

# *Two Chinas: Chen Qiulin & Yun-Fei Ji*

March 8 through September 21, 2008



WORCESTER ART MUSEUM



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This exhibition considers the rapidly changing conditions in China through the lens of Chen Qiulin (b. 1975) and Yun-Fei Ji (b. 1963), two Chinese artists whose works recently have been acquired by the Museum. Working in radically different formats—video and watercolor—and from distinct points of view, both artists engage in a dialogue between China’s history and its future. Each felt compelled to respond to the altered landscapes and human displacement caused by China’s Three Gorges Dam project. Perhaps there is no more sobering symbol today of China’s uncertain relation to its ancient past in the face of urban development and economic growth.

Chen Qiulin uses video in *Bie Fu (Farewell Poem)*, from 2003, to revisit her childhood memories and China’s traditions amidst the rubble of her hometown, Wanzhou, one of the cities flooded by the dam project. In Yun-Fei Ji’s monumental scroll-like painting, *Below the 143 Meter Mark*, from 2006, allusions to classical landscape painting are transformed by grim contemporary details—houses and hillsides crumbling, a ghost town littered with abandoned bundles and bicycles.

< Cover images: Chen Qiulin, *Bie Fu (Farewell Poem)*, 2003, still from color video, 9 minutes, Stoddard Acquisition Fund, 2007.81. Courtesy of the artist and Max Protetch, New York; Yun-Fei Ji, *Below the 143 Meter Watermark* (detail), 2006, mineral pigments and ink on mulberry paper, 118.5x 56.125 inches. Stoddard Acquisition Fund, 2007.17. Courtesy of James Cohan Gallery, New York. Above: Yun-Fei Ji, *Below the 143 Meter Watermark* (detail)

## Background

*“Think of the millions of silenced people who cannot express their sadness and speak against this project. Think of the lost cultural history, art and destruction of the natural river.”* —Dai Qing, journalist<sup>1</sup>

The stretch of the Yangtze River defined as the Three Gorges region is an image of stark contrasts—the natural beauty of a mountainous terrain and the harsh living conditions of the inhabitants along the raging river’s banks. China’s leaders have long dreamed of taming the Yangtze whose waters have caused deadly floods for thousands of years. The idea of a dam, first proposed by Sun Yat-sen in 1919 and again in the mid-1950s by Mao Tse-tung, became a reality when construction on the world’s largest hydroelectric dam began in 1994 at Sandouping, with completion expected in 2009. The Chinese government envisions that the dam, which will raise the river’s level to 175 meters (574 feet) and create a reservoir that extends nearly 400 miles upstream to Chongqing, will provide much-needed electricity to fuel the booming economy, control the Yangtze’s regular flooding, and increase commercial shipping access to China’s interior. Not incidentally, this vast structure has become symbolic not only of China’s engineering and construction expertise but also of the government’s desire for economic “progress” regardless of human or environmental cost.

Controversy inside China and around the world is directed at the social and environmental implications of the dam including the forced resettlement of an estimated 1.5 million residents. As many as 13 cities, 140 towns, 1300 villages, and 100,000 acres of farmland will be submerged under the rising waters of the dam’s reservoir. Ubiquitous markers—“143 meters” or “175 meters”—dot the landscape designating future heights of the water (we see them in the streets of Wanzhou early in Chen’s video, and Ji locates the water level in the title of his painting). While many towns along the river are being

dismantled and rebuilt higher up the hillsides with the promise of new apartments and prosperity from increased shipping, rural dwellers—peasants, boatmen, fishermen, and farmers—must abandon homes, fields, and ways of life that were intertwined with the river, and are oftentimes relocated to distant urban areas where it is difficult to find jobs because of different languages, cultures, and economies. Although some important cultural sites have been moved and rebuilt, an estimated 1300 known archaeological sites including ancestral burial grounds, centuries-old temples, and ancient fossils will disappear underwater, along with miles of majestic, mountainous landscape that has been the subject of Chinese art and poetry for thousands of years.

Environmentalists charge that the dam will exacerbate the river’s already declining health by changing the oxygen content, blocking fish migration, and increasing rubbish build-up in the reservoir. There is great concern that when the dam’s reservoir submerges waste dumps and old factories, the water will become a toxic lake threatening the ecosystem and human health. Rising water also threatens to cause severe erosion and landslides along steep hillsides. What is certain is that even before the dam’s completion, this one example of China’s path to economic development and urbanization already has altered forever the special interrelation between humans and the landscape that defined life in the Three Gorges region.

*“The people of the Three Gorges no longer exist. What I mean is that the environment, the local customs, the feeling is gone. Before, locals carried things in baskets on their back, climbing steep stairways up the hillsides to get to the towns; now it’s all highways. It’s not just the physical sites that are at issue.”<sup>2</sup>*

—Tang Yuyang, Beijing Institute of Civil Engineering and Architecture

## Chen Qiulin

*“Real life experiences have always been the basis for my work. As such, over the past few years, my work has been closely connected with changes in the urban environment...When construction of the Three Gorges Dam began, my hometown was directly affected. It is a place that is very small, an insignificant speck in the entire construction of the Three Gorges Dam. Those familiar sites of buildings, streets and friends have slowly faded from memory. A roaring river has become a shimmering, placid lake. There are millions who solemnly face starting a new life in a different city, and millions of new apartment construction projects suddenly rising out of the ground. My hometown has already become a giant construction site, but perhaps it is only a small snapshot of the urbanization process occurring throughout China.”<sup>3</sup>*

*Bei Fu (Farewell Poem)* begins as it ends, with a demolition witnessed near the bank of the river. As we come to understand through the course of the video’s narrative, the effect is not only an immediate absence on the physical landscape but also an enduring psychological loss associated with changes in contemporary China’s cultural landscape and experienced in the vanishing of childhood memories, the disappearance of societal traditions, and the rupturing of family ties.

When Chen Qiulin (who currently lives in Chengdu) returned in 2002 to her hometown of Wanzhou,<sup>4</sup> a once-critical port along the Yangtze located midway between Chongqing and the Three Gorges Dam, she was inspired to record the dramatic changes to the city caused by the dam project and to explore how “this period in history, which I have experienced,”<sup>5</sup> is forever changing the way a community’s people see themselves. Through this autobiographical narrative of place, Chen attempts to understand how people renegotiate relationships with the past as they face the future.



Chen Qiulin, *Bei Fu (Farewell Poem)*, video still



Chen Qiulin, *Bei Fu (Farewell Poem)*, video still

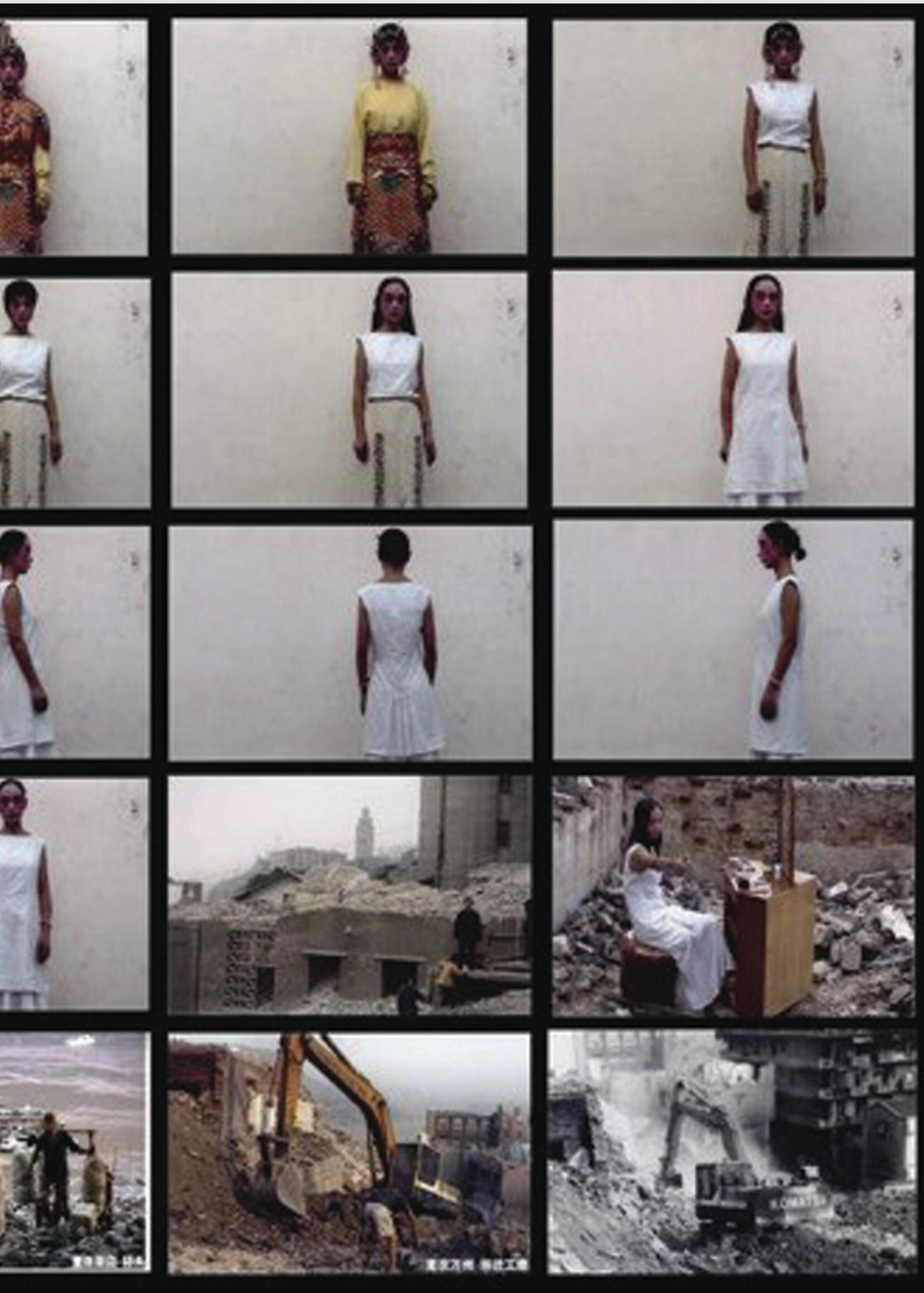
In her “farewell poem” to Wanzhou, Chen creates a collage of contrasts: present and past, documentary and myth, demolition and construction. In handheld tracking shots, Chen’s camera weaves its way through the city recording the sights and sounds of an urban landscape under transition—markers signaling future water heights of 143 and 175 meters, buildings being torn down brick-by-brick to the beat of pickaxes and sledgehammers, pedestrian migration through crowded streets, riverboats and porters (“bang-bang men”) hauling loads uphill, the constant din and dance of heavy construction equipment. Layered into this contemporary urban soundstage are two narratives symbolic of China’s past: the fictional drama of *Farewell My Concubine* and Chen’s search for the sites of her childhood memories.

Chen turns to the highly choreographed theatricality of opera to counterbalance the spontaneity of real life in Wanzhou and to denote a different time. She introduces us to the actors as they begin their transformation through make-up into the characters of King Xiang Yu and his favorite concubine, Yu Ji (played by Chen). Although staged in contemporary settings, this familiar legend essential to Chinese culture provides traditional imagery and a classic soundtrack while its tragic story of farewell expresses feeling that Chen found strikingly analogous to the contemporary loss and separation experienced by the residents of Wanzhou.<sup>6</sup>

The second narrative collaged into the demolished landscape of contemporary Wanzhou is told in the slowed scenes of a solitary Chen, running through the gray rubble or twirling in a trance-like dance atop the ruins—the site of her childhood now reduced to a near-mythical place only reachable in her imagination. At times she is wearing a simple white dress (the color of mourning in China); at others she is clothed in an elaborate costume. In a striking sequence near the video's end, the artist embodies the vanishing of China's history—in a setting stripped of context, the traditionally costumed Chen is “deconstructed” before our eyes into the contemporary female in the white dress. With much of Wanzhou's history and the places of Chen's childhood submerged by the rising waters, will they live on as the subjects of myths and memories? Or will they, like the powerful myths of the mountains and legendary descriptions of the raging river that have been the cultural underpinning of people's lives for thousands of years, quickly cease to be relevant to future generations?



Chen Qiulin, *Bei Fu (Farewell Poem)*



em), video stills



Yun-Fei Ji, *Below the 143 Meter Watermark*



## Yun-Fei Ji

*"There are two periods of great cultural destruction in Chinese history. The first was the Cultural Revolution, and the second is happening right now."*<sup>7</sup>

Recovery and disappearance, although seemingly antithetical, are at the heart of Yun-Fei Ji's paintings. Given China's practice of severing ties to its past, Ji's reclamation and transformation of the tradition of ink brush landscape painting was a radical act by the young artist, who left China in 1986 to study in the U.S. His continuing commitment to the genre and technique has been directed at understanding the contradictions between history and irrevocable change that define contemporary China and are central to the Three Gorges Dam project.

Ji's art has been shaped by his experiences during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), when the country's leadership sought to eradicate all culture and ideas signifying pre-Communist China. He believes his paintings, which emulate classical landscape painting, are "about trying to retrieve some of this history because there was so much effort to get rid of it when I was growing up..."<sup>8</sup> Separated from his parents and siblings, the young Ji was sent to live with his grandmother on a collective farm outside Hanzhou, near Shanghai. There an early fascination with comic books inspired Ji to draw, an interest and talent supported later with tutoring by an army artist who illustrated combat manuals.<sup>9</sup> Ji (who has lived and worked in Brooklyn since 1990) was among the first generation to attend university following the Revolution and it was around 1981, as a student at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, that Ji recalls hearing rumors about the massive dam project on the Yangtze that would become the subject of his art two decades later.<sup>10</sup>

*"Every child in China who reads a story about coming down the Yangtze River through the Three Gorges knows about all the legends, and can recite all those poems; but this is the area they are going to change..."*<sup>11</sup>

*Below the 143 Meter Watermark* is part of a series of works Ji began in the late 1990s in response to the Three Gorges Dam and collectively called *The Empty City*. About the controversial dam, Ji has said, "It is not simplistically right or wrong. The issue is complex...it physically represents what we have done for so many years,"<sup>12</sup> alluding to the dramatic destruction and displacement, first under Mao and again today, that seem to plague China's pursuit of progress.

In 2001, Ji traveled to the Three Gorges area and visited cities being dismantled before the flooding. There he encountered jarring juxtapositions of the modern and old, new cities being built near the tops of mountains and ruined architecture below, and scavengers lingering like ghosts in condemned villages. Ji never paints the dam but rather the signs of its inevitability and its ruinous effects. The paintings are hybrids of observation and imagination, based on his research and on-site digital photography that he transforms into notebook drawings, as well as memories, literary descriptions, knowledge from looking closely at classical paintings, and "his own conflicted relation to China."<sup>13</sup>

The painting's monumental verticality, its virtuosic treatment of dramatic mountains, rocky hillsides, twisted trees, and misty air, its traditional materials of ink washes and mineral pigments on mulberry paper, together recall a classical Song Dynasty landscape painting. But the scene Ji depicts is not one of traditional meditative beauty; it is a place marked by disturbance and desolation where everything

“below the 143 meter watermark” soon will be submerged. Hillsides with dismantled houses and derelict storefronts crumble in slow motion. Empty streets are lined with rubble; carts are piled high with bundles; trucks, bicycles, and chairs sit abandoned. The village is deserted save a solitary ghost-like figure; elsewhere a lone animal waits, it’s back loaded with someone’s belongings.

Ji invokes a scene that is impossible to comprehend at once, teeming with instability from the dramatic to the nearly imperceptible. Our eyes must navigate endless visual detours and make sense of multiple scales. The painting invites us to step back then come closer and rewards those who scrutinize it slowly, scene by scene, detail by detail. Contrasts of light/dark, wet/dry articulate shifts in space and time: the eternal and ephemeral, the past and present, the observed and imagined. People’s belongings (homes, vehicles, furniture, baskets) often are rendered more lightly than the landscapes they inhabit, as if in the process of disappearing. The density of Ji’s imagery, painted in a palette of muted earth tones and atmospheric blues, is matched by his complex layering of pigments and marks, sometimes washed away or scrubbed off and reapplied causing the paper to wear away or wrinkle as though aged. As it reclaims Chinese tradition, *Below the 143 Meter Watermark* captures the magnitude and still-unfolding nature of China’s current erasure of history.

Susan L. Stoops  
Curator of Contemporary Art



Yun-Fei Ji, *Below the 143 Meter Watermark* (detail)



## Notes

1. Dai Qing, in "Great Wall Across the Yangtze," [www.pbs.org/itvs/greatwall/controversy.html](http://www.pbs.org/itvs/greatwall/controversy.html).
2. Tang Yuyang, in Anthony Kuhn, "China's Three Gorges: Assessing the Impact; Three Gorges History Drowning in Rising Reservoir," aired January 4, 2008, transcript at [www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=17810431](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=17810431).
3. Chen, statement in "Migration: Chen Qiulin Solo Exhibition," [www.nyartsmagazine.com](http://www.nyartsmagazine.com), November-December 2006, vol. II, no. 11/12.
4. In correspondence with author, May 2007, Chen explained that the text at the opening of the video describes "the feeling of that time when I came back and saw my hometown" and decided to record Wanzhou's "tremendous changes in 2002."
5. Chen, statement in press release for exhibition, "Chen Qiulin," at Max Protetch, New York, April 2007.
6. Chen, correspondence with author, May 2007.
7. Ji, interviewed by Melissa Chiu, "Ghosts, Three Gorges, and Ink: An Interview with Yun-Fei Ji," in *Yun-Fei Ji: The Empty City*, ed. Shannon Fitzgerald (St. Louis: Contemporary Art Museum, 2004), 87.
8. *Ibid.*, 87.
9. Benjamin Genocchio, "Exploring Utopian Dreams of Chinese History," *The New York Times Connecticut*, January 16, 2005.
10. Gregory Volk, "The Empty City," in *Yun-Fei Ji: The Empty City*, 40.
11. Ji, interviewed by John Yau, "Yun-Fei Ji with John Yau," *The Brooklyn Rail*, December 2006/January 2007.
12. Ji, quoted in Christopher Lew, "Yun-Fei Ji: Dead and Alive," *Art Asia Pacific*, Winter 2007, no. 51, 2006, 64.
13. Gregory Volk, "The Empty City," in *Yun-Fei Ji: The Empty City*, 57.

## About the Artists

### Chen Qiulin

Born in 1975 in Hubei, China, Chen Qiulin lives and works in Chengdu. Since graduating in 2000 from the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, where she studied print-making, she has worked in photography, video, installation, and performance. Chen has participated in several exhibitions in China, Europe, and the United States including *The Wall: Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art* at the China Millennium Art Museum, Beijing and the Albright Knox Art Museum, Buffalo (2005); *This is Not for You: Sculptural Discourses* at Thyssen Bornemisza Art, Vienna (2006); and *Red Hot: Asian Art Today from the Chaney Family Collection* at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (2007). Recent solo projects include *Migration* at Long March Space, Beijing (2006); *Garden* at Max Protetch, New York (2007); and *Chen Qiulin: Recent Work* at University Art Museum, Albany (2007). In 2006, Chen was awarded a grant from the Asian Cultural Council to work for 6 months in the United States. She is represented in New York by Max Protetch.

### Yun-Fei Ji

Born in 1963 in Beijing, China, Yun-Fei Ji grew up in Hangzhou in southern China, and in 1982 he completed studies at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. Ji first came to the United States on a Fulbright Scholarship in 1986 to study at the University of Arkansas where he received an MFA in 1989. Since then, he has lived and worked in Brooklyn, New York. He was included in the 2002 *Whitney Biennial* in New York and since then has participated regularly in exhibitions throughout the United States and Europe including *A Brush with Tradition: Chinese Tradition and Contemporary Art* at the Newark Museum (2003); *Regeneration: Contemporary Art from China and the US* at Bucknell University and toured nationally (2004-6); and *An Atlas of Events* at the Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon (2007). Recent solo projects include *The Old One Hundred Names* at the Pratt Manhattan Gallery (2003); *Yun-Fei Ji: The East Wind* at the ICA, Philadelphia (2004); *The Empty City* at the Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis and toured nationally (2004-5); and *Yun-Fei Ji* at James Cohan Gallery, New York (2006). He was an Artist-in-Residence at Yale University (2004-5) and at Parasol Unit in London (2006-7) and received the Prix de Rome from the American Academy in Rome (2005-6). Ji is represented in New York by James Cohan Gallery.

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