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P.O.V.'s "Up the Yangtze" Is an Epic Journey Into the Heart of the New China, Tuesday, Oct. 8 on PBS

As the Three Gorges Dam Rises, Peasant Villages Are Submerged While Luxury Cruise Ships Take Tourists for a Last Look at the Fabled Yangtze Valley

A Co-presentation with the Center for Asian American Media (CAAM)

"An astonishing documentary of culture clash and the erasure of history amid China's economic miracle." — Stephen Holden, The New York Times

"A beautiful way to glimpse the big picture of dislocation. Grade: A" — Entertainment Weekly

Everything in booming, Olympic-hosting China comes huge — especially the Three Gorges Dam. Imagining the Colorado River dammed up and the Grand Canyon turned into a vast lake might give you an idea of the physical scale of the project. It might even give you a sense of what it would feel like to see one of your country's iconic landscapes being drowned in the name of progress. But, as revealed in **Up the Yangtze**, the new documentary airing on P.O.V., such an imaginative exercise would hardly capture the scale of social and economic dislocation caused by the dam, especially for the peasants who have farmed the Yangtze River Valley for millennia. Nor would it capture the hope for a strong, prosperous China that Three Gorges represents for many other Chinese.

Up the Yangtze is an epic journey up the river on one of the luxury cruise ships that feed the hunger of tourists to have a last look at the legendary valley, where even the mythical "Gates of Hell" at the Ghost City of Fengdu will be soon inundated. By focusing on the fortunes of two young people who work on the same ship — one a poor peasant girl and the other an urban, middle-class boy — the film reveals the river to be a symbol of the new China, where an ancient way of life disappears underwater as metropolises of mind-bending size spring up along the new shores. And where the common folk of old China are left to fend for themselves in a world being remade, literally, under their feet.

Yung Chang's **Up the Yangtze**, an Official Selection of the 2008 Sundance Film Festival, has its broadcast premiere on **Wednesday, Oct. 8, 2008** at 10 p.m. on PBS, part of the 21st season of P.O.V. (Check local listings.) American television's longest-running independent documentary series, P.O.V. is public television's premier showcase for point-of-view, nonfiction films, winner of a Special News & Documentary Emmy Award for Excellence in Television Documentary Filmmaking.

Beautifully filmed with sweeping vistas and intimately rendered details, **Up the Yangtze** captures 21st century China in the stories of 16-year-old Yu Shui, the shy daughter of an illiterate farmer, and

19-year-old Chen Bo Yu, the city-smart, upwardly mobile youth of a “one-child” family. Their stories contrast and oddly intersect on the Yangtze River.

Yu Shui’s difficult, heart-wrenching passage up the river, which is also a passage from the past of her parents toward an unknown future, forms the moral heart of the film. The rising waters have already displaced her family once. As **Up the Yangtze** opens, they cling to a waste patch of land where they farm vegetables and live in an improvised hut. But this land, too, will soon disappear. Her father might then find unskilled construction labor on the homes being built for some of the “relocatees” (but not the Yu family). After that, the future looks extremely bleak.

The eldest of three siblings, Yu Shui has dreamed of pursuing her education and becoming a scientist, despite her family’s poverty. Now she has an opportunity to train and compete for a permanent position on the cruise ships, making many times more than her father could ever hope to make. The job is a lifeline for the entire family — but for Yu Shui it seems the end of her dreams for an education and the beginning of a rupture with her family and the way of life she has known.

Chen Bo Yu is quite a different character. The only child of a middle-class family — a product of China’s one-child policy — he falls into the demographic of “little emperors,” reputed to be spoiled and self-centered for having been only children. Chen Bo Yu is, in fact, brash, self-confident and in tune with China’s rush into capitalist economics. He spends his final night before joining the cruise ship partying with friends in nightclubs, freely boasting that the cruise company hired him because “First I’m good-looking and second I’m good at English.” It’s a send-off achingly different from Yu Shui’s tearful, angry last meal in her family’s fire-lit hut.

Once on board the luxury liner, the differences in Yu Shui and Chen Bo Yu’s backgrounds show in the ship’s hierarchy of labor. Shy and poor at English, Yu Shui begins below decks as a dishwasher. Chen Bo Yu works above as a porter or bartender, sharply attired in a steward’s uniform, interacting with the tourists, many of them Americans. Both, however, must submit to the company’s strict training and evaluation regimen. **Up the Yangtze** provides a fascinating glimpse into the Chinese way of business, in which regimentation, self-effacement and an unabashed catering to tourist tastes and biases come without a hint of social or political problems. An easy-to-say American name is given to each employee — Yu Shui becomes “Cindy” and Chen Bo Yu is “Jerry.” This is definitely post-Mao China, which one current joke quoted in the film describes as turning right with the left turn indicator on.

In such an environment, the fast-track Chen Bo Yu would seem to be a lock for success while Yu Shui would certainly be the one to face daunting challenges. Yet in an environment where workers are instructed to find just the right level of humility (not humble enough and Americans are offended; too humble and they see you as fake), all is not as straightforward as it might seem. Chen Bo Yu runs into trouble for his overconfident attitude while Yu Shui begins to adapt to the life of a worker in the new capitalist China.

Like the river itself, this journey **Up the Yangtze** reveals a country undergoing an inexorable and tumultuous reshaping, in which the past is seen as being washed away while it lies just below the surface, and the unintended consequences of rapid economic and technological change chart an uneasy course toward a stronger and more prosperous China.

“The idea for this film was born in 2002, when I went on one of the so-called Farewell cruises along the Yangtze with my parents and grandfather,” says director Chang. “The whole sensory experience was so overwhelming that I wanted to document it — a kind of ‘Gosford Park’ idea that shows the social hierarchy, the lives above and below the decks. And I realized that the people working on the boat were all from the Yangtze area, and that many of their families were affected by the dam. The other aspect was this sense of apocalyptic journey — something out of *Heart of Darkness*. It’s a strange landscape of chaos and decay.”

“Being Chinese-Canadian, growing up hearing my grandfather’s stories of the old China, was also one of my motivations,” Chang says. “It added a personal layer to the project – but the story I wanted to tell was a bigger one about what’s happening in China now.”

Up the Yangtze is an EyeSteelFilm/National Film Board of Canada production in association with American Documentary | P.O.V., and a co-presentation with the Center for Asian American Media.

About the filmmaker:

Yung Chang

Director/Writer

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 meditation on food production and migrant labor, as well as awards at the International Film and Video Festival in Columbus, Ohio, and Montreal's Recontres Internationales du documentaire.

Chang’s parents are both first-generation Chinese immigrants to Canada. Through their influence, he maintains a strong interest in contemporary Chinese issues. Since 1996, he has spent extended periods in China and has traveled throughout the country.

Credits:

Director/Writer: Yung Chang
Producers: Mila Aung-Thwin, Germaine Ying-Gee Wong (NFB), and John Christou
Cinematographer: Wang Shi Qing
Editor: Hannele Halm
Original Music: Olivier Alary

Running Time: 86:46

Awards & Festivals:

- Golden Gate Award, San Francisco International Film Festival, 2008
- Don Haig Award, Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival, 2008
- Jury Prize, Best Documentary/Documentary Feature/Best Cinematography; Special Jury Prize, Cinematography, RiverRun International Film Festival, 2008
- Special Jury Prize, Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival, 2008
- Charles E. Guggenheim Emerging Artist Award - Honorable Mention/Spektrum Award - Honorable Mention, Full Frame Documentary Film Festival, 2008
- Grand Jury Prize nominee, World Cinema-Documentary, Sundance Film Festival, 2008

CENTER FOR
ASIAN AMERICAN MEDIA

The Center for Asian American Media (CAAM) is a non-profit organization dedicated to presenting stories that convey the richness and diversity of Asian American experiences to the broadest audience possible. We do this by funding, producing, distributing and exhibiting works in film, television and digital media. For more information, visit www.asianamericanmedia.org.



Produced by American Documentary, Inc. and celebrating its 21st season on PBS in 2008, the award-winning P.O.V. series is the longest-running showcase on television to feature the work of America's best contemporary-issue independent filmmakers. Airing June through October, with primetime specials during the year, P.O.V. has brought more than 250 award-winning documentaries to millions nationwide, and now has a Webby Award-winning online series,

P.O.V.'s Borders. Since 1988, P.O.V. has pioneered the art of presentation and outreach using independent nonfiction media to build new communities in conversation about today's most pressing social issues. More information about P.O.V is available online at www.pbs.org/pov.

P.O.V. Interactive (www.pbs.org/pov)

P.O.V.'s award-winning Web department produces special features for every P.O.V. presentation, extending the life of our films with filmmaker interviews, story updates, podcasts, streaming video and community-based and educational content to involve viewers in activities and feedback. P.O.V. Interactive produces our Web-only showcase for interactive storytelling, *P.O.V.'s Borders*. In addition, www.pbs.org/pov has launched the *P.O.V. Blog*, a gathering place for documentary fans and filmmakers to discuss and debate their favorite films, get the latest news and link to further resources. The P.O.V. website, blog and film archives form a unique and extensive online resource for documentary storytelling.

P.O.V. Community Engagement and Education

American Documentary | P.O.V. works with local PBS stations, educators and community organizations to present free screenings and discussion events to inspire and engage communities in vital conversations about our world. As a leading provider of quality nonfiction programming for use in public life, P.O.V. offers an extensive menu of resources, including free discussion guides and curriculum-based lesson plans. In addition, P.O.V.'s *Youth Views* works with youth organizers and students to provide them with resources and training so they may use independent documentaries as a catalyst for social change.

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American Documentary, Inc. (www.amdoc.org)

American Documentary, Inc. (AmDoc) is a multimedia company dedicated to creating, identifying and presenting contemporary stories that express opinions and perspectives rarely featured in mainstream media outlets. AmDoc is a catalyst for public culture, developing collaborative strategic engagement activities around socially relevant content on television, online and in community settings. These activities are designed to trigger action, from dialogue and feedback to educational opportunities and community participation. Simon Kilmurry is executive director of American Documentary | P.O.V.

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