

River Views: The All-to-one Image Context in Muge's *Going Home*

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Home is a model shaped by the very essence of life, a receptacle of memory; the act of going home is the reaffirmation and re-tracking of the traces of existence. Chongqing- born photographer Muge had been recording the sights and people he encountered on the way back to his hometown since 2005; as the construction of the Three Gorges Dam progressed, the landscape along Muge's homeward journey changed, to the point where every trip revealed some more gaps in the memories of the land. In this way, one could say that the path paved out by the images in *Going Home* is an obscure one, pointing towards a longing for a homeland to which one can never return.

Where is Home?

Some of Muge's photographs are run through with temporary roads born of construction and demolition, paths created by foot traffic on the side of steep cliffs, and people walking over tracks that are not really roads. All passageways are still in transition.

There are broken stones and bricks strewn across the ground; exposed rebars are abandoned on the wayside; pebble-ridden grass patches lie next to tire tracks pressed into soft mud. These are the discarded remains of construction. With the image of a man and a bike wobbling through an uneven, rocky terrain, disappearing into a seemingly indeterminable fog, the viewer may find that the traces and direction of the "roads," as they were, resonate with the viewer's own daily struggles and life journey.

The bird's eye view and extreme long shot angles enhance the depth of the composition; the camera observes its subjects from the other side of the river, framing the insignificance and intricacy of human life in the vastness of nature. Muge's detached viewpoint here focuses on the common laborers whose life and livelihood were impacted by the Three Gorges Dam construction.

To go home, one must have a specific direction and destination. However, Muge's series catalogues an undecided, ambivalent state of being: while the people in the photographs carry their luggage on their backs, the luggage itself becomes a floating home. Their journey homewards is no longer categorized with a determinable end goal, but becomes a psychological sense of belonging sought after by the common people.

Portraits of the Masses

The contrast between light and shadow is not sharp in the images of *Going Home*: light beams through the humid air of the river; the flying dust of the construction sites lingers in the air; the light falls as the dust does, while the background details are submerged in layers of mist.

Muge often turns his camera lens to those he meets during his journey. With soft, clear light on their facial features, most of his subjects are consistent in demeanor and sentiment. That is, their features are clear, but emotions are obscured; the ambivalence of their expressions gives off a vague melancholy;

the brightness of their eyes speaks of serenity; their continence is simple, almost to the point of the merest character sketch; their profiles and lowered gazes conceal the turbulent thoughts within.

These faces, from different parts of the land, are dissimilar in facial features but alike in their commonness and austerity, as though one may easily encounter any of them in one's daily life. In this way, Muge puts together a smorgasbord of the common folk with a light touch, as though providing a symbolized portrait of the masses whose lives are similarly affected by the Three Gorges Dam's construction. Instead of creating a stereotype or a trite collection of "faces of the era," the artist explores the shared psychological qualities of the collective in the individuals, inspiring the viewer to read deeper into the portraits, beyond the faces themselves.

A beam of back light or side light projects shadows onto a face, highlighting the complex emotions behind bland features and revealing the temperate tenacity of the flesh-and-blood common man under the weight of reality's incessant pressure.

The Comprehending Eye

The contents of *Going Home* are usually static images of the environment or of travelers; snapshots of people in motion are relatively rare, and the expressions captured in stillness are not of an exhibitionistic or performative nature. In fact, one can detect neither the divide in perspective between observer and observed, nor any labeling effect. Muge dexterously seeks out that moment of thoughtfulness seeping through one's everyday exterior, as one pauses or looks towards the horizon. The snap of the shutter captures a suspended, breathless moment, validating the minute-to-minute consciousness in the images.

The moment captured in film is not cut off and separated from the flow of time. As Muge worked with a hand-held, medium-sized camera, it is likely that his subjects would notice his attempt; however, by gaining the trust and consent of those photographed, Muge was able to look for the right moment for the portraits. As a result, the faces in the shots are always undisturbed, steeped in their own quiet thoughts. Maybe it is Muge's sophisticated and worldly eye; more likely, it is his openness, empathy, comprehension and innocence which guide the viewer easily past the superficial impressions of the common man, right into the inner world. At the same time, the portraits reflect Muge's own turbulent inner state in his homeward journey.

One Another's Other Shores

The portraits of *Going Home* are almost exclusively of adults in their prime and children. Muge's central concern is for the living condition and future of those close to him, and this series touches upon the core issue of existence for a whole generation. The generalized objective consciousness is consistent with the inner workings of the active subject, and the expressions of those being photographed directly mirror the bewilderment and confusion felt by Muge and the collective consciousness of which he is a part. In this way, the photographs create an abstract space for the viewer to enter into and share his/her own meandering life experiences and emotions with strangers.

Going Home speaks of a vast narrative of time and space; Muge's angle in examining reality and the masses is evident in the way he presents the younger generation as detached while in social settings. Muge does not focus in on the idiosyncrasies and emotional tension of the individual, but instead creates a tender, blurry border to his visual space, making it easy for individuals from different cultures, communities or nationalities to join in and create resonance.

Muge's photographs not only function as references for the imagination, but also as mirrors reflecting truth and reality. Collectively, these visages are geared towards a universal will of life, one that is greater than the individual performance of the artist himself; therefore, they achieve an equal-footing relationship with the viewer, making the artwork spiritually accessible.

The individual is funneled into the prospective landscape altered by the state apparatus under the principle of equality; what is unbalanced is that only through the labor-intensive faction of the population can the universal value of equality be revealed. This group of people is exactly the kind we see in *Going Home*: young workers and laborers.

The laboring body seems powerless and frail under the control of the governmental system. The Three Gorges Dam showcases the strength of the nation, but also reveals a cruel aspect. Confronted with a transitioning national economic structure and shifting social landscape, Muge has no desire to turn the construction into a spectacle. Instead, his lens focuses upon the odd plot of land after urban re-planning, where the debris of demolished buildings fade into the flow of time, like the fragile bodies of their former occupants.

The Riverbank: A Social Landscape in Miniature

With the building of the Dam, the banks of the river become construction sites, constantly changing and given to disappearing under water without warning. As the banks turn into a peculiar borderland where one cannot stay long, the half-submerged docks extending into the water become a temporary Laundromat and water park. People play with the sand, swim, set up fairground games of balloons, and even place wooden beds and furniture to create resting areas, all in disregard to the backhoes and excavators digging away nearby.

Ruins are the evidence of repeated history; the human activities in ruins signify the obscured inner consciousness under the sea change in civilization, especially when the progress is happening far above speed limit and out of control.

In *Going Home*, one does not directly see signs of disharmony between modernization and the agricultural lifestyle along the Yangtze River; however, the photographs often present sites rendered purposeless by recent construction, such as the concrete block-filled river bank and the rock-strewn lot, where people idle in repose without much interaction. More often, the photographer shows a single figure lingering in an empty landscape by the river, with no obvious purpose; the figure looks towards the gray area between the old and the new, with overpasses and an industrial city of high-rises cropping up in the background, laundry hanging from half-demolished houses, and smoke rising out of ruins, from the cooking fires of the old town residents who refuse to leave. All of these temporary spatial

frames, combined with some figures' territorial squatting stance, point towards a transitional, waiting state of being.

There is a sense of interrupted time. Just as the young man's life is about to start advancing towards an exciting future, it is interrupted and rerouted by the construction of the Dam, throwing both life and living environment into a blank unknown. Thus, Muge's images effectively connect the outward social changes with the individual's private inner struggle.

Even when focused on objects, the camera expresses an honest compassion. From a potted plant, a ripped poster board, sparkling river water, a paper kite, a bent utility pole, concrete-filled table and chairs next to the valley, to slanted light and shadows in a corner, everything echoes the loneliness of the people in Muge's photographs.

A cormorant at rest, an unsupervised goat, a dog and a duck in a basket—all these creatures reflect a sense of alienation within a civilized world, under Muge's careful observation. After all, when the relationship between humanity and nature has been aggressively twisted out of balance, the animals have also lost their original peaceful dwelling.

Muteness and Speechlessness

Different life forms and objects alike share the same declaration in Muge's photographs—even animals without the power of speech emit a soundless sigh. Their subtle expressions, evocative as silent film stars, seem to denote a silent acceptance for the trials and tribulations of reality, responding to the invasion of capitalism and the state apparatus with muteness.

The state policies bring both hope and a sense of futility. The subjects' ambivalent facial expressions point to people's speechlessness in the face of political, civil, land, and social justice issues. The state and the individual both incur gains and losses in the construction of the Dam, but the loss of the people's trust is a major setback for the state. In contrast to the frequent physical altercations and desperate, hopeless accounts of residents presented in documentaries about the Three Gorges Dam, Muge's images paint a picture of acceptance and understanding for the conflict and clash between the benefit of the nation and the right of the individual. Overall, the images speak of hope for the future.

Conclusion

Within the low-profile, quiet grayness of Muge's work is a kind of translucence, cutting straight through to the viewer's heart effortlessly with a simple visual vocabulary. The beauty of human existence is showcased in everything from the couple embracing on the ferry, the lovers warming up in front of a fire, the man cleaning a woman's ear while she leans against his legs, to the father holding his child while looking into the distance with a twinkle in his eye. Such is Muge's visual style, pregnant with meaning yet gentle and elegant in its use of emotions.

Muge's *Going Home* looks for a way out in the life map of a whole generation who is living through the construction of the Three Gorges Dam. Transcending rational understanding and sympathy, the

series presents the beauty of humanity and a noble, humble will, giving ample room for the generosity and dignity of a people looking for peace and stability.