



Waking the Green Tiger

A Green Movement Rises in China

2011 • Running time 78 minutes • Directed by Gary Marcuse • Distributed by Face to Face Media

Seen through the eyes of activists, farmers, and journalists, *Waking the Green Tiger* follows an extraordinary campaign to stop a massive dam project on the Upper Yangtze River in southwestern China that would displace 100,000 people. Featuring astonishing archival footage never seen outside China and interviews with witnesses and a government insider, the documentary also tells the history of Chairman Mao's campaigns to conquer nature in the name of progress.

An environmental movement takes root when a new environmental law is passed, and for the first time in China's history, ordinary citizens have the democratic right to speak out and take part in government decisions. Activists test this new freedom and save a river. The movement they trigger has the potential to transform China.

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Waking the Green Tiger



Ken Berthel
Assistant Professor of
Chinese, Whittier College

Gary Marcuse's stirring documentary celebrates the brave souls at the forefront of China's new revolution. —Vancouver Film Festival, 2011



WHY I SELECTED THIS FILM

Waking the Green Tiger frames the unprecedented success of a grassroots environmental movement as a pivotal moment in the context of the detrimental environmental practices of the recent past, suggesting that this success might represent a foothold for a more burgeoning democratic movement. The film can serve as an excellent jumping-off point for a number of important topics, including environmental justice, political activism, Chinese environmental history, and the power of documentary filmmaking.

Marcuse's film will appeal to educators who wish to focus on environmental justice, tensions between rising demands for energy and environmental protection, and the power of grassroots movements to effect unexpected outcomes in political contexts as challenging as the one in contemporary China. *Waking the Green Tiger* will be relevant for courses in environmental studies, Chinese cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, political science, law, and film, among others.

SUGGESTED SUBJECT AREAS

Activism	Ethnography
Animals and Animal Rights	Geography
Asian Studies	Human Rights
Biodiversity	Journalism
Communication	Political Ecology
Environmental Science	Public Health

BACKGROUND: A FILM WITHIN A FILM

Waking the Green Tiger (2011) includes excerpts from an earlier film shot over a six-year period by Shi Lihong, one of China's first environmental filmmakers, of Wild China Films. Prior to 2000, it was all but impossible to film independent documentaries in China. Shi Lihong and her partner, Xi Zhihong, made history in 2002 when they completed a film about the golden monkeys in the high mountains of Yunnan province, whose survival was threatened by logging. That film sparked a national discussion about endangered species and led to the preservation of their forest.

Then, in 2004, Shi Lihong shot and directed a powerful and revealing short film about the fate of a small village of farmers who were forced off their land to make way for a dam on the Mekong River in southwestern China.

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Like millions of other villagers who were being displaced for other dam projects, these farmers were promised new land and compensation that never materialized. Shi's short film captured the desperation of the villagers and unmasked the deception of the dam builders and local officials. The film was widely distributed underground as activists began to fight against further dams on the Nu and Upper Yangtze rivers. Shi continued to film this story for the next six years and made her footage available for inclusion in *Waking the Green Tiger*.



THE INSIDE STORY OF AN ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

Waking the Green Tiger also had unprecedented access to China's former director of environmental protection, Qu Geping. Honored with many international prizes, including the Blue Planet Prize, Qu has been China's "father of environmental protection" for more than 40 years. He has provided a candid, no-holds-barred look at the state of China's environment since the days of Mao.

By the end of the film, the dams at Tiger Leaping Gorge and most of the dams along the Nu River have been cancelled, after much debate. The activists and Qu Geping reach the conclusion that environmental laws and green activism can provide a model for the evolution of democracy in China.

By 2018, despite multiple efforts by dam supporters to build additional dams on the Nu and Upper Yangtze rivers, the projects remain stalled. Meanwhile, the Tiger Leaping Gorge and the wild Nu River have become popular tourist destinations, and the province has invested heavily in new roads and facilities that would be underwater if the dams had been built.



THE ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE FOCUS OF THE FILM

The film deals with questions of individual and local group agency over the environmental conditions in which they live, with reference to associated tensions that arise among farmers, non-governmental organizations, hydroelectric power profiteers, and government agencies.

REVIEWS

“Given the Chinese political context and a lack of historical precedent for successful democratic uprising, it has been unclear what kinds of activism might result in bringing about positive change and giving a voice to those who oppose government policies and profitable projects that cause ecological harm. This film documents the efforts of a groundbreaking and pivotal movement.” —Ken Berthel, associate professor of Chinese at Whittier College and curator of the Global Environmental Justice Project



“By declaring that nature must be conquered in the name of progress, Chairman Mao ushered in an era of environmental degradation for China. Now passionate activists strive to preserve their natural wonders, educate their compatriots, and encourage public debate. Gary Marcuse’s stirring documentary celebrates the brave souls at the forefront of China’s new revolution.” —Vancouver International Film Festival catalog, 2011

“It’s quite unlike any other recent documentary on China in that it penetrates the official government censorship to show how peasants in the southern part of China stopped the construction of a gigantic dam in Tiger Leaping Gorge in the Upper Yangtze River. Marcuse’s team enjoyed incredible access to the beleaguered peasants of the valley and to the green activists who were egging them on to try to stop construction.”
—James Bawden, former film critic for the *Toronto Star*



BACKGROUND: THE BIRTH OF A GREEN MOVEMENT

It is well known that there has been an escalating environmental crisis in China over the past several decades. As the nation has raced to develop its industrial and economic infrastructure at unprecedented speed, many people’s lifestyles and health have been adversely impacted. It has been unclear what kinds of activism might result in bringing about positive change and giving a voice to those who oppose government policies and profitable projects that cause ecological harm, particularly given the Chinese political context and a lack of historical precedent for successful democratic uprising. This film documents the efforts of a groundbreaking and pivotal movement.

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KEY LOCATIONS AND PEOPLE

Nu River valley, Yunnan province, China

Mekong River valley (Manwan Dam)

Tianba village, flooded by the Manwan Dam

Yangtze River valley (Tiger Leaping Gorge, Upper Yangtze River)

Xiaoshaba village, Nu River valley

Shi Lihong – journalist-turned-filmmaker

Wang Yongchen – senior environmental reporter, China National Radio

Liu Jianqiang – investigative journalist based in Beijing

Ma Jun – journalist who runs an environmental website in Beijing

Yu Xiaogang – social scientist who brings residents of the Nu River area to meet villagers who had been displaced by the Manwan Dam construction decades earlier

Qu Geping – former director of China's State Environmental Protection Agency

Xiao Liangzhong – local activist who passed away after tireless efforts on behalf of villagers

Ge Quanxiao – local leader

Xi Zhinong – famed photographer of China's golden monkeys

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the main source of conflict presented in the film? What forces are motivating the dam project that threatens to displace the villagers?
2. In China, how have such conflicts usually been resolved? How was this situation different, and why?
3. The focus here is about the preservation of the lifestyle of a group of people as much as the preservation of an ecology. These are the stakes in many conflicts centered on development, energy, and the environment. Ultimately, what kind of policy or theory about development can we embrace going forward to ensure the best outcomes for the largest number of people?
4. The film suggests that this clash and its outcomes may also represent a turning point for those who strive for democracy in China. Does it seem that way? What elements are in place? What challenges remain? And, critically, would a democratic system ensure better results?

SHORT VERSION/SELECTED EXCERPTS

Where time is short, teachers may choose to assign an 18-minute compilation of selected clips or screen them in class. The clips focus on a key meeting between activists and farmers at Tianba village near the Manwan Dam on the Lancang (Mekong) River in southwestern China.

The farmers displaced by the dam were promised new land that never materialized and are now in a desperate situation. Shi Lihong records the meeting and creates a short film. The film, when viewed in neighboring villages, has a dramatic impact and helps galvanize opposition to proposed dams on the Upper Yangtze River.

Waking the Green Tiger-Excerpt can be viewed on Docuseek2. Alternatively, one or more of the chapters described below could be assigned or screened in class.

QUESTIONS RELATING TO THE SELECTED EXCERPTS

1. Based on what you have seen from these clips, reflect on the importance of access to information in the empowerment of people. In particular, in what ways is film a particularly powerful medium for presenting information? Consider this point with reference to both the “underground” film that Shi Lihong shows the villagers and your own viewing of *Waking the Green Tiger*.
2. In addition to environmental issues, films can be used to bring other “hidden” issues to the attention of a larger audience. Do you think that this strategy can be successfully deployed to expose other injustices in China and empower people to change the systems that have allowed them? Give examples of other issues that might lend themselves well to this strategy.



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***Waking the Green Tiger* in 10 chapters.**
For more detail, please see the transcript.



1 Introduction to Yunnan (4 min.) 0:00:00 to 0:04:00 (H:MM:SS)

Against the odds, journalists set out to save a river. Mao's "war against nature" is introduced. Activists decide the time has come to speak out to stir up a dialogue to save the wild Nu River from being dammed. Journalist Wang Yongchen says she's tried to publish stories in the past, but they were censored. The natural beauty and diverse wildlife of Yunnan are introduced.



2 The Nu River (4 min.) 0:04:00 to 0:08:40

Journalists and activists admire the beauty of the Nu River but say they are also concerned about the livelihood of the people who farm along the river. What happens to them if the valley is flooded? Activists are encouraged by the intervention of Premier Wen Jiabao, who calls for caution and scientific study after hearing of the debate over the river's future.



3 The Great Leap Forward (9 min.) 0:08:40 to 0:17:17

In the 1950s, Chairman Mao launched the Great Leap Forward under the banner "Man Must Conquer Nature" (*ren ding sheng tian*). Street scenes and old posters capture the look of Beijing soon after the revolution. "Insider" Qu Geping recalls the ardent desire of people to improve their living standards. Archival footage shows the ambitious campaign to smelt steel in backyard furnaces and a parallel campaign to exterminate sparrows. These campaigns damaged China's forests and contributed to a deadly famine. Food shortages persisted into the next decade.

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4 Will dams end poverty? (13 min.)

0:17:17 to 0:29:27

As the debate over the future of the Nu River builds, social scientist and green activist Yu Xiaogang questions who benefits from the dams. Yu proposes a meeting between residents of Xiaoshaba on the Nu River and the impoverished residents of Tianba village, who were moved in the 1980s to make way for the Manwan Dam on the Mekong River. The meeting is captured by filmmaker Shi Lihong. The poverty of the Tianba villagers is in stark contrast to the promises of wealth and prosperity offered by dam developers and their supporters.



5 Man Must Conquer Nature (11 min.)

0:29:27 to 0:41:06

Mao returns to power with the Cultural Revolution. The masses are mobilized to create more farmland across China. Lakes, rivers, marshes, grasslands, and forests are damaged, some permanently. Eyewitnesses describe a campaign at Dianchi Lake near Kunming. There is environmental damage and pollution from new factories. Premier Zhou Enlai steps in. While the “economic miracle” initiated by Deng Xiaoping after Mao’s death spurs massive development and growing pollution, Qu Geping begins a lifelong campaign to control the damage to China’s environment.



6 Tiger Leaping Gorge (6 min.)

0:41:06 to 0:46:44

By 2004, eight dams have been proposed for the Upper Yangtze (Jinsha) River in central Yunnan. One hundred thousand residents would be moved to make way for a massive reservoir—265 kilometers (165 miles) in length—above the proposed dam at Tiger Leaping Gorge. Shi Lihong’s short film about the plight of the farmers at Manwan circulates in the valley and stirs up concern. Journalists pick up the story. Liu Jianqiang’s article in the influential *Southern Weekend* widens the debate. Premier Wen Jiabao again calls for caution. Liu loses his job.

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7 Farmers organize (12 min.)

0:46:44 to 0:58:08

A movement takes shape as activists join with farmers. Filmmaker Shi Lihong travels to the Upper Yangtze (Jinsha) River to meet local activist Xiao Liangzhong. She attends a local meeting, where farmers are viewing her earlier film. After Xiao Liangzhong suddenly dies from a heart attack, the village remembers him as “the son of the Jinsha River.” They remain firmly opposed to the flooding of the valley.



8 New rights, new voices (6 min.)

0:58:08 to 1:04:44

Qu Geping’s lifelong campaign to introduce environmental protection laws bears fruit in the 1990s. As head of the State Environmental Protection Agency, he helps introduce key reforms, including greater media exposure of polluters, the formation of environmental organizations, and his greatest achievement, an environmental protection law. Shi Lihong and her husband, Xi Zhinong, emerge as early environmental filmmakers as they campaign to protect the endangered golden snub-nosed (golden) monkeys in Yunnan.



9 A village rises (6 min.)

1:04:44 to 1:10:27

Dam developers attempt to press ahead without the required environmental permits. Surveyors clash with local farmers on the Upper Yangtze River. A crisis develops as the surveyors are seized and held hostage, and an angry crowd of 10,000 demonstrators surrounds local government offices. Cooler heads prevail, and the crisis is defused as the provincial government, remarkably, suspends and finally cancels plans for the dam. Activists and farmers celebrate the defeat of a dam and the preservation of a valley thanks to China’s first green movement.

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10 Signs of change (8 min.)

1:10:27 to 1:17:26

Across China, there are signs of change. Farmers who were displaced by the Manwan Dam 20 years earlier receive additional compensation. Dam development on the Nu River is largely suspended. After enormous efforts, Dianchi Lake begins to recover. A model project in the Loess Plateau restores the ecology of an area the size of Belgium (35,000 square kilometers/13,500 square miles). China emerges as a leader in wind and solar power projects. Activists and insider Qu Geping agree that the green legislation and the green movement are about more than the environment. They are part of a larger movement toward democracy and the rule of law.



ACTIVITIES

1. Research the plight of individuals around the world who are also being impacted by hydroelectric power projects, including those in Myanmar, Brazil, and Sudan. Report on any common themes and successful tactics of resistance.
2. Investigate the source of your electricity supply. How is the electric power you use created? What social and environmental impacts result from its production?
3. Research the significance of water in traditional Chinese culture, including in art, philosophy, scholar gardens, and landscape design. Consider how this context may inform people's attitudes about dam construction and its impact on the environment.

Create a documentary that sheds light on an endangered habitat, resource, or population in the local area. Have students use their skills as scholars to perform research in support of the issue and use their film evidence and resources for advocacy. Visit a hydroelectric power plant and learn the history of its construction and operation. Ask about what the impact of its construction was at the time, as well as its ongoing impact to the local environment. Find out if any changes to its operation or to the creation of electric power for the area in general are forecast.

4. Take a trip to Yunnan, China, to visit the area that the dam would have flooded. Interview locals and ask about what they felt was essential in winning the battle to stop the dam from being built. Document the natural and cultural beauty of the region.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

An interview with the film's director and Shi Lihong, who is featured in the film: <https://www.chinadialogue.net/culture/6557-Waking-the-green-tiger-the-rise-of-China-s-green-movement/en>

Face to Face Media's film website provides a number of resources and reviews for further reading:

<http://www.facetofacemedia.ca/page.php?pageID=149&tionID=2&pageParentID=107>

For a history of the evolution of environmental legislation and the green movement in China, see filmmaker Gary Marcuse's essay "China: A Vision of Green Democracy" on the website of the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting: <https://pulitzercenter.org/reporting/a-vision-of-green-democracy>

China's Water Warriors: Citizen Action and Policy Change, Andrew C. Mertha (2010).

China and the Environment: The Green Revolution, Sam Geall, ed. (2013).

China's Green Religion: Daoism and the Quest for a Sustainable Future, James Miller (2017).

By All Means Necessary: How China's Resource Quest Is Changing the World, Elizabeth C. Economy and Michael Levy (2015).