

# LEITERMAN IN CHINA



WERE YOU IN CHINA FOR AN ENTIRE MONTH?

"Yeah, almost. We got back from India on the 28th of November and wasn't supposed to go to China until the 7th, but they pushed the date ahead by a week, so I left the 1st of December. Flew to Vancouver, then the next day to Tokyo and Hong Kong. We went from Hong Kong to Canton by train, then over to the mainland, and then to Peking. This was all with the University of British Columbia hockey team, which went on invitation by the sports federation of mainland China."

*Cinematographer Richard Leiterman accompanied director Les Rose and soundman Jim McCarthy to film the Canadian team for veteran producer Don Brittain, who had to stay home for reasons of economy and lack of room on the flight. The shoot was for Lapierre, Thomas, and Associates of Montreal.*

IS THERE HOCKEY IN CHINA?

"There has been hockey in China for about 12 or 15 years and it seems obvious that they're trying to move ahead and put together a national team for the Olympics and what have you.

HOW DID YOU FEEL ABOUT GOING TO CHINA?

"It's something I've always wanted to do. I've had an application at their embassy in Ottawa since they first opened. So the opportunity came up to go to China; I usually try not to go away for Christmas. I like to spend Christmas at home with my family. But it was a thing I'd always wanted to do: to go to China and be among the few

Westerners ever to go there and to see how much it was possible to put down on film.

"Nobody seemed to know, not even the hockey team, what was going to happen until we got to Peking. It was a situation of not knowing where the hell you were going to be next. We went to all the games. Some of them we couldn't film because there was a light problem, some of them we did film. We heard that the games were going to take place outside on most of the occasions, which ended up to be true, but unfortunately they happened at night rather than daytime, which limited us in shooting them. Some places there just wasn't enough light, and we could only take one or two of them to light up a dressing room at most."

THERE WAS ENOUGH LIGHT TO PLAY HOCKEY, BUT NOT ENOUGH TO SHOOT FILM?

"Yeah, well you just can't do it. You're pushing a stop, and you're still not getting enough exposure. The first games were played in Peking. It has the only indoor arena in China. And it was a fair sized stadium, seating about 18,000 people. Every seat was full all three nights of play. They had their national television set up there, which gave us a little extra light. In fact it was the same place they had the ping pong tournament. So lighting wasn't that bad there, but you still had to shoot pretty wide open to get an image.

"They did very funny things. Because of their own television, when they were going to shoot a crowd reaction, all of a sudden half the seats would light up. The audience would be lit up,

throwing your exposure off. Then they would shoot the stuff on video and the lights would go down again, completely by surprise. Lights going up, lights going down, and you never knew what you had. But aside from this, the Chinese were as cooperative as any place I've been."

*Leiterman has been to as many places as any veteran cameraman, yet the experience of shooting in China has noticeably affected him. Just prior to the trip he spent two weeks in New Delhi with Henri Fiks, filming a U.N. sponsored conference on world population for Martha Stewart Communications (to be shown on NET), and within two days was off to the most densely populated country in the world.*

"It was a culture shock, going from India and coming back to Canada, and not knowing whether I was coming or going, and all of a sudden I was going and getting to China, you know, and it made me blink once or twice. Just trying to comprehend what had happened in the last 48 hours. It's not something I'd want to repeat again in that short a time. It takes longer to adjust.

HOW LONG WILL THE FINISHED FILM BE?

"We're aiming for an hour, and I think we've got a good hour. We shot 30,000 feet. There's a lot of hockey, and there's a lot of whatever else we could grab. Team reactions to China, and then they took us on their tours, which included everything from the Great Wall, to a truck factory, to a couple of song and dance evenings. We even filmed hospital acupuncture: one of the hockey players

had acupuncture done on his trick knee. He said it felt great afterwards.

"These trips would be sprung on us on the spur of the moment. We stopped at a city called Kuong Chi where the movie studios are those that were built by the Japanese in the thirties. We asked to see them and were told that there was nobody there. When we asked where everybody was, we were told that they were all out on location, but our interpreter didn't know where. The next day, however, he came with a big smile on his face and said, "Guess what, we're going to the movie studios." We were really surprised, because the day before he said that there wasn't any production going on.

"So we got out there, and they were grand old studios with two sound stages. We walked into one and there was this big production, at least twenty people on a set that was obviously not built overnight. There was an old 35mm Mitchell BNC and a cameraman, but it was strange because in most places when you walk into a movie studio people are interested, and you're watching a movie being made, and you're obviously interested in films, you exchange information. People look over your gear, especially in any Eastern European country. But in China, we tried to establish communication with the crew, yet they really seemed very disinterested in what we had."

#### DID YOU HAVE ANY PROBLEMS IN GETTING PERMISSION TO SHOOT WHEREVER YOU WANTED?

"No. Once they've accepted us as a foreign delegation, there were no problems. We could shoot most anything that we saw, although they were a bit hesitant about stopping the van in the countryside and letting us shoot the nearly endless trains of horse carts, and oxen carts, and water buffalo carts. But they did let us do that. Obviously, we couldn't shoot near any airports, railway stations, or anything military. And we couldn't just break off from the delegation and travel freely: we were touring the northeast part of China, near the Russian border, and had to stay with the team.

"But they looked after us very, very well. The hotel accommodations were good, the food was terrific, everywhere we went it was a banquet of no less than seven courses, and sometimes — on official occasions — as much as twelve courses. The people were extremely friendly, but at the same time very hard to know because of the extremely difficult language barrier. And there's no language other than Chinese that you can use, even their sign language seems to be different. Up in the northern parts, people hadn't seen a European face for twenty-five years or more, not since the Russians left. And the kids,

even the teenagers, had this kind of look on their faces, you know, that we were completely from another planet. I understand that the Chinese call Westerners "people with long noses," because we look so strange to them."

#### HOW DID THEY SEEM TO YOU?

"On the street, people really didn't want to have their pictures taken. They seemed to be afraid sometimes, kids would scatter. If there was a group of us we were almost mobbed by people following us and just watching and looking. But if you were alone, you'd be left almost entirely alone, except for the secret serviceman following discreetly several blocks behind. They didn't like to have us wandering off by ourselves, certainly not while we had the camera gear. But I guess that was also a type of protection, if the people got too inquisitive.

"We tried to go into one of the Chinese player's homes to film, but they kept making excuses."

#### WHAT KIND OF TEAMS DID THE CANADIANS PLAY AGAINST?

"The Chinese national team, and some regional teams made up mostly of the Chinese national team (laughter). It was very surprising to see the same faces at each new place, or at least some of the same faces. We never saw them en route, we never knew how they got there. In China, things have a tendency of mysteriously happening. But the Chinese players didn't seem to be as steady on their feet as the UBC team, and they had a few things to learn about checking. But they caught on pretty fast. Their equipment and uniforms are copied from western stuff, but they seem to play a more polite form of the game. After a few fierce body checks they were ready for a scrap, I think, but there's a maxim in China 'Friendship first, and Competition second.'

"When we got to one place up north it was very cold, 15 below zero, and we

had to shoot in an open arena which sat 20,000 people, freezing but friendly. And the camera wasn't going to operate very long in that kind of cold. I explained this to the interpreter and asked him if it was possible to make up a little cover or coat for the camera, like a Barney or a blimp. In an hour he came back with a tailor who took the measurements of the Eclair and made a paper pattern, with all the openings necessary for the eyepiece, lens, and handle. I explained to him how I wanted it open at the back, and since I didn't see too many zippers around, suggested buttons to hold it together. I asked what he thought of the idea, and he said, "How about a zipper?" He came back the next morning, and he must have stayed up all night, because he brought this beautiful quilted, tailor made Barney for the camera. It just fit perfectly!

#### DID YOU BRING IT HOME?

"Oh, definitely! (laughter)"

*Not having an assistant cameraman made Leiterman's job that much harder. In addition to lugging the equipment around, he had to spend hours loading and unloading the six magazines, not to mention shooting as much as 4,000 feet a day. He had a back up camera in case anything went wrong (it didn't) and took along 7241, 42, and 52 colour reversal film, never knowing too far in advance under what conditions the next shoot would take place. Sometimes he'd have one stock loaded all around, only having to unload everything because of altered schedules. Next time he would either take along an assistant or limit himself to the 42 stock to make his life easier.*

#### HOW WOULD YOU COMPARE INDIA AND CHINA?

"India in comparison to China is a wide open country. It's colourful with a lot of things happening and you can go wherever you want. It's quite a shock in



Richard Leiterman, second from the right, at one of the banquets.

China that you can't go, you can't jump into a cab, there are no cabs. You can't jump on an airplane because there's only the government airline and you don't have the kind of freedom that you have in India. And the colours in India and the things that are happening on the street, it's all alive! And I'm not by any means putting down the Chinese, because they're very much alive too, but in a different way.

"In China, everything seems to be done with a great purpose, even going from their homes to work on their bicycles, a great sense of value. Get on with it! And seeing a construction site with all the workers building a house through sheer willpower with manual labor, hardly any machines, and the little red flag flying in the breeze on top, and they all seem perfectly happy.

#### WHAT ABOUT THE UNIFORMITY OF IT ALL?

"You get tired of the uniformity, you want to see a little colour. And it's certainly true, they all have their uniforms and that's about all you see. I think that in the 3 1/2 weeks I was there, I saw only one skirt on a woman, and that was at one of the song and dance evenings. She introduced the acts on stage. The only colour you see other than the khaki or the dark blue or the dark grey, which are the three standard uniform colours, would be on some of

the younger kids, who'd wear a coloured, patterned winter jacket. But those were just on kids below ten years old, you'd never even see a teenage person with that. And there's very little colour in the stores and shops."

#### DO PEOPLE SEEM TO HAVE THE BASIC NECESSITIES?

"Oh, sure, but it depends on what you mean by necessities. Their houses can only be heated for two hours in the morning and two hours in the evening, but I guess that's what they've been used to. Before the revolution a lot of them didn't have any heat at all. There's very little rationing. It seemed that beer was in short supply in some of the places, although we always had an ample amount with our meals. There are no bars, I guess they drink their beer at home, and they do have their rice wines available in the shops. But there are no public drinking places, even the hotels do not have bars. People eat in restaurants, which are like soup kitchens, and there are some cafes."

#### DOES PEKING STILL RETAIN ITS COLONIAL APPEARANCE OR IS IT NOW COMPLETELY ORIENTAL?

"I think it is more colonial still than oriental. It's a huge, sprawling city with posters and slogans everywhere, across factory buildings and shop windows. Evidently it's not 'Out with the im-

perialist dogs' anymore, it's a bit softer 'sell'. But you look in vain for something old, a trace of imperial days. None is left. We were in some parts of the old downtown area, which I imagine was pretty exciting at one time, and now they have down there a People's Antique Shop. They sell beautiful things. I don't know if they're antiques or not, but the old man who runs the shop used to own it years ago and now of course the state owns it. And I think he's just having fun collecting the stuff and dusting it off, but it really doesn't matter whether he sells any or not."

#### IS EVERYBODY STILL CARRYING AROUND THE LITTLE RED BOOK?

"Not too much, except in the bookshops which carry huge stacks of them. But we didn't get into politics too much."

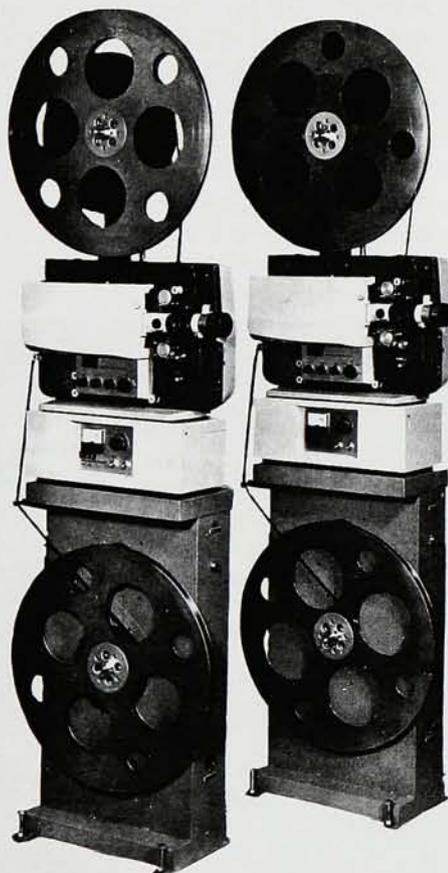
#### WAS VIETNAM EVER MENTIONED?

"They tend not to talk about it. I mentioned to the interpreter that I was near to China before since I had been in Vietnam filming, and of course he thought I meant North Vietnam. When I told him that it was South Vietnam, he thought that was unfortunate. The way he put it is that he understood things weren't going too well in the south. End of conversation. And he said that he had never been outside of China, so he really didn't know, but that's the way he understood it."•

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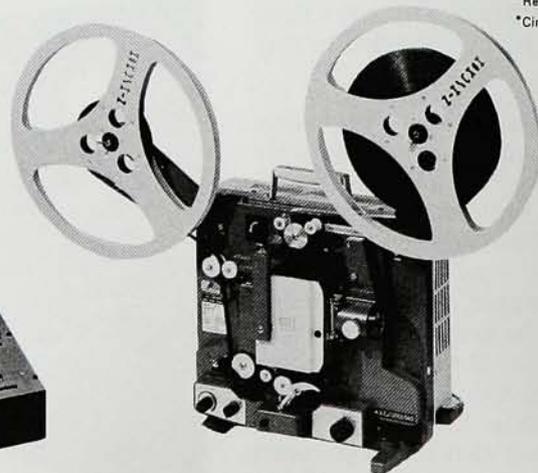
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