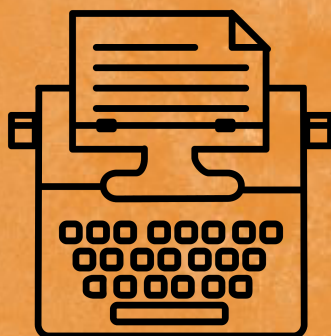


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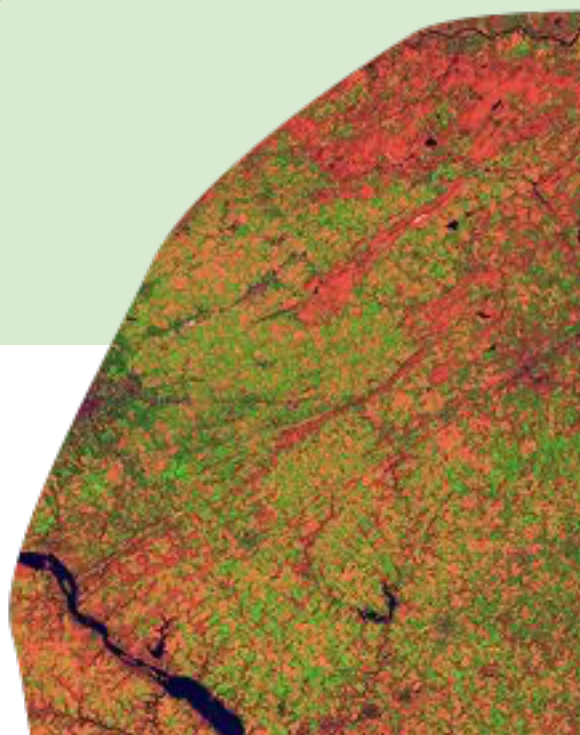
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Wuhan / 200 Years Later: No Fishing Boats on the Yangtze, but the River Women Remain

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In 2021, fishing was banned on the Yangtze River. Yet, two centuries later, the stories of the "River Women" endure. These women, like the legendary sea women of old times, were known for their endurance and intimate knowledge of the water. Not quite as mythical as their oceanic counterparts, they did not dive into the depths, but they knew the river as few others did. They understood the shifting tides, the secret places where fish gathered, the rhythm of abundance and scarcity that came with the changing seasons.

As the fishing boats disappeared, so too did their homes, their livelihoods eroded by time and policy. The ancient wisdom that had once been passed down through generations became obsolete, lost in the changing currents of the river. But the River Women, ever silent, found new ways to survive. They adapted, just as life beneath the surface began to seek its own renewal. Old companions—*Coilia nasus*, *Neophocaena asiaeorientalis*, and *Lipotes vexillifer*—fish thought lost forever, began to return. The playful games of the water were revived once more, a quiet testament to resilience.

Amid the ripples and splashes of life's return, the legacy of the River Women resurfaced too. In the shimmering waters, their story emerged, threaded through the river like a song that would never be forgotten. Their presence, though no longer present in the ships that once dotted the waters, is still present in the rebirth of the river.

Yangtze River, 200 Years Later

The river stretches beneath a cold, silvery moon, its surface unfurling endlessly like an ancient silk scroll. Silence reigns—there is no hum of factories, no flickering lights to stain the night. Only the occasional glint of fireflies, their tiny bodies pulsing along the riverbank, their glow swallowed by the shifting sheen of the water. The current flows slowly, as though reluctant to break the stillness, brushing against jagged rocks,

caressing thick, untamed trees on either shore. The quiet is so profound, so ancient, it feels as though time itself has paused—just for a moment—to listen.

The marks of humans have faded. The river has reclaimed itself, swallowed what we once made. The dikes that once tamed the mighty Yangtze lie in ruins, jagged piles of stone overtaken by vines and moss, as if they had never been built, as if no one had ever tried to hold back the river's power. The busy docks of a distant time now rest beneath the water, submerged in the depths, transformed into new homes for fish. The buildings, once symbols of our control, have become reefs—ghostly structures draped in the river's shifting shadows. Schools of fish dart through the ruins, not searching for what we once valued, but for what they need: food, shelter, space to thrive. The ban on fishing, once an act of desperation, has become the river's salvation. The great river, as old as the world, is wild again, returned to itself.

A river dolphin surfaces, slipping through the water like a shadow, its great body cutting a path between the grasses (see figure 1). Once on the brink of extinction, now it thrives, returning in numbers, as though it has always owned this place. It rises from the depths, breaking the surface in a silver arc, catching the moonlight before plunging back into the dark. There is no fear, no terror of slaughter, no grief for lost kin, no longer does it worry about poisoned waters. The humans are gone. This river is no longer theirs. It has been returned—just as it was always meant to be—to the creatures who belong to it.



Figure 1. Yangtze River, 200 Years Later. © Yafei Wang made together with AI generated recraft App.

On the dyke, we call them by name—"jiangzhu (江猪)," the river pigs. It is a whisper, a prayer, an old friendship passed between us. The river has fallen into its natural rhythm once again: the fish on their endless journey, the birds nesting in the trees, the plants rising and falling with the seasons. Life moves in infinite cycles, turning, turning, turning... as it always has.

"Okay, Mom, stop working on your speech, and come watch the 14th Annual Water Rights Summit. You might find something new to add to your speech!" My fifteen-year-old daughter called out to me with enthusiasm. Her eyes were bright, as if they could pierce through time and meet the gaze of our great-great-great-grandmother An, who would have been pleased.

After the fishing ban on the Yangtze river, she had abandoned her lifelong career as a fisherwoman. With no steady income, she relied on government subsidies and did everything she could to try new industries, seeking out ways to make a living. Drawing on her deep knowledge of fish, she first worked at a restaurant (figure 3). The owner, noticing her keen understanding of how to judge the freshness and quality of fish, promoted her to the position of the restaurant's buyer. During that time, life improved somewhat, and An decided to send my great-great-grandmother to high school. At the time, my great-great-grandmother had failed her entrance exam for high school and, by the rules, was only allowed to attend a vocational and technical college, rather than continuing her studies at a regular high school—a choice that was still not welcome in China. An didn't want her daughter to face the same hardships she had endured due to a lack of education, so she spent a considerable sum of money and called in favors to get my great-great-grandmother into an international high school.



Figure 2. The restaurant Ann used to work. © Yafei Wang made together with AI generated recraft App.

However, just as my great-great-grandmother entered her second year of high school, An's restaurant, located too close to the lake, was ordered to close. An moved with her boss to another part of Wuhan, trying to recreate the previous restaurant's success, but with all lakeside restaurants banned, they could only open a new one far from the lake and river. This meant the hotel lost its signature selling point—the fresh fish dishes from the nearby waters. So within six months, new restaurant had to close. An was out of work, unable to continue paying for her daughter's expensive international education. Faced with reality, An had no choice but to accept her circumstances and give up on the hope that her daughter could change her fate through schooling. In the end, An, along with her daughter and the former restaurant boss, moved to Jiangxia and rented a fish farm, determined to embark on a new chapter in the fish farming business.

Aquaculture has deep roots in Asia. But, as history has repeatedly shown, the primitive accumulation of capitalism often arrives with a heavy price—one that is paid by the most vulnerable. In the case of Asia's aquaculture industry, the workers are often drawn from marginalized communities: people who, for various reasons, have never received a good education, nor do they have the means or awareness to protect their rights. On the exploitation of these workers, the industry can sell its products cheaply while generating massive profits.

An came from such a community. She understood, all too well, the struggle of people fighting for their rights and their livelihoods, without the power or resources to support themselves. Yet, as the owner of her own fish farm. She dreamed of creating a workplace that was ethical—one that was friendly to women and respectful of animal welfare (figure 4). But she knew this was not an easy path. In an environment where such values were still rare, An’s ambitions were both bold and fraught with risk.



Figure 3. An’s crayfish farm. © Yafei Wang made together with AI generated recraft App.

It didn’t take long for the challenge to become painfully clear. The crayfish she farmed were of exceptional quality, but their high production costs made them uncompetitive in a market driven by low prices. Sales faltered, and with them, An’s spirits. She began to wonder if she had made the wrong choice. Perhaps, she had misjudged her way.

But her daughter, Qiu told her, “Mom, you have to hold on,” she said “This is right. It’s always hardest at the beginning. Just keep going.”

For months, An’s crayfish went unsold. But then, as if by chance, some particularly discerning customers sampled the crayfish. They were impressed by the texture, the flavor, the depth of the meat. In fact, they believed that An’s crayfish were much better than those raised in Japan.

It didn’t take long for An’s crayfish to land a place in high-end restaurants. The day she received the news, An and the women at her farm felt a surge of joy and relief. Finally, after all the struggle, their work was being recognized. The future, though still

uncertain, seemed a little brighter. And for the first time in months, An allowed herself to believe that, despite the obstacles, perhaps she had made the right decision after all.

An's success in crayfish farming not only gave her credibility but also a voice in the field. With her growing expertise, she became a respected figure and was invited to speak at the inaugural River Rights Summit. Her speech was simple, direct, and carried the weight of lived experience:

"When I was a child, people fished on rivers and oceans as if they were dining at an endless buffet, taking blue food from the water without thought. Today, nearly 150 million people around the world are engaged in aquaculture. The waters have always provided, but this relentless extraction, this insatiable hunger has driven fish stocks to the brink. Overfishing stripped the rivers bare, leaving not just ecosystems depleted but people like me unemployed. But it taught me something vital: respect for nature is not optional—it's essential.

Aquaculture can be sustainable and kind to the environment, but the industry has its shadows: the exploitation of women workers and neglect of animal welfare. This must change.

Thus, I call for action:

1. Improving Welfare Standards for Farmed Fish

a. Enhancing Aquatic Environment Quality

Optimizing Water Quality Management: Regularly monitor water conditions to maintain cleanliness, appropriate temperatures, oxygen levels, and pH balance, minimizing stress on fish during farming.

Natural Habitat Simulation: Design farming systems that mimic natural habitats by introducing water flow, hiding spots, and diverse substrates to alleviate stress and promote well-being.

b. Limiting Stocking Density

Overcrowding hinders fish growth, lowers immunity, and accelerates disease transmission. Establish density standards to reduce group stress and ensure adequate space for fish health and activity.

c. Improving Harvesting and Transport Methods

Adopt humane techniques to minimize physical harm and stress during capture and transport, such as using soft nets and avoiding prolonged fasting periods.

d. Enhancing Feed and Nutrition

Provide high-quality feed tailored to fish growth, avoiding harmful chemical additives, and explore sustainable feed sources like terrestrial plants to reduce dependency on wild fish stocks.

e. Promoting International Animal Welfare Standards

2. Improving Conditions for Women in Fisheries

a. Elevating Social Status and Awareness

Promoting Gender Equality Education: Offer training to empower women in skills, leadership, and safety, reducing discrimination and fostering equality.

Leadership Opportunities: Encourage policies that place women in leadership roles within fisheries, challenging traditional gender norms.

b. Enhancing Working Conditions

Fair Compensation: Establish equitable wage standards to match women's contributions, especially in remote areas.

Labor Rights and Benefits: Provide health insurance, maternity leave, and workplace injury compensation, while improving workplace safety conditions.

c. Strengthening Social Support Networks

Women's Cooperatives: Support the formation of women-led fisher associations or cooperatives to provide technical assistance, financial aid, and legal support, boosting collective bargaining power.

Work-Life Balance: Introduce flexible working conditions to help women manage family responsibilities alongside work.

d. Policy Support

Gender-Inclusive Policies: Develop government initiatives that fund women-centric fishery projects and train women in sustainable aquaculture techniques.

Combat Gender Discrimination: Enforce anti-discrimination measures to ensure women have equal career opportunities and fair treatment.

e. Improving Health and Safety

Provide better health services, prevent gender-based violence or harassment, and offer gender-specific health education to help women better manage occupational health risks.

Through a combination of targeted policies and collective social efforts, we can improve the welfare of farmed fish while simultaneously enhancing the living

conditions and social status of women laboring in the fishing industry. Such measures not only pave the way for sustainable fisheries but also reduce dependency on wild aquatic resources, ensuring the provision of sustainable blue food while safeguarding wild fish populations and water ecosystems.

The proposals put forward by An were swiftly adopted, creating ripples of change throughout Wuhan. The impact was profound, driving legislative discussions during the inaugural Water Rights Summit and fostering a collective empathy toward the natural world. An's vision inspired a shift—a call to treat the environment not as a resource to be consumed but as a partner in our shared existence.

This is the legacy carried forward by generations of river women, who continue to advocate for the rights of water and life at every summit. Their voices remind us of a simple truth:

Respect for nature. Reverence for life. We share a future with the river—we do not own it.

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