Rivers of the World - China

Chongqing 2006 & 2007
Measuring in at 6,378 kilometres, about 3,915 miles, the Yangtze River is the longest river in Asia and the third longest in the world after the Nile in Africa and the Amazon in South America. Only in its lower reaches, in the final 200 miles before it reaches the sea, does the river go by its common name, the Yangtze River, which translates as Son of the Sea. Elsewhere it has many local names. But when referring to the river as a whole, the Chinese call it Chang Jiang (Long River) or Da Jiang (Great River).

The river is essential to China’s livelihood. Almost 30% of China’s land area falls within its drainage area and some 500 million people or 12% of the world’s population live in the basin. The scale of the river is immense. Ocean-going vessels can now travel the 2,400 kilometre journey from Shanghai to Chongqing. In fact, 80% of the nation’s water cargo travels via the Yangtze.

The river has been the effective dividing line between north and south China, both geographically and culturally, and has been a highly valued internal highway for over 2,000 years. As a line of defense too, the river has been central to China’s history. In 1949, a million or so of Mao Zedong’s communist troupes crossed the river in a flotilla of every kind of boat that became a turning point in the fight against Chiang Kai Shek’s superior nationalist army.
For the ancient Chinese, the source of the Yangtze was in heaven. It wasn’t until 1976 that a Chinese expedition traced the precise source of the Yangtze to the foothills of the Tanggula Mountains on the Tibetan Plateau at an elevation of about 4,800 metres. The Tibetans call it the Wild Yak River and there are stories that its source spills from the mouth of an immense female yak living high in the mountains. The stream here, the Dam Qu, combines with the Tuotuo to form the Tongtian River (The River that Travels Through the Heavens). 300 kilometres downstream, at the border between Tibet and Sichuan, the Tongtian is renamed the Jinsha Joang (The River of Golden Sand). In these upper reaches the river is very turbulent, very fast flowing and tightly confined between heavily forested valleys. After two great bends in the river (see left) and the torrents of the Tiger Leaping Gorge area, at the foothills of the mountains, the river reaches Yibin, the upper limit of the river’s navigability. Here, the river changes name again to Chang Jiang (The Long River). Downriver of Chongqing is the 192 kilometre long Three Gorges area, one of China’s most popular tourist attractions.
Common consent has it that the earliest form of human life sprang up in Africa. The first pre-human hominid animals to arrive in Asia from Africa have been found in China. Fossil teeth of early man from 2 million years ago have been found in the Three Gorges area and it is reasonable to suppose that these are the ancestors of all Asian mankind. When excavations began for the Three Gorges Dam, archaeologists uncovered artefacts unlike any they had seen before. These relics have since been attributed to the formerly unknown Ba people, now considered an important part of early Chinese history. The Ba are thought to have established kingdoms from the sixteenth to the third century BC.
The Yangtze River provides the drinking water for 400 million people living in its drainage area. Yet environmentalists think that 90% of the length of the river is in a critical condition. According to a survey by the Water Conservation Commission, 59 towns and cities along the Yangtze are suffering either from a lack of water or from poor quality drinking water. Some academics think that 70% of Yangtze water will be unusable within five years unless tough new measures are introduced to curb toxic discharges.

900 billion tons of water flow down the Yangtze River every year. This annual flow accounts for 36% of the total water resources in China yet 25 billion tons of waste water is dumped into the river every year and about 80% of this is untreated. Most comes from factories and cities. Chongqing pumps out 1.3 billion tones of water waste each year, 80% of which runs untreated into the Yangtze River. In Shanghai, China’s wealthiest and most environmentally-conscious city, up to 90% of the city’s sewage runs into the Yangtze untreated. Chongqing is trying to redress the balance. The city is spending $5 billion on pollution treatment infrastructure.
Situated strategically at the confluence of the Yangtze and Jailing Rivers, Chongqing became the capital of China in 1937 when General Chiang Kai-Shek abandoned Nanjing. The Yangtze River is about a kilometre wide here and the city was considered to be a safe haven and the river a crucial transport artery.

Chongqing is now the largest municipality in the world with a population of more than 30 million people. There is an ancient saying that during the winter in Chongqing a glimpse of the sun is so rare that all the dogs start barking when they see it. In the summer months from May to October, the city is as hot as a furnace with insufferable humidity levels. The city is known euphemistically as 'foggy' because a combination of some of China's worst air pollution and low cloud frequently makes visibility very poor indeed.

From 1937 to 1945 Chongqing was heavily bombed by the Japanese and it now holds the distinction of being the most bombed city in history. It is now a major manufacturing centre, particularly for cars and motorcycles. Chongqing is also the focal point for the unique Three Gorges Dam and most tourists begin their two- or three-day Three Gorges cruise from here.
It is the biggest inland port in western China and massive public works are currently underway in the city to develop it as the gateway to the west. After the construction of the Three Gorges Dam, water levels will rise by up to 90m allowing for year-round navigation. Ocean-going ships of 10,000 tons will be able to travel the 2,400km from the East China Sea all the way to Chongqing's Chaotianmen Docks.

Chongqing’s busy docks bustle with thousands of porters known as bang bang jun – the help army. These men and women, some 200,000 on any given day, line up with their bamboo poles and ropes to carry supplies unloaded at river level up the slopes and staircases into the heart of the city. Visitors to Chongqing in the 1920s and 30s commented on its 30m high city wall, and the rough steps from the river up to the city gates “dripping with slime from the endless procession of water carriers”. At that time, Chongqing, with a population of 600,000, had no other water supply. Between ten to twenty thousand coolies carried water daily to the shops and houses through the steep and narrow lanes of the city.
Baxian Middle School was partnered with Hatch End High School in LB Harrow
Polluted River

The students researched the water and environment of the Yangzte River and then, facilitated by the artist, they made an artwork based on their findings in the style of artist Gustav Klimt.

Zhou Litong, Ning Jia,
River Culture

The students made drawings and imagery using paper-cutting techniques, fibreglass, wax and watercolours. The students proved themselves to be careful, innovative and good team-workers.
Fengjie Middle School was partnered with Oaklands School in LB Tower Hamlets
Cao Zhi (2006)
Working River

The students researched the people associated with the Yangzte River and then, facilitated by the artist, they made an artwork based on their findings in the style of artist Raoul Dufy.

River City

The students created two boards, one dark and the other light. They made lines and blocks of colour using pure pigment on the dark background. They then cut the light board into small pieces and arranged these onto the dark one.
Fulin No 5 Middle School was partnered with Archbishop Tenison CE School in LB Lambeth
Su Fei (2006)
River Culture

The students researched the history of the Yangzte River and then, facilitated by the artist, they made an artwork based on their findings using the traditional Chinese stamp technique.

Polluted River

The students were encouraged to imagine their waterway in the context of 'being harmed'. The each drew pictures and the drawings were then scanned and arranged on the digital board.
No 37 Middle School was partnered with Raines Foundation School in LB Tower Hamlets
Southwest University Affiliated School was partnered with St Thomas the Apostle School in LB Southwark
Ning Jia (2006)
River of Life

The students researched the wildlife of the Yangzte River and then, facilitated by the artist, they made an artwork based on their findings in the style of artist Gao Yu.

Working River

The students chose paper-cutting as their main medium for creating their artwork. They focused on people's daily life, for example looking at clothing, food, accommodation and traffic.
River of Life

The students researched the wildlife of the Yangzte River and then, facilitated by the artist, they made an artwork based on their findings in the style of artist Liang Kai.

Resourceful River

The arts facilitators encouraged the students to think creatively and guided them towards producing drawings using watercolours and other painting methods.
Yongchuan Middle School was partnered with Yongchuan Middle School in LB Southwark
Zhu Lanjing (2006)
River City

The students researched the boats and bridges of the Yangzte River and then, facilitated by the artist, they made an artwork based on traditional Chinese painting style.

River Culture

The students made both observational drawings of views along the river, and drawings based on stories relating to the river, using pencils, paper-cuts, photographs and collage. These were then scanned into the computer and arranged on the digital board.
Yunyang Middle School was partnered with Skinners Company's School for Girls in LB Hackney.
Lie Jie (2006)  
River City

The students researched the riverside development along the Yangzte River and then, facilitated by the artist, they made an artwork based on their findings in the style of artist Wu Guanzhong.

River of Life

The students took lots of photographs by the river. They then cut up the images using scissors or ripping them up by hand. They pasted them freely according to their understanding of the ecological system and particular organisms along the river.
Exhibition
October 2006
June 2008
Carnival in Chongqing by Charles Baeuchamp and Julieta Rubio of Mandinga Carnival Arts.