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Rising Waters: Submersion and Survival in Yung Chang's *Up the Yangtze*

A luxury cruise boat slowly moves upward in a lock, lifted gently by the rising water level in the chamber. Some of the passengers watch the spectacle from the upper deck, and, with them, we anticipate the view that awaits us on the upper level of the lock. At first we see only a small section of pale blue sky, but once the boat has reached the 95 meter mark the surrounding landscape gradually appears: concrete, some grass, and a few scattered trees. The dominating feature, however, is dozens of power poles and hundreds of crisscrossing transmission lines that seem to cut the hazy sky into tiny little pieces.

The pacing of this opening sequence of Yung Chang's 2007 documentary film *Up the Yangtze* is slow, almost elegiac, and it prepares us for the story we are about to be told, a sad story of longing, loss, and absurd luxury on the mighty Yangtze river.¹ It is also a story about power—electrical as well as economic and political power—and about what it means to have little or no power at all over one's life and the place in which one lives. The film was shot in 2006, shortly after the completion of the body of the Three Gorges Dam in Central China, currently the largest hydro-electric power project in the world. The film's first images—the slow upward movement of the camera as it rises with the cruise boat in the water lock—mimic the rising waters of the Yangtze that slowly but inexorably swallow and drown everything along its banks. Thus far, an estimated 1.3 million people who lived along these banks have been displaced and “resettled” as the water level slowly rises over 175 meters.²

1.3 million people is an enormous, almost unfathomable number, and *Up the Yangtze* attempts to give it a human face by offering us a glimpse into what it means for individual people to have to come to terms with the fact that the places where they live will soon be under water. The film records both the slow submersion of landscapes and cities, and the strategies for survival used by the soon to be displaced people who are at the heart of the film. Almost paradoxically, however, there is something else that

1 Yung Chang, *Up the Yangtze*. (Canada: Eye Steel Film/National Film Board Canada, 2007), Filmstrip, 95 min.

2 Chang speaks of “an estimated two million people” in his film, but 1.3 million is the number that most experts currently agree on. There are indicators, however, that this number will continue to rise as emerging environmental problems in the region will necessitate the relocation of additional people.

survives in the virtual space of the film: the landscapes, towns, and cities of the region that, by now, have long been submerged by the waters of the Yangtze.

“Imagine the Grand Canyon being turned into a big lake,” suggests Chinese-Canadian filmmaker Chang in the first minutes of *Up the Yangtze* to give an idea of the magnitude of the Chinese project. According to International Rivers, the Three Gorges Dam is not only the world’s largest hydropower project but also its “most notorious dam. The massive project sets records for number of people displaced (more than 1.2 million), number of cities and towns flooded (13 cities, 140 towns, and 1,350 villages), and length of the reservoir (more than 600 kilometers),” and it is at the same time notorious for “corruption, spiraling costs, technological problems, human rights violations, and resettlement difficulties.”³ The environmental impacts of the project are also profound, and most experts agree that they are likely to get worse as time goes on. Not only will hundreds of submerged factories, mines, and waste dumps likely produce massive pollution problems, but there are also concerns over increased soil erosion and resulting landslides, as well as possible reservoir-induced seismicity.⁴

The area affected also includes 108 historical and cultural monuments, and this is why the Three Gorges Project has also produced a lucrative new form of disaster tourism, which gave Chang the idea for his film. The son of first-generation Chinese immigrants to Canada began working on the script in 2002 when he went on one of the so-called “farewell tours” along the Yangtze. These tours offered affluent tourists from around the world a chance to visit the area before it disappeared in the floods. He found the experience “very surreal,” especially after he realized that “the people working on the boat were all from the Yangtze area, and that many of their families were affected by the dam.”⁵ He decided to make a film about some of these people who accompanying the rich passengers on their apocalyptic journey through a disappearing “ghostlike” landscape, while their own families are struggling with the fact that their homes will soon be flooded.

3 “Three Gorges Dam,” International Rivers, accessed on 9 May 2011, <http://www.internationalrivers.org/china/three-gorges-dam>.

4 Ibid.

5 Chang makes this statement in an interview that has been published in the film’s press kit. “Yung Chang Interview.” *Up the Yangtze Press Kit*, accessed on 11 May 2011, http://www.uptheyangtze.com/medias/extras/UTY_press_kit.pdf.



Figure 2(l):
The Yu family's
shed (Reprinted by
Permission from
Chang, *Up the
Yangtze*, 2007)

Figure 1(r):
Cruise boat on
the Three Gorges
(Reprinted by
permission from
Yung Chang, *Up the
Yangtze*, 2007)

Chang tells the story of the Yu family: illiterate, poor people who live in a little shack next to the river not far from the ghost city Fengdu, and of their 16-year old daughter Yu Shui, who speaks English well enough to get a job on one of the cruise ships. While her parents and two siblings struggle to feed themselves by growing vegetables on the river bank, Shui becomes “Cindy” to make things easier for the western passengers, and soon plays her small part in the highly profitable business of the farewell tours. The contrast between passengers and staff, between the luxury of the boat and the Yu family’s miserable shack on the river bank, could hardly be more extreme. People from the United States, Canada, Europe, Japan, and other parts of the world have booked this tour because they “want to wave good-bye before it all disappears.” Shui works for them because her parents have asked her to. They desperately need the money not only because health and school expenses have put them in severe debt, but also because the water is coming closer every day, and in their new urban habitation they will no longer be able to grow their own food.

Chang relies on powerful and often poetic images to convey the gradual submersion of the landscape on the one hand, and the culture clash between poor rural inhabitants and international tourists on the other. He mostly refrains from commenting on these images, leaving it to the viewers to puzzle together the story of environmental transformation and social injustice presented to them. The drama emerges from the doomed landscapes themselves and from the faces and voices of his protagonists. But this, of course, does not mean that his film simply “documents” the world he encountered during the principal shooting of the film between May and December 2006. “To take the documentary film as a mere photographic document,” argues film scholar Carl Plantinga, “ignores the ‘creative shaping’ that is an ineluctable element of all documentary films, and that occurs in diverse registers such as narrative or rhetorical

structure, editing, cinematography, [and] sound design.”⁶ Plantinga maintains that although documentaries may make use of documents, it is a problem if we reduce them to the provision of *documentation*, because such an understanding neglects the manifold ways in which documentary filmmakers actively frame and shape the filmic worlds they present to their audiences. Watching a documentary—even an unobtrusive one like Chang’s *Up the Yangtze*—we have to keep in mind that, like fiction films, they are creative cultural texts and the product of directorial choices. The special appeal of the documentary form lies in its very power to “seduce” us into believing that we watch an “objective” account of the events presented to us and that it “simply allows the filmed subjects to ‘speak for themselves.’”⁷ This appearance of objectivity and immediacy is the main reason why documentaries are so often the weapon of choice for filmmakers who want to offer alternative perspectives on accepted “realities.”

Presenting such an alternative perspective on the gargantuan Three Gorges Dam is certainly one of the things that Chang had in mind when making his film. He took almost a full year getting to know the Yu family before he and his Chinese camera team started principal shooting. “By the time we got the camera out,” he explains in an interview, “they [the family] had come to trust us.”⁸ This relationship of trust between the filmmakers and their protagonists is obvious in the film, and it allows Chang to show the development of the dam and Shui’s work on the cruise boat from the perspective of those who are personally affected by the rising waters, and to have the story told through *their* voices, which are otherwise rarely heard or listened to. Shui herself does not say a lot; most of what we learn about her work on the cruise boat is conveyed through observation of her daily routine. Her father, on the other hand, is very willing to talk about his view of his family’s situation in the film: “When the water rises,” he says quietly as he looks out on his tiny piece of land, “and [when] the Three Gorges gate closes, where can you farm? You can’t even have a life.”

The latter is often quite literally true, and it in fact is one of the most serious problems of the vast relocation project pursued by the Chinese government. Yan Tan and Fajun Yao remind us in a 2006 article in *Population and Environment* that 42.7 percent of the

6 Carl Plantinga, “Documentary,” in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film*, ed. Paisley Livingston and Carl Plantinga (London: Routledge, 2005), 495.

7 Jasmine Nicole Cobb and John L. Jackson, “They Hate Me: Spike Lee, Documentary Filmmaking and Hollywood’s ‘Savage Slot,’” in *Fight the Power! The Spike Lee Reader*, ed. J. D. Hamlet and R. R. Means Coleman (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 263.

8 “Yung Chang Interview.” *Up the Yangtze Press Kit*, 5.

people to be relocated are rural residents, and that “due to a shortage of cultivated land, a fragile physical environment, and an underdeveloped economy, the challenge of successfully resettling all rural residents in the reservoir area is huge.”⁹ In many cases the challenge will not be met. “The official view in China is that the dam is good for the nation,” explains Chang in the interview. “As for the suffering of people like the Yu family, the standard line is the small family must sacrifice to help the big family—the nation.” However, for poor and uneducated people like the Yu family, this sacrifice has existential dimensions. What is more, adds Chang, “all serious studies show that mega-dams like the Three Gorges ultimately have greater negative effects than positive. . . . They cause terrible damage to the environment and destroy the livelihoods of local people. You see this already along the Yangtze—the pollution and silt buildup, the disappearance of certain species like the Baiqi Dolphin, and the hardship caused to so many people.”¹⁰ These are the issues Chang wants to draw attention to with his film.

In his review of *Up the Yangtze* for the *New York Times*, Stephen Holden notes that the film tells a story of “culture clash and the erasure of history amid China’s economic miracle.”¹¹ The culture clash is between what Holden calls the “old China” and the “new China,” and it is also between the powerless poor and the international tourists, who watch the river banks through glass panes while getting some exercise on the cruise boat’s high-tech ergometers. Perhaps these tourists would begin to care about the existential struggles of the local people, and the enormous ecological and social challenges posed by the Three Gorges Dam, if they were able or willing to see beyond the drowning cultural sites the tour organizers have lined up for them. As it is, however, they merely enjoy the eerie shadow of doom that lingers over the ancient ghost town of Fengdu and other highlights of the tour, remarking dryly in Chang’s film that “China is even more modern than [we were] expecting to see,” but that “the poverty and the rural life is still very visible also.” In the context that the film builds for its viewers, such well-meaning statements sound cynical at best. *Up the Yangtze* helps its viewers understand what exactly this poverty looks like in the Yangtze region and what it means to be “relocated” against one’s will from the place where one has been making one’s living. Once again, it doesn’t do this by giving us detailed background

9 Yan Tan and Fajun Yao, “Three Gorges Project: Effects of Resettlement on the Environment in the Reservoir Area and Countermeasures,” *Population and Environment* 27, no.4 (2006): 353.

10 “Yung Chang Interview,” *Up the Yangtze Press Kit*, 5.

11 Stephen Holden, “A Visit to Old China, Before It Drowns,” *The New York Times*, 25 April 2008, accessed on 10 May 2011, <http://movies.nytimes.com/2008/04/25/movies/25yang.html>.

information or expert opinions, as many other documentaries would. Instead, Chang lets the people speak for themselves. “You just can’t help it,” says a young shopkeeper in one of the many cities that will be flooded. “It’s hard being a human, but being a common person in China is even more difficult.” And then he breaks down crying, talks about how he was beaten by the local police when he had to move.

Moments like these, which have a remarkable intimacy, give the film part of its emotional strength. The other part comes from the many wide-angle landscape shots that linger for some time on the river and its banks, accompanied only by music. Stephen Holden notes that “as the boat sails upriver, the landscape is spectacular,”¹² and indeed, Chang dedicates a good amount of film time to showing us the strange beauty of the Yangtze landscape, which, as Holden also points out, is marked by a “yellowish haze over the water,” which “suggests China’s already serious air pollution problem.”¹³ But even as it celebrates the beauty of the landscape, the film constantly reminds us of its future fate. Again and again we see signs along the river banks that start at 55 meters just above the water surface and go all the way up to 175 meters—the estimated final water level once the dam is completed and the reservoir filled up.

Figure 3 (l): View of the water level markers (Reprinted by Permission from Chang, *Up the Yangtze*, 2007)



Figure 4(r): Visiting the Three Gorges Dam with the Yu family (Reprinted by Permission from Chang, *Up the Yangtze*, 2007)



Towards the end of the movie, the filmmakers bring Shui’s parents to the nearly finished Three Gorges Dam, confronting them with the enormous structure that will change their lives forever. They cannot really grasp it and the amount of electrical power it will produce. They have never had electricity in their little home by the river. As the cruise boat moves on, Shui’s father returns to the family home and on his back carries every single piece of furniture the family owns up the newly built bank reinforcement. Then the Yu family moves into its new home, a much larger room than they used to have, but still

¹² Stephen Holden, “A Visit to Old China.”

¹³ Stephen Holden, “A Visit to Old China.”

without electricity and water, and, what is even more important, without land they could use to grow food. Their old home remains behind on the bank of the Yangtze. In one of the most impressive and memorable sequences of the film, we are invited to witness what is happening everywhere along the Three Gorges Reservoir: a stop-motion montage shows in time-lapse the Yu family's field and shack as they are slowly swallowed by the rising water of the river. In the end, they are completely gone, and the only trace that will remain of them and many other landscapes in the Three Gorges region is people's memories, stories, and images—and documentary films like Chang's *Up the Yangtze*.

Further Reading

Chang, Yung. *Up the Yangtze*. Canada: Eye Steel Film/National Film Board Canada, 2007. Film-strip, 95 min.

Cobb, Jasmine Nicole and John L. Jackson. "They Hate Me: Spike Lee, Documentary Filmmaking and Hollywood's 'Savage Slot.'" In *Fight the Power! The Spike Lee Reader*, edited by J. D. Hamlet and R. R Means Coleman. New York: Peter Lang, 2009.

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