

UNIT 1: GEOGRAPHY AND ENVIRONMENT
LESSON 4

Changing Landscapes

Explore the impact of urbanization and overdevelopment
in Shanghai



Lesson Overview

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Observe Chinese artworks depicting landscapes that include natural and built elements, and consider their significance
- Learn about urbanization and overdevelopment in contemporary Shanghai
- Explore how art plays a role in local activism in their own communities

VOCABULARY

- Landscape** A type of artwork that shows an environment, either real or imagined
- Photomontage** An artwork made from edited photos combined together into one image
- Urbanization** The ongoing process whereby an area becomes more like a city, including increased density of population and buildings
- Handscroll** A horizontal format for artwork and calligraphy that is meant to be unrolled and viewed, section by section, from right to left

REQUIRED MATERIALS

- Paper
- Drawing materials (such as colored pencils, crayons, markers, etc.)
- Scissors
- Tape or glue
- Large backing materials (such as butcher paper, poster board, etc.)

INCLUDED RESOURCES

- Animated video: [*On the Quiet Water—Underwater Paradise*](#), by Yang Yongliang
- [Photograph](#) of the Shanghai skyline
- [Map of China](#) showing the location of Shanghai



Click image to enlarge

For the Teacher

Background Information

Chinese artists and artisans have long included nature in their work—from real and imagined creatures to natural features of the land. Plants, mountains, clouds, and water are prominent in both Chinese sculpture and paintings. Mountains held specific significance in China, as they attracted rain clouds and protected the herbs needed to help people stay healthy and live long lives; they were seen as sacred and receptacles of nature’s *qi*, or vital energy. Chinese artists believed that heaven and earth existed in harmony, so in *shan shui*, or landscape painting, they sought to show nature’s relationship with the whole cosmos. Thus, natural elements in artworks represent valued aspects of life. For example, a pine tree signifies longevity because it stays green throughout the winter, and the plum blossom represents renewal and perseverance because the plum tree is the first of the year to bloom.

Landscape painting served to remind the viewer of appropriate conduct or to provide inspiration for the future. This ancient mode of expression is still used by contemporary artists such as Yang Yongliang. Landscape paintings are generally painted as either handscrolls or hanging scrolls; Yang creates both, but the piece featured in this lesson is a handscroll. Traditionally, handscrolls are unrolled a little at a time, and looked at from right to left, taking the viewer on a journey through the landscape. Yang created this scroll while living in Shanghai, and the work is a commentary on the rapid, apparently uncontrolled development occurring across China.

Artwork Description

From afar, this work by Yang Yongliang, titled *On the Quiet Water—Underwater Paradise*, appears to be a landscape in gray tones with mountains shrouded in clouds and surrounded by water. The landscape is dominated by a large, still body of water in the center. We see small islands in the right foreground, with more islands barely visible through mist in the background. To the left, there is a larger land mass made up of tall, dramatic cliffs, through which rivers and waterfalls run. In the distance is another small, mountainous island. Upon closer inspection, it is apparent that the seemingly natural features of this landscape are all composed of layered and collaged industrial images. The mountains are formed of urban skyscrapers, and the trees are made up of power lines and construction materials. What at first looked like a waterfall in a natural landscape now becomes a tsunami destroying the built environment. The view appears shrouded in mist, which

lends a mystical mood to a traditional natural landscape but evokes pollution in contemporary urban imagery. The scroll at once displays both the beauty and serenity of ancient landscape painting and the more complex and bleak imagery of a modern urban landscape.



Yang Yongliang (Chinese, born 1980). *On the Quiet Water—Underwater Paradise* (止水之上—水下乐园), 2008. Media inkjet print on paper, mounted as a handscroll, image: 19¹¹/₁₆ × 111¹³/₁₆ in. (50 × 284 cm); mount: 20⁷/₈ × 210⁹/₁₆ in. (53 × 535.6 cm). Brooklyn Museum; Gift of Dr. Myron Arlen, Benjamin Faber, Dr. Ellen Pan, and Dr. John Tchang, by exchange, 2017.2. © Yang Yongliang. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

About the Artwork

Yang Yongliang, a contemporary Chinese artist, builds upon the established form of Chinese landscape painting by photographing buildings in China and then combining the photographs in collages. He explores economic, environmental, and social issues by focusing on unrestrained urban development in China and abroad. Inspired by *shan shui*, traditional Chinese landscape painting, Yang works with digital photography like a painter. Inspired by the thirty-year transformation of Shanghai, his hometown, Yang plays with the landscapes of Chinese *shan shui* artists as they sought to demonstrate the harmony of heaven and earth, and nature's relationship with the cosmos. His work is a commentary on the city's uncontrolled urbanization and industrialization, and the tension between harmony and discord. Yang's website states: "Ancient Chinese people painted landscapes to praise the magnificence of nature; Yang's works, on the other hand, lead towards a critical rethinking of contemporary reality." This reality is a dystopian view of nature, one that replaces the idea of its ultimate harmony. Yang's work prompts such questions as: What is the cost of modernization? Are Chinese values in relation to nature shifting or being lost?

Lesson

STEP 1: 5 MINUTES

Introduction

Tell students that the class will be thinking about different ways that artists can depict their environments.

Explain that landscape painting, in which artists show scenes from nature, is an important tradition in Chinese art. In Chinese landscape paintings, artists drew inspiration from the environment around them to express feelings and ideas about the importance of the natural world.

Explain that landscapes can show nature or built structures, and that some landscapes combine both. Some also include people and animals. Then ask: If you were making a landscape showing our environment, what sort of things would it be important to include?

STEP 2: 20 MINUTES

Artwork Discussion

Explain: We are going to look at a contemporary landscape by the artist Yang Yongliang. The landscape is an example of a handscroll, or a long, horizontal artwork that is meant to be viewed slowly from right to left, so we are going to watch an animated video that helps us to look at it in this way.

Show students the [animated video](#) of *On the Quiet Water—Underwater Paradise*.

After watching, have students share with each other in pairs:

- How did this artwork make you feel? Why?
- What's one thing you're wondering about this artwork?

Show students images of the full artwork. (Note: Because the artwork is very long, it may be difficult to display it all at once; you can also show them [detail images](#) one at a time, or print out the detail images to hang on the wall or pass around.) Ask:

- What details did you notice?
- How would you feel if you lived in the city landscape created by the artist?

Tell students that this artwork is a photomontage, a collage made from lots of different photographs of Shanghai, a city in China. Show them the map of China, pointing out Shanghai, and the photograph of the Shanghai skyline.

Tell students that Yang was living in Shanghai when he made this artwork, and he noticed the city changing very quickly, growing into the second-largest city in the world. Although the photographs are of a real place, he put them together to make an imaginary landscape and titled the piece *On the Quiet Water—Underwater Paradise*.

Ask: Why do you think Yang titled the artwork *On the Quiet Water—Underwater Paradise*?

STEP 3: 20 MINUTES

Reimagining Our Community

Tell students that Yang lives and works in China, and uses his art to draw attention to contemporary issues facing his communities.

Brainstorm together: Ask students to think about a specific community they share. You can ask them to focus on their school community, or on their neighborhood, if most students in your class live locally. Have them share observations about their community and write their responses on the board. To help them brainstorm, ask such questions as:

- What are the most important parts of our community?
- What changes have you noticed in our community?
- What are some things we wish we could change in our community?
- How would we like to feel in our community?

Art-making: Tell students they are going to make individual drawings representing some part of their community, and that they will combine their drawings together to make one large community drawing.

Pass out drawing materials.

While students are working, prepare a larger surface (e.g., butcher paper, poster board, bristol board, or even a cardboard box, for an added 3-D element) to use as the backing for the final artwork.

Once students have finished their drawings, give them the option to contribute to a larger collective work. Students will tape or glue their entire artworks or cut-out portions of them to the larger backing to create a collaborative vision of their community.

If time allows, ask students to agree on a name for their collective work.

If time allows, hang the artwork and have students look at it together, sharing things they notice about the finished piece.

Lesson Extensions

SOCIAL STUDIES CONNECTION—COMMUNITY HISTORY

Ask students to return to their community brainstorm, and ask: What questions do you have about your community? Who could help us learn the answers? Identify several individuals who could help students to learn about the community's past, present, and future, and share the students' questions with those community members. If possible, invite the community members to come to class to be interviewed by students.

ARTS CONNECTION—PHOTO COLLAGE

After creating a collaborative artwork about a community they share, ask students to think about another community they're a part of. (Examples could include their family, their block or neighborhood, etc.) Ask students to brainstorm about the community they chose, thinking about what parts of it are most important to them, how they feel in the community, what changes have happened in the community, etc. Finally, have students go through old magazines to find images that relate to the community, and collage the images together to create an artwork representing it.

Cover:
Yang Yongliang (Chinese, born 1980). *On the Quiet Water—Underwater Paradise* (止水之上—水下乐园) (detail), 2008. Media inkjet print on paper, mounted as a handscroll, image: 19¹¹/₁₆ × 111¹³/₁₆ in. (50 × 284 cm); mount: 20⁷/₁₆ × 210¹/₁₆ in. (53 × 533.6 cm). Brooklyn Museum; Gift of Dr. Myron Arlen, Benjamin Faber, Dr. Ellen Pan, and Dr. John Tchang, by exchange, 2017.2. © Yang Yongliang. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

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The Arts of China Teaching Toolkit initiative is coordinated by Michael Reback, Teacher Services Coordinator, with assistance from Keonna Hendrick, School Programs Manager, and Adjoa Jones de Almeida, Director of Education.