

BRINGING KING to CHINA



a documentary film

Written, Directed and Produced by Kevin McKiernan

85 minutes/Unrated/
English and Chinese with English subtitles

Stills available at www.bringingkingtochina.com

PRESS KIT

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SYNOPSIS (SHORT 22 words)

A father's love letter to his adult daughter, a young woman struggling to bring Martin Luther King's dream of nonviolence to China.

SYNOPSIS (LONG 241 words)

Bringing King to China is the bittersweet story of Cáitín, a young American teacher in Beijing, whose failed protests against the Iraq war inspire her to produce a play in China about Martin Luther King, Jr.

Early in the film she mistakenly learns that her father (the filmmaker) has been killed by a suicide bomber in Iraq.

Vowing to show the world "the positive face of America", the protagonist sets out to raise \$200,000, hires the most prestigious theater troupe in China, and stages a play in Chinese with African American gospel singers. But her efforts to translate Dr. King's vision of global peace to a Chinese audience turn rocky in the face of cultural obstacles and soured relationships.

Caitrin succeeds in producing a popular play, but she is forced to re-define her success. She finally repairs a strained friendship with her beloved Beijing assistant, while confronting her father with the charge he is suffering from post-traumatic stress from his coverage of the war in Iraq.

Bringing King to China is a daughter-father story that plays out against a bridge Cáitín tries to build between the U.S. and China. As it turns out, her bridge is full of unexpected "potholes," as she learns that language proficiency alone does not guarantee that two cultures will understand each other. In the journey to find independence, Cáitín comes to realize that genuine cross-cultural dialogue entails a gritty struggle to find common ground.

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DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

This is a character-driven film about a good will ambassador who unwittingly generates conflict (“I have a lot to learn--I’m a white girl in China trying to understand a black man who died 12 years before I was born”). On the surface, it is a drama about diversity and cross-cultural dialogue: a self-assured foreigner in Beijing produces a play that extols civil disobedience as a means of social change--under the scrutiny of the Chinese Ministry of Culture. As such, the film encourages western audiences to view Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the U.S. civil rights struggle from the perspective of another culture.

The heart of this story, however, is the protagonist’s self-doubt: her struggle to deal with the threat of losing her father, her decision to abandon journalism and her questioning of whether Dr. King's 1960’s vision of global peace still has relevance in a post-9/11 world.

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SOUND BITES FROM THE FILM

"One day it hit me: could Martin Luther King's nonviolence work in China?"

- Cáitín McKiernan

"That's my daughter, Cáitín. Really something. She was nine years old when I covered the presidential election in Nicaragua. NBC put her on the TODAY Show."

- Kevin McKiernan, filmmaker

"In the East and the West philosophies, maybe we don't see things eye-to-eye."

- Wang Xiaojiang, translator

"Rarely will people talk about Dr. King clearly articulating how the war is an enemy of the poor."

-Wilmer Leon III, Professor,
Howard University

"I thought I could be a fly on the wall. I didn't expect that I would be part of Cáitín's back story, that she'd challenge my firewall between war, work and life. That Iraq would end up in China."

- Kevin McKiernan, Writer, Producer, Director

"The thing we dislike the most about Americans is their tendency to try to control other people--to interfere in their private affairs."

- Wu Xiaojiang, Director,
Passages of Martin Luther King,
China production

"I believe that Martin Luther King's message I believe is really on the marginalization of important groups in society that must be included in the society and whose contributions need to be supported and welcomed in order for the society to progress."

- Sabina Brady, China scholar

"I was in China and I was being criticized for this thing my country had done. This thing that I didn't believe in and I didn't know how to tell them how much I actually didn't believe in it. I wanted to show another face of America."

- Cáitín McKiernan

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SOUND BITES FROM THE FILM

"If you reduce King's ideas to violence versus nonviolence, you are blitzing him. You've made his greatness smaller. His real greatness is about equality."

- Beijing TV Producer

"The general public in China has great confidence in the future of the nation, but is relatively unconcerned with whether it becomes a more democratic nation. China appears to be emerging as a successful capitalist nation, without becoming a democratic one."

-Frank Wu, Chancellor and Dean,
UC Hastings College of the Law

"In China we have a saying: If you wear black glasses, you will see everything in black. If you wear yellow glasses, you see everything in yellow. America wears these colored glasses to view China."

- Yan Shikui, Adviser to Cáitín

"China is rapidly expanding its military and power...There will be a day when the Chinese equals the United States in military and economic power."

- Larry Diamond, Hoover Institute,
Stanford University

"If you (Americans) want to bring King's idea to China, that nonviolence and peaceful methods should be used, then what about the invasion of Iraq? This is the reason why King needs to be brought back to the U.S.."

- Beijing TV Producer, China

"We need to work together and the 21st century is showing us that. If we don't, we'll end up blowing each other to pieces."

- Sabina Brady, China scholar

"As the U.S. goes down, so goes the Chinese economy. The U.S. empire, the U.S. domination of the world's affairs, is coming to an end."

- Professor Shipping Zheng

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SOUND BITES FROM THE FILM

"The threat of the menacing hordes of the yellow peril."

- Frank Wu, Chancellor and Dean
UC Hastings College of the Law

"Last year there was something like 1700 civil disturbances where there was violence and China is having problems. To be able to take Martin Luther King's concept of civil disobedience within the system, and translating that into what would *that* mean in China, could have reverberations for decades."

- Sabina Brady, China scholar

"After September 11th happened--and the U.S. invaded Afghanistan and then Iraq. I was in China as a Fulbright scholar, and I represented my country. And I was being criticized for this thing that my country had done--this thing that I didn't believe in. And I didn't know how to tell them how much I didn't actually believe in it."

- Cáitrlín McKiernan

"God damn it! You're too conceited...She keeps insisting on her way to do the play! I keep saying: Americans and Chinese have to be on the same level! You're always messing things up!"

- Liu Tegang, Producer,
Passages of Martin Luther King, China

"The way that Martin Luther King was able to create real change, was partly through the legal system. I want lawyers in China and lawyers in the United States to start talking. I'd like to have a team of people who are big thinkers, who believe in dreams but also know how to realize them."

- Cáitrlín McKiernan

"The purpose of your play is not to overthrow the Chinese government."

-David He

"How can you get it wrong? Just tell the truth and it's always right."

- Cáitrlín McKiernan

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Q & A with the Filmmaker, Kevin McKiernan

Q: When did you begin to make this film?

A: I've made six trips to China, the first in 1996 when my daughter was 16. Cáitín was there as an exchange student and quickly became fluent in Mandarin. Ten years later, she came back to the same Chinese school where she had studied, only this time she was in China as a teacher. Cáitín had majored in Chinese history at Stanford University, where she also had worked part time at the Martin Luther King Research and Education Institute. Following the events of September 11, Cáitín went to China as a Fulbright scholar.

Q: What inspired Cáitín to produce this play in China?

A: After the U.S. invaded Afghanistan and Iraq, Cáitín found herself having to defend U.S. foreign policy, which the Chinese regard as aggressive. She decided she wanted to show "another face" of her country--and that was the beginning of the plan to produce a play about Martin Luther King, in Chinese, with professional actors.

Q: What got you interested in this story?

A: I got interested in the story in 2006, when my daughter brought a delegation to the U.S. from the National Theater of China to look at important civil rights sites. They visited Atlanta, Georgia, Memphis, Tennessee, Birmingham, Alabama and other locations. That's when I began filming the project. So, it's been a four-year production and post production and I'm quite happy to have this feature documentary, which is 85 minutes in length.

Q: Where did you film?

A: We shot in four countries: China, India, Iraq and the U.S.. I shot the Iraq footage when I was on assignment as a reporter for ABC News covering the war. The reason for the inclusion of war footage goes to the heart of "Bringing King to China": Cáitín's belief in nonviolence and her dissatisfaction with my going to war zones to get stories. This is the dramatic back story in the film: Cáitín believes that history has downplayed Dr. King's pacifist beliefs.

Cáitín becomes progressively disturbed in the film by the media's insistence that Dr. King be portrayed as a dreamer, not an activist who strongly opposed war in his time.

Q: What was your relationship with the legendary cinematographer Haskell Wexler?

A: I was privileged to have the assistance of Haskell Wexler in making the film. As you know, Haskell was nominated six times for an Academy Award in cinematography and he received two Oscars as a cinematographer, as well as an Oscar as producer of a documentary about Vietnam. Wexler, provided both inspiration and shot a number of the scenes in the U.S.. Haskell also provided information about the civil rights movement. He had met Martin Luther King, the late civil rights leader, in the 1960s. He himself had attended the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, where he studied the use of nonviolence in situations involving racial conflict.

Q: What were your interactions with the National Theater of China?

A: It was fascinating to go backstage at the National Theater of China, which is an organ of the government's Ministry of Culture. We had almost complete access--from the script meeting, to rehearsals, to the make-up room, to the sneak preview, and the performances. I got to know many of the actors, the director and the producers, all of which made for a delightful meeting of East and West. I visited many of them in their homes.

The film deals with a clash of cultures that arose during the international collaboration, which was difficult, but eventually successful. The drama in the film is Cáitín's journey as a first-time theatrical producer who was young, female, and an American in China.

The play received rave notices in the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, on National Public Radio and a host of other media.

Q: What is the legacy of the China project?

A: The project already has produced its own legacy. The Ministry of Culture filmed the play for national broadcast, giving the life and words of Martin Luther King a potential audience of hundreds of millions of viewers. In addition, the U.S. State Department recently made a \$100,000 grant to a group of actors in the Middle East to present their interpretation of the Martin Luther King play—those performances are scheduled in April 2011.

Q: What about China's status in the world?

A: China continues to dominate both the world economy and the world news. Chinese President Hu Jintao just this month was welcomed at the White House with a state dinner and much publicity. China's human rights policy came under the glare of international attention once again a few months ago when imprisoned human rights activist Liu Xiaobo was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Cáitín's idea of bringing Martin Luther King's dream of nonviolent change to China may have profound implications for the future. As her father, I'm quite proud of her. It was a pleasure to work on such a project with my own daughter.

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ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

Kevin McKiernan, Writer, Producer and Director

www.kevinmckiernan.com

Kevin McKiernan has been a foreign correspondent for more than thirty-five years and he has reported from Central America, Asia, Africa and the Middle East. His articles and photographs have appeared in *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Newsweek*, *Time* and other publications. He lectures frequently at universities and he has appeared as a television guest on a number of programs, including the CBS Evening News and the NBC Today Show. He has covered the Iraq war for ABC News, for extended periods in both Kurdish and Arab areas. Prior to that, he co-produced *Spirit of Crazy Horse* for PBS Frontline and he wrote and directed *Good Kurds, Bad Kurds*, the award-winning PBS documentary. His book, *THE KURDS: A People in Search of Their Homeland* was released by St. Martin's Press in 2006.

Haskell Wexler, Cinematographer

www.haskellwexler.com

Oscar winner Haskell Wexler is best known for two features, *Medium Cool*, a groundbreaking film shot during the Democratic convention in Chicago, and *Latino*, shot in Nicaragua, which received a special honor at the Cannes Film Festival. Both films broke the mold of conventional storytelling by using the immediacy of documentary-style filmmaking. Wexler has directed over 50 documentaries, rock videos and award-winning commercials, including *The Bus*, *Bus II*, and *Bus Riders Union*, *Introduction to the Enemy* (shot in Vietnam), *Interview with My Lai Veterans*, which also won an Academy Award, *No Nukes* (with Barbara Kopple), and *Target Nicaragua: Inside a Secret War*. As a cinematographer, Wexler has photographed a wide range of films that have earned him five Academy Award nominations and two Oscars for Best Cinematography. His nominations came for his work on his first feature documentary, *The Living City* (a short film), *T for Tumbleweed*, Milos Forman's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, John Sayles' *Matewan*, and Touchstone Pictures *Blaze*. He won Academy Awards for Mike Nichols' *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* and Hal Ashby's *Bound for Glory*. Other films shot for Ashby include *Coming Home*, *Second-Hand Heart* and *Lookin' to Get Out*. Wexler and Kevin McKiernan shot *Good Kurds, Bad Kurds*.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

Paul Alexander Juutilainen, Editor

www.defactofictionfilms.com

Paul Alexander Juutilainen is an award-winning filmmaker with experience in independently producing feature length, television documentaries. His first feature documentary, *Herbert's Hippopotamus*, was broadcast and screened at festivals internationally, winning an Emmy, Telly Award, a CINDY Gold, the Gold Plaque at the Chicago International Film Festival, the Best Prize at the Vermont International Film Festival, and 12 other awards. For this film, Juutilainen was selected for the Emerging Filmmaker Showcase at the 1998 Cannes International Film Festival. In 2004 he was a finalist for a Rockefeller Media Arts Fellowship and received a media artist residency in 1997 at the Wexner Center for the Arts. Juutilainen is a visiting lecturer in film and video production at the University of California, San Diego.

Bronwen Jones, Original music

www.bronwenjones.com

Bronwen composes music for documentary films, industrials, and public service announcements and also orchestrates for feature films. She has been nominated for a South East Regional Emmy for her score of *Sisters Of Selma: Bearing Witness For Chang*, the PBS documentary about the nuns that marched with Martin Luther King. Other documentaries broadcast on PBS that Bronwen has scored include: *Good Kurds, Bad Kurds, Roots In The Sand*, and *Pictures From The Old Country*. Robert Koehler, *Variety*, in his review of *Good Kurds, Bad Kurds*, wrote: "Vid lensing by McKiernan and master Haskell Wexler is first-class, with extra bonus of a fine, moody Bronwen Jones score."

Cully Gallagher, Cinematographer

www.cullygallagher.com

A producer and videographer, Cully's work has been broadcast on PBS, The Discovery Channel, and MTV. His location audio work has been heard at the Cannes and Sundance film festivals. He lives in Minneapolis.

Maggie Butte, Assistant Editor

Maggie graduated from the University of California, Santa Barbara, with a B.A. in Film and Media Studies. She has worked as the production coordinator and assistant editor for *Bringing King to China* since September 2008.

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ABOUT THE PLAY

Passages of Martin Luther King **China Production**

National Public Radio/June 23, 2007/Anthony Kuhn
Martin Luther King's Story Plays on Beijing Stage

The play's production in China is the brainchild of 27-year-old Cáitín McKiernan. She says she's surprised that she's been allowed to hold discussions on Chinese campuses about the Montgomery bus boycott and the freedom rides.

"I think that it shows that there's something happening right now in China," McKiernan says. "There's a moment, there's an opening that's happening that allows people to have these kinds of discussions, that allows the actors during one scene to hold signs that say 'freedom now' and to sing 'We Shall Overcome' on stage, and to show what civil disobedience is."

***The New York Times*/May 30, 2006/Howard French**

Found in Translation: King's 'Dream' Plays in Beijing

But the reactions Ms. McKiernan has heard so far suggest otherwise, and give her reason to hope that her dream of building a bridge between the societies by talking about peaceful struggle and universal rights has some hold on reality.

***Los Angeles Times*, June 22, 2007|Mitchell Landsberg | Times Staff Writer**

Even in China, King has a dream

"I think it's impossible to completely translate Martin Luther King's speaking style into Chinese," admitted (director) Wu. The actor playing King has adopted some of the trademark cadences, especially when he talks about how justice "will roll down like a mighty stream." But the phrase "drum major for justice" was drummed out of the script; so were references to St. Augustine and Jekyll & Hyde.

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“This Little Light of Mine,” by The Montgomery Improvement Association from *Sing For Freedom: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement Through its Songs*, Smithsonian Folkways SFW40032, provided courtesy of Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. ©1990.

Filmed on location in China, Iraq and the United States.

In Memoriam

Richard Baldwin
K.C. Carlsen
Carolyn Jensen Chadwick

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