

**UP THE
YANGTZE**

a YUNG CHANG film

A ZEITGEIST FILMS RELEASE

UP THE YANGTZE

In China, it is simply known as “The River.” But the Yangtze—and all of the life that surrounds it—is undergoing a truly astonishing transformation wrought by the largest hydroelectric project in history, the Three Gorges Dam. Canadian documentary filmmaker Yung Chang returns to the gorgeous, now-disappearing landscape of his grandfather’s youth to trace the surreal life of a “farewell cruise” that traverses the gargantuan waterway.

With Altmanesque narrative agility, a humanist gaze and wry wit, Chang’s *Upstairs Downstairs* approach beautifully captures the microcosmic society of the luxury liner. Below deck: A bewildered young girl trains as a dishwasher—sent to work by her peasant family, who is on the verge of relocation from the encroaching floodwaters. Above deck: A phalanx of wealthy international tourists set sail to catch a last glance of a country in dramatic flux. The teenaged employees who serve and entertain them—now tagged with new Westernized names like Cindy and Jerry by upper management—warily grasp at the prospect of a more prosperous future.

Singularly moving and cinematically breathtaking, *Up the Yangtze* gives a human dimension to the wrenching changes facing not only an increasingly globalized China, but the world at large.

Synopsis

A luxury cruise boat motors up the Yangtze, navigating the mythic waterway known in China simply as "The River." In the biggest engineering endeavor since the Great Wall, China has set out to harness the Yangtze with the world's largest mega-dam.

Meanwhile, at the river's edge, Yu Shui (whose name is later westernized by her employers to "Cindy") says goodbye to her family and turns to face the future. From their small patch of land, her parents watch the young woman walk away, her belongings clutched in a plastic shopping bag. The waters are rising.

The Three Gorges Dam, gargantuan and hotly contested symbol of the Chinese economic miracle, provides the epic and unsettling backdrop for *Up the Yangtze*, a dramatic and disquieting feature documentary on life inside the 21st-century Chinese dream.

Stunningly photographed and beautifully composed, *Up the Yangtze* juxtaposes the poignant and sharply observed details of Yu Shui's story against the monumental and ominous forces at work all around her.

Among the two million losing their livelihood to the dam, the Yu family must send their daughter off to work. In a bitter irony she's been hired by Farewell Cruises, part of the strange apocalyptic tourist trade that thrives along the river, offering a final glimpse of a legendary world before it disappears forever.

Life onboard mirrors the hierarchy of the wider world. Western passengers take in the spectral views, consuming entertainment on the spacious upper decks, while Yu Shui ("Cindy") toils in the galley down below, vying with co-workers for the few permanent positions. A shy country girl, she must compete with young show-offs like Chen Bo Yu (later renamed "Jerry"), an urban kid with the over-confidence typical of single sons, the "little emperors" of China's one-child-only policy.

All the while, the ship charts a course towards its controversial destination, travelling upriver through a landscape of unprecedented upheaval, as ancient and revered sites give way to the burgeoning candy-colored towers of China's neon future. Back at the river's edge, far from the bright lights, Yu Shui's parents assemble their humble possessions as the floodwaters rise.

Chinese-Canadian filmmaker Yung Chang directs it all with insight and cinematic flair. Drawing inspiration from contemporary Asian cinema and post-war neo-realism, he crafts a compassionate account of peasant life and a powerful documentary narrative of contemporary China.

Character Bios

Yu Shui (“Cindy”)

Yu Shui, 16 at the time of filming, is the eldest of three children in the Yu family, subsistence farmers who live along the Yangtze River, near Fengdu, the so-called “Ghost City.” As the Three Gorges Dam nears completion, the Yus’ home and livelihood will be submerged. Having already been displaced once, they are facing yet another forced move.

As they struggle to make a living on the shore, an apocalyptic tourist industry flourishes along the river in the form of the Farewell Cruises, luxury boats offering tourists a glimpse of a legendary landscape before it disappears. In need of extra income, her impoverished family is considering sending Yu Shui to work on the boats. She herself would prefer to continue her education, but circumstances beyond her control will intervene to shape her future.

Chen Bo Yu (“Jerry”)

In contrast to Yu Shui, Chen Bo Yu is from a middle-class urban background. He was raised by his grandparents in the town of Kai Xian, near the Yangtze. As an only child, Chen Bo Yu is typical of an over-indulged generation of young men, “the little emperors” who have come of age since the implementation of China’s one-child-only policy. Proficient in English, goodlooking and confident, he fits the needs of Victoria Cruise managers, who rename him Jerry for the benefit of their largely Western clientele. Although Chen Bo Yu’s family is among those being displaced by the final phase of flooding, Bo Yu, at 19, is embracing with gusto the opportunities offered by a changing China.

A Conversation with Director Yung Chang

What inspired you to make *Up the Yangtze*?

The idea was born in 2002, when I went on one of the so-called Farewell Cruises along the Yangtze with my parents and grandfather. The aim is to offer tourists the chance to visit the area before it is flooded by the Three Gorges Dam. It's very surreal. Traveling from Canada to China was in itself an emotional experience. We got off this thirteen-hour flight to Beijing, and then took a flight to Chongqing—the largest municipality in the world. They call it the new Hong Kong. It's where the cruise begins.

The whole sensory experience was overwhelming. The moment you get off the bus, you're surrounded by day laborers carrying these heavy loads—tourists' luggage. So I got this idea of making a movie about tourists on this Yangtze cruise boat—a kind of *Gosford Park* idea that shows the social hierarchy, the lives above and below the decks. And I 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.

The other aspect was this sense of apocalyptic journey—something out of *Heart of Darkness*. It's a strange landscape of chaos and decay—like the photos of Edward Burtynsky. It's very ghostlike along the river—hazy and grey and difficult to see long distances. Then we visited the Ghost City itself—Fengdu—famous in Chinese mythology as the site of the Gates of Hell. In my mind, the Three Gorges Dam became the Gates of Hell. There were so many metaphorical layers to explore, so I just went with this idea of a surreal journey up the Yangtze.

Being Chinese-Canadian, growing up hearing my grandfather's stories of the old China, was also one of my motivations. It added a personal layer to the project—but the story I wanted to tell was a bigger one about what's happening in China now.

How long did the production take?

I started developing it in 2003, and it took time to figure out the right direction. I first pitched the film at the 2003 Planet in Focus International Film Festival in Toronto where it won the award for Best Pitch. From there, I approached Mila Aung-Thwin and Daniel Cross, a former professor, at EyeSteelFilm (ESF). They had just begun production on two projects about China, so I thought it would be a good fit. The National Film Board of Canada came onboard as co-producers. Germaine Ying Gee Wong, my producer at the NFB, produced my first film *Earth to Mouth*. ESF got support from SOCEC and the CBC for the project, and then we pitched it at the Banff TV Festival in 2004, and again at the Documentary Forum at the 2006 Hot Docs Fest, with CBC as our broadcaster. We received most of our support at that event. It was a slow but fruitful development process—I shot two demo reels, one in 2004 and another in 2005. I got a deeper sense of the issues and found my two main characters. I filmed lots of people who aren't in the final film, from cruise boat workers to village protesters. Then we went back to China in 2006 and shot our principal photography between May and December. Post-production took place from December 2006 to July 2007.

How did you decide on your subjects—and how did you work with them?

I wanted to find characters that linked the boat to the larger picture, to what was happening onshore. That's when I hooked up with Victoria Cruises—a company based in Queens, New York owned by Mr. James Pi, a Taiwanese-American. He's an engineer who made his money in the photo-development business, but he had studied shipping and had always wanted to operate a cruise boat. He runs one of the "Farewell Cruises."

I made a cold call to the Victoria Cruise office and spoke to his son Jerry Pi, who helps to manage the company. The Pi family, who support all kinds of philanthropic causes, were very helpful. They offered access to the ships, both above and below deck, and they let me observe their recruitment process. That's how I found Yu Shui and Chen Bo Yu—or Cindy and Jerry as they were renamed on the boat.

Yu Shui's family was living on the banks of the Yangtze near Fengdu—a peasant family living in extreme poverty. They have three children, which is not unusual for a peasant family—the ultimate goal being to have a son. With the one-child policy, the father would have paid fines for the extra children. The boy was in a meningitis-related coma, in fact, when we first met them in 2005. It was pretty serious but he survived. Hospital fees combined with school fees put the Yus in severe debt. In normal circumstances the cruise managers would not have hired Yu Shui—she couldn't speak English and was below the required height—but I think they empathized with her situation. We're lucky that they hired her. Yu Shui and her family provide the film with its center.

Chen Bo Yu is the complete opposite to Yu Shui. He's an only child, from a small city named Kai Xian, which is located off a tributary of the Yangtze. He's from a middle-class background. His family is separated so he was raised by his grandparents. He's like lots of single sons—kind of spoiled and cocky. He's tall and good looking, and speaks good English, so he fit the mold of what Victoria Cruises was seeking. And in terms of the wider story, his family too will be displaced by the dam. I wanted to find people whose families were being directly effected by the next phase in flooding.

Your principal subjects are remarkably open on camera. What was your working relationship to them?

I spent a lot of time getting to know the Yu family—about a year in all, including the development shoots. That gave us time to develop and build a relationship. By the time we got the camera out, they had come to trust us.

Beyond that, it was luck and chemistry. Yu Shui and Chen Bo Yu were both comfortable with the camera, in different ways. Yu Shui and her family, although unaccustomed to cameras, possessed a kind of ease—a quality which worked on film. Yu Shui doesn't say a lot, but yet so much comes out about her character in her expressions and body language. You see her grow and change. Chen Bo Yu, on the other hand, was very aware of playing to the camera, and that worked well for his character.

I did some training in the Meisner technique at the Neighborhood Playhouse in New York, and it helped me find a way to communicate with my subjects. I learned to listen

and be patient, to tap into emotions without being overly intrusive, to find subtle ways of directing. There's the scene where Yu Shui is leaving her family to work on the boat. She didn't want to go, but the family needed the money. It was an emotional day, with lots going on. I had to ask them what they were going to do when their home was flooded. It was a big question—but by putting it out there, it was as if I was giving them permission to talk about something they may not have talked about otherwise. They began communicating with each other in different ways.

We first shot material of Yu Shui and Chen Bo Yu before they were employed by the company, in their home locations. And then in August we got them as they started working—their training and initial experiences on the boat. Then we paused for a month to see what kind of transformation they would undergo, and sure enough when we resumed there had been developments in each character, especially Yu Shui. It was great to be able to shoot in sequence. It's every fiction director's dream and we actually got to do that. We got to follow characters as they grew over time.

Who were your Chinese crew members—and what did they bring to the project?

Our director of photography was a Beijinger, Wang Shi Qing, who is a talented filmmaker in his own right. Lixin Fan, another filmmaker from Beijing, now living in Toronto, took on the job of sound recordist, and more importantly the broader and very valuable role of production manager and all-around fixer. And I also brought along Michael MK Siu, a young guy from Toronto, who became our production supervisor, to hold the ship together at our production office in Chongqing.

They contributed much more than their technical expertise. My own position in China is unusual. I look Chinese and understand some aspects of the culture, but there are lots of things that I didn't immediately grasp and my language skills are not 100%. Because of the local dialect, often I would have to speak through my crew. And the logistics of shooting are very different there—you can't shoot with location permits, it just doesn't work that way, so having a Chinese crew helped to deal with those cultural adjustments. And they could also gauge what was safe to shoot in the Chinese environment. They were gutsy—willing to carry hidden cameras if necessary.

Working with them allowed me to see both the Chinese and Western perspectives of the story, and I was constantly negotiating the two. The question came up as to whether I was making an anti-China film. So I had to reassure them that this was not my aim, that I was trying to tell a complex human story. As open-minded filmmakers, they listened to my perspective and were helpful in executing my vision. And they had their own blind spots. My cinematographer, for example, was initially reluctant to film a peasant family. It's a class thing there, where peasants are looked down upon as uncultured, and the Yus are at the bottom of the social hierarchy. But by the end, he saw the value in telling the Yu family story. I later learned that he himself was from a poor family but had managed to get into the prestigious Beijing Film Academy.

To what extent was your story already in place when you started to edit?

I prepared before shooting, outlining a general story line, and ensuring that I was covering a scene with all the necessary shots. But at the same time, I left room for spontaneity and let myself enter into the experience as a traveler on my own voyage of discovery.

The edit was quite straightforward. From the beginning I had the idea of beginning on the cruise ship and ending up at the dam, following the river with the boat as our guide. Along the way you get off and discover other aspects of the story. And the edit stuck to this general line. Hannele Halm is a wonderful editor. She works in an instinctive and organic way, and has great technique. She's able to find the drama in a story, and to build character. And we had a nice relationship. I was sending her footage while we were still shooting. A lot of amazing footage and entire storylines didn't make it to the final cut: a village protest; a factory owner who was beaten by officials; and a whole storyline about the river guide, Campbell, a former laborer who mastered the English language in order to work on the cruise boat. Extra features on the DVD, I guess!

Your two main subjects are teenagers. How does the film reflect the position of young people in contemporary China?

Both Yu Shui and Chen Bo Yu are part of the generation that's come of age with no direct connection to the socialist ethos that their parents knew. They did not go through the Cultural Revolution, the purging of so-called reactionaries and all that. Mao is a nostalgic figure for them, someone they see from a distant perspective. At one point in the film we use archival footage of Mao, swimming the Yangtze, to illustrate his historic role in the Three Gorges Project and its association with nationalism. But to Yu Shui and Chen Bo Yu—he's just a face, someone they studied in history books. Even this is changing now, and school textbooks in China are being rewritten to skip over whole sections of history. The next generation will have even less of a link to Mao's China.

There's a brief sequence in the film that I shot myself on my cell phone. An event that I happened upon—a little girl, bathed in garish pink light, who's participating in a dance competition. It was such a strange sight—an image of China's future. I remember thinking how this child's experience was so very far from that of my grandfather and the old China. This little girl was part of the upcoming generation. It was kind of unsettling. It's not clear what the future holds for China.

The Three Gorges Dam has sparked vigorous debate all over the world. How would you like *Up the Yangtze* to contribute to the discussion?

The official view in China is that the dam is good for the nation. 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. That gets repeated time and again. There's never been so much nationalist fervor in China, especially with the Beijing Olympics in the near future, so many people are very proud of the project.

However all serious studies show that mega-dams like the Three Gorges ultimately have

greater negative effects than positive. The writer Jacques Leslie presents a pretty convincing critique of large dams in his book *Deep Water*. The growing consensus is that they simply don't work in the long run. 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.

There has been some opposition in China, especially along the river where people have protested against corruption within the relocation program. Some opposition is tolerated, but there are real risks in going too far. Dai Qing, the dissident journalist who's been critical of the project, was incarcerated for her views. She has since been released, and is speaking out again. There have been thousands of protests by rural people, on the dam and other issues, in recent years.

Once, during our shoot, while we were on our way to film one of these protests, we ran into a second unrelated demonstration. Hundreds of police in riot gear were confronting a crowd of people, many of them elderly and determined not to budge. I filmed it myself and a clip has made into the final cut. So these protests were happening all over the place. The government's current "Harmonious Society" policy has been implemented to address the reasons behind this unrest.

I'm not a scientist or an expert on contemporary China. What I have tried to do is to tell an engaging story and make a moving film—one that explores the impact of the changes on the lives of real people. I think of the cruise ship as a microcosm of the bigger picture. You have these kids working down below who look up to the western tourists on the upper decks. And all around China is changing in unprecedented ways.

I don't want to give an overwhelmingly negative impression. With Yu Shui and Chen Bo Yu, you have people who want change, who want a better life. And who can argue with that? And at the end of the film there is some hope that Yu Shui is moving towards something better. A lot of the changes in China are unsettling, but they highlight problems that other societies are facing around the world, even in Western countries. By focusing on the Yu family, people who are falling through cracks, I hope to go inside the culture and tell a story from that perspective.

Are there any references you would like to mention?

I'm very excited by recent developments in Asian cinema. In China there's the Sixth Generation filmmakers who have responded to censorship and meager budgets by making stripped down but stylized films—using handheld cameras, long takes, ambient sound, and lots of attention to real life detail. Li Yang's film *Blind Shaft* is a great example of this—a kind of neo-realist film noir about coal mining. *This Happy Life* is another film that I love—Jiang Yue's documentary about a couple of guys who work at the Beijing West railway station. He uses static camera and long takes to capture all this everyday detail and emotion. And of course there are better-known filmmakers like Jia Zhangke and the Hong Kong filmmaker Wong Kar-wai. As for Western filmmakers, I admire the work of John Cassavetes for its emotional impact, and the films of Robert Altman. Initially I had this idea of making *Up the Yangtze* as a mosaic story, with lots of characters, like Altman did in many of his films. And as I mentioned, from the beginning,

I kept thinking of the novel *Heart of Darkness*, another story of another strange journey along a river.

You open the film with a quote from Confucius: “By three methods we may learn wisdom: first, by reflection which is noblest; second, by imitation which is easiest; and third, by experience which is the bitterest.” To what extent does this apply to your own experience in making the film?

I admit that I did encounter a kind of darkness in making this film. The story is a dark one in some respects. For someone who grew up in middle-class Canada, it's sobering to meet people like the Yu family whose lives are shaped by so much hardship and suffering. Their lives have been completely disrupted by the dam. It's been great working with EyeSteelFilm, where the film was nurtured and evolved. EyeSteel's Dan Cross has a strong sense of social responsibility and has involved himself in his subjects' lives once his films are released. So it will be hard to walk away from this film—from everything that happened. It will stay with me.

The Filmmakers

Yung Chang, Director

Yung Chang is a Canadian filmmaker currently based in Montreal, where he earned a degree in film production in 1999 from Concordia University. His parents are both first-generation Chinese immigrants to Canada. Through their influence, Yung maintains a strong interest in contemporary Chinese issues. Since 1996, he has spent extended periods in China and has travelled throughout the country.

His first documentary film, *Earth to Mouth*, produced by the National Film Board of Canada, is a beautifully crafted meditation on migrant farm labor, food production and Canada's Chinese community. It played widely on the international festival circuit, winning awards at the International Film and Video Festival in Columbus, Ohio, and Montreal's Rencontres Internationales du documentaire.

He is also a graduate of the Neighborhood Playhouse School of the Theatre in New York City, where he studied the Meisner technique. He makes innovative use of this methodology in *Up the Yangtze*, his first feature-length documentary.

EyeSteelFilm, Production Company

EyeSteelFilm is a Montreal-based production company dedicated to using film as a catalyst for social and political change. Founded by Daniel Cross and Mila Aung-Thwin, the company specializes in documentaries and interactive media aimed at empowering groups historically ignored by mainstream media.

EyeSteelFilm made its mark with a trilogy of films about homelessness in Canada: *Danny Boy* (1993), *The Street: a film with the homeless* (1996) and *SPIT: Squeegee Punks in Traffic* (2002). These films chronicled a generation that fell victim to social funding cuts, political apathy, alcoholism and drug use. They also provided a template for blending *cinéma-vérité*, activism and interactivity.

In *SPIT: Squeegee Punks in Traffic*, a camera was given to a street kid named Roach, who had been living rough in Montreal. Over a period of three years, viewers see Roach transform from a drug-addicted street kid to filmmaker. He went on to direct three documentaries with EyeSteelFilm, including *Punk le Vote!*, which was selected for the 2007 Hot Docs film festival. EyeSteelFilm branched out to make films on a range of topics. *Inuuvunga: I am Inuk I am Alive* documents the coming of age of young people in a modern Inuit village, while *Music for a Blue Train* goes underground to the musicians who perform in Montreal's metro system.

Moving beyond film production, EyeSteelFilm also created the interactive documentary project HomelessNation.org, a Web-based initiative that features user-generated content from across Canada, creating a forum where filmmakers and homeless people collaborate to democratize digital technology and document the homeless experience.

Up the Yangtze is the third EyeSteelFilm production that examines modern China. *Bone* (2005) features Willy Tsao's Beijing Modern Dance Company in the first China-Canada dance co-production, and *Chairman George* (2006) profiles a Greek-Canadian troubadour who has developed an unusual career and following in contemporary China.

The EyeSteelFilm producers on *Up the Yangtze* are Mila Aung-Thwin and John Christou. The executive producer for EyeSteelFilm is Daniel Cross.

Germaine Ying-Gee Wong, Producer (NFB)

Germaine Ying-Gee Wong's distinguished career with the National Film Board of Canada spans three decades, with numerous credits in documentary and feature film.

In 2001 she was a producer on the landmark Canadian feature film *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*. Co-produced by the NFB, this first Inuit-language drama was hailed as a masterpiece by *New York Times* film critic A.O. Scott, and won many international awards, including the prestigious Camera d'or for Best First Feature Film at the 2001 Cannes International Film Festival. The film also took home five Genie Awards (Canada's top film honor) including Best Picture.

In 2004, Wong received a Genie nomination for the documentary *Mr. Mergler's Gift*. Directed by Academy-Award-winner Beverly Shaffer, the film is a moving account of a student and her mentor, and a lyrical reflection on the transcendent power of music.

Other documentary credits include the award-winning *Okimah*, about the Cree goose hunt, and *Music for A Blue Train*, which documents the struggles of subway musicians in Montreal.

Wang Shi Qing, Director of Photography

Wang Shi Qing is a cinematographer and independent filmmaker based in Beijing. A graduate of the Beijing Film Academy, he has been the director of photography on over 120 productions, ranging from TV dramas and music videos to commercials and documentaries.

He both directed and shot the short films *Drifting Dust* (2002), about migrant labor, and *SARS in Beijing* (2003), which won awards at the 2nd Asian International Short Film Festival and the Isfahan International Short Film Festival.

He is currently directing a documentary for China Central Television about the opium trade and ruby mining that occurs along the Mekong River.

UP THE YANGTZE

Featuring
YU SHUI ("CINDY") and CHEN BO YU ("JERRY")

Written and Directed by
YUNG CHANG

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An EYESTEELFILM and NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA co-production

Canada • 2008 • 93 mins • Color
In English, Mandarin and Sichuan with English subtitles
35mm and digital • Aspect ratio: 1.85:1 • Sound: Dolby Digital

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