



A River Returns

我家和北京凉水河的故事

By An He and Wang Jian

Translation by Madeleine Ross and Fang Li

Below is the ninth in a series of oral histories about Beijing water, as told to An He and Wang Jian by Li Yuling, a long-time resident of Beijing:

LI YULING (FEMALE, 47 YEARS OLD)

I was born in Beijing, but left for a while and later returned. After getting married in 1989, my husband and I were given an apartment outside the South Third Ring Road, west of Yangqiao Bridge and near the Majiabao,¹ I have lived here for over nine years. You know that old Beijing saying, “The east is pricey and the west is expensive, whereas the south is poor and the north is cheap.” This area is part of the south city and is in rough shape environmentally. Even though it is close to the city centre, it is dirty, smelly and dilapidated. The Macao River, a tributary of the Liangshui River, is about 20 metres to the south of our place.

I often participate in Beijing’s ‘water action’ activities, I suppose because I love rivers. And, for as long as I can remember, my dream has been to live next to a river that flows tumultuously day and night. Sadly, I was never able to. Then, quite by chance, I was given the opportunity to live near this river. But it was a rather smelly one. I just kept hoping it would be properly managed so that it wouldn’t stink any more. As long as I have lived here, people have been talking about how nice it would be if the river were cleaned up.

The Liangshui River itself runs from Caihuying to Yizhuang village. It flows from Lianhuachi (the Lotus Flower Pond), and a little water also comes from the area near the Capital Iron and Steel Works. The Macao River and Liangshui River part at the Yangqiao Bridge. Looking over from Majiabao near us, the Macao River appears to be a very natural river, with flowing water and grass growing on both banks. Flowing directly east to the Wenyu River, the Liangshui has always been known as an especially smelly waterway. It was only after some scientists took us for a walk along the river that we found out that both the Liangshui and the Macao rivers receive more wastewater than any other river in Beijing.

I remember when we moved here in 1989, it was summer, and there were so many mosquitoes that we were able to grab over 30 in one night with our bare hands. I recall that when we were decorating the house we didn’t dare open the windows. Even though I was born in Beijing, I never paid much attention to the climate—especially not to which way the wind was blowing. But when I settled here with my husband, I realized that in Beijing, as the day progresses, the wind blows from the south at night and from the north during the day. As soon as the southerly night wind started blowing, it made life difficult for people living on the north

1 A neighborhood in Beijing

bank of the Liangshui River. During the day, it is a little bit better for the residents living on the north bank—though it still smelled, there were fewer mosquitoes. As we are located on the south bank, our home would be considered a good one. The two of us lived in 60 square metres, with two sunny rooms and a toilet that works well. But it still stank.

As it happens, I'm very sensitive to odours, and if something smells bad I can't sleep. So back then, we didn't dare open the windows. During the summer you couldn't open them, even though sleeping with all the windows closed was suffocating. In autumn and winter it didn't smell as bad. But mainly in the summer, beginning in May or June, and up until just before October, oh dear, those days ...

When it rained it was even worse because the whole compound filled with water. In order to go out for a walk, we had to walk on planks resting on bits of brick. New residential areas had sewage systems and bathrooms in every house, but in our compound the sewers were above ground level and the sewage wouldn't flow into them. So, the sewers in the buildings became blocked. The residents complained. A lot of time went by, but still no one appeared to do repairs. They said there were some particular difficulties and it just dragged on like that. The first floor residents had the worst of it, so no one wanted to live there. The underground pipes in those old residential areas still haven't been connected. When it rains the residents continue to get around by jumping from plank to plank.

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The water quality in the river deteriorated to its worst level during the mid-nineties—it really stank. At that time, we didn't have air conditioning, and at night everyone went out to relax in the cool air—old men and women, young people, so that the compound was full

of people sitting around. You might ask what kind of cooling off did this provide? There was a flower, bird, fish and insect market on the north bank of the river and a lot of people set up stalls there, relaxed in the cool air, ate, drank, and basically lived there. Work units had bought our building and others in the nearby residential areas as living quarters for workers. Some buildings belonged to the Agricultural Bureau and some to a local technical school. The stench of the river was the daily companion of anyone who lived there, and everyone suffered it with great difficulty. But, gradually, we became accustomed to it. The first group of people who lived there were mostly people whose houses in the city had been demolished. And from what I observed, there were quite a lot of older people. We closed the doors and windows to sleep, and during the day we left for work. However, the older people lived there day and night in that environment, year-round and with great stoicism. There was nothing else they could do. The ordinary people suffered the most.

Before the Liangshui River was cleaned up, both its banks were muddy slopes that ran along its original course. The Macao River in particular had not been altered at all. It contained a vast amount of water, all black and murky, with froth on its surface, rubbish floating on it, soggy bits of vegetable leaves, plastic bags ... and all the dirty stuff that everyone just tossed into the river however they felt like it. It was unimaginably dirty. You couldn't see the bottom and grass grew in a total mess all over the sloping banks.

The company I worked for was originally based in Yizhuang Village and I often caught a taxi home after work. When the driver asked where we lived, I said that when he got to the place that smelled the worst, we'd be there! Even the taxi drivers knew about it.



Later on, I bought a place in Xinghe Cheng (Star River Town), which was a bit further south than my original home. At first the houses there were cheap; five thousand yuan a square meter—people were surprised that we would actually buy in that area. However, I went ahead and bought because we had been living there for nine years, and I was sure that one day it would change. Sure enough, around 2004 or 2005, when they had finished building the southern railway station, it finally happened; the area was slated to be cleaned up.

Among the changes we would see: the road to the south railway station now passes the Liangshui River, and the Macao River has been completely dug up, and re-landscaped. The bottom of the river was cleaned and a narrow channel added to the riverbed for the placement of pipes, covered over by crushed stone and pieces of brick, instead of cement, which is only used in combination with sluice gates. Pipes now transport sewage directly to the Xiaohongmen Sewage Treatment Plant.

This round of improvements to the Liangshui River was one of the fifty-six large projects Beijing tackled in 2004, and ranks as a successful example of environmental protection. Although the river had been maintained and cleaned in the past, there was little effect. It is my understanding that these cleanups have been attempted twice in the past. Now it has been done especially well, and there is a real and obvious improvement from what it used to be. After the rehabilitation of the river, fewer of the original people who came to work at labouring jobs in Beijing remain in the one-story houses next to the river. People don't go to the river to throw out their rubbish anymore. Instead they use the area's centralized garbage facilities.

Now, land prices have skyrocketed and new people have moved into the area. The actual improvements have been very good, and people's outlook has improved too—after all, there is water here through all four seasons. It's not much, but last year, for example, some water was released into the river and there was quite

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As a result, the river doesn't smell any longer because it doesn't have wastewater and sewage flowing freely through it. And now, the ground on both sides of the river is a sea of green, planted over with grass and trees. Yes, the banks of the Liangshui River have certainly improved a great deal. And what with the number four subway now going past our house, house prices in the area have leapt right up to more than double what they were before, with one square meter now selling for 12,000 or 13,000 yuan. In the end, I think that cleaning up the environment helped to bring about greater economic development.

a lot of it because of the Olympic Games. Small parks have been built near intersections. There is one behind the Route 300 Terminus around the Caoqiao area. It is a major stop on the Third Ring Road line.

Now there is some water in the meandering middle section of the Macao River, in fact a little more than there is in the Liangshui River, but there are still no fish. Looking at Beijing as a whole, you can only imagine what kind of rivers they have in other areas if this is what's called having water. If the rivers in other areas are not dry and covered in grass, then they are full of stagnant water. For better or worse, this



little river of ours is still flowing naturally. Some people have said that if the South to North Water Diversion Project happens, the Liangshui River might have water in it.

People often talk about “environmental consciousness” but in reality, ordinary people were simply plain grateful just to have their own home. They couldn’t afford to be too fussy about the environment. For example, when we got married when we were just over 20 years old, we had a simple two-room home, which we thought was terrific. As for the environment, it depends on what one compares it to. If we could put up with it, we did. It was a lot better than not having a home or being holed up with our parents. So we were content with what we had.

Because I lived next to a smelly river, I developed an interest in environmental protection over time. To get started, I learned quite a lot about the environment from the ‘Friends of Nature’ website, and later discovered that there were ‘water action’ activities which my son and I got involved in. We realized that the environment was an issue and now we are getting organized.

The first time we walked along the Liangshui River was in May of 2007. We have done similar walks about twenty or thirty times a year, along almost all of Beijing’s rivers, some of them more than once, so that in the end we will have a complete understanding of the situation. My son only comes with me once a month now, as he is in eleventh grade (he was born in 1995) and he is very busy with his studies. However, it is his habit to write essays and everyone says he should write down what he sees, such as the work undertaken on the Liangshui River. That’s a lot better than going to special classes,² don’t you think?

² *Editors note: Here Li Yuling is referring to classes such as math, English, drawing and so on. Parents often put their children in special classes so they can go to a good university. The narrator doesn’t think that is as important as pursuing environmental issues.*

COMMENTARY BY WANG JIAN

The Liangshui River is located in the southern part of Beijing and runs along the old riverbed of the Yongding River before it changed direction. During the Jin Dynasty (1115-1234 AD), it linked up to the Yongding River at Kandankou. The origin of the Liangshui is the Yongding River, and it connects to the moat that circles the Jin capital, in the southwest of the Forbidden City.

Because frequent flooding on the Yongding River threatened the security of the capital, stone embankments were built in the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644 AD) to replace the earthen dykes above Lugou Bridge. In the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911 AD) both dredging and building were carried out and dykes installed to control water and help manage sandstorms. The lower reaches of the river were diverted to the southwest, which changed the source of the Liangshui River to Shuitou Village in Fengtai District – in the southeast it flowed past Dahongmen and the Old Palace right up to Maju Bridge in Tongzhou, and in the east it flowed past Gaogu Village and Zhangjiawan, where it turned southeast to enter the north part of the Grand Canal. It is around 52.7 kilometres long and the river basin covers about 693 square kilometers. Today it is one of Beijing’s main drainage rivers.

Since the 1980s, the Liangshui River has been notorious in Beijing for its bad smell. Before then, the river was able to purify itself naturally, and was home to many kinds of aquatic life. However, after becoming a dumping ground for metallurgical, chemical and industrial effluents, as well as large quantities of untreated domestic sewage, the river became highly polluted. As well as the visible filth there are also a great number of contaminants in the riverbed sludge.

Since coming to power 60 years ago, the Communist Party has conducted many water management programs to resolve the flooding problem in Beijing, but the problem of environmental pollution has never been a major concern for policy makers. After 2002, with the



restructuring of industrial production in Beijing, commercial enterprises causing pollution were closed down, production stopped, or they were relocated out of the city entirely. This led to a greater focus on the environmental rehabilitation of the Liangshui River, which took into account the human requirements of the area with flood prevention and dredging. Local materials were used, natural resources were safeguarded and maintained, and the river's own ecology and self-cleaning processes also helped to bring about the river's long-term sustainable viability.

The plan for managing river banks in a sound ecological way was also based on an understanding of the natural water cycle—river banks have been kept soft and in their natural state by not using cement or other building materials to line them. This facilitates the absorption of surface water and thus the mixing of surface and ground water. In addition, flood prevention measures, refilling of dry riverbeds and water level adjustments have all been useful in the recovery of the river's plant and animal life, the growth of which has also assisted in cleaning up the water.

A LITTLE BOY'S ESSAY

by Quan Yizhou

A study of the Liangshui River

On the fourth of May when we were returning from grandma's house, mom said that she would take me to inspect the Liangshui River near our house. We live in a place very close to the lower reaches of the river, and in its lowest reaches it intersects with a river called the Macao River.

Halfway along our walk we came to a bridge beneath which the water was black and smelly: the Liangshui River. As we walked upstream along the riverbank for a while, we saw numerous drainage outlets and a huge quantity of rubbish on the surface of the water. Upstream, the water was grey with some rubbish floating in it, but the amount of rubbish increased the further downstream we got and the water was a

deep yellow colour, becoming almost black in the dirtiest parts.

We walked for a while and saw quite a few small houses on both sides of the river, and I thought that whatever was coming out of the drainage outlets must have been sewage from the residents of those houses.

At Caihuying there was a road off to one side, and at the intersection I saw two more very large drain holes with dirty black smelly water and white froth coming out of them, which you could smell even from the roadside. That was the smelliest place on the upper reaches. Further up there was a sluice gate, on the other side of which the water was clean. There were fish, shrimps and some waterweed in the water there and some people on the bank were fishing and trying to catch shrimps.

We walked to a River Management Bureau office and asked an older gentleman at the information desk what was being done about the Liangshui River. He said, "After the river has been fixed up, clean water will be put into it. A pipe of two meters in diameter will be put in underneath the river bed so that later on it will pipe sewage and grey water through to the sewage treatment plant." He also said, "After the river has clean water in it, we will be able to go boating and raise fish." I asked my mom, "Could one plant water weed in the water?" Mom replied, "No, because if there was water weed in the river, boats would get tangled in it. However, some weed just might start growing there by itself!" The old gentleman also told us quite a few different ways that they were managing the river.

Quan Yizhou, Sunday, 6th June 2004

Work begins on the Liangshui River

Six months ago, I described the Liangshui River, and how it was dirty and smelly. It was so bad that the water had actually become completely black. It simply couldn't be called water anymore. Now the River Management Bureau has begun to



fix up the river, and everyone says that when it is done it will be clean, beautiful and crystal clear. I asked my dad to take me to have a look, because I was very interested in this project.

The water in the river had been diverted into a small channel, which was still blocked by a lot of sand bags. On the banks were piles of pebbles and everything below was in a state of confusion; there were trucks beeping and workmen banging away with hammers. I also saw a bulldozer digging out the soil and a truck bringing down a load of pebbles and pieces of broken brick. Dad said that the pieces of brick were for building a river embankment to prevent soil erosion. He said trees would be planted on the banks of both sides of the river which would help stop people from throwing rubbish into it. Why do people throw rubbish into the river? Well, just because it's right there and convenient. Trees will prevent them from doing so easily, at least a little bit. But if rubbish that's thrown down gets caught in the branches of the trees, is there anyone to do something about it? Beneath the river bed there is a pipe. Dad said that it goes through to the sewage treatment plant.

We walked on and on, and suddenly found a place where there was a mound of earth, planks of wood, steel bars and sheets of steel. Dad said that it must be where they are going to build a sluice gate. I heard one of the workmen say that they were going to sprinkle water on the embankments that had already been built and then cover them with canvas to prevent them from crumbling when the earth froze during the winter. He said that by the first of May next year, the repair work on the Liangshui River would be completed. Then the river will be transformed into a beautiful waterway.

Quan Yizhou
Sunday, 21st November, 2004

An He is a Beijing-based engineer. Wang Jian is a Beijing-based water expert.

MY HOME AND WATER: A PEOPLE'S ACCOUNT

Beijing, once famous for its sweet spring water and clear-flowing rivers is now infamous for its polluted canals and dried up riverbeds. *My Home and Water: A People's Account* provides a rare uncensored glimpse of life and water in the ancient capital of Beijing and surrounding areas – as told by longtime residents.

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