

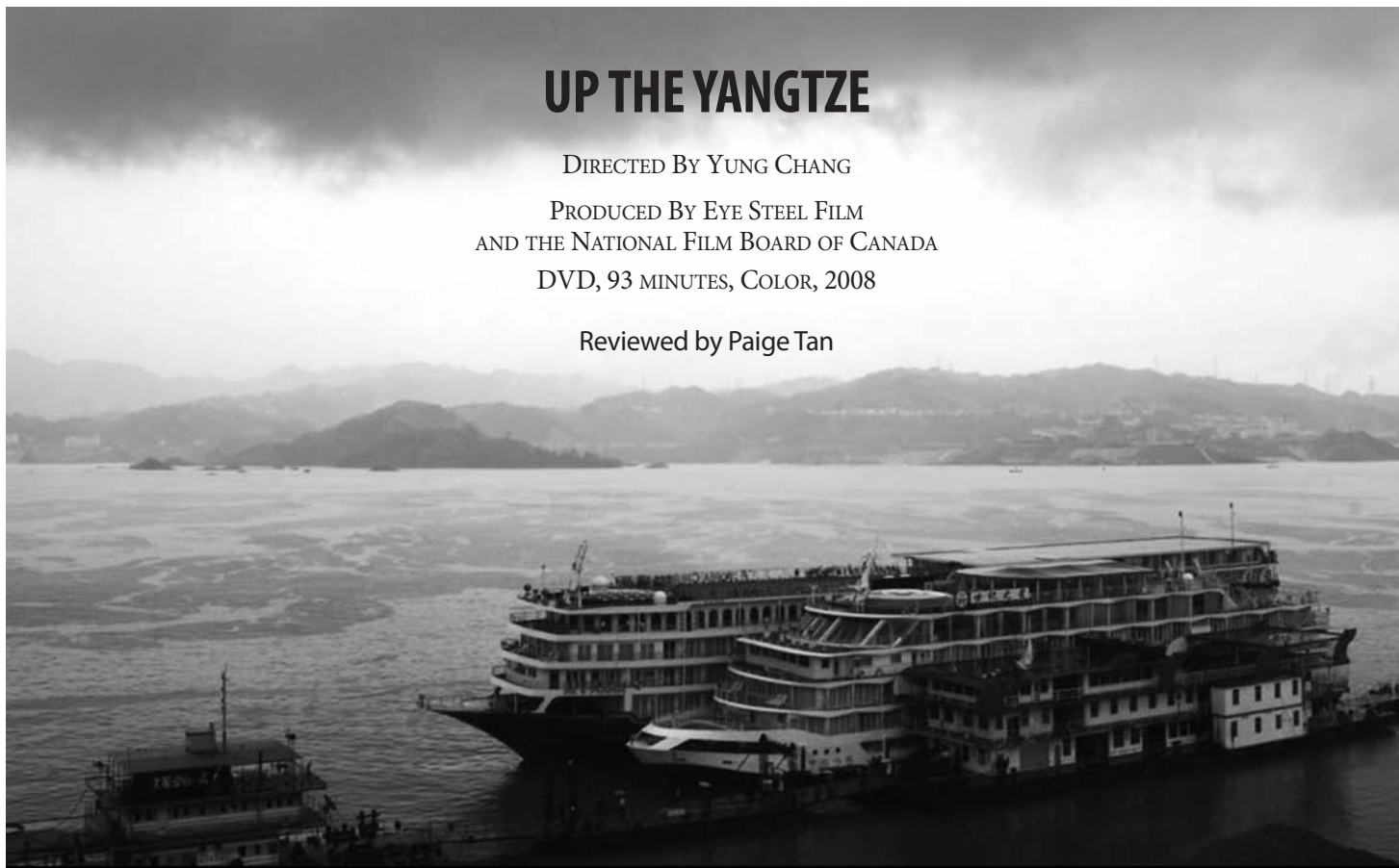
UP THE YANGTZE

DIRECTED BY YUNG CHANG

PRODUCED BY EYE STEEL FILM
AND THE NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA

DVD, 93 MINUTES, COLOR, 2008

Reviewed by Paige Tan



Still photo from the official Web site for *Up the Yangtze* at <http://www.uptheyangtze.com/index.php>.

Chinese-Canadian filmmaker Yung Chang's documentary *Up the Yangtze* is not easy to watch. Like the story it tells, the film is unsettling with the wrenching change it portrays. Chang follows two Chinese young people, Yu Shui and Chen Boyu, as they embark on new jobs with a "Farewell Cruise" company on China's Yangtze River.

As the Three Gorges Dam has risen across the Yangtze, farewell cruises have taken tourists through the historic river and gorges to bid farewell to this important part of China's artistic and historical heritage that will eventually be submerged behind the dam. China's great poets Li Po (701–762) and Tu Fu (712–770) immortalized the region, a Chinese landscape painting come to life. Some Chinese believe that souls will pass through Fengdu, a city along the river, on their way to the afterlife. Legendary statesman Qu Yuan (332–295 BCE), for whom the Dragonboat Festival exists, also came from the region.

Yu Shui, given the Western name "Cindy" on the ship, is the anchor of *Up the Yangtze*. Her family lives in a shack at the river's edge. Cindy is sixteen, and she has completed middle school, but her family is not able to allow her to continue on to high school. They compel her to go to work on the farewell cruise ship to help earn money for the family, as its situation has grown precarious. There are younger children at home. The family's plot of agricultural land will be lost to the rising waters. Mr. Yu, Cindy's father, is forced to take a job cutting stones. Cindy goes to the ship with a small bag full of belongings. She appears utterly miserable as she embarks on this new chapter of her life.

The counterpoint character to Cindy and the impoverished Yu family is Chen Boyu, given the Western name "Jerry" on the ship, an urban only child who, at nineteen, spends his evenings drinking and singing karaoke with friends. In his time and place, he passes for one with a silver spoon in his mouth, though his parents earn together just a few hundred dollars a month. Jerry embarks on the job on the ship happily. He radiates confidence. On the cruise, he happily engages in banter with foreign tourists and takes their tips with sly joy. He gets a chance to sing for the tourists, recreating his karaoke glories.

The tale of these two young people on the ship is a tale of modern China. The building of the Three Gorges Dam has been a dream of China's leaders for decades. It is a way to control the river's flooding, to which lives are regularly lost, and to offer power to feed China's development. That power will be "green" in that it does not rely on fossil fuels (however, environmental concerns with dams, particularly big dams like the Three Gorges, are legion).

The dam in the film is a leitmotif for development in China as a whole. Whenever and wherever development occurs, something is lost, and something is gained. The Three Gorges Dam will produce power for China's growth. It will also result in the relocation of 1.4 million people, the loss of homes and communities, art, and history. The dam is changing the lives of the Chinese people every single day. *Up the Yangtze* gives us a window into just a few of those lives.

The story in *Up the Yangtze* challenges us. It is not always easy to watch Cindy. She is wrenched away from her family, thrust into the new environment of the ship. Her shipmates think she needs to work harder.

She cries piteously while washing dishes. But over the course of the film, Cindy changes. She advances in the hierarchy of the ship's jobs and her confidence increases. She learns to make friends with her co-workers, to try make-up and new clothes. On a visit home after some time on the ship, Cindy discusses her experiences in an animated fashion—a far cry from her earlier sullenness. After her home visit, Cindy veritably bounces back to the ship with a much larger bundle of goods this time.

Jerry, on the other hand, does not change. Over the course of three months on the ship, he remains the same cocky, over-confident only child he was when he boarded. He is standoffish and makes few friends among the staff, others snidely calling him a “superstar.” He has to write a self-criticism when he is accused of soliciting a tip from a passenger (a no-no on the cruise ship). At his end-of-probation interview, he is told that his performance does not meet the ship's standards, and he will have to leave. The manager cites particularly his need to overcome his overconfidence and conceit.

The DVD version of *Up the Yangtze* contains deleted scenes. Apparently, one minor character from the film, Campbell He Ping, was slated to have a larger role in the documentary, but his scenes were cut. It would have been quite a different movie with these deleted scenes as Campbell's story is a bit of the “American dream” Chinese style. Campbell rose from a peasant family to go to university, studying tourism English. Now, he has a fancy apartment with many modern conveniences like computer and Internet. His wife is expecting their first child. He talks of running his own business one day. Campbell's was the story we think we know about the new China but that Yung Chang chose not to show us in the final cut of the film. Including Campbell's story would have made the tale even more nuanced and complex.

Using *Up the Yangtze* in the classroom can open students up for a discussion of development and politics in China. Through the film, students see the complexity of development, the winners and losers, and the wrenching process of change. The film shows us “New China” not as a given, but as something in the process of formation. Students see

real poverty—a house with no lights, no running water, a father appearing so old while probably still so young—and can contrast this with other images of China, the tall buildings and bright lights of the cities. The documentary also provides insight into complex views toward the Chinese government. Tour guides smilingly present the happy face of China's development, while some citizens come to tears over the way they have been treated in the relocation process. Others mention how compensation payments have disappeared into the pockets of corrupt officials. One peasant, watching the rising waters, observes that China must be very strong and prosperous now as it can even stop a river.

The movie concludes in its characteristically ambiguous fashion. Cindy's parents are taken to see the Three Gorges Dam, the creation that has impacted their lives so greatly. They don't seem to understand it or the electricity it will create. Then, the Yus are shown moving out of their old home by the riverside. With time-lapse filmography, we watch the Yu's house eventually swallowed by the waters. We see Cindy looking out of the porthole of the ship, perhaps at the area where her house used to be. The Yus move to a new home up in the city. It is old, dark, and dingy. However, it does have one bastion of modernity the Yus formerly lacked, an electric light. And that, in the end, is the reason the dam is being built.

Up the Yangtze is appropriate for high school and above due to the edgy emotion of the film and some issues with vulgar language (in the subtitles only). The official Web site for the film is <http://www.uptheyangtze.com/>. ■

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