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# The Three Gorges Dam and the demiurges: the story of a failed contemporary myth elaboration in China

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► **To cite this version:**

Katiana Le Mentec. The Three Gorges Dam and the demiurges: the story of a failed contemporary myth elaboration in China. *Water History*, 2014, 6, pp.385 - 403. 10.1007/s12685-014-0118-2. hal-03346881

**HAL Id: hal-03346881**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03346881v1>**

Submitted on 16 Sep 2021

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**Date de dépôt sur HAL :** septembre 2021

**Type de document :** article dans une revue à comité de lecture

**Auteure :** Katiana LE MENTEC

**Titre :**

The Three Gorges Dam and the demiurges: the story of a failed contemporary myth elaboration in China

**Revue :** *Water History*, 6(4) : 385-403

**Date de publication :** December 2014

**Date d'acceptation :** Octobre 2014

**DOI :** 10.1007/s12685-014-0118-2

**Note for the reader :**

This version includes photographs as well as few text & typo corrections/upgrading and additional references which were not part of the original published version.

**Abstract**

This article analyses the elaboration and modes of diffusion of official narratives about the past and the present following the construction of the Chinese Three Gorges Dam (1994–2008). After the vote on the Three Gorges Project, alongside a myth of progress, a narrative relying upon ancient legends linking the Dam to the past was widely transmitted by the official discourse. The aim of this paper is to analyse this narrative, and in particular the parallel developed between the Dam's construction and the myth of Yu the Great, a famous hero-demiurge. The first two parts of the article are dedicated to the main facets of Yu's myth associated with the Dam: the political control brought by successful water management and the demiurgic action of reshaping the territory. The contemporary uses of songs, poems, metaphors, statue settings, tourist sites, temples, and public engravings are emphasized. The last part of the essay introduces a shift in the government discourse and focuses on the population's reactions to the official narrative. It presents the lack of efficiency of the official narrative and the cultural tools (such as rumors and legends) mobilized by the people to propose alternative interpretation of the Dam. The conclusion reflects on issues related to the use of the past in the context of big construction works: How efficient are myths and legends in conveying positive or negative interpretations of such structures? Can these tools be involved in processes of resilience? This work relies on qualitative long-term ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Wuhan (Hubei), Chengdu (Sichuan) and the Three Gorges Area (Chongqing) between 2002 and 2014. The data also includes printed and electronic (internet) media.

**Keywords:**

Three Gorges Dam · China · Yu the Great · Flood · Myth · Resilience

# The Three Gorges Dam and the demiurges

## The story of a failed contemporary myth elaboration in China

By Katiana LE MENTEC

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### Introduction

The Chinese official narrative paints the Three Gorges Dam as having glorious founding fathers [figure 1]. It is said that Sun Yatsen, founding president of the Chinese Republic, first mentioned the idea to build a large dike over the Yangtze River in its 1919 Development Plan for the Industry. Mao Zedong supported the proposition and even prophesied it in the poem “Swimming” which he wrote in 1956 [figure 2]. Finally, Deng Xiaoping, leader of the economic reforms in the 1980s, launched the process by appointing Li Peng, engineer in hydrology, as head of the commission that realized the Project approved by the assembly in 1992. As Prime Minister for 10 years (1988–1998), Li Peng supervised it closely under the presidency of Jiang Zemin (1989–2002). The construction was completed in Yichang County, located in the Western part of the Hubei province, downstream of the famous three gorges of the Yangtze River in 2009. Media often incorrectly present the structure as the “biggest dam of the world”, as it is more than 2 km long and 185 m high. According to the official audit, the final cost of the Project reached 250 billion Renminbi (equal to 32 billion Euros at the time of writing), including 85 billion dedicated to the resettlement process (National Audit Office 2013). Even if we consider these figures as accurate, it is almost twice the budget agreed to by vote. The arguments for building such a gigantic project were numerous: People would be protected from floods; electricity would be produced intensively; shipping conditions on the Yangtze would be improved and therefore, the West of China would be “at last” opened up and modernized — if not “civilized”. Political purposes have also been highlighted by researchers. The hydroelectric structure was presented as the masterpiece of the Communist Party still able to undertake big work and to launch the country in a great and promethean adventure: “[The Dam] is a manifestation of the government power, addressed to its people and to the world” (Padovani 2004, p 8). The vote for the Project constituted a strong political message at the time. Controversially in the 1980s (because of the risk for the environment and the enormous social cost of relocating two million people—mainly farmers—upstream of the structure), the decision to build one big dam happened in the very tense period following the protests for democracy in the summer of 1989. By launching the Project, Beijing’s leaders were showing their power and control not only over the population but also over regional authorities that had expressed disapproval (Edmonds 1992; Sanjuan and Béréau 2001; Black 2009).

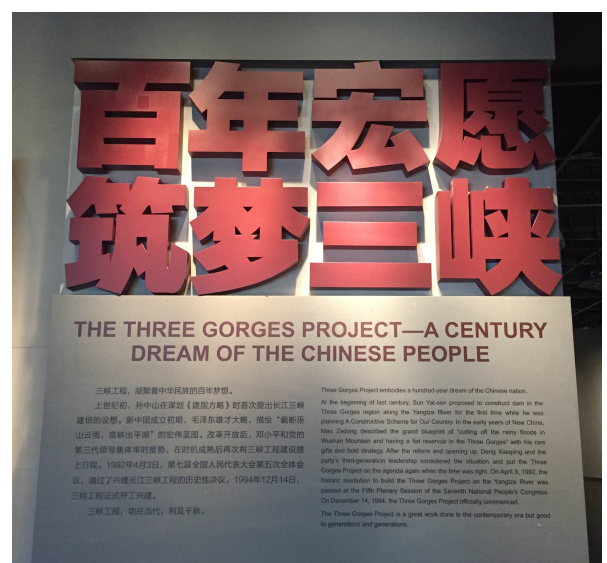
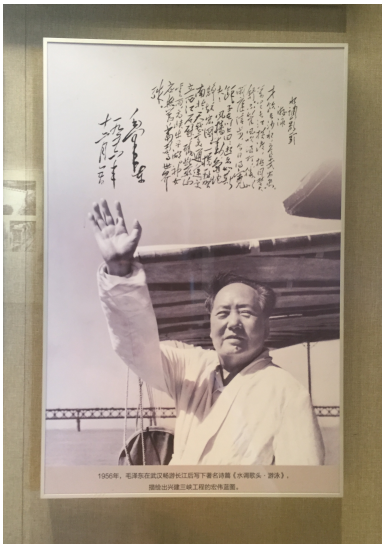


Figure 1. Panel in the Three Gorges Migrants Memorial 三峡移民纪念馆, Wanzhou, China. Source: Katiana Le Mentec, 2018.



Thereafter, no tolerance was shown on intellectual and social debates, critics and demonstrations. In the country, no movement against the Dam arose, and only few activists and intellectuals at the national level expressed their concerns (such as the journalist Dai Qing, the archaeologist Yu Weichao, the sociologist Ying Xing). At the regional level, criticism was expressed, notably against the management of resettlement at the time it was occurring. But only in the local context did the expression of critique reach the form of collective protest actions (via petitions and sometimes violent actions), usually related to compensations. People affected by the Dam were not involved in the international network described by Fisher (2001) to claim rights in the context of resettlement projects.

**Figure 2.** Panel in the Three Gorges Migrants Memorial 三峡移民纪念馆, Wanzhou, China. Source: Katiana Le Mentec, 2018.

After the vote on the Project, a myth of progress was widely transmitted in the media and official discourse which constructed the Three Gorges Dam as instigating a new prosperous era leading to a modern and bright future for both the people and the government. The official rhetoric announced “a new chapter” in Chinese history, marked by modernity, science and technology. More than a new step, the Dam implementation was presented as a historic moment, inaugurating a “rebirth” (Journal of economic information 2003) and a “new age” (Zhou 2006). During the construction of the Dam, government propaganda showcased people’s happiness in light of such a marvel, and about the abundance of civilizing benefits. This kind of narrative is common in the context of large construction works. Considered among humanity’s greatest achievements, big dams are the subject of intellectual elaborations by their designers, engineers, private developers as well as political figures who support them. Numerous authors have shown how these infrastructures are presented as icons of modernization and progress<sup>1</sup>, and as works displaying the prestige and power of their makers (McCully 1996; Espeland 1998; Varaschin 2001; Fisher 2001; Wateau 2003; Fanchette 2006; Bethemont 2008; Dalmasso 2008). In China, alongside the narrative emphasizing modernity and discontinuity, there is a second complementary narrative regarding the Three Gorges Dam. While this project is presented as a material manifestation of a political and economic orientation towards the future and is celebrated as a radical break with the past [figure3], it is also paralleled with legendary and mythical events, notably the actions of the demiurge Yu the Great (*Dayu*, 大禹) [figure 4] and the goddess of the Peak, Yaoji.



**Figure 3.** The Three Gorges Dam from the Three Gorges Reservoir, Yichang (Hubei) China. Source: Katiana Le Mentec, 2017.

<sup>1</sup> According to Dalmasso (2008), dams were widely considered as icons of progress until the beginning of the 2000s when this kind of construction work was criticized after reports showing that resettlement progresses were always leading to more poverty.

Observers not familiar with China might be surprised by the plentiful references to myths and gods in a country where the government praises Marxist-Leninist ideology, and glorifies such a scientifically and technologically advanced hydroelectric structure as the Three Gorges Dam. But when considering Chinese history and contemporary practices, the use of such references could be classified as a typical ideological and educational tool which has been used by leaders for centuries. Since the early days of Chinese history, Confucians have profusely used legends to persuade and educate masses and officials. They showed righteous examples by presenting supernatural beings from popular legends as historical civil servants. In this country it is also well known that authorities, as much during the imperial as the republican period, have constantly relied on the past—by invoking both history and legend—to seek political legitimacy or to stimulate national cohesion and patriotism (Lamouroux 2012; Coble 2007; Varutti 2014). As McNeal (2012, p 684) has shown, since the early 1920s, Chinese scholars and literary figures have seized the recently invented category of *shenbua* 神话 (myth) to compose a coherent and smooth body of myths in order to mobilize the Chinese citizenry and to present to the world narratives comparable with the West's body of Greek myths. While during the Maoist era the authorities considered such references as pre-scientific illusions and superstitions, in contemporary China, myths—including their supernatural elements—are valuable items of the intangible cultural heritage, a new concept promoted through the UNESCO. Today at the national, regional and local levels these narratives are used in numerous issues linked to identity, economy, ideology and politics.

However, from the selection of ancient myths to the impact of their use on the population, few researchers question the mechanisms of such processes. They are usually assumed to be effective as tools for the government such as in the work of Billeter (2007) on the Yellow Emperor. Whilst researchers have noted the regular comparison of the Three Gorges Dam with Yu the Great in the official narrative, no one (to my knowledge) has tried to analyse this issue in more depth, which is the aim of this paper. How has the “new myth” (as it has been called) of the Three Gorges Dam been shaped? Why was the reference of Yu the Great chosen to support it? Which kind of actors nourished the parallel with the Dam and through which actions? The first two parts of the essay are dedicated to these questions by following the main facets of Yu the Great's myth which has been established in regard to the Dam: the political control brought by a successful water management and the demiurgic action of reshaping the territory. The last part of the essay focuses on people's reactions to this official narrative and the tools they have used to interpret the Three Gorges Dam in different ways. It will include recent discourses following the power shift in the last couple of years that generated some critique. The conclusion reflects on two issues related to the use of the past in the context of big construction works. First, using the case study of the Three Gorges Dam and considering the relation between authorities and the population, I address the question how efficient myths and legends are in conveying positive or negative interpretations of such structures. Second, the conclusion examines the tendency of people and political leaders to include an unprecedented event in a kind of continuity. The final question revolves around whether uses of the past in this process can be involved in other issues in the context of big dam constructions, such as processes developing resilience.<sup>2</sup>



Figure 4. Statue of Yu the Great, Huguang Guild (Chongqing) China.

Source: Katiana Le Mentec, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> The analysis presented in this article was first arranged in a chapter of my PhD thesis (defended in 2011 at Paris West University). It was then updated with new data and proposed at conferences at Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin on June 1, 2012, and the South-West University for Nationalities in Chengdu on June 9, 2014. I am deeply grateful for the comments and remarks of participants of the conferences, proofreaders, and editors of this issue.

Before going further, a few words are necessary regarding the context and methodology used for this research. My first encounter with the official narrative regarding the Three Gorges Dam occurred when I was living in Wuhan (Hubei province) from September 2002 to February 2005, first as a student and then as a lecturer. I regularly saw the regional news coverage of the hydroelectric project, in particular during the ceremonies dedicated to the finalisation of the Dam's first part followed by the first rise of the Yangtze waters in 2003. As a foreign student and as a teacher, I was invited to the Dam construction site by the university on several occasions, which could be reached only by taking a bus for several hours. My field research upstream of the structure began in early 2004. After exploratory fieldwork in Yichang (Hubei), I chose the Yunyang County (Chongqing Municipality, 200 km upstream the Dam) as the focus of my PhD research in anthropology. From April 2004 to January 2008 I undertook ten periods of ethnographical fieldwork in Yunyang adding up to more than a year lived exclusively with local families. Because of the political sensitivity of the subject, I avoided engaging in conversations directly related to the Dam and its consequences.<sup>3</sup> I focused my attention on a temple dedicated to a deified hero, Zhang Fei, and classified as national heritage before it was removed to escape submersion by the Dam reservoir. This god, along with the temples, legends and cults dedicated to him, was seized upon by people and authorities at the local level to talk about the consequences of the Dam (*Le Mentec 2006*). In 2008, I turned my attention to the tourist cruises which included the Dam construction area. During this first stage of the research (2002–2008), the hydroelectric project was under completion and the water was slowly rising. People were directly confronted with the change in the landscape, the transformation of their native land, the submersion of their homes and the relocation of friends and families. A few years after the last rise of water (which occurred in 2009), in October 2011 and in June 2014, I undertook two further pieces of fieldwork (one month each) in Chongqing, Yunyang and Wanzhou focusing on the Museums and exhibitions dedicated to the forced migration caused by the Three Gorges Dam.

The data presented in this article have been collected in various ways. Ethnographic work, observations and discussions (in Mandarin and Sichuan dialect exclusively), allowed me to collect comments from local people from all walks of life, mainly during informal chats (over a meal, during temple festivals, a walk in the park with families and friends, etc.). I met them by chance and over the years my network of acquaintances grew, especially through the Zhang Fei temple, to include mediums, diviners, worshippers, but also employees and officials from the Bureaus of Culture, Propaganda and Education. Directors and deputy directors of these bureaus were the only ones with whom I conducted formal recorded interviews. At first, I was the recipient of the very well-constructed official discourse presented in the official media, then over the years my status became less suspicious for some and I grew closer to others, thus they shared more private and honest thoughts during informal conversations. The methodology has been constructed to avoid engaging in specific topics with people, but to let myself be guided by the themes that were emerging in the field—to understand what was significant for the people. The second set of data is constituted of written documents (books of the regional culture, tourism guides) and media platforms (paper journals, local and regional TV news reports and programmes). They allowed to identify the rhetoric promoted or authorized by authorities in Yunyang but also at the regional and national level. As a fellow at the French Centre for Research on Contemporary China in Hong Kong (2005–2008), I had the opportunity to do a key word search in a database containing all the local, regional and national articles published in China since 1992, linking for instance Yu the Great and the Three Gorges Project. Then, up to July 2014, I collected articles in Chinese published on the Internet.

## **Water management, a virtuous political action**

References to Yu the Great paralleled with the Three Gorges Dam were common on TV and paper journals I came across in Wuhan and Yunyang during the construction phase. Journalists would introduce the Project through this poetic metaphor because, as the hero demiurge did in the myth, the Dam was supposed to manage the water and control floods.

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<sup>3</sup> During my first stay in Yunyang, I was interrogated at the Bureau of External Affairs for almost five hours. The person in charge strongly recommended to me to develop a research in another county. She explicitly explained that the local government would not tolerate a social sciences study that would criticize its management of the resettlement process.

Yu the Great is a well-known figure in China. He is the main character featured in the narratives—attested as early as the West Zhou period (1121-771 BC) according to Lewis (2006)—on the shaping of the world and the beginning of a new era. These accounts were the subject of extensive redrafting by Confucians and other literati who stripped them of supernatural traits and fixed them in a coherent myth. They portrayed Yu as a historical character, an official and a hydrologic engineer at the time of a great flood [figure 5]. In order to save the people, he dredged channels to drain away the waters. According to the myth, his actions led to the creation of rivers and mountains. His travel's footprints defined the known world, which he organized into the Nine Provinces delimited by mountains and rivers and which he stabilized in each cardinal point, by five peaks (Granet 1926). Through the demiurgic nature of these actions, Yu the Great appears as the saviour of humankind. He did not only manage the flood but created the landscape (a term meaning literally in Mandarin, “mountain and river”), and gave order to the world. Yu the Great shaped the civilized world and then conquered it, introducing a toll for each region to pay to a central power. The story recounts that on Mount Kuaiji the hero summoned all feudal lords or, depending on the version, demons and gods. After having sacrificed one of them for being late, he presided and initiated rituals for millennia to come that legitimized the political domination. He founded what is presented as the first Chinese Dynasty: the Xia<sup>4</sup>—considered by Western researchers as legendary. Even though there are no textual or archaeological data to testify to this information, Yu is presented as an historical figure. In the contemporary Chinese historiography his reign is precisely dated: 2207-1766 BC. In China, Yu's story is part of common knowledge. It is narrated, transmitted in books, theatrical plays, and tales for children. Today, Yunyang people can find it in books related to the Chinese culture and legends.



**Figure 5.** Mural painting of Yu the Great taming the flood, Qiang Ethnic Minority Folklore Museum (Beichuan) China. Source: Katiana Le Mentec, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Allan (2017:23-30) makes clear that “the story of Yu controlling the waters and the foundation of the Xia dynasty were not linked in the earliest accounts. This story originated as part of a cosmogonic myth in which the world was made habitable and conducive to agriculture” [...] All evidence about Yu and the Xia dynasty are from the Zhou dynasty [c. 1050- 222 BCE] or later [...] even if we assume that Yu, with all his supernatural aspects, was based upon a human ruler, the textual evidence that Yu founded a dynastic state is problematic”. The myth has many versions (see Allan 1984 & 1997:39-41).

The mentioning of Yu the Great when referring to public construction work dealing with floods is not rare in China. According to Lewis (2006), this hero became the model to celebrate officials completing hydraulic structures; they were said to “pursue the work of Yu” or to be his “heirs”. This figure is compared both to constructors and members of the government involved in a project. In a park included in the Three Gorges Dam’s tourist tour in Yichang, visitors can read an engraved inscription stating: “Pursuing the footsteps of Yu the Great thousands upon thousands of constructors exerted great efforts to fulfil the river diversions for the three phases of construction of the Three Gorges Project”. The demiurge was also paralleled with high officials such as Jiang Zemin, the president who implemented the Project. Padovani (2006), who has worked on the Three Gorges Dam since the beginning of its implementation, told me that Jiang’s Prime Minister Li Peng strongly relied on his vocational training as hydraulic engineer, and considering the Dam his legacy, referring to himself as a “contemporary Yu the Great” (*dangdai dayu*, 当代大禹) quite a few times. Indeed, in his “Diary of the Three Gorges Project” he seems to have been inspired by the myth of Yu the Great to narrate his story: “[...] each year I visited the Three Gorges Reservoir, inspected the dike, managed the site, covered the whole area with my footprints on the mountains and canyons of both shores of the Yangtze, crossing over rivers [...]” (Liu 2003).

The parallel between the Three Gorges Dam and Yu the Great’s achievements produces more than a nice poetic touch referring to the Chinese past and tradition. This metaphor carries a strong significance. Demonstrating the restoration of the world order preceding the introduction of a new legitimized political order, the myth of Yu the Great constitutes a genuine myth of political founding. Confucian thinkers used it as the perfect metaphor of righteous governance. The flood represents an allegory of chaos; the efficient management of waters is interpreted as a demonstration and a guarantee of a virtuous administration. The one able to control a flood was considered in harmony with movements of the universe, guarantor of the order, provider of civilization, favourable for the people and thus worthy of receiving the cosmic legitimacy. The analogy between water management and human governance appears in Chinese writings. The same verb 治 is used for both actions and the character includes the root of water 氵. Yu the Great was cited by Confucians—and especially Mencius (a Chinese philosopher of the 4th century B.C. and Confucius’ most famous follower)—as an example to be followed by civil servants and leaders (Teiser 1985).<sup>5</sup> The narrative of the Three Gorges Dam relies on the rationalization of Yu the Great by Confucians, and calls upon a long tradition of water management interpreted as a strong political action.

Nonetheless, the Three Gorges Project was implemented by a new team of Chinese leaders, Li Peng and Jiang Zemin, a few years after the 1989 protests for democracy. The forced passage of the decision to build one big dam over the Yangtze was a strong signal made by the central government at the time<sup>6</sup>. The communist party was seeking to demonstrate its almighty power. Premier Li Peng clearly stated in the media that this implementation aimed at reinforcing the power of central government and should remind everyone of the leading role of Beijing’s authorities in the country. Several facts demonstrate this. First, although the assembly voted for the Project in 1992, construction and deconstruction works began earlier.<sup>7</sup> Second, Beijing introduced a new tax on electricity for the funding of



Figure 6. Panel in the Three Gorges Migrants Memorial 三峡移民纪念馆, Wanzhou, China

Source: Katiana Le Mentec, 2018

<sup>5</sup> Yu was not the only hero who reached political power after having successfully dealt with a flood. In the Sichuan province, Li Bing, who became a deity of water, is also well known. Li Bing is presented as a hydrologic engineer who was appointed governor of Shu during the 3rd century BC after he had built the Dike of Du (Kleeman 1998; Verellen 1998; Lewis 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Fifteen years later it was immortalised in the Wanzhou Three Gorges Migrants Memorial as a “shared decision making” - a democratic one (民主), see figure 6.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, the Yunyang New County seat was flooded by the first rise of water in 2003. Its reconstruction 30 km upstream had already begun in 1991.



the Three Gorges Project; Macau and Hong Kong, newly included in the national territory, were asked to contribute (Edmonds 1992). Third, the government redrew regional borders by creating a new administrative entity in 1997: the municipality of Chongqing. One of the main goals was to gain direct control over the territories submerged by the Dam's reservoir and in particular over the resettlement process and funding.

The ancient and significant cultural reference to Yu the Great contributed to this reaffirmation of the political legitimacy and hegemony. The steps of Yu's myth fit well to describe and enhance the leader's actions at the time: the shaping of a new landscape, the national resettlement of land, the redefinition of territorial borders, the introduction of a national tax, while benevolent actions—freeing the people from the tyranny of floods, supplying energy, improving access to the West of China and establishing an irrigation system—legitimized the decision. Moreover, Yu's narrative diffuses an authoritarian and hegemonic vision of governmental actions in which the Chinese leaders recognized themselves at the time. Yu was one of the many elements (besides a vocabulary of progress and rebirth as well as mentions of political figures as founding fathers) that shaped the official rhetoric of the Three Gorges Dam.

Top leaders openly favoured the parallel between Yu and the Dam. This was reflected in the work of some journalists of the mainstream media but also some local officials, song composers, and authors. One could suppose that they felt that mentioning Yu was positively regarded at the highest political level, and hence could contribute to some positive career outcome or winning favours from the Party. While it is doubtful that an internal memo was circulated, or a concerted, highly organized publicity campaign was put in place, to emphasize the use of Yu the Great, a—perhaps implicit—consensus seems to have developed around it. Initiatives to promote Yu the Great's achievements at the specific time of the Dam construction could also be related to this consensus. For instance, in Wuhan, capital of the Hubei province, a new park along the Yangtze River was especially dedicated to this figure. McNeal (2012) describes the numerous statues and various scenes narrating the myth. According to the author, a text at the entrance of the park states that the site aims to remind people of the government's actions taken against floods. This inscription refers to the actions of Wuhan's mayor to repair former flood damages. But this park also echoes the official narrative of the Three Gorges Dam. The hydroelectric structure was indeed presented as bringing an end to terrible floods affecting territories downstream the dike, and in particular the city of Wuhan. Another example of Yu the Great's promotion at the time of the Three Gorges Dam implementation is the new complex on Mount Kuaiji in the Zhejiang province. A nationally televised ritual offering to Yu was organized in 2005. For McNeal (2012), these actions constituted regional attempts to stimulate tourism. However, we can question the timing of these decisions and the national coverage of the event, authorized by a government building a hydroelectric project linked to Yu's actions.

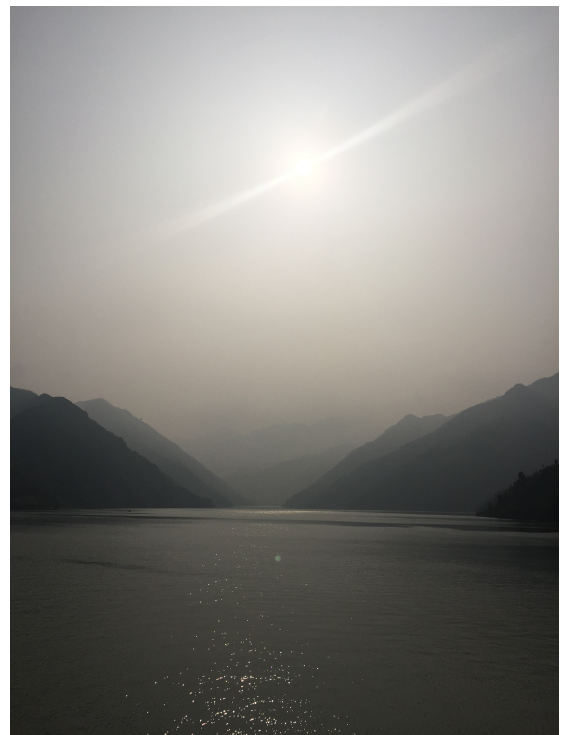


Figure 7. Entrance to the Three Gorges from upstream  
Source: Katiana Le Mentec, 2017

## The demiurgic action of reshaping the landscape upstream of the Dam

The character of Yu the Great was also seized upon to compare the Three Gorges Dam to the demiurge who shaped the landscape transformed by the reservoir today. The Three Gorges is a segment of the Yangtze River winding between the Chongqing Municipality and the Hubei province over more than 120 km. In this area, the width of the river could shrink to less than 100 m and cliffs reached up to 800 m in height. For centuries boatmen were deeply affected by the deadly dangers of crossing this perilous pass, while travellers continuously expressed their astonishment regarding the beauty of the landscape. This view

was a famous site of inspiration among Chinese poets and writers such as Li Bai (701–762), Du Fu (712–770) and Qu Yuan (3rd to 4th BC). This is the landscape changed by the Three Gorges Project.

The Dam's official narrative was also built on a set of etiologic legends originating from counties of the Three Gorges area close to the Dam's construction site. References to these legends in relation to the hydroelectric project appeared in official discourses at the national level, but they seem to have been especially promoted in the Three Gorges area bearing the transformations induced by the Dam. Some regional and local officials compared the Communist Party's reshaping of the landscape with the legends narrating the landscape's creation to improve the image of the Dam and the national authorities but also to downplay the transformation of the topography. By way of ancient cultural and literary references, supposedly meaningful for the regional population, they aimed at presenting—in the Three Gorges area—the Dam as a marvellous and epic achievement.

The gorges' etiologic legend was narrated to me on my very first trip to Yunyang, in May 2004. I met Mister Xiong through his ten-year-old child, who was one of the students of the first foreign English teacher in Yunyang. He invited me to join his family and friends for a lunch followed by a walk in the park. Xiong, cadre at the Bureau of Propaganda, was entertaining the crowd with regional stories and legends. Thrilled by my interest (the others were not so keen to listen to what seemed to be recurrent topics of discussion), he proudly accepted when I asked if I could record some of these stories for my research on the regional culture: *You know for sure Yu the Great, China's most ancient figure of political power! Do you know that a local legend says that he shaped the Qutang, the Xiling and the Wu gorges by cutting the mountain with a hatchet? It happened when he controlled the floods all over China. Twelve goddesses [The goddess Yaoji and her sisters, daughters of the Queen Mother of the West] helped him. The legend narrates how they fought aquatic creatures, but this is a metaphor used in ancient China to mention floods. Yu cut the mountain to allow the water to reach the sea. After the victory, the goddesses were changed into the twelve peaks of the Wu Gorge. Local people say they protect boatmen throughout the crossing of the gorges. Yu the Great built the gorges of the Yangtze River. You know that today, the Chinese government is building the Three Gorges Dam, it is also building the landscape of the gorges. The Chinese leaders are true followers of Yu the Great! They not only manage the flood as Yu did but they transform the mountains and the rivers, they are shaping a new beautiful landscape by creating the peaceful lake* (Xiong, 1th May 2014).



Figure 8. The Qutang Gorges, (Fengjie), China.

Source: Katiana Le Mentec, 2017.

Indeed, the gorges are transformed by the rise of water upstream of the Dam. At the construction site, the river's water level rose, in 6 years, up to 92 m, reaching 175 m above the sea level, with two intermediate landings (139 m in 2003, and 156 m in 2006). By 2009, the reservoir covered an area of 54,000 square meters over a segment of the river longer than 600 km and reaching the city of Chongqing. The tumultuous river meandering between steep mountain peaks settled down to make place for a vast expanse of quiet waters. The Three Gorges section of the Yangtze River was deeply altered: wholesale flooding of coastal land including farms, villages and towns; mountains became hills and valleys became lakes.

In the Yunyang County, I heard the legend of Yu shaping the three gorges of the Yangtze narrated on several occasions, always by civil servants. In October 2006, Mister Li, retired member of the local

Education Bureau designated it “an old regional legend” and referred to a recently published book (Sun and Yang 2004) he had at home. The legend was also mentioned during official speeches and sometimes on the local media. Such local stories involving Yu the Great accomplishing miraculous actions can be found all over China. This one seems to have originated from Wushan where the Wu gorge is localized (more than 100 km upstream of the Dam) and from Yichang, where the Dam was built. It is only recently that this story was integrated to the historiography of the Chongqing Municipality including most of the counties along the Dam reservoir. Yu and Yaoji’s creation of the Three Gorges is today presented by the Chongqing authorities as one of the main regional foundation legends. It is narrated orally by tourist guides during the cruises crossing the gorges and published in tourism guides and books dedicated to regional culture (Sun and Yang 2004; Han et al. 2003). These recent books are available in Yunyang but local historical annals do not mention this legend which was, in the past, either not known or not endorsed by officials and elites from this county. However, today some of them embrace the legend and disseminate it, often with a clear mention of the landscape’s reshaping as a result of the Dam. The parallel made between the two events can also be noticed in the Three Gorges area through sites of memories. For instance, in the county of Wanzhou the government was planning to erect a statue of Yu the Great, “the hero who built the Three Gorges” in a square dedicated to the resettlement project engendered by the Dam (Anonymous 2005). One of the most obvious reference is located next to the Dam’s site. The Huangling temple [figure 9], first erected during the Spring and Autumn period (770-476 BC), is dedicated to Yu the Great and the Yellow Ox, who according to a local legend helped Yu and Yaoji to manage the flood and witnessed the cutting of the mountain by the hatchet (Chetham 2002; Han et al. 2003). The Three Gorges Dam is built at the foot of the hill where the temple is located. This worship and heritage site is included in the tourism spots of the guided visits of the Dam.<sup>8</sup> On the occasion of the completion of the first stage of Three Gorges Dam, Zhang (2003) wrote about this temple. He reported in the official Chinese media network that people were interpreting the miraculous blooming of the temple centenary trees as a sign of the benevolent glance of Yu the Great upon the new Dam. Zhang closes the paper saying the statue of the hero strangely seemed moved by “listening to the sound of the Project’s victory” reached by “contemporary Yu the Greats.” [figures 10 & 11]

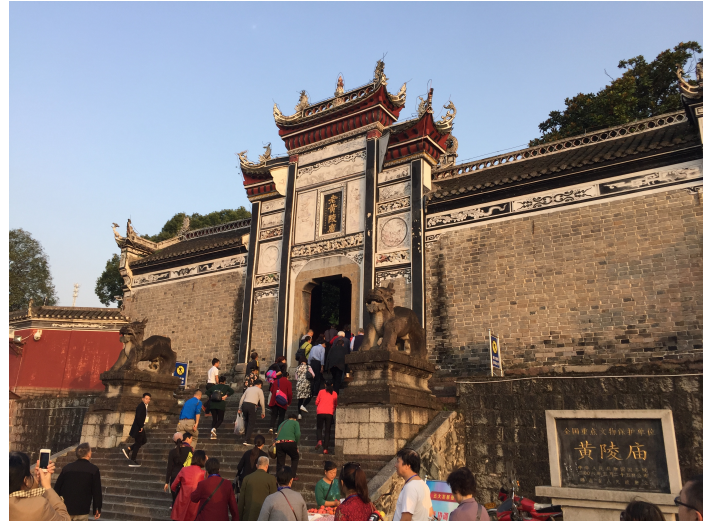


Figure 9. Huangling Temple, Yichang, China. Source: Katiana Le Mentec, 2017



Figure 10. Old trees in the Huangling Temple, Yichang, China. Source: Katiana Le Mentec, 2017



Figure 11. Statue of Yu the Great in the Huangling Temple, Yichang, China. Source: Katiana Le Mentec, 2017

<sup>8</sup> At the Three Gorges Dam, individual visits are not allowed. People can access the very much controlled area through a bus tour (usually via a tourist agency) that stops at several spots specifically designed for tourism purposes.

The mentioning of the astonishment of the gods and demiurges that mythically shaped the gorges is not rare in officially promoted discourses. On numerous occasions, by way of songs and poems, deities are reported not only compliant but amazed by the Dam. Against all expectations, Mao Zedong might be the first to have used such references. Dreaming of the big dam in the poem “Swimming” [figure 2], the chairman closes the piece with a mention of Yaoji: “From the steep gorges will emerge a smooth lake. The goddess shouldn’t be affected but will be astonished facing such a wonderful world.” During the phase of the construction, this poem was widely quoted in the media when referring to the Dam. Could Mao’s lyrical flight have inspired Tan Yanyan (谈炎炎), the composer of the 2005 song “Best wishes to the Three Gorges” (祝福三峡)<sup>9</sup> dedicated to the people leaving their native place to make place for the Dam’s reservoir? The lyrics also associate the first shaping of the gorges with the Dam’s construction. They parallel the two achievements, referring, for the first one, to “the ancient myth (*shenbua*),” and for the second one to the “imminent [...] new myth (*shenbua*).” The term *shenbua* has been used in the media to characterize the Three Gorges Dam (Jin 2006; Wu and Wang 2006). The chorus of Tan’s song summons the goddess but also the stars, the moon, the sky and the clouds, in front of which a “scream” is uttered when the infrastructure is achieved. Performed by a regional singer, the song was regularly presented on official TV channels and emissions in the Chongqing municipality and the Hubei province at the time the Dam’s second part was completed in 2006. The Yunyang authorities invited the singer for entertainment at the New Year festival. The song featured a locally-designed video clip displaying pictures of the landscape changes and relocation process.

*In the history of the Three Gorges, there was Yu the Great controlled the flood, the Yellow Ox open the mountain and others myth of humanity subduing nature [...] Yet, the Three Gorges Engineering Project is precisely the reality of transforming nature [...] Furthermore, it lies in the fusion/harmonization of a huge engineering project and a magnificent landscape [...].*<sup>10</sup>  
Yang Shangpin (1996)

These poetic metaphors participate in a broader official interpretation of the consequences of the Three Gorges Dam. To encompass the territorial changes in the Three Gorges area, authorities advocated that the new landscape would be even more splendid than before. The new topography was presented as enriched because it incorporated the newly created panorama with the old one. Using vocabulary pointing to rebirth, the official rhetoric contends that the landscape did not vanish, but was renewed. For instance, when referring to the Dam, the expression “from steep gorges emerged a smooth lake” is constantly used. This line is extracted from Mao’s poem and it is constantly quoted by the government and the Party media (Sun 2011). Through the use of the verb *chu* 出 the phrase conveys the idea of creation. This Chinese character represents a stem extending out of its receptacle, the soil, to hatch and bloom (Tan, 1998). It refers to the action of spurting and giving birth. The expression “the construction of the Three Gorges” is also used to compare the territorial upheaval involved in a landscape creation. This phrase means “the construction of the Three Gorges Project”. Instead of a contraction which would have been “more natural” for the Mandarin—such as “the construction of the Three Project” or “the construction of the Gorges Project”, the phrase selected carries a second meaning which emphasizes the idea that the Dam led to a reshaping of the topography. In Yunyang County, deeply affected by the rise of water, the local government strongly relied on this rhetoric when presenting the hydroelectric project to the population facing, on the front line, the transformation of the environment. One example of many can be found in 2007, when during a local festival dedicated to the Dam and the resettlement process the authorities promoted a song which in the chorus mentions mountains and rivers “receiving a new direction” and being “wrapped with a new suit.” This discourse is included more broadly in the myth of progress and the man-conquest-of-nature vision, highly promoted from the very beginning.

The Three Gorges Dam’s official narrative elaborated at the time of the vote passing the hydroelectric project relies on two facets: first the legitimate political achievement, and second the act of “demiurgical” recreation of the landscape. The character of Yu the Great, fitting in both, was mentioned through

<sup>9</sup> Lyrics of this song in Chinese and translated in French are available at the end of this document.

<sup>10</sup> 三峡的历史上，有着大禹治水、黄牛开山等人类征服自然的神话 [...] 而三峡工程，恰恰是改造自然的现实 [...] 而且在于巨大的工程和壮丽山水的融合。

expressions, metaphors, songs, poems, but also sites of memory and of worship. Use of this reference aimed to rank the Chinese authorities as new demiurges and to define the Three Gorges Dam as a “myth”, in continuity with the act of putting the world and Three Gorges in order after their creation.

## **Alternative narratives of a devastating Dam**

Since the early 1990s, the Three Gorges Dam official narrative has been progressively promoted in China. How do people from the Three Gorges Area react to it and especially to the use of Yu the Great? Are the myths and legends dedicated to Yu significant references for them? Did people embrace the parallel painting the Dam as a demiurgic achievement? Fieldwork in Yunyang County between 2004 and 2014 allows to have a glimpse at these issues<sup>11</sup>.

First, the myth of Yu the Great and especially the regional etiologic version of the shaping of the gorges did not seem to be a regularly used cultural reference for the people I met. In Yunyang, except for cadres who aim to “teach” the history and the regional culture, I have never heard anyone narrate them. Yet, I observed many opportunities seized upon by the people to recount legends and myths: a family meal, a visit to the park, a temple festival, a rest in a square, a promenade in the mountains or a journey by public transportation. Not only did the stories of Yu never appear in the social gatherings I participated in, but when asked about it, people would only vaguely refer to the myth which does not mention the shaping of the gorges. This was the case on the 21 June 2014 when the warder of Yunyang Museum, a 54 years old man, told me he had learnt this “famous Chinese legend” of Yu managing the waters at primary school but had difficulty in remembering the details. Once, during a temple festival in October 2007, a medium assured me that there was no legend of Yu the Great shaping the gorges. People and mediums around us agreed. Either they had never heard of it or they refused to promote it. Could it be because they did not want to endorse the comparison between the legend of Yu and the Dam? Unfortunately, my fieldwork only began in 2004 and there is no historical research on the spread of this etiologic legend in the area before the Three Gorges Project. It is thus difficult to establish whether the story was narrated orally by the population previous to the Dam construction, or if it was mainly promoted by some regional elites who mentioned it in their writings (poems, accounts of legends, etc.) which were co-opted for issues related to the Wushan peak of the Goddess and the Yichang Huangling Temple for purposes of tourism, identity formation, politics and ideology. Interestingly, in June 2014, a guide at the Yunyang museum, a 27 years old woman from Wushan, told me she had never heard of Yu and Yaoji’s shaping of the gorges although she grew up in the county where the legend is supposed to have originated. However, the absence of the story in peoples’ discourses today does not mean it was not part of the oral literature in the past.

Fieldwork in Yunyang allowed me to identify some shifts in the discourses. An example is the slow disappearance of references to Yu. For instance in June 2014, when I asked Mister Li (the retired member of the local Education bureau) to tell me again the legend of Yu shaping the gorges he narrated another

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<sup>11</sup> As all ethnographic works are, the portrait presented in this essay has been developed through a specific time, place and people met during fieldwork. The scope of the research was not an exhaustive discourse analysis of the narrative of the Dam in China and of its impact on the overall Chinese population. An analysis of the significance of the Yu the Great’s myth outside of the Three Gorges area might not have been relevant for understanding the interpretation the population gives to the Dam—especially after the completion when the official discourse began to change. This character, known all over the country, is used as a reference in many other issues that are not related to hydraulics. For instance in the Sichuan province the myth of Yu the Great managing the waters was seized upon by various actors in Wenchuan and Beichuan, counties deeply affected by the earthquake of 2008. Statues, temples, exhibitions, festivals are built in honour of Yu and numerous articles mention him in the context of the post-disaster rebuilding. First, it is included in tourist strategies; in 2010 Beichuan authorities established the scenic spot “Yu the Great Native Place” claiming that this is the site where the hero was born (Chen 2010; Li and Shi 2011). Second, Yu’s figure was chosen by the regional authorities as a paragon of hard work and bravery during disasters. He is presented as a model people should look up to during the reconstruction but also as the model of the team work between different levels of authorities as well as between the two ethnic groups that populate the area presented as sharing the myth (Nanfang Journal 2010). A study of the relevance of the myth of Yu for the people of Beichuan and Wenchuan would give us an input on a quite different issue than the Three Gorges Dam.

story, far less “demiurgic” than the one he told me 8 years before.<sup>12</sup> Li assured me it was the only story he knew on Yu and a space formation. The etiologic legend of the gorges seemed to have been wiped from his memory—or from the references he wanted to use—and it was not the only case I encountered. In 2011, when discussing my PhD hypothesis with Mister Jia, accountant and member of one of my host families in Yunyang, he gave me examples of journalists and cadres—including Li Peng—comparing the Dam with Yu the Great. But in 2014, while the subject arose during breakfast, he told me he had never heard such comparison, and that there was absolutely no relation between the Dam and the demiurge. He said he recalled only one story that authorities were paralleling with the Dam: *It is the story of the “foolish man” — Yugong 愚公 —living in a house facing two colossal mountains. In order to have a more convenient entrance, he decided to move the mountains by displacing, everyday, pieces of earth. When a wise man passed by and asked him why he did not move the house instead, Yugong replied that an immeasurable and painful task can be completed through willingness and stamina over several generations for the benefit of the offspring* (Jia, the 13th June 2014). The “foolish man moving the mountain” (愚公移山) is a well known idiom understood as “where there’s a will, there’s a way”. Indeed, Padovani (2016) recall how leaders, such as President Jiang Zemin, mobilized this idiom and other famous phrases exhorting to overcome the struggle for this hard task (拼搏) and carry determination for such a conquest of nature. While it was part of the propaganda on the Three Gorges Dam, the story of Yugong is far less glorious than Yu the Great’s one. Jia prefer this story that paints the Three Gorges Dam in the light of a difficult task that brings his generation suffering, for the promise of a better future for next generations. This view is coherent with his own interpretation of the situation. Mistery Jia and Li are not exceptions. In the articles on the Dam published in recent years, the reference to Yu seems to have been put aside. The logic of the comparison itself is also openly contested. During a casual dinner with Chinese anthropologists in Chengdu on the 8th June 2014, they relied on the details of Yu’s myth to argue that the comparison with the Three Gorges Dam was not logical. Tang Yun (South West Minzu University Chengdu) explained that not only did Yu manage floods using a completely different method—water channelling—but the myth said that he killed his father who was not successful at managing water by building dams. This comment was included in a broader critical conversation over the Dam. While the retired official and the middle class man cited above forgot or denied the comparison with Yu, intellectuals like Tang Yun pointed out the contradictions of the parallel.

The disappearance or undermining of Yu’s myth in the narrative of the Three Gorges Dam is consistent with a shift in the official discourse at the national level. Open acknowledgments of the hydroelectric project’s mixed results and remaining issues slowly developed after Li Peng and Jiang Zemin left the highest office. In 2007, officials from the Chongqing Municipality reported the lack of funding to facilitate the relocation process. In 2009, except for Li Peng, no high-ranking official joined the ceremony celebrating the achievement of the Three Gorges Project, no CCP leader offered on-site congratulations<sup>13</sup>. Then in 2011, Premier Wen Jiabao made an official statement on the “myriad of urgent problems” induced by the Dam, citing relocation and risks of geological disasters—referring to the 2008 Beichuan Earthquake (Hui and Blanchard 2014). The latest strong testimony of disengagement with the Dam happened in early 2014. The sweeping campaign launched by Xi Jinping (new General Secretary of the Communist Party and President of the PRC) to expunge deep-rooted corruption affected the corporation managing the Three Gorges Project. An inspection conducted by the CCP Central Commission for Discipline on the 17th February led to the departure, on the 24th March, of the state-owned enterprise’s two top executives. One of them was accused of illegally using 2.1 billion of RMB to acquire 30 % of the stocks of a company owned by Li Peng’s Daughter (Adams 2014). On Weibo (the Chinese equivalent of Twitter and Facebook), the topic ranked among the most widely discussed subjects. Sino-American commentators proposed the hypothesis of a friction between Xi Jinping and Jiang Zemin political factions (NTD TV 2014a, b).

Top leaders questioning the Dam slowed down the circulation of the myth of progress and opened the atmosphere for negative comments a little. In June 2014 I witnessed criticisms that would have been hardly

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<sup>12</sup> Li narrated the legend of “The Stones of the Dragon’s back” 龍脊石. This site is a series of stone engravings located in the Yangtze River in Yunyang. Submerged with the rise of water, the stones were reproduced and are exhibited in the Three Gorges Heritage Park inaugurated at the county seat in 2009. According to the legend, the dragon causing a flood was killed by Yu and transformed into stones. This story is now part of the intangible cultural heritage recognized by the Yunyang government (Hu 2014).

<sup>13</sup> I warmly thank Florence Padovani for pointing out this information to my attention.

expressed so openly before. Ma, a PhD student from Yichang—where the Dam is located—told me a story: Few years back a significant flooding of the Yangtze River was occurring in Yichang. People were using bags of sand to stop the rise of water. But the river kept overflowing for days and the situation could not be controlled. At some point, as he was the high official linked to the Dam, Li Peng came to show his care on the matter. As soon as he arrived the flood stopped. This event led to an anecdote narrated in the region saying that “Li Peng is the biggest bag of sand [which is the homonym of ‘stupid’] of all”. This anecdote is ironically counteracting the status of demiurge bestowed on Li Peng by the parallel with Yu the Great. The former Premier is entirely ridiculed whilst still presented as the one who managed the flood. This rumour is spreading; I heard it in Chengdu and in Yunyang. In this county, in June 2014, some people brought up their discontent with several aspects of the Dam very openly. One evening, Ping—a 25 year old migrant worker and a recent father, whom I have known for almost ten years—invited me to his home, ostensibly so I could use the Wi-Fi connection, but actually he was interested in telling me his views on the economic crisis and some consequences of the Three Gorges Dam. First, he narrated a rumour about the possible closing down of the Chongqing port because of the accumulation of sediments in the river. He quoted the results of geological studies published by Huang Wanli (interviewed by Dai 1994, pp 162– 170). Then he complained about the fact that it is not fair that Yunyang people had to pay for the construction of the Dam. He showed me his electricity bill including a fee for the “water management projects”. He also referred to the accusations of embezzlement at the Three Gorges Corporation—that were constantly on the news at the time—and he noted that “everyone knew” that half of the money came from this electricity tax.



**Figure 12.** The Three Gorges Dam and the reservoir, Yichang (Hubei) China. Source: Katiana Le Mentec, 2017.

Chinese people—including the ones living in the Three Gorges area—did not join demonstrations against the Project before the final vote of approval in 1992. And only a few local groups tried to protest afterwards, because of very specific problems. People I met between 2004 and 2008 rarely made direct accusations regarding the Dam or top leaders, and sometimes they even expressed pride about the great Chinese achievement it was. However, during that period, I identified many ways used to propose alternative interpretations of the socio-economic consequences and the management of the resettlement. For instance, a poetic locution was saying that “the Project had cost three times the necessary amount”—implicitly because of embezzlement. In the summer of 2007, another rumour was linking the numerous and deadly landslides to the Dam Reservoir and after 2008, to the Sichuan Earthquake. Until now some people in Yunyang blame the reservoir for local climate change (more high temperatures, droughts, long and heavy rain, drying of lakes, absence of wind) as well as polluted water and atmosphere.

Moreover, by way of geomantic interpretations and recollections from the past, the rise of water upstream of the Dam was sometimes compared with a flood (Le Mentec 2015). One morning in July 2006, I met an old man on a small vessel at the old county seat. We were alone, waiting for clients to fill up the boat to cross the River, and began to chat. He had the typical dark skin and damaged hands of a poor farmer. While he was weaving plastic wires to make sandals he narrated legends, stories and rumours. Among them was his version of the filling of the Dam Reservoir in 2003. He said his nephew “was there when it happened” nearby. Through rambling words, punctuated by coughs and repetitions, he described an event that happened suddenly and surprisingly to the family in the middle of the night. He said people were running in

the streets, wearing pyjamas and some of them were naked. For him, his nephew had “dealt very well with the situation”, giving instructions to leave everything behind and to exit while holding hands. For the old man, it was the will to survive and the protection of deities that allowed his family to pull through the event unharmed. According to him, many have perished by drowning that night and most of the survivors have lost everything in the flood. In Yunyang, I heard several people in the rural area recalling the event in such a light, although it is doubtful that families were caught in such situations since all constructions were dismantled before the rise of the water in order to facilitate the navigation of the river. Nonetheless, for some people this story can be a way to shape the memory of the event in correspondence with their feelings at the time (of loss and of not being well informed) and with comparable past events. Floods were a common feature of the Three Gorges culture and have marked numerous families. Sometimes, people explicitly refer to past floods when they talk about the dam reservoir filling saying the current event reminded them of stories about the unleashed waters of river overflows they used to hear when they were children. Their accounts are built with patterns of regional legends related to town floods, such as the detail of being barefoot or not being able to have a last glimpse. In Yunyang, the interpretation of the filling of the Three Gorges Dam Reservoir as a disaster appears through other kinds of narratives. For instance, inhabitants from Shuangjiang village show the link they established between the reservoir and a flood through toponyms. In order to master the “evil dragon” causing the submersion of a part of the village, as did terrible past river overflows, they designate the bank where they live as “the beheaded dragon” and refuse to use the new name “the rolled up dragon” chosen by the governor himself for its more positive meaning [figure 13]. These narratives present the Three Gorges Dam as a disaster. The references to floods and death carry strong meanings, and are entirely contradictory with the official narrative promoted at the time, including the Dam preventing floods.



**Figure 13.** Model of Shuangjiang after the relocation of Yunyang County Seat, Planning Exhibition Hall, Yunyang.  
Source : Katiana Le Mentec, 2014

The topography of the hill is interpreted through geomancy as a dragon whose head dive into the Yangze River. Local popular legends interpret the dragon as evil and causing flood while after the New county Seat relocation there, authorities promote an auspicious emerald Dragon by circulating a new legend and marking the site with new toponyms signs (Le Mentec, 2011).



Although there was almost no interaction between the population of the Three Gorges and activists at the national and international level, some of them relied on similar vocabulary and references. The environmental activist Dai (1994, 1998)—whose books were censored—and writer Wei (1997), who lives abroad, condemned the forced migration, the “destruction of the regional ecology” and of the “immemorial landscape” that the Three Gorges Project would induce. Foreign researchers also conjured up the vision of an apocalyptic future. Anthropologists Chetham (2002) and Chenivesse (2004, 2007) as well as the political scientist Black (2009) describe the area as a mausoleum. The metaphor of Atlantis and the interpretation of territorial disfigurements are part of common counter argumentations in cases of reservoir projects around the world (Racine 2001). For Lacoste (2001), these passionate and moving accusations aim to convince public or private organizations in charge to limit impacts of the hydroelectric infrastructure or to abandon the projects. But according to Florence Padovani<sup>14</sup>, who studied the Dam and Resettlement, from the beginning, the people of the Three Gorges area were not much informed of the Project before its implementation and they knew their voices would have little impact on decisions. Death and disaster rhetoric accompanied by legends and rumours criticizing the Dam were a way to contradict—through a safe but powerful way—the positive official narrative as well as to express and transmit, in the public space, their feelings of loss and their grievances regarding corruption, embezzlement, and the management of the resettlement.

## **Conclusion : from tools of expression to resilience processes—historical and mythical references**

This paper aimed to analyse the elaboration of the master narrative related to the Three Gorges Dam and its impact upstream of the structure. Fieldwork showed that the official discourse glorifies and legitimises the Project by relying on a typical rhetoric of progress and rebirth. Morin (1981) and Jeudy (1990) have shown for cases of infrastructures or hydraulic works in Europe how enrolled engineers and officials use such expressions and metaphors aimed at building a modern mythology. In the case of the Three Gorges Dam, links were also developed with a glorious past and the cultural tradition through myths and legends related to the creation of the known world, the founding of the Chinese Imperial system, and the shaping of the Three Gorges landscape. Researchers have identified this way of bestowing big hydraulic works with a glorious past: for instance Marié (1993) shows how mythical founding fathers were associated with the Canal de Provence in France and Wateau (1999) noted how the “golden age” of conquistadors was linked to the Alqueva Dam in Portugal. In China, the master narrative of the Three Gorges Dam followed recurrent national practices (inherited from imperial times) when building hydraulic works—such as the use of the past by leaders and the comparison with the myth of Yu the Great. However, in this specific case, a new element was added: the legend of the landscape reshaping, specific to the area affected by the Three Gorges Dam. Linking this etiologic legend with the Dam was a way to use regional cultural knowledge and references that were supposedly significant for the people facing social and territorial upheaval. In Yunyang 10 % of the population were relocated, but everyone was impacted by the transformation of landscape, the modification of the territory, the rise of water, the delocalization of cities, the forced migration, the departure of a part of the families and the loss of native places and worship sites.

The other specificity in the case of the Three Gorges Dam was that officials in charge of the Project were at the top of the national leadership, at a time of strong political control by the Party over the whole country—the Project was imposed at the highest level and no protest was allowed. Many journalists, writers, song composers, officials at the local and regional level followed the line by embracing the authorised narrative that was endowing the Dam by way of poems, songs, texts, speeches and sites of memories with a strong and significant aura but that was also endorsing and glorifying the hegemonic portrait of the ruling Party and the demiurgic nature of leaders Li Peng and Jiang Zemin. Premier Li Peng in particular relied on the Project and the narrative attached to it to promote himself and affix his mark on the Chinese—if not the world—history. According to the anthropologist Zhang Yuan (conference closing remarks at the South-West Minzu University on 9th June 2014<sup>15</sup>), the irrational decision to build this specific Dam Project taken by official engineers was stimulated by the potential benefit for their own reputation, to show their prestige

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<sup>14</sup> personal communication, 2014

<sup>15</sup> see note 2

—and as Chinese officials did in the past, they relied on the “mythic thought”—such as the myth of Yu—to produce strong symbols—such as the Dam.

However, as big dams are not built in a day, the eco-socio-political changes in context can impact the official point of view of the projects. Changes in the leadership (the rising of new political factions introducing a new era of leaders whose biographies were not shaped by careers in engineering), complemented by the Project’s mixed results, allowed the master narrative to include criticism of some aspects of the Dam. While this opportunity is today seized upon by some people in the Three Gorges area to openly express critical points of view, even before they were already using many ways to contradict the positive interpretation of the Project and dismiss the references from the past used to enhance it. For instance, despite an intensive promotion, people would ignore, forget or discredit the myth of Yu the Great and its link to the Dam. Some would mobilise other regional cultural references—such as tales of flood, geomantic analysis and rumours—to propose interpretations that corresponded to their own experiences and points of view. For instance, Li Peng would be personally discredited; the Project would be presented as bringing hardship, as an object of intense embezzlement and as having disastrous consequences on the climate and the topography. The analysis shows that even the official narrative elaborated with great care and transmitted through a wide range of platforms, in the context of control over freedom of speech, can be ignored by people who manage to circulate their points of view around them.

This case study allows to reflect on the use of the past in the context of big hydroelectric works, and first, on the relation between the population and the infrastructure’s builders (in the Chinese case: the authorities). How efficient can myths and legends be in conveying positive or negative interpretations of such structures? Fieldwork shows that officials as much as people affected by the Dam use references to the past to elaborate contradictory points of view. To endow the Three Gorges Dam with a myth woven with ancient and symbolic references has not been sufficient to build a positive interpretation which is embraced by the population living upstream of the Dam. Why? Several hypotheses can be suggested. The efficiency of the link between hydraulic works and Yu might have been exhausted by too much promotion over the generations—people would see it clearly as “propaganda” and would discredit it as such. Reference to Yu might also have been too elitist and not significant to the people of the Three Gorges rural area. Moreover, the word “myth” (*shenhua* 神话) used to characterize the Dam was newly invented by Beijing scholars in the 1920s and does not really seem practiced locally, so it might not have made sense for most people in the Three Gorges area. Above all, the references to the past used in this context did not meet the experiences of the people living upstream of the Dam. Authorities were not considered as brave heroes-demiurges. Criticisms, however, were quite well transmitted by the people through the references to the past they seized upon which were considered significant at the local level. These references to the past serve as effective weapons of the weak (concept from Scott 1985) for people to communicate on sensitive matters, especially in the context of censorship in China, as authors have shown in different contexts (Unger 1993; Veg 2007; Ferhat 2012). The flood seems to be a recurrent and strong reference used to crystallize bad experiences of the filling up of a Dam. Jun (1996) for the Sanmenxia Dam in China, and Rodriguez (1994) in Galicia, have noted this narrative being transmitted among people being resettled or witnesses of a reservoir’s creation. When dam reservoirs are built on rivers or lakes where coastal communities experienced floods over generations, this feature is widely shared and could constitute a strong and meaningful reference, when people consider that they have been rushed into the resettlement. In China, references to the past are intensively used by the people as contradictory tools but there are other ones, such as deities (via medium trances, miracles and dreams)<sup>16</sup> or art, that people use to elaborate and successfully spread narratives related to dams. For instance, the contemporary artist Chen Qiulin, a native of the Three Gorges area, relied on culturally known patterns (the Chinese Opera) and significant signs (the white colour related to death) to propose a video emphasising the urban destructions upstream of the Three Gorges Dam and depicting the area as a mausoleum. Art is known to be used in campaigns against dams; Hémond (2003) describes for instance how the painting on Amate paper contributed to stopping a project in Mexico.

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<sup>16</sup> Colson and Scudder (2002) noted that in 1950s’ Zambia, people would believe shadow spirits to be against a resettlement caused by a dam. In the Haut-Balsas (Mexico), the revival of the cult of Saint Jacques was linked to the struggle against the Dam (Hémond 2003).

While the past is obviously a tool (effective or not) in the hand of promoters and of opponents of dams, we might want to go beyond this observation, and go on to investigate the larger issues of which it is part, by questioning the tendency to incorporate a dam and its consequences in (imaginary) continuities. Hoffman and Oliver-Smith (2002), Clavandier (2009) and Revet (2010) working on contexts of upheaval have underlined the penchant of people to think, classify and explain a turmoil in order to deal with it. References to the past are used in these processes as comparative elements. According to Jeudy (1990), considering an event as having already occurred in the past allows people to conjure the upheaval, as if thinking it through the lens of history would allow the possibility of a future. Augé (1997) followed this line and considered that the tendency to transform disturbing events into known experiences and to deny the existence of an upheaval can be observed in all societies, as most social groups prefer the safety of a know situation to an unpredictable future. Bringing back the disturbance to known processes would be a way to cope. That might have been one of the reasons why some journalists, singers and officials from the Three Gorges area embraced the comparison of Yu's myth with the Dam. The same process might have driven Xiao Min, the former governor of Yunyang who elaborated a new paradigm of the regional past focusing on migration (Le Mentec 2015). Promoted by the regional authorities for his idea, Xiao Min relied on myths, historical data, cultural heritage items and archaeological findings to argue that regional people have all descended from migrants and that the Three Gorges resettlement is part of a glorious tradition.<sup>17</sup> In the context of the Aswan Dam in Egypt, Fogel (1997) identified a similar discourse of “migrant identity”, in this case forged by the Nubians themselves, who embraced this identity paradigm to deal with the numerous displacements and migrations several generations had experienced. Relying on the historical or mythical past is a way to transmute the novelty brought by dams into continuity. For Yunyang's people and authorities, as in other places affected by dam constructions, calling upon myths, legends and history allows to find ready-made images and narratives that can be indexed as “already experienced”—a reassuring stability that allows social actors to promote or critique a dam, depending on the references used.

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**Katiana Le Mentec** work focuses on the social and territorial consequences of the Three Gorges Dam in China. She undertook long term fieldwork in the County of Yunyang since 2004 and Beichuan since 2015. She is interested in processes occurring during and after transformative events (such as the creation of a dam reservoir), namely the apparition of new identity paradigms, changes in the conception of the past, the present and the future, propaganda, campaign of cultural policies and heritage as well as the modification of social ways to think about territory. Her research aims to contribute to the anthropology of territorial upheaval and disaster.



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<sup>17</sup> The same kind of rhetoric was used in the Three Gorges area to present some relocated cities as returning to their localisation in a distant—usually golden—past.

## Appendix - Song « Best wishes to the Three Gorges »

This appendix is a quote from my PhD thesis (Le Mentec, 2011, volume 2 - appendix, pages 133-134):

Quitter les Trois Gorges, avancer vers l'horizon,  
Emporter les bagages et laisser derrière soi les inquiétudes,  
Jeter son dernier regard vers les eaux du Long Fleuve.  
[Fleuve !] Comment oublier les ondulations de tes vagues ?

告别三峡，走向天涯  
带走行李，留下了牵挂  
看一眼长江水  
怎能忘记在你怀抱中滚爬

Quitter les Trois Gorges, avancer vers l'horizon,  
Emporter les bagages et laisser derrière soi les inquiétudes,  
Jeter un dernier coup d'œil au Pic de la déesse,  
[Déesse !] Comment oublier nos enfances  
rythmées par les mythes te concernant ?

告别三峡，走向天涯  
带走行李，留下了牵挂  
看一眼神女峰  
怎能忘记在你神话里长大？

Ah, mes Trois Gorges, au revoir,  
Au revoir mon pays natal,  
À l'heure du départ, avec le cœur brisé  
Et une profonde émotion, je t'exprime mes meilleurs vœux

啊，我的三峡，再见吧  
再见我的老家  
在依依不舍的时刻  
让我深情祝福你吧

Ah, mes Trois Gorges, au revoir,  
Au revoir mon pays natal,  
À l'heure du départ, avec le cœur brisé  
Et une profonde émotion, je t'exprime mes meilleurs vœux  
La réalisation d'un nouveau mythe est imminente.

啊，我的三峡，再见吧  
再见我的老家  
在依依不舍的时刻  
让我深情祝福你吧  
早日实现新的神话

[Musique et vidéoclip]

Quitter les Trois Gorges, déménager vers l'horizon,  
Aimer une nouvelle maison  
mais s'inquiéter pour le pays natal,  
Invoquer avec vigueur les étoiles et la lune,  
On espère entendre encore un peu plus les paroles  
de ceux, du pays natal, dont on va être séparé pendant longtemps.

告别三峡，迁居天涯  
爱好新家  
牵挂着老家  
喊一声星和月  
多想听听久别故乡人说话

Quitter les Trois Gorges, déménager à l'horizon,  
Aimer une nouvelle maison  
mais s'inquiéter pour le pays natal,  
Invoquer avec force les nuages et le ciel,  
On espère apercevoir les rêves colorés  
situés à des milliers de kilomètres.

告别三峡，迁居天涯  
爱好新家  
牵挂着老家  
喊一声云和天  
多想看看那梦中万里彩霞

Ah, mes Trois Gorges, tu me manques,  
Tu me manques mon pays natal,  
Il n'y a pas de moment comparable dans les souvenirs,  
Avec une profonde émotion, je t'exprime mes meilleurs vœux  
La réalisation d'un nouveau mythe est imminente.

啊，我的三峡，我想你啊  
想你我的老家  
在思念无比的时刻  
让我深情祝福你吧  
早日实现新的神话

Ah, mes Trois Gorges, tu me manques,  
 Tu me manques mon pays natal,  
 Il n'y a pas de moment comparable dans les souvenirs,  
 Avec une profonde émotion, je t'exprime mes meilleurs vœux  
 La réalisation d'un nouveau mythe est imminente.  
 un nouveau mythe

啊，我的三峡，我想你啊  
 想你我的老家  
 在思念无比的时刻  
 让我深情祝福你吧  
 早日实现新的神话  
 新的神话

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**This paper was part of collective project** led by Katrin Bromber, Jeanne Féaux de la Croix and Katharina Lange at the Zentrum Moderner Orient (Berlin). First an International Workshop entitled “Big Dams: Investigating their temporal and spatial politics in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia” was organised on the 1-2 June 2012. Second a journal issue on “Temporal Politics of Big Dam” was published on December 2014 in *Water History* (volume 6, number 4) with Katrin Bromber, Jeanne Féaux de la Croix and Katharina Lange as guest Editors.

The introduction of this issue is available [here](#).

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**This paper was also based on some data and analyse presented in my PhD : Le Mentec (2011)**

On particular in the chapter 2 : part one “Le grand requiem des Trois Gorges” p67-71, part two “Le chant de renaissance marquant l’instauration d’une nouvelle ère” p71-82, part three : “La production d’une mythologie par la réactualisation d’un ancien mythe étiologique” p82-87 and part four : “La manifestation de la domination politique sous le ciel” p87-96.

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