

The Sun Shines Brightly, No Way Home: On Muge's *Going Home*

"The lyrical work is always the subjective expression of a social antagonism."
-- Theodor W. Adorno¹

Written by Liang-Pin Tsao
Translated by Wei-ming Liu

After the Three Gorges Dam, poetry no longer seems possible. *Going Home*, Muge's photography series, records the aftereffects of the construction of the Three Gorges Dam. With silence and tender touches, the artist expresses sadness and compassion. At the very site of destruction, where all is gone and no possibilities remain, we suddenly come face to face with the paradoxical weight of poetry.

Born in Wuxi County, Chongqing City and living in Chengdu (both major cities along the dam-affected parts of the Yangtze River,) Muge had been creating this photography series since 2005, both along the travel route back to his childhood home, and in towns around the dam. The journey back home, long since etched into his brain, as well as the feeling of familiar comfort permeating the landscape along the way, had all been overlain by dust with the beginning of the construction. When all the demolition was completed and all the dust settled, the only thing left was the feeling of loss and bleakness. Whether easy to take or hard to swallow, the pace of progress and modernization seemed especially swift, ruthless and heartless here. Muge's emotional and practical artistic self-awareness, in this sense, brings about the true visage behind the familiar landscape of his photographs: that of impermanence.

Going against the flow of time as it rushes past like the water of the Yangtze, Muge reexamines the past within a nostalgic landscape, remotely re-connecting a lost and broken link of memory with the images in his series. Still, all the ruins and debris have been submerged in the quiet flow of river water, and all is returned to the appearance of normality. *Going Home*, in this way, becomes a memory-undercurrent of the river, and Muge's journey up the stream is turned into the occasional arch of a fish's jump breaking through the endlessly vast, eerily undisturbed surface. With such a pleasantly surprising discovery, after the fish goes underwater again, how far will the ripple of discussion reach? How many broken hearts will be comforted?

During the staccato journeys between his home and the Three Gorges Dam over five years, Muge recorded the changes in landscape and countenance with photography, with an insider's perspective. The subtle connections and struggles between mankind and the land are given tangible shapes in *Going Home*. Perhaps the hesitant subtext of the series can be summed up in one question: after the intrusion of modern construction, how do we view this new relationship between mankind and nature?

In terms of form and subject matter, *Going Home* reminds one of South African photographer Pieter Hugo's *Permanent Error*. Both series can be roughly categorized as traumatic literature or "scarred writing;" however, Muge's style and perspective are a far cry from the razor-sharp

1 Theodor W. Adorno, "On Lyric Poetry and Society," in *Notes to Literature*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, Vol. I (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), P. 45.

subjectivity of Pieter Hugo's work. The dramatic nature and accusatory bloodiness of the scenes depicted in *Permanent Error* may be able to extract a deep sympathy from the viewer, but the series's effect is akin to holding a knife to the viewer's throat; as the viewer is confronted with the shameful helplessness of the images, he/she may succumb under the pressure of morality and be unable to face the guilt in a rational manner, much less reach the state of reconciliation or consider a solution to the problem.

In contrast to the above scenario, perhaps due to his own status as the insider, Muge's treatment of the subjects in front of his camera seems full of compassion, with a touch of tenderness and emotional comprehension. At the same time, the lightness of his treatment sits heavily on the viewer's mind. One cannot help but imagine the moment when he took a photo: the complex emotions warring with the simultaneous rigid precision of operating a mechanical apparatus; the tug-of-war between his heart and his photo-snapping finger; the jumbled shivering as he takes a shot. The implicit, repressed formal tension of *Going Home* may even be described by the definition of the term "reservation" in *Twenty-four Modes of Poetry*²: "achieving essence and style without a single word."

With its traditional format and modern interest, *Going Home* follows the conventional path of documentary photography, adopting a straightforward, realistic approach in recording events and subjects as the artist encountered them. However, the spiritual and emotional impact of the series go far beyond superficial documentation and serendipitous encounters, transcending reality and telling far more than is shown. The lyricism of Muge's work makes concrete the spiritual landscape of people who have lost their homes; at the same time, it reflects an image of the self. To use a photography metaphor, the real value or true subject of the photograph here may well be the profound understanding garnered from Muge's own realization that the way home is no more, and his subsequent confrontation with unimaginable loss and helplessness.

The cultural assets of Sichuan Province, a province long hailed as the Land of Abundance, a major epicenter of culture and a nurturing ground for local talents, has now been partially submerged, rendered into underwater ghost cities. When geography can so easily become history, the impact of Muge's understated series title of homecoming may supercede that of the images within the series, even if by accident. That is, the name of *Going Home* may trigger constant and immediate reflection; it may be seen as the most reserved yet powerful critique or the humblest yet strongest reminder of this engineering project.

Images, however realistic and precise, cannot possibly encompass or carry the arguments and anguished cries of the masses triggered by the Three Gorges Dam project. Photographs, no matter how numerous or large, cannot compare to irrevocable facts. The dam is built; the people and the land have changed; the temporary incomprehension and discomfort of a reunion between the two can all be condensed into a long silence. It would seem that the value system of a new China can be judged by none other than the passage of time.

Can the cheerful scene of the launching ceremony and the long-anticipated benefits of the dam wash away people's apprehensions like the flowing river water? As we look through the photographs of *Going Home*, it seems that only in the darkness of eyes closed in prayer can we imagine a tiny glow of hope. To conclude this article, we will evoke a poem by Song Dynasty scholar Zhu Xi:

To shine an ancient mirror, one requires methods of old;

The clarity of vision must rival the rays of the sun;

The sun shines brightly all the way back home,

Do not mistake the land of another for your own.