

# SFIFF 51



**2008**  
**Schools at the Festival**  
**Study Guide**

*for*

**Up the Yangtze**

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## **Film 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. 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.

At the river's edge Yu Shui 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. 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 views, consuming entertainment on the spacious upper decks, while Yu Shui toils in the galley down below, vying with workmates for the few permanent positions. A shy country girl, she must compete with young show-offs like Chen Bo Yu, 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, traveling 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 crafts a compassionate account of peasant life and a powerful documentary narrative of contemporary China.

*From the film's website: [www.uptheyangtze.com](http://www.uptheyangtze.com)*

### **Biography of Director Yung Chang**

Yung Chang is a Canadian filmmaker based in Montreal. He has a degree in film production from Montreal's Concordia University and has studied the Meisner technique at New York's Neighborhood Playhouse.

His first documentary film, *Earth To Mouth*, produced by the National Film Board of Canada, won praise for its beautifully crafted meditation on food production and migrant labour. He displays a remarkable sense of cinematic storytelling in his first feature-length documentary, *Up the Yangtze*, in which the contested Three Gorges Dam forms an unsettling backdrop to a richly detailed narrative of life inside contemporary China.

*From the film's website: [www.uptheyangtze.com](http://www.uptheyangtze.com)*

## The Yangtze River



<http://www.vacationstogo.com/cruiseports/viewport.cfm?port=1043>

- The Yangtze River begins high up on the Tibetan Plateau then moves eastward across ravines and passes and is joined by tributaries before depositing its silt along the East China plains and finally opening out to the East China Sea.
- The river is about 6,300 kilometers long (3,914.64 miles) making it the third longest river in the world.
- In China, the Yangtze River as a whole is called the Chang Jiang, or literally the Long River.
- In the lower reaches of the river's delta, the Liangzhu culture (3400-2250 BC) left traces of advanced rice irrigation and aquaculture as well as finely worked jades with sophisticated motifs.
- Upriver in the Sichuan basin, the Sanxingdui culture is an example of the hidden treasures along the Yangtze. Unknown until 1986, when archaeologists discovered sophisticated bronzes, the Sanxingdui civilization flowered at about the same time as the Shang dynasty (1600 BC to 1200 BC), an early Chinese dynasty with writing and records. These bronzes and other artifacts indicate an advanced civilization existed four to five thousand years ago in Sichuan, long considered the margins of historic China.

*Adapted from the film's website: [www.uptheyangtze.com](http://www.uptheyangtze.com)*

### **Timeline for Construction of the Dam**

*<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/~chen20m/classweb/outsourcing/timeline.html>*

1919 – Sun Yat-sen proposes constructing a dam to generate hydroelectric power to industrialize China and improve navigation on the Yangtze in the Three Gorges area.

1932-1946 – Planning and design by various parties begin.

1947 – Work stops during Chinese Civil War.

1954 – Extreme flooding on the Yangtze forces Mao Tse Tung to ask the Soviet Union for help constructing the Three Gorges Dam.

1958-1969 – Mao postpones construction.

1970 – As a precursor to the Three Gorges Dam the government begins construction on the Gezhouba Dam in Yichang, which is chaotic and poorly managed.

1972 – Construction on the Gezhouba Dam stops and remains so until 1974.

1984 – The government decides to build a dam in Xiling Gorge creating a large reservoir. Objections from Chongqing result in preparations to form the new Three Gorges Province.

1989 – The Yangtze Valley Planning Office in charge of the dam project decides to increase dam reservoir size.

1992 – The National People's Congress passes the proposal to build the Three Gorges Dam.

1993 – The Three Gorges Project Construction Committee is established to oversee construction. Dam construction begins (unofficially).

1994 – Premier Li Peng officially announces start of construction.

1996 – Chongqing Municipality comes directly under the authority of the central government. This removes both Qutang and Wu Gorges from Sichuan Province control where there has been considerable objection to the project.

1997 – The China Construction Bank issues bonds to finance dam's construction; Chongqing elevated to municipality status

June 2000 – World Bank approves loan for Urban Environment Project.

December 2001 – Construction of treatment plants commenced.

2007 – Dam construction work to be completed.

2008-09 – Construction of treatment plants completed.

2009 – Dam final completion.

2013 – Generators fully operational.

### **Fast Facts**

- 1 US Dollar = 7.09 Chinese Yuan
- The Three Gorges Dam is the world's largest dam and will flood over 62,000 acres of farmland, 13 major cities, 140 large, and hundreds of small villages along the river's banks, necessitating the evacuation and relocation of over one million people. (Wikipedia)
- On October 11, 2007, Chinese state media announced that under a development plan of Chongqing city, an additional 4 million people will be encouraged to move from their homes near the dam to the Chongqing metropolitan area by the year 2020. (Wikipedia)

## **Classroom Discussion and Activities**

To enrich the students' experience, we recommend post-viewing discussions and activities for *Up the Yangtze*. Teachers are encouraged to adapt the study guide to meet their own learning objectives for their students.

### **Grade Levels**

We recommend *Up the Yangtze* for grades 7-12.

### **Suggested Subject Areas**

Asian Studies  
Chinese  
Environmental Studies  
ESL  
Hearing Impaired  
Social Studies  
World Affairs

### **Pre-viewing Activities**

You can share the film synopsis, as well as information on the filmmaker and the Three Gorges Dam.

### **Post-viewing Discussion**

To get the student discussion going, pose some general questions such as:

- What is the significance of the film's title?
- Did anything in this film surprise you? If so, what was it?
- What new insights or knowledge did you gain from this film?
- What is this film about and what is the filmmaker trying to get across to the audience?

Discussion Questions:

- This film documents many hardships that the Yu family must endure. What responsibility do you think the filmmaker has to help the subjects of his film?
- What does it mean to "sacrifice the small family for the big family"? Do you agree with this philosophy?
- How would you describe the relationship between the tourists on the cruise ship and local people working on the ship?
- The filmmaker quote Confucius as saying, "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." How would you explain this quote? How does it relate to the film?

### **Post-viewing Activities**

1. Come up with a topic you think would be an interesting subject for a documentary. Research it and come up with a script.
2. Write your own review of the film and submit it to [www.efilmcritic.com](http://www.efilmcritic.com).
3. Classroom Debate: Split the class into two groups, (1) in support of the dam, and (2) in opposition to the dam. Then have the groups research their respective arguments. When the class comes back together, hold a debate between the two sides.

**Websites with More Information:**

Case Study:

<http://www.arch.mcgill.ca/prof/sijpkcs/arch374/winter2001/dbiggs/three.html>

Article about relocation program:

[http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2001/05/0515\\_threegorges.html](http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2001/05/0515_threegorges.html)

More detailed information about the project:

<http://www.ibiblio.org/chinesehistory/contents/07spe/specprep01.html>

Website in support of the dam:

<http://www.ctgpc.com/>

Articles from the Chinese Embassy about the dam:

<http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zt/sxgc/default.htm>

**Books**

*The River Dragon Has Come!: The Three Gorges Dam and the Fate of China's Yangtze River and Its People*, by Dai Qing

**Film**

*Three Gorges: Biggest Dam in the World* (Discovery Video)

Please feel free to contact me at [kzwolfer@sffs.org](mailto:kzwolfer@sffs.org) to give me feedback on the screening. Let me know what you thought of it, comments, requests for future activities, etc...

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