

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

Characters in Bertolucci's Films

JOHNSTON (in "Last Emperor") Conscientious

Character Mr Johnston comes to the Forbidden City as a tutor when he is already well-adapted to life in Peking. He carries himself ramrod straight and plays a 'straight bat' with his young charge, while also not fearing to stand up for his beliefs when they clash with palace tradition. Slowly, he develops a deep friendship with Pu Yi and defends him whenever possible.

Avuncular From their introductory, very un-Chinese handshake, it is clear that Mr Johnston and the young Emperor will become close friends. The tall tutor takes the boy under his wing, observing palace etiquette but also bringing new perspectives to the Son of Heaven. The most telling example is Johnston's gift of a bicycle. He comes through a door wheeling the new-fangled contraption and holds it out in front of him with a firm gesture. When the Emperor repeats his doctor's belief that bicycles are bad for you, Johnston does not hesitate to contradict that statement. 'Bad for you? Nonsense!' And when the intrigued Pu Yi asks how it works, Johnston gives him, and a crowd of astonished onlookers, a demonstration. Cycling around, he says, 'Head up. Eyes forward. Just like in math!' Soon, the teenage ruler is cruising through the courtyard complex and tries to escape through the palace doors on his new vehicle. Mr Johnston has performed his role as tutor admirably, offering his pupil a gift that the boy did not even know he wanted.

Proactive Not merely protective, Johnston is also proactive in looking out for his young charge. This quality is illustrated when the tutor seeks to introduce another new object into the Emperor's life: a pair of spectacles. When the Lord Chamberlain refuses to allow the emperor to wear this symbol of weakness, Johnston stands his ground and threatens to expose Pu Yi's true condition to the outside world. 'I will publish my comments in all the newspaper in China,' he warns. 'The Emperor has been a prisoner in his own palace since the day that he was crowned, and has remained a prisoner since he abdicated. But now he's growing up, he may wonder why he's the only person in China who may not walk out of his own front door.' Johnston wins this battle, which is significant is demonstrating his willingness to become actively engaged in palace politics on behalf of his pupil.