

The Road Ahead *The First Green Long March*



DIRECTED BY RYAN WONG

DISTRIBUTED BY CINEREACH LTD.

DVD, 52 MINUTES, COLOR, 2008

Reviewed by Anita Peters

The Road Ahead: The First Green Long March depicts the birth of a grass-roots environmental youth movement by civic-minded young people in China. What does it mean to be civic-minded in twenty-first century China? How do citizens create social change from the bottom up in a state controlled society? What are the risks? These are just some of the questions I would discuss with my students before presenting the film.

For two weeks, 500 student activists recruited at twenty-two universities follow ten different routes within each of the ten ecological zones in China. China's State Forestry Administration and an American non-governmental organization (NGO), Future Generations, jointly organized the project. The students' mission was to survey and research local conditions, interview citizens, and promote environmental awareness. *The Road Ahead* records those experiences of fifty-nine university students from Beijing's Forestry University, told by the students themselves, genuinely, and without self-censorship. These students are much like young college students anywhere: full of hope, enthusiasm, optimism, and suggestions, and this element alone makes it a useful film for the classroom. It is easy to identify with them as they express empathy, surprise, frustration, anger, and spontaneity. On a trip to the disappearing grasslands in Mongolia for example, a student leader describes how their plan to interview local inhabitants was inhibited by the presence of their host, a local official, and indeed this is apparent as you watch the interactions of student, farmer, and host. The students portrayed here see themselves as vanguards of social and even political change, a view rooted in the student movements of twentieth century Chinese history. At one point in the film, you may even think you are watching the unleashing of a new "Green Guard" movement, but the slogans and fists are more reminiscent of a pep rally than a revolution.

The in-country director of Future Generations, Frances Fremont-Smith, explains that in China today "the historic meaning of the Long March is one of perseverance, striving for something better, striving for what you believe in." The reference to the Long March refers to the 1934–35 military retreat of the Chinese Communists to Yan'an in Shaanxi after the collapse of the first United Front. Those who survived persevered and formed the revolutionary core of the Party that was ultimately victorious. The ecological challenges facing China do seem daunting, both to local

citizens and the students. In China's Green Long March, the enemy becomes the enormity of the environmental challenge. The students, like the Communists before them, are persevering in the face of adversity, and their universities represent a Yan'an-like retreat where successful solutions may one day be hatched.

This film will engage both high school and university students and provides an excellent segue into a number of contemporary and historical topics as suggested in this review. The "Green Long March" is an annual event, and it may be the inspiration for a collaborative learning project with a university or secondary school in China. Geography teachers will appreciate the visual introduction to the huge variety of Chinese landscapes. Language teachers interested in contemporary materials can acquire the marchers' diaries, press clippings, and reports from the first march in a book series by the China Environmental Science Press. Political scientists, historians, social scientists, and human rights activists will find the film provocative. *The Road Ahead*, allowing China's youth to speak for themselves, provides an alternative view to the common media portrait of a polluting superpower.

To order this film visit <http://www.the-road-ahead.com/>. ■

The Lessons of the Loess Plateau

PRODUCED, WRITTEN, AND DIRECTED BY JOHN D. LIU

DISTRIBUTED BY ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION MEDIA PROJECT

DVD, 52 MINUTES, COLOR, 2009

Reviewed by Anita Peters

The Lessons of the Loess Plateau was produced, written, and directed by John Liu, an American and former CBS cameraman, who has been living in China for the past twenty-five years. It tells the amazing story of how scientists, working in collaboration with local farmers in one of the most eroded places on the planet, reversed thousands of years of environmental degradation perpetrated by the combined actions of humans and nature.

Each year, Beijing residents choke on the dust swept in by winds from the Loess Plateau, an arid region in north central China, and millions of



Screen capture from *The Lesson of the Loess Plateau* showing villagers working together to reshape and renovate their land.

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Above: Screen capture from *The Lesson of the Loess Plateau* showing the barren hills and valley near the village where these children live.

Below: The same hills and valley ten years later.



tons of fertile silt wash into the Yellow River, destroying natural fisheries and contributing to flooding. Here is a grim visual portrait of a collapsed ecosystem entrapping its human inhabitants in a fight for survival and an existence of extreme poverty. This is a problem for science to solve and science students and teachers will appreciate the emphasis on using the scientific method to tackle the problems of biological sustainability. A central question raised in the film is—if the loess is one of the most fertile soils, why is there so little arable land available to farmers? “That is why I became a soil scientist,” answers the filmmaker John Liu.

The story of the Loess Plateau is a cautionary tale of how ignorance, benign neglect, apathy, population growth, and nature can conspire together over millennia to cause the collapse of ecosystems, thereby altering the physical and cultural geography of an entire region, continent, and planet.


As the film opens, John Liu narrates as the camera pans over the arid dusty landscape, covering an area the size of France and spanning seven provinces, running from as far west as the Plateau of Tibet in Qinghai and east to Shaanxi. It seems hard to imagine that this barren land was once covered by forests and grassland and is considered by some historians to be “second only to ancient Mesopotamia in its importance to the spontaneous development of agriculture” as recounted in the film. To help the viewer imagine what the land was once like, the film employs time-lapse photography of the Loess Plateau and cinematography of nearby similar, but less-degraded, ecological zones. Nevertheless, to gain the most from the film, students will be well-served by first acquiring grounding in Chinese agrarian civilization and traditional Chinese farming practices.

The film documents the ten-year journey of trial and error by a team of Chinese and foreign scientists participating in the Loess Watershed Rehabilitation Project. During the project’s first two years, scientists met with local farmers throughout the region to determine whether they could learn anything from their “best” practices, which turn out to be, surprisingly, nothing. Local farmers and herders have been eking out a living anyway they can irrespective of the impact on the environment and their future. This is Lesson One.

The scientists next turn their attention to the physical environment to find answers—applying their knowledge of biology, soil conservation, geology, and watershed preservation—using all the available technology of today to assist them in their research. One year later, equipped with answers, they soon realize that returning balance to the physical environment will require the cooperation of its inhabitants, hence Lesson Two. Through interviews and profiles of local residents and scientists, we learn how they gain villagers’ cooperation. This is what makes *Lessons* such a compelling and engaging documentary. Even though we know from the outset there is going to be a positive outcome, i.e., the Loess region will be rescued, the result is nevertheless mindboggling. The film stands as visual proof that lasting change depends upon changing human behavior.

Please direct purchase requests to Patrick Augenstein at augenstein@eemp.org. ■

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