

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE LAST EMPEROR (L'ultimo imperatore) 1987

Bernardo Bertolucci

OVERVIEW

Coming a full fifteen years after his controversial *Last Tango in Paris*, *The Last Emperor* is an ambitious historical epic that restored the director's reputation on the international stage. In telling the life story of Pu Yi, the last ruler of the Qing (Manchu) dynasty, the film covers the turbulent history of China from 1908 to 1967. Based on Pu Yi's autobiography, translated into English in the 1960s, it was the first feature film to be granted permission to shoot inside the Forbidden City. Bertolucci's well-known political sympathies for revolutionary politics must have influenced the Chinese government to allow him to film in the palace grounds that symbolise the country's feudal past. With its beautiful photography, complex story and strong performances, the film won all nine Academy Awards for which it was nominated, including Best Picture.

PEOPLE

Pu Yi	Pu Yi is the last emperor.
Wan Jung	Wan Jung is his wife.
Wen Hsiu	Wen Hsiu is his second wife.
Eastern Jewel	Eastern Jewel is his cousin, who becomes a spy for Japan.
Johnston	Mr Johnston is his tutor from Scotland.
prison commander	His prison commander is unnamed.
Amakasu	Amakasu is head of the Japanese film corporation in Manchuria.

SYNOPSIS

The film opens in 1950, when Pu Yi is a prisoner in a Chinese re-education camp, and alternates between his life as Emperor (childhood, youth, maturity) and his life in prison. Key events include his coronation in the Forbidden City at age three, his western education from a Scots tutor and his marriage. In 1924, he and his entire staff are expelled from the Forbidden City, and he takes up residence in the Japanese-controlled city of Tientsin. In 1934, he is installed as Emperor of Manchuria but is merely a Japanese puppet. When Japan falls in 1945, Pu Yi is captured by the Russians, who hand him over to the Chinese in 1950, where the film began. After ten years in prison, Pu Yi confesses his war crimes and is released. Working as a gardener, he witnesses the excesses of the Cultural Revolution and makes a tourist visit to the Forbidden City. He died in 1967. Twenty years later, we hear his story summarised by a tour guide.

SCENES

[Note: The main narrative is intercut with scenes from Pu Yi's time in a re-education camp from 1950 to 1959. The two timelines merge near the end of the film.]

1908: Child Emperor Pu Yi, aged only three, is summoned to the Forbidden City, where the ailing Empress Dowager informs him that the previous emperor has died and that he, therefore, is the new ruler. His mother hands her child over to the care of a nurse, Ar Mo, who distracts the little one from his homesickness. The perplexed toddler manages to stay awake during his coronation but is confused by the hundreds of palace eunuchs and maids eager to serve him. He has a brief moment of joy when his old nurse, Ar Mo, tells him a bedtime story.

1912: Family reunion Still only a little boy, Pu Yi has grown into his role as Emperor and enjoys exercising his power. He is joined by his mother and younger brother, Pu Chieh. Although he doesn't recognise his mother or brother, the latter becomes his playmate. One day, while explaining the customs of the Forbidden City to his brother, he says, 'Ordinary people cannot look at the Emperor. I'm too important.'

1912: Revolution When the Qing (Manchu) dynasty is overthrown by a revolution, Pu Yi is told that he is still Emperor but only rules inside the palace. Outside its formidable walls, where he is forbidden to venture, two thousand years of imperial rule has disappeared and China is a republic. He is confused and angry when his nurse, Ar Mo, is also taken away from him.

1919: Foreign tutor The age of the warlords has arrived, with corruption and infighting that tears the new republic apart. Students, communists and nationalists all take to the streets. At this point, a Scotsman, Reginald Johnston, arrives as tutor to Pu Yi (the first foreigner, he is told, with an official court post since Marco Polo). In his top hat and tails, Johnston is a formidable figure, who knows Chinese culture and literature well. Tutor and pupil earn each other's respect, and Johnston introduces the young man to western ideas. He also gives Pu Yi news of the tumultuous events taking place outside the Forbidden City, which increases his anger at his confinement.

1920: Bicycle The most important thing that Johnston gives Pu Yi is a bicycle, the current fashion icon. Soon, the Emperor is cycling around the palace courtyards and attempts to flee in order to see his mother's corpse (she has just killed herself) and his brother, but armed soldiers prevent him. Distracted, Pu Yi climbs recklessly onto a high roof, where Johnston rescues him.

1922: Marriage After winning an argument with the Chief Minister about the need for the Emperor to wear glasses, Johnston advises him to marry as a means of changing his status and possibly escaping from the palace. Pu Yi weds Wan Jung and takes a second wife named Wen Hsiu. With his new position as householder, Pu Yi launches a series of reforms in the Forbidden City, dismissing the 1,200 palace eunuchs who have been stealing from the royal collection of art. He also takes the controversial step of cutting off his pigtail and says that he no longer wants to escape: he wants to rule. He also begins to have sex with his two wives, sometimes with both at the same time.

1924: Expulsion During another period of political upheaval in 1924, Pu Yi is accused of being a Manchurian foreigner and is expelled from the palace, along with his entire royal staff. Following Johnston's advice, Pu Yi and his wives settle in the Japanese-controlled area of Tientsin, where they live in relative luxury and become increasingly westernised. Pu Yi takes the name of Henry, while his wife becomes known as Elizabeth.

1928: Eastern Jewel Chiang Kai-shek defeats the Communists, his erstwhile ally, and sets up a new government. The adoption of western ideas leads Wen Hsiu, the second wife, to ask for a divorce. When Pu Yi refuses, she leaves. Wan Jung misses her, but an old female friend, Eastern Jewel, shows up to take her place. A spy for the Japanese, Eastern Jewel has been sent to bring Pu Yi into closer contact with the Japanese. For example, she tells him that his ancestors' tombs in Manchuria have been desecrated by Chiang Kai-shek's soldiers.

1932: Manchuria After his mentor Johnston returns to Great Britain, Pu Yi makes another move. Following the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, he is invited to become Emperor there. Despite warnings that he would be a puppet of the Japanese, he says that as a Manchurian by birth he is the hereditary ruler of its people. When accused of betraying his country, he replies, 'Which country?'

1934: Emperor again At a grand ceremony, Pu Yi is installed as Emperor of Manchuria, with his wife as Empress. His wife, who opposed his decision from the beginning, is upset by his disloyalty to China. Pu Yi refuses to make love to her because, under the influence of Eastern Jewel, she has become an opium addict.

1935: Demotion After a trip to Tokyo, Pu Yi returns to Manchuria and realises that his vision of an independent Manchuria is a dream. His authority is formally undercut when he is blackmailed into signing an edict that hands real power to a Prime Minister. His wife then tells him that she is going to have a child, by another man, a Manchurian. She says she did it for him, in order to produce an heir. The father, Pu Yi's driver, is shot as a punishment.

1937: Loss Pu Yi signs a decree making Japanese the official language in Manchuria. Then tragedy strikes when Wan Jung's baby, the bastard who would be the heir, is killed by the doctor. Wan Jung goes into shock and is sent away to recover at a clinic. In despair, Pu Yi turns to Eastern Jewel for solace. The Japanese assault on China intensifies with bombing raids on Shanghai and a massacre in Nanking.

1945: Capture When Japan surrenders, Pu Yi is advised to flee to Japan to avoid capture by the Red Army, which is nearing Manchuria. At the moment of flight, though, he delays in order to comfort Wan

Jung, who has returned from the clinic half-mad and does not recognise him. As a result, he is captured by the Russians.

1950: Re-education camp After five years as a prisoner of the Russians, Pu Yi and his fellow prisoners from Manchuria are sent to China, where they are interned in a re-education camp. Wearing a western hat and hair cut, he is recognised by the other prisoners, who bow down to him. Not wanting to be a risk to his fellow prisoners, he tries to kill himself but is rescued by the camp commander.

1950: Regime Pu Yi is put through a strict regime of re-education, including reading new history books and writing his own life-history as a confession. When fellow prisoners show deference to the former emperor, he is moved to another cell. Pu Yi is forced to clean toilets, sweep floors and make beds. He is interrogated about his war crimes, especially collaboration with the Japanese in Manchuria. He also watches film footage detailing the Japanese massacre of thousands of innocent citizens. Pu Yi is confronted with new facts and forced to rewrite his history.

1959: Citizen Pu Yi Aged 53, having been a prisoner for ten years, Pu Yi is finally declared rehabilitated and released. He works as a gardener in a botanical garden, one of the skills he picked up in prison.

1967: Cultural Revolution Walking home from work one day, he watches a parade of Red Guards, who sing and dance to celebrate the end of feudalism. One of those accused of anti-revolutionary crimes, complete with dunce hat, is his former prison commander. Pu Yi pleads the man's innocence but is pushed away by youths dedicated to Mao's Cultural Revolution.

1967: Tourist Some time later, Pu Yi visits the Forbidden City as an ordinary citizen and stands in front of the throne he once occupied. A little boy, wearing the red scarf of a Communist Pioneer, orders him to step aside, but Pu Yi proves his identity by retrieving the pet cricket still in the wooden box given to him on the day of his coronation sixty years before. He gives it to the young boy, who is impressed and wants to speak to the last emperor, but he has disappeared.

1987: Legend A tour guide leads a group through the Forbidden City. He stops in front of the throne and gives a summary of Pu Yi's life, concluding with the fact that he died in 1967.

THEMES

1. *Truth vs Appearance*

overview At the heart of this complex epic story is the search for historical truth, the attempt to disentangle truth from memory, prejudice and political ideology. Everyone seeks it, and views it from their own perspective, whether ideological or personal. But no one seems to know what it is, not even the director, who wisely did not assume an omniscient point of view in telling the story.

re-education The re-education prison, where Pu Yi is held for ten years, is the battleground between the last emperor's memories and the rewriting of history promoted by the Communist Party. When the prison commander makes a speech to Pu Yi and his fellow prisoners in 1950, he says that 'we believe' men are born good, which echoes the message given to the young emperor by his imperial instructor in the palace. The Communist prison governor, however, goes further and states, 'The only way to change is to discover the truth and look at it in the face.' The re-education programme includes new history books, documentary film, interrogations, summoning witnesses and, most important, the prisoners writing their own biographies. The prison commander's speech is articulated with conviction and optimism, but the process of re-education and rewriting history is, as the film shows, far from simple.

Manchuria One example of this knotty problem is the question of whether Pu Yi went to Manchuria of his own volition (as the Communist Party asserts) or as a hostage of the Japanese government (as Pu Yi claims). This issue is presented in several scenes, and in one the prison commander tells Pu Yi something he didn't know: that the anti-Manchurian league, which had threatened to assassinate him, was financed by Japan. But a more dramatic moment arrives when the commander confronts Pu Yi with Johnston's book, in which his old tutor claims that the emperor went to Manchuria of his own accord. When he hears the relevant passage read aloud, Pu Yi screams, 'He's a liar' and points out,

truthfully, that Johnston was not in China when the event happened. Next, Pu Yi is confronted with the confession of a former colleague in Manchuria, who also says that the emperor made the decision himself to go. Later, in their cell together, Pu Yi asks the man why he told a lie, but the man maintains that he told the truth. The film then shows us that Pu Yi did decide to go to Manchuria on his own but for noble reasons, namely, because he regarded himself as the hereditary ruler of Manchuria. Did Pu Yi lie to the prison commander? Did he misremember certain aspects of the event? Or did he later convince himself that he was 'forced' to go to Manchuria? The film does not answer the question.

2. *Politics*

overview Related to this search for the truth is the theme of the 'hollow crown,' that is, the artificial nature of Pu Yi's political power. A phrase used by Shakespeare to describe the authority of Richard II (r. 1377-1399), it applies equally well to the symbolic nature of Pu Yi's rule six centuries later in China. As is true of other puppets, or pensioned-off rulers, the last emperor is allowed to keep the trappings of power without the means to assert it.

coronation One of the most telling scenes in the entire film occurs when the Empress Dowager formally proclaims Pu Yi as the Son of Heaven. Amid all the pomp and circumstance, the three-year-old simply sticks his fingers in his mouth and is barely able to stay upright on his throne. He starts to fidget and flail his arms about, much to consternation of his minders, who tell him to shush. 'It'll soon be over,' they whisper. Excited by the sight of a huge yellow curtain draped in front of him, the little child wiggles off the high throne and toddles toward the curtain. When it is whipped away, he sees ranks and ranks of palace eunuchs and soldiers lined up to honour him. As they bend their heads to the ground in unison, he waddles through them and reaches a staircase from where he can see hundreds more servants doing the same thing in a larger courtyard. Later, when he is bathed by servants, he asks, 'Is it true that I can do anything I want?' He is assured that he can because he is the 'Lord of Ten Thousand Years.' As it turns out, his authority over China does not even last four years.

ruler without power After Johnston becomes his tutor, Pu Yi has some of the gold dust wiped from his eyes. A memorable scene occurs when Pu Yi discovers that the palace eunuchs, who have been stealing pieces from the royal art collection, burn down the storehouse to cover up their crimes. The still-young Pu Yi asks the Scotsman why his servants have never been loyal and deceived instead of served him. 'Why?' the boy asks, 'have they worked so hard to keep me completely ignorant and still in power.' Johnston's reply is cold and true: 'Because, your majesty,' he says, 'it was to save their jobs.' Now, Pu Yi understands that the servile behaviour of the hundreds of palace staff, their deference and kowtowing, was not sincere. He does command the palace any more than he commands the country. In both contexts, he has no real power.

symbolic figure Against the picture of the powerless monarch, the film also presents many scenes of the genuine respect shown to him by his former servants and colleagues. Those loyal men are often punished in prison or in Manchuria, but still they continue to act with traditional deference toward the last emperor. In one scene, Johnston watches Pu Yi at a western-style dance in Tientsin and comments on his loss of power to a former palace official. That man, smiles wanly and tries to correct the Scotsman's point of view. 'The Emperor may have abdicated, Mr Johnston,' the official says, 'but he is still a symbol of great importance to many people.' In this sense, then, Pu Yi does retain power, but only insofar as other people acknowledge it. Rather than something he holds in his own hands, his power is a transaction that requires others.

emperor again As if to emphasise the hollow nature of his crown, the story includes a second coronation of Pu Yi, this time as the ruler of the Japanese puppet-state of Manchuria. The ceremony takes place with a large cast of dignitaries and military men in formal dress, a brass band and flags fluttering in the strong wind. Pu Yi arrives in a limousine and emerges wearing traditional Chinese royal dress. The onlookers bow down and Buddhist priests chant as the Emperor of Manchuria walks onto a platform and utters the traditional prayer: 'To Heaven, to Earth, to the Moon, to the Sun.' He is now emperor again, but the whole event is enacted on a hastily-erected stage in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by windy desert landscape. The setting matches the empty nature of Pu Yi's new role. Moments later, he is hailed as the new emperor at a dinner party, but the celebrations are led by Eastern Jewel, who is doped up on opium. The lights and the cheers are as artificial as the tinsel thrown from the balcony surrounding the ballroom.

political intrigue Despite his status as 'emperor,' in Manchuria, Pu Yi is under the thumb of his

Japanese masters, who require him to sign away any real power to a prime minister. He is also forced to sign an edict that introduces Japanese as the medium of education in Manchuria. Everywhere he turns, Pu Yi is watched and followed by Japanese officials and spies. One of them is Amakasu, head of the Japanese film corporation in Manchuria, who uses film to manipulate the emperor's public image as well as to keep an eye on him.

3. Society

westernisation Another main theme in the film is the advancing westernisation and modernisation of Chinese society, which took place in the first half of the twentieth century. Pu Yi is taught by a Scotsman, learns English, wear glasses and, when he takes up residence in Tientsin, adopts the playboy life-style of the Roaring Twenties. The film depicts small details, such as Pu Yi's habit of chewing gum, as well as the major developments, such as the democratic movement of Sun Yat-sen, the 'father of modern China.'

western tutor The initial step in Pu Yi's westernisation takes place when he meets his tutor for the first time. The tall, aging Scotsman, who is well-versed in all things Chinese, shows respect to the young emperor and they sit down for a lesson. Rather than begin by teaching his pupil, Johnston turns the tables and asks if Pu Yi has anything he might like to ask him. The boy hesitates for a moment and says, 'Where are your ancestors buried?' A good question, which Johnston can't answer, but he goes on to instruct Pu Yi in the importance of honesty. 'Words are important,' he says, 'and a gentleman should always mean what he says.' Again, Pu Yi hesitates before replying, 'I'm not allowed to say what I mean. They're always telling me what to say.' Here, in a brief scene, we glimpse the opening-up of a young mind. Pu Yi is forced to think for himself, rather than repeating information parrot-like in traditional Chinese tutoring. He is also advised to match words and thoughts, something which an emperor (or any politician) cannot afford to do.

tennis Another significant scene is that of tennis-playing. A full tennis court has been set up in on the palace courtyard. Pu Yi is dressed in western clothes, white trousers, white shirt and striped V-neck sweater, while the ladies wear long white dresses. Johnston sits in the umpire's chair, like the impartial judge that he is, calling out the score: 'Fifteen-love, thirty-love.' After a rumbling noise is heard, dozens of armed soldiers emerge and swarm down the stairway to the courtyard. The military leader informs the tennis-player Emperor that he must leave the Forbidden City because he has been declared a traitor. The game is over, and the puppet emperor is expelled. It is significant that such monumental news is delivered by a soldier carrying a gun to Pu Yi carrying a tennis racket. He is no longer a traditional emperor of China. He must leave.

4. Love

a) overview There is only one fully-developed relationship of love in the film, that between Pu Yi and Wan Jung, his wife. Although she is slightly older and wiser than he, and although it is an arranged marriage, they grow up together, establish a rapport and enjoy mutual respect. Pu Yi also takes a second wife, Wen Hsiu, who plays second fiddle and eventually leaves the arrangement.

b) sexual initiation The few scenes of sexuality are suggestive rather than explicit. Overall, beginning with the baby Pu Yi's fixation on his wet nurse, the scenes chart the awakening of the protagonist's sexuality. After his marriage to Wan Jung, when both of them are still teenagers, Pu Yi begins to explore his sexuality. In a Chinese version of the wedding night, Wan Jung asks the Emperor if he would like to see the face of the Empress. He does and slowly lifts the heavy cloth headdress that hides her. That same night, the two of them sit together on a couch and kiss, while courtiers aid their love-making by deftly and discreetly removing layers of clothing. When her breast is exposed to view, and Pu Yi's boots are removed, Wan Jung calls a halt to proceedings and tells the 'helpers' to leave. A moment later, speaking to herself, she admits that she likes her husband. 'And he will grow up,' she says with a mischievous smile.

c) two wives The next scene that advances Pu Yi's sexuality takes place after he has accepted Wen Hsiu as a second wife. Pu Yi is lying in bed alone when Wan Jung comes in, dressed only in a revealing nightie, and asks if she can join him. Before they can get down to business, though, Wen Hsiu shows up and asks if she can get into bed with them. She does, and then Pu Yi throws the sheet over all three of them and begins a sexual romp, in which no one seems to know who is who. The whole scene is played with tenderness and playfulness—after all, the three of them are still kids.

lesbianism The other sexual strand is the suggestion of a lesbian relationship between Eastern Jewel and Wan Jung. It is obvious that Eastern Jewel has a 'butch' nature, with her manly swagger and self-chosen professions as spy and pilot of a warplane. As soon as she enters the story, just when Wen Hsiu leaves the family (because 'in the west you can only have one wife'), Eastern Jewel's sexual energy is electric. Once or twice, she gets physically close to Wan Jung, but the significant scene occurs when they both smoke a pipe of opium. Her husband, furious that she has taken up habit ('Opium killed China!' he screams), refuses to sleep with her. Alone, Wan Jung also turns to Eastern Jewel for sexual satisfaction. The scene, which is shot in a silky silver light, begins as Eastern Jewel slowly lifts Wang Jung's robe and kisses her feet. She then puts a ring on one of her toes and says, 'Now, we're married.' The camera cuts to another scene, but we are left in no doubt about what happened next.

marital troubles The marriage between Pu Yi and Wan Jung is strained by the political events that pull them one way and then another. She is against the move to Manchuria because she wants to remain loyal to China. Later, he rejects her in bed when she comes under Eastern Jewel's malign influence in opium smoking. The defining scene, the one that illustrates their genuine love, comes after her pregnancy, which she engineers with another man, in order to provide the dynasty with an heir.

loss of two wives Pu Yi suffers the loss of both his wives. Wen Hsiu, the second wife, decides to leave on her own, explaining that they are fully westernised and westerners only have one wife. Pu Yi does not suffer much from her departure, as his real love is his first wife, Wan Jung. She is taken from him in a cruel and tragic way. When she gives birth to a son fathered by a commoner (a driver in the royal employ), the doctor murders the infant, which sends Wan Jung into a trauma, from which she never recovers. When Pu Yi is told that the baby was stillborn and that his wife is being taken to a clinic, he rushes to see her but can only watch as the ambulance carries her away. The look on his crestfallen face is one of devastation and loss. They had their quarrels, but they had a deep love for each other.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Pu Yi The film is, essentially, a bio-pic of Pu Yi, who is crowned Emperor of China when he is three years old. Given that start, it is no surprise that he is self-centred and vain. Through his inner strength, aided by a western tutor, he develops into a thoughtful and compassionate man, though still plagued by his past. His time in the re-education prison brings out the contradictions between his desire to find the truth and his personal investment in his own legend.

Arrogant Even the little-boy emperor enjoys wielding his (supposedly) unlimited power. An illustrative scene occurs when he and his younger brother are practising their calligraphy under the eye of their tutor. Pu Yi notices that his brother is wearing a robe with a yellow lining. 'Take it off,' he orders. 'Only the emperor can wear yellow. It's the imperial colour.' The brother then says that Pu Yi is no longer the emperor and that the real ruler of China rides in a car outside the palace. Hearing those words of betrayal, Pu Yi screams, 'Liar!' and chases his tormentor around the table. But when the brother challenges Pu Yi to prove that he is emperor, he orders his servant to drink a dish of poisonous green ink. To the horror of the onlookers, the man does as he is told. The young boy has the arrogance of an emperor.

Honest During his stay in the re-education camp, Pu Yi is subjected to harsh discipline and an unrelenting campaign designed to make him confess his war crimes in writing. Throughout the interrogation sessions with the prison commander and conversations with fellow prisoners, he appears to want to tell the truth, as Johnston has taught him. In one scene, he has just witnessed the release of one of his former colleagues in Manchuria. After the commander orders him to rewrite his entire history once again, Pu Yi sits in a room with four others engaged in writing their confessions. He knocks over his ink bottle, rips a page out of his confession notebook and uses it to wipe up the spilt ink. 'We are all pretending,' he says to fellow prisoners. 'You are just pretending that you have changed. You are still the same people. People don't change.' He enumerates the various crimes that these men, his former colleagues, have committed. But at the end, he adds that he let it all happen. Pu Yi is trying to be honest in his appraisal of the past.

Compassionate The other admirable trait in Pu Yi's character is his compassion. Although he grows up believing in his right to order everyone around, he slowly learns to be kind to others—to his wife, to his mistress and to former colleagues in prison. But his supreme act of compassion is displayed

toward his former prison commander in the closing sequence of the film. Now a free man, living a proletarian life as a gardener, Pu Yi sees the commander paraded in public as an enemy of the revolution. The commander is forced to wear a dunce hat as he is denounced by chanting crowds of students. When Pu Yi points him out to his brother, the latter advises him not to get involved because 'it's too dangerous.' But Pu Yi charges into the parade and tells a Red Guard that his commander is a good man, a good teacher and an innocent man. Pu Yi is thrown to the ground and can only observe the ceremonial humiliation heaped on the commander who helped him achieve self-understanding. His intervention is useless, but it is brave and compassionate.

Proud Self-deluded, naïve and sometimes arrogant, the last emperor is also a proud man. He sincerely believes that he is the rightful ruler of the people of Manchuria, the homeland of his ancestors. He agrees to become the Emperor of that large territory because he wants it to become an independent country, allied to but not colonised by Japan. After he makes a speech to this effect, which no one listens to, he has a formal dinner with his wife. They sit yards apart at an enormous table. 'You're right,' he says to her. 'I was blind.' At this moment of despair, when Pu Yi realises his puppet status, his wife announces that she's pregnant and that the father is Manchurian [they have not had sexual relations for some time]. She adds that she did it in order to produce an heir. Suddenly, an official enters and demands that Pu Yi sign an edict giving power to a prime minister, in effect, his own abdication. Having heard this demand, Pu Yi rises and stands behind his wife. Placing his hands on her shoulders, he announces that 'The Empress is expecting a child. Manchuria will have an heir.' It is his finest moment, when he believes that he will continue the Manchurian dynasty that had ruled China since the 17th century. He is immensely proud.

Reginald Johnston Mr Johnston comes to the Forbidden City as a tutor when he is already well-adapted to life in Peking. He carries himself ramrod straight and plays a 'straight bat' with his young charge, while also not fearing to stand up for his beliefs when they clash with palace tradition. Slowly, he develops a deep friendship with Pu Yi and defends him whenever possible.

Avuncular From their introductory, very un-Chinese handshake, it is clear that Mr Johnston and the young Emperor will become close friends. The tall tutor takes the boy under his wing, observing palace etiquette but also bringing new perspectives to the Son of Heaven. The most telling example is Johnston's gift of a bicycle. He comes through a door wheeling the new-fangled contraption and holds it out in front of him with a firm gesture. When the Emperor repeats his doctor's belief that bicycles are bad for you, Johnston does not hesitate to contradict that statement. 'Bad for you? Nonsense!' And when the intrigued Pu Yi asks how it works, Johnston gives him, and a crowd of astonished onlookers, a demonstration. Cycling around, he says, 'Head up. Eyes forward. Just like in math!' Soon, the teenage ruler is cruising through the courtyard complex and tries to escape through the palace doors on his new vehicle. Mr Johnston has performed his role as tutor admirably, offering his pupil a gift that the boy did not even know he wanted.

Proactive Not merely protective, Johnston is also proactive in looking out for his young charge. This quality is illustrated when the tutor seeks to introduce another new object into the Emperor's life: a pair of spectacles. When the Lord Chamberlain refuses to allow the emperor to wear this symbol of weakness, Johnston stands his ground and threatens to expose Pu Yi's true condition to the outside world. 'I will publish my comments in all the newspaper in China,' he warns. 'The Emperor has been a prisoner in his own palace since the day that he was crowned, and has remained a prisoner since he abdicated. But now he's growing up, he may wonder why he's the only person in China who may not walk out of his own front door.' Johnston wins this battle, which is significant in demonstrating his willingness to become actively engaged in palace politics on behalf of his pupil.

Prison Commander The prison commander is a dour man, a person of firm conviction that people are basically good and can be re-educated to bring out their innate nature. For a commander of a prison in China in the 1950s, he is extremely kind toward his wards, never showing anger or violence. At the end, we also witness his iron-hard determination not to compromise himself and confess to crimes.

Skilled The commander may not be a psychologist, but his occupation of overseeing the re-education of men has taught him the skills to accomplish his aims. At times, he seems to understand Pu Yi better than the prisoner does himself. In one significant interview, the commander is able to peel away some of the layers of Pu Yi's self-image. Sitting in the commander's office, they have both just seen the release of a rehabilitated prisoner. Pu Yi says that he thought the commander kept the man in prison because he wanted someone to look after him [the emperor]. At that, the commander loses

his patience and says, 'If I released you, someone would kill you on the streets. You think you're the only one who suffered! Stop trying to hide behind your private story.' Here, the commander exposes Pu Yi's self-pity as a blindness that prevents him from seeing the larger picture. The task of getting a former child-emperor to face the reality of his life is not easy, but the commander is skilled in the art of personal reformation.

Perceptive 'You think we are here to teach men to lie in a new way?' With this question, the commander opens another interview. He is angry because Pu Yi has signed a confession for crimes for which he could not have been responsible. When Pu Yi replies that he was responsible 'for everything that happened in Manchuria,' the commander stares at him. 'You are only responsible for what you do,' he says. 'All your life you thought you were better than anyone else. And now you think you're worse than anyone else.' His comment is extremely perceptive: Pu Yi's arrogance, as an emperor, that he controlled everyone is the same as his delusional belief that he is responsible for all the war crimes in Manchuria.

Defiant One of most moving scenes in the story comes at the end, when the prison commander is paraded through the streets and humiliated as an enemy of the revolution. He is made to kowtow and ordered to confess his crimes. The elderly commander stands upright and says, 'I have nothing to confess.' Twice he proclaims his innocence, surely putting his life at risk. We know, as Pu Yi tells the Red Guard who berates the commander, that he is a 'good man' and a 'good teacher.' The man who manipulated countless men to confess their crimes is defiant when ordered to do the same. He knows of no crime he committed and he will not lie simply to be exonerated.

Wan Jung Wan Jung is seventeen when she is chosen as the right bride for Pu Yi. From the beginning, she shows more maturity and self-control than her husband, whom she grows to respect. Wan Jung is fiercely loyal to China, despite its treatment of Pu Yi, which causes a rift between her and her husband. Her growing isolation from him leads her into a lesbian relationship with Eastern Jewel and opium smoking. In the end, though, she proves her loyalty to Pu Yi.

Intelligent Wan Jung, like the prison commander, has insight into Pu Yi and his complicated motives. This quality is demonstrated in a scene that occurs at a celebration after Pu Yi has been crowned Emperor of Manchuria. While he basks in the adulation, she sulks in a corner. He approaches her and asks why she is spoiling such a happy occasion. Proudly, he says, 'You did not think I'd be emperor again, but I am.' She looks at him with tear-filled eyes and says, 'You are blind.' He is dressed in full military regalia, admiring his image in a mirror, but she sees through it all. She knows that in accepting the Japanese offer to become ruler of Manchuria he has become only a pawn in their plan to conquer all of China. It doesn't matter that she is under the influence of opium, she is clear-sighted enough to see what he does not want to know.

Loyal A second illustrative moment in Wan Jung's character comes later. They royal couple are seated at an enormous table. The distance between them is symbolic of their relationship: Pu Yi has not slept with his wife because he detests her opium habit. Now, at this formal dinner, which begins by Pu Yi admitting to her that she was right ('I was blind'), she makes a startling announcement: 'I'm going to have a child.' He is dumbfounded. To mollify him, she adds, 'The father is Manchurian.' After a moment's silence, she says, 'I did it for you.' Wan Jung has sacrificed her modesty and reputation in order to satisfy her husband's desire to have an heir. It is a supreme act of loyalty.



(Pu Yi at his coronation)



(Pu Yi and Wan Jung, now Henry and Elisabeth)



(Wan Jung in despair)