

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

## Characters in Bertolucci's Films

### **PU YI** (in "Last Emperor")      Conscientious

*Character*      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 17<sup>th</sup> century. He is immensely proud.