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Salvaging Memories from the Ruins of the Three Gorges

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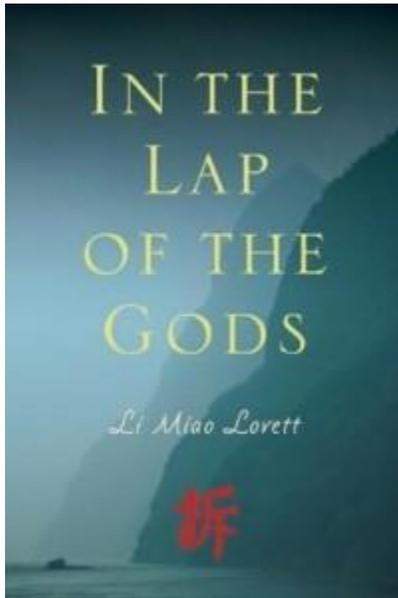
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[Salvaging Memories from the Ruins of the Three Gorges](#)

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By Daisy Yan Du



The Three Gorges Dam is the largest hydro-electric power station in the world. The construction of the dam began in 1994 and was completed in 2009. Proponents bill it as a symbol of China's rise on the global stage, while critics worldwide see it as a huge humanitarian crisis that has the potential to worsen in years to come. The biggest controversy of this project concerns the forced migration of around two million people, who, due to the rising water, have been displaced from their hometowns along the upper reaches of the Yangzi River in Chongqing and Sichuan and Hubei provinces. Many novels and films have found fertile topics for exploration in these ongoing drastic social-historical changes, large-scale population movements, and everyday narratives of displacements and loss of homelands.

[In the Lap of the Gods](#) (2010), a lyrical novel written by Li Miao Lovett, is set against this complex landscape of disappearances. The novel begins in an evacuated village about to be submerged by the Yangzi River as the water crawls steadily uphill. Nothing but ruins remains. In this deadly quiet ghost village, Liu Renfu, a poor scavenger, is digging in the ruins, collecting the trash and occasional valuables left behind by departed villagers. Among the ruins on the riverbank Liu finds an abandoned baby girl. He brings her home to Wushan, a small city also about to disappear under the rising water. The rest of the novel revolves around Liu's life with the baby girl named Rose. Her English name is unique because other characters have typical Chinese names, a distinction perhaps explained by her illegitimate status. The novel takes place over several years as Rose grows into a toddler, and the scope of the story is expanded as it is interwoven with other narratives about people's daily lives and their pasts in the Three Gorges area.

Although there are many perspectives from which to approach this novel, the figure of the baby girl is the pivot of the whole story, because it is she who connects or disconnects all the other characters. After Liu brings her home, he does not know how to take care of her, so he turns to Fang, a shrewd and well-connected old broker. Fang advises Liu to take the baby girl to the orphanage in Chongqing. On their way there, however, Fang's car breaks down. Liu then changes his mind and brings the baby girl back home, functioning as her surrogate father from then on. Later, when Fang finds out that Rose is the granddaughter of Sulin, the woman he has loved for many decades, he intervenes again and tries to get the child back from Liu in order to please Sulin, who wants the baby.

Mei Ling, a waitress in a restaurant in Liu's neighborhood, desperately wants to escape from her tyrannical father and to start a new life of her own. Mei Ling thus marries Liu in a rush without knowing of his poverty. However, Rose, although affectionate with Liu, is instinctively hostile to Mei Ling. Many conflicts take place between Rose and Mei Ling, and Mei Ling finally leaves Liu for Chongqing to begin her life anew.

Rose serves as an allegory of memory and the haunting presence of the past that resists to be effaced. She is an illegitimate child born to the daughter of Sulin and the son of a Party member in the village. Although Sulin volunteers to raise the girl herself, her daughter, who desperately wants to forget the past and start over, declines her offer and abandons the child on the riverbank as she leaves for her new home designated by the government. Rose, because she is illegitimate, lacks a family name and represents an embarrassment, repeatedly reminding people of the unspeakable past associated with her. In saving the baby girl from being drowned by the river, Liu not only saves a life, but also salvages the disturbing memories and secrets that would have otherwise been submerged.

The whole novel is fraught with this tension between memory and amnesia. The grand narrative of the forced migration of the Three Gorges Dam is predicated on the rhetoric of forgetting. As the wheels of history relentlessly move ahead, the local residents are expected to forsake their pasts, which are to be buried under the water forever. Memories are disavowed as the nation pushes forward in a collective enterprise of progress and modernity. However, traces of the past can never be completely erased by the master narrative, because what is repressed and oppressed will eventually return to haunt those who seek to forget.

Liu the scavenger is not only digging up and collecting the personal belongings buried among the ruins, but also salvaging the memories and desires about to be submerged forever. His discoveries form a living museum for the vanished space. As a scavenger, Liu is the most sentimental character, a man who stubbornly clings to the past. Fei Fei, his pregnant first wife who was drowned by the river in a boating accident, haunts him constantly. As a ghost that exists only in Liu's memory, Fei Fei assumes a role even more significant than that of Mei Ling in Liu's life. Associated with Fei Fei is the memory of the already submerged city of Fengjie, where they had found a home and spent happy times together. Torn between the past and the present, Liu painstakingly searches for the meaning of his life before the imminent disappearance of his whole world.

In the Lap of the Gods is filled with stories of unfulfilled desires, voluntary or involuntary abandonment, aborted hopes, ephemeral emotions, failed relationships, unending regrets, and nostalgic longings for a home that is no longer welcoming. Against such a drastically changing landscape, perhaps nothing remains constant. The only thing one can always hold on to is memory itself.

Although most of the characters in this novel are ordinary people such as peasants, scavengers, beggars, brokers, and migrant workers, they are nonetheless endowed with dignity, respect, and even tragic heroism. Confronted with unprecedented physical and emotional crises resulting from the deluge, some of them choose to follow the call of the mainstream rhetoric, move ahead, and start anew, while some choose to linger in the past and indulge in the disappeared world. Whatever the case, memory still asserts its presence and leaves traces among the ruins, just like the abandoned child Rose, who is rescued from the coming deluge and stubbornly lives on as a haunting reminder of the vanished past, whether others welcome it or not.

Daisy Yan Du is a PhD candidate in modern Chinese literature and visual culture at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She is now completing her dissertation on Chinese animated film between the 1940s and 1970s.