Interview

***China Youth Daily* Journalist Jiang Fei**

**With**

# American Embassy Minister-Counselor for Press and Cultural Affairs

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**The American Embassy, during the observances of the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II, has been showing some American documentary films. Can you tell us why?**

During World War II the U.S. government made hundreds of films to support and document the war effort. We found three that we thought would be of interest during the 60th anniversary.

For the older generation, the films would recall the period of the alliance between China and the United States during the war, of which the Flying Tigers, the airlift over the Hump, and building the Stilwell Road were important chapters.

For the younger generation, the films could introduce that period of cooperation.

For both generations, the films could make the commemoration of the 60th anniversary more real, using the power of film made during those eventful times.

Using wartime films rather than more recent documentaries has an advantage. It allows us to see how China, Chinese, and the alliance were portrayed by American filmmakers during the war itself.

There’s been no editing of these films – viewers can see them just as they were presented in 1945. Yes, a 1945 film does not have the benefit of subsequent historical evaluation. But on the other hand, a 1945 film has a certain freshness and authenticity -- because they communicate the Chinese-American relationship as it was portrayed at the time.

**Can you tell us more about the films?**

The first film is “Stilwell Road.”

This was a straightforward documentary film made by the Army. It shows the fighting in Burma by American, Chinese, and British troops, and it portrays the building of the Stilwell Road. The scenes were mostly shot by U.S. Army combat cameramen in India, Burma, and China. It shows General Stilwell’s original retreat through the jungles of Burma and the effort to resupply China by air with flights over the Himalayas. And it portrays the difficult Burma campaign, along with the efforts made by the Air Force to supply the troops operating at a long distance from the allied bases in India.

The film is a tribute to the Americans and Chinese who constructed the 478 mile road from Ledo, Assam, into East Burma. It shows the extraordinary achievements of military engineering during 26 difficult months.

For more information on the building of the Stilwell Road, see:

http://www.usembassy-china.org.cn/press/events/020405don.html

There are some stirring scenes in “Stilwell Road.” My favorite shows Air Force Colonel Philip Cochran speaking to his transport and glider pilots before they took off on the dangerous mission to insert troops into central Burma. Many died in the mission.

Narrating the film was a Hollywood star who had, in the 1930s, joined the California National Guard as a cavalryman. Originally he was what Americans call a “weekend warrior” (a reserve officer who trains one weekend a month). Called to active duty after the attack on Pearl Harbor, he was given a commission in the Army Air Forces.

Because his eyesight was bad, the doctors ruled he should be assigned in the United States in the training command. He became commander of the Air Force film unit in Hollywood.

The narrator was Captain Ronald Reagan.

The second film is “China Crisis.”

This is the official Army Air Forces film that told the story of the 14th Air Force in China. It covers the movement of supplies from India to China over the Hump route, the Flying Tigers in their P-40s, B-24s and B-25s covering the shipping lanes running from Japan to the southwest, and Japan's 1944 Great East China offensive. (The Japanese offensive is the “crisis” in the title.)

The footage in the film was shot by thirteen young Army combat cameramen assigned to General Chennault’s 14th Air Force. Three hundred hours of footage resulted in a film less than one hour long. The editing and narration were done in New York and Hollywood.

The lead photographer, Harold Geer, is now visiting China, and he was present when we showed the film at the National Library. He told the audience of the five cameramen in the unit who died in China during the war.

The American government financed the war by the sale of “war bonds” to American citizens. The marketing of war bonds was very sophisticated. Movie stars and returned heroes appeared at large rallies to sell bonds. And each war bond campaign was anchored by a documentary film that showed Americans how the war was progressing.

“China Crisis” was put together to be shown during the 8th War Bond campaign of 1946. Of course, the war ended in 1945, so the film was seen by only a few Americans at the time.

The third film, “The Battle for China,” is part of a famous series.

Early in the war, General George Marshall, Army Chief of Staff, desired to give the ordinary American soldier more knowledge about why the United States was battling Germany, Italy, and Japan.

Many soldiers did not have advanced schooling. While they were growing up during the Great Depression, they had to focus on school and work to help their families, so many had paid little attention to matters outside the United States.

General Marshall asked Frank Capra to make a series of seven “orientation” films. Capra was a famous Hollywood director who had joined the Army soon after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

The series was called “Why We Fight.” The title of the series pointed to an important characteristic of the American armed forces. It goes back to the Revolution. The German general who trained General Washington’s troops found that American soldiers were quite different from those he had commanded in Europe. He said, “when I gave an order to a German soldier, he obeyed. But when I give an American soldier an order, he always asks ‘why?’ After I tell him why, he follows his orders far better than any soldier in Europe.”

The sixth film in the “Why We Fight” series was “The Battle of China.” It was made in 1944 and shown to recruits and to soldiers in 1945. It was also seen by war workers and civilians, in the United States and in other countries.

The footage in this film was not shot especially for “The Battle of China.” The film is what is called a “compilation documentary.” Lieutenant Colonel Capra and his team mostly used newsreel film that had been shot by civilian journalists in China (and Japan) in the 1930s and 1940s. Footage was also drawn from the U.S. National Archives, the Library of Congress, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Army Pictorial Center. Films from Allied Governments and those captured from the Axis were also used in the productions. These films were arranged and rearranged to explain official U.S. policy on the causes of the war and toward the Allied and Axis powers.

A modern historian can find some fault with the film.

-- It is a wartime snapshot of American views, without the benefit of the work of historians after the war.

-- To explain complicated issues in an hour’s time, the film simplifies -- perhaps oversimplifies -- some complicated matters. For instance, while the Republic of China under Chiang Kai-shek had many accomplishments, many pluses, it also had many minuses – for instance, the terrible corruption that eventually eroded its support by ordinary Chinese. “The Battle of China” shows all the pluses, but not the minuses.

-- There is no use of film that shows the Communist forces that were also fighting the enemy. I think there are three reasons. (1) Chongqing (the location of General Stilwell’s headquarters) and Kunming (the site of General Chennault’s headquarters) were in the areas of China controlled by the Nationalists. (2) Americans coming into China "over the Hump" from India came into southwest China where the Nationalist armies were fighting. (3) The United States was working with China's national government. The scenes in the film that describe the fighting “behind the lines,” however, implicitly acknowledge the contribution of the Communist forces.

-- One other problem with the film is that Capra and his team made frequent reference to a "Tanaka Memorial" to explain Japan’s plans for conquest. Subsequent research by historians has demonstrated that the so-called “Memorial” was not authentic.

For these reasons, the film is often watched in university classes on mass communications – as an example of a film that aims to persuade. Some call it “propaganda.” However the film is categorized, it aimed to demonstrate why America needed to support China, and why China was an ally that deserved American support.

I was recently reading the recollections of an elderly Chinese-American recalling the war. He said that before World War II many Americans had a prejudiced attitude toward the Chinese living in America, thinking of them as laundrymen or “coolies.” But the alliance during the war did much to change those fundamental attitudes. Americans saw the bravery of the Chinese people as they faced Japanese aggression, and they changed their minds. It was during the war that the United States gave up extraterritoriality in China. It may have been films like “The Battle for China,” showing China’s resistance, that helped changed these attitudes.

We would like to know some specific stories during the shooting of these documentaries. For instance, how did the crew shoot those dangerous scenes?

“The Battle for China” is a “compilation documentary.” Frank Capra and his team mostly drew on newsreel footage. Getting that footage in early wartime China by the civilian newsreel photographers from many countries has its own history. Perhaps a Ph.D. candidate in film can make that the topic of a dissertation.

“Stilwell Road” and “China Crisis” were shot by young military combat cameramen. They served in all the theatres of the war. The flew frequent combat missions. Some were killed by the enemy. Others died in aircraft crashes. Some were forced to parachute into enemy territory. Some were wounded. Some became prisoners of war.

The combat cameramen who made “China Crisis” and “Stilwell Road” traveled with the combat units in Burma and China. Harold Geer, for instance, flew 86 missions with the Flying Tigers. At the National Library he told us the story of one combat cameraman. While he was taking pictures in an aircraft dropping supplies by parachute, he fell out of the plane. He landed safely by parachute, but he was captured by the Japanese.

The footage was sent to New York for editing and compilation. The Army, as I have noted, set up its film operation in a former Hollywood studio and was able to draw on other soldiers with film production skills to make the finished films.

**Did the showing of the documentaries stop after World War II?**

Harold Geer told me that when the war ended, Americans wanted to see other kinds of films. That is why few people saw “China Crisis” at the time.

However, all the footage has been used over and over to make films since the war ended.

When did you personally know the existence of these documentaries? What was your feeling when you first viewed these documentaries?

When I was a boy I saw many television programs that used the original combat footage taken during the war. I watched more when I studied history in graduate school.

Wartime footage is also seen daily on one of the most popular cable channels in the United States, the History Channel. History Channel films and other modern documentaries combine the footage from the wartime films with new narration, new historical research, and new interviews.

When I looked at the three films earlier this year, my impression was that they told an important story of cooperation between China and the United States – a story that has, with the passage of years, receded in the memory.

Young Chinese I meet, for instance, have heard a little about General Chennault and the Flying Tigers, but not much more about the wartime cooperation between China and the United States. The films bring that wartime period to life and tell more of how difficult it was to fight the war in China.

Not so many people, however, know some of the other chapters in our wartime alliance. Building the Stilwell Road just a few miles behind the advance of American and Chinese troops in northern Burma was a great engineering feat, and it was very dangerous. More than a thousand American engineers lost their lives building the road, two thirds of them in combat. The films help us see the great achievement, and help us understand we must be grateful to the generation that fought the war.

**What can these documentaries tell us about U.S.-China relations?**

The observances and ceremonies marking the 60th anniversary of the end of the Second World War remind us how close was the relationship between China and the United States during the war.

We were allies.

We were especially close allies because of the many ties between China and the United States that had developed earlier in the 20th century – ties in education, medicine, and business. The many missionary schools in China had taught many Chinese English. American authors like Pearl Buck explained Chinese society to Americans. So did the best-selling Chinese author Lin Yutang. Chinese scholars like Hu Shih were well known in the United States.

During the war more than sixty thousand American servicemen (and a few hundred service women) served in China. There are many stories of bravery, courage, and skillful flying by the Flying Tigers, the Hump Pilots, the Doolittle Raiders, and the men of the 14th, 10th, and 20th Air Forces in China during World War II. Some of them are visiting China now.

Although they were the heroes in the movies and in the newspapers, the pilots in the air were only the “tip of the spear.” They will be the first to acknowledge that behind them were thousands of Americans and Chinese – specialists in maintenance, airfields, cargo, supply, communications, radar, intelligence, weather, building construction, and medicine. As the war progressed, there were more and more Chinese pilots, many trained in the United States.

The individual Americans and Chinese who fought together in China during the Second World War may have played large or small roles, heroic or ordinary. The point is that our nations were allies. China needed what its American ally could provide. The Americans in China needed what China could provide. Many people played vital roles to turn the commitment into a reality. This is their legacy to us today.

In 1979 China embarked on the new policy of “reform and opening.” Since then there have been some ups and downs in our relations. But the trend has been upward.

Sixty years after the war, Americans and Chinese again work together. President Bush and President Hu will meet later this month, but it is also the tens of thousands of Americans and Chinese who work together that strengthen our friendship.

Everyone knows of our cooperation in business and commerce. Everyone knows about the hundreds of Americans teaching English in China. Everyone knows about Chinese students studying in the United States, and the growing number of American students in China. But let me offer a few less-well-known examples.

Doctors assigned to the Embassy from the Centers for Disease Control of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services are working side by side with Chinese doctors to prevent SARS, HIV/AIDS, avian influenza, vaccine-preventable diseases, and birth defects. The U.S. National Institutes of Health supports biomedical research by Chinese scientists, and this research has led to advances that have improved health in China, the United States, and around the world. They are worthy successors to the doctors and other medical professionals, American and Chinese, who supported the Flying Tigers.

The U.S. Department of Labor is cooperating with the Chinese government as it develops standards and practices to improve safety and save lives in China’s mines. The Army civil engineers who built the Burma Road and laid down the runways would, I know, salute their efforts.

Americans and Chinese once again fly in the skies over Kunming. An American company trains Chinese pilots in flight safety. And the Ministry of Aviation and the Federal Aviation Administration are closely cooperating on air routes, air traffic control, and flight safety.

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China Youth Daily published an article based on the interview on September 9, 2005. It can be found at:

http://zqb.cyol.com/gb/zqb/2005-09/14/content\_63841.htm