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serving: recording, broadcast and sound contracting fields

Lab Report: Soundcraftsmen 900X2

Movie Making in China

Hands on: Crown IQ System 2000
Computer Program

Higher Ground: The Winans—Live!

Audio in Houses of Worship





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The sound contracting engineer

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About the Cover

● On our cover, the Sanctuary of the Salem Church of God in Dayton, Ohio. It seats 2,200 people, and has a sound system installed that is tied into the multi-track recording studio described in Brent Harshbarger's *Church Audio* column beginning on page 35. Photo by Robert "Bob" Shively.

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Movie Making in China

In 1988, I was invited to teach video production in the People's Republic of China. Marietta (Georgia) College, where I am a faculty member of the mass media department, has begun an exchange program with the Southwest University of Finance and Economics (S.U.F.E.) in Chengdu, Szechuan Province. Our department was selected to participate in the first year of this program, and I was lucky enough to go.

We were officially invited by the Chinese Government to go to Chengdu from May 1989 to July 1989. Accompanying me on the trip was a student in our broadcast program. Together, we were to conduct lectures and seminars on the basic video production skills required to produce programs with higher production values than the "talking heads," as well as chalkboard lectures which had been the norm at SUFE.

We arrived in Shanghai May 15, but that was about the last thing that happened the way it had been planned. Due to the then-happening civil unrest, we left China about two weeks before we had expected to return to the United States.

While in Chengdu, we had the opportunity to visit many fascinating sites including temples, monasteries, parks, zoos and the like. The most interesting tour we experienced was at Emei Film Studios, one of two major studios which produce most of China's feature films.

Like film studios in the United States, the Emei lot is a completely walled and fenced compound, and admittance is gained only after clearance with the guards at the gate. Once inside, things are not much different than at any other studio. The compound is populated with a dozen large buildings housing sound stages, processing labs, audio studios, editing suites, screening rooms, offices and other requisite facilities.

UNRELIABLE A.C.

A common feature to nearly every building we visited in Chengdu was the dark, damp and dirty interior. China is on a 240-volt electrical system, which is highly unstable and quite unreliable in the Szechuan Province. Therefore, lighting is minimal, and air conditioners and de-humidifiers are practically non-existent. The result is a less-than-ideal

environment for electronic equipment in light of the fact that the climate is somewhat similar to the southern United States or Mexico. The sound stages are in a dismal state of disrepair. It was explained during the tour that almost all film production is now done on location, and the studios have become nothing more than storage barns.

SHARP CONTRASTS

Contrast best describes China's appearance, for as unattractive as the building interiors are, the grounds are beautifully kept. The Emei lot is landscaped with gardens, fountains, reflecting pools and lavish plantings of all sorts. The contrast extends to other aspects of Chinese culture as well. A typical sight in Chengdu is a peasant farmer with his water buffalo working a field in the shadow of a high-rise building with its roof-top satellite receiver. The streets are equally crowded with people whose only mode of transportation is a bicycle as well as those who drive Audis and Mercedes.

Similarly, the contrast is apparent in the equipping of the facilities. As dank and dreary as the buildings are, the equipment is nothing less than the best. China, as a developing nation, has received several generous grants from the World Bank to improve its media systems. As a result, Emei's audio production facility is outfitted with Studer 24-track and two-track machines, Nakamichi cassette decks, an ADM custom film-mixing console, JBL 4345 monitors and an outboard rack equipped with Yamaha, Lexicon, Urei, dbx, Ursa Major and others. All this state-of-the-art hardware appears to be a visual paradox in the environment and culture in which it resides (*Figure 1*).

Figure 1. Making ready a master for playback in the tape machine room.



CONSPICUOUS STUDIO FEATURES

A conspicuous feature of the studios and control rooms is the power conditioner. Each room is outfitted with a device attempting to level out the highly erratic voltages. It was our observation that these power condi-

tioners operated with varying degrees of effectiveness. For example, in the video facility where we worked, the computer-assisted editor regularly "lost its mind" and the edit list contained therein.

Another curious aspect of virtually all the production facilities we toured was the method used for connecting equipment to A.C. power. The generally accepted method is to cut off the plug and insert the bared wires directly into the outlet. This was a bit unnerving by our western standards. The rationale for this practice is based on the reality of at least a half dozen different configurations of connectors at both the equipment and supply ends. So rather than deal with the myriad adaptors which would be required...

NEWLY INSTALLED AUDIO FACILITIES

At the time we visited the Emei studios, a new audio facility which will house the existing equipment was just being completed. The old studio, a huge, cavernous room finished in dark woods, is of Soviet design. The surface treatment yields a very reverberant quality. The studio is like a dimly-lit empty cathedral with the acoustic characteristics of a gymnasium.

The main console (the ADM) is located in the studio, versus the main control room, *Figure 2*. How this works for scoring and track laying was quite beyond our comprehension. A satisfactory explanation was never given by our Chinese hosts. The studio also contained a screen and projection booth, serving as a film-mixing facility as well, and it appeared to function well in that configuration.

There is a small control room attached to the studio which houses a 12-input Studer console. This was the room of choice for doing more "pop" types of music. This control room also contained a Yamaha DX-7 and limited outboard equipment.

The new studio was designed by Chinese engineers from the Engineering University of Chongqing. The acoustic treatment of this room is very similar to that of a Western studio. The surfaces feature anechoic wedge shapes, fabric covered forms filled with an absorptive glass fiber material as seen in *Figure 3*. The studio is spacious by our standards and is decidedly non-reverber-



Figure 2. The ADM console. Note that it is not located in a control room, but in the studio itself.

ant. The walls and ceiling are finished in much lighter colors, and consequently, the room has a more open feel.

WESTERN STYLE

The new studio and control room will be patterned in a Western style with the console located in the control room. It will be used for track laying, scoring, foleying and dialog replacement. The new facility will also include a small studio for voice-over which will be linked to the main control room.

Final mixes will be done in a newly outfitted multi-function theater. This room is luxuriously appointed (even by Western standards), and features comfortable, spacious seating. The mix position is at the rear of the auditorium.

The acoustic treatment features thousands of absorptive cells along the side and rear walls. The absorbers consist of cubes roughly 10 by 10 inches, which are filled with a fibrous material and covered with colored fabric. See *Figure 4*.

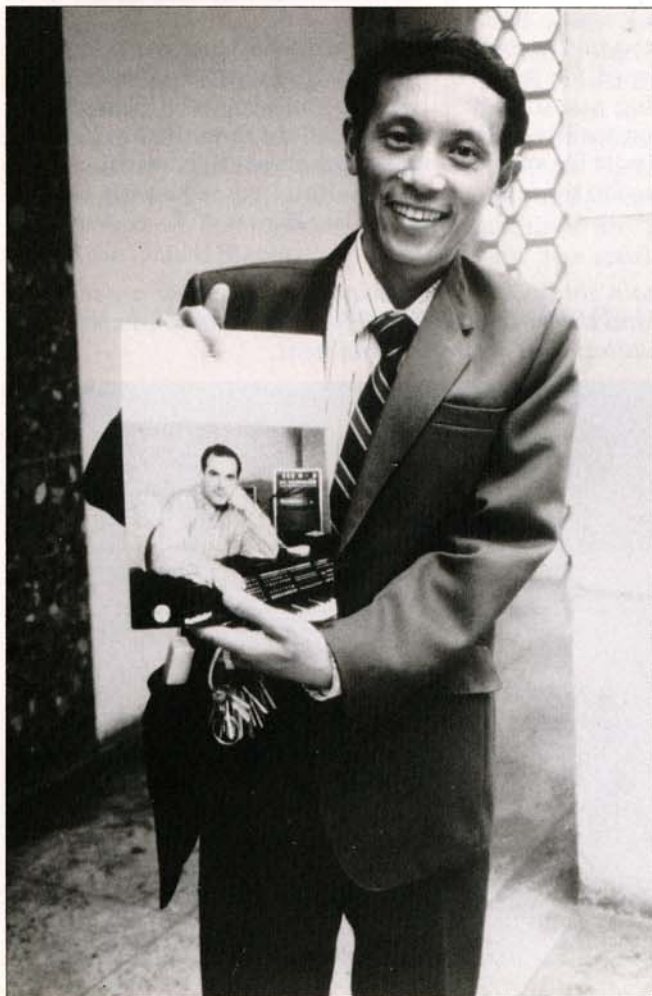
Figure 3. The new main studio. The lower windows at the rear are the control room (right) and the voice-over studio (left). The windows above are for the future installation of projection equipment.





Figure 4. The theater. You are looking forward from the mix position.

Figure 5. Mr. Shi Yulin, Director of the audio facilities at Emei. He is holding a September/October issue of *db Magazine* which contained an article by author Rick Shriver on the construction of his Electronic Cottage studio. The photo on the cover is of Shelton Leigh Palmer, tapeless studio owner, also featured in that issue.



Another use of the theater is previewing completed features. Communist party officials regularly scrutinize films to make sure the content is "appropriate."

Because China is still decidedly Third World economically and culturally, recording has not become the flourishing industry that it has in many Western countries. As a result, popular music artists frequently find the only recording facility that exists is in film, television or radio studios. In fact, our guides explained that the studio at Emei was the only one with multi-track capability in the Chengdu area, which has a population in excess of one-and-a-half million. As a result, music recording has become a lucrative sideline.

Strangely enough, the most popular genre of music in China currently is

"disco." It is the same form of dance music which dominated the United States' music scene in the 70s. Likewise, the whole disco phenomenon is enjoying this popularity. Dance clubs with spectacular light shows, lighted dance floors and polyester-clad dancers can be found in most cities. But as with many adopted western customs, it's a close-but-no-cigar imitation. A sign in the lobby of the Jingjiang Hotel reads *Saturday Fever In The Roof-top Lounge*.

Another disconcerting tendency, by our Western standards, is that of the Chinese to select same-sex dance partners and to openly display same-sex friendship in a more physical way than we are accustomed to seeing. On more than one occasion, we were asked by young Chinese fellows to come dancing.

Lest this essay end with a negative impression of media production in the People's Republic of China, it should be noted that the Chinese have managed to adapt and persevere, and successfully turn out a high quality product, even in the face of these adverse conditions. While the content may not suit our tastes, the quality of the recordings we heard was excellent. The frequency and dynamic range of films scored with traditional Chinese instrumentation was spectacular.

SUMMARY

Given time to reflect on the overall experience, the cultural and technological exchange seems to have been successful. We probably learned as much as we taught. Certainly, we have a life-time of stories to tell, some about being in and trying to get out of Communist China during the "civil war" of 1989.

Chengdu was the only other city outside Beijing to experience any large-scale violence associated with the pro-democracy demonstrations. On the day we boarded the train to Shanghai, thousands of protestors began burning and looting the downtown district. Troops from Mongolia quickly moved in and "quieted" the unrest. The 18-hour trip to Shanghai lasted two-and-one-half days, as demonstrators halted rail traffic to prevent troops from moving in and out of Beijing. The train just ahead of ours into Shanghai was stopped and burned. So much for seeing history being made—we decided it was a good time to get out of China. ☐