1-16-2008

In Case You Missed It: They Chose China
In the opening scenes of Shuibo Wang’s 2005 documentary, “They Chose China,” American soldiers dressed in the long, padded winter coats of the Chinese military cluster around a microphone to explain the international threat posed by McCarthy’s witch hunts and U.S. intolerance for freedom and democracy. The documentary tells the story of these twenty-one American soldiers, held as POWs by the Chinese during the Korean War, who refused repatriation after the 1953 armistice.

Through a mix of archival footage, Chinese and American TV clips, and contemporary interviews with one of the few surviving defectors, Wang tries to unearth why the young men chose to stay in China, attend university, and work as factory workers, farmers, truck drivers, and government propagandists. All but one of the men returned to the U.S. prior to the Cultural Revolution. (The one who stayed, James Veneris, lived out his life as a factory worker in Shandong, his fellow workers protecting him from persecution during the Cultural Revolution.)

Wang attempts to counter the argument that the men had been brainwashed by the Communist government (these soldiers were among the first tangible cases in U.S. media of the “brainwashing” phenomenon), instead presenting the men as “dissidents.” However, it becomes clear over the course of the movie that each of the men made the choice to stay for different reasons. Clarence Adams, a black soldier from Memphis, speaks of escaping from the racial discrimination and inequality in the United States, others seemed excited about the adventure of living in China, and others appear to have truly committed to socialism, maintaining their political beliefs even after returning to the U.S.

China buffs will find most interesting the footage Wang dug up from the POW camps—including film of the camp-wide “Olympic Games” prisoners organized—and clips of the soldiers explaining why they chose to stay in China. The film is rather hard to track down in the U.S. unless your local university or public library has a copy; it is not currently available through either Netflix or Blockbuster.