

CONTEMPORARY RECONSTRUCTION OF THE YELLOW RIVER MYTH: THE POWER OF RELIGIOUS NARRATIVE IN SHAPING CULTURAL IDENTITY

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Abstract: This article investigates the transformation of the Yellow River myth from its religious and cosmological origins into a contemporary symbol of Chinese nationalism and cultural identity. Once revered as a sacred locus of divine power, the Yellow River has, over the course of the 20th and 21st centuries, undergone significant reinterpretations and reconstructions. Employing an interdisciplinary approach drawing on mythology, anthropology, political history and cultural studies, the article traces the river's shift from a religious signifier to a cultural icon embedded in China's collective consciousness. Particular attention is given to literary works, state-sponsored narratives, media portrayals and diaspora discourses, which illustrate how the myth has been continually appropriated to serve evolving

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social, cultural and political purposes. By highlighting this dynamic process, the authors focus on the enduring power of religious narrative to bridge ancient traditions with modern identity formation and to shape the cultural imagination of a nation.

Keywords: *Appropriation, China, Communism, Culture, Diaspora, Memory, Mythology, Narrative, National Identity, Religion, Symbolism.*

1. Introduction

The Huang He—known in English as the Yellow River or historically as the Huang Ho—winds through northern, central and eastern China, stretching 3,395 miles (5,446 km) from the Tibetan Plateau to the East China Sea (Huang Hai). Revered as the “cradle of Chinese civilization,” the river’s geographical, cultural and mythological heritage has profoundly shaped China’s history. Known evocatively as the “Green Sorrow” due to its destructive flooding in lower reaches, the river has shifted course repeatedly over centuries, sometimes moving nearly 500 miles (800 km). Continuous efforts at flood control and irrigation—beginning in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644)—were later expanded through modern hydroelectric projects. Beyond sustaining life, the river has served as a natural fortification, notably during the Wudai Regime (907–960).

The Huang He functions not merely as a river but as a sedimented archive of China’s civilization, embodying both creative vitality and enduring struggles. The Yellow River is a cultural, poetic and philosophical force that has shaped various generations and their thought patterns. Historically, the Yellow River was enmeshed in religious and mythological narratives. Wohlfart et al. (2016) highlight its associations with dragons, the Yellow Emperor, and cosmogonic myths that legitimized dynastic authority (3–5). The river’s dual character—life-sustaining yet potentially destructive—reinforced its sacred status and ideological significance. Over time, it became a marker of dynastic legitimacy, with its state and flow symbolizing the ruler’s virtue and capacity. Figures such as the Yellow Emperor (Huangdi, c.

2704 BCE) and Yu the Great (c. 2200–2101 BCE) combined divine narrative with practical governance, linking moral virtue and technical competence to stewardship of the river (China Daily, 2012; Travel China Guide, n.d.). Rituals to Hebo, the river spirit, reinforced collective understanding of natural forces and integrated spiritual, social and political dimensions (Biswas et al., 225–227; Webber et al., 114–135; Jun Zhang, 2021). According to Jiaqi Wang (2024) the river’s representation in contemporary China has shifted from sacred and mythological to public, cultural and political realms. He further observes that the Yellow River’s image has been reinterpreted for modern nationalist and developmental purposes, moving away from its religious foundations (1192–1198). Nicholas Morrow Williams (2022) notes that while ancient populations personified the river as a divine force, modern reconstructions emphasize secular symbolism, highlighting historical continuity, civilization-building and cultural identity (1–15).

2. Religious and Mythological Roots

In the ancient Chinese worldview, the Yellow River (*Huang He*) was more than a geographical feature; it was regarded as a living, spiritual force governing fertility, sustenance and cosmic order. Early agricultural communities, whose survival depended on the river’s seasonal cycles, both revered and feared it for its dual capacity to nurture and devastate (Micheaux & Kull, 2020, 149–156). Its characteristic yellow hue, derived from loess sediments, symbolized earth and centrality within the Five-fold Elements (*wuxing*), situating the river as a keystone of universal balance that intertwined agricultural success, social stability, and political authority.

Rituals, including offerings to Hebo, the river spirit, reflected collective recognition of the river’s power and fostered social cohesion (Biswas et al., 225–227). The ‘deification of the river’ grew in response to seasonal unpredictability, floods and human dependence, illustrating how mythology reinforced popular understanding of natural phenomena (Webber et al., 114–135). Iconic figures such as the Yellow Emperor, Huangdi (c. 2704

BCE), and Yu the Great (c. 2200–2101 BCE) solidified this symbolic relationship. Huangdi's mythical battles and Yu's engineering feats against floods merged divine narrative with practical governance, linking the ruler's moral virtue and technical competence to the river's stewardship (China Daily, 2012; Travel China Guide, n.d.).

These narratives demonstrate that the Yellow River myth was not merely a religious story but a mechanism for legitimizing authority, fostering humanistic values, and embedding ecological awareness into governance. Its myths integrated spiritual, social, and political dimensions, illustrating a sophisticated worldview where human action, divine sanction, and natural forces were inseparably intertwined (Biswas et al., 225–227; Jun Zhang, 2021, 332–340).

3. The Yellow River in Literature, Culture and Philosophy

For centuries, the Yellow River (*Huang He*) has inspired legends, rituals and literary expression, serving as a profound emblem of Chinese civilization. Recognized as the “mother river,” it embodies both life-giving sustenance and the burdens endured by generations. According to Leon Long (n.d.), the river functions as an enduring symbol of culture and poetic imagination. Classical poets such as Li Bai, Du Fu, Wang Wei and Wang Zhihuan immortalized the river in their works, addressing themes of nature, ambition, patriotism, grief and resilience. Their verses reveal the river's centrality in shaping collective identity and cultural consciousness, reflecting experiences of conflict, displacement and human perseverance. The imagery of the Yellow River—its vastness, ceaseless flow and intimate connection to the land—continues to influence Chinese literature and philosophy. Li Bai's (701-762) *Invitation to Wine*, translated by Xu Yuanchong (2020), compares the river's unceasing flow to human life, urging celebration, companionship, and philosophical reflection on mortality. This poetic meditation resonates with the pre-Socratic concept of flux articulated by Heraclitus, emphasizing the impermanence of life and the inevitability of change (Chang, 111).

*Do you not see the Yellow River come from the sky,
Rushing into the sea and ne'er come back?
Do you not see the mirrors bright in chambers high
Grieve o'er your snow-white hair though once it was silk-black?
When hopes are won, oh! Drink your fill in high delight,
And never leave your wine-cup empty in moonlight!
Heaven has made us talents, we're not made in vain.
A thousand gold coins spent, more will turn up again.
Kill a cow, cook a sheep and let us merry be,
And drink three hundred cupfuls of wine in high glee!
Dear friends of mine,
Cheer up, cheer up!
I invite you to wine.
Do not put down your cup!
I will sing you a song, please hear,
O hear! Lend me a willing ear!
What difference will rare and costly dishes make?
I only want to get drunk and never to wake.
How many great men were forgotten through the ages?
But great drinkers are more famous than sober sages.
The Prince of Poets feast'd in his place at will,
Drank wine at ten thousand a cask and laughed his fill.
A host should not complain of money he is short,
To drink with you I will sell things of any sort.
My fur coat worth a thousand coins of gold
And my flower-dappled horse may be sold
To buy good wine that we may drown the woes age-old (Taikong
Sky)*

By likening life to the ever-flowing Yellow River, the poem underscores the irreversibility of time — once a moment passes, it cannot return. It urges readers to embrace life fully, finding joy in the present rather than worrying about aging or chasing material wealth. Wine, music and companionship are portrayed as ways to lighten the burdens of existence, emphasizing enjoyment and human connection over worldly pursuits. Philosophically, the poem resonates with the thought of the pre-Socratic philosopher

Heraclitus (c. 540–480 BCE) of Ephesus, who similarly reflected on the constant flux of life: “All is flux. Nothing stands still. Nothing endures but change. You cannot step twice into the same river, for other waters are continually flowing on. There is nothing permanent except change” (Chang, 111). Both the poem and Heraclitus highlight the transient, ever-changing nature of existence, inviting a mindful and celebratory engagement with life.

The river’s cultural resonance extends beyond mythology into literature, arts, and philosophy. Li Yuche and Wu Jie (2025) note that flowing through nine provinces, the Yellow River nurtures local traditions such as Weifang kite-making and Shaolin Kung Fu, embodying a synthesis of Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist values. Its influence permeates agriculture, medicine, and philosophical thought, positioning it as a lifeline for Chinese cultural identity. The revitalized myth thus portrays the river as a symbol of perseverance and resilience, selectively emphasizing contributions to civilization-building while downplaying historical floods and ecological vulnerability.

4. Political Appropriation and National Identity

The Communist Party of China has strategically reconstructed the Yellow River myth to support nationalism, unity and cultural pride. Gloria Jung Eian Tham (2009) demonstrates how Mao Zedong utilized the river in cultural policy, commissioning folk songs, dramas, and socialist realist art to mobilize mass support and legitimize political authority. The river’s mythic imagery reinforced ideological goals, uniting populations under shared narratives of struggle and achievement while minimizing historical disruptions. This reconstruction has contemporary implications: the river functions as a secular symbol of modernization, technological achievement and national cohesion. Infrastructure projects such as dams and irrigation systems exemplify human ingenuity and reinforce the narrative of state-led progress (Wang et al., 1–12). Yet, this emphasis on achievement often obscures ecological fragility, sedimentation challenges, and water scarcity, reflecting a tension between

cultural symbolism and environmental reality (Pu et al., 1-8; Wang et al., 2018; Yu, 389-403).

The Yellow River’s transformation illustrates the power of narrative in shaping public consciousness, policy, and identity. Its mythic reconstruction reinforces collective memory and national pride while simultaneously influencing environmental governance. Policies addressing water management, flood control, and resource allocation are informed not only by practical needs but also by the river’s symbolic significance. Digital representations of the Yellow River extend these narratives, merging traditional myth with modern technology to strengthen cultural identity (Hu et al., 617-621). This duality – uniting people while obscuring ecological vulnerability – underscores the complex role of myth in contemporary China. While the river functions as a symbol of endurance, resilience, and modernization, it also demands careful attention to sustainability and ecological management.

5. The Secularization of the Yellow River and Nation-Building

The fall of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) and subsequent political fragmentation spurred the search for unifying symbols. The Yellow River emerged as a natural emblem of national rejuvenation, secularized to emphasize cultural heritage rather than religious veneration. Intellectuals and reformers like Liang Qichao and Lu Xun employed the river’s imagery to evoke historical pride and mobilize a collective consciousness (Rowe, 1998, 378-397). Scholars and political architects stripped religious sentiment from the river, highlighting its historical, cultural and civilizational significance to reinforce unity in a diverse, multi-ethnic society.

Under communist rule, the river was further reinterpreted as a symbol of proletarian resilience and revolutionary will. In the Maoist vernacular, the river transformed into a potent metaphor for the people and was repeatedly depicted as a formidable, though ultimately conquerable force, reflecting the spirit of the Chinese people and their unyielding tenacity (Yanxia Fan, 163-169). Works like the *Yellow River Cantata* (1939) exemplify this

ideological transformation, framing the river as both a witness to collective struggle and a resource to be harnessed by the people (Xiangtang Hong, 2009, 1–33). By removing divine attributes and emphasizing human agency, the river became a metaphor for national strength, collective effort and political legitimacy (Liu et al., 2020, 65–68).

Political campaigns, education and propaganda played key roles in consolidating this reinterpretation, embedding Marxist ideology into public consciousness while shaping the narratives of nationalism and historical continuity (Strafella, 2015, 235; Wei Jianlin, 2011, 19–28). Yet this secularization raises critical questions about authenticity, inclusiveness, and the degree to which such symbolic narratives genuinely reflect the experiences of diverse communities.

The Yellow River's contemporary significance merges myth, environmental stewardship, and governance. Policies on water management, flood control, and resource allocation are shaped not only by practical concerns but also by the river's symbolic power. Digital representations and media amplify these narratives, blending tradition with modern technology to strengthen cultural identity (Hu et al., 617–621).

Literature and cinema increasingly depict the river as a wounded emblem of environmental and social disruption, symbolizing rural struggles, intergenerational trauma, and fragmented identity (Yu, 389–403; Wang et al., 1–8). State-led projects, such as the Yellow River Cultural Park, present idealized narratives of national unity and progress, while ecological studies reveal ongoing crises (Cone et al., 2019, 372–383). This duality highlights the tension between mythic narrative, political authority, and ecological reality.

6. Environmental and Cultural Consciousness

Today, the Yellow River serves as a nexus where cultural memory, national identity, and environmental consciousness intersect. Contemporary ecologists and cultural activists argue that the river's degradation is not only a technical issue but a moral and ethical concern, reflecting the tension between China's

modernization and its ecological heritage (Wohlfart et al., 8–11; Biswas et al., 225–227). State-led projects such as the Yellow River Cultural Park present idealized narratives of national unity and technological achievement, while satellite imagery and ecological studies reveal ongoing environmental crises (Cone et al., 2019, 372–383).

Modern literature and cinema confront this contradiction directly. The Yellow River is depicted not merely as a scenic backdrop but as a wounded emblem of environmental and social disruption, personifying intergenerational trauma, rural struggles, and fragmented identity (Yu, 389–403; Wang et al., 1–8). Such portrayals link mythological resurrection with contemporary eco-consciousness, highlighting the ethical responsibility to reconcile cultural pride with environmental stewardship.

The river’s mythic narrative is actively curated through media, public monuments, and state-sponsored exhibitions, reinforcing its role as a symbol of continuity and national identity (Pu et al., 1–8). This adaptive mythology bridges historical memory with modern imperatives, simultaneously shaping collective identity and raising urgent questions about ecological sustainability.

7. Conclusion

The Yellow River illustrates the enduring power of religious, mythological and political narratives in shaping cultural identity and consolidating authority. Once revered as a sacred river embodying divine forces, ecological balance and moral order, it has been transformed into a secular emblem strategically employed to assert political authority, foster national cohesion and construct collective memory. Literature, film and ecological activism reveal the tension between idealized representations and environmental challenges, portraying the Yellow River as both a symbol of endurance and a cautionary emblem of neglect. This highlights how power operates through narratives to shape identity, legitimize authority and influence public consciousness. That is to say, the reconstruction of the Yellow River myth

demonstrates the dynamic force of religious and cultural narratives to define identity, legitimize authority and shape social values, while also raising critical questions about the ethical and ecological responsibilities embedded in such symbolic power.

The Yellow River myth thus reminds us of the relation between sacred memory and modern nation-building. Geographically and cosmologically, the Yellow River once anchored Daoist understandings of the universe and statecraft. Figures like Yu the Great, whose legendary flood-control achievements symbolized sovereign virtue, tied cosmology to governance by embedding hierarchy, moral order and humanity's relationship with nature. These myths provided both spiritual meaning and practical guidance in water management. Yet in the 20th century, as the Qing dynasty collapsed and the Communist movement rose, the Yellow River was secularized and refashioned as a revolutionary emblem—an icon of proletarian might, collective struggle and national rejuvenation. Cultural works such as the Yellow River Cantata and propaganda of the Maoist era epitomized this transition. This modern appropriation, however, comes with contradictions. While monuments, cultural parks, and public rituals project an idealized, unifying image of the river, they often obscure its ecological fragility and socio-environmental crises—droughts, sediment accumulation, pollution, and habitat loss. Literature and cinema, meanwhile, portray the river as a scarred symbol, mirroring both natural decay and social fragmentation, evoking memories of historical trauma. Thus, the Yellow River myth survives in a contested form—mythologized to preserve cultural pride, yet haunted by ecological and political realities.

The case of the Yellow River underscores how myths are mobilized to forge collective identities and political legitimacy, even as they clash with pressing realities of governance and sustainability. The Communist Party's cultivation of the myth reveals an intricate blend of ideological control, selective memory, and popular sentiment—where authenticity and inclusivity are continually negotiated. As ecological degradation intensifies, the myth acquires an urgent ethical dimension, pressing the nation to

reconcile cultural pride with environmental responsibility. This examination raises a universal question that transcends China: How can ancient cultural myths be safeguarded and responsibly transformed into narratives that support national identity and modernization, while simultaneously addressing urgent ecological, demographic and socio-cultural challenges of the contemporary world?

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