

THE TREE OF LIFE

Some of her most poignant work has its roots in the desecration of Chinese woodland in the name of progress, explains Yan Wang Preston

WORDS: GAVIN BELL





PUHEJING QUARRY ECOLOGY RECOVERY PROJECT, DALI, CHINA, 2017

PREVIOUS PAGES, FROM THE FOREST PROJECT

'The power of this picture is in its structural simplicity, but also the implications it might have. It's a nightmare vision – it was a very powerful moment standing there, awed but terrified. They say they are

"renaturalising" the quarries. I revisited this area and most of the netting had gone. I believe they have tried to spray red soil on the vertical quarry face which did not do much, and you think why did they bother.'

Y40_3,900KM FROM THE RIVER SOURCE

BELOW, FROM THE MOTHER RIVER PROJECT

'Some of the best shots are simple pictures with limited graphic elements and some are the opposite, like this one. This is Migrant Square in a new town built to house migrants forced to abandon their homes for the Three Gorges dam. Every

morning these people go there to practise routines going back to the cultural revolution celebrating the government and the Communist Party. There are two ladies who are clearly lost and every time I look at them, I laugh.'

FOR THREE CENTURIES A magnificent tree stood in the Chinese village of Xialiu. The *Ficus hookeriana*, also known as as Hooker's Ficu, was a venerable tree of life, a place for villagers to gather in its shade to discuss affairs of the day and watch children at play.

Then one day workers came and ripped it out by the roots, chopped off most of its limbs and all of its leaves, and took away 70 tons of emaciated remains to replant them at the construction site of a five-star hotel in a nearby city. The tree had been reduced to a skeleton, and two years later it was dead.

The tale is told in *Forest*, a monograph by the British-Chinese landscape photographer Dr Yan Wang Preston that documents the creation of woodland and 'natural' environments in huge new Chinese urban developments. A portfolio from the eight-year project won the professional landscape category in the 2019 Sony World Photography Awards, and the 2017 Syngenta Photography Award.

The life and brutal death of the Xialiu tree is not unique – many mature trees

suffer the same fate, but it was the only one Preston was fortunate to find and photograph before and after its transplanting. She had suspected its fate was sealed when she found the village being demolished to make way for a dam project on the Yangtze River.

In a video commentary, she says: 'When I saw trees like this, I felt the pain like my limbs were chopped off, my hair was torn, and I was dug out from somewhere I lived all my life. It was real physical empathy.'

It was a traumatic experience for Preston, a native of Shanghai who now lives in west Yorkshire. 'The project was imbued with a profound sense of sadness,' she adds now. 'Even if we try to look at the transplantation process rationally, for the individual trees it's still very sad to see the trauma they go through.'

'We all love trees – or most people do – and if you see one tree being stripped of its leaves and branches and being transplanted it's okay, but when you see whole woodlands being uprooted you begin to ask questions. What happened here? Clearly this is a thriving business. Some were planted in shopping





centres, so they were more like decorations than trees.'

In Chongqing, China's largest metropolis, with more than 30 million inhabitants, a ready-made 'forest city' is being created with saplings – along with thousands of uprooted mature trees. Preston explains: 'Generally speaking, the older the trees are the more likely they will die because they are so adapted to their natural environment, with big root systems.'

Those that do survive often become trophies that raise property prices.

Stark images of emaciated and dying trees against gleaming glass and concrete

'My project is helping people to understand that when you try to construct nature you can destroy it'

skyscrapers are disturbing, but as a professional photographer Preston takes a detached view.

'I'm not a campaigner,' she says. 'Wanting to have nature in cities is a good thing, but often in China they are not patient enough for nature to establish itself, so they buy ready-made forests. My project is storytelling, helping people to understand that when you try to construct nature you can destroy it, and to question the ways we go about it. Nature in urban societies is positive, but are there better ways than just forcing it?'

Less contentious are clumsy attempts to mask ecological scars being gouged in landscapes as new cities are created. In Haidong Development Zone in Yunnan province, the entire topsoil of a rural area has been removed and replaced by red semi-artificial soil to root non-indigenous plants, including thousands of mature trees, for what was termed an 'international leisure and ecology

YUAN-A HAND DRAWN, RED CIRCLE, 2011

ABOVE

'My artistic vision is often reserved and restrained. This is a performance piece, one of the very few moments in my artistic life that I totally went for it by making this red circle on a frozen headwater of the Yangtze River. It was

a very powerful experience to alter the landscape temporarily and to do this with my bare hands. I was desperate to find my mother river, seeing was not believing any more, and touching was more convincing.'

BEST SHOTS

Y57_5,600KM FROM THE RIVER SOURCE

RIGHT, FROM THE MOTHER RIVER PROJECT

'This is a picture you cannot plan for. When I was working on *Mother River* it was always a struggle to distil something from given realities. This was one of the locations where I managed that. I like its tonality and its ambiguity. It's less of a description for me, it's more what my mind's eye sees, slightly mysterious, and I hope I can be in that state more as a photographer. It's more like a feeling than a rationale.'

• model town'. In an attempt to be visually green, the authorities use green plastic sheeting to mask everything unsightly, from construction waste to disused quarries. Over time the sheeting disintegrates into polluting fragments.

The bizarre 'ecology recovery' landscapes captured by Preston produced her Sony award-winning series *To the south of the colourful clouds*. One image in particular, of a towering quarry face swathed in decaying sheeting, she admits was a nightmare vision that terrified her.

Then she went to look at a river. In a concurrent four-year photographic expedition Preston travelled the length of the Yangtze River, from its source on the Tibetan plateau through the heartland of China to its mouth on the East China Sea, portraying its changing moods, landscapes and communities at precise waypoints every 100km. The result of the *Mother river* project is the life story of one of the planet's mightiest waterways.

At 6,300km the Yangtze, the world's third-longest river, has mythical status in China, celebrated in pictures, songs and poems that have transformed it into a national icon. Preston's goal was to present more realistic, multilayered images of the river than •

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QIUTIAN

LEFT, FROM THE HE PROJECT

'For three years I have been working on portraiture commissioned by the Open Eye gallery in Liverpool exploring Chinese identities in the city.

This year our theme was "masculinity". There is a lot of vulnerability in young men and that's what I decided to work with. This student on Crosby Beach looks

frightened, but calm at the same time. The composition is successful, with the structure of the abandoned fishing net and the shape of his body.'

JIANGBEIZUI CBD, CHONGQING, CHINA, 2017

BELOW, FROM THE FOREST PROJECT

'This central business district is a flagship area showing the city's ambition. It was almost a ghost town at the time – most businesses were not

there yet. It's quite a simple picture. I saw the dead and dying trees and the brand-new glass buildings behind them, and for the composition

they all worked together. It sums up what I wanted to say but with a light touch I hope, and because of the light it has some magic in it.'



PROFILE YAN WANG PRESTON

Yan Wang Preston is a British-Chinese artist primarily interested in the contested conditions

of nature in contemporary societies.

She has won major international awards including the professional landscape category of the Sony World Photography Awards (2019) and the Syngenta Photography Award (2017), and was named one of the RPS Hundred Heroines.

She has presented solo exhibitions at the 56th Venice Biennale, Chongqing China Three Gorges Museum, Wuhan Art Museum, Gallery of Photography Ireland, Impressions Gallery in Bradford and Side Gallery in Newcastle.

Preston's monographs *Forest* and *Mother river* were published by Hatje Cantz in 2018.

Her work is collected by Wuhan Art Museum, Swatch, Syngenta, and the Open Eye Gallery.

Awarded a PhD in photography by the University of Plymouth in 2018, Preston lectures at the University of Huddersfield, UK.

• the usual visions of it as a glorious 'Mother River' or as environmental victim of dam projects.

The waypoints plan presented challenges. A couple of locations were impossible to reach, and at others poor light or misty conditions limited the possibilities of her large-format Linhof camera.

'Most of the time the photography was a bit of a struggle and a disappointment, in that you don't have a lot of choices,' she admits. 'I gave up trying to take a meaningful picture in the end, and worked out a rule: if in doubt, shoot, don't think too much.'

It was a good strategy, as her images gained plaudits at exhibitions



‘On a personal level this project was a way of reconnecting with my motherland’

EGONGYAN PARK, CHONGQING, CHINA, 2017

ABOVE, FROM THE FOREST PROJECT

‘This picture took two days of observing and planning. It is the pinnacle of the forest project and technically one of my most successful pictures. In terms of the storyline of the project, I realised that despite the cruelty of displacing

people and bringing them to this brutal concrete environment, life can adapt and grow. The children will see these trees and this place as their homeland and they can still have joy. That’s the story I want to tell from this picture.’

● throughout the world, and contributed to her being chosen as one of the RPS Hundred Heroines whose work is transforming photography. They were not universally popular in China, however.

‘At one of the exhibition talks, the audience really didn’t like my work. They stood up and said perhaps you’re too young – how dare you portray our grand, mother river in this way. I took this as a triumph,’ she says.

Her favourite Yangtze shot was created at the source. ‘On a personal level, this project was a way of trying to reconnect with my motherland. So, going all the way to the source, which was difficult to reach, it’s almost like you’re visiting your spiritual homeland.’

Today it is the only picture of the river on the wall of her home, and it’s not for sale. Preston says the long-term projects helped her to better understand her native land, and to accept how it is.

‘I could see the upheaval of the modernisation process in China reaching its remotest corners, but I could also see the benefits of building the dams, so the situation is complicated.

‘We need to be cautious about making judgments. A lot of things over here we tend to criticise and in China they celebrate, but there are many aspects to consider. I tried to get that across in my projects. It may not satisfy some people because it is too subtle or neutral, but it’s what I tried to do.’

A less controversial venture is now in prospect. Preston is interested in a movement in the UK to free rivers of dams, weirs and other industrial detritus no longer serving a useful purpose, and to return them to a more natural state. It should make a pleasant change from dying forests.

Visit yanwangpreston.com