

## JENNIFER CHUN, GU XIONG & CHRIS LEE / Waterscapes: Working Notes on Globalization

In their preface to *Cultures of Globalization*, Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi write, “Globalization falls outside the established academic disciplines, as a sign of the emergence of a new kind of social phenomenon” that “seems to concern politics and economics in immediate ways, but just as immediately culture and sociology, not to speak of information and the media, or ecology, or consumerism and daily life.” Thus, while globalization is widely invoked as if we already know what it means, its logics remain unruly and elusive. *Waterscapes: Mapping Migrations Along the Yangtze and Fraser Rivers* is an interdisciplinary collaboration that seeks to chart the ephemerality of globalization.<sup>1</sup> *Waterscapes* draws on our backgrounds in sociology, literary criticism, and fine arts to construct an ongoing conversation about the effects of globalization through blogs, art installations, public events, and essays. Our project tracks the relationship between the environment and migrant experiences in China and Canada by comparing two major riverways. Here, we present a brief excerpt of this conversation by focusing on a research trip that we took in July 2011 from Chongqing to Shanghai along the Yangtze River. A photo-essay by Gu Xiong is juxtaposed with field notes written by Jennifer Chun and framing commentary by Chris Lee.

July 5, 2011: Chongqing, China

Gu was waiting for us at the airport with a car and a driver . . . On the drive into the city, I was overwhelmed by the scale and pace of development. Lining the wide roads were dozens of high-rise buildings. They were similar to the massive apartment complexes in Seoul . . . but one thing seemed significantly different: all the lights were turned off. By 8 PM the sun had set and one would expect that the apartment buildings would be speckled with lights. But it was

1 We gratefully acknowledge the funding support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. For more information on *Waterscapes*, see [blogs.ubc.ca/waterscapes](http://blogs.ubc.ca/waterscapes).

almost completely dark. According to our driver, the lights were off because people were either trying to conserve energy or because there was no power. The heat required that people conserve as much energy as possible for air conditioning.

Gu seemed singularly focused on the heat levels. It had reached 40 degrees on the previous days and he had suffered mild heat exhaustion. We often talk about the weather as a conversation filler, but the unbearable heat level seemed to confirm to Gu that he was lucky to live in Vancouver. Gu remarked that one of his friends who is also from Chongqing called Vancouver “heaven”—presumably because of the weather.

After we checked into our hotel, we walked to the nearby Three Gorges Plaza, a commercial district that commemorates the building of the Three Gorges Dam. I felt dwarfed by the enormous billboards on the towering buildings and the glittering neon lights. I pointed to the bright red neon sign in front of the KFC with a humongous picture of the Colonel. Gu and Chris chuckled and then pointed to the Chinese equivalent right across the street, CSC.

. . . At the end of my first evening in Chongqing, I am struck by two things: the massive and ongoing construction of a sprawling city; the pollution and heat, and talk of it.

Chongqing, a municipality with a population of 33 million, is one of the fastest developing regions in China. Amidst this transformation, the most basic indicators of being in the natural world—such as weather—have become indexes of social and technological development. Meanwhile, the nearby Three Gorges Dam, the construction of which has flooded over 600 square kilometers and displaced at least 1.3 million people, has become the namesake for a commercial district enjoyed mostly by those who have benefited from Chongqing’s success. While these developments are undoubtedly linked to underlying causes such as modernization and entry of China into the world market, their visceral immediacy defies easy explanation. Irony and humour seem to offer promising perspectives.

July 11, 2011: Wushan, China

After breakfast, we jumped into a taxi to tour the city. The driver seemed young, perhaps in his early 30s, and was very open to answering our questions. During the ride, he recounted many stories of corruption by local officials, including one about an official who had embezzled 20 million yuan [3.5 million CAD] in a bridge construction project and slept around with multiple women . . . The driver also told us about how the city had changed. In 1997, the government started building the city and 60,000 people moved in thereafter. By 2009, the relocation [of those displaced by the Three Gorges Dam] was finished and 100,000 people now reside in Wushan. The goal is for the population to grow to 200,000 people, mainly from neighboring villages. The driver also mentioned that each person receives 10,000 yuan to buy an apartment or a piece of land.

The driver explained that there are not many job opportunities in the area. Rather, the area really functions as a labour source for Guangdong [the site of many factories making products for export]. Tellingly, the major road in Wushan is called "Guangdong Road." The driver explained that his wife lives in Guangdong and works in an electronics factory. She comes home once a year for the spring festival. He chose not to move. Instead, he bought a car with his relocation compensation but after a year and a half, he still has a significant amount of debt on the car. He and Gu became engrossed in a long conversation, and I later learned that he had been part of a collective struggle the previous year against the seizure of their cars. They went all the way to Beijing to protest their case. A couple of leaders were imprisoned for a year. When asked what he thought about the central government's relocation efforts, he responded that their plans were good; the problem was really with the local officials and their widespread corruption.

As we drove through Wushan, I was struck by all the stores at the base of the new apartment buildings: hair salons, warehouses for food,



machine repair, convenience stores, restaurants, etc. Seeing the kind of growth of development that has sprung up in Wushan has made me think about the city/country divide. How are cities created? How are they planned? What defines the city? What defines the country? As we leave Wushan, I am feeling confused about displacement and relocation. I really didn't expect to see the vibrancy and dynamism that characterized life in the so-called "country." I expected to see much more visible poverty and dislocation. But, instead, the booming and on-going construction emitted a sense of vitality.

I wonder how other governments that plan infrastructure developments like dams deal with displacement. Is it simply a technical, bureaucratic project? What about the histories and memories of people who are required to evacuate their homes and move to new shiny apartment complexes? The fact that the central government planned the relocation of 3 million people and provided compensation to individuals (even if nominal) is almost too overwhelming to grasp. It is hard not to feel impressed by the [Chinese] central government's relocation plans, even in the face of such ecological destruction and human and cultural loss.

Our desire for cheap consumer goods in North America directly affects the lives of those we met along the Yangtze. In recent years, over 200 million have left villages to work in larger towns and cities. Zhu and Zhao estimate that another 200 million migrant labourers will leave the countryside by 2015. Agriculture can no longer sustain rural communities while farmland continues to be taken over by urbanization and plagued with pollution. With the concentration of wealth and production in regions such as Guangdong, even smaller cities such as Wushan have turned into sources of migrant labour. Agricultural economist Wen Tiejun argues that unsustainable and unrealistic development practices imported from the West have led peasants to "drastically reduce their labour input in agriculture and seek more use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides." The rural economy has been devastated while the entire food supply has become dangerously tainted, affecting the health of all citizens. Those of us

in North America, accustomed to endless stories about toxic food imports, are also affected by these transformations. At what point do seemingly disparate intersections between consumption and production begin to form a more coherent picture of globalization and our roles in it?

## Postscript

Since returning to Canada, we have been preparing for our next exhibition, which will feature materials from our trip and also address agricultural practices in the Fraser Valley today, with a focus on guest workers from Mexico and Guatemala. *Waterscapes: Reframed* will be shown at The Reach Gallery Museum in Abbotsford, BC from January 26–March 25, 2012. From China to Canada to Latin America, globalization inheres in labouring bodies as well as supermarket shelves. It is one thing to know these relationships exist and plot them, but another to understand the lives of those who render them possible; how to engage in this listening remains a pressing challenge.

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*Three Gorges Dam, 2011, photo, 50.8 x 129.5 cm*

PHOTOGRAPHER: GU XIONG

The Three Gorges Dam blocks the flow of the Yangzi River, and completely changes the geographical environment of the land along the river. Residents have to cope with the new environment forced upon them. So much is sacrificed in the creation of this haunted beauty, as the Communist power tries yet again to shape nature and build man-made sublimity.





*Chongqing #2*, 2011, photo, 50.8 x 114.3 cm

PHOTOGRAPHER: GU XIONG

This is my hometown, where I grew up. When I was a child I sat on these hills and watched people using guns fighting with each other from the two sides of the river during the Cultural Revolution. Nowadays these hills are transformed into a fast-growing city where high-rise buildings grow like baby bamboo sprouting after a spring shower. Back then, people wanted to fight for a better future under Mao's direction, and yet ironically, social problems continue to exist today: the gap between the rich and poor, just like the growth of these buildings, is ever continuing and never-ending.







*Yangzi River trucks, 2011, photo, 50.8 x 96.5 cm*

PHOTOGRAPHER: GU XIONG

My attention is focused on the driver who tries to stand up. Surrounding him are all kinds of heavy-duty loading trucks. The big changes in China are actually carried out by these ordinary people, who are fundamental to the ongoing transformation, yet no one notices them.



*Green House*, 2011, photo, 50.8 x 86.4 cm

PHOTOGRAPHER: GU XIONG

Most international contract workers who work in the Fraser Valley, British Columbia work in these greenhouses. Now the greenhouses have become a growing agricultural and industrial field. Migrant workers here produce tomatoes, peppers, Chinese bamboo and money trees.





*Fraser Valley, 2011, photo, 50.8 x 106.7 cm*

PHOTOGRAPHER: GU XIONG

When looking into the beautiful Fraser Valley depicted here, we probably cannot imagine how many migrant workers from Mexico and Nicaragua work here in producing goods that are marked “made in Canada,” yet by international labour.







*Outsourced cars*, 2011, photo, 50.8 x 81.3 cm

PHOTOGRAPHER: GU XIONG

The Fraser River flows into the Pacific Ocean, and boats carry outsourced waste to China to be melted and re-transformed into new products—recycling and globalizing through the Fraser River.