

Characters in Bertolucci's Films

PRISON COMMANDER (in "Last Emperor") Conscientious

Character 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.