. Until then, though, tunnel vision rules.