Appendix C

The Three Gorges Dam and the Fate of China’s Southern Heritage

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The fate of archaeology in the Three Gorges area is perilous, if not fatal, due to the intention to flood the middle Yangtze River within a mere ten years.* Archaeologists in China have been forced to scramble to preserve what they can of the past without provision by the government for adequate funding, tools, or time. Of the nearly 1,300 known sites along the 482 square kilometers of river bank, archaeologists have determined that between 400 and 500 are worthy of preservation. They estimate, however, that it will be possible to preserve only half of them.

Sites to be inundated by the Yangtze flooding comprise two major types: those primarily architectural monuments standing above ground, and those that are subsurface and require excavation. Finds dating from before the Han period (206 B.C.—A.D. 220) from the Three Gorges area are almost entirely archaeological in origin. Han and post-Han finds are represented by a select group of extant monuments, in the form of architecture and of engraved stones from the river’s framing walls. The extent to which this area was originally dominated by a rich array of monuments has long been known historically. The Three Gorges is the alleged setting for the romantic poet Qu Yuan (338–278 B.C.), traditionally recognized as the author of the Chu Ci (Songs of the South), and for the bloody feuds of the Three Kingdoms (c. A.D. 220–280) heroes, who were later celebrated in the Ming period (1368–1644) novel Sanguo Yanyi (Romance of the Three Kingdoms). In characterizing this environmental melting pot of personalities, author Lyman P. Van Slyke lyrically refers to Qu Yuan as one who “spoke in a characteristically ‘southern’ idiom: extravagant language, passionate emotional tone, a richly inhabited spirit world complete with seductive shaman goddesses, transparent sensuality, lush images of plants as metaphors—orchids for purity, fragrant flowers for virtue, weeds for evil.”* Qu Yuan, the “protean archetype of personal integrity, loyalty and dissent” is celebrated not only in southern China’s annual Dragon Boat Festival, but by a memorial temple in the Three Gorges at the alleged site of his burial, Zigui. The Qu Yuan temple was built during the Qing period (1644–1911) and restored during the 1980s. The government intends to transfer this entire modern building to a site removed from the flooding waters of the Yangtze, while the alleged burial site will be inundated.

The Three Kingdoms hero General Zhang Fei, who at the famous Peach Garden in 220 took an oath of loyalty in the face of death, is also celebrated by a temple built in his honor further up the river at Yuyang in Sichuan Province. The Zhang Fei temple was built during the Northern Song (960–1126) and was restored late in the Qing period by the Tongzhi emperor (r. 1862–73). Characterized by extensive gardens, the multiroom

*An earlier version of this article was published in Orientations (Hong Kong), (July/August 1996): 55–61.

complex with balconies sits at the foot of a mountain, where it precipitously overlooks the southern banks of the Yangtze opposite Yunyang Town. Zhang Fei was said to have been murdered here when his army officers mutinied. His sworn friend Liu Bei, with the help of the adept strategist Zhu Geliang, defeated the arrogant challenger to the throne, Cao Cao, in a climactic battle nearby at Red Cliffs, just to the southeast of the Three Gorges, between Hanzhou (Wuhan, Hubei Province) and Dongting Lake in Hunan Province. The battle sealed the fate of the Han and divided China into three kingdoms, and the site is one of the most famous along the Yangtze River due to its being celebrated in Su Dongpo’s (1037–1101) time-honored prose-poem “The Red Cliff,” and in numerous Song and Yuan (1279–1368) period paintings.

Yu Weichao, director of the National History Museum of China and an archaeologist currently in charge of excavations in the Three Gorges, has referred to the probable demolition of other equally remarkable architectural monuments, including the famous Shibaozhai of Ming period date—a Buddhist temple complex used until the Cultural Revolution and located west of the Three Gorges at Zhongxian in Sichuan Province. This so-called fortified “treasury” leading up to the mountain outcrop of the temple site was built out of wood by the Jiaqing emperor (r. 1796–1820) in 1800 into the limestone rock face. At 56 meters, it is the highest building of its kind in China. The twelve-story edifice resembles a pagoda and houses Buddhist sculptures and slab stelae, one of which is inscribed with the history of the founding of the site.

Also in danger of inundation is the town of Dachang in Sichuan Province, which preserves Ming and early Qing folk architecture. Located on the eastern bank of the Daning River, the town was surveyed in 1957–58 by the Sichuan Museum, and in 1993 the Sichuan Institute of Archaeology carried out a preliminary excavation. Apparently, since the site’s location was pivotal for north-south boat transport on the Daning River, its history may be traced archaeologically back to the Three Kingdoms or Jin (265–420) period. The special characteristics of this town’s later history are the architectural design of a courtyard conjointing four houses and the enclosing volcanic wall with segregated views. Bold and uninhibited modelling of the latter wall’s edge gives the site a strong and lively local flavor. Although the town of three main streets rises 141 meters above sea level, it will be completely inundated and has been ranked as a national-level monument. There are plans to move the entire town to drier, higher ground.

One other type of extant monument, unique to the middle Yangtze and its gorges, are the examples of “low water calligraphy” (kushuitike) engraved into critical passages along the Yangtze’s limestone walls, beginning at Chongqing, but most numerous in the Three Gorges area. These engraved examples of historical and calligraphic value range in date from the Han and Eastern Jin (317–420) through the Qing periods. The major purpose of these so-called “low water calligraphies" is as reference points for recording low-water and thus safe or unsafe passage levels for cargo and boats. The most artistically prominent example, recently declared a national-level monument, are the Baidieliang engravings. Amounting to 163 sections and 30,000 characters, the Baidieliang engravings are located near Fuling in Sichuan Province and range in date from the Tang dynasty (618–906) to the Qing period, with the most numerous dating to the Song dynasty. The earliest Tang record encloses two profile fish, known as shiyu (stone fish), whose eyes when exposed were allegedly the symbol for a safe water level. An inscription of 917 explains:

In the spring, February, of the Tang Guangde era [763–64] the river waters receded and the stone fish appeared so that four chi [Chinese feet] were visible below the fish. According to legend, the [seer] Xian said: When the Yangtze waters recede [and] the stone fish appear, the year will witness a rich harvest.*

Other still-standing architectural monuments include the Han period que (towers) represented by the Wuming (No Name) tower and Dingfang temple towers in Zhongxian. Like other que elsewhere in Sichuan Province, the Wuming tower of Ganjianggou and the pair from Dingfang temple at Eastern Gate of Zhongxian typify the pairs of tall, elaborately carved stone pillars traditionally positioned at the entrance to shendaos (spirit ways) that in turn may preface large earthen burial mounds. Like other examples from the Chengdu area, these are stone replications of wooden prototypes, 3 to 4.5 meters tall, with a two-level bracket-type capital and tiled roofs. The upper surfaces of these towers are often elaborately decorated with cosmological themes in relief. Animals symbolizing the four directions, including the dragon of the east, tiger of the west, bird of the south, and tortoise and snake of the north, decorate the pillar bases.

Semihuman dwarfs uphold corbeled eaves and various immortals and mythological creatures playfully decorate in deeply undercut relief the spaces between simulated beams and curving bracket ends. Immortals ride deer, play liubo (chess), or chase fantastic animals.

Buried remains from the Three Gorges area are as dramatic in quality and significance to the cultural history of China as the architectural and aboveground monuments of Han through Qing date. Their fate is equally perilous. The current archaeological data available from reports on the Three Gorges area provide preliminary documentation on what appears to be a significant but little understood southern, Yangtze cradle of civilization. Meaningful finds range in date from the Upper Paleolithic (50,000–12,000 B.C.) through the Warring States period of the Eastern Zhou (481–221 B.C.). The discovery of remains of Homo sapiens sapiens man at Ziyang and Tongliang between Chongqing and Chengdu and the more recent discovery of the even earlier Homo erectus in the Three Gorges area reveal typological similarities to modern Mongoloid populations and suggest that, with more archaeological evidence, it may be possible to qualify how this southwestern existence of early man contributed to the evolution of human prehistory in early China and the rest of Asia.

Before the Three Gorges area became part of the Chinese empire under the Qin (221–206 B.C.) and Han dynasties, the area was inhabited by a culture and peoples known historically as the Ba. It is hypothesized that the Ba may have originated in the advanced Neolithic cultures called Daxi (c. ?5000–3200 B.C.) and the succeeding Chujialing (c. 3200–2300 B.C.), which flourished in the area encompassing both banks of the Yangtze in the area of Dachang, and which has been excavated by members of the History Department of Sichuan University. What is going on west of this site, however, appears to be connected with another still unknown Neolithic culture, which hopefully can be explored through future, government-supported excavation. Distinctive wares of the Daxi and Chujialing phases include those polished red on the outside and black on the inside in the form of tall gu-shaped drinking goblets and those dou-shaped bowls placed on openwork stands. The flare for eccentric shape and abstract decoration differentiates these wares from the much more mundane painted pots of the northern Neolithic cultures of the Yellow River basin. Fine wheel-thrown, egg-shell thin blackwares and jades with shamanic imagery characterize the successive Shijiahe (c. 2500–2000 B.C.) and Erlitou (c. 2100–1800 B.C.) cultural phases, the latter of which has been identified at a site in Xiling Gorge (Zhongbao Island, Yichang, western Hubei Province).

Unfortunately, Zhongbao Island has now been completely inundated in preparation for the dam. The remains from this site were published in 1987 and belong to three levels that included the Daxi, Chujialing, and “late Erlitou-like” periods.* The “Erlitou-like” settlement is identified by the typical bag-legged pitcher called gui. When it is with a pipe-spout it is called he.

It is important to put into perspective that these Neolithic cultures of eastern Sichuan Province share with their western Sichuan neighbor, Shu, certain southern cultural idiosyncrasies. One of the latter is the motif of an elegantly shaped bird head with long curving beak that forms the handle of ceramic ladies. This same bird, interestingly, continues in the imagery of the bronze of the succeeding early Shang period (1766–1122 B.C.).

Although the Erlitou, Shang, and Western Zhou (c.1127–771 B.C.) periods are difficult to document in the Three Gorges area and middle Yangtze basin, certain data suggest that this era was a creatively active one. Yu Weichao, among others, has reported that the region from Wuhan below Yichang west to Yunyang, including especially the Wushan area and the Xiling Gorge, is rich in Ba cultural data dating to the late Neolithic and Shang periods. Particularly exciting are the preliminary finds from Shuangyantang, located in the Daning River Valley just northwest of Dachang. The Institute of Archaeology in Beijing began preliminary investigations in 1983 and uncovered an area of 10,000 square meters. It is not yet clear if Erlitou remains from this site are comparable to those identified with contemporaneous remains elsewhere at Bai Miao, Lujiahe, and Yidu in the Three Gorges.** Early and middle Shang period finds are now represented by the recent discovery of a ritual bronze wine vessel (zun) that is of an approximate height of 80 centimeters. The shape and decoration of this vessel are not only identical to others found in western Sichuan at Sanxingdui and at Funanxian in Anhui Province, but also to another from Chengguxian, Shaanxi. Seated birds, which are unique to these early southern bronzes, alternate with the more familiar animal forms on the shoulders of these zun. This bronze discovery is exciting new evidence that points to the existence of what must have been a thriving,

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**Chen Xianyi et al., "Lun Hebei diqu cao Shang wenhua" (On the Early Shang Culture in Hebei), Changjiang wenhua lunji (Essays on Yangtze Valley Cultures) (Wuhan: Hubei Education Publishers, 1995), pp. 149–150.
independent southern bronze-working culture stretching across all of Sichuan Province and southern China during the Shang period.

Equally exciting are the excavations of another early culture called Lijiaba, near Gaoyang Town and Qingshu Village west of Three Gorges at Yunyang. A fourth season of excavations was carried out by the Archaeological Institute of Sichuan in 1995, at which time the site was designated "national level." The site is estimated as measuring 20,000 square meters in size at a depth of 1.5 to 2 meters. Lijiaba cultural finds are also represented at Ganjinggou in Zhongxian and Lujiahe in Hubei Province. All conspicuously hug low terraces of river valleys, extending from hills into valley floors along the river or river branches. At Lijiaba, lower-level finds date to the Shang and Spring and Autumn (722–481 B.C.) periods, and upper-level strata date to the Warring States (480–221 B.C.) and Han periods.

Although very little is known archaeologically of the Western Zhou period, it is known from historical records that the Ba were on good working terms with the Zhou ruling house, whose seat of power was to their north up the Han River at Xi’an in Shaanxi Province. Like the Shu of western Sichuan, the Ba helped the Zhou defeat the Shang; unlike the Shu, the Ba were apparently singled out for their loyalty to the Zhou King Wu (r.c. 1122-1115 B.C.).* The Zhou not only designated the Ba royal house with the surname Ji, but the Zhou took Ba women as wives. That there was cultural contact during the Shang period between the Zhou and Ba of the upper Han River and in the middle Yangtze regions further south is demonstrated, for example, by the shared bronze zun type with shoulder birds. It has been suggested that the Ba, as early as the late Shang period, were either in direct contact and living along the upper Han River as they were later in the Warring States period, or they were simply a major southern influence on the Zhou, who were gaining power in the area of the upper Han and further north.

There is no holistic view of the Ba from their alleged beginnings in Neolithic times through the Western Zhou period, or of the Ba during the Eastern Zhou period. Nonetheless, according to current assessments, distinctive Ba works of art of the Eastern Zhou/Warring States period include the chunyu (war drum) and zheng (gong), boat-shaped wooden coffins, a unique form of writing, the ge (dagger axe) decorated with tigers in profile, and other eccentrically shaped and decorated weapons. Except for the chunyu, the above

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Example of "boat-shaped coffins" retrieved from Three Gorges area in a local museum. (Photo by Audrey Topping)

bronzes can also be found at Shu sites in western Sichuan Province, which has led to the archaeological term Ba-Shu to describe the period of circa the fifth to third century B.C., when cultural sharing between the Ba and Shu seems to have been at its height. The chunyu excavated from western Hubei Province and at Wanxian in Sichuan Province are typically bulbous in shape with a long cylindrical body and bulging shoulder and rim. Their lids, which can be removed, are usually crowned by a crouching feline, the ubiquitous Ba emblem. Although unknown at Shu sites, these drums are found as far afield as Guizhou, Yunnan, Hunan, and Anhui provinces.* Large drums reach 70 centime-
ters in height and the smaller, portable ones average 20 centimeters in height. The latter were allegedly used in war chants and as a signaling device during war.* They were complemented by the zheng, which could produce a contrasting sound to the drum for long-distance communication. They have handles by which they can be held and struck. Zheng have been found at Xiaotianxi in Fuling, at Entuoshi in Hubei Province,** and at Shupu, Dajiangkou, in Hunan Province. Zheng can be large, measuring over 40 centimeters in height. The Ba aristocratic emblem of a tiger frequently appears cast on the outer surface of these instruments.

The function of the unique script of the Ba, which appears most commonly on bronze mao (spear points) and lian (short swords), is difficult to identify. Li Xueqin has argued that there are two forms of Ba script: “A” script is considered to be emblematic, but with both phonetic and ideographic components; “B” script is considered to be writing identical with Chinese.† The undeciphered BA script, including the hand, tiger, and bird motifs, are represented by Ba examples excavated at Xiaotianxi and Majiayang. The same graphs appear on lian excavated from a tomb in territory traditionally thought of as Chu, Jiangling in Hubei Province, which is just down the Yangtze River from Yichang. It is likely that these graph types found elsewhere on Ba-Shu and Chu weapons are signs of noble rank and ownership. Use of the graphs, however, gradually died out. Nor were any of the graphs integrated into scripts in use in northern China.

The Ba Culture of the Warring States period is characterized by a taste for eccentric weaponry. No doubt this disposition favoring weapons as objects of beauty distinguishes Ba expression. It is known from historical accounts that the Ba and Shu joined together to defeat the state of Chu on Ba’s eastern flank during the early fourth century B.C. The revolver-shaped ge is allegedly Ba in origin, although it is better known in the much more thoroughly excavated Shu sites of western Sichuan Province, and when published is therefore labeled Ba-Shu. This distinctive ge type has a long shaft and wide blade simulating a revolver in shape and is usually decorated with a profile of a growing tiger. According to Li Xueqin, ge of this type are known from the sites of Fengjie and Fuling.

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* Sage, Ancient Sichuan, p. 55.
** Wenwu (Antiquities) 5 (1980): 44.

Chu state culture site already excavated. (Photo courtesy of Jim Williams)

along the Three Gorges and middle Yangtze region, although most are unpublished.* The prototype of this weapon is the considerably earlier Shang ge made out of jade or bronze found at sites along the northern Yellow River. Other diagnostic Ba weapon types include the boot-shaped yue (axe), the three-cornered ge, and the frequently inscribed hollow mao and willow-leaf-shaped lian.

Whether or not the presence and influence of the Chu state and culture can be documented in the Three Gorges in part depends on the interpretation of the material character of finds from sites such as the Qin period tomb at Xiaotianxi in Fuling, allegedly the royal burial center of Ba nobility and kings. Although there is debate about the cultural identity of Chu deep in Ba territory, there are few features typical of Chu in this area during the Eastern Zhou period. In separate papers, Barry Blakeley of Seton Hall University and Wang Ran of Wuhan University demonstrate how through historical interpolation the area occupied by the Ba on the Three Gorges at Zigui,** for example, was confused with the capital of Chu at Danyang.

* Li Xueqin, Eastern Zhou, p. 208.
** See, Barry Blakeley, “In Search of Danyang. I: Historical Geography and
Wang also clarified why there are so few Chu remains in the Three Gorges area. Based on written records, it is stated that Ba and Chu were on good terms during the eighth century B.C. and that as late as 590 B.C. the Chu King Gong took a Ba woman in marriage. By the fourth century B.C., and after a great deal of warfare, Chu evidently penetrated Ba territory. What appears amid Warring States and early Qin and Han period remains in the Three Gorges is in fact primarily Ba; Ba never foregoes its cultural heritage of weapon and musical instrument types. From the one published tomb at Xiaotianxi there are numerous Ba artifacts, including round or boot-shaped yue, revolver-shaped ge, short-handed zheng, willow-leaf-shaped lian, but most importantly, chunyu and Ba writing. The inlaid bronze hu and 14 bianzhong (chime bell) set found within the same tomb at Xiaotianxi conform to the current fashion of northern central China during the late Warring States and early-Qin-to-Western Han periods. The inlay technique and design of vessels and bells can be compared with others excavated from Chu tombs of late Eastern Zhou date at Jiangling, or of Han date at Mawangdui in Hunan Province. The inlaid vessel and bell type, nonetheless, are bronze types popular throughout China during the Warring States period and should not be interpreted as objects unique to Chu.* Due to the traditional Ba paraphernalia of zheng and chunyu, the site is unequivocally Ba, not Chu under Ba influence. The drum and gong were used in Ba ritual performances and evidently were accoutrements reserved for the Ba elite.

Finally, the problems facing archaeology in the Three Gorges area are manifold and profound. If we are to understand the southern contribution to Chinese civilization, then archaeology must be supported in this area. To inundate the Three Gorges would not only eradicate the only source of our understanding but would also eradicate completely the contribution of the little understood but uniquely creative Ba peoples and their relationship to Shu and Chu.

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