

Mother River

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Project Description

Yan Wang Preston making a red circle on a frozen Yangtze headwater in front of Gangjiaquba Glacier, 5,340 meters above the sea level, Qinghai Province, China. The action was the first step to have bodily contact with the Yangtze River environment in order to gain non-visual understanding of the landscape.



The Yangtze River, often synonymous with 'China', has been extensively photographed since 1842. However, most existing images portray the river in binary visions: as China's idealised national icon, the 'Mother River', and as an environmental victim of China's current ideology of rapid modernisation. The nature of Yangtze's iconic status has not been systematically interrogated. Meanwhile, China's modernising landscapes along the Yangtze have been viewed primarily negatively, without an in-depth investigation of their complexities that can provide a more comprehensive visual understanding of modern China. The research generated two new critical insights: 1) that the Yangtze as the 'Mother River' of China is mythic, constructed by state-controlled media since 1949, with a major contribution from the photographic idealisation of certain river landscapes; 2) that the impact of China's modernisation is multilayered and complex, and cannot be judged as simply positive or negative. These insights were visually articulated through the photographic series *Mother River*, for which the entire 6,211 km Yangtze River was photographed at precise 100 km intervals with a large-format film camera.

Project Duration:

2014-2018

Completion Date:

20 October 2018 (Book launch date)

Funder:

British Council (China) (£30K)

Arts Council England (£2K)

Beijing Shengji Orthopaedic Hospital, China (£30K)

IG Art Gallery, China (30K)

Research Aims & Objectives

Research Aims:

- To critically interrogate the nature of the Yangtze's iconic status as the 'Mother River' of China.
- To investigate the complexity of the impacts of China's modernisation by using the Yangtze River landscapes as a case study.

Research Objectives:

- To penetrate the extensive visual representation of the Yangtze River landscapes and gain original, first-hand research data.
- To produce a significant body of photographic work with sufficient scale and depth to visually articulate the new critical insights gained through the research process.
- To disseminate the photographic work as widely as possible, with Chinese audiences as the priority, in order to challenge and expand existing understanding of the Yangtze River and its relevance to a modernising China.



Y21_2,000km from the river source. From *Mother River* series by Yan Wang Preston.

Research Narrative

'National identities are coordinated, often largely defined, by legends and landscapes, by stories of golden ages, enduring traditions, heroic deeds and dramatic destinies located in ancient or promised homelands with hallowed sites and scenery' (Daniels, 1993:5). Since the early twentieth century, ongoing photographic idealisation of the Yangtze landscapes has been vital in making the river into modern China's national icon as the 'Mother River', intimately linked to a sense of its national identity.

Since the construction of the Three Gorges Dam in the 1990s, a new wave of photographic projects explored the changing Yangtze with a view to critically examine China's modernisation process and its negative impact on China's historical landscape, environment, and national identity. However, the iconic status of the 'Mother River' has not seen a systematic interrogation and the complexities of China's modernisation impact on the Yangtze River have not been explored in-depth. This research addresses these 'gaps' through practice-based photographic research that generated significant output providing a more comprehensive visual understanding of China's development and its national landscapes along the Yangtze.

Given the saturation of Yangtze imagery, this research developed a multi-sensorial deep-mapping methodology to collect first-hand information impossible to attain from conventional research methods. This research discovered that the 'Mother River' is constructed in state-controlled media representation, particularly photographically, to naturalise China's ideology of modernisation and political unity. With a historically rooted regional hierarchy, such representation has tended strongly towards an aesthetic of idealisation with very few locations repeatedly photographed beautifully. China's modernisation impacts, as seen along the Yangtze River, are complicated and cannot be seen as only destruction, as is demonstrated by this research.

The *Mother River* project photographed the entire 6,211km Yangtze River at precise 100km intervals with a large-format camera. This method challenges the existing regional hierarchy in the river photography while providing systematic access to vernacular

landscapes, which were photographed with topographic rather than idealistic aesthetics. With a vast diversity in their social-economic-environmental status (from Tibet to Shanghai), such 'unknown' landscapes and their topographic details, clearly rendered by the camera, portray a developing China with multilayered complexity rather than merely environmental degradation. Given the pace of China's development, many of the photographed locations have already been transformed forever, making the unprecedented systematic documentation involved in *Mother River* timely and important. The photographs provide detailed, visual information of the geology, geography and human settlement along the river.



Mother River exhibition in Wuhan Art Museum, China as part of the 2015 UK-China Cultural Exchange Program in a three-museum touring show.

Research Context

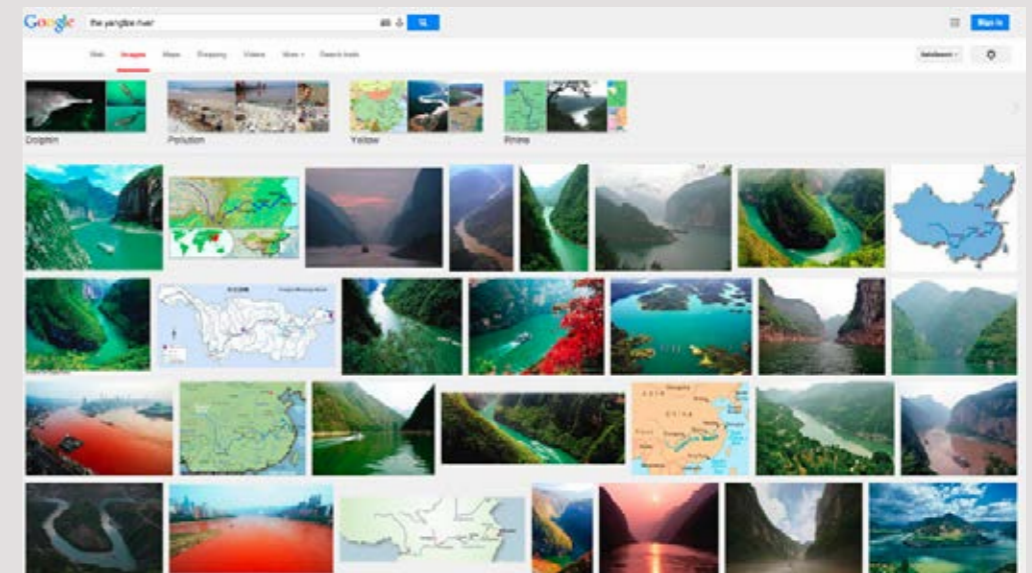
The two main camps of existing Yangtze imagery portray the river with two opposing views: as either a celebrated (inter)national icon with idealised, postcard-like landscapes, or as an environmental victim of China's development. The complexity of the Yangtze landscape, in states that are neither a perfect 'motherland' nor a 'symbol of a destroyed nature', has rarely been explored in-depth and the precise nature of the Yangtze's iconic status as 'Mother River' has never been investigated critically. This is the primary context for this research to make a contribution.

The second context lies within the entire history of Yangtze River photography since 1842, when the first-ever photograph in China and of the Yangtze River was produced. Although the Yangtze has been photographed extensively ever since by both Chinese and international photographers, *Mother River* is the first photographic work that has systematically documented the entire river by one person since then.

The third research context concerns 'mapping' as a photographic research methodology. Here, 'mapping' is used in connection with geological mapping as a systematic exploration of previously unexplored physical areas, and as an aesthetic built on the authority of modern science, placing objective vision and the eye as the preferred sensory organ to receive information from the external world. Mapping as a photographic aesthetic and method has been established since the 1970s, by influential exhibitions such as the *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape* at the International Museum of Photography in Rochester, New York. Situated with this context, a key innovation of this research is to develop a new element of 'deep' mapping employing 'emplacement', in which tactile interventions, social interaction and subjectivity are placed at the centre of the research methodology. Such emplacement proved effective for penetrating and going beyond the extensive visual representation of the Yangtze River landscapes within and beyond China.

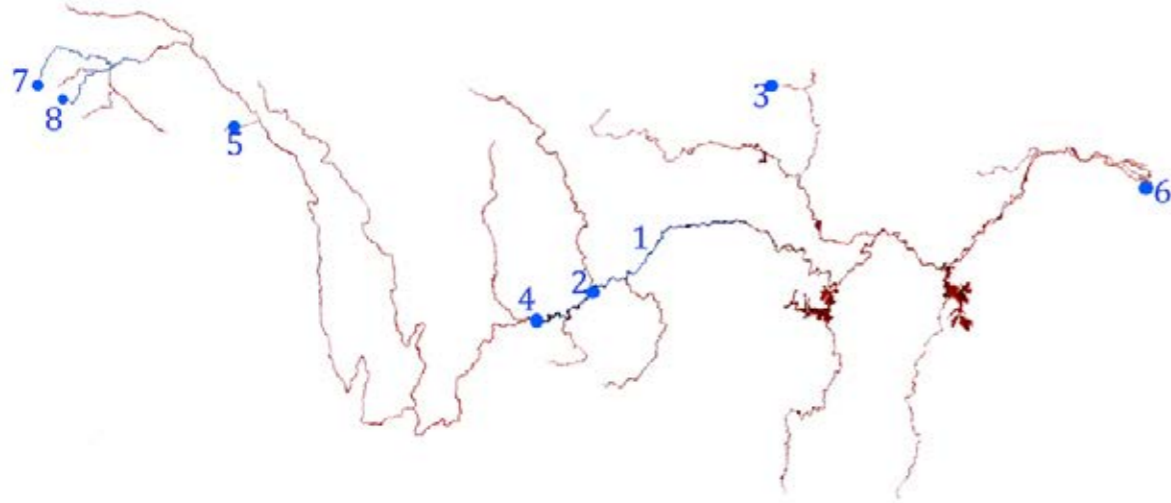


RMB ¥10 note (Chinese currency) with an image of the Three Gorges on the Yangtze River printed on the back. Similar to the Queen's portrait in the UK, this Yangtze landscape is one of the main national icons of China.



A screen grab showing the Google search results with the keyword 'Yangtze River', providing an example of how a 'natural Yangtze' is represented in the popular visual culture in an international context.

Research Methods & Process



Places visited during the early stages of the research, in order to have a first-hand experience of different types of Yangtze landscapes, including the source (7,8), the mouth (6), the political (The Three Gorges area, 1), the urban (2,4), the vernacular (3) and the less-pictured (5 - a Tibetan town).

The initial stage of the research involved a systematic investigation of the Yangtze as through the 'deep-mapping' methodology described above. During field trips to the Yangtze River, places were selected loosely based on their (non-definite) types: the iconic (river source and mouth), the vernacular, the rural, the political (The Three Gorges Dam), the new urban (major cities) and the borderland (Tibetan region of the Yangtze catchment). A critical insight was gained in this process: that Yangtze as the 'Mother River' is mythic, constructed solely in media representation to naturalise China's modernisation ideology and its political unity.

To articulate this new insight, the entire 6,211km Yangtze River was photographed at precise 100-km intervals with a large-format film camera. Subverting the river representation's regional hierarchy and pictorial binary, the focus was on vernacular sites in order to explore the multi-layered complexities of China's modernisation along the Yangtze River.



Learning to carve stones with local Tibetans in Yushu (No 5 in the map left) in order to have active social interaction with them and to find out their views on the Yangtze River, which flows near to their town.

The final stage was to disseminate the research to add a new, more comprehensive visual understanding of the Yangtze River and the contemporary national identity of China. With China as a priority, seventeen large scale exhibitions with at least 100,000 visitors in seven countries were held. It has also been extensively published in mainstream media, as well as photographic and academic journals, and its impact amplified by intensive media coverage including CCTV, Irish Times, and The Guardian.



A screen shot from a video produced while swimming in the Yangtze River in Chongqing (No 2 in the map left). The action was carried out in order to experience the river environment from a non-visual perspective and to gain social interactions with the local Yangtze swimmers.

Three research methods related to 'mapping' (referring to systemic and in-depth exploration of areas unknown by the researcher) were employed in the research process:

1. Mapping photographically, the researcher would experience, observe and document by photographing, typically without intervening in the subject matter.
2. Emplacement—mapping with the body, in which a series of bodily and social interventions within the river environment were conducted in order to collect 'data' from non-visual channels. This method, 'the sensuous interrelationship of body-mind-environment' (Hawes, 2004: 7), proved highly effective in interrogating the 'Mother River' myth. Deep Mapping, with emplacement as the key, constitutes a new contribution to photographic research methodology.
3. Contextual mapping — referencing a critical review of representations of the Yangtze with an emphasis on photographic representation in modern China since 1949, as well as China's environmental history and its relevance to the Yangtze River imagery. Such research confirmed the finding from the field trips that Yangtze the 'Mother River' was a myth. It identified some key characteristics of this myth and directed future theoretical research and practice.



A Google Earth map showing the 63 Y Points at precise 100km intervals, marked on the Yangtze River. The practical outcome of the research is the project title *Mother River*, in which all the 63 Y Points were photographed.

Research Outcomes & Dissemination

Title: Mother River (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2018)

ISBN: 978-3-7757-4447-8 (EN)

Texts: Jem Southam and Liz Wells.

160 pages, 71 illustrations, hardcover, 27.5*33 cm.

Print Run: 1,500



Solo Exhibitions:		
2017	Mother River	Gallery of Photography Ireland, Dublin, Ireland
	Mother River	Impressions Gallery, Bradford, UK
2015	Mother River	China Three Gorges Museum, Chongqing, China
	Mother River	Wuhan Art Museum, China
	Mother River	The Swatch Art Peace Hotel, Shanghai, China
	Mother River	Swatch Faces 2015, the 56th Venice Biennale, Italy
	Mother River	Lianzhou Fotofestival, Lianzhou, China
2014	He – River Together	Touchstones Gallery, Rochdale, UK
Group Exhibitions featuring Mother River:		
2018	40 Years of Contemporary Chinese Photography	OCAT, Shenzhen, China
2017	Mother River	KAUNAS PHOTO festival, Lithuania
2016	Dubai Photo	Dubai, UAE
	The 8th Three Shadows Photography Annual Award	Beijing and Xiamen, China
	Pondyphoto 2016	Pondicherry, India
2014	Flow – British and Chinese Landscape Artists	Xu Space, Chongqing, China
Awards:		
2018	Bronze	Best Portfolio Award, Photo Meet, London, UK
2017	Top 8	KAUNAS PHOTO festival, Lithuania
2016	Shiseido Photographer Prize	Three Shadows Photography Art Centre, Beijing, China
2015	Selected artist and grant	2015 UK-China Year of Cultural Exchange, British Council (China)
2014	Reviewers' Choice Award Clifton Camera Award Genesis Imaging Award	FORMAT Photography Festival, Derby, UK FORMAT Photography Festival, Derby, UK FORMAT Photography Festival, Derby, UK

Solo Exhibition Catalogue:	Preston, Yan Wang, Mother River (Shanghai, 2015)
Group Exhibition Catalogues:	Dubai Photo Exhibition, HIPA, UAE, 2016
	The Three Shadows Photography Art Centre (compilation), Immeasurable: The 2016 Three Shadows Photography Award Exhibition (Hangzhou: Zhejiang Photography Publisher, 2016) 三影堂摄影艺术中心编著, 无量 - 2016年度三影堂奖作品展 (杭州: 浙江摄影出版社, 2016) ISBN: 978-7-5514-1388-6
	Duan, Yuting, Expanded Geographies: 2015 Lianzhoufoto (Beijing: China Nationality Art Photograph Publishing House, 2015) 段, 毓婷, 扩张的地域: 2015年连州国际摄影节展 (北京: 中国民族摄影艺术出版社, 2015) ISBN: 978-7-5122-0762-2
	Wells, L (ed.), Flow: Time, Movement, Change (Exhibition catalogue for shows at Sichuan Fine Art Institute, Chongqing and 501 Xu Space, Chongqing, 2014; Jia Ling Jiang Gallery, Nanchong City, China, 2015) 利兹, 威尔斯, '流':时间, 移动, 变化 (展览画册) (重庆市四川美术学院及501序空间, 2014; 南充市嘉陵江美术馆, 2015)
	The Swatch Ltd (compilation), Faces & Traces (Shanghai, 2014)
Printed Publications in Specialist Photography Magazines:	Source to Sea: Yan Preston in The RPS Journal, May 2015/ Volume 155/ Number 5 ISSN: 1468-8670
	He, Yining, Walking and Mapping: The Physical Experience of Contemporary Photography, in Art World, July 2015 何, 伊宁, '当代摄影的行为体验', 艺术世界, 2015年7月 ISSN: 1005-7722
	Yan Wang Preston, 'Mother River', in Chinese Photography Magazine, November 2015, pp. 王岩 (图文), 母亲河, 中国摄影杂志, 2015年11月 ISSN: 0529-6420
Conference Presentations:	
2019	Paper title: Compasses, Cameras and Ladies: Case studies of women photographers and explorers, at the 'Fast Forward: Women in Photography' conference, Tate Modern. Organised by University for the Creative Arts, UK.
	(Keynote speaker) Paper title: Rivers, Trees, Journeys, at the 'Arts Practice Research' conference. Organised by Land/Water and the Visual Arts Research Group, University of Plymouth, UK
2014	Paper title: Mother River, at the 'Art of Risk' Symposium, Leeds University, UK



Mother River exhibition at Chongqing China Three Gorges Museum as part of the 2015 UK-China Year of Cultural Exchange Programme. The exhibition attracted over 60,000 visitors in 3 weeks.



Mother River exhibition at Impressions Gallery, Bradford, UK, 2017.

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Wells, L Land Matters (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2011)

Wu, Hung Displacement: The Three Gorges Dam and Contemporary Chinese Art (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, 2008)

Output Type:

Scholarly book, original artistic works, creative body of enquiry, solo exhibition, contribution to collaborative group exhibitions, journal articles, conference contribution