

RESOURCES
FILM REVIEWS

The Revolutionary

PRODUCED BY IRV DRASNIN, STOURWATER PICTURES
BY IRV DRASNIN, LUCY OSTRANDER, AND DON SELLERS
92 MINUTES, COLOR, 2011

Reviewed by David Kenley



Sidney Rittenberg became a celebrity during the Cultural Revolution. Here he exhorts a large crowd in Tiananmen Square to defend Mao Zedong thought. The photo used for the poster is from the personal collection of Sidney Rittenberg.

In 1945, Sidney Rittenberg arrived in China as a US Army language specialist. Soon thereafter, he trekked across the country to Mao Zedong's capital in Yan'an and asked to join the Chinese Communist Party. For the next three decades, Rittenberg remained in China, serving as a vocal and powerful defender of Mao's revolution. *The Revolutionary* combines powerful visual images together with interview footage to tell the fascinating tale of Rittenberg and the momentous, world-changing events he witnessed firsthand.

The film begins with Rittenberg's adolescence in Charleston, South Carolina. Upon reaching college age, Rittenberg enrolled in the University of North Carolina, where he became an active labor organizer and advocate for



Interview scene with Sidney Rittenberg. Screen capture from the trailer for *The Revolutionary* at <http://tiny.cc/zu68mw>.

civil rights. When he entered the military, his commanding officer assigned him to study Japanese at the US Army Language School at Stanford University. Instead, Rittenberg asked to be reassigned to study Chinese. This was a turning point for the young man that would have lifelong consequences.

Because of Rittenberg's political views, giving up a career in the US military and joining the Chinese Communist Party was not a difficult decision. He supported the party throughout its war with Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists and soon became a trusted journalist and propagandist. Nevertheless, when Stalin accused Rittenberg of being a US spy, Mao was obliged to arrest him and place him in solitary confinement. Rather than shattering his faith in the party, the experience steeled Rittenberg's revolutionary commitment. For six years he remained in detention, finally being released in 1955, following the death of Stalin. Determined to prove his loyalty, Rittenberg went to work for the Chinese Broadcast Administration, becoming a vocal defender of state policies and a representative of "international cooperation." Even during the initial years of the Cultural Revolution, Rittenberg remained a trusted party member, speaking to large crowds across the country and calling on them to rid society of "rightists."

However, despite his continuing service to the party, Rittenberg again found himself on the wrong side of history. In 1968, at the height of the Cultural Revolution, officials once more arrested Rittenberg, this time as a counterrevolutionary, and sent him to the maximum-security Qin Cheng Prison in Beijing. For nearly nine years, Rittenberg remained locked up. Following the death of Mao and the end of the disastrous Cultural Revolution, officials reversed Rittenberg's conviction and released him from prison. This time, he decided to leave the country he loved, and in 1980, just before his fifty-ninth birthday, he returned to the US.

Rittenberg's life is a fascinating topic of investigation, and *The Revolutionary* is an engaging and interesting film. The documentary's producers spent twenty-six hours interviewing Rittenberg over a five-year period, beginning in 2005. The film consists almost entirely of interview segments, allowing Rittenberg to tell his history in his own words. Interspersed with

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Sidney Rittenberg studying Chinese at Stanford during WWII. The photo is from the personal collection of Sidney Rittenberg.

video of these interviews, the filmmakers insert still images of China's colorful propaganda posters. These posters, they explain, "offer China's own representations in depicting revolutionary ideas and events."¹

In addition to telling an interesting story, the director and producer of *The Revolutionary* also want to "set the record straight" about a period in China's past that has largely been forgotten.² However, while many Chinese youth are unaware of the various disasters of the 1949–1979 era, Western students seem to dwell on this period of chaos. It is rare to find an Asian history course without at least one Cultural Revolution text assigned. *The Revolutionary* is an additional tool for teaching this real-life drama. The film moves chronologically through the mid-twentieth century, with Rittenberg relating his memories of the most important national events. Along the way, he tells a familiar tale, with only a few revisions to the orthodox narrative. For instance, Rittenberg claims that Mao always intended to use the Hundred Flowers movement to ensnare dissenting intellectuals. He also claims that Zhou Enlai was a reliable and fervent ally of Mao's,

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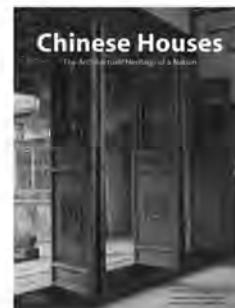
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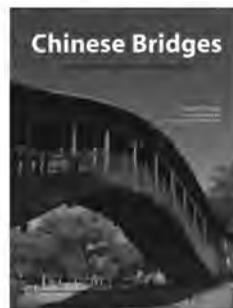


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Mao Zedong signs Sidney Rittenberg's copy of the *Little Red Book* during a gathering of party leaders during the Cultural Revolution. The photo is from the personal collection of Sidney Rittenberg.

rather than the mediating and calming influence historians often assert Zhou to have been. For the most part, however, Rittenberg does not deviate far from the standard historical interpretations.

The most intriguing segment of the film is Rittenberg's description of the Cultural Revolution. Not only does he describe the brutality in detail, comparing it to Hitler's Holocaust, but he also provides a unique and first-

Rittenberg uses humor and unflinching honesty to tell the account of his life.

hand view of the various Red Guard factions. Rather than providing a macro-level analysis of the Cultural Revolution's political environment, Rittenberg talks about the micro-level impact of the Red Guards on his work unit and on his own life. Instead of providing clarity to this confusing decade, Rittenberg demonstrates just how chaotic and unpredictable the entire movement was. His account brings the epic to life, forcing the viewer to struggle to make sense of it all.

Throughout the film, Rittenberg uses humor and unflinching honesty to tell the account of his life. Nevertheless, he also maintains a certain emotional detachment. He uses a rather dispassionate tone even as he describes his long years of incarceration. Consequently, the viewer is left to answer many of the questions Rittenberg leaves unanswered. How complicit does he feel in sustaining a regime that abused its own citizens? What regrets does he have today? Why did he support Mao even after the Great Leap Forward and the death of thirty million Chinese? Why did he advocate the methods of the Cultural Revolution? How did it feel to leave his US family behind? Did he maintain loving contacts with them during the thirty years he was in China? Perhaps Rittenberg had to create an emotional firewall in order to survive. Perhaps that same steely exterior sustained him through his long years of imprisonment.

This film can be used in middle school, high school, or college classrooms. Rittenberg himself provides the background information necessary to understand the events he describes. Like a kindly old grandfather, he tells the story of China's bloody revolution in an engaging and easy-to-understand tone. Before showing the film, students may be encouraged to consider the following questions:

- Why would an American choose to leave his own country and swear his loyalty to another?
- What attributes and experiences would influence this decision?
- What were Rittenberg's motives?
- Rittenberg's experience is extremely atypical. What are the advantages and disadvantages of studying atypical individuals?
- What does Rittenberg's perspective teach us about the Chinese Communist Revolution?
- If you had the opportunity to interview Rittenberg, what would you ask him?

The Revolutionary is one more resource for teachers trying to cover twentieth-century China. World history and even US history teachers will find it helpful. After watching the film, students will have many questions that can stimulate further discussion. Ultimately, this is the hallmark of a great documentary. ■

NOTES

1. *The Revolutionary* press kit is available online at <http://tiny.cc/hpwenw>.
2. Ibid.

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