



Make it louder



Climb up on top. Hurry up.



Before the Flood

2005 • 147 minutes • Directed by Yan Yu and Li Yifan

Before the Flood II

2009 • 60 minutes • Directed by Yan Yu • Distributed by Icarus Films

National imperatives and displaced lives

These landmark documentaries follow the lives of Chinese people as they clash with officials and others who are forcing them to evacuate their homes to make way for hydropower projects. Both films provide superb material for the study of dams and development both in Asia and around the world.

Before the Flood (2005) is a groundbreaking two-and-a-half-hour exploration of the impact of the building of the Three Gorges Dam on China's Yangtze River. The dam flooded farms and cities and displaced millions of residents.

TEACHER'S GUIDE



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Face to Face Media 2019



Before the Flood • Before the Flood II

Three years after *Before the Flood* generated global criticism of the Three Gorges Dam project, filmmaker Yan Yu again gained intimate access to villagers facing eviction for another dam project. *Before the Flood II* (2009) showcases various layers of community organizing at the village level, portraying, in the end, their futility in the face of national development.



Curator

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WHY I SELECTED THESE FILMS

I chose these films in part because they resonate with other documentaries in this collection—*Waking the Green Tiger*; *Dams, Drugs, and Democracy*; and *Yindabad*—that examine environmental, social, and political issues related to hydroelectric power development and management throughout the world.

I also selected *Before the Flood* and *Before the Flood II* because they are particularly useful for any kind of interdisciplinary course in Asian Studies or in other fields that examine the moral economies of water and water management as seen from different local and global perspectives, including comparative social ethics. These films provide an intimate and intense exploration of the tensions, fears, anxieties, and conflicts that arise when people are displaced for development purposes.

SUGGESTED SUBJECT AREAS

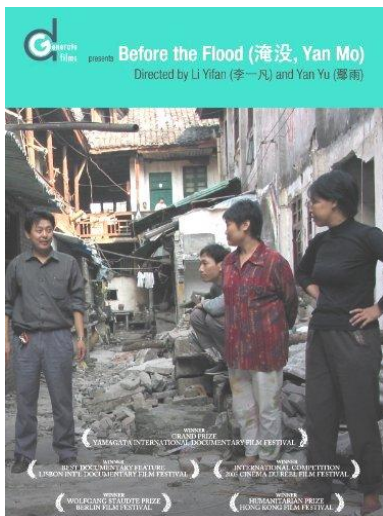
Anthropology	Political Science
Asian Studies	Public Policy
Environmental Science	Social Geography
Ethnography	Studies of Bureaucratic Power
History	Studies of Development
Media Studies	Water Management

SYNOPSES

Before the Flood

Fengjie, a city that has thrived along the Yangtze River for a thousand years, has only a few months left before it is completely submerged in water. Its citizens contend with administrators and each other over the residences in “New Fengjie,” which are allocated via lottery and are far smaller than the homes they have worked a lifetime to build. Communist collectivism gives way to individual ruthlessness while the community battles furiously against bureaucratic mismanagement.

Shot over the course of two years, *Before the Flood* is a breathtaking achievement in verité-style documentary filmmaking. Directors Yan Yu and Li Yifan observe the death of a city, from streets teeming with life to a ghost town echoing with the sound of sledgehammers. A disaster movie rooted in



reality, the film has won awards around the world and inspired Jia Zhangke's *Still Life*, also shot in Fengjie. *Before the Flood* shows what the consequences—loss of home and heritage—have meant for Fengjie's residents, thanks to one of history's grandest environmental, social, and geographical engineering projects.



These films are extremely useful for any kind of interdisciplinary course dealing with the moral economies of water and water management in global and comparative social ethics perspectives.

Before the Flood II

Profiled are the residents of Gongtan, a 1,700-year-old village soon to be left in ruin and abandoned because of a hydropower plant project. National imperatives displace local lives as authorities make decisions with little regard for village life. Ran Qingsong, a barber, and Ran Si, the proprietor of a cell phone repair shop, try, along with others, to rally the residents of Gongtan to stand against their impending displacement. But the will of the townspeople to save their land and homes soon wavers in the face of external pressure and internal suspicion.

—Summaries adapted from the distributor's website at dGeneratefilms.com

THE ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE FOCUS OF THE FILMS

These films document interrelations among environmental engineering and bureaucratic mismanagement, dehumanization, and displacement. Various people exemplify the plight of many as they and others struggle against the forces of large-scale water and power management.

BACKGROUND

China's modern efforts to control and use water have been abundant, ambitious, transformative, and, at times, environmentally tragic and disastrous. The idea of the Three Gorges Dam itself initially emerged under Sun Yat-sen in the early 20th century, with others, including Mao Zedong in the 1950s, calling for and planning it over time. Finally proposed in 1992, the dam is intended to produce electricity for hundreds of millions of people and for the industries in central China, as well as to address flood control in the Yangtze River basin. The Three Gorges Dam, the world's largest, was called "a crowning achievement in controlling and using water for human use," yet its long-term ecological impacts remain to be seen. In addition to Three Gorges Dam, there are tens of thousands of dams in China. Concerns abound relative to habitat fragmentation, species loss, dam-induced drought, land destabilization, and earthquakes. *Before the Flood* and *Before the Flood II* do not tackle these concerns; rather, they focus on the human side of the dams' environmental impacts by concentrating on what happens when human populations need to be moved out of the way of rising flood waters.

Before the Flood • Before the Flood II



This film shows what the consequences—loss of home and heritage—have meant for Fengjie’s residents, thanks to one of history’s grandest social engineering projects.

KEY LOCATIONS AND PEOPLE – *BEFORE THE FLOOD* (2005)

China

Fengjie

New Fengjie

Yongan District

Yangtze River

Three Gorges

Three Gorges Dam

Kuimen Gate (a scenic place at the Three Gorges)

Haiyu Xiang – a hostel owner in old Fengjie

Guizhen Yang – Haiyu Xiang’s wife

Chunjie Li – a pastor

Dajun Li – an assistant pastor

Mrs. Wang – the widow of the former pastor

Zi’en Pu (“En’en”) – a contractor and the son of the former pastor

Chaoyang Xiang – Yongan’s deputy mayor

Local relocation committee

Commissioner Sun (whom we never meet in person)

Porters

Dock workers

Merchants

Wedding party

Local residents

Demolition crews/workers

FILM CHAPTERS OR SEQUENCES – *Before the Flood*

Before the Flood focuses on the dismantling and decomposition of the city from January to July 2002. Sweeping panoramas are interwoven with intimate and unparalleled footage of day-to-day social interactions as the pressures on all the residents take their toll. Some moments of lightness and levity are included (e.g., a wedding party being silly), but the overall cadence of the film documents both the city’s decay and the strains on social relations and conduct.

Before the Flood • Before the Flood II

January 2002: opening and introduction to Fengjie

00:00–00:12

The film opens with a view of Kuimen Gate (one of the scenic views at the Three Gorges) and a poem by Tang dynasty poet Li Bai. The poem evokes the impending cultural loss of the ancient walled town of Fengjie. There are scenes of daily life: members of a wedding party walking across a field; the hustle and bustle of porters working at the Fengjie docks and market; a heated argument at the dock; people eating meals. Viewers are introduced to key people and locations, such as Haiyu Xiang and the Xiang Family Hostel.



Church scene

00:12–00:21

A woman crying at a church. Pastor Chunjie Li at the Fengjie Protestant Church, built in 1905 by Anglican missionaries. A tough discussion of assets, taxes, and other matters related to the relocation.

Yongan District Office

00:21–00:29

Title shot: compensation tables for homes and property. A tense scene unfolds in the mayor's office as Deputy Mayor Chaoyang Xiang and other officials and residents of Fengjie argue about their dire situation. A flash to a notice painted on a wall: Three Gorges Dam stage 2 flood line, 146.7 meters.



Jiaochang village

00:29–00:34

Views of fields and cultivation, then the village. People talking about how the dam is going to wipe them out.

Housing lottery

00:34–00:45

This particularly insightful sequence focuses on a housing lottery. Few people attend and the mood is tense.

Nighttime in Fengjie; Haiyu Xiang's efforts to find a new home; demolition

00:45–1:04

Haiyu is looking for a new place to reside. He hikes down a steep and treacherous slope, ending up under a massive bridge. He talks with his wife afterwards; they are concerned for each other and their future. Emotions run high.

Demolition and village scenes

1:04–1:13

The key segment in this section consists of people and reporters gathering to watch the blasting and demolition. Also featured are scenes from a morning vegetable market, some wedding party silliness, city rubble, what appears to be the city center, a fight, and scenes from a church gathering related to donations.

Church scene and more demolition

1:13–1:18

The pace of decay and demolition quickens. Scenes at the docks, at the church, and in the city generally show the daily flow at that same pace. People receive notices of eviction and demolition, and they argue and tangle with government officials. Negotiations are made for the demolition of the church, but a misunderstanding leads to a heated argument.



Eviction notices, etc.

1:19–1:33

Notices of eviction and about cutting off water; women meeting with officials and expressing exasperation. Haiyu Xiang tries to get through to the relocation office. Tough negotiations at the church, street scenes, more demolition notices, and confrontations with officials.

Haiyu loses it

1:33–1:43

Various matters related to the demolition continue. One key sequence in this segment concerns Haiyu Xiang. After being dismissed for so long, he becomes quite angry while at a relocation office.

Construction crews, residents engage, and scenes of people's struggles

1:43–1:53

People confronting officials; officials pushing back.

Officials walking the streets

1:53–1:56

Tensions over the speed of progress ensue between government officials and the local relocation team.

Back at the church

1:56–2:08

An argument with a contractor. Further demolition of the church.

Before the Flood • Before the Flood II

City being reduced to rubble

2:08–2:19

The city has been reduced to rubble and water is cut off. The church facade has been razed, and the Xiang hostel, along with the ancient city of Ido Gate, is but a shell of its former self. Nighttime discussions.

November 2002

2:19–2:25

Further demolitions; scenes on the river. Buildings are blasted. Fengjie is now a wasteland. Men sell liquor from a barrel. The film ends.

SHORT VERSION – *Before the Flood*

25 minutes: 00:20 to 00:45

This excerpt may be viewed if a short selection is needed. This selection highlights the experiences people have in dealing with the government and its bureaucracy. Featured are interactions at the Yongan District government offices as ordinary people react to their plight and to a housing lottery. This selection is especially insightful on matters concerning the relations between the people and the government because of the impending flooding of Fengjie.

FOCUS ON RELIGION

As noted in the scene list above, there are several other sections of the documentary that focus on religion and, in particular, on the Anglican Church community in Fengjie.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS – *Before the Flood*

Questions for the short segment that can also be applied to the longer film:

1. *Before the Flood* provides an intimate and intense look at the hardships people faced during their impending displacement, exemplified especially by those in hostel owner Haiyu Xiang's type of situation. Discuss his plight as well as that of other residents. What would you do if you were him/them? What do you think you could do?
2. The government officials in *Before the Flood* have a difficult time managing the relocation process. Explain the tensions that erupt between the officials and the people they need to move. Does the bureaucratic "system" seem rational? What are its features? Do they seem fair? Who is involved? In this system, what does it mean to be responsible for other people? Is the government being ethical in terms of what it offers citizens for compensation?



Before the Flood • Before the Flood II

3. Can a government bureaucracy, in the service of such a massive project with deep environmental impact, ever be ethically or socially responsible?
4. What does it take to move such a sizable group of people as well as to prepare an entire city to be submerged under water?

Additional questions for the film at various points:

1. Describe the flow of life for porters and others at the Fengjie docks.
2. Discuss life at the market. How does it compare with markets you are more familiar with?
3. Why do you think the filmmakers opted to include the wedding scenes?
4. The church pastors and community members are documented as they struggle with the demolition of their church and the prospect of building a new one. How are tensions within the community shaped by the experience of the transition? What sorts of social or moral principles are invoked when people argue? Why? Does the problem with the contractor seem to get resolved? How?



KEY LOCATIONS AND PEOPLE – *Before the Flood II* (2009)

China

Gongtan – a village on the banks of the Wu River

Wu River – a tributary of the Yangtze River

Chongqing municipality

Barbershop

Cell phone repair shop

Ran Qucai – former boat puller

Ran Qingsong – barbershop owner

Ran Si – cell phone repair shop owner

Chairman He – chairman of the Gongtan Old Town Flood Safety Demolition and Relocation Committee

Government officials

Police

Construction workers



FILM CHAPTERS OR SEQUENCES – *Before the Flood II*

Shot in a style similar to that of its predecessor, this film focuses on local protests and attempts to organize among some villagers in Gongtan. The funeral for a former boat puller, who dies during the filming, seems to symbolize the death and decimation of the village. The film concentrates on the time between January and May 2007, with a special though not sole focus on Ran Qingsong's barbershop being the site of community organizing, conversational space, and a heated argument as villagers try to figure out what to do.

Opening

00:00–00:08

A pan of mist-shrouded mountains reveals Gongtan village. A sickly looking boat puller, Ran Qucai, sleeps in a room. Narrow streets; people are waking up, smoking; now Ran Qucai is awake. Photos and newspaper clippings on the walls; one clipping reads, "Wu River's last boat puller becomes ancient Gongtan village's spokesman." Women outside talk bitterly about the government and the Communist Party.



Village meeting

00:09–00:14

The Gongtan Old Town Flood Safety Demolition and Relocation Committee and others attempt to hold a village meeting where people can ask questions. However, people walk away amid shots of protest. Some stay to set up a large banner: "The people of Gongtan, Xiyang County, stand together to protest relocation."

Nighttime meeting

00:15–00:20

At the barbershop, villagers organize and hold their own meeting to discuss the steps that have been taken in Beijing to try to protest the relocation.



Protesting on heavy machinery

00:21–00:24

People gather around and on heavy machinery to highlight their plight and to voice their concerns about the relocations.

Further protests

00:24–00:26

Ran Qingsong and Ran Si lead further protests, pointing out how the government seems to be breaking its own rules. A riverboat moves upstream.

Construction workers in town

00:26–00:28

Demolition crews arrive and are berated by villagers, who drive them away.

At the barbershop and elsewhere

00:28–00:49

People talk, plan, and recount stories of being treated unfairly. Scenes of the police outside the barbershop as well as outside the cell phone repair shop. One day, a large group gathers at the barbershop, where some protest banners appear to have been torn down. The crowd becomes loud and expresses its anger at the police, shouting demands and statements. More discussions at the barbershop and other places, with people voicing concern about being sold out. A rumor that Ran Si has gone over to the government side is countered. There is talk about mobilizing more families.

Ran Qucai's death and funeral

00:48–00:53

A long shot of the village and river at night. The old man and former boat puller, Ran Qucai, has died. His funeral is highlighted, culminating in a walk and struggle up a very steep hill to the gravesite.



The decimated village

00:52–1:02

Men carry a wardrobe upstairs on their backs. People are moving their possessions out. A man carries a fridge on his back and puts it in a truck. The truck moves off down the road. Ran Qingsong is asked about how much money they raised and whether they made a difference. He says he is about to sign the documents. There is nothing else to do. Ran is very disappointed in the people; men are bitter. Loaded trucks drive off, leaving the village quiet. Women gather plants to take with them. The camera shows a rubble-strewn area, then turns to look back over the river and the mess and garbage left behind. A dog sniffs at a piece of concrete for a long time.

SHORT VERSION – *Before the Flood II*

21 minutes: 00:20–00:41

This excerpt may be viewed if a short selection is needed. It showcases the different types of protests and conversations concerning the dam project and the relocation process. Featured are people organizing around and on heavy machinery; there are heated exchanges with construction workers. The barbershop and cell phone repair shop are locations for organizing, protesting, and voicing anger and frustration; there is police surveillance.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS – *Before the Flood II*

1. Describe people's efforts to protest their situation. What do they do? Why? How? Do they seem to have an impact? What does either the short selection or full film help us to see about community organizing at the local level—at least in Gongtan—in the context of opposing a dam?



2. What do you make of the arrival of the construction and demolition workers in Gongtan? Why do they leave? Explain.
3. Discuss the social function(s) of the barbershop in Gongtan; try to identify its role(s) in terms of both community cohesion and fragmentation.

ACTIVITIES RELATED TO BOTH FILMS

1. Ask students to compare/contrast the experiences of the residents featured in both documentaries. What common or different experiences do the students see? Why? Explain. This exercise can give them an opportunity to apply insights they learn from each film, allowing them to develop and reinforce their analytical skill sets. This can also be done with segments from *Waking the Green Tiger*; *Dams, Drugs, and Democracy*; or *Yindabad*. Please refer to the study guides for those films in this collection.
2. Have students research the wide environmental, social, and economic impacts of the Three Gorges Dam or other dams in China and report back to the class with their findings. (Students should be able to find materials on such topics as emissions, sedimentation, landslides, waste management, wildlife, re/deforestation, flooding, and industry.) Do the benefits of the dam(s) outweigh the human and other tolls?
3. Have students research where their water comes from. What are its sources, and how is it managed from source to sewage?
4. Have students research water management in another country. What are its sources, and how is it managed from source to sewage?
5. What is the history of dams in the students' country? What are the current policy discussions about dams in their country?

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Books

Marks, Robert B. *China: An Environmental History*, Second Edition (Rowman and Littlefield, 2017). Interested readers can turn to pages 307–391, which cover China's attempts to control nature since 1949 broadly, and to pages 343–357, which focus on attempts to control water specifically, with attention to the Three Gorges Dam and other efforts.

Tilt, Bryan. *Dams and Development in China: The Moral Economy of Water and Power* (Columbia University Press, 2014).



News articles

“Chinese Dam Projects Criticized for Their Human Costs”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/19/world/asia/19dam.html>

“China Admits Problems with Three Gorges Dam”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/20/world/asia/20gorges.html>

“Water”

<https://www.chinadialogue.net/topics/water>

Website, with many links

International Rivers:

<https://www.internationalrivers.org/programs/china>

