

# MIN RIVER FLOWS TO THE SEA

Yangzi

Translated by Wen Peihong

Min River flows on through the Yangtze River into the sea,  
takes ahold like starlight, an endless persistence and exploration.

The Min flows into the sea,  
follows the instinct of rock and water.  
The Min is a source of the sea, feeds the sea,  
and the sea submits to the shape and inclusion of flow.  
The Min is the flow joining the sea,  
authentic flow feeding the Yangtze,  
a flow to its tributaries, celebrated and unknown,  
so small they are too much trouble  
to mark on maps.

Just like the ancient people fed along the banks  
overhanging the river, the Qiang were  
once nomads, their fates inseparable from their sheep.  
They now slash a herding whip and grip a plough handle.  
In the shadow of the tempestuous mountain, its clouds and singing birds,  
one thousand years have passed,  
suppressed by yet another thousand years of silence.  
The Qiang tend the grains' color and luster.  
Their eyes, once accustomed to melody of open spaces,  
have adapted to the rhythm of the terraced field,

their riding feet to walking the rough road,  
their stomachs to the five grains.  
At last they forgot the milk and dense and fragrant beef  
of their once ranging cattle.  
Memory fades from the eyesight of the elders  
and is lost in the howling valley.

Min, one immense and silent flow,  
wears away, one by one, opulent imaginations and expectations.  
Of benefit to the people in the Heavenly Kingdom, the Min flows  
A civilized and barbarous flow, choked by the Du Jiang Yan Dam,  
the Min that unveiled the mysterious gold stars,  
the ruins of Sanxingdui, the 9th wonder of the world.  
For centuries, the Min sowed their bronze and jade into the earth.  
The relentless flow still sweeps the great plateau and basin,  
over the land, across to the Pacific Ocean, from then until now,  
flows into the sea, the flow of the Min, great with voice and essence,  
this flow passes through my heart, my life.

This is the stream of my hometown, garnered, linked and gathered  
around the singing Taoping Village, Gucheng Village,  
Mianhu Village, and Yingpan Mountain, murmured  
from the ploughing cow and father's fingers washing his feet.  
It is the flow under the walnut tree, apple tree, peach tree.  
From the villages of Black Tiger, Chibusu, Yanmen Trench, West Qian,  
it flows, murmuring under the mill of stone blockhouse  
and the shadow of the Qiang tower.  
Hand in hand with its brothers and sisters, it flows, triggering sluggishly  
the paradise of the flying phoenix and dragon dancing upside down.

Min River gives itself to the sea.  
A universal flow, with no beginning and no ending,  
a flow bred by Min Mountain and back from Heaven,  
an overall flow, a creative flow, an original flow,

the great flow cut through Longmen Mountains,  
 the flow of life and death where King Yu the Great grew,  
 an authentic flow, a self-conscious, deep-rooted flow,  
 an ethnic flow, through numerous numbnesses, a never covered  
     deep-rooted flow,  
 a flow, breaking through clouds and fogs, never allured and  
     detained by ditches,  
 a forever flow, a never-ending flow, an always-rushing-to-the-sea flow.

*Translation Note:*

*The Qiang people, the oldest minority group in China, live upstream of the Min River, which the poet Yangzi celebrates and eulogizes in this poem. The pictographic character (Qiang) suggests that the Qiang people live on either herding (as the stroke looks like a herding whip of a shepherd), or farming (as the stroke looks like a plough handle of a farmer.) The force and endurance of the Min symbolizes for the poet the determination and perilous existence of his people as their population, language, and culture faces erosion in the contemporary world. The word “flow” is an approximate translation of the Chinese word “liu.” Both a noun and a verb, the word means to move vigorously and with determination and denotes a current. This poem is meant to be chanted or sung with a forceful stress on the word “flow” in the presentation.*

# SUBARCTIC FRUIT

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Sarah M. Brownsberger

You enter a rocky valley and notice the scrub. Crouch down and berries come clear: pink, green, glaucous blue. The sun will move on before you do. We are born to hunt for globular things, from speckled eggs to burls and even misty gobs of beach glass.

Pulling berries from a bush is a form of wealth-getting. “We will take our berries home and can them,” says the mother in McCloskey’s *Blueberries for Sal*. Today we think of wealth as the result of clever dealings with man-made systems, but until recently everyone knew that economies grow from habitat. Prosperity hinges on territory. Hence trade. Hence war. We wear diamonds or amber to flaunt the wealth of our habitat: we flash the appearance of sparkling water and glowing fruit.

My current habitat is near Reykjavik, Iceland, at 64° N. Here, edible produce grows mainly offshore, silver and scaly: fruits de mer. On shore, no fruit bigger than a dime grows unassisted.

For fruit you need soil, but for soil you need organic matter. Rich dirt is the fruit of eons. The town where I live rests on 7,000-year-old lava, a riot of basalt folds and twists and pinnacles. Gray *racomitrium* moss lies over it like frost; grass and flowers grow in rifts. East of town the rock is still younger and utterly bare; near *Eyjafjallajökull*, it has yet to cool. Newborn rock is barren as the moon. Though rich in water, Iceland is Europe’s largest desert.

Life likes to appear. Lichen blooms on basalt in rusty splotches. Where erosion mingles clay and lichen crumbs, low plants like campion and thyme crop up. Mosses thrive in crannies and nourish each other until they can support flowers big enough for a bee to land on. Slowly heath comes into being, a sweet-smelling carpet of plants so tough you can scour pots with them.

A classic Icelandic children's book frankly explains, "We live in a cold place, where only grasses can grow. We can't digest grass, so we eat animals that can, such as sheep and cows."

But Iceland does have native trees, low and gnarled as they may be. Scrub willows crouch by mountain streams. The local birch, or "perfume bark" in Icelandic, is as sweet-smelling and as tough as heath. After the recent eruption at Eyjafjallajökull, a ranger surveying the gray devastation stood amazed as a tinkling sound, like ice cubes in glasses, began all around him: the birch buds were breaking through glassy coats of ash to leaf out.

Unaware of the fragility of volcanic soil, Norse settlers cleared the native trees and let their stock range free, nibbling saplings. Now wind skirls up loose soil. In *Collapse*, Jared Diamond calls the Icelandic environment one of the most degraded in the world. Elsewhere one flees the city in search of green; in Iceland, the greenery is mostly in town.

Transplanted from New England, I sometimes wake from dreams of hardwood trees. I pine for canopies of chattering life. In the hills of Reykjanes you are lucky to see a raven. The only mammal native to Iceland is the fox.

But not all our aesthetic joy stems from fertility. The deep slant of northern light makes whole days pink and gold. The sun smolders on snowy peaks as sharp as fish spines. Auroras, ice castles, and nacreous clouds ache with a high-lonesome beauty. Coming back from a trip home I once closed my eyes against the sight of Keflavik's barren plain, only to reopen them at a gasp of pleasure from my fellow passengers: the plane was taxiing through a lake of violet fire, a field of lupine.

In April, between sleet squalls, I walk the cobble shore and eye the tasty-looking vermilion nodes that grow on kelp roots. In May I nibble scurvy grass. Then suddenly it's June, night is vanquished, gentians riot, spirits soar; the radio declares, "Sun holiday, sun holiday, this factory is closed due to good weather." By late August, the endless light has conspired with stoncrop, bartsia, sedums, ling, bearberry, and other sisters of the moor to produce vaccinium myrtillus, bilberry, or "chief berry" in Icelandic—blueberries to any tongue.

My mother-in-law has a berry scoop that is an antique tin can with tines soldered on, painted a durable lead-green. For years she and her husband picked each fall in a certain Happy Valley they had found, in a fjord facing due north on the Arctic.

Recently four generations of our family met there. We spanned eighty years to eighteen months, false teeth to milk teeth. The oldest struggled down on her knees and the baby sat chest-deep and picked and ate with no instruction. The haze of next winter lay far out to sea. We brought our treasure home, picked over and stored it, and then hurried, sunburnt, to the hospital where my father-in-law lay stunned from a stroke.

We told him we'd been berrying, and where. His eyes grew canny and interested. "Gobs of berries," we told him. "We picked all day."

"Good," he said.