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The Redemptive Aesthetics of Water

Changping Zha

Abstract

Based on *the Ark Project*, a work conceptualized by contemporary Chinese artists Wang Xieda and Liu Chuyun, this paper discusses many works involving water in contemporary Chinese art and Noah's flood as a historical event in the *Bible*. Comparing the Hebrew religious tradition with the secular tradition of Chinese thought, suggests that the flood will symbolize both the righteous judgment and loving redemption of all things, and the function of disclosing as well as erasing both the difference and identity of all things.

Key Words

Water, ark, righteousness, love, redemptive aesthetics

What do the torrents of a flood mean for the objects they submerge?

Whatever the waters of a torrential flood can destroy would sooner or later be consumed by the ravages of time, with or without the flood; those things capable of surviving the flood, in contrast, would only grow more resilient and better able to withstand its onslaught, even before the flood had arrived. For the former, the flood signifies righteous judgment; for the latter, it symbolizes loving redemption. The flood draws out the inherent qualities of all things so that they tend either toward the eternal or toward the ephemeral. The floodwaters thus compel all temporal things to align themselves with eternity or transience. As the most extreme manifestation of water, the flood highlights or annihilates the difference and identity among all things. Everything is tried by the same threatening possibility of extinction, while the flood leaves a trail of different states of existence in its wake.

The Ark Project, a work conceptualized by contemporary Chinese artists Wang Xieda and Liu Chu-

yun, invited the public to collect water samples that possess personal significance for the individual and send these to a designated laboratory for testing. At the same time, participants could log onto a website where they could share their personal stories about water. They worked together with on-site spectators to visualize their thoughts and memories connected with water using Chinese ink-wash painting techniques, turning all of these creations into some of the elements of this advanced work of re-creation and exhibition. In collaboration with the public, the two artists collected memories of our human ancestry related to floods, transmitting them interactively through a designated online public platform. Separately, the artists also produced watercolor and ink wash paintings of bodies of water, the sky, rain—and other naturally occurring forms of water—and installed stone tablets that they engraved on-site, with rubbings made from the engravings of phrases such as “Rainbow Covenant”, “Clear-Water Reflection”, “Autumn Rain Blessings”, and “Pure Water Has No Fragrance”. Taken together, these



Figures 1, 2. Water sample collection.

symbolic acts suggested how the “ark” might save contemporary art, as well as contemporary people’s lives. Each aspect of the work’s execution contributed to its artistic effectiveness as an event.

These diverse conceptualizations on the theme of water date back three or four years, to when the two artists were spontaneously inspired by their contemplations. On an ordinary day, they sat and contemplated a seemingly endless surface of water. They returned to this moment of inspiration again and again. Once their ideas on the theme were engaged, they wanted to lend expression to the continuity and unbroken quality of water that had inspired them. Water became the medium by which these two artists represented their conscious life activity as human beings. Moreover, it allowed them to interact creatively with others. Beyond this, water signified an object for which to be grateful, a source of life offering daily sustenance.

We might ask a further question: Who endowed water with such mystical and absolute power to redeem, as well as to judge?

In contemporary art, we find many works involving water. However, the chief concern in most of these is water as an artistic medium, or the problem of water preservation as it relates to the present ecological crisis. In the 1990s, a group of artists mainly from within and around Chengdu’s contemporary art scene initiated an art project called *Keepers of the Waters*.¹ The initiative materialized in four separate events in 1995, 1996, 1997, and 2000, respectively, leaving its mark on the history of contemporary art with Dai Guangyu’s 1995 *Long-abandoned Water Standards*,² Datong Dazhang’s

Crossing (1996), Liu Chengying’s *Tianwen* (1997) and other works of representative quality. Among these, the third art exhibition, entitled *Sources-Life* and held in Dujiangyan, was the most widely influential.³ Song Dong’s performance piece *Writing Diary with Water*⁴ (1995 to the present) offers an extreme representation of the equalizing function of water. Sitting before his stone slab day after day, Song Dong, both as an artist and as an individual with a living imagination and conscious life experiences, uses the medium of water to continuously merge with the natural materiality of the stone, while simultaneously fusing with the nothingness of the evaporated water. Whether he writes on his stone slab or not, and no matter what he writes with his water brush, after just a few hours, the slab—only slightly altered—is much the same as before, as if to say to the artist: “All your writing is in vain!” Water thus functions as the executor of a historical judgment against humanity. Sun Haili’s *Face-washing: My Lifelong Habit* (2002-present), Tong Wenmin’s *Vertigo* (2017) and *Ocean Waves* (2019),⁵ explore the relationship between humans and water more deeply, all symbolically alluding to the theme of redemption. In Sun Haili’s recollection, he had since his childhood experienced a force that drove him mercilessly and that he thought would make him a fugitive for the rest of his life. Over time, he found that his soul was full of all kinds of filth and ceaseless anxiety. Thus the habit of “face washing” became a kind of self—“baptizing” ritual. When he contemplated the water flowing through his fingers, it was as though he could see the multitudes crying tears of desperation. Although acutely aware of the difficulty of securing his



Figure 3. Wang Xieda. *The Ark-29*. Ink and wash on Xuan paper, 71×140cm, 2022.

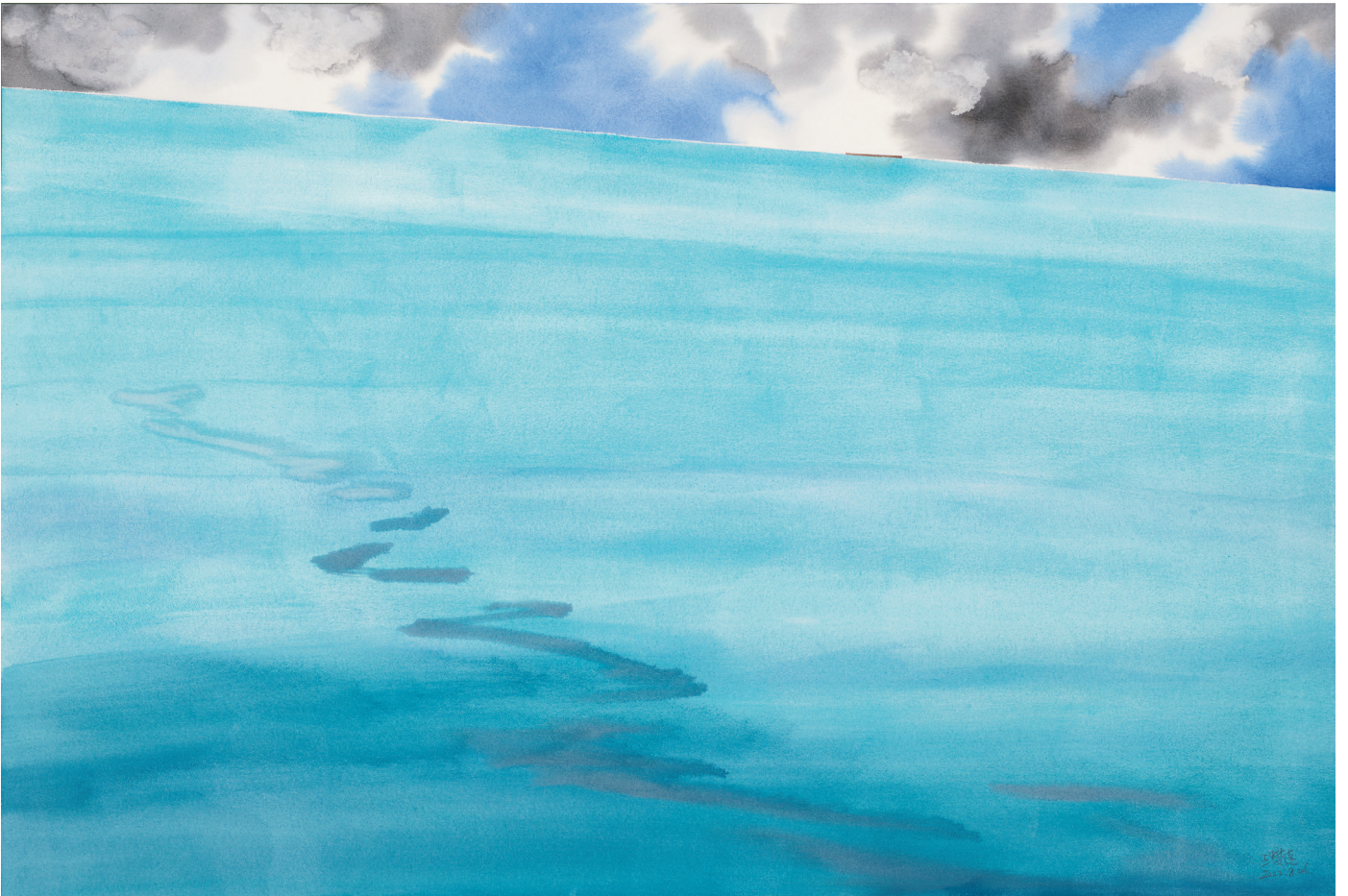


Figure 4. Wang Xieda. *The Ark-103*. Watercolor, 100×150 cm, 2022.



Figures 5, 6. Exhibition Site.



Figure 7. Exhibition Site.

salvation, he was consumed by an intense longing for redemption. Tami Xiang's *Gengzi Refugee Map* of 2020 (figure 9) visualizes the inevitable difficulties encountered by those on the bottom rung of Chinese society who have abandoned the fight for their salvation and letting others save them, have gone into exile. The 13th Shanghai Biennale, which convened the same year,

had the theme "Bodies of Water", taken from the notion that all species are interconnected, just like water molecules; water connects all things through which it flows. Thus, whether in individual works or art exhibitions, artists seem to have opened themselves to the artistic concept that water preserves both the difference and identity of all things.

When descending from the summit of Qingcheng Mountain in Sichuan, hikers are likely to come across watermarks formed by a flood on the scale of Noah's flood on the stone slope to the left side of the paved footpath. These marks were discovered in 1999 by the German artist and geologist Harro Schmidt as we descended the mountain together. Based on what scholars know of ancient peoples, most cultures in antiquity had flood myths.⁶ Materialists hold that such myths existing in a people's cultural memory originate from their reflections on their conscious, subjective experiences of reality. They would likely add that such reflections are false, or even deliberately distorted. However, one might ask how most cultures came by similar original myths at a time when the flow of information across geographical distances was severely



Figure 8. Dai Guangyu, *Long-abandoned Water Standards*. Installation, Chengdu, China, 1995.



limited. Could it be that the authors of the flood myths all had the same nightmare one night? Could it be that they shared a common destiny beckoning them to recite and pass those nightmares on through the generations until they could one day be written down?

The *Bible* records Noah's flood as a historical event resulting from human cruelty and the perpetual evil in people's hearts and minds. Jehovah regretted his creation of human beings and resolved to destroy them, to wipe them from the face of the earth, along with the beasts, crawling insects, and the birds of the air. Noah alone was righteous and innocent before God and found favor in his eyes. God commanded Noah to build an ark; he would make his covenant with him; and he allowed Noah's wife, sons, daughters-in-law, and animals of all kinds to escape annihilation with him. After they entered the ark, God sent rain for forty days and forty nights, the earth was flooded, and the ark floated about on the water. "The waters flooded the earth for a hundred and fifty days" (Gen. 7:24). God remembered his people and the animals in the ark, the water receded, and the ark eventually landed on Mount Ararat. By this time, Noah was 601 years old; the dove he had sent out to know whether there was dry land on the earth returned with a freshly plucked olive leaf in its beak. Noah came out of the ark with his whole family and animals of all kinds and built an altar to the Lord to offer sacrifices. Then God "said in his heart": "...As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease."⁷ (Cf. Genesis 6:1-8:22)

God blessed them and said,

"Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth. The fear and dread of you will fall on all the beasts of the earth, and on all the birds in the sky, on every creature that moves along the ground, and on all the fish in the sea; they are given into your hands. Everything that lives and moves about will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything. But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it. And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand

an accounting from every animal. And from each human being, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of another human being. 'Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made mankind.' As for you, be fruitful and increase in number; multiply on the earth and increase upon it." Then God said to Noah and his sons with him: "I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth. I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth." And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth." (Genesis 9: 1-16)

This is the classic tale that introduces what Christians call the "rainbow covenant". The story of Noah's Ark is thus a detailed account of the relationship built on external salvation that exists between humanity and the *Wholly Other*.

The descendants of Noah's three sons subsequently scattered in all directions. Thus, in contemporary art we come across works such as He Gong's installation pieces *Dream of the Ark* (1991), *The Last Ark* (2019),⁸ or *The Holy Mother; the Mayflower; Potosí, and the Standard Box* (2021). In modern history, Columbus' voyage to the Americas, the ocean crossing of the *Mayflower*, the silver mining in the mines of Potosí, and the specifi-



Figure 9. Tami Xiang. *Gengzi Refugee Map*. Picture, 2020.

cation of standards for standard boxes—do not all these actions represent the human quest for self-redemption? He Gong’s *Questioning the Ark* of 2012 visualizes transcendent salvation with objective elements such as prayers offered by the Pope.

In the gospels Jesus interprets Noah’s flood as the judgment of humankind, a prophecy that will be fulfilled at the return of the Son of Man (Matthew 17:20-37). For Christians,

...without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith (Hebrews 11:6-7).

Noah’s family of eight was saved from the water by taking shelter in the ark, which, according to Peter, prefigured Christian baptism. They were baptized, in fact, into God as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to join in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and thereby share in his resurrected life (1 Peter 3: 20-21).

The Hebrew psalmist, moreover, often employs the redemption metaphor of a person being pulled by God from the “deep waters” or the torrents of a flood.⁹ At the same time, water also symbolizes the judgment of the unrighteous (Psalm 106:11). Thus, according to the Christian tradition, righteous judgment and loving redemption are two aspects of Jehovah’s treatment of his creatures, a different interpretive dimension: on one hand, he “sits enthroned as king” in righteousness; on the other hand, God “blesses his people” in love. David the psalmist thus wrote: “The Lord sits enthroned over the flood; the Lord is enthroned as King forever. The Lord gives strength to his people; the Lord blesses his people with peace.” (Psalm 29:10-11)

However, unlike the Hebrew religious tradition, the secular tradition of Chinese thought focused on articulating another quality of water, namely, the

function of identity. This is particularly true of the pre-Qin Zhuangzian ideas on the aesthetics of water, an aesthetic in which all difference is erased with the flood, an aesthetic that erases the difference between beauty and ugliness—and thus an aesthetic without beauty.

When Zhuangzi returned from his “free and easy wandering” to the “human world”, he discovered the stillness and purity of water, which symbolized heaven’s virtue. It “[flows] on without limit, reaching to heaven above, and wreathing round the earth beneath. It transforms and nourishes all things, and cannot be represented by any form. Its name is ‘the Divinity’...”¹⁰ (“Ingrained Ideas”). According to Zhuangzi, this quiet, lonely, and static “still water” holds the root of all things.

When water is still, it is clear; when it is clear, it is empty, and when it is empty, it is *wuwei* (non-action). *Wuwei* “proceed[s] from ...vacancy and stillness, yet reach[es] to heaven and earth, and show[s] a communication with all things.”

He shall hash and blend all things in mass without being cruel; he shall dispense his favours to all ages without being benevolent. He is older than the highest antiquity, and yet is not old. He overspreads the heavens and sustains the earth; from him is the carving of all forms without any artful skill! This is what is called the Joy of Heaven 《天道 -The Way of Heaven》. ¹¹

That is the joy of *wuwei*, and water is only natural when it is *wuwei*. “...heaven ...is high of itself, ... earth ...is solid of itself, ...the sun and moon ...shine of themselves.” (*The Revolution of Heaven*).¹² In Zhuangzi, water, *qi*, and *dao* are of the same essence.

“Still water symbolizes inaction, a silent heaven and a silent earth. Flowing water has no shape; having no shape, it erases all differences. The difference between life and death, or the difference between the beauty and ugliness of objects is only a difference in quantity. Great transformation, beautification into ugliness, ugliness into beauty, and



Figures 10, 11, 12, 13. Song Dong. *Writing Diary with Water*. Performance, 1995 to the present.

transient transformations: *qi* constantly changes its form. From the point of view of *Dao*, human beauty and ugliness are relative to their beauty and ugliness. ... Aesthetically, there is no difference between the beautiful and the ugly in terms of their objective qualities; moreover, there is no standard of beauty or ugliness about aesthetic subjects... The *Dao* is like flowing water: wherever it flows, the difference between beauty and ugliness remains hidden. Water uses selfless love to render ugliness no longer ugly, and beauty no longer beautiful."¹³

The water mentioned in the Zhuangzian tradition is not the flood recorded by humanity's ancestors as represented in the ancient tale of Noah. It is a challenge for those surrounded by "still water" to believe in such vastly different accounts of redemption and judgment as ancient flood narratives confront us with. It may even be difficult for many of them to grasp the implementation of Wang Xieda and Liu Chuyun's *The Ark Project* in the present "Meta-Covid-19-era", which resembles a flood.

This does not mean of course that people today will evade similar disasters, nor that we can live without the redemption of the "flood".

(First draft was written in Ao'shen Old Town, Chengdu, under Covid-19 lockdown on 10 Sep-tember 2022, and completed on 22 September 2022. Translated by Naomi Thurston 11 September 2022.)

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Editor: Liu Kexin



Figure 14. He Gong. *The Last Ark*. Installation, 280×250×500×1500cm, 2019.

ENDNOTES

1. English translation of this work from the Asia Art Archive, “Betsy Damon Archive: Keepers of the Waters (Chengdu and Lhasa) [貝特西·達蒙檔案：水的保衛者（成都與拉薩）],” *Asia Art Archive*, accessed Sept. 10, 2022, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/betsy-damon-archive-keepers-of-the-waters-chengdu-and-lhasa-11525>.

2. Cf. “Keepers of the Waters,” “Betsy Damon Archive: Keepers of the Waters (Chengdu and Lhasa),” *Asia Art Archive*, accessed Sept. 10, 2022, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/programmes/programmes/keepers-of-the-waters>.

3. Zha Changping, *Ecological Art in Humanist Criticism* (Shanghai: Shanghai Joint Publishing Co, 2021), 154-180.

4. English title taken from Mutual Art, Song Dong, “Writing Diary with Water,” *Mutual Art*, accessed Sept. 10, 2022, <https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/Writing-Diary-With-Water/6627D22DF31AAE1E>.

5. For more on these artworks, cf. Ding Fenqi, ed., *Water-forming Chengdu: Ecologi-*

cal Art Since the 1990s (Sydney: China Cultural Centre, 2022). [English title taken from: CCCSYD, accessed 10 Sept 2022, <https://cccsydney.org/2022/05/25/water-forming-chengdu-ecological-art-since-1990s/>.]

6. J. G. Frazer, *The Collected Works of J. G. Frazer, XII vol.*, (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1994), 104-361.

7. Genesis. 8:21, 22 (NIV).

8. The title of this work alludes to Chinese-American author Helen Zia’s recently published book *The Last Boat Out of Shanghai* (2019). In it, Zia recounts her parents’ journey from St. John’s University in Shanghai, where the two were a young couple in China’s late Republican era (-1949). Toward the end of 1949, they left Shanghai for the United States on the “last boat” transporting American teachers. The author was born in the United States in 1952 and grew up sensing that her parents had been fortunate to escape on the last boat from Shanghai. After graduating from Harvard and becoming a reporter, she found that many Chinese in the United States felt the

same way about these events. Her book is a collection of interviews on the theme of escape and rescue.

9. Psalm 18:16; 66:12; 144:7.

10. Zhuangzi, 《刻意 -Ingrained Ideas》, James Legge, trans., *Chinese Text Project*, accessed 11 Sept. 2022, <https://ctext.org/zhuangzi/ingrained-ideas>.

11. Zhuangzi, 《天道 -The Way of Heaven》, James Legge, trans., *Chinese Text Project*, accessed 9 Sept. 2022, <https://ctext.org/zhuangzi/tian-dao>.

12. Zhuangzi, 《田子方 -Tian Zi-fang》, James Legge, trans., *Chinese Text Project*, accessed 11 Sept. 2022, <https://ctext.org/zhuangzi/tian-zi-fang>.

13. See “A Priori Understandings of Art in the Zhuangzi Tradition”, in Zha Changping, *The Humane Thinking of Contemporary Arts* (1997-2007) [當代藝術的人文追思 (1997—2007)], vol. 2, (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2008), 603-604.



Figures 15, 16. He Gong, *The Holy Mother, the Mayflower, Potosi, and the Standard Box*. Installation, Variation Size, 2021 .

水的救贖美學

查常平

摘要：本文以當代藝術家王燮達、劉楚筠發起的《方舟計畫》為切入點，回顧了當代藝術中藝術家們創作的不少與水相關的作品和聖經關於挪亞洪水的文字。通過比較希伯來宗教傳統與漢語思想傳統的差異，文章提出洪水具有如下含義，即公義的審判與慈愛的救贖，彰顯或泯滅萬物的差別與同一。

關鍵詞：水；方舟；公義；慈愛；救贖美學