

An ordinary hero

A LEGEND COMES TRUE

Huang Dafa is hailed as a living personification of the myth of Yu Gong, 'the old man who moves mountains'. Erik Nilsson explores his world in Zunyi, Guizhou.

The villagers he led only had hand tools — and explosives. He's the stuff of legend — but real. Huang Dafa is arguably an actual, modern incarnation of the ancient myth of Yu Gong.

The saying *yu gong yi shan* — or "the old man moves mountains" — is a parable of persistence that seems foolhardy in the face of unimaginable odds.

Fable says two peaks separated Yu Gong's home from the village.

So, he decided to dig them away.

Another elderly man mocked him. Yu Gong responded that while his descendants could dig for generations, the mountains wouldn't grow any higher.

The gods were so moved by his determination that they moved the mountains for him.

Huang enjoyed no such divine intervention.

He had to rely on pure will.

The 81-year-old spent 36 years persuading and then leading villagers to chisel about 10 kilometers of irrigation channels into the vertical sides of three karst mountains.

Droughts below pucker the soil and left residents with just enough drinking water.

Villagers forging the waterway sometimes had to hike to the top of the ascendable side of the mountains, tie themselves to trees and rappel down sheer — sometimes-concave — cliff faces.

The peaks stood in the way of the water source nearest Caowangba village on the outskirts of Guizhou province's Zunyi city.

So, like the ancient Yu Gong, Huang grabbed a shovel — and made the impossible possible.

It was not only difficult but also dangerous.

Huang was the first to lash himself to a tree trunk at the top of a 300-meter-high cliff and take a leap of faith over the edge, he says.

"If I didn't, nobody else dared."

Even afterward, sometimes, nobody was willing to, villager Huang Binchun recalls.

"We eventually persuaded some young men," the 53-year-old recalls.

"The tasks were precarious and hard. Some nights, we slept in caves on the cliff. Everybody worked together. And we completed the channel."

The villagers spent a decade boring more than 100 meters through one peak — in vain.

Their determination was abundant. Their understanding of irrigation wasn't.

The water didn't flow.

But residents still use the tunnel as a passageway to walk through — rather than over — the mountains.

Just like Yu Gong.

Huang later spent a few years studying water-system engineering in Zunyi's Fengxiang town.

He returned to Caowangba and asked the villagers to try again. They agreed.

The water arrived in 1995. Previously, residents lined up from morning until night to get just enough for their most basic needs from the last well.

"Other sources had dried up," the village's deputy chief Xu Zhou recalls.

"There was a rule that nobody could take too much. If they did, someone else may not have any for breakfast. These conditions motivated us."

People sometimes argued. "Drinking water was short," Xu explains.

He started working on the



Irrigation channels are chiseled on the cliffs of mountains by Huang Dafa and his fellow villagers in Caowangba in Guizhou province's Zunyi. XING HAN / FOR CHINA DAILY



Huang Dafa (right) spent 36 years persuading and then leading villagers to build 10 kilometers of waterways. PAN LINGFENG / FOR CHINA DAILY



Left: Huang Dafa shares his story with local primary school students. YUAN QINGPAN / CHINA DAILY

Right: Caowangba's villagers have tap water after the irrigation channels' completion. XING HAN / FOR CHINA DAILY



channel at age 12.

"Forget irrigation. We had a 330-square-meter rice paddy that was parched to the point you could put your foot in the cracks in the dry season. It was a serious problem. So, we started looking for a serious solution."

There weren't really other options aside from doing nothing. And nothing wasn't really an option, villagers say.

That was Huang Dafa's main point.

Carving the channel across the cliffs seemed like more than an uphill battle.

But the consequence of inaction was steeper than the vertical precipices the villagers had to reconfigure.

"If we can do something (for progress), we should," Huang Dafa says.

"We shouldn't wait for things to happen. Dozens of years of my life could have passed without anything happening."

So, he and the villagers decided to change things. Even if the odds were stacked against them — as high as a mountain ... or three.

"I was determined to bring

water to Caowangba. People have had plenty of food since. Full stomachs mean peace of mind."

But the sacrifices necessary to achieve this included family. Huang Dafa's daughter and grandson passed away while he was on-site.

"He wasn't home, even when my sister was on her deathbed," recalls his 53-year-old son, Huang Binquan.

"The construction teams wouldn't know how to proceed if he wasn't there."

In the end, it wasn't just water but also a rising quality

of life that poured into the village.

Yu Gong and his family, like Huang Dafa and Caowangba's villagers, perhaps show we can move mountains that serve as obstacles through determination — with or without heaven's help.

That is, we can do it on our own if need be.

Liu Yixi contributed to this story.

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An old fool and a wise man



Erik Nilsson
REPORTER'S LOG

Yu Gong was considered a fool. But I consider Huang Dafa to be wise.

Indeed, the legendary Yu Gong's success in moving mountains was ultimately because he had the gods on his side — albeit unbeknownst to him.

Huang instead believed he could accomplish the seemingly impossible mission of leading villagers to carve 10 kilometers of irrigation channels into the dizzyingly precipitous bluffs of three karsts without assistance from above.

Or, at least he knew he had to try.

There was little choice. People need water.

That's his wisdom, though — to act, although prospects seemed sublimely daunting.

Just waiting for a miracle wouldn't work.

They had to create their own.

The villagers he led ultimately took fate into their own hands and overcame unbelievable odds.

Huang isn't only wise but also brave, I realized when I actually climbed the mountains in remote Guizhou province's Caowangba village and teetered atop the waterway's edge.

The rim is only several centimeters wide. The fall would be hundreds of meters.

Plus, the cliff overhangs above in several parts, throwing off my balance as I tiptoed along the lip.

One wrong step would be the last.

It's an acrophobe's nightmare. And I'm mortified by heights.

Vertigo seized my soul many times.

I'm maybe more than half joking when I say I was perhaps more afraid of dying from fear than from falling. (Slightly.)

The trick was to keep moving forward. Once I stopped, gravity exerted its downward tug on my psyche.

Physically, my legs melted.

Huang and the villagers started from even higher locations and rappelled down the mountain with ropes tied to their waists like a special-forces team — albeit one of farmers armed with only the most rudimentary of implements.

Indeed, Huang possesses not only Yu Gong's determination but also courage beyond the mythical figure's.

Yu Gong was tenacious. But he never rappelled down anything.

Yu gong yi shan, or the "old man moves mountains" — sometimes "man" is replaced with "fool" in the translations — was the first *chengyu* (four-character sayings based on ancient parables) I learned.

It's still my favorite — and even more so after spending a week with the real Yu Gong.

“I was determined to bring water to Caowangba. People have had plenty of food since. Full stomachs mean peace of mind.”

Huang Dafa, villager in Caowangba

“The tasks were precarious and hard. Some nights, we slept in caves on the cliff. Everybody worked together. And we completed the channel.”

Huang Binchun, villager



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