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## Documenting Three Gorges Migrants: Gendered Voices of (Dis)placement and Citizenship in *Rediscovering the Yangtze River and Bingai*

Daisy Yan Du

*What is displaced—dispersed, deferred, repressed, pushed aside—is, significantly, still there: Displaced but not replaced, it remains a source of trouble, the shifting ground of signification that makes meanings tremble.*

—Angelika Bammer, introduction to *Displacements:  
Cultural Identities in Question*

First envisioned by Sun Zhongshan in 1919 and later supported by Jiang Jieshi and Mao Zedong, the Three Gorges Dam—dubbed “the Great Wall across the Yangtze River”—has always been a controversial project among Chinese citizens. After the 1989 Tiananmen demonstration, Li Peng, the hardliner who quelled that movement, also stifled the dam’s opponents and finally managed to get the project approved by the National People’s Congress in 1992. The construction of the dam began in 1994 and was fully completed by 2009. It is the world’s largest hydroelectric dam, serving the functions of electricity generation, flood control, and navigation control. As a megadam, it has provoked criticism worldwide. Besides its environmental costs, the dam’s most controversial consequence is the resettlement of more than two million citizens displaced from their hometowns along the six-hundred-kilometer reservoir area in Hubei Province and Chongqing Municipality (formerly in Sichuan Province). There are essentially three ways these citizens can be relocated: through vertical migration up the mountain slope above the submersion line, through migration to nearby villages, or through distant migration to other counties or provinces along the lower reaches of the Yangtze River. While Hubei Province has adopted a policy of intraprovincial resettlement, Chongqing has opted



**FIG. 1:** The Yangtze River and the Three Gorges Dam site. Courtesy of Alex Jianzhong Chen.

for interprovincial resettlement, because of its already large population (Padovani 2006, 101–2).

Numerous studies have charted the Three Gorges Dam resettlement, but most of them were conducted from a social science perspective, which centered primarily on macrosocioeconomic factors. In contrast, in this essay I pay particular attention to aesthetic representations of the dam and resettlement, focusing on two documentary accounts of the dam’s impact on rural migrant citizens. *Rediscovering the Yangtze River* (CCTV 2006) is a state-sponsored documentary produced by China Central Television (CCTV), and *Bingai* (Yan Feng 2007) is an “underground/independent” documentary film (Pickowicz 2006).<sup>1</sup> Because the documentary is a unique artistic form that oscillates “between the recognition of historical reality and the recognition of a representation about it” (Nichols 2001, 39), I firmly locate my analysis of these representations in their larger sociohistorical context, which includes the dam’s distinct repercussions for female citizens and the very concept of citizenship in China. Citizenship, which is

materialized in identity cards and passports, is usually understood in legal, political, and social terms according to the politics of inclusion and exclusion. In contrast to this traditional understanding of citizenship as a fixed identity status in relation to the state, my study approaches citizenship as a fluid identification. A citizen may or may not fully identify with the state and feel like a citizen despite his or her legal citizenship. Thus I emphasize the cultural, symbolic, emotional, and psychological dimension of citizenship, based on the politics of recognition and belonging.

The issue of citizenship becomes especially contested when it intersects with migration, because “migration and especially forced migration, is a conceptual disruption of citizenship in the historical nation-state system” (Dobrowolsky and Tastsoglou 2006, 23). Forced migration not only affects the legal citizenship of migrants, but also has a tremendous impact on the cultural and psychological dimension of citizenship as a result of migrants’ experience of dislocation. My discussion of the disruption of citizenship caused by the Three Gorges Dam resettlement revolves around the key word “(dis)placement,” which refers not only to physical deterritorialization, but also to migrants’ sense of placement or displacement in relation to the state.

Because gender plays a significant role in how one experiences (dis)placement, in this essay I seek to unravel the intertwined relationship between gender, the cultural and psychological dimension of citizenship, and resettlement as represented in the two documentaries. I adopt an interdisciplinary approach that draws on citizenship studies, migration studies, feminist studies, and film studies. Focusing on the concept of documentary voice, I argue that the cultural and psychological dimension of citizenship shaped by the Three Gorges resettlement is gendered in the two films. While *Rediscovering the Yangtze River* uses the patriarchal state’s masculine, collective, and nationalistic voice to express male citizens’ migration experiences as (re)placement and progress toward modernity in the state, *Bingai* adopts a feminine voice that depicts a female citizen’s migration experiences as a form of multiple displacement as well as resistance. In a patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal-exogamous rural society, the female migrant from the geographically isolated Three Gorges region is always already a multiply displaced citizen.

**(Re)placement: The Masculine Voice of the State in  
*Rediscovering the Yangtze River***

*Rediscovering the Yangtze River* centers on a gallery of male migrants and addresses men's migration experiences. The documentary's main subjects are Ran Yingfu and Hu Zhiman, who are head of their families in the village of Daxi in Sichuan Province. They are relocated to Anhui Province, located in the lower reaches of the Yangtze River. Ran Yingfu and Hu Zhiman's sons and grandsons are also treated as central subjects in the film. When the families of these migrants are discussed, they are usually referred to by the name of their patriarchs: "Xu Jibo's family," "He Xueming's family," "Tan Changliu's family," and so on. Female migrants are displaced in this documentary, serving only as invisible and silent followers of their male family members. This is typical of grand narratives of migration. As Nikos Papastergiadis observes, "Women were not seen as active agents in the great migration stories; they were either left behind, or taken along as part of the man's family" (2000, 52). What are the cinematic apparatuses that allow *Rediscovering the Yangtze River* to be dominated by male migrants?

In his analysis of documentary films, Nichols categorizes them into six different, sometimes overlapping types: the poetic mode, the expository mode, the observational mode, the participatory mode, the reflexive mode, and the performative mode. The expository mode attempts to persuade by addressing "the viewer directly, with titles or voices that propose a perspective, advance an argument, or recount history" (2001, 105).

According to Nichols, the voice-over is the signature device of expository documentaries. "Expository films," he claims, "adopt either a voice-of-God commentary (the speaker is heard but never seen), or utilize a voice-of-authority commentary (the speaker is heard and also seen), such as we find in television newscasts" (105). He further points out that this "professionally trained and richly toned" voice-over is usually a male's voice. The disembodied male voice-over is designed to represent truth, power, and knowledge for the viewer.

In her feminist critique of the male voice-over, Mary Ann Doane argues that "it is precisely because the voice is not localizable, because it cannot be yoked to a body, that it is capable of interpreting the image, producing its truth. . . . In the history of the documentary, this voice has been for the most part that of the male, and its power resides in the possession of knowledge and in the privileged, unquestioned activity of interpreta-

tion” (1980, 42). Because the male voice-over is used to suggest truth and knowledge, these documentaries usually feature the voice of an authoritative father figure, who is invisible but still controls the viewing experience with his disembodied voice. Drawing on Doane and Lacan, Kaja Silverman associates the authoritative male voice-over with the symbolic father:

The capacity of the male subject to be cinematically represented in this disembodied form aligns him with transcendence, authoritative knowledge, potency and the law—in short, with the symbolic father. Since these are the qualities to which he most aspires at the narrative level, but which he never altogether approximates, we could say that the male subject finds his most ideal realization when he is heard but not seen; when the body drops away, leaving the phallus in unchallenged possession of the scene. (1984, 134)

Belonging to what Nichols calls the expository documentary mode, *Rediscovering the Yangtze River* combines an authoritative male voice-of-God narrator with standard CCTV Mandarin. The voice-over becomes the voice of the “father” state, which is disembodied but always present in his aggressive voice. The voice-over itself carries the leitmotif of the film, while images play a subordinate role as reinforcements of the film’s ideology. In terms of emotional tenor, the masculine voice-over constructs the Yangtze River as the Janus-faced “Mother River” who nurtures citizens with her milk/water and who also kills with her floods. To borrow Susan Stanford Friedman’s words, “She is the (m)other, m/other as womb/tomb: the imaginary origin and the end of life” (2004, 194). With this emotional ambivalence toward the Yangtze River, the male voice-over glorifies the Mother River while simultaneously suggesting that she must be controlled by the phallic Three Gorges Dam in order to avoid flooding.

As a voice of authoritative knowledge, the narrator constructs a spatially and historically totalizing view of the Yangtze River. The narrative travels linearly through space, beginning at the river’s origin in a Geladandong Mountain glacier in the Tibetan Plateau, to the Yangtze River estuary that ends in the East China Sea near Shanghai. This spatial trajectory entails a movement from the backward and primitive Tibetan plateau towards the modern civilization of Shanghai. This binary of primitiveness and modernity is also reflected in the film’s treatment of history. The voice-over constantly flashes back to the river’s past and draws attention to the astonishing progress China has achieved. The drastic change in landscape

and the massive relocation of citizens are used to reinforce the national narrative of progress that replaces rural backwardness with modernity.

Complementing this masculine voice-over of the state, the other voices in the diegesis (the film's "story") are all those of male migrants. The male voice-over speaks for these men as a collective voice, while the male migrants' speeches serve as testimonials that further legitimize the authoritative voice-over. The voice-over defines the ideal migrant, while the male migrants prove its validity through their testimonials. These male citizens are either upright, patient, and capable relocation cadres or obedient, supportive, and nationalistic villagers who are eager to migrate for the development of the country.

For Nichols, a documentary's "voice" includes both its literal words and its social point of view: "By 'voice' I mean something narrower than style: that which conveys to us a sense of a text's social point of view, of how it is speaking to us and how it is organizing the materials it is presenting to us. In this sense 'voice' is not restricted to any one code or feature, such as dialogue or spoken commentary. Voice is perhaps akin to that intangible, moiré-like pattern formed by the unique interaction of all a film's codes" (1985, 260). The literal voices reinforce the film's social point of view, in which gender, one of the "film's codes," plays a vital role. In *Rediscovering the Yangtze River*, the male voice-over and the male migrants' speeches collectively generate the masculine voice and social perspective of this documentary.

This masculine perspective represents the voice of development nationalism that legitimates the state's construction of the Three Gorges Dam. Because of its crucial role in national development, the dam is directly linked with the greatness of the national leader and the rise of the Chinese state on the global stage. In fact, this phenomenon has historical and political roots in ancient China. Thousands of years ago, the legendary hero Dayu (2059 BC) successfully orchestrated a hydroproject to control the Yangtze River's floods for the first time in Chinese history. Upon the acclaim he earned from this project, he was elected ruler of the people. Later his son founded the Xia Dynasty, China's first hereditary dynasty, which marked the end of tribal government and the beginning of powerful feudal states.

The connection between technological knowledge and masculine leadership became even more pronounced after China was defeated by Britain during the humiliating Opium War (1839–42). Building the larg-

est dam in the world would potentially heal that wound and assert China's masculinity, especially at a time when critics worldwide claimed that because of technological challenges, "the Chinese people [were] incapable of building the Three Gorges Dam" (Cheng 2006, 160). Rebutting this assertion, Li Peng proudly declared in 1992, "The Three Gorges Dam will show the rest of the world that Chinese people have high aspirations and the capacities to successfully build the world's largest water conservancy and hydroelectric power project" (qtd. in Winchester 1996, 227). Echoing Li Peng, the male voice-over in *Rediscovering the Yangtze River* underscores the nationalist significance of the dam: "The Three Gorges Dam not only brings about drastic changes in landscape; it also realizes the one-hundred-year dream of a nation" (CCTV 2006).<sup>2</sup> The dam represents the collective dream of a prosperous and powerful nation equipped with advanced technology.

With resettlement as the decisive factor in determining the dam's ultimate success or failure, it became the ideologically laden benchmark of successful nationalism for the Chinese citizenry. Those who are willing to migrate are considered pronationalist citizens; those unwilling to migrate are labeled as outsiders who oppose the dam, the nation/state, and, ultimately, the people. Ran Yingfu, the most important "talking head" in *Rediscovering the Yangtze River*, is a nationalist citizen who, before his imminent migration, proudly says, "After I migrate to Anhui Province, what should I write for my Spring Festival couplets? I will write 'Migration to the Three Gorges in the war-torn Qing Dynasty' on the left doorpost and 'Migration to the plain for the development of our country' on the right doorpost. I will write 'Loving My Country Any Time' on the lintel. I am always a nationalist" (CCTV 2006).<sup>3</sup> When Ran Yingfu enters the ship that is waiting for him and readies for departure he delivers a patriotic speech through a loudspeaker to his fellow villagers: "For the development of our country, we have to leave our small families for the sake of our big family. The Three Gorges is our home, and the Yangtze River is our Mother River. We are reluctant to leave. However, in order to revitalize the Chinese nation and build our motherland, we will hold our heads up high and march ahead bravely" (CCTV 2006).

Why are male citizens, instead of women, at the forefront of this nationalist "march" toward development? According to George Mosse, "Nationalism had a special affinity for male society and together with the concept of respectability legitimized the dominance of men over women"



(1985, 67). In many grand narratives the nation itself is personified as a female figure or even victimized through the trope of rape, especially when that country is threatened by virile external powers. The victimization of the woman/nation serves to justify men's nationalistic responses to foreign invasion in the name of protecting women and the nation. In this sense, the nation is still deeply configured in masculine terms. As Benedict Anderson asserts, "The nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately, it is this *fraternity* that makes it possible" (2006, 7).

*Rediscovering the Yangtze River* spares no efforts in dramatizing the "fraternity," "comradeship," and "patriotism" that legitimate the Three Gorges Dam resettlement. In a prolonged close-up from episode 15, three men affectionately embrace and bid farewell before their patriotic departure for their hostland. Women are positioned as unrelated spectators at the background of the frame, reinforcing their status as outsiders to this male community. Once they have migrated to Anhui Province, the two main subjects, Ran Yingfu and Hu Zhiman, maintain their friendship by visiting each other during the Spring Festival. This masculine bonding over a common cause is echoed in the interaction between Hu Zhiman's young grandson and the off-screen male documentarian, who praises the boy's adaptation to his hostland and rewards him with a red envelope containing one hundred yuan for the Spring Festival. Narrated by the masculine voice of nationalism, the forced migration becomes a patriotic, progressive, and voluntary one. Displacement is refigured as (re)placement.

Not only are male citizens at the forefront of the nationalist discourse of development, they also manage their families' connections to their natal provinces in a patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal-exogamous rural society. They are usually the symbolic heads of their families, responsible for building and guarding their ancestral houses and their family's memories for future generations. In *Rediscovering the Yangtze River*, it is up to Ran Yingfu to maintain a connection with place through remembering his ancestors. Before his migration to Anhui Province, he traces his family origins for the male documentarians by showing them his already dismantled ancestral house. In a similar vein, the film shows Hu Zhiman reminiscing about how his ancestors migrated to the Three Gorges region. This patrilineal memory and placement is further reinforced by family rituals. Before their migration to Anhui, Hu Zhiman's family bids farewell to their deceased ancestors by burning paper money. However, only male family members are present in the ceremony. Hu Zhiman's wife and daughter

are displaced in this family ritual because they do not really belong to this place: his wife lived elsewhere until marriage, and his daughter will leave this place to get married. Only men really belong to a place, and this rootedness is passed down to male heirs generation after generation.

Once settled in Anhui Province the men are re-placed in their hostland, which supplants their backward homeland in the Three Gorges. Spatial “roots” are thus portable for men. Five years after the migration, Ran Yingfu’s family prospers because it has successfully rerooted itself in the hostland. As the voice-over narrates, Ran Yingfu makes double progress, political and economic: this former rural boatman has become party secretary of his new village in Anhui Province and a successful entrepreneur, establishing a factory, run by his family, that specializes in a spicy sauce. He also aids in the development of his fellow villagers by promoting the building of six plantation factories, which help the villagers increase their annual average income from 850 yuan in Daxi village to 3,000 in Anhui Province.

Ran Yingfu thus serves as an ideal example of the government’s “developmental resettlement” policy, which encourages villagers to approach migration as an opportunity for development and progress. The rhetoric of “developmental resettlement” reveals the push-pull dynamic that structures this migration: the backwardness of the hometown pushes villagers to migrate and the advancement of the hostland pulls them to migrate there. As the voice-over narrates, “These years, the villagers have heard lots of good news from their migrated fellow villagers. Hu Zhiman and other villagers thus have high expectations and long for the migration. In their farewell meeting, they are so excited that they begin to sing songs to celebrate the departure” (CCTV 206). Inspired by Ran Yingfu’s migration, Hu Zhiman finally moves to Anhui, where he and his family live in a much better house than their shattered one in the Three Gorges. They all adapt well, especially his grandson, who will carry on the family name.

These men are like seeds; wherever they go they can always root themselves in new soil, procreate, and memorialize themselves through family rituals generation after generation. After all, while the term “diaspora” suggests displacement from home/land, it also means “scattered seeds.” This meaning reflects the ability of men to “root” wherever their seeds are sown. Discussing the gendered experiences of migration, James Clifford associates displacement with men and placement with women: “When diasporic experience is viewed in terms of displacement rather than placement, trav-

eling rather than dwelling, and disarticulation rather than rearticulation, then the experiences of men will tend to predominate” (1999, 258–59). However, in the case of the Three Gorges Dam resettlement, Clifford’s notion must be reversed.

Depicting the horizontal movement downstream, *Rediscovering the Yangtze River* thematizes the push-pull pattern of migration as a movement from primitiveness to modernity. The dam serves as the physical and symbolic border between the backward upper reaches and the advanced lower reaches of the Yangtze River. Thus the migrants’ encounter with the dam on their way to their hostland functions as a ritualistic passage from backwardness to enlightenment and progress. It is, then, no surprise that these relocatees view resettlement as an opportunity for a better life, to the extent that they are even eager to migrate. The migrants’ voluntarism and enthusiasm are especially dramatized when they pass by the dam itself. As the voice-over narrates: “For the first time the migrants saw the Three Gorges Dam that made them migrate. For the first time they saw the magnificent buildings. For the first time they saw the electricity cables from the Three Gorges. At the same time, they saw such a broad Yangtze River, such a colorful world outside. They rushed to their new homelands downstream along the Yangtze River, with great hope for the future” (CCTV 2006).

### **Displacement and Resistance: The Feminine Voice in *Bingai***

In contrast to *Rediscovering the Yangtze River*, with its focus on male citizens, *Bingai* documents a female citizen who refuses to migrate when pressed to do so by local cadres. The filmmaker, Yan Feng, highlights the individuality of her female subject, indicated by her use of the female peasant’s name, Bingai, as the title of the film. Energetic, hardworking, confident, and aspiring, Bingai is the head of her family. Her husband is physically disabled, serving only as her passive foil.

Unlike *Rediscovering the Yangtze River*, which employs an expository style, *Bingai* generally uses Nichols’ “observational mode,” in which the documentarian merely observes the subject, without demonstrating explicit intervention. Nichols describes this mode as one that honors “this spirit of observation in postproduction editing as well as during shooting” and results in “films with no voice-over commentary, no supplementary music or sound effects, no intertitles, no historical reenactments, no behavior repeated for the camera, and not even any interviews” (2001,

110). Free from the authoritative voice-over that controls meaning, the observational mode, though not a “neutral” representation itself, still allows subjects, especially women and other marginalized people whose voices are otherwise muted, to speak for themselves.

The feminine voice is especially significant because women have historically been reduced to mere aesthetic spectacles in the patriarchal system of film. Laura Mulvey has argued that in classical films women are associated with exhibitionism and exist only in their “to-be-looked-at-ness” for male characters and spectators (1990, 33). Women are, therefore, objectified by the voyeuristic and scopophilic male gaze in mainstream cinema. The voice functions as an alternative way for women to express themselves cinematically. Doane underlines the importance of the female voice as “an alternative to the image, as a potentially viable means whereby the woman can ‘make herself heard’” (1980, 49). Given the significance of women’s voice in cinema, it is no surprise that early feminist documentaries emphasize its role: “many of the first feminist documentaries used a simple format to present to audiences (presumably composed primarily of women) a picture of the ordinary details of women’s lives, their thoughts—told directly by the protagonists to the camera—and their frustrated but sometimes successful attempts to enter and deal with the public world of work and power” (Lesage 1978, 507).

Since *Bingai* serves as the “speaking subject” in the film, the feminine voice of the work can be broken down into two areas: the subjects’ speeches and the voice-over. This film differs from other observational documentaries in that it uses a voice-over. Unlike the expository, authoritative voice-over, whose source is never shown in the diegesis, the voice-over in *Bingai* is that of a female character. This female voice-over blurs the arbitrary boundary between the speeches in the diegesis and the spoken narrative, which is exaggerated in expository documentaries. While the expository voice-over relies on authority to persuade the viewer, the voice-over in *Bingai* serves the function of self-expression, because it mainly describes *Bingai*’s memories and reflections on women’s particular experiences. The diegetic speeches revolve around *Bingai*’s daily life and her negotiation of social realities as a rural citizen. In other words, the two kinds of voices in *Bingai* have different temporalities. While the speeches describe the present, the voice-over remembers the past. Yan Feng’s past-centered voice-over contrasts with the future-oriented voice-over of *Rediscovering the Yangtze River*, one that functions as a carrier of prophecy. A further

difference is evident in the two films' uses of language. In *Rediscovering the Yangtze River*, the male voice-over speaks standard CCTV Mandarin, and only migrants use local dialects, whereas in *Bingai* all the voice-overs and speeches use the Hubei dialect. The first case presents an unequal relationship of languages in which the unifying Mandarin dominates the dialects and controls the meaning of the film. In *Bingai*, however, the distinction between "high" and "low" language is blurred.

There are six voice-over segments in *Bingai*, and all are narrated by Bingai herself. The first, at the very beginning of the film, narrates Bingai's initial experience of displacement with her arranged marriage. Since her father dislikes her boyfriend, who is from the local area, the former demands that the couple break up. He then asks his daughter to marry a man living on the riverbank, because those who live near the river are generally richer than people living in the mountains, where Bingai and her family live. Bingai recalls, "[My father said that] if I marry off my daughter to someone living on the riverbank, she'll have fresh drinking water. The riverbank is a good place! You can make two yuan a day working on the riverbank, while here in the hills you can only get two to three jiao. Girls are bound to want to marry into families down here, don't you think?" (Feng 2007)<sup>4</sup> Bingai's father is not irrational in his consideration of her marriage—people living on the riverbank generally do have an easier life than residents in the mountains, thanks to the fertile land along the river. Qi Ren, a freelance writer and newspaper journalist, describes this difference in terms of landscape-based productivity: "The slope of the land increases as one moves up the mountain, while nearer the river the land is flatter and more amenable to irrigation. Therefore, it is readily apparent that the most highly productive land is closer to the river and below the mountains" (qtd. in Dai 1998, 61). Under her father's pressure, Bingai unwillingly marries a man from the riverbank, who turns out to be physically disabled and unable to do much farmwork. Bingai has to shoulder most of the family's responsibilities.

Driven by the economic push-pull factors identified by her father, Bingai is left feeling extremely displaced by her vertical migration from mountain to valley. The indifference of her in-laws further aggravates her sense of displacement and exacerbates her longing for her parents' home. "Home," Susan Stanford Friedman observes, "comes into being most powerfully when it is gone, lost, left behind, desired and imagined" (2004, 202). The sense of "dwelling-in-displacement" (Clifford 1999, 254) is so poignant

that it haunts Bingai for years. For many years following her migration for marriage, Bingai still identifies with her parents' home and is reluctant to acknowledge her husband's home as her own. In her second voice-over, Bingai notes that "in my dreams I'm often at my parents' house. Usually working with my mom or with my grandma. In my dreams I am always at my mother's home. My husband seldom appears in my dreams. I may only dream of this place many years later. Maybe my soul was left behind. The soul does not move with the body easily" (Feng 2007). Experiencing what Clifford calls the diasporic condition of "living here and remembering/desiring another place" (1999, 255), Bingai can only project her "desire for return" into dreams, which according to Freud are sites where the repressed and displaced returns. Whereas in *Rediscovering the Yangtze River* the migrants' new homes have completely replaced and erased their old ones, in this film Bingai's former home constantly returns and haunts her memory.

The voice-over in *Bingai* subverts the documentary tradition that is dominated by the male voice-over by divorcing the female voice from the female body. While her voice-over is running, Bingai is shown collecting pigweeds, and she does not speak directly to the camera. Hence the cinematic apparatus of synchronizing the voice to the body does not apply here. For Kaja Silverman, the rule of synchronization "is imposed much more strictly" on the female voice than on the male and thus functions as a means of "confining female voices and subjectivities" in mainstream cinema:

To permit the female subject to be seen without being heard would be to activate the hermeneutic and cultural codes which define woman as a "dark continent," inaccessible to definitive male interpretation. To allow her to be heard without being seen would be even more dangerous, since it would disrupt the specular regime upon which mainstream cinema relies; it would put her beyond the control of the male gaze, and release her voice from the signifying obligations which that gaze sustains. It would be to open the possibility of woman participating in a phallic discourse, and so escaping the interrogation about her place, her time and her desires which constantly re-secures her. (1984, 135)

Divorcing the female voice from the female body highlights the subversiveness of Bingai's voice-over. While the male voice-over in *Rediscovering the Yangtze River* adopts a depersonalized third-person point of view that

imbues it with a sense of objectivity, Bingai's voice-over belongs to what Michel Chion calls the "I-voice," which is characterized by "close *miking*," namely, "a feeling of intimacy with the voice" (1999, 49). This kind of voice-over provides access to the speaker's own thoughts and, in so doing, emphasizes her subjectivity. In fact, Doane suggests that "the voice displays what is inaccessible to the image, what exceeds the visible: the 'inner life' of the character. The voice here is the privileged mark of interiority, turning the body 'inside-out'" (1980, 41). In other words, while the male voice-over in *Rediscovering the Yangtze River* is an institutional and collective "we" voice characterized by exteriority and objectivity, the female voice-over in *Bingai* is a personal "I" voice associated with interiority and self-expression.

As such, the female voice-over in *Bingai* becomes the voice of displacement caused by a particular type of marriage migration experienced by a rural woman in the Three Gorges. Migration theories usually associate displacement with men and placement with women. In her study on gender and migration, Janet Wolff highlights the "intrinsic relationship between masculinity and travel" (1993, 230). In a similar vein, Eric Leed argues that men's greater mobility is often "stimulated by a male reproductive motive, a search for temporal extensions of self in children, only achievable through the agency of women" (qtd. in Wolff 1993, 230). However, my essay suggests that the Three Gorges case requires us to reverse Leed's "spermatocentric journey." While men can be (re)placed and rooted in a patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal-exogamous rural society, many rural women experience their first displacement through marriage migration, which, according to Elizabeth Croll, is "a moment of discontinuity, dislocation and rupture like no other" (1995, 37). In rural exogamous marriages Chinese women are always outsiders at home. Since they are from other places, they are usually treated as strangers by in-laws; since they will eventually leave their parents to get married, they are also outsiders in their own natal families. Women are indeed the homeless at home, especially compared with their brothers. Even as little girls in their parents' home, they are already conscious of their status as "outsiders" (36).

Because the female migrant is always already a displaced subject in patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal-exogamous rural China, the Three Gorges Dam migration represents a second uprooting that reopens the wound of displacement, making resettlement doubly painful. Bingai's experience of displacement and her longing for her mother's home are not



merely a family issue. It is the looming Three Gorges Dam resettlement that provokes Bingai to recall her previous marriage migration. While her first experience of displacement is prompted by her father, this one is dictated by the “father state,” personified through male officials. One such official explicitly asserts his metonymic relationship with the state: “I’m not personally forcing you to move, it would be stupid of me to do so. I am talking to you about this as a representative of the state” (Feng, 2007). These officials repeatedly come to Bingai’s home and press her to move, making her home a highly politicized site in which the state literally infiltrates the domestic sphere. Both of Bingai’s migrations are enforced by father figures, and their juxtaposition links her biological father to the father state.

While Bingai submits to her father’s will in filial obedience, this time she is determined to resist the father state. In 1996, the male official explains the lucrative prospects of horizontal migration and urges Bingai to move downstream so that she can live a better life and earn a larger income: “In line with your current condition, the best way for you is to move to a faraway place downstream” (Feng 2007). The officials even threaten that if Bingai does not migrate, they will revoke her *hukou*, that is, her local household registration. As a consequence of this, Bingai will become an outcast in the state and lose some of the rights enjoyed by legitimate citizens. She will be unable to build her own house and use the electricity provided by the state. More important, her children will be barred from attending school. In contemporary China, citizenship is structured along a rural-urban axis through the local household registration system, which confines citizens to their local place and thus limits their mobility in the country. Millions of rural citizens migrated to cities to make their fortunes, but without a local *hukou* in these cities, they cannot enjoy many of the rights that their urban counterparts enjoy, such as medical care and childhood education. This is what K. H. Maher calls “lessened citizenship” or what R. S. Parreñas terms “partial citizenship” (qtd. in Dobrowolsky and Tastsoglou 2006, 24). As a result of this liminal citizenship status, the sense of displacement and not-belonging is rampant among these migrant workers, the so-called floating population, which has caused many problems in China related to social stability. Given this backdrop, it is ironic that in the case of the Three Gorges Dam migration, mobility reinforces, rather than “lessens,” the citizenship of rural residents, because the migration is a massive movement imposed by the state.





**FIG. 2:** Bingai talks about her attachment to the land, from *Bingai*. Courtesy of Yan Feng.

Despite risking “lessened citizenship,” Bingai does not buy into the push-pull enticements of a migration dictated by the state. Psychologically, Bingai’s unwillingness to migrate reflects her attachment to this familiar region. “It’s difficult for me to leave the land,” she narrates. “Land can give you everything. Land is the most precious thing. You can plant anything on it. Land gives us food. Only the land can support us” (Feng 2007). Bingai’s attachment to the land is a common phenomenon in rural China. In his study on rural culture, anthropologist Fei Xiaotong notes that “people in the village are bound with the land generation after generation, and there are almost no changes. . . . Generally speaking, this is a feature of rural society. For people living on farming, settlement for generations is normal, while migration is abnormal” (1948, 3).

There is also a material reason for her unwillingness to migrate. As the matriarch of a subsistence-farming family, she belongs to what Gayatri Spivak calls the “groups that cannot become diasporic,” namely, impoverished subaltern women (1996, 246). Relatively isolated from the center of China by mountains, the Three Gorges is one of the poorest areas in the country. Zigui County, where Bingai’s village is located, is the poorest county in Hubei Province. In 1992 the average annual income of peasants in this region was 300–500 yuan, much lower than in Sichuan Province (620 yuan) and nationwide (764 yuan). The impoverishment of this area

results not only from its relatively isolated geographical location, but also, and more important, from the state's plans to build the Three Gorges Dam. Ever since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the debate over the Three Gorges Dam delayed development in the area along the reservoir. To reduce the probability of costly property damage to the infrastructure, much of which would be flooded during the dam's construction, the state limited its investment in the riverbank region and thus purposefully retarded its development (Zhu 1996, 78). Wanzhou, a town located beneath the submersion line, had been a large city that was as famous as Chongqing and Chengdu. Now it lags far behind these two cities because for many decades the central government refused to invest in what would potentially be "projects under water" (Zuo 2002, 293).

Adding to already existing economic hardships, the state's compensation for resettlement is quite limited. Migration usually means economic loss, which increases as migration distance rises. In her discussion of the dam, Florence Padovani reports that an "analysis made on relocatees around the world proves that the farther people move, the more they are at risk of impoverishment due to marginalization" (2006, 102). Bingai's long-distance migration will most definitely impoverish her. She laments this future, saying, "I really can't live elsewhere. . . . If I am forced to migrate, I have no other choice but to go begging" (Feng 2007). This negative depiction of long-distance migration contrasts sharply with *Rediscovering the Yangtze River's* portrayal of migration as a movement toward modernity and civilization.

Whereas Bingai's voice-over directly articulates her memories and sense of displacement, her speeches in the diegesis concern her resistance to resettlement and her negotiations with local officials. Unwilling to move, Bingai resists forced migration by speaking, arguing, quarreling, and even cursing. These strategies have a transformative effect that ultimately enables her to stay put. As Janice Welsch asserts, "Speech is active." She explains: "It can change, a crucial point for women and other marginalized people who want to effect change within any oppressive social structure" (1994, 163). Although Bingai's vigorous speech enables her to remain on her land, she must pay the costs.

The relationship between Bingai and local officials becomes increasingly tense as the water rises. It is 2002 and officials redouble their efforts to persuade her to move. Rather than buying into the lure or buckling under their threats, Bingai vehemently criticizes the state's unequal com-

pensation of peasants and local officials. Bombarded by her vigorous speech, a male official compromises by allowing Bingai to stay, as long as she builds a new house in a designated area on the slope of another village. The climax of this conflict occurs when three male officials show Bingai the place they have designated for her future house—a cornfield on the side of a mountain. Seeing it, Bingai is desperate and furious: “Look at it carefully with your conscience. That’s all I ask of you. Now I don’t want a cent from the country for the compensation money. I give that money to you, and you help me to level this land yourselves, and see whether you can level it or not. Human hearts are made of flesh, and we are born from our mothers” (Feng 2007). Hearing this, one of the officials becomes irate and suddenly asks the filmmaker to “stop filming.” After several seconds in which the screen is completely black, the official’s voice continues, in the darkness: “You’ve seen the land. You better decide what you want. Like it or not, you’ve got to build it. Otherwise, you have to move to a faraway place. I’ve told you before, when the time comes, you’ll relocate, like it or not. We’ll arrange for some men to move you here. This isn’t such a bad place. . . . We’re not doing business. You’re not in a position to require anything. If you don’t build your house here, we’ll drag you here” (Feng 2007). Despite enormous pressure from the officials, Bingai does not move to the designated place. In February 2003, Bingai’s house is finally submerged. She then sets up a tent in her field and lives there for one additional year. After she obtains a compensation fee of 4,800 yuan, she buys a shed just up the slope from her farmland where she lives to this day.

## Conclusion

Focusing on the concept of (dis)placement, in this essay I have discussed the intertwined relationship between gender, the cultural and psychological dimension of citizenship, and the representation of the Three Gorges Dam resettlement in two documentaries. As the voices of the two films demonstrate, resettlement’s disruption of the cultural and psychological dimension of citizenship is gendered. While male citizens, as members of a fraternal community, can experience internal forced migration as (re)placement and progress for the family and its extension, the state, the female citizen—as a fundamentally alienated individual—experiences resettlement as a form of multiple displacements as well as possible resistance at familial and national levels. In a patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal-exogamous

rural society, the female migrant from the geographically isolated Three Gorges region is always already a multiply displaced citizen. The use of different narrative voices in the two films illustrates what Yingchi Chu sees as the movement “from dogma to polyphony” in Chinese documentaries (2007, 26). In these more progressive documentaries, the univocal voice-over—the voice of God/government—gives way to alternative voices, signifying the gradual process to media “democratization” in post-1989 China.

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### Notes

1. *Rediscovering the Yangtze River* is a TV *zhuanti pian* (special-motif documentary) with thirty-three episodes. Issues of resettlement are addressed in episode 15, “Leaving Homeland,” and episode 16, “Hostland and Homeland,” both of which are the focus of this essay. In contrast, *Bingai* belongs to the genre of underground/independent film, which is not connected to the state’s system of production and distribution. The filmmaker of *Bingai* is a woman named Yan Feng, who lived a diasporic life in Japan when she made the film.
2. Unless otherwise indicated, all the translations of this film are mine.
3. In the early Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), the government forced the Chinese people to migrate to areas depopulated by war: from Huguang (today’s Hubei and Hunan Provinces) to Sichuan. Today most of the people in Sichuan Province are descendants of those early migrants from Hubei and Hunan.

The “plain” here refers to Anhui Province, which is geographically different from the mountainous Three Gorges area.

4. The translations are from the original English subtitles of this film.

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