When Warners found they had a major new star on their hands in the early 30’s, and sought to capitalize on that by introducing him to as many different audiences as possible, they found an effective if not too imaginative way of doing it. They kept the Cagney character consistent - tough and cocky, qualities that audiences obviously went for - but they put him into as many different kinds of films where that kind of character would be appropriate: more crime films, comedies, musicals, eventually service melodramas. Warners’ mass production methods meant that they could put Cagney into four or five films every year, even getting the "class" trade by putting him into a George Arliss vehicle. Paramount had a similar problem with Alan Ladd, but it needed a different solution. Ladd had been in films since 1932, but only really began to make an impression in the 1939-41 years, with suddenly bigger supporting roles in a number of "B" films and "B" film success of "This Gun for Hire" made him a star. But the film noir and private eye thrillers were on the increase already, and also looming was Ladd’s probable army service. His success had to be consolidated by accelerating the Cagney process with fewer but bigger pictures, and then to exploit his fairly obvious success with even more variety following his army service. Paramount, not normally too astute in moulding stars, preferring to exploit their particular niche until their vogue ran out, and then find somebody else, actually did fairly well by Ladd.

While his career didn’t contain as many “definitive” entries as did Begart’s or Mitchum’s, it should be remembered that he wasn’t as good or as versatile an actor as these two players. For a limited talent and a non-dynamic persona, he did rather well, and certainly no career that includes "The Glass Key", "The Blue Dahlia", "The Great Gatsby" and "Shane" can be considered to have been mishandled - even if not developed to its full potential. "China" was the last film Ladd made before joining the Army; "And Now Tomorrow" the first after his discharge, both aimed at different audiences, and yet both cunningly using Loretta Young as leading lady to expand the appeal of each film. Incidentally, although it is very much his film, Ladd gets second billing to her in "China" - while his status new established, he gets top billing in "And Now Tomorrow", even though it is very much of a Young vehicle. Paramount films of this particular type seem to have largely disappeared even from television these days. Neither is a particularly notable film, but each is typical of its period and of its star-building function. Sometimes coupling such films, as we have today, gives them a film history orientation which justifies their revival and transcends their modest importance. (Of course, they have to be entertaining too -- and, each in its own way, tonight’s two films are).

**CHINA** (Paramount, 1943) Directed by John Farrow; Assoc. Producer, Richard Blumenthal; Screenplay by Frank Butler based on the play "The Fourth Brother" by Archibald Forbes; Camera: Leo Tover; Music, Victor Young; NT premiere, Paramount Theatre, April 43, 78 mins. With: Loretta Young (Carolyn Brent); Alan Ladd (Mr. Jones); William Bendix (Johnny Sparrow); Philip Ahn (First brother); Richard Loo (2nd brother); Victor Sen Yung (third brother); Marianne Quon (Tan Ying); Irene Tso ("Donald Duck"); Tala Birell (Jones’ girl-friend); Ching Wah Lee (Chang Teh); Soco Tong (Tai Shen); Barbara Jean Wong (Nan Tung)

War films - and war-oriented ones - were all over the place when "China" opened at the Paramount. During the prior and current week, "The Moon is Down", "Tonight We Raid Calais", "Chastniks", "Hitler Dies or Alive", "The Edge of Darkness", "Flight for Freedom", "Hangmen Also Die", "Assignment in Brittany", "Air Raid Wardens" and "Crash Dive" had all opened, together with sundry war documentaries and Russian and French war-related films. Small wonder that Paramount decided to play it safe by catering to the bobby-socks trade and having Harry James’ Orchestra head the stage show with "China"! Following "This Gun for Hire" in 1942, Ladd had made three more films that same year - "The Glass Key", a comic guest-spot in "Star Spangled Rhythm", and the light-hearted anti-Nazi gangster thriller "Lucky Jordan" (shown here last year). "China" was typical of the war films that every company made when they wanted something in a hurry as a star vehicle: John Wayne, Ronald Reagan, Tyrone Power and James Cagney all made equivalent movies based on the formula of the cocky, arrogant American to whom war is either a game or a business, and who reforms with a vengeance, sometimes at the cost of his own life. At the time there were so many of them that the lesser ones, like "China", got lost in the shuffle and caused little stir. Seen in a more detached frame of mind today, it is somewhat more interesting -- not least in its fairly obvious influence from "They Died With Their Boots On", and the Paramount release of the same year, "Wearrow", which would soon establish himself as a reliable director for Ladd, John Wayne and Robert Mitchum, was here fresh from his success with "Wake Island" the year before. In some ways, "China" is a little too efficiently made. In the opening bombing raid, the camera sweeps rather too smoothly through the elaborate set, being in exactly the right place at the right time to make the most of exploding shells and falling wreckage, and having Bendix disappear behind stretches of blank wall so that jump cuts and/or optical printing give the impression of the camera roaming through one huge set rather than a carefully fragmented one. The polish and efficiency is such that the omnipresence of Hollywood is felt at all times .... even when the story goes on location, it is in the familiar foothills of Chatsworth, just a few miles away. - over -
One reason that films like this are rarely shown these days is that, of course, they are clearly open to charges of racism. While the Japanese understandably take the brunt of this, Ladd's character (pre-reformation!) doesn't take too kindly a view of the Chinese either. His most outrageous line comes when asked his reaction to having cold-bloodedly mown down a group of Japanese soldiers who had just raped a Chinese girl. Justified or not under the circumstances—his act was still one of murder—and the Production Code wasn't going to let any movie hero get away with that in 1943. It's interesting that following the new Production Code restrictions in 1934, rape became a virtually extinct crime in Hollywood movies. The war film brought it back as a catalyst for revenge: the afore-mentioned "Edge of Darkness", which opened within a week of "China", likewise had the rape of a major character as one of the catalysts of its climactic blood bath. Despite its grim undertones, "China" is too artificial to be taken really seriously. It certainly doesn't have the stature of its title, and once digested, to underline the obvious, leaves one hungry again. Hopefully the co-feature will be something to counteract that.

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

AND NOW TOMORROW (Paramount, 1944) Directed by Irving Pichel; Asso. Producer, Fred Kohlmar; Screenplay by Frank Partos and Raymond Chandler from the novel by Rachel Field; Camera, Daniel Fappi; Music, Victor Young; 85 mins; NY premiere, Paramount Theatre, November 1944; With: John Lund (Dr. Weeks); Loretta Young (Emily Blair); Susan Hayward (Janice Blair); Barry Sullivan (Jeff Stoddard); Beulah Bondi (Aunt Em); Cecil Kellaway (Dr. Weeks); Grant Mitchell (Uncle Wallace); Helen Mack (Angeluta Gallo); Anthony Caruso (Peter Galle); Jonathan Hale (Dr. Sloan); George Carleton (Neecher); Connie Leon (Hester) and Baryck Hakman, Conrad Binyon, Lee Bulgakov.

Rachel Field's tear-jerking novel "All This and Heaven Too" had been made into a very successful film some years earlier. "Time Out of Mind", originally intended for James Whale was finally made by Robert Stodola, and was an interesting misfire. "And Now Tomorrow", a third Field novel, falls literally in the middle: glossy and slick, a sure-fire audience pleaser, not as good as its predecessor, but generally much better than the third Field adaptation.

Usually when stars came back from the wars they were put into the kind of vehicles they had left behind, but clearly Paramount wanted to make Ladd a firm favorite with the ladies before returning him to tough thrillers, and a rather surprising number of westerns. "And Now Tomorrow" certainly didn't get very good reviews. The NY Times was quite sarcastic, calling it "stupid" and of Loretta Young saying rather cruelly "Whatever it was this actress never had, she still hasn't got". Medical reaction (Young plays a deaf woman, as she had in "The Story of Alexander Graham Bell" a few years earlier) was somewhat critical too, pointing out that Young both read lips PAR too well and spoke with far too normally pitched a voice. Ladd didn't really help either; although it's a sympathetic performance, he doesn't really have a bedside manner, and plays as though he knows this is a one-shot deal and he'd better not forget how to be tough. Oddly enough, the script is by Frank Partos and Raymond Chandler, two writers far more versed in tough thrillers. Not too much of their influence is readily apparent, though Alan Ladd's first introductory line, and the reply from a soda-jerk, have the right Philip Marlowe flavor! And whenever Susan Hayward played the "other woman", writers had their work cut out to play down her attractiveness and make her steadily less sympathetic as the film progressed. The same problem arose in "The Forest Rangers" and -- she always wound up taking over the feminine half of the film, and making audiences wonder why -- sly, or unfaithful or whatever -- the hero didn't prefer her to the official star!

Director Irving Pichel (also an excellent actor) was probably at his peak in the war years, directing such off-beat and interesting films as "The Moon is Down", "The Pied Piper", "The Man I Married" (a really interesting anti-Nazi film that we'll be showing soon) and "Happy Land". He also did an excellent job on the all-stops-out emotional drama "Tomorrow Is Forever", but there he had a really good script and Orson Welles and Claudette Colbert. He doesn't get enough help from script or stars (though the supporting cast is very good one) to be able to either hide or exploit the artifice of "And Now Tomorrow". In that sense it is a rather appropriate co-feature to "China" though its title (unless it's a quote that the original book explained) seems completely without meaning.

William K. Everson

Program ends 10.23.
Discussion/question session follows.