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### Memories of the Revolution

by Nicole Pope  
May 2005

China's Yellow River (also known as China's Sorrow) has made at least five major course changes since 602 B.C. During these tumults, the river destroyed everything in its path, causing major floods and killing hundreds of thousands of people. But along with devastation, the floods also brought to China some of the most fertile soil in the world, annually producing large crops.

Chinese-born choreographer Yin Mei's *Nomad: A River*, a new work presented at Dance Theater Workshop in March, explores the destructive and life-giving dichotomy of the river and, in a larger sense, uses this to serve as a metaphor for the more personal, namely Yin Mei's reassessment and examination of her own identity.



Photograph of Yin Mei's *Nomad: The River* by Julieta Cervantes.

Yin Mei, once a child of the Cultural Revolution, muses on a passage she wrote as a seven-year-old: "Whatever our enemies are for, we are against/Whatever our enemies are against, we are for/I will become a steal and iron fighter/I am the red air of the revolution." What happens when a grown woman of forty-two questions how her once young, innocent hand could have scribbled down phrases filled with such vehemence? What happens when that same woman wonders who she is, if not "the red air of the revolution"? Such questions preoccupy Mei in *Nomad: The River*, which invokes nightmarish images recalled from her experiences.

In addition to dancers Gaye Atay, Sonja Kostich, and Perdo Osorio, who appear to be nothing more than ghostly shadows behind three rows of 3' x 7' fiberglass sheets, the stage is saturated with Christopher Salter's projections of tree branches. The images thicken and multiply, pulsing with fluid and morphing into what look like veins or rushing rivers. Along with the movement, the images bring a texture to the work. The dancers lure the audience into a world of memories. Dancers stick their arms through the sheets and beckon with their fingers. They grab their throats as if being hung to the soft groan of cicadas.

At one point, Yin Mei re-creates a life-altering memory, one that prompted her to question her role in the revolution. One sunny day, as Mei recalls it, she saw a bereaved mother collecting the body of her executed son, a counterrevolutionary. It began to thunder and rain, though the sun remained brilliant and shining. "Were the heavens crying for this murdered man?" she wonders. "Was this a crime?" Using metal sheets, Mei dramatizes the memory. Women wrap the square sheets around their waists as if donning skirts of armor. In triangle formation, they diligently step forward as "steal and iron fighters," shaking the sheets overhead to create the roar and rumbling of thunder.

Yin Mei's choreography is filled with a sense of silent suffering. A subtle limp, closed eyes, or an unwilling, sustained drop to the floor bespeaks resistance or the sorrow inherent in having no choice. When Osorio covers the other dancers' legs with red paint, they dutifully lift up their skirts, looking helplessly into the distance. The image is powerful, but when coupled with the heavy-handed lyrics of Keren Ann or the overly sentimental rounds of Philip Glass, it verges on the verbose. Mei's movement is best when resonating with sounds of nature or the electronic samplings of Salter. And while *Nomad: The River* is deeply rooted in Mei's personal experience, the work is abstract enough for viewers to find their own personal connections to this journey of self-discovery.

*Nicole Pope is a dancer and writer living in Brooklyn.*

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**The Independent Press Association-NY recently honored *The Brooklyn Rail* with the following awards:**

1st place: Best article about Immigrant Issues or Racial Justice-- Gabriel Thompson, "One Immigrant's Journey" (September 2004).

1st place: Best article about the Arts--Amy Zimmer, "The Brownsville Rec. Center" (April 04)

2nd place: Best article about the Arts--Brian Carreira, "Harlem Arts: A Faux Renaissance" (Dec 03/Jan 04).

2nd place: Best editorial or commentary--T. Hamm, "The Issue is Free Speech" (Dec 03/Jan 04).

3rd Place: Best Investigative News Story--Marjory Garrison, "Minimum Matter of Survival" (May 04)

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Honorable mention: Best Original Feature--Yvette Walton, "My Life in the NYPD" (Dec 03/Jan 04).  
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