

Ancient Chinese flood is latest to match oral, geologic histories

August 5 2016, by Hannah Hickey

INSIGHTS

PERSPECTIVES



Emperor Yu is famous through Chinese legends in which he worked to control persistent flooding. Credit: Science/AAAS

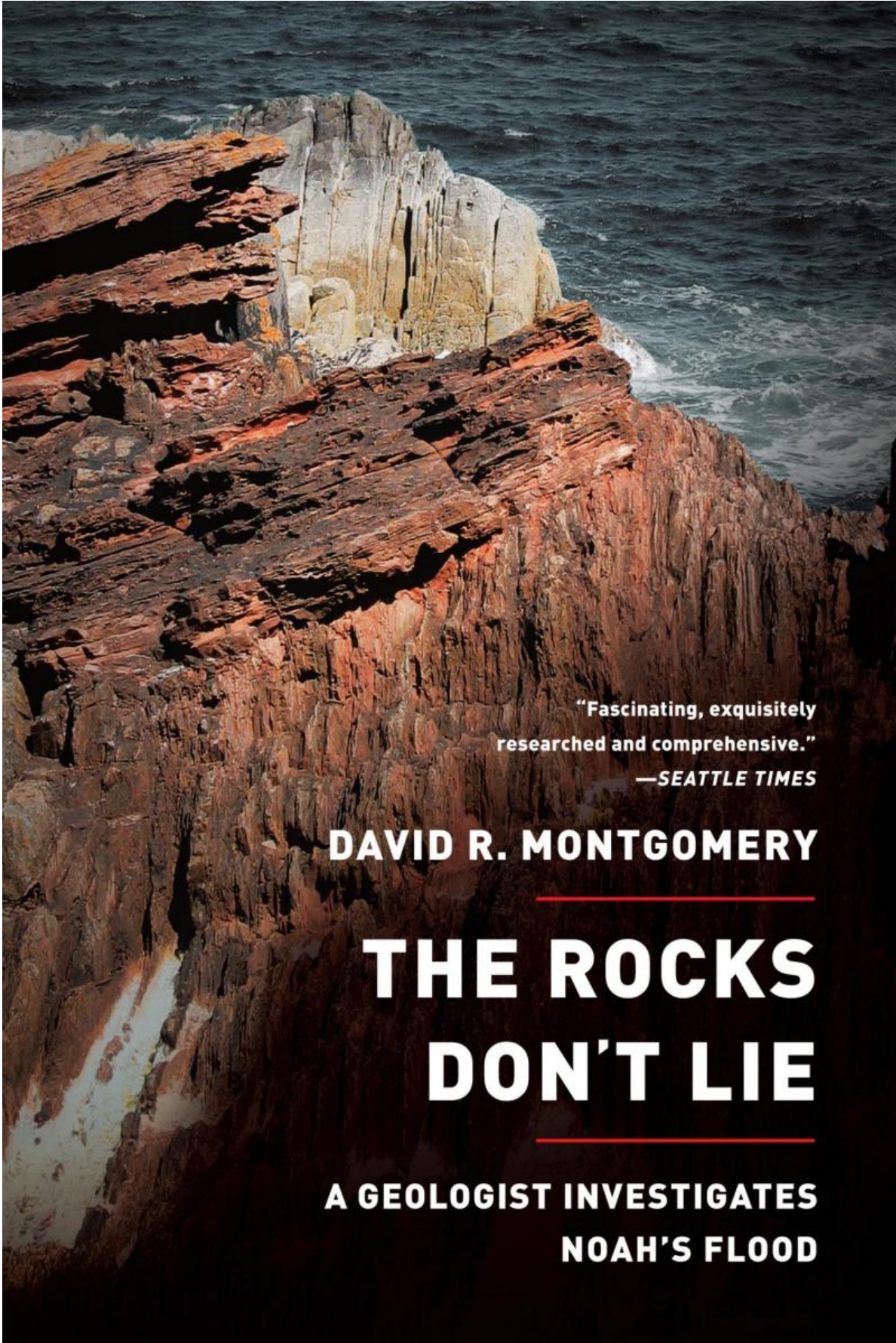
A paper published this week in *Science* finds evidence to support stories that a huge flood took place in China about 4,000 years ago, during the reign of Emperor Yu. The study, led by Chinese researcher Quinlong Wu, finds evidence for a massive landslide dam break that could have redirected the course of the Yellow River, giving rise to the legendary flood that Emperor Yu is credited with controlling.

An accompanying commentary by David Montgomery, a UW professor of Earth and space sciences, discusses how this finding supports the historical basis for traditional tales about China's Great Flood. It even explains some details of the classic folk story.

"A telling aspect of the story—that it took Yu and his followers decades to control the floodwaters—makes sense in light of geological evidence that Wu et al. present," Montgomery writes.

The study showed that an ancient landslide dammed the Yellow River on the edge of the Tibetan Plateau. When the dam broke in about 1922 B.C., the authors found, it created an enormous flood that coincided with a period of major social disruption, suggesting that the Yellow River overflowed its banks and had to set a new course.

"It would have taken considerable time for a large river to adjust to such a change and the associated sustained flooding would fall in the right time and place to account for Yu's story—including the long time it took to control the floodwaters," Montgomery commented.



“Fascinating, exquisitely
researched and comprehensive.”

—SEATTLE TIMES

DAVID R. MONTGOMERY

THE ROCKS DON'T LIE

**A GEOLOGIST INVESTIGATES
NOAH'S FLOOD**

UW geologist David Montgomery is the author of a 2013 book that looks for the geological basis for Noah's flood and other traditional stories.

The discovery is the latest in a series of efforts to link geologic and oral histories, including the biblical tale of Noah's flood.

"Great floods figure prominently in some of humanity's oldest stories," Montgomery said. "In researching my book, 'The Rocks Don't Lie,' I found that while the idea of a global flood was soundly refuted almost 200 years ago, many of the world's flood stories have their roots in real catastrophic events—like tsunamis, glacial dam-break floods and disastrous flooding of lowland valleys and areas along major rivers."

The Pacific Northwest is home to one prominent example. Montgomery notes UW research that has linked Native American tales about shaking and flooding to the 1700 earthquake and tsunami along Washington's coast, for which no written records exist.

"Now it appears that we can add China's story of a great [flood](#) to the growing list of legends of ancient catastrophes that may be rooted in real events," Montgomery said.

More information: Massive flood may have led to China's earliest empire. [DOI: 10.1126/science.aag0729](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aag0729)

D. R. Montgomery. Emperor Yu's Great Flood, *Science* (2016). [DOI: 10.1126/science.aah4040](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aah4040)

Provided by University of Washington

Citation: Ancient Chinese flood is latest to match oral, geologic histories (2016, August 5)
retrieved 9 May 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2016-08-ancient-chinese-latest-oral-geologic.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.