

# Lost Treasures of the Yangtze

Time is running out for central China's cultural artifacts.

By Patti Verbanas



**Y**u the Great grew despondent. For years he had sought viable outlets for the ever-rising Yangtze River, which drowned central China with unceasing floods, only to be thwarted by the mountain's rocky cliffs. Hearing Yu's cries, a god of the earth transformed himself into a yellow ox, gored the mountains apart and plowed a gorge to relieve the river. To honor Yu and the ox, residents of the saved villages constructed the Yellow Ox Temple between 770 and 476 B.C. Today, the Huangling Temple, built on this spot during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), is the oldest and largest building in China's Three Gorges region, the canyon area carved by the Yangtze.

More than 2,000 years later, Yu and the ox once again are defying the Yangtze; Huangling is one of the few temples in the region that will survive the opening of the controversial Three Gorges Dam. The world's largest hydroelectric project, the dam is designed to prevent floods, generate electricity and improve navigation in China's poorest region. By the time the two-mile long, 610-foot-high structure becomes operational, the landscapes and treasures of the famous gorges will have been engulfed by a 400-mile-long

*How much of Shibaozhai (left) and Qu Yuan Temple (above) will be destroyed when the Yangtze River rises in 2005? The government claims these structures are safe; locals and archaeologists say otherwise. For information on how to visit sites soon to be submerged, see Resources on page 88.*

reservoir. Starting in 2003, water levels will rise 575 feet, inundating more than 1,200 culturally significant sites—including ancient pagodas and temples, and archaeological relics dating back 100,000 years—in central China west from the dam site in Sandouping to Chongqing. Fortunately for Huangling, it is situated just east of the dam and will be spared.

Little progress has been made in the protection and excavation of cultural relics due to the remoteness of the region and a lack of funding. Exactly what treasures have been and will be lost in this incipient Atlantis is another mystery, and on the whole, the Chinese people seem apathetic. The region's youth, raised in the wake of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), have been bought with promises of modern conveniences, and those who do oppose the project are reluctant to voice this sentiment, ever mindful of the prison sentences imposed on dissidents, such as journalist Dai Qing, who published the critical *Yangtze Yangtze* in 1989.

## WORLD VIEW

Pockets of concern for cultural heritage can be found, however—if you persist in asking enough Chinese their opinions. “I never gave much thought to what was going to be lost when the river flooded until I became a mother. Now, when my baby asks me about my heritage, what can I say? What can I show him? A lot of our temples will be underwater. Once the temples go underwater, nothing can be saved,” says “Irene,” a Pan Zhixu resident who wished to use her Anglo “working” name for security. A former employee

built during the reign of Emperor Qianlong (1736–96) and is partially constructed of excavated Han dynasty bricks. The official government statement is that Shibaozhai, which sits 525 feet above the river, will be protected by foundation consolidation and strengthening. However, as Irene explains, “They are building a wall to make the structure sit like on a mesa. What they don’t say is that some of it—about 50 feet—will be submerged.

“The Chinese are not thinking about the culture that will be lost; foreigners care more,” she continues. “Most of these temples are Buddhist, and the people don’t use them. If the Cultural Revolution never occurred, they would probably still care.”

The estimated 215 temples in the water’s path are not the only treasures in jeopardy. Feeling the pressure of the clock, a frantic excavation is underway at the doomed Daxi archaeological sites in the Qutang Gorge,

where scientists have discovered a rich collection of bone, stone and jade artifacts from the Neolithic Daxi culture (5000–3200 B.C.).

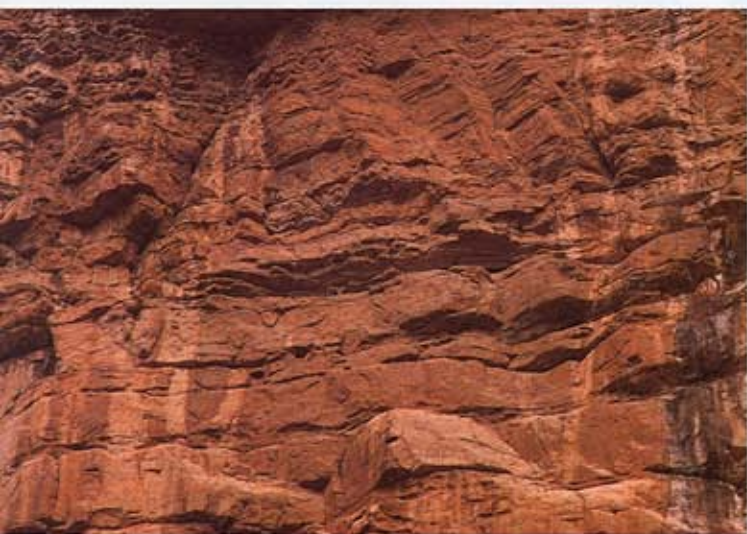
More fortunate are the highest of the many “hanging coffins” along the Yangtze’s mountain walls; they are among the few relics certain to be spared. These ship-shaped wooden burial chambers—containing the remains of important elders and soldiers, dating back 2,000 years and often laden with bronze and lacquer items—were suspended in crevices by

the Ba people as a sign of respect.

Governmental claims that some structures, art and artifacts slated for complete salvation still leave many skeptical. Details are sketchy, for instance, on Qu Yuan Temple, which was built in 820 in homage to China’s most famous poet. Although official statements report the temple will remain intact due to foundation strengthening, concerned locals challenge that the temple only can be saved by relocation.

A sadder tale is that of Baiheliang, 14 fish carved into the sandstone of the White Crane Ridge that serve as low water record tablets. By June 2003, the tablets, which date back to the T’ang dynasty (618–907) and are considered the world’s oldest hydrological station, will be completely submerged. Initial government plans to build an underwater museum—encasing what is known as the “Forest of Underwater Steles” and the adjoining 163 inscriptions by famous people throughout the dynasties—were scrapped in 2001 due to the project’s great expense (an estimated \$12 million U.S.). Instead, the government has earmarked approximately \$1.2 million to brace up the relic site to preserve it for future archaeological exploration. Even so, experts predict that silt will irreversibly damage the carvings within 20 years.

For the structures that cannot be moved completely, an effort is underway to salvage precious artworks contained within for display in museums—a plan that is not detailed enough to please citizens like Irene. “The government will scatter the artifacts across China, and the people of this area will lose their heritage,” she laments as the tourist-laden cruise winds down the murky Yangtze. “Chairman Zamin wants this dam to be his big accomplishment, and I was proud of the project initially, but am not now. I don’t want to keep silent about the cultural destruction anymore.” □



*The treasure-laden hanging coffins along the river are visible tucked into the cliff walls. They were placed on narrow ledges and inside crevices or hung with stakes on the cliff face. The higher the coffin, the higher the person’s status.*

at the Er Tan power station along the Yangtze, Irene now leads tour groups of antiquities lovers—mostly foreigners—through the Three Gorges on the Regal China Cruise line. She is one of the rare citizens who will openly comment to journalists about the cultural carnage along the Yangtze. Of particular concern to her is the fate of Shibaozhai, the Precious Stone Fortress, whose 184-foot crimson pagoda hugs a protruding cliff in Zhongxian County in the Qutang Gorge. One of the most famous structures in the region, it was