**Cormorant fishing: An endagered Chinese art?**

Text and photo by Alexis Duclos  
  
  
  
For centuries in China , cormorant fishing has been an amazing art in which the fisherman and the animal, settled together on a small bamboo boat, establish a real bond to catch fish. Today however, this traditional technique is threatened by overfishing, pollution and economic change. Strangely, it is through tourism that this ancient, fragile tradition continues to exist. There are only a handful of fishermen with cormorants today. They resist, but for how long?  
  
  
We are in the autonomous region of Guangxi, China, Yangshuo, on the Li River. Between night and day, stands the beautiful shade of limestone mountains while the master fisherman, Long Hi, 65, balances himself on his bamboo boat, using neither a net nor a hook to fish, but rather the Great Cormorant bird (Phalacrocorax carbo) to catch the prey, mainly carp.  
The fisherman uses a simple technique of tying the neck of his cormorant with a cord before letting it go to dive and catch fish. This system prevents the bird from swallowing the larger fish it catches, but allows it to eat the little ones. Trained by the master fisherman, the cormorant, a fearsome predator, dives and returns to the boat to land on a bamboo cane presented by its master. The big fish trapped in the bird’s throat are recovered by the fisherman. Gradually, the bird’s neck is freed from the cord but the animal remains close to its master on a leash.  
Cormorant fishermen operate on the Li and Lijiang River. There are only a few dozen who still practice this ancient art that enables these old fishermen to eek out a daily living to feed their families. Fishing with the help of cormorants is physically less demanding than net fishing. For the rest of the day, these fishermen transform into models to be photographed with their birds by passing tourists, charging as little as 5 yuan. (Less than one euro).  
Long Hi is hired by a hotel to entertain tourists with his fishing cormorant. He is paid a salary of 1 500.00 yuan each month (around 250,00 euros) He says, "I have fished for 20 years. The profession has changed because of tourism and development, but for me it is a good thing. I make more money now. Life is easier, because I have a regular income and other family members can look for another job.” Long Hi owns 5 cormorants. He has established a real bond, created an emotional relationship between the fisherman and his birds.  
Long Hi :"Each cormorant has its own personality. I love them all. One will always want to play or fight, the other will be a good fisherman, another will be lazier. I am committed to them as if they were children. Almost ... "  
Qin Gui Lai, 76, is also fishing with cormorants.  
According to the elderly, experienced man, fish are increasingly rare. "There are not enough big fish to feed my family. Many catch fish now with electricity or even dynamite! ... So instead I go to the banks of Yangshuo and I wait for tourist boats to offer photos. This brings me more money than fishing. »  
Indeed, several conditions make it difficult to maintain this ancestral tradition. An increase in the population along with more tourists has resulted in overfishing, depleting the Chinese rivers of its biggest fish. Also, fishing techniques, especially with electricity, make cormorant fishing practiced by the older generations less and less competitive. Ecosystems are also affected by pollution coming from agriculture and the growth of river traffic. Yet Yun Huang, 74, who appears at least ten years younger, goes carp fishing every morning on the Li River. Younger people will sell his fish to the hotels in the city. In the afternoon, he can be found being photographed by tourists to earn a few tips. Despite challenging times for fishermen with cormorants, Yun Yuang is optimistic because he thinks that this ancient thousand year old tradition will endure despite the advances of the modern world and its various pollutions.  
  
The Great Cormorant (Phalacrocorax carbo). This is an animal from the family of Phalacrocoracidae. With a size of 0.80 to 1.00 meters, its weight is 2 to 3.7 kg. Its longevity is 15 to 20 years. The bird is a beautiful example of adaptation whose physiology and morphology make it a formidable fisherman with outstanding water performance. Its body is elongated and it has a powerful, hooked beak. Cormorants usually are covered in black plumage and have a long flexible neck. It can dive up to 15 meters deep and stay 1 minute snorkeling. Mainly found in Asia, it is domesticated and has been used for fishing in freshwater for several centuries.