

Documentary: *The Warriors of Qiugang*, Director: Ruby Yang, Writer: Thomas Lennon. 2010, 39 minutes. See also, <http://www.warriorsofqiugang.com/en/1AboutFilm.html>

The Warriors of Qiugang, a stark and powerful 39-minute documentary, offers an excellent introduction to some of China's gravest issues, one that would be extremely helpful to students of modern China. With no voiceover and little editorial mediation, this Oscar-nominated film displays in miniature the environmental crisis that is taking place throughout the country. We see evidence of the soaring death rates that are the by-product of unregulated industrialization in a rural area. At one point, a woman stares at the camera and says, "I'm 87 years old and I never lie." She then points to her tally of recent cancer deaths as the camera pans across a telling set of blue slash marks on the wall of her house. *Qiugang*, though, is unusual, in the success its grass roots activism has managed to achieve. The documentary follows the efforts of the residents to drive away the local factory, an initiative that exposes them to political retaliation. Finally, the film allows us to see, if in a limited fashion, the responses of the factory owners and the official bureaucracy: we get glimpses of the power on the other side, power that tells the story of how China has been able to consolidate so much wealth so quickly.

Qiugang (pop. 1,900 in 2010) is a village in the suburbs of Bengbu City in Anhui Province in central-eastern China. In *Warriors*, the film-makers Thomas Lennon and Ruby Yang emblemize *Qiugang* as the victimized small town, and, indeed, its story is a familiar one. According to one of the village's narrators, in 1970 a factory that manufactured pesticides and dyes opened alongside the village's clean streams and fertile farmland. The government took the factory over soon after, and over the decades the size of the factory project grew. The results were all too predictable. People complained of burning eyes and throats. Polluted waters led to contaminated crops. Mortality rates skyrocketed.

The visuals that display this human catastrophe show a grim landscape of rural poverty. Like many remote Chinese towns, *Qiugang* is populated by the elderly and the small children they look after, i.e., those most vulnerable to health threats. The film opens at the Jiucailuo Company, with photos of vats stirring dark liquids. The filmmakers follow friendly but forlorn residents, who guide them through shabby homes and debris-filled streets. One gets the sense that anyone fit enough to do a renovation job has fled to the city. All around water ominously flows from factory pipes and culverts into streams and ponds where villagers wash clothes and fill buckets.

Much of the film's attention is focused upon Zhang Gongli, a self-deprecating farmer, whose garden was taken from him when the factory expanded. Zhang's situation defines him. Although he tells us that he is not well educated, his fellow villagers clearly respect him and the film features his quiet bravery. When an activist from Green Anhui, an environmental NGO, comes to *Qiugang*, Zhang becomes the local go-to guy who organizes his neighbors and expresses their collective discontent. As viewers, we are often with Zhang, who at times seems self-conscious at being such a focal center. Yet the film's directors have chosen their subject well. Zhang appears undeterred by any of the

dangers that his activism can expose him to: bricks flung through windows, gangs of hired thugs, imprisonment, threats against his life.

Though grass roots opposition to entrepreneurial or state projects (often the same thing) likely receives greater publicity now than ever before due to the internet, few instances of its success have reached the West. Rather, the imperatives of entrepreneurial success and the requirements of China's infrastructure trump the needs of the poor—often peasants--about to be displaced from their homes. The construction of the 3 Gorges Dam, the largest hydro-electric project in the world, for example, forced 1.5 million people from their homes, and the resulting reservoir covered mines and factories, stirring fears about the toxins that were released into the water.¹ To a still larger degree, the North-South Water Transfer, scheduled for completion in 2014 and designed to supply China's dry northern provinces with water, threatens to create a migrant population of an estimated 50 million people. Although there has been substantial criticism of both mega-projects, the needs of the state come first.

On a far smaller scale, Qiugang's grievances over land deals resemble those of the people of Wukan, a small town on the Guangdong Province coast, where a local party official, over the course of decades, sold away land that the villagers had held in common. Violent protest erupted in September 2012 and arrests followed. After the representative of the protesters died under mysterious circumstances while in police custody, the ensuing uproar led provincial officials to back down, to defuse the situation by allowing free elections of local representatives and by releasing detainees. The significance of this victory has been the subject of some debate: Does the "Wukan model" suggest future possibilities of harmonious cooperation between villagers and party officials, as the Party contends? Or will the Wukan victory become a piece of hollow symbolism that ultimately does little to impede shadowy land transfers?²

Alternately, perhaps the story here concerns the influence that media publicity can exert. As with the Wukan protesters, media attention elevated the position of the farmers in Anhui Province. The voices of protest in Qiugang came to the film-makers' attention when schoolchildren wrote essays on their environmental problems and the story was picked up, first by local newspapers, then by the internet. Over three years Lennon and

¹ Canadian film-maker Yung Chang's 2007 documentary, Up the Yangtze, offers a sensitive glimpse of the human cost of this huge project. His film depicts a poor family forced to take their daughter out of school to work on a luxury river boat that takes Western tourists on cruises to see the valley before it is flooded. In an interview, Yung claimed that during filming, his crew regarded him as "a foreigner with an odd message. Why, they wondered, did he want to portray a peasant family in a sympathetic light?" <http://www.canada.com/vancouversun/news/arts/story.html?id=ba9fa9d3-bee3-44dd-a00d-16ab3523d4e9>

² <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-16173768>
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/mar/03/wukan-villagers-elections-protests>

Yang filmed the complaints of the villagers and saw their efforts to improve their environment take shape. Early in the documentary we see shots of barren garden plots and suffering children. The presence of the photojournalists seems to inspire the villagers as they voice their anger towards the businessmen and corrupt officials who profit from their misery. Their staunch resistance builds. By the end of 2008, after two years of petitions, meetings, and community development, we see stills of the villagers united in opposition, holding a banner that says, “We are going to stand up and fight.”

Documentary, by its nature, surfaces certain kinds of information and submerges others. Lennon and Yang have chosen to follow the villagers and this choice enlists sympathy to their situation. The unfortunate farmers are no longer cold statistics, a footnote to China’s economic miracle. Rather, *Warriors* makes viewers feel their distress and share their hopes. Zhang, at one point, expresses what we can easily read as a universal sentiment: “We risk our lives for their [the next generation’s] happiness,” and the film offers us individual faces of self-sacrifice. Zhang and his neighbors emerge as our neighbors and as victims of powerful economic players who remain largely off-camera.

Standing back and allowing the villagers center stage comes at a cost, though. Without editorial intervention, the graphics only offer a slim sense of the film’s context. We do not know, for example, how to value the conference on environmental law and advocacy that Zhang attends in Beijing. Zhang carries with him a thick petition bearing the thumbprints of his fellow townspeople. At this conference, he learns that there are aggrieved activists from many areas in China, and he shows his fellow conferees his petition. Yet it is hard to tell what comes out of his journey to the capital since he himself remains largely silent about the effect this meeting has upon his involvement. Nor does he appear to have connected with more important Party officials, a movement that the film seems to be driving towards. Zhang’s trip to Beijing appears to be a pivotal point in the struggle—and in the film—though Lennon and Yang do not make its significance clear.

The film also presents a graphic whereby party officials claim that Zhang’s trip northwards, mysteriously influential in the film, was a non-factor, that, in fact, government agencies were already alerted to Qiugang’s unrest and to Jiacaילו’s illegal pollution practices. Should the viewer value this contention as a piece of face-saving rhetoric, whereby the government positioned itself as a mediator between parties? Or do the film-makers overvalue the struggles of the Warriors? What role did Zhang’s gentle persistence play in the factory’s closing?

For that matter, what role did Lennon and Yang themselves play in turning their cameras on Qiugang? The film itself does not acknowledge its own potential to influence policy—it is about “the Warriors,” after all—yet the sustained gaze of the camera is a potent force. The photojournalists offer the villagers a platform from which they proclaim their anger and grief. A representative of the factory, clearly uneasy on film, makes a brief appearance as he tries to reassure Zhang of imminent changes. Party officials are notable by their complete absence from the film. We learn, though, that the municipal authorities have warned the villagers about speaking with the photojournalists,

who are said to be Falun Gong. Managing public image in the world is intensely important to China: witness the Bird's Nest and the Water Cube, the gleaming skyscrapers and the plan to construct 100 airports. What the footage of independent film-makers like Lennon and Yang offers, then, is an unsettling counterpoint to self-congratulatory Party rhetoric and a covert call to clean up not only the environment but bureaucratic corruption as well.

There are further provocative questions that the documentary opens. Zhang tells us early in the documentary that the factory was a state factory for decades before it was sold in 2004. At about the time when the factory changed hands, protests against the factory's polluting began and continued thereafter. Can we therefore conclude that the Qiugang citizenry felt empowered to protest against private enterprises but reluctant to oppose a state-run operation? And is this why the villagers succeeded? The viewer is on his/her own in interpreting the denouement of the controversy as answers to these questions remain beyond the scope of the film.

The narrative arc of *Warriors* concludes in celebration. At the end of 2008 official agencies decide to turn off the power and water, the factory closes down, and demolition soon follows. Lennon and Yang give us images of pastoral revival: a woman drives a flock of geese down a road; young men are harvesting grain; people excitedly talk about how they are once again able to grow vegetables. Zhang's wife, delighted that her once-bare tree again bears peaches, climbs the tree to pick a ripe one for the cameraman.

Do we dare? The film-makers seem of two minds. After allowing us a few moments to enjoy the villagers' glee, the film quickly repositions us outside this ring of happiness, standing uneasily in a cancer hotspot, as the conversation turns to the efforts that lie ahead. One reality check comes in the form of a graphic: "Jiucailuo moved to an industrial park a few miles away," i.e., it will be a less immediate but not negligible threat. Qiugang's air quality will improve and the water will as well, but Zhang's memories of the pre-1970 terrain (beautifully animated in the film) will remain memories. The film closes with shots of industrial waste and reminders of polluted land that cannot be farmed. Finally, Lennon and Yang flash three questions onto the screen: "Will the factories clean up the waste they left behind in Qiugang? Will their pollution be monitored and controlled at their new site? Will China produce a thousand campaigns like this one?" It seems a lot to hope for yeses to any of these.

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