

So much water

「溪流並不只是流動的水，她還是流動的泥沙、流動的石頭，以及流動的生態系。沒有一條溪流像地圖上那個僵硬、不可更移的幾何圖形，溪流每天生長、堵塞、漫衍、沉積。溪流遠比我們可以測量到的長、深、曲折，而秘密。」（《家離水邊那麼近》）

延着一條垂直的金屬梯架，可以由新界北區孔嶺村的地面下沉至丹山河畔疏通河流的水道——這是羅玉梅深入地理的方式。

夏日雨水綿密，狹長的水道裡迴蕩雨水敲擊河流、風雨雷電伴隨蟲鳴狗吠的聲響。徘徊於其中，或近或遠的音律縈繞身畔，它們挾帶着河水的濕氣在水道深長的洞壁上震顫出悠遠的迴響，召喚出許多關於河水的記憶。

丹山河從八仙嶺腳下開始流淌，匯集山泉及雨水，一路蜿蜒西行，流匯成梧桐河之後向北延伸，依次與麻笏河、石上河與雙魚河匯流，最終在羅湖融匯為深圳河。「九龍界限街以北，深圳河以南」，正是1898年中英簽署的《展拓香港界址專條》中租借給英國的新界地區界址。彼時，英國派遣至新界的印度籍地理測量師為這裡河流標註名稱，或許是出於鄉愁，縱貫北區的梧桐河被他們以「印度河」命名，而印度河數條重要的支流則成為梧桐河支流的名稱：傑赫勒姆河（丹山河）、比亞斯河（雙魚河）、薩特萊傑河（石上河）。接受精確定位與繪圖訓練的測量師們不乏傷感地為他鄉的河流冠以故鄉的名字，藉助命名在殖民版圖中連接起充滿溫柔與感傷的情感紐帶。然而，現代測繪學的視野卻只限於對領土的標註、對界線的劃分，它看不見河水下的情感潛流，聽不見河床上砂石低語的故事。於是，以「印度河」為起點，羅玉梅開始她對新界北部河流的「測繪」。她的測量所關心的，是天空到水底的距離，季節到季節的長度，記憶與願望的形狀。

1963年夏季恰逢乾旱，《香港工商日報》記錄了上水鄉村的二百餘名婦女於梧桐河畔的華山山頂設壇求雨的過程。她們在山頂的求雨石邊鋪設青竹、花果、清水、祭祀牲畜，演練一套古老的儀式。據稱法事進行不久，便天降甘霖。

2021年夏季，羅玉梅在丹山/傑赫勒姆河的水道內遇見一條乾死的下口鯰魚。同年夏天，在一幅綠幕前，她依照文獻記載重現了1963年的祈雨儀式，她手搖銅鈴，踏着禹步，播頌咒語，向商羊神鳥祈雨，用黃豆與X光片製造雷雨聲效，作為想象的、歷史的回聲。

2013年6月21日的夏至，羅玉梅初探梧桐/印度河，在孔嶺村的一戶屋簷下錄得當日颱風的聲音。

2021年6月21日的夏至，羅玉梅回到丹山/傑赫勒姆河水道，在水道內的金屬梯架上安置錄音器材，記錄了夏至的夜雨，以及日間的蟬鳴、鳥叫、狗吠與廢鐵回收場的機動聲。

順着丹山河西行，在粉嶺龍躍村附近便是梧桐/印度河與麻笏河之交匯處。梧桐/印度河流速和緩、河水淡藍，而麻笏河水流湍急、色澤厚重。交匯時兩條河的紋理與速度相互摩擦，在一條河上並行出兩路水流。趟着河水，羅玉梅採樣了交匯處的兩條河水以及它們水底的聲音。於是，水紋、水路、水聲、水體以及身體趟過河流的記憶成為她測繪河流的數據：交錯起伏的水紋局部被燈帶打亮、梧桐/印度河一路蜿蜒向北的路線被無人機低空捕捉、水流在河底與泥沙碰撞的聲音在玻璃樽內共振迴響、深淺不一的河水在塑膠桶內浸泡着羅玉梅趟河而行的相片。展覽中唯一接近地理測繪的視角來自一架無人機由早上至黃昏時分從孔嶺村一路北上至羅湖火車站的低空俯拍。黃昏的光暈漸漸把畫面染成橘紅，伴隨着河底水流的迴響，無人機緩慢地向北飛行，俯視梧桐/印度河所串聯起的農田、道路、工地、棕土，新界與深圳，以及不同時空裡的事件、地理與祈願。展覽昏暗、粗糲的空間猶如河床邊的水道，它的洞體內散落着河水湧入水道時留下的生命、聲音與記憶。羅玉梅在空間的角落及滑輪座椅周圍堆疊起厚重的沙袋，仿佛在避免河水衝入時將這些記憶帶走——畢竟，相比起書寫的歷史，它們顯得如此脆弱，隨時都會從指縫中流走。

羅玉梅的創作常常透過水體勾勒香港的地理。從《維多利亞之東》中對消失的海域的追溯，到《那傳來浪潮的方向》裡對海上遷移的勾勒，水體在她的作品中既是描繪香港地貌及地緣政治的重要元素，亦是映照個體記憶、身份與情感結構的流動晶體。由磅礴、充滿史詩感的海水退回至絹細、聲響細膩的溪流，《河上沒有人唱歌》以散文的結構丈量着關於河流的種種深度：從天空的凝望到山頂的儀式，從地面的勘探到水底的音律，羅玉梅垂直丈量着地理空間的深度與記憶。在她勾勒的河流地貌中交錯着微觀的、個體的聲音以及漫長的、歷史的迴響，譬如殖民全球化下被錯置的鄉愁流入河水所匯成的區域邊界，又譬如一條魚的願望和一隻鳥的視野。

羅玉梅告訴我她在讀台灣作家吳明益的散文集《家離水邊那麼近》，於是我也翻起這本水汽氤氳的文集，恰好讀到作者談及自己多年沿水而行的田野調查，為的是書寫那些「漂浮在水上、沉默到水底、隨着水所流逝、以及化為雨水重新滲透進入土地的種種。」誠然，水所流

經、滲透的地理一路向下蔓延，牽動起被遺落和不可見的歷史與情感，它們交疊起伏，形成難以測繪的地貌，觀察者必須深入它們的岩層與水體，連接它們所滲透的不同時空與地域——這是羅玉梅深入地理的方式。

So much water

‘The stream is not just flowing water; she is also flowing sands, flowing stones, flowing ecosystems. No stream is like the rigid, immovable geometric figure on the map.

Every day the stream grows, is blocked, diffuses, deposits. The stream is far longer, deeper, more full of twists and turns, and more secretive than we can ever measure.’

(So Much Water So Close to Home)

Along a vertical metal ladder, one descends from the ground of Hung Leng Tsuen in the northern New Territories to the watercourse for dredging the Tan Shan River: This is Law Yuk Mui’s method of delving into geography.

Rainfall is heavy in summer. Sounds of rainwater hitting the river, of thunder and lightning, of the calling of insects and barking of dogs reverberate in the long and narrow watercourse. Wandering in the midst of it all, rhythms from far and near trail about, carrying the moisture of the river, striking upon the extensive wall of the watercourse, creating far-reaching echoes, summoning the many memories about the river.

Tan Shan River begins at the foot of Pat Sin Leng, gathering mountain springs and rainwater as it meanders westward, joins Ng Tung River and extending northward, followed by Ma Wat River, Shek Sheung River and Sheung Yue River, before finally becoming Sham Chun River in Lo Wu. ‘North of Boundary Street on the Kowloon Peninsula and south of the Sham Chun River’, later known as the New Territories, were leased to the United Kingdom under the Convention for the Extension of Hong Kong Territory signed between Qing China and the United Kingdom in 1898. At that time, Indian surveyors sent by the British to the New Territories named the rivers. Perhaps out of a yearning for home, they named Ng Tung River that ran through the northern district the ‘Indus’, and the tributaries of Ng Tung River were named after the other important tributaries of the Indus River: Jhelum (Tan Shan River), Beas (Sheung Yue River), Sutlej (Shek Sheung River). Trained to be precise in positioning and mapping, the surveyors, in a sentimental gesture, conferred names from home upon the rivers in a foreign land, and through the act of naming, connected the emotional bonds of utmost tenderness and melancholy across the colonial map. Yet modern surveying and cartography is limited to the marking of territories and drawing of boundaries; it does not discern the emotional undercurrents under the water, does not hear the

murmured stories of the sands and debris on the river bed. And so, beginning with 'Indus River', Law Yuk Mui 'surveys and maps' her own rivers in the northern New Territories. She is solely interested in the distance between the sky and the river bed, the length between seasons, the shapes of memories and prayers.

During the summer drought of 1963, *The Kung Sheung Daily News* reported two hundred village women in Sheung Shui who set up an altar on the top of Wa Shan by Ng Tung River, praying for rain. They laid bamboo, flowers and fruits, fresh water, animal sacrifice beside the rain prayer rock on the mountain top, and performed a set of ancient rituals. It is said that not long after the ritual was performed rain fell from the sky.

In the summer of 2021, Law encountered a dried catfish in the watercourse of Tan Shan/Jhelum River. The same summer, in front of a green screen, she reenacted the 1963 ritual according to the archival records. Ringing a copper bell and pacing the Steps of Yu, she chanted mantras and prayed to the Shangyang bird god for rain. With soybeans and x-ray films she produced the sound effect of a thunderstorm. An imaginary, historical echo.

On the summer solstice of 21 June, 2013, Law first visited Ng Tung/Indus River, and recorded the sound of typhoon under the eaves of a village house in Hung Leng Tsuen.

On the summer solstice of 21 June, 2021, Law returned to Tan Shan/Jhelum River. She installed recording equipment on a metal ladder in the watercourse and recorded the night rain, as well as the sounds of cicadas, birdsong, dogs barking and the machines from the scrap metal yard.

Following Tan Shan River, in the west lies Lung Yeuk Tsuen in Fanling, near which is the confluence of Ng Tung/Indus River and Ma Wat River. When the gentle flow of pale blue water of Ng Tung/Indus River and the rapid and opaque Ma Wat River meet, the textures and speeds of the two rivers collide against each other, two parallel streams flow in the same river. Wading in the river, Law collected the two waters at the confluence and their sounds in the riverbed. Water patterns, water flows, sounds of water, water bodies, and memories of the body wading through the river became the data for her river surveying: The interlaced and undulating water patterns partially illuminated by light strips, the northward meandering Ng Tung/Indus River captured by the low flying drone, the sounds of water colliding with sands and dregs in the riverbed

reverberating in a glass bottle, in a plastic bucket, a photograph of Law wading in the river floats upon different shades of water. In the exhibition, the only perspective resembling that of surveying is from a drone which flew over Hung Leng Tsuen all the way north to Lo Wu railway station, from morning till dusk. Little by little, the fading light dyed the scene into saffron. Accompanied by echoes from the riverbed, slowly the drone glided north, overlooking farmlands, roads, construction sites, brownfield lands connected by Ng Tung/Indus River, the New Territories and Shenzhen, events, geographies and prayers of different times and spaces. The dark and rough exhibition space resembles a watercourse by the riverbed, whose cavernous body is scattered with the lives, sounds and memories left behind as the river flows past. In the corners of the space and around the rolling chairs, Law stacks heavy sandbags, as if to protect the memories from being washed away by the influx of water: After all, compared to written history, they appear so fragile, likely to escape through our fingers any moment.

Very often in her works, Law Yuk Mui charts the geography of Hong Kong through water bodies. In *Victoria East* where she traces the vanished seas, and *From Whence the Waves Came* where she maps the trajectories of migration across the seas, the water body is not only an important element in her depiction of Hong Kong's landscape and geopolitics, but also a moving prism reflecting individual memories, identities and emotional structures. From the majestic and epic seas, to the silky, delicate-sounding streams, *There Is No One Singing On The River* measures the various depths of the river through the prose structure. From gazing at the sky to the ritual on the mountain top, from exploration on the ground to underwater rhythms, Law probes vertically into the depths and memories of geographic space. The river landscapes she maps are intertwined with microscopic, individual voices, and enduring, historical echoes, such as the regional boundaries formed by rivers fused with dislocated homesickness under colonial globalisation, the prayer of a fish, or the vision of a bird.

Law told me that she was reading *So Much Water So Close to Home* by Taiwanese writer Wu Ming-yi. So I picked up this essay collection steaming of water vapour, and chanced upon the part when the writer wrote about his years of fieldwork along the waters, in order to write about 'the things that float on water, fall silent underwater, vanish with the flow of water, and those transformed into rainwater, infiltrating back into the soil.' Indeed, the geography through which water flows and penetrates extends all the way down, evoking lost and invisible histories and memories. Overlapping and undulating, they form landscapes almost impossible to map.

Observers must go deep under their rock formations and water bodies, and connect the many times and territories they penetrate. And such is how Law Yuk Mui penetrates into geography.