

Making and Deconstructing Mythologies in Yun-Fei Ji's *The Three Gorges Dam Migration* (2010)

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YUN-FEI JI's *The Three Gorges Dam Migration*, 2010, hand-printed watercolor woodblock mounted on paper and silk.

Introduction

Ancient mythology makes its way into contemporary society through the hand of artist Yun-Fei Ji. Referencing legends of ancient kings and long-gone spirits, Ji unveils the “utopian dreams of Chinese history”¹ that persist today as mythologies – legends passed down and clung onto, dissolving with time. Such mythology is explored in his handscroll *The Three Gorges Dam Migration* (2010, hand-printed watercolor woodblock mounted on paper and silk), one of multiple works exploring the aftermath of the eponymous Three Gorges Dam (TGD), or 三峽大壩 sānxiá dàbà.

Crafted in collaboration with Beijing's Rongbaozhai Studio,² *Migration* was made using over 500 carved pear-wood blocks pressed in watercolor ink and stamped on long sheets of mulberry paper. These sheets were then mounted on silk to create a handscroll, traditionally read from right to left.³ As such, *Migration* begins its tale with the declaration

1 Benjamin Genocchio, “Exploring Utopian Dreams of Chinese History,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, January 16, 2005), <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/01/16/nyregion/exploring-utopian-dreams-of-chinese-history.html>.

2 “A Brief Abstract of Rong Bao Zhai,” A Brief Abstract of Rong Bao Zhai - 历史沿革 - 荣宝斋官方网站, accessed December 15, 2022, <http://www.rongbaozhai.cn/index.php?m=content&c=index&a=show&catid=3&id=75>. Beijing's Rongbaozhai Studio specializes in painting, calligraphy, and woodblock printing, among other art forms, and is one of the most prestigious visual arts studios in China.

3 Wenshu Wang, “Displaced Mayflies: Ephemeral Ghostly Bodies in Yun-Fei Ji's Three Gorges Dam Migration,” *Unsettled Ground* (University of Chicago), accessed December 5, 2022, <https://voices.uchicago.edu/unsettledground/displaced-mayflies-ephemeral-ghostly-bodies-in-yun-fei-jis-three-gorges-dam-migration/>.

that “water floods Badong [a region in western Hubei Province, China]” before going on to a detailed visual description of forced mass migration – at first glance due to the aforementioned flooding of Badong. The handscroll closes with a lone sampan carrying blurry-faced government officials and a colophon, which explains that the mass migration is occurring due to the construction of the TGD.

The TGD stands where the Yangtze River flows through Hubei Province. One of the world’s largest dam structures and a feat of engineering, it is also the largest hydroelectric power station to date, supplying irrigation and electricity to east and south China.⁴ The colophon text in *Migration* stretches out the mythos of the TGD, threading a history that begins from the popular tale of Yu the Great diverting the Yangtze to prevent flooding in around 3,000 BC. The tale jumps to 1919, when Sun Yat-sen first proposed damming the Yangtze, and then to 1994, when the Three Gorges project began under the helm of President Jiang Zemin and Premier Li Peng.⁵ The making of *Migration* itself plays with time – created between 2009 and 2010, it recreates Ji’s memory of a moment witnessed in 2003, three short years before the completion of the TGD’s main wall in 2006.⁶

Migration unites mythologies of ancient legend, modernization, and the spiritual life of nature to deconstruct contemporary mythologies based on sociopolitical situations in China, revealing the overlooked realities of environmental degradation, powerlessness, and propaganda.

Myths and Legends: Yu the Great

Since ancient times, China has built its national identity on a historical need to “overcome the environment,”⁷ to oppose natural hazards toward the supposed goal of improving human wellbeing. Such a need goes beyond history to ancient mythology: upon the completion of the cofferdam in 1997, Jiang Zemin proclaimed, “Man must conquer nature

4 “Three Gorges Dam,” Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc.), accessed December 5, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Three-Gorges-Dam>.

5 “The Three Gorges Dam: A Deluge of Doubts,” *The China Story*, April 21, 2021, <https://www.thechinastory.org/yearbooks/yearbook-2020-crisis/forum-broken-river-shattered-mountain/the-three-gorges-dam-a-deluge-of-doubts/>.

6 “Three Gorges Dam,” Encyclopædia Britannica.

7 Jonathan Spence, “The Scroll and the Story of the Three Gorges,” *Art Journal* 69, no. 3 (2010): 80–87, 80.

[...] This is a victory for the spirit of the Foolish Old Man who moved the mountains.”⁸ Both the legends of Yu the Great curing the floods and the Foolish Old Man – who, through sheer faith and perseverance, chipped away at a mountain in order to clear a path in front of his house – stand testimony to the spirit of man conquering nature.⁹ Both legends also perpetuate the long-standing mythos that taming or overcoming nature is necessary for the benefit of the common people, and that it could be achieved for and through the sacrifice of the everyday person.

The TGD has boded ill for the region, however, in ways both ecological and social. 1.5 million people in total were displaced as a result of its construction. The west Hubei region has seen an increase in landslides and waterborne disease, with an accompanying decline in biodiversity and knock-on effects flowing downstream along the river. A landslide in Miaohe in July of 2003 took 14 lives; the resulting crack in the earth split the village into two, forcing residents to camp in a mountain tunnel for three months.¹⁰ In the long term, the dam is estimated to have halved the Yangtze’s water flow, with far-reaching effects: in October 2022, severe droughts swept across cities along the river, even threatening to cut off water supply to 27 million residents in Shanghai.¹¹

Ji’s depiction of nature reflects the instability of the environment in the face of humanity. Wet patches of ink seep into people’s shoes; bushes and branches curve in from every corner to fill up slivers of space; quasi-brushstrokes on rocks push upwards like waves lapping at the legs of chairs. Nature has nowhere else to exist. As the clouds broil like a river threatening to spill over, a static pile of bricks dams it abruptly and haphazardly. Yet the clouds continue to ebb and flow in the curvature of tall, mountainous tarp and striped, wriggling piles of clothing. In this way, nature creeps into humanity despite humanity’s best efforts to dam it. And so, the mythos of humans taming the environment shatters. As Ren puts it, “the true spirit of the Foolish Old Man reprimands the shortsightedness

8 Annie Luman Ren, “THE THREE GORGES DAM: A DELUGE OF DOUBTS,” *Crisis*, ANU Press, 2021: 159-164, 162.

9 “大禹治水_百度百科.” 百度百科, accessed December 15, 2022, <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%A4%A7%E7%A6%B9%E6%B2%BB%E6%B0%B4/121970>.

10 Mara Hvistendahl, “China’s Three Gorges Dam: An Environmental Catastrophe?,” *Scientific American* (Scientific American, March 25, 2008), <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/chinas-three-gorges-dam-disaster/>.

11 “Shanghai Says Water Supplies ‘Normal’ after Shortage Scare Sparks Hoarding,” *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, October 12, 2022), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/12/shanghai-says-water-supplies-normal-after-shortage-scare-sparks-hoarding>.

of human ambition and greed.”¹²

Mythological Creatures

And yet, looking further along the scroll, the ambition and greed belongs not to humanity as a whole, but rather to a faceless government. People crowd every inch of land. Humans and nature cluster along a crowded riverbank, indistinguishable from one another. Just as the environment blends into humanity, humanity bleeds into the environment, evident in the fantastical mythological creatures in *Migration*: a wild boar standing upright and two fish-headed people in business suits. These strange, dehumanized creatures almost merge into the wild chaos of the landscape, as though signaling the merging of environment and human in their shared destruction. Neither has anywhere to go.

On the other end of the scroll, the packed scene opens into a vast swathe of river, where a sampan carrying five blurry-faced government officials bobs with the tides. Ji’s use of almost-negative space here hammers the point home: the TGD does not serve the interests of those scrambling for living space along the riverbank. Instead, it serves the interests of a distant government, represented by lone figures whose blurry faces and uniforms conceal their humanity – a stark contrast against the clearly unique expressions of each individual person on the riverbank. The final paragraph of the colophon text reads, “With [the displaced people’s] own hands, they tore down and moved thirteen cities, one hundred forty townships, and thirteen hundred villages, brick by brick, tile by tile. They had no choice but to leave the homes in which their ancestors had lived for generations.” Ji points out the disenchantment of the mythos of Yu the Great: the common people have been sacrificed, but to what end?

Crafting Mythos, 2003-2008

Indeed, China circa 2003 saw a number of different events that heralded both crisis and success, reinforcing the need for mythologization. The outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) took a heavy toll on the country. Beyond the immense pressure placed on a still-developing healthcare system and the loss of countless lives, China also

12 Ren, 163.

saw “substantial decline in consumer demand”¹³ alongside other economic impacts, such as reduced investor confidence and one of the largest negative impacts to national GDP in the world, second only to Hong Kong.

Internationally, China counterbalanced the domestic disaster of SARS by heightening its geopolitical influence. From the newly forged free-trade agreement with ASEAN countries to the launch of Shenzhou 7, China’s rise to prominence on the global stage – along with the promises of technology and modernization – acted as a “spectacular patriotic show, a bread-and-circuses distraction from mundane political issues.”¹⁴

While patriotism is far from the focus of Ji’s *Migration*, the disillusionment of modernization haunts its riverbanks. Plain, worn slippers, traditional wicker baskets, and cloth-wrapped sacks are scattered across the handscroll. Technology, clearly, has not arrived in Ji’s Badong. The irony becomes apparent: the TGD is a feat of engineering, a technological behemoth that has propelled China into the international spotlight. And yet, the people of Badong – who, as Ji points out, sacrificed their labor, homes, and ancestors for the construction of the dam – lead lives untouched by the technological developments that brought about the TGD. Who, then, does it serve?

Mythology of Modernization, 2008

Even with all the social, economic, and political shifts that were taking place in the early 2000s, the most crucial factor in Ji’s decision to commemorate the particular moment of water flooding Badong was likely his physical presence in China in 2002 and 2003. When he first drew inspiration from the scenes of mass migration, however, Ji was abroad in Rome and the TGD remained years from final completion.¹⁵ With that in mind, the sociopolitical context of 2008 – when he conceived of *Migration* – comes into focus as a motivating factor.

The year 2008 in particular is practically synonymous with a few major events in recent Chinese history: the global financial crisis, the

13 Jong-Wha Lee, Warwick J. McKibbin, “The Impact of SARS,” *China: New Engine of World Growth*, ANU Press, 2012: 19–33, 21–26.

14 Richard Kraus, “CHINA IN 2003: From SARS to Spaceships,” *Asian Survey* 44, no. 1 (2004): 147–57, 154.

15 John Yau, “Yun-Fei Ji with John Yau,” *The Brooklyn Rail*, January 14, 2007, <https://brooklynrail.org/2006/12/art/yun-fei>.

Sichuan earthquake, and the Beijing Olympics. The financial crisis, which started in late 2007, hit first: trade surplus fell continuously, reaching a record 33% deficiency by mid-2009.¹⁶ Then, on May 12, 2008, an earthquake in Sichuan Province left 69,000 dead and 4.3 million homeless.¹⁷ What was perhaps felt most acutely was that in 2008, a 586-billion-dollar stimulus plan was distributed largely to state organizations, reinforcing the loss of confidence in and support for the government among the general population. Furthermore, in 2009, officials in Guangdong and Tianjin were arrested for corruption while the People's Armed Police received a 32.6% budget increase, highlighting the prioritization of state over citizens.¹⁸

The sense that everyday welfare was neglected in favor of strengthening the state was further bolstered by the media shift toward nationalism and patriotism through the Beijing Olympics. The Beijing Olympics entailed a deliberately crafted media campaign that political scientist Brady labels a “campaign of mass distraction, designed to distract the population from more troubling issues such as political representation, inflation, unemployment, corruption and environmental degradation.” These issues include the aftermath of SARS, the financial recession and earthquake – and the construction of the TGD. Limits were placed on Chinese media regarding what they could and could not report on, with particular restrictions on safety, construction, the environment, labor matters, and major disasters.¹⁹ While the political situation was nuanced – the anti-CNN mass movement protesting negative international news reports about China occurred simultaneously – it is undeniable that much of the dissent and dissatisfaction in China was silenced in 2008. More than that, the Olympics inspired massive construction projects on par with the TGD. This was conducted under the banner of modernization and infrastructural development and led to similar issues of forced migration, where over 2 million were forcibly removed from their homes in

16 Valérie Niquet and N. Jayaram, “China in the Face of Economic Crisis,” *China Perspectives*, no. 3 (79) (2009): 80–86, 80.

17 July 29, 2009. “Sichuan Earthquake Caused Significant Damage to Giant Panda Habitat,” The Ecological Society of America, accessed December 5, 2022, <https://www.esa.org/blog/2009/07/27/sichuan-earthquake-caused-significant-damage-to-giant-panda-habitat/>.

18 Niquet and Jayaram, 83–85.

19 Anne-Marie Brady, “The Beijing Olympics as a Campaign of Mass Distraction,” *The China Quarterly*, no. 197 (2009): 1–24, 13.

preparation for the 2008 Olympics.²⁰ Despite developments in infrastructure being touted as progress toward “enlightenment,” it became clear that this modernization came at massive cost to the people.²¹

The mythology of modernization for common benefit was thus further deconstructed in 2008 by happenings like the financial recession, the Sichuan earthquake, and the Beijing Olympics. At the same time, the optimistic façade of patriotic media propaganda through the anti-CNN movement and the Olympics media campaign concealed the devastation felt by people living in China, in a hollow echo of the mythos of the TGD. In *Migration*, Ji responds to this directly: a close look at the handscroll reveals wooden chairs, thick blankets, and overturned side tables amid rocks and trees. A sense of unease and the uncanny permeates the piece. Not only is this a symbol of migration, but it is also representative of what is supposedly interior being unveiled and forced into the open – an exposé of sorts.

Deconstructing Mythos

Migration brings together the mythology of human superiority over ecology through the legend of Yu the Great and the mythology of sacrifice toward common benefit through the fantastical creatures Ji depicts. Combined with the mythologies of modernization crafted and dissolved throughout 2008, *Migration* paints a record of the sacrifices and disillusionments involved in the construction of the TGD. Where Ji’s chosen medium of landscape painting-esque works recall literati traditions from dynastic China, his expression of modern social issues reveals his work as firmly rooted in moments of contemporary Chinese politics.

In a 2010 interview with the *New York Times*, Ji asked, “What do you do when so much control and power is concentrated in the hands of a few corrupt officials?”²² *Migration*, then, is his response to environmental degradation, powerlessness, and propaganda involved in the TGD and beyond. At its core, *Migration* is a political commentary on the divisions between nature & modernization, people & government, and the mythological & the real, in which Ji unveils the political mythos of China to reveal an overlooked reality, beyond mythology.

20 “Olympics Blamed for Forcible Removal of 2m over 20 Years,” *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, June 5, 2007), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/jun/06/sport.china>.

21 Yau, *Yun-Fei Ji*.

22 Dorothy Spears, “Part Traditionalist, Part Naturalist, Part Dissident,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, February 17, 2010), <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/21/arts/design/21ji.html>.

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