

Sweet and sour images find an audience abroad

By Mark Thompson in Los Angeles

Chinese cinema has reached a milestone of sorts in the US: it has become modestly trendy. For the first time, US film critics and movie-goers are being exposed to the works of the "fifth generation" of Chinese film-makers, as those in the first class to graduate from the Peking Film Academy after the Cultural Revolution are called.

The film blazing the way is *Red Sorghum*, the saga of a family from north-west China in the 1920s and early 1930s beset by bandits and invading Japanese. It was directed by Zhang Yimou, one of the oldest members of the fifth generation, and was awarded the top prize at the Berlin Film Festival in February, the Golden Bear Award. In October, it was chosen as the closing film for the New York Film Festival, where it was hailed as "the definite coming of age of the

talented fifth generation of Chinese film-makers."

The day after the New York Film Festival ended, *Red Sorghum* opened at the Lincoln Plaza Cinema in Manhattan, thus becoming the second film from China released in the US outside of a handful of theatres in a few Chinatowns over the country.

For a while it looked as though *Red Sorghum* might go the way of the first film released for a general audience, *A Girl from Hunan*, which was pulled after a short run because of its poor reviews. Vincent Canby, the influential film critic for *The New York Times*, wrote a review which apparently turned New York audiences away. Canby described it as somewhat better than a Soviet social-realist "tractor film, awfully provincial" and "not very exciting except as sociology."

The film has, however, had better reviews in other cities. Reviews in *The Los Angeles Times* and other local newspapers have called it "overblown" and "strange," but also "striking," "visually stunning," and "superb."

The popular appeal of Chinese films also was given a boost this September when the director of China's Xian Studio, Wu Tianming, was one of three individuals commended for their contributions to cinema at the Telluride Film Festival in Colorado.

Another of Xian Studio's latest international releases, *King of Children*, directed by Chen Kaige, competed at the Cannes Film Festival in May and was also shown at the Telluride Festival. It is scheduled to be released commercially in the US by Orion Classics, a New York-based film distribution company, sometime next year.

The slow but visible acceptance by US audiences of Chinese films comes on the heels of the success of several films by Chinese-Americans, such as *Dim Sum* and *A Great Wall*, a 1986 film which was the first Sino-US co-production. Then came Italian director Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* — also a

Sino-US co-production — which dominated the Academy Awards early this year.

The rousing success of *The Last Emperor* has also encouraged the Chinese Ministry of Radio, Film and Television to step up its efforts to market films in the US. The ministry's film distribution company has had a subsidiary in Los Angeles since 1985. But until early this year, this operated primarily as a buyer of US movies and videos, and only distributed Chinese films to universities and museums. Now, the office is aggressively peddling more than two dozen feature films.

Xiaolin Chen, who has been the firm's president since August 1985, says she is still learning about what type of films would sell in the US. One thing she has observed is that films that were viewed as controversial in China earn critical acclaim in the West. For instance, the 1984 production *Yellow Earth* was criticised in China for playing up the back-



Bertolucci filming his successful *The Last Emperor*.

wardness of the Chinese countryside, while *The Black Cannon Incident* was attacked by Chinese officials for highlighting corrupt bureaucrats. Yet, the two are among a series of six features her office has had touring universities and museums around the US since 1986. (*Yellow Earth's* international acclaim has not included Singapore, which banned the film in November because "the theme of the film was politically objectionable.")

"Some people [in China] think it's good to have no bad impressions of China," says Chen. "But in the US, people say these are positive [features of a film]. The fact that China allows these films to be shown and to expose problems in the government . . . is good."

Indeed, a good part of the current fascination with Chinese cinema stems from the novelty of the political candour in the films. John Powers, writing in the *Los Angeles Weekly* said: "After decades of being forced to edify the masses with party-approved tales, Chinese film-makers have begun to revel in their newfound freedom."

But the next round of Chinese releases in the US market may have a harder time since curiosity will have been satisfied. "Some of the praise heaped on *Red Sorghum* sounds as if it were surprise that the Chinese could turn out a movie of any technical sophistication whatsoever," wrote Canby. "I suspect its success owes less to intrinsic merit than the desire to jump on the Chinese New Wave bandwagon," Powers said. Future Chinese entries into the US commercial film market can expect harsher critics. □