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18TH BIENNALE OF SYDNEY EDUCATION KIT

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With thanks to:

Yun-Fei Ji, James Cohan Gallery New York and Shanghai, Ellen Watson

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Yun-Fei Ji, *The Three Gorges Dam Migration*, 2009 Hand-printed watercolour woodblock on Xuan paper mounted on silk, scroll 975 cm long Courtesy the artist and the Library of the Museum of Modern Art, New York Photograph: Ellen Watson

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Yun-Fei Ji



Look and engage: first impressions

- What does the scroll remind you of?
- What materials has the artist used?
- Make a list of the range of subject matter.
- What is the artist representing?

'With the exception of the river Nu, almost all the major rivers in China are dammed, some more than ten times. The biggest of these dams is the Three Gorges Dam, which has just been completed. The state media regards this project as a feat of engineering and a social and economic success, a symbol of progress and modernization. And yet the dam has displaced some 1.24 million people and is causing dramatic ecological changes, including landslides and soil erosion.'

– Yun-Fei Ji, *Artist Video*, Philip Dolin, Particle Productions Inc., 2011

Interpretation of practice

You could easily be mistaken when attempting to date the works of Yun-Fei Ji. What at first appears to be a piece from the classical **Song Dynasty**, quickly reveals itself to be a meditation on a contemporary Chinese disaster.

Chinese born Yun-Fei Ji has been practising in New York since 1989. Using over 500 hand-carved woodblocks, Yun-Fei Ji's scrolls are hand-printed using watercolour, mineral pigments, and ink on rice paper employing traditional Chinese understanding of perspective and landscape. However, on closer inspection, the subject matter reveals itself to be driven by both historical sources and contemporary occurrences.

Yun-Fei Ji's past works have addressed the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the Boxer Rebellion and the Great Leap Forward. His *The Three Gorge Dam Migration*, 2009, will be exhibited in the 18th Biennale of Sydney. The Three Gorges Dam, the world's largest hydro-electric power plant, saw 1.2 million people relocated, affected ecosystems and threatened biodiversity along the Yangtze River. Yun-Fei Ji tells of families digging up their ancestor's bones and leaving their homes and land in the mass relocation. The people, their belongings, their past and their future are all connected by this traumatic experience.

Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution began in 1966. It was an intense political climate in which communism was enforced and traditional ways of living were banned. Throughout this period artists, musicians, intellectuals and many others were sent to the countryside to be 're-educated'. Artists who created work deemed anti-communist were persecuted and creative practice had to be in line with the new social and political order. There was a cleansing of all culture in the push to take society forward.

Raised by his grandmother during his mothers 're-education', Yun-Fei Ji's upbringing is reflected in his practice. Yun-Fei Ji does not idealise his subjects, they are realistic representations of the upheaval caused from the Three Gorges Dam displacement. The details in their clothing, their belongings and transport all compassionately depict the dispossession. However amongst these figures lurk creatures representing 'people dancing "loyalty dances" (Cultural Revolution era replacements for traditional folk dances) expressing allegiance to the government, and officials toppling into high waters'.¹

In a time when most of his peers were creating Chinese realist art, Yun-Fei Ji's return to study traditional art-making was radical. Yun-Fei Ji's own version of Chinese folk law, mythical creatures, ghosts and spirits become tools for the critique of Chinese government. They become the voices of the real citizens who are unable to speak.

¹ Yun-Fei Ji, Collection description, The Museum of Modern Art, 2012

Artistic Directors' voice



Yun-Fei Ji, *A Band of the Ghosts*, 2009 Ink on Xuan Zhi paper, 33 x 27.9 cm Courtesy the artist and James Cohan Gallery, New York and Shanghai

'Ji's paintings, populated by fantastical creatures, animal spirits and monstrous ghosts, take their inspiration from these tall tales to offer a critique on the fallibility and corruption of Chinese leaders as their subtext

'Often the "rural flight" is caused by unpredictable environmental disasters of drought or flooding, but here it is planned as part of a highly organised, yet increasingly disastrous policy, with the goal to increase the country's energy levels and with it capital gains. Sadly, according to Ji, the relocation of these villagers, who used to live close to the earth and the water, turns them from self-sufficient farmers into poor city dwellers. Inspired by the centuries-old Book of Changes, the artist continues to advocate the preservation it stipulates of "the harmony between all things on Earth to have a long period of peace and "stability".'

– Catherine de Zegher, 'arc are ark arm art ... act!', in 18^{th} Biennale of Sydney: all our relations, exhibition catalogue, 2012, p. 108

Student voice

The Drowning of History

Once upon a time, on the banks of the Yangtze River in China, underneath the protective shadows of the misty mountains, lived millions of people. Here they existed in harmony with nature; playing in the river's cleansing waters, building a life with their families – just as their ancestors had done before them. They lived there self-sufficiently, raised children, and told stories around the fire at night about the ghosts who inhabited the land too – their bones buried safely in the earth near the river. For thousands of years the people lived by the river, and for thousands of years the water came, the water brought life and nourishment to their farmlands, and sometimes the water brought death in times of flood and drought. This cycle of nature was accepted and understood by the people, who believed that nature was the connection to higher wisdom, and so nature must take its course.

One day, not so long ago, some other Chinese people with very different ideas and much power decided that they could change the river and control it. They would build the world's largest dam to serve the greater good of the people and the modern needs of their modern society. They could stop the floods and prevent the droughts, and show the world how powerful they were by defeating nature. As the plans started to take shape, the happy people of the river and their thousands-of-years-old history were forced to move. Some were forced to move to brand new empty cities which had been built for them especially, while others were separated from their families and spread all over the

great land of China, some a thousand miles away from home. They dug up the bones of their ancestors from their spiritual resting place to take with them and salvaged what they could of the homes they had built with their own hands. After they left, the water rose higher and higher, drowning their villages and towns, their farms and the resting places of their ancestors, submerging their ancient history forever. The stories and bones are all they have left.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, when the dam was in the first stages of being built, and the mass migration was just beginning, a young Chinese artist heard of the peoples' devastation and their great loss. His name is Yun-Fei Ji. This young man, who was born in 1963, had grown up in the years of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–76), when the vast history of China was almost wiped clean and the plans for modernity and progress were forged. People were taken away to be re-educated, to forget their old ways and traditional ideas, to create a world where people were without memory, valuing progress and profit more than wisdom. The artist's mother was taken too. Yun-Fei Ji was luckier than others because he had the chance to experience the outside world. When he was 18, he travelled with his teacher to Tibet and to the ancient Silk Road, where he learned about the history of his land and how to paint in a traditional way. instead of the socialist realism that artists were forced to paint in China. It wasn't long before he found a way to leave China and move to America to study and paint.



Yun-Fei Ji, *Men with a large mouth*, 2009 Ink on Xuan Zhi paper, 38.1 x 35.6 cm Courtesy the artist and James Cohan Gallery, New York and Shanghai

² John Yau, 'Yun-Fei Ji with John Yau' in *The Brooklyn Rail*, December 2006/January 2007

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It was from his new home in New York that Yun-Fei Ji learned of the suffering of the people in this story. The unbelievable destruction made a strong impression on him. He returned to China many times and spent many years listening to peoples' stories and walking their ancient lands, so that he could paint their story of displacement and become the great voice they had lost. Using all the traditional methods of his ancestral painters; scroll-like works with mineral dyes on mulberry paper and a flattened perspective landscape, Yun-Fei Ji constructed the sad and terrible journey of the Three Gorges Dam migration, the result of one of the biggest engineering feats in human history. Traditionally, landscape painting depicted the harmonious relationship between people and nature, but Yun-Fei Ji uses the traditional methods of Chinese landscape painting to subtly show what happens when we try to force nature to change. Instead of painting a peaceful scene of coexistence between man and nature, he paints the destruction and devastation of the dam project.

Due to some countries enforcing restrictions on the people's voice, artists have to be quite clever about their messages, hiding the meaning in codes and symbols. For many people, it is not possible to know all these meanings, but the overall message is still very clear. Through the mountains wander ghosts of the past, monsters and grotesque animals, and the sad faces of displaced people, their belongings destroyed and left behind them, the presence of the government is like an all-seeing eye.

Yun-Fei Ji's paintings, and the other projects he has completed about the Three Gorges Dam Migration over the last decade, have not been enough to save the people from their fate, but they are a way of keeping the stories alive so they can live on, and not be completely forgotten. They are a way for the people to share their story with the rest of the world, and connect their lives to ours.

Skye Gibson, The Drowning of History, 2012,
 Student, College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales,
 Sydney



Yun-Fei Ji, *The Three Gorge Dam Migration*, 2009 (detail) Hand-printed watercolour woodblock on Xuan Zhi paper, mounted on silk, image 35 x 306 cm, scroll 45 x 975 cm Courtesy the artist and the Museum of Modern Art Library, New York

Photograph: Ellen Watson

Engage

- Many prominent Chinese artists around the world, such as Ai Weiwei, are reflecting on the Cultural Revolution, which still impacts their identity today. Examine the cause of this revolution and discuss its effects on contemporary art, artists and the audience.
- Imagine that traditional stories from your culture were banned. How would your world and your art be affected? Explore the topic of oppression in relation to past and present events and the artworks that represent and communicate the smothered voice of the people.
- How does the artist's choice of material and technique affect the audience's interpretation of the work?
- Take on the role of three different audiences. An elderly person from China who has spent their lives dedicated to serving and surviving their country, a young person from China who travels and has visited many of the large cities of the western world, and a middle age person who lives in Australia but grew up in China. How do you think each audience would interpret Yun-Fei Ji's work?
- Explore other contemporary artists who adopt traditional materials, techniques, style or subject matter to investigate contemporary events. This could include Ai Weiwei, Tim Johnson, Alick Tipoti or Arlo Mountford.

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In the distance (on the left side of the scroll), Yun-Fei Ji depicts soldiers in uniform on a boat. From the left to the right of the work, write a one page narrative of what is occurring. Outline the subject matter, style, cultural conventions, materials and processes. Give specific examples to support your observations.



(Top and Bottom) Yun-Fei Si, *The Three Gorges Dam Migration*, 2009 Hand-printed watercolour woodblock on Xuan paper mounted on silk, scroll 975 cm long; image 35 x 306 cm Courtesy the artist and the Library of the Museum of Modern Art, New York Photograph: Ellen Watson

Create

- Traditional Chinese painting did not follow the rules of perspective. Their idea of drawing was closer to the idea of how we experience the world, not from a fixed position, but, with a moving eye. Create a drawing of a space or story in which perspective and time are not fixed. Objects move as does the eye of the artist. The spaces oscillate and the same characters reoccur. Using this idea take a long piece of paper and explore a contemporary landscape of your own. Let your eye wander and record where it goes, record anything that moves or changes in the space over time.
- Investigate the history of traditional Chinese painting and how it has transformed and been interpreted in contemporary Chinese culture.

 Adopt aspects of the traditional materials and techniques. Using a large piece of paper, fabric or canvas, create a visual journal of key changes and events that occur daily in your life for three weeks.
- Observe a place or environment that has transformed over time. From memory draw the past and present representation of the environment and the memory, event or action connected to it. Merge the two drawings to create a panoramic image panning from the original environment to the new environment with a seamless transition between the two in the middle. Examine the history of Chinese woodblock printing.

 Transfer to lino and create several prints of the transformed landscape. Experiment with watercolours to highlight and add details to the work. Similarly this could be created using etching techniques, monoprints or by photocopying your drawings.

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Artist video



Watch an interview with Yun-Fei Ji about his work the *The Three Gorges Dam Migration*, 2009:

http://www.jamescohan.com/artists/yun-fei-ji/video/

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Glossary

Book of Changes: an ancient Chinese book of divinitation and a source of Confucian and Taoist philosophy. Answers to questions and advice may be obtained by referring to the text accompanying one of 64 hexagrams, selected at random.

Song Dynasty: the imperial dynasty of China from 960 to 1279 AD; noted for its art, literature and philosophy.

Woodblock: a block of wood engraved in relief, for printing from; woodcut.

Further reading

Emma Dexter, Vitamin D: New Perspectives in Drawing, Phaidon Press, 2005

Explanation of *The Three Gorges Dam Migration* work at MoMA: http://www.moma.org/learn/resources/library/council/ji

Article on Yun-Fei Ji's practice: http://www.artdaily.com/index.asp?int_sec=2&int_new=36327

Further watching

Insightful interview with Yun-Fei Ji about *The Three Gorges Dam Migration*, 2008 http://www.jamescohan.com/artists/yun-fei-ji/video/

Curator Jane Neal speaks about Yun-Fei Ji's work, 2011 http://www.brandnew-gallery.com/Software/index_mm.php?artist=49

A video of Yun-Fi Ji explaining his practice, 2011 http://wn.com/Yun-Fei_Ji