55th Sydney Film Festival—Part 5

Yung Chang speaks with WSWS about Up the Yangtze

Richard Phillips
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This is the fifth in a series of articles on the 2008 Sydney Film Festival. Part 1, 2, 3 *and* 4 *appeared on September 16, 17, 18 and 19 respectively.*

Yung Chang's Up the Yangtze *is a feature-length documentary about the massive Three Gorges dam in China and its impact on two young people—Yu Chen (Jerry) and 16-year-old peasant girl Yu Shui (Cindy). Both are employed on Farewell Cruises, a fleet of luxury ships that ply the Yangtze carrying American and European tourists. (See* Part 3*)*

Up the Yangtze *is Yung's third documentary and follows his 42-minute* Earth to Mouth *(2003), about food production and migrant labour in Canada, and* The Fish Market *(2002). The Montreal-based filmmaker was born and raised in Canada and studied film production at Concordia University and then acting at New York's Neighborhood Playhouse. He spoke with the* World Socialist Web Site *during the Sydney Film Festival.*

Richard Phillips: *Up the Yangtze* has an exceptional level of intimacy. How were you able to achieve this?

Yung Chang: I spent a lot of time with my subjects even before I had a camera in their vicinity. It was important to build up a level of trust so that they knew I was treating them with respect and not going into the exploitative realm that many documentary filmmakers do. For me it was important to establish a long-term relationship with everyone involved and I'm still in touch with all the subjects. It was also important to have a Chinese film crew and to be able to surround myself with them and melt into the environment.

WSWS: How long did you work with Yu Shui [Cindy] and Yu Chen [Jerry] before shooting?

YC: It was about a month or so. They were hired by the cruise ship in the winter of 2006 but didn't start until summer so I was able to be with them and build up their trust before they got on board the cruise ship and began their transformative process. I also got to know their families very well and spent quite a bit of time with them separately. Yu Shui is from a city along the Yangtze River and Yu Chen from a city on a tributary river, so there was a bit travelling between the two different locations.

WSWS: How large was your crew?

YC: I had a sound recordist and a cinematographer but on some occasions there would only be a sound recordist and myself on camera, but not necessarily shooting all the time. The subjects were also very familiar with my crew and we became part of the activity in the daily life of our subjects. It had to develop in line with the level of comfortability of the subjects—their response to us.

The Yu family thought that I was going to be some sort of mentor or big brother guardian for Yu Shui when she left to work on the boat. This was important because she was leaving home for the first time. It all came together very slowly because I didn't want to rush the process.

The intimacy doesn't come easily. You have to be very clear about your objectives and to make sure—especially for the Yu family—that your subjects understand what all the equipment is for. The Yu family was very relaxed toward my cinema verité approach. Jerry was the complete opposite and always looking into the lens. This, of course, complemented his personality.

WSWS: Who are your influences as a filmmaker?

YC: I'm influenced by fictional filmmakers—from Robert Altman through to Vittorio di Sica, the director of *The Bicycle Thief*. I was also inspired by Chinese filmmakers, especially the Sixth Generation, and Taiwanese New Wave filmmakers. In general, I think about particular films rather than individuals.

My film, of course, is not the only one about the Three Gorges dam. There are others, one of them being *Still Life*, a fiction film by Jia Zhangke. In fact, movies about the Three Gorges are almost a genre, the dam being used by filmmakers as a backdrop to explore bigger social issues.

WSWS: Could you explain the interview with the young shopkeeper?

YC: He was actually an antique dealer who was selling castaway items, lots of Mao iconography. I don't know what triggered it but suddenly during the interview he started weeping about the situation. It's difficult to explain, but sometimes the camera aids in the subject's emotional outpouring. It's almost therapeutic and so the antique dealer was able to give us his deep inner feelings and what he'd been through as a former farmer and relocatee who felt that he

hadn't been given proper compensation.

WSWS: He doesn't mince words though, describing Communist Party officials as "bandits". Did you witness other indications of hostility toward the bureaucracy?

YC: I wouldn't say that there is a collective movement but there's certainly a deep-seated feeling that when people are wronged they will get out and voice their opinions. I read that in 2004 or 2005 there were about 70,000 incidents of civil unrest throughout China. Much of this is from the peasant class and directed against local government corruption or a result of environmental issues, but all sorts of people are becoming more emboldened to express their opinions.

Along with the antique dealer I followed other subjects who didn't make into the film, including villagers protesting local government moves to build a new relocation home on top of an ancestral tomb. The villagers blockaded a road, stopped the construction vehicles, and were eventually able to negotiate a deal with the local authorities.

WSWS: There's tremendous social inequality in China—it has one of the cheapest labour forces in the world and yet growing numbers of billionaires. Could you comment?

YC: That's true and there is, with the advent of the Olympic Games, growing nationalism. Chinese people know their position in the world economy and don't want the country to be stepped-on like the world's factory anymore.

The overseas Chinese, as they are called in Canada and in the US, are also voicing their opinions and fortunately or unfortunately this is on a patriotic basis. And I've seen this in China too. There are protests in China against Carrefour, the French grocery chain, and other foreign companies. There's lots of interesting things happening in China right now.

WSWS: The government claims that China is communist but clearly this is not the case. How would you describe China politically?

YC: I'd say that my position as a hyphenated Chinese-Canadian is conflicted. You could argue that many people in China are living quite happily, living well and eating well, and climbing up the capitalist ladder. On the other hand, others are falling through the cracks in the name of progress. These are the people who question the pace of change and who can often end up in trouble with the government.

Freedom of speech is obviously limited but it's almost the same in the Western world where most people lead lives that are unquestioning and don't think about human rights issues in their own countries.

I can also see from a wider Western perspective the negative effects of progress and yet on the other, through Chinese eyes, I question the idea of denying China the ideas and development that the Western world has passed through in terms of industrialisation for past two hundred plus years. There's an obvious conflict and I'm hoping that comes out in the film.

WSWS: Were you subject to any shooting restrictions or censorship by the Chinese government?

YC: No. In general, we didn't encounter any problems with the authorities. It was an eye-opening experience for me to film quite freely throughout the countryside. Having a Chinese crew was obviously a big advantage. In fact, we were often mistaken as a Chinese news crew.

It is not illegal to talk about corruption in China and because corruption is so rampant there are Chinese television programs exposing some of these issues. If you're only focused on local authorities then you won't run into major problems. In fact, the central government is trying to stamp out local corruption and so as long as you're not criticising the central government you're generally OK.

WSWS: This is obviously in order to head off more politically dangerous issues.

YC: Yes.

WSWS: What's happened to Yu Shui and Yu Chen since the film?

YC: I've maintained contact and the first thing I did after completing the film was to go back and screen it for all those involved. You can imagine how emotional it was for Yu Shui. She later wrote to me explaining that through the film she could see her fate and had decided to leave the cruise ship and go back to high school. Our production company has paid for the rest of her high school education and we have a fund for the family on our web site, to try to lift them out of their poverty.

WSWS: And Jerry?

YC: He's working on another cruise boat. He saw the film and, not unexpectedly, thought there should have been more about him.

WSWS: And your next project?

YC: I can't go into any detail but I'm not finished with China. I'm interested in rural China and the disparity between rich and poor.