

# wang makes the camera live

by Mikel Koven

If there is any realistic hope for American cinema, it is Wayne Wang. Although many young, independent directors are making excellent films outside of Hollywood, it is Wang who is creating consistently fine work.

Wang, born in Hong Kong, has directed *Dim Sum*, *Chan is Missing* and *Slamdance*, which repeatedly enthrall his audiences with imaginative camera work, his ability to get terrific performances out of his cast and an almost sentimental, yet fully believable, nostalgia for the extended family.

The 1989 Festival of Festivals presented two of Wang's most recent films. This furthers the argument that Wang is recognized as one of the United States' most talented auteurs. His camera is able to place itself in not only original but perfect positions. This is the work of both Wang and his cinematographers, yet at times it feels as if the camera is an entity in itself. Whether in the rich, sumptuous glow of 1949 Chinatown in *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (one of this year's festival films), or in the avant-garde neon glow of *Slamdance*, the camera lives with a life of its own.

Another factor attributing to Wang's auteurism is his attraction to stories about Chinese Americans. With the exception of *Slamdance*, Wang's films deal with the generation gap between young Chinese Americans and their immigrant elders. Keeping faithful to true auteurism, Wang is dealing only in subject matter he is familiar with and he depends on his own cultural knowledge to keep his films passionate and real.

The other Wang film at the festival was *Life is Cheap* . . . and although it is the superior of the two, it is the least accessible. *Eat a Bowl of Tea* was released in New York in August (to mixed reviews), but I doubt anyone will see *Life is Cheap* . . . in wide release.

*Eat a Bowl of Tea* tells a simple story, an arranged marriage between a Chinese American and a young girl who has never left China. When the laws for Chinese women immigrating to the United States became lax, two men who had immigrated and left their wives behind, decide to arrange a marriage between one's daughter (who was born after he left, 20 years ago) and the other's G.I. son. Being the only woman in the neighborhood, the community pressures the young couple to procreate. The pressure is too much for them; he becomes impotent and the marriage crumbles.

The film is a comedy. It is also a soft and romantic movie, with its heart firmly planted in the past. Wang conveys the beauty of New York's Chinatown with delicate and muted colours. His "camera eye" is in top form.

The major problem with *Eat a Bowl of Tea* is its gentleness. Where *Slamdance* rips through the theatre like an angry straight razor, *Eat a Bowl of Tea* is like an old teddy bear. It is really nice, and although you never throw out your old teddy bear, you do outgrow it. You put it on a shelf and take it down only when you're feeling very insecure. Such should be the fate of *Eat a Bowl of Tea*.

But imagine if teddy bear became possessed by the demon from *The Exorcist*. That's *Life is Cheap* . . . Although the better film, it is more problematic. Spliced together in a kinetic manner resembling some of Jean-Luc Godard's best work, the film jump cuts, features gratuitous violence, endless scenes of dubious meaning, monologues directed at the audience and a story that functions only to serve the essay that is at the centre of the film.

*Life is Cheap* . . . 's story is about a young Chinese American sent to Hong Kong to deliver a briefcase. He loses the case, but saves the concubine. The film's central focus is a glimpse of the real, unglamorized Hong Kong that is

now threatened by the Red Chinese takeover planned for 1997. With characters identified merely as Duck Killer (he says that when the Chinese take over, "we're all going to be sitting ducks" and then the film cuts to a shot of a duck's throat being slit), the Man with No Name (Clint Eastwood's character in the spaghetti westerns who is now the Chinese American who comes to clean up the "wild, wild East"), the Blind Man (who represents capitalism and how blind the west is to Hong Kong) and Money the Concubine (very nice lady, but kills when she "opens her legs"), the message is clear.

In Hong Kong, life is cheap. A hand severed from an arm is a recurring motif, as is the slaughter of ducks. The Man With No Name is forced to eat excrement, which he does with a smile and delivers the best line of the film: "This is good shit." It is more than a punchline, it is an example of the degradation that makes life cheap.

There is also a porn magazine circulating in the movie called *Popin' Mamas* which features pornographic photos of pregnant women. Carrying life themselves, these women further the argument that life is cheap.

*Life is Cheap* . . . engages intellectually as a riddle to be solved — at least solved before too much is given away. But why even mention it? Unless it appears at a repertory theatre in a year, no one will see it. It is a shame, because all of the beauty of Wang is there: his magic camera, his humor and his love of explaining the gap between the old world and the new.

*Life is Cheap* . . . acts as a nice counterbalance to *Eat a Bowl of Tea*. Where one is soft and cuddly, the other is savage and nasty. Both are great works of art which emphasize two points: Wang is a hot director, and successful films can only be made if the filmmakers deal with subjects they can understand.

## realities of war

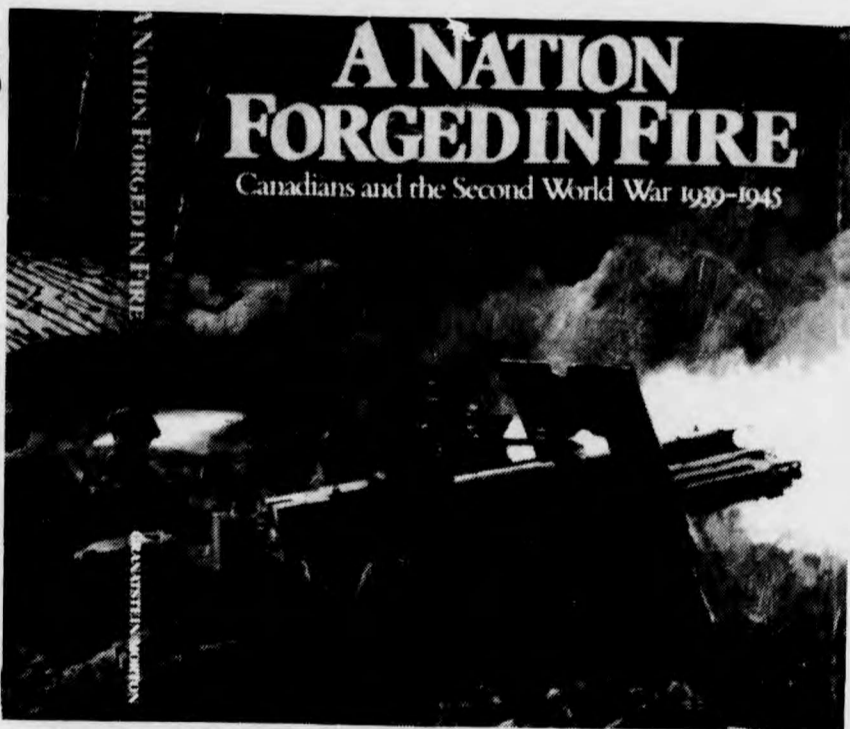
by Howard Kaman

*A Nation Forged In Fire*  
by J.L. Granatstein and Desmond Morton  
Lester Orpen and Dennys

There are two types of historians. One type seems to do only historical research for other historians to interpret. Their books seem to dominate the history book market and, due to their complex nature, are often unsuitable for public consumption.

York Professor J. L. Granatstein and Desmond Morton are representatives of the other type of historians, those who write for the people. *A Nation Forged in Fire* is a prime example of their type of work, eloquent in its literary style, yet still easy to read.

The book tells its story in two ways: by describing a different aspect of World War II as it relates to Canada, and through several pages of visuals. The photographs and paintings, many of them in colour, accentuate the words and bring the realities of war to life. Rather than being a boring history book, it is a beautiful volume.



The narrative is a straightforward retelling of history, but is far from dry. Granatstein and Morton know their audience and write with the emotion that it demands. The authors shy away from excessive facts and figures, and try to focus upon the experiences of the men and women involved in the war — often in their own words.

The authors' interest in people is exemplified by their choice for the book's opening illustration; a group of soldiers in prayer, before embarking upon their D-Day mission. It emphasizes both the positive and negative aspects of the war.

Aside from describing the hor-

rors of the war, the authors also enforce their belief that it "forged a stronger, surer and more sovereign nation" in Canada. In their interpretation, Canada entered the war because "of the link to the mother country, not because of any understanding of the issues at stake", but came out of the war an independent nation.

Ultimately, the authors argue that World War II had to be fought. "The second world war was a just war," they write, "without it the outcome could only have been unspeakable tyranny and institutionalized horror."

*A Nation Forged in Fire* describes that horror, as well as its effect on Canada, in fine style.

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