Saturday night at the movies
Lanzhou, China

by Kevin Tierney

and very few street lights in the compound which houses most university employees; the second is the bustle - a quiet kind of quickstep shuffle. This is not only my first chance to see a Chinese Film in China, but it's the first time I've been out at night since we arrived here a week ago.

Approaching the gates which divide the compound from the campus, I am struck by the weird combination of features: the buildings are mostly Soviet-style, uninspired. Stallinist Plain - they are to architecture what 'sensible shoes' are to fashion ; but the physical layout is Father Knows Best - tree-lined walk to the clock-towered library and all. A 60-watt bulb hanging naked outside the guard-house allows me to see what I've been hearing : people coming from every direction, moving through the darkness with a rush of suppressed excitement. The sound is broken only by the noise of sunflower seeds being eaten : bite, crush, spit and the crunch of the rejects underfoot. Sunflower seeds are to China what popcorn, gum and chocolate bars are to the West.

Everywhere I look people are walking in the same direction and their movement forces us to quicken our pace: men, women, children - all ages, shapes, sizes and descriptions - Saturday night at the movies in Lanzhou. A whole lot more than The Drifters had in mind.

Outside the auditorium the queues are long but orderly. The auditorium seats 1200 and tickets were on sale this morning for $1.20 or 13 cents. In principle, tickets for unit film screenings are available only to the workers of that unit, but everyone's got friends. Films are shown in this auditorium on an average of twice per week, Wednesdays and Saturdays. People know if there's a movie by the posters on the community bulletin board situated outside the student cafeteria: same day advertising, i.e. , they tell you in the morning what will be screened that night.

Inside people are rushing about matching seat numbers to those on their tickets: there is no such thing as non-reserved seating in the unit auditoria or the commercial houses. Before the film begins a series of slides are projected, all of them urging better behavior: no talking, no spitting, an unfortunate habit that can make walking to class at 8 am an excrutiatingly painful experience; no smoking, etc. People try, but it's hard to break old habits.

When the film begins, so does my interpreter, and I feel badly for the people seated near us, for they have to listen to his valiant efforts at simultaneous translation. He has since taken my advice and now only translates what makes the audience laugh and information he feels is essential. Fifteen minutes into the film I tell him not to bother. The dialogue, however insightful and poetic it may be, is not really the bad guy - that title is saved for Annie Oakley's lover who, of course, shows his real reactionary colors before the end of the film.

Our heroine rides her white horse to the hideout of an ex-member of her gang. She is the voice of yet another expert; everyone who comes here, looks around, is the voice of yet another expert, and will, no doubt, continue to write for five-thousand years and shows every sign of maintaining its record of longevity.
Canada is physically larger than China—especially amusing considering that a fact that everyone I speak to mentions.

oneself as being part of 25% of the world, and isn’t it more interesting to think of try? rather than living in just another coun-

Beijing. In each province there is a national agency headquartered in

charged more to see a new ‘story’ film (as features are known) due to a quietly capitalist-like trick that is loaded with

The parl<ing lot filling up as the attendant tiands out stubs (on right)
there are failures of a different nature in every country where filmmaking is active. But what the leadership thinks of as propaganda or education, and what we might like to think of as art, do not necessarily take into account what local filmgoers seem to be most interested in. entertainment. It is difficult to have a serious discussion of a film with either the students or the teachers of this and probably most universities, because their idea of film is so alien to that. (The idea that people actually teach film borders on the preposterous.) It is equally difficult to discuss the politics of a film, or film in general. (I may be totally wrong about why this is so, and should I discover that I am, I will write a letter to the editor and mea culpa my way back to credibility.) In almost every conversation in English or in translation (but always unofficial), I detect an almost apologetic tone. Surprising to think that the people we consider to be among the most politicized in the world are the least interested in discussing such a topic. Or is it? A sign of reluctance to discuss this with a foreigner? This should never be discounted, but even those who have spoken freely in other situations display similar tendencies of disinterest. Too much politics? A real possibility; so much so that people seem to have learned to separate national politics from their daily lives in order to survive the most tumultuous political history yet recorded: in 40 years they have gone from war to civil war, revolution, liberation, development, the Russians, the 100 Flowers Campaign, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, the death of the embodiment of the revolution, the Gang of Four, the four modernizations and the open door to the West— not counting other political shakups that we don't even know about. Just reading the list is enough to make the eyeballs spin. To do no more than cope, a filtration system would have to be at work. It is this filtration system that changes propaganda to entertainment and like everywhere else in the world, there is good and bad entertainment. Like audiences everywhere else, people respond accordingly: they stay home, go to another movie, or line up at o'clock in the morning to see THE film that everyone's talking about.

Although more and more people are now buying televisions, and more and more money is being spent on television productions, movies remain the most important source of entertainment in Lanzhou and elsewhere. I have been to four or five different cinemas on many different occasions and I have yet to attend a screening that was not sold out. (Even parking is a problem: lots, tickets and attendants— but waiting for the traffic to clear, bicycle or car, is a universal phenomenon, indeed.) Many people ask me about foreign films and clearly more of these would be welcome. The future seems bright for Chinese feature films, and should the present political situation remain stable even better films will be produced. A recent retrospective of 135 Chinese features dating from the 20's to the present is a most promising omen, for it shows that the audiences are interested in more film exchanges with the West, but even more importantly, they are interested in their own film history (an industry did, after all, exist before liberation).

As for me, I like going to the movies, here and everywhere else. Of the 12 films I've seen, one was very good, another quite good but not nearly as ambitious, while the other 10 run the range from dreadful to ho-hum. Not a bad average. Besides, like my friends say, what else is there to do in Lanzhou on Saturday night?