

Documentary Film: Interview with Wu Benli

Fang Fang: How do you do? It's not easy to find you. I want to know, as the director-in-chief on the Chinese side of *Victory of the Chinese People*, how did you assist Soviet experts in the making of the documentary? What did the Soviet experts ask you to do? How did you make the film?

Wu Benli: I heard that after we had won decisive victories, when the whole country was about to be liberated, Stalin had suggested to make a film about Chinese people achieving victory, and this was approved by Chairman Mao. Later on, this hearsay proved to be accurate, because when we edited this *Victory of the Chinese People* in Moscow, this film passed censorship after Stalin himself previewed and approved it. After that, the directors and producers, all of us brought the completed film back to China. It was released after the preview and discussion by Party Central Committee and Chairman Mao who approved it.

Fang Fang: Chairman Mao previewed it himself?

Wu Benli: Yes, himself.

Fang Fang: When did he preview it?

Wu Benli: The preview was held in the Film Bureau on Yangshi Dajie. Just after the liberation, the Film Bureau Chief was Yuan Muzhi. That preview room wasn't big. All the leaders in the Politburo at Zhongnanhai, dozens of people, all came, and filled the room. I stood with the Soviet director Varlamov. We were very nervous, not sure if it would pass, whether it had to go through revision. He was nervous, I was also nervous. We stood on the side. Varlamov was a nice person. [...]

Wu Benli: [...] The making of this film, they came to China from the USSR in a hurry. The celebration of the founding of our PRC [...]

Fang Fang: Yes, I know this situation. The Soviet crew had arrived in the evening, a few days before the PRC founding ceremony.

Wu Benli: Yes, a few days before that. But we have already set up our crew. I was in charge of *Victory of the Chinese People*, Xu Xiaobing was in charge of *Liberated China*. The main members, translators, producers, cinematographers, all were ready. They (from the Soviet Union) stayed at Cuiping Village upon arrival. [...]

Wu Benli: [...] After filming the founding of the PRC, we need to design the entire film *Victory of the Chinese People*. Comrade Liu Shaoqi was the main person in charge of this design.

Fang Fang: Yes, I've seen documentations on this.

Wu Wenli: As the main person in charge was Comrade Liu Shaoqi, I would always go to him for important issues. Before the directors began to design the film, the Party's Central Committee had arranged to have Li Tao of the Combat Department to give a talk on the military, and asked directors, cinematographers and the comrades from the Soviet Union to participate. Our military consultant is Huang Zhen, who was later the Minister of Culture. [...]

Wu Benli: [...] Li Tao, the Department Head of the Combat Department, gave a talk. We all listened to it. The talk was mainly on the four major battles: Liaoshen in the northeast, Pingjin, Huahai, Crossing the Yangtze. At the beginning he also talked a bit about the Nationalists' encirclement campaign, our Long March, the meeting at Zunyi that decided on Chairman Mao's correct line of leadership, and about how we only had 30,000 people left upon arriving in Yan'an. He talked briefly about all these. The main focus was on the four main battles.

Then, the Soviet director, who specialized in war films, wrote a shooting outline based on these. He wrote in Russian, we translated it. Liu Baiyu was the literary consultant, and participated in all the discussions on the outline. We including the military consultant also participated in the discussion.

The Soviet director's shooting script was more or less ok. Because he specialized in war films, he understood the general principles of war films. We shared a lot in common. So we more or less decided on the outline. [...]

The four major battles were filmed according to the season of the battles.

We first filmed the crossing of the Yangtze, because it was autumn, and the climate looked similar to when the PLA crossed the Yangtze.

Fang Fang: The actual crossing of the Yangtze was around March and April?

Wu Benli: Yes. So in Autumn, we first filmed crossing the Yangtze. The river-crossing was re-enacted near Zhenjiang. Actually, all materials were re-enacted. It summarized the actual situation in these battles, selecting the main action.

Fang Fang: So, boats, and troops, all of these were re-organized?

Wu Benli: Troops were mostly the original troops.

Fang Fang: What about the Nationalist troops? Who played them?

Wu Benli: Our own troops. When filming, we did it according to how we had actually crossed the river then, before and after, from mobilization, to later on, fighting all the way to Nanking and Shanghai, we filmed mostly based on the actual situation. I had been in the army fighting all the way to Shanghai.

Fang Fang: Mr. Wu, there is a very famous shot, the PLA troops charging into the Presidential Palace, and took down the nationalist flag.

Wu Benli: Haha, this was filmed for *Victory of the Chinese People*. It wasn't in *Million Heroes Crossing the Yangtze*.

Fang Fang: It wasn't filmed by the nine film teams (during the war itself) led by you.

Wu Benli: No, it wasn't. It was filmed with Soviet filmmakers' participation, by our and Soviet cinematographers together.

Fang Fang: It was all arranged? Getting up there, tilting the camera up, and then throwing the flag down?

Wu Benli: Yes, yes, that was planned in advance, designed.

Fang Fang: Which soldier would go up and throw the flag? Did they send a particularly good soldier?

Wu Benli: Of course there was selection.

Fang Fang: Selecting someone who had done a deed of merit?

Wu Benli: Filming in the army [...]

Fang Fang: This matters.

Wu Benli: Filmmaking had the effect of encouraging the soldiers. Those soldiers who made it into films were all good soldiers who had received awards, or done deeds of merit.'

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