



Before the Flood I & II

Forced Migration for the Three Gorges Dam

2012 • Running time 147 minutes • Directed by Yan Yu and Li Yifan
• Distributed by dGenerate Films

This teaching guide focuses on *Before the Flood I*, a two-hour exploration of the impact of the building of the Three Gorges dam on the Yangtze River in China which resulted in flooding of farms and cities and the displacement of millions of residents. The directors' follow up film, *Before the Flood II*, is discussed in the Activities section, below.



Before the Flood I



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WHY I SELECTED THIS FILM

I chose this film in part because it works really well with other documentaries dealing with environmental, social and political issues related to hydro-electric power development and management, such as *Waking the Green Tiger* and *Dams, Drugs, and Democracy*. I selected this film also because it is 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. Not only an intimate and intense look at impending displacement, the film also shows how that displacement is managed, efficiently or not, by the government, and the many tensions, fears, and conflicts that people have to confront as a result.

SUGGESTED SUBJECT AREAS

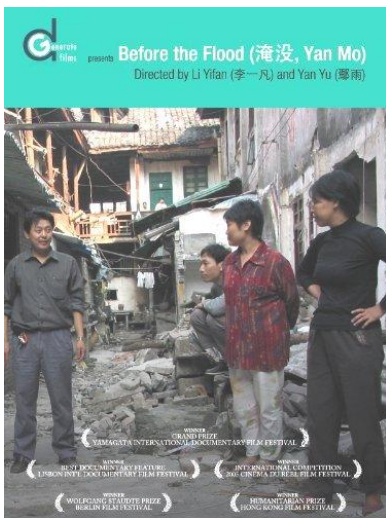
History	Media Studies
Anthropology	Geography
Political Science	Ethnography
Environmental Science	Global Development
Water Management	Public Policy

SYNOPSIS

These landmark documentaries follow the residents of the historic Chinese city of Fengjie as they clash with the officials who are forcing them to evacuate their homes to make way for the world's largest dam. China's Three Gorges Dam, has displaced millions of local residents whose towns and villages have been flooded. 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've 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, *Before the Flood* has won awards around the world and inspired Jia Zhangke's *Still Life*, also shot in Fengjie. This profound film shows the human effects of one of history's grandest social engineering projects that reflect the loss of both home and heritage.

— dgeneratefilms.com/catalog/before-the-flood-yan-mo.



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THE ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE FOCUS OF THE FILM

This film documents interrelations among environmental engineering and bureaucratic mismanagement, dehumanization, and displacement. Mr. Haiyu Xiang, a hostel owner, symbolizes the plight of many as he and others struggle against the forces of large-scale water and power management in China.

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 and to address flood control in the Yangtze River basin. The 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. Concerns abound relative to habitat fragmentation, species loss, dam-induced drought, and land destabilization and earthquakes. The documentary *Before the Flood* does not tackle these concerns; rather it focuses on the human side of the dam’s environmental impact, by concentrating on what happens when large human populations need to be moved out of the way of rising flood waters.

KEY LOCATIONS AND PERSONS

China
Fengjie
New Fengjie
Yangtze River
Three Gorges
Three Gorges Dam
Kuimen Gorge (a scenic place at the Three Gorges)

Haiyu Xiang – a hostel owner in old Fengjie

Guizhen Yang – wife of hostel owner

Chunjie Li – Pastor

Dajun Li – Assistant Pastor

Mrs. Wang – widow of the former pastor

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

Chaoyang Xiang, Yongan’s Deputy Mayor

Local Relocation Committee

Commissioner Sun (never meet in person)

Porters

Dock workers

Merchants

Wedding party

Local residents

Demolition crews/workers

FILM CHAPTERS OR SEQUENCES

The first film focuses on the dismantling and decomposition of the city from January 2002 to July 2002. Sweeping panoramas are interwoven with intimate and unparalleled footage of day-to-day social interactions as the pressures on all 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 is to document both the decay of the city and the strains on social relations and conduct.

Opening

The film opens with a view of Kuimen Gorge (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.

January, 2002 – Fengjie County

Scenes of daily life: a wedding party walks across a field; porters hustle and bustle at the Fengjie docks and market, etc. Viewers are introduced to key persons and locations: Mr. Xiang and the Xiang Family Hostel; Pastor Chunjie Li and others related to the the Fengjie Protestant Church; Deputy Mayor Chaoyang Xiang and other officials; and residents of Fengjie, who discuss their dire situation. A particularly insightful sequence is provided by a housing lottery, which has low attendance and is filled with tension.

February 2002

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

July 2002

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 pace. People receive notice of eviction and demolition and argue and tangle with government officials. Negotiations are made for the demolition of the church but a misunderstanding leads to heated argument. After

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being dismissed for so long, Mr. Xiang becomes quite angry at a relocation office. Tensions ensue between government officials and the local relocation team over the speed of progress. Toward the end of the segment, the city is in rubble, the church façade has been razed, the Xiang Hostel a shell of a place along with the ancient city Ido Gate.

November 2002

Buildings are blasted. Fengjie is a wasteland. Men sell liquor from a barrel. The film ends.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. This documentary provides an intimate and intense look at the hardships people face in the process of their impending displacement, exemplified especially by those in Mr. Xiang's kind of situation. Discuss Mr. Xiang's 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 have a difficult time managing the process of relocation. 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? Does it 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?
3. Can a government bureaucracy, in the service of such a massive project with deep environmental impact, ever be ethical or socially responsible?

SHORT VERSION

24 minutes: Minute 20:45 - minute 44:45

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 Yong'an District Government Offices as ordinary people react to their plight, and to a housing lottery. There are other sections of the documentary that focus on religion, particularly in terms of the Anglican church community in Fengjie. However, I found this selection especially insightful on matters concerning the relations between the people and the government as a result of the impending flooding of Fengjie.

ACTIVITIES

1. Have the students research the wide environmental, social, and economic impacts of the Three Gorges Dam and report back to the course with their findings. (Students should be able to find materials on such topics as

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emissions, sedimentation, landslides, waste management, wildlife, re/deforestation, flooding, industry). Do the benefits of the dam outweigh the human and other tolls?

2. Have the students watch a segment from *Before the Flood II* on their own, and compare/contrast the experiences of the residents featured in that documentary with those in *Before the Flood I*. This could also be done with a segment from *Waking the Green Tiger* or *Dams, Drugs, and Democracy*.

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

Robert Marks, *China: An Environment and History*, 2nd 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.

Bryan Tilt, *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>

Before the Flood I

Documentary

Before the Flood II

Yan Yu follows his groundbreaking documentary *Before the Flood* with this profile of the residents of Gongtan, a 1700-year-old village soon to be demolished by a hydroelectric dam project. Gongtan, a historic village located on a tributary of the Yangtze, is about to be flooded by a dam project, forcing its residents to relocate. National imperatives displace local lives as authorities make decisions with little regard for village life. Ran Qingsong, a barber, and Ran Si, a cell-phone proprietor, 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. Three years after *Before the Flood* generated global criticism towards the Three Gorges Dam Project, Yan Yu achieves intimate access again, this time to the Gongtan villagers as they protest official meetings and face off with construction workers eager to tear down their homes for a day's pay.

<http://dgeneratefilms.com/catalog/before-the-flood-ii-gong-tan>