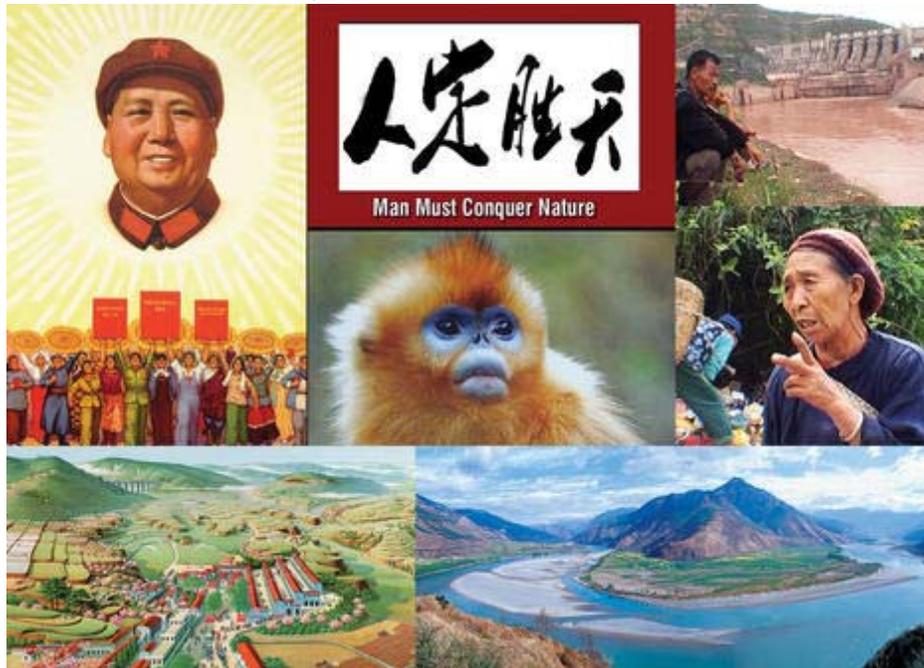


## VIFF 2011: Waking the Green Tiger paws eco China

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There's so much to worry about on this planet right now that it's worth taking a minute (or 78 even) to contemplate a success story that happened in a place where *environmental* is still a new word. Veteran filmmakers Gary Marcuse and Betsy Carson certainly thought so. After going to Russia and elsewhere earlier this decade, for *Nuclear Dynamite* and *Arktika: The Russian Dream That Failed*, both dealing with technological perfidy, they were excited to see how a showdown would develop in China after the arrival of a new law allowing citizen participation in public-works projects.

“I first went over to see if I could simply make contact with some environmental activists,” says director Marcuse, meeting the *Straight* at a West Side café. “And I wasn't sure if it would happen at all. But it just kept opening up. I think two-thirds of China's leading activists turn up in the film, and they tell the stories that we wanted to get across.”

The resulting film, *Waking the Green Tiger*—screening at VIFF October 7 and 11 (with the filmmakers on hand)—details Marcuse's extended visit with a ragtag consortium of urban-Chinese activists, journalists, and even another filmmaker-journalist, Shi Lihong, who was also travelling to the remote site of the massive Nu River Dam at an area called Tiger Leaping Gorge.

“It was kind of a hall of mirrors,” Marcuse says, “given that we were filmmakers watching journalists watching people trying to change things.”

The hinterland journey and its subsequent ramifications are only two strands of the story, however. While abroad, Marcuse gained access to phenomenal archival footage, and the film does a striking job of laying out where China's anti-environmental attitudes came from. In a word: Mao.

“They really did a number on the people with Chairman Mao's campaign to conquer nature. As the former

environment minister says in the film, the Communist leadership was excellent at waging war, and they tried to apply the same principles to reconstructing the country from scratch. They basically tried to catch up with a hundred years of industrial revolution in one decade, and there was a lot of dubious science involved.”

As the film's terrific clips show, the Chinese were encouraged, in the name of growth, to smelt iron in the backyard, fill in lakes by hand, and kill millions of innocent sparrows.

“They treated birds as pests, and, of course, as soon as the sparrows were gone, there was nothing to eat the insects that went after their grain. Then they really starved.”

“I haven't been to China since 1984, and it's amazing how much things have changed,” adds Carson, who also helped produce another festival enviro hit, *Surviving Progress*. The latter movie's dire view of human foolishness is mitigated—for a few minutes, at least—by *Green Tiger*'s hard-won success story.

“There's an attempt now in China,” Marcuse concludes, “to spread the notion of rule by law instead of rule by personality. There's a lot of tension around that, but you can feel it happening.”

**Watch the trailer for *Waking the Green Tiger*.**

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