

THREE TALES THE RIVER TOLD

A glimpse of the past.

BY STEWART C. BAKER

0) Under Guangdong, Bureau of Surface Change, 2136

“But why study rivers?”

The man smiled. “Why not? Besides, they can tell us a lot about where we’ve come from. Where we might go.”

We aren’t going anywhere, Siu Fan thought. *Nothing is — not up there.*

She brought up the contract again, in her peripherals. The terms were certainly generous. The bureau would ensure publicity; all followers and tips went to her on top of regular pay. All she had to do was walk through the desert.

It was hardly the deal with a big-name production comp she’d dreamt of, but ...

“Sure.” She pushed the signed contract to his private cloud and met his smile with one of her own. “Why not?”

1) Archaic characters reading: “Weep, Mothers, for Your Children.”

They’d been carved into the rock walls a good metre or so below what had once been the Yellow River’s turbulent surface. Where Siu Fan was standing, at the bottom of the shallow canyon formed by the water’s absence, the characters were roughly at head height.

“Qiang era,” her bureau guide said, his voice crisp in her implant. “Fascinating — I’ve never heard of the river running dry this close to its source.”

Siu Fan snapped a vid with one of her cam drones and pushed it to the cloud for her followers, then turned away, shuddering. Post-processing, the indentations in the rock had caught the redness of the sunset and the whole thing looked like blood, nearly liquid. Appropriate, and no doubt just the sort of thing the bureau wanted, but too macabre for her.

Not that she had anything to fear. Nothing lived up here in these heat-stroked mountains, not since the Yellow River’s slow death had driven people away — first to the ocean’s edge where water could be desalinated and used to survive, and then into the cavernous city-states they’d built beneath the earth. Even that had been ages ago, back in her own mother’s childhood.

➔ NATURE.COM

Follow Futures:

🐦 @NatureFutures

🌐 go.nature.com/mtoodm

Still, those words stuck with Siu Fan as she hiked slowly down, cam drones

following, into what was left of the rest of the topground world.

2) Ming-era riverworks, sun-baked and cracking

Two months and 1,000 miles later, Siu Fan stopped to camp for the night at what her guide told her had once been Kaifeng.



All its citizens now underground, of course. Down there where anyone with sense was. Out of the Sun’s heat, the smog, the endless desert. Siu Fan dreamt of it while walking, sometimes: the cool breezes sent around through the cavern systems. The water, sourced from the sea and filtered a hundred times over to be purer than pure.

She took a sip of the grimy, lukewarm recyc water her facemask provided and grimaced.

The only things to see were some ancient dykes and bundles of dried grass stalks, preserved by the silt of the river they’d been meant to tame and had instead sunk into, half a millennium before.

Oh, sure, her followers were way more engaged than they had ever been when she was just another wannabe star. Not many people foolhardy enough to come up here, especially for such a long trip.

But was it worth it?

She turned the question over in her mind as she parroted the story her guide fed her about the Siege of Kaifeng in 1642, when the governor had purposefully broken dykes like these in an attempt to stop a peasant rebellion.

And he *had* stopped it — along with his own rule, and very nearly Kaifeng. The river had been powerful enough back then to

flood tens of thousands of square miles of farmland, sowing famine and starvation in its wake.

Now there was only the history of a river. The memory of lives.

3) Cutting through the plains, a passage to the sea

Two days into the last week of her walk, Siu Fan came out onto a hill.

The ill-defined banks of the river curved away through the smog to meet what could still charitably be called the Yellow Sea, just at the edge of sight. Between her and its poisoned shores were the ruins of what had once been Baoding. Beijing. Tianjin. A hundred other cities that Siu Fan had never learnt the names of, or the stories for.

Now there was only the riverbed, stretching through the dust. A long, lonely road with her as its solitary traveller.

All of a sudden, it was too much. At last, after everything she’d seen the past three months, she broke. Bent her head and cried.

Her tears left little rivulets in the dirt on her face, and — even now, knowing a vivid moment when she saw one — she dutifully recorded the precious water’s pathways and pushed it to the cloud.

Her guide was saying something, but she didn’t listen. What was the point? What would it do?

And then she saw it too: abrupt motion in the corner of her eye. She flinched. If someone had somehow survived up here, all this time, a scavenger ...

But no, it wasn’t a person. It was, somehow, a bird, a gull. Scraggled and filthy, more yellow than white, but alive and digging in the slightly damp soil at the centre of the riverbed. It started at her motion, then forced its way up into the sky and away towards the sea, cawing hoarsely.

Siu Fan’s numbers surged higher than they’d ever been, but what did that matter? What did *that* matter, at a time like this?

She ran in the bird’s wake until she was breathless from running, and then collapsed to the ground, laughing. Sobbing. Her heart like a river, overflowing its banks. ■

Stewart C. Baker is an academic librarian, haikuist and speculative-fiction writer based in Oregon. His fiction has appeared in *Daily Science Fiction*, *Flash Fiction Online*, *Nature* and other magazines.

ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY