Chapter Nine

The Danger to Historical Relics and Cultural Antiquities In and Around the Three Gorges Area

Interviews with the Director of the National History Museum of China, Yu Weichao

Dai Qing

Author’s Note

Yu Weichao is an archaeologist and expert on the culture of the Chu kingdom (700–221 B.C.) and on the history of the Qin (221 B.C.–206 B.C.) and Han (206 B.C.–A.D. 220) dynasties. In 1961, Yu graduated from the History Department of Beijing University with a major in archaeology. He later received a master’s degree from the university, where he has periodically taught in its history and archaeology departments. Currently, Yu sits on the Board of Directors of the China Archaeological Association and the Chu Culture Association, and is director of the National History Museum of China. His archaeological digs include the Shang dynasty (1766–1122 B.C.) site at Panlongcheng in Hubei Province, the Western Zhou dynasty (1122–771 B.C.) site at Shaozhen in Shaanxi Province, the Neolithic (c. 15,000–1766 B.C.) Kayue culture site at Suzhi in Qinghai Province, and the Neolithic and Warring States (472–221 B.C.) period site at Zhouliangyuqiao in Hubei Province. Among his major publications in Chinese are Historical Legacies and Remnants of Grain Water Transport in the Three Gate Gorge (1959), Collection of Articles on the Pre-Qin and Han Dynasties (1985), and An Investigation of the Commune System in Ancient China (1988).*

First Interview, October 1994

Dai Qing: We all know that there are many archaeological sites in the region of the Three Gorges [Qutang, Wu, and Xiling gorges] along the Yangtze River. The possible inundation of their invaluable ancient relics concerns everyone. Among the 412 experts involved in the assessment of the Three Gorges dam project, there was not one sociologist, cultural anthropologist, or archaeologist—it’s beyond belief! Now that construction has begun, what do you think will happen to the area’s treasure trove of historical relics and cultural antiquities?

Yu Weichao: It is true that not one archaeologist was consulted during the project assessment. Earlier this year [1994], however, the Three Gorges Construction Committee (Sanxia jianshe weiyanhui) and the State Bureau of Cultural Antiquities (Guojia wenwu yanjiusuo) formally designated two units to undertake preservation and protection of archaeological sites in and around the Three Gorges dam area. One unit is our history museum and the other is the China Cultural Antiquities Research Institute (Zhongguo wenwu yanjiusuo). We were assigned responsibility for subsurface sites, while the Cultural Antiquities Research Institute was charged with handling the aboveground sites. Preliminary planning and survey work was already begun in November 1993, and I have been chosen to be director of the work group. Twenty-eight other academic institutes have joined in the project. We now have a basic idea of what archaeological material will be submerged by the reservoir. The institutions were to work out their own proposals first and subsequently develop a comprehensive report intended to be submitted to the Three Gorges Construction Committee by June 1995.

DQ: Are you saying that in the past you were unsure about these historical sites, or that you have made new discoveries, or have become aware of new site locations?

*Excerpts from these interviews were published in Orientations (July/August 1996): 62–64, and Archaeology (November/December 1996): 44–45. For more on the dangers posed to archaeological sites in the Three Gorges area see Appendix C.
YW: Among the many world-renowned antiquities in the Three Gorges area are the low water calligraphy carvings (kushuitie) of Stone Fish, White Crane Ridge (Baihe liang shiyu), which date back to the mid-to-late Tang dynasty (A.D. 618–907). Another example of low water calligraphy is the Soul Stone (Lingshi) site below Facing Heaven Gate (Chaotianmen) in Chongqing, Sichuan, which is even older than the White Crane Ridge site. According to the Complete History of the Tang Dynasty (Quan Tang wen), this Soul Stone site dates back to the period of the Eastern Han (25 B.C.–A.D. 220) to Jin (A.D. 266–316) dynasties. Another world-renowned site is Dragon Spine Stone (Longji shi) near Zhang Fei Temple at Yuyang, which is also low water calligraphy carvings. The Qu Yuan Temple, which is located in the same general area [near Zigui], has been of primary popular concern, but it is actually an example of contemporary architecture—it wasn’t built until the 1980s. There is also Zhang Fei Temple built during the Northern Song dynasty (960–1126) and restored late in the Qing dynasty (1644–1911).* And then there is Stone Treasure Fortress (Shibaozai) at Fuling. Although its architecture dates back to the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing dynasties—not as ancient as the others—the surrounding scenery is quite extraordinary, perhaps the most magnificent in the entire Three Gorges area. All of these sites will be inundated as the dam project progresses. There is another fabulous site, the ruins of Dachang Village (from the Ming-Qing period), which is the best of its kind in the gorges area. We have proposed relocating the entire village for its preservation.

DQ: What about subsurface sites?

YW: Despite our efforts over the past twenty or thirty years, we knew little about these sites until we began our studies last November. First and

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*Qu Yuan (338–279 B.C.) is perhaps China’s most famous ancient poet. General Zhang Fei is the hero of the Three Kingdoms period (A.D. 220–265) who in 220 at the famous Peach Garden took an oath of loyalty in the face of death.
foremost is the famous site of the Daxi Culture (c. 5,000–3,200 B.C.), the Neolithic complex unearthed near Wushan, Sichuan that dates back about five to six thousand years. Over the past ten to twenty years, archaeologists have worked hard to determine the western border of the Daxi Culture and also the nature of the culture that lay to the west of it, but they were unsuccessful. Now, finally, we have discovered that the western border of Daxi is in Wushan. The Daxi region is quite flat, and west of the region is Qutang Gorge, which is not very long but is extremely steep, so steep that human habitation is considered nearly impossible. On the other side of Qutang Gorge is the site of another ancient culture that we have yet to name. We now have a basic understanding of the distribution of different cultures at various times during the Paleolithic (c. 2,000,000–15,000 B.C.) and Neolithic periods in the Three Gorges area.

Entrance to Qutang Gorge. (Photo courtesy of Jim Williams)
One is Shuangyantang, on the banks of the upper reaches of the Daning River near Wushan. This find probably represents an early stage of the Ba Culture and is over 10,000 square meters in size. The strange thing is that it is located near the riverbed where the water level fluctuates a great deal. In the past, we never would have thought that such a site would lie so near a river. About five or six kilometers from Shuangyantang we discovered a very large zun [wine vessel] roughly 80 centimeters in height and exactly like another excavated at Sanxingdui in western Sichuan Province. We can now identify Shuangyantang as an early center of Ba Culture.

A second site, Lijiaba at Yunyang, Sichuan Province, also represents an early stage of the Ba Culture. Compared to the Shang dynasty period site of about four thousand years ago at Panlongcheng in present-day Hunan Province, Lijiaba is older, probably dating from the Xia dynasty (2205?–1766? B.C.). Many of the sites of the Ba people are located within Xiling Gorge, but later, about the time of the Shang, the center of the Ba Culture shifted to the area of Wu Gorge. Right now, outside of Shuangyantang, the three largest known sites in the Three Gorges area are: Lijiaba, Ganjinggou in Zhongxian, and Xiaotianxi in Fuling [all three in Sichuan Province]. The last site probably dates from the Warring States to early Qin dynasty period. Xiaotianxi is where tombs belonging to Ba aristocrats have been found.

According to ancient texts, the origin of the Ba Culture lies in Zhonglishan, in Wuluo along a southern tributary of the Yangtze known as the Qing in Hubei Province. From our recent investigations, we have learned about several important sites of the Ba Culture and have discovered its center, which lies in the region from Wushan to Yunyang. The culturally advanced Chu people living in Hubei blocked the Ba people from expanding eastward. Instead, the Ba were forced to retreat westward and made a living by fishing and hunting in the Three Gorges area and further west.

DQ: According to the 1982 Cultural Antiquities Law, antiquities graded 1, 2, or 3 (as established by the State Bureau of Cultural Antiquities) are considered “precious.” Although the 1987 Ministry of Culture circular “The Ranking of Cultural Antiquities” purports to provide criteria by which cultural antiquities are ranked, in reality, the determination of grades is a subjective decision made by a panel of the State Bureau of Cultural Antiquities or local cultural antiquities bureaus. The ranking is then approved by the State Council.* Are these sites which you have been discussing ranked as Grade 1, 2, or 3 and, therefore, protected at the national level?**

YW: Baiheleng [White Crane Ridge] has been declared a national-level site. But the other sites that we have discussed were only recently unearthed and are awaiting recognition. Most archaeologists believe that the earliest phase of a culture should have national protection.

Over the past forty years, the state has at different intervals recognized three grades of national-level relics and antiquities. A fourth grade is now being considered. The four or five sites within the Three Gorges area have yet to receive final approval by the State Council. The difficulty at present is that once the approval is issued, considerable efforts must be made to preserve and protect the sites. But if they are beyond protection, then these approvals are worthless. If the day after a site is approved as a national-level site it is submerged by a reservoir, then why go to all the trouble? Of course, we archaeologists will continue with our work as usual.

DQ: How is it that such invaluable sites have but one future, namely, inundation? Is the phrase “national-level antiquities preservation” (guojiati wenwu baohu) nothing but empty words? How, as it is often said, do you “continue with your work as usual”? YW: Let me tell you how I continue. Since last November we have been working on our proposal. After many discussions, the Three Gorges Construction Committee finally agreed to provide ¥10 million for preservation work. So far, however, the Yangtze River Planning Commission (Changweihu) has only allocated ¥2 million of that amount.

Over two hundred specialists are currently working in the Three Gorges area. These include over forty scientists from the Ancient Vertebrae and Ancient Humankind and Animal Research Institute of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, and this is the institute's largest site project since its establishment in 1949. Unfortunately, I had only ¥300,000 for


**Since 1949, archaeologists in China have had a very difficult time gaining government protection for the country’s vast storehouse of cultural antiquities largely because of political turmoil (during the Cultural Revolution rampaging Red Guards were encouraged by Mao Zedong to destroy ancient artifacts as they symbolized China’s “old society”), general neglect, and government disinterest.
the whole lot, including the costs of boat rentals and local laborers. This was totally inadequate. University professors visiting the site could only afford to stay in shabby hostels, and the working conditions were extremely difficult. Nevertheless, after only a few months, the institute’s basic research was completed. Some of the participants paid their own way and now they are asking me for reimbursement. I had no choice but to borrow ¥2 million from the Palace Museum in Beijing on my personal authority even though the money should have been allocated by the Yangtze River Planning Commission. I am at a loss as to why they refuse to give us the money.

DQ: As far as I know, no separate budget exists for the preservation of historical relics and cultural antiquities in the Three Gorges area. However, according to the official proposal, if money is badly needed it can be squeezed out of the population resettlement budget. Is this the conventional way of doing things in large-scale hydroelectric projects?

YW: According to international standards, the budget for the preservation of historical relics and cultural antiquities should be about 3 to 5 percent of the total project budget. In the mid-1980s, I worked with some Canadian experts from whom I learned of this standard. Two years ago when the National People’s Congress formally approved the construction of the Three Gorges project, the total cost was put at ¥57 billion. The State Cultural Antiquities Bureau did a rough calculation based on the 3 to 5 percent standard and estimated that ¥1.7 billion was needed for the preservation work, and the Yangtze River Planning Commission acknowledged the accuracy of this estimate. Recently, however, the budget for the entire dam project has grown to ¥120 billion. Again, if we follow the 3 to 5 percent standard, the budget for relics and antiquities preservation should now be around ¥4 to ¥5 billion.*

DQ: Has the money been authorized?

YW: We have been given a verbal commitment that the budget for population resettlement in Hubei and Sichuan provinces will be ¥40 billion, and that this includes funds for the study, preservation, and protection of cultural antiquities. We have also been told that the total budget for antiquities preservation will at most be around ¥400 to ¥500 million and to forget about the 3 to 5 percent standard. For the next ten years or so, this is all the money we will have, and it will only be allocated to us after contracts are signed. But right now the costs for planning and the proposals for carrying out preservation work come from borrowed money.

DQ: Four or five hundred million yuan comes to only about 1 to 1.25 percent of the ¥40 billion for resettlement. Realistically, what can be accomplished with such a paltry sum? The removal of the Abu-Simbel temple at the Aswan dam in Egypt cost U.S.$40 million alone.

YW: I’m trying my best to work this thing out. Right now, we have identified over 1,000 sites in need of protection, but depending on how much money we get, we will have to choose only a few.* Of course, there is another problem too—even if we have enough money, we don’t have enough experts to complete such a big project in such a short period of time.

For instance, how long will it take to properly excavate a site as massive as Shuangyangtang? According to conventional practice, and with the manpower and material resources available to us, this one site would take several decades to excavate. But we have to have everything completed in ten years time, because at that point the area will be submerged. This requires more manpower, more money, and more advanced technology than we have. I have visited several subsurface sites being excavated by German scientists where the details of the sites—the layout of roads and streets, for instance—were explored without excavation and using new technology. Once the specific details of a site are known, then decisions can be made about which particular sites should be excavated. This is the only way.

DQ: Even if you were able to use this new equipment and technology on sites in the Three Gorges area, would you have enough time to excavate and relocate them?

YW: Absolutely not. No country in the world would dare to undertake such a large-scale excavation project in only ten years. We have no choice but to sacrifice some sites. Nonetheless, we will certainly try our best to minimize the loss. Keep in mind that we have only been talking about one specific site, Shuangyangtang. There are many others like it in the Three Gorges area, including over one hundred Ba Culture sites alone. And the westernmost site of the Chu Culture is in Yunyang and it must be excavated. . . . How could such important sites be inundated?

*A list of priority-level cultural antiquities found in the Three Gorges area is found in Appendix D. A list of 16 archaeological sites which are likely to be inundated in 1997 is found in Appendix E.
houses and buildings are privately owned and are not considered historical relics. The owners can sell or tear down the buildings at will. Within the last year alone, the situation at Dachang has deteriorated significantly. If government budgets permitted, the simplest and most effective way to preserve these buildings would be to buy them from the private owners.

DQ: Ancient civilization belongs to all of humankind. Could overseas assistance help solve the budget problem—perhaps from Taiwan, Hong Kong, or other overseas Chinese communities?

YW: Indeed. We archaeologists endorse the concept of international cooperation, not just in terms of money, but also in terms of manpower. However, the office of the Three Gorges Construction Committee has repeatedly admonished us, telling us that we do not need outside assistance. A few days ago, an American newspaper published an article on the problems confronting the Yichang City Museum.* The interview was with Yao Yingxin, director of the Archaeology Museum, which is located near the dam site. The authorities came down and interrogated us: “Why did you mention those things to foreigners?” they asked. We told them that it was people from the Yichang Museum who had done all the talking. But a high-level official said to me: “We are capable of building the Three Gorges dam, so how can it be said that we can’t come up with the money to preserve cultural antiquities and works of art?” He added that this was not his personal opinion but reflected the basic policy line laid down by the Three Gorges Construction Committee, namely: “Never discuss the issue of international assistance without our approval.”

DQ: If the design of the dam were to be altered, for instance if its height were reduced from 175 meters to 150 meters, what would this mean for the preservation of cultural antiquities?

YW: Of course, the losses would be fewer.

DQ: And if the project’s completion was postponed until the 2020s, would that provide more time for archaeologists to complete their work?

YW: Of course, this would make us more than happy.

DQ: As an expert who has been involved in historical and archaeological research for over forty years, what are your expectations and thoughts about the current situation?

YW: Archaeological work in China has certainly improved a great deal.

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over the last forty years. We are capable of doing a first-rate job in preserving the historical relics and cultural antiquities of the Three Gorges area. As for expectations, as an archaeologist and the person responsible for cultural antiquities preservation in the Three Gorges area, I sincerely hope that the Three Gorges Construction Committee carries out its work in a steadfast fashion and that it follows international standards. Moreover, in order to protect the cultural antiquities, we should seek international support both in terms of money and manpower. Personally, I am someone with the highest national and ethnic pride, and so I do not wish to see China lose face on this issue. On this particular matter, however, we must seek international assistance. What needs to be done should be done.

Second Interview, August 1995

DQ: You mentioned in our first interview that beginning in November 1993 scholars involved in the preliminary work to assess the protection of historical relics and cultural antiquities in the Three Gorges area were forced to “pay their own way.” It has now been eight months since the formal inauguration of the Three Gorges project in December 1994. Have you received the funds promised to you by the state to implement your preliminary assessment?

YW: Implementation of the assessment plan began in November 1993, and has involved over 20 major academic units from all over the country. These included the Chinese Academy of Sciences, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and Beijing, Qinghua, and Tianjin universities [China’s three premier institutions of higher learning]. In March 1994, I was formally appointed the director of this effort. My first act was to negotiate funding with the Three Gorges Construction Committee but nothing really came of it until April 1994, several months before the formal inauguration of the dam project in December. At that point, I held several meetings with representatives from the Resettlement Bureau of the Three Gorges Construction Committee and the population resettlement bureaus of the Hubei and Sichuan provincial governments. On April 31, 1995, several months after the project began, I signed an agreement with these organizations, and in early May we finally received approval of our funding as stipulated in the agreement to initiate the assessment plan.

DQ: Thank God. It seems that Li Boning, who was in charge of resettlement and the protection of cultural antiquities for the Three Gorges Construction Committee, and his successor, Tang Zhanghui, have finally come to their senses, and realized that this is no trivial matter. Is that true?

YW: Do you see it that way? Let me tell you. We started talking about funding last April, but I didn’t receive anything until the National People’s Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) met in April of this year. Prior to those gatherings, I had convened my own meeting where members of my group reported to a select number of NPC and CPPCC delegates on the development and implementation of the assessment plan. After delivering our report, everyone there shouted at us: “Such an important matter and you have been conducting this behind closed doors. Why didn’t you scream and yell at the Three Gorges Construction Committee and the State Council?” Others said: “In 1992, when the NPC was considering the total budget of the Three Gorges dam, why was funding for the protection of cultural antiquities not included?”

During these two meetings a series of proposals were worked out, which journalists then reported on in internal reference* and public newspapers. The proposals advocated that funds be allocated immediately to implement the assessment, criticized the funds provided in the agreement as woefully inadequate, and recognized that this task should be managed by the central, and not the provincial, government. The curator of the Beijing Municipal Library, Ren Jiyu, joined in by writing a letter and meeting personally with Zou Jiahua [a vice premier], at which time Ren proposed that the funds earmarked for the protection of cultural antiquities not be part of the resettlement budget but be separate. I also wrote a letter to Zou in which I stressed that if the funds to carry out the assessment were not authorized soon, we would have to terminate our work. Zou then gave his approval to Guo Shuyan who, in turn, gave the green light to his subordinates resulting in an executive order to release the funds in late April finally being issued. Getting these funds was, therefore, the result of a collective effort.

DQ: Is it true that your work is almost completed—that you have determined which sites should be protected and relocated and which will be submerged by the reservoir?

YW: Between August and October 1995, a plan for 22 counties will be developed and submitted for approval. By the end of December, planning

*Publications restricted to top-level leaders in China.
for both Hubei and Sichuan provinces should be completed. By March 1996, an overall plan should be completed, consisting of 25 separate reports. As for the total number of sites, our investigation suggests that there are 1,271. We must be very careful in our estimates about the total number of sites which must be protected. I would say a conservative figure is about four hundred to five hundred.

**DQ:** What about manpower? And the funding problem? As I recall, in 1991 the Yangtze River Planning Commission (under the authority of the Ministry of Water Resources) stated that the Three Gorges project would submerge between 60 and 70 cultural sites, and that the estimated cost of protection was ¥60 million. Are these figures still valid?

**YW:** Those are the figures proposed by the committee in 1990. I have no idea how it arrived at them. In November 1994, the State Council decided that funds for the protection of cultural antiquities would be taken out of the ¥40 billion population resettlement budget. The budget for cultural antiquities would, therefore, come to around ¥300 million. This figure is still valid.

**DQ:** Is that possible? As you mentioned in our last interview, the general rule for calculating a budget for preservation of cultural antiquities should be about 3 to 5 percent of the budget for the entire project. Based on a conservative estimate of the project’s total cost (¥120 billion), the budget for the preservation of cultural antiquities should be around ¥4 to ¥5 billion. Why only ¥300 million? I should point out that the cost of relocating structures from the Central Fine Arts Academy [in Beijing] alone cost one billion yuan! Three hundred million yuan for the entire Three Gorges area! Are you kidding! Did you agree to this by signing the resettlement budget you just mentioned?

**YW:** That figure is from Item Number 10 in the document titled “Professional Project Restoration and Rebuilding Compensation Investment” from a report on the estimated cost of compensation for resettlement in the Three Gorges area that was issued at the end of last year. Let me tell you a story. A few days before signing the budget agreement, I had a conversation with a high-level official responsible for resettlement in the Three Gorges project. I told him: “Now that we’re alone, tell me frankly, is ¥40 billion enough for population resettlement?” He smiled but didn’t say a word. Then I told him: “Although the State Council has decided on a budget, I know for sure that ¥40 billion is not enough. Let me tell you something else. Three hundred million yuan for cultural antiquities from that ¥40 billion is inadequate! The only difference between the two of us is that you’re not intimidated by the inadequacy of the ¥40 billion resettlement budget because you know there are a million peasants out there whom you know will protest when the time comes. We archaeologists can only clam up no matter how dire the situation.”

He then replied: “You must understand. The State Council requires us to use limited funds and work out a plan. I am in no position to comment on any of this. The budgetary agreement signed by our Resettlement Bureau and your cultural antiquities protection group is based on that allocation. I cannot say whether it can be changed.”

I responded: “We are from the academic realm. It is up to the government to decide on budgetary allocations. Our job is to provide an accurate figure for the amount of money needed. As an academic, I must be responsible for my work. I cannot concoct a figure based on how much money is available from the government simply so the Three Gorges project can be launched. All I can say is that the ¥300 million for antiquities protection is far from enough and, therefore, I can’t sign the agreement.”

Again he responded: “What if the authorities require you to sign? What will you do?” I said: “Fine, I’ll resign and you can look for somebody else.” In the end, he said: “Let’s make a compromise. Try to conduct your work with the amount given. You can submit proposals later for work that requires more money.” And so I signed the agreement, but there is a clause in it that says: “The budget for cultural antiquities protection should be based on actual need.”

**DQ:** Did the agreement specify any limits on additional monies for the protection of cultural antiquities?

**YW:** No. The understanding was that the agreement called for providing whatever will be needed. Now that we have received the money to fully execute our initial assessment, by early next year we’ll be able to provide an outline for the overall plan to relocate the cultural antiquities. The State Council will invite other departments to assess and improve on our plan. Personally, I think whatever the government provides will be far less than what is needed. We got into a big argument with the Yangtze River Planning Commission over the whole issue of the protection of cultural antiquities. I said that if they asked for our advice, it would be that if the Three Gorges weren’t built, then protection of cultural antiquities wouldn’t be necessary. This would be the best of all possible worlds. However, now that the project has been launched, we will try our best to save as many historical relics and cultural antiquities as possible. It’s not a matter of asking for a certain sum of money. Even if adequate funding is
forthcoming, it will only mean that we can rescue an additional 10 to 20 percent of the relics. The majority will still be submerged. At this point, with the project moving along, and the cultural antiquities in need of protection, the only solution is to call for international support.*

DQ: The problem is that the project has already started. Can the relics be excavated while the project is being built?

YW: Protecting cultural antiquities is not like digging for sweet potatoes, you know.** It's not as if once you dig them out the work is finished. Such excavations require meticulous scientific recording and treatment. The problem is that even if we do receive the required amount in line with international standards (that is, 3 to 5 percent of the total budget), it is still inadequate. We are trying to minimize the losses as much as possible, but at most we will succeed in preserving about 10 to 20 percent of the sites we found in our assessment.

DQ: Could you seek support from UNESCO? Wasn't the preservation of cultural antiquities at the Aswan dam project in Egypt done with international cooperation, implemented through UNESCO?

YW: Every time someone mentions Aswan, the Three Gorges Construction Committee says: "Ours is a different situation." I don't know why, but they are deeply reluctant to talk about international support. They said to us: "We haven't asked for overseas support and you shouldn't either. It's up to us to decide. The Three Gorges project is unique, and even the State Cultural Antiquities Bureau has no right to seek international assistance." As far as we're concerned, however, the two most difficult problems facing us right now—money and manpower—require us to call for international support. Even if the government eventually provides the necessary funds, it will be impossible to complete the massive amount of work required in such a short period of time, even if we mobilize every archaeologist in the country.

There is the possibility of help from overseas Chinese in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao. Last November, Zhang Delie from the State Cultural Antiquities Bureau and I headed a Chinese museum delegation to Taiwan. When the protection of cultural antiquities around the Three Gorges was raised, I said that we would willingly accept help from organizations in Taiwan such as Academia Sinica, Taiwan University, and the Natural History Museum in Taizhong City. Of course, the costs would have to be borne by the Taiwanese. I also told them that whenever two or more identical pieces were excavated they could be shared between Taiwan and the mainland. In the case of Hong Kong, I met with the historian Xu Zhuoyun, who was very excited about the prospect of helping to raise money from foundations in Hong Kong.

DQ: What about Singapore?

YW: We haven't made any suggestions on that matter. I would like to establish a Three Gorges Cultural Antiquities Protection Foundation that would operate as a nongovernmental organization, and I hope that the Chinese government will go along with this idea. Protecting cultural antiquities enhances everyone's understanding of ancient cultures. This is not a matter that China should consider relevant to its national security. We should discourage narrow, parochial nationalism and invite scholars from all over the world to join in the effort.

In addition to the preservation work, we should take advantage of this opportunity to conduct research on these ancient cultures. I personally would like to get in touch with international networks and organizations. The people of China have not adequately addressed how we lag behind the rest of the world in the humanities. Nor has our national leader [Deng Xiaoping] acknowledged it. He does not understand that it is impossible for a country to gain national independence through technology alone. Without a concern for the humanities, it will be impossible to regulate society properly, which will ultimately hinder our economic development. Since the late 1960s, research on ancient cultures has made great strides, especially in archaeology and anthropology. We must, therefore, get in touch with the world. Otherwise, we will fall further and further behind.

DQ: Perhaps this idea of yours will be very hard for others to accept. The loss of status and a role for the humanities and social sciences in China is nothing new. It occurred many years ago.

YW: Personally, I think that it is possible for us to use the preservation work in areas such as the Three Gorges to increase our understanding of humanity and culture. For instance, the Ba Culture has been directly linked by a consanguineous relationship (xueyuan) to the contemporary Tuja minority group. These two peoples live in roughly the same area around the Three Gorges in Hubei and Sichuan provinces. I sincerely hope that our archaeological research can be linked to the study of ethnicity and

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*In August 1996, Yu Weichao and 55 other prominent academics and officials took the unusual step of writing to Jiang Zemin to advocate that preservation work be sped up and adequately funded. That letter is found in Appendix F.

**A sarcastic swipe by Yu Weichao at the general ignorance of China's official cadres and decision makers on matters such as archaeology.
folk customs so that valuable comparisons can be made. One is a cultural comparison between relics from three to four thousand years ago and those still in use today. A second comparison could involve DNA. From the sites along the Three Gorges area we could excavate tombs of the Ba Culture that date as far back as the Han dynasty and even the Western Zhou (1100–771 B.C.). We could then compare the DNA from these two-thousand-year-old bones with that of the Tujia, in effect carrying out a comparative study between two cultures. The sites in this area are too unique and valuable to be lost.

In short, an enormous challenge awaits the scholars involved in excavating and preserving the cultural antiquities which are to be submerged.

Chapter Ten

A Lamentation for the Yellow River

The Three Gate Gorge Dam
(Sanmenxia)

Shang Wei

“A Clear Yellow River”

In August 1949, just before the establishment of the People’s Republic, a “Preliminary Report on Harnessing the Yellow River” (Zhili Huanghe chubu yijian) was delivered to Dong Biwu, chairman of the North China People’s Government of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). One of the report’s authors, Wang Huayun, headed the Yellow River Research Group and would later serve as director of the Yellow River Commission (Huang weihui) which was charged with advising the Ministry of Water Resources and Electric Power on management of the river’s resources.* Comrade Wang was known as the “leading expert” on harnessing the Yellow River, and he has also come to be known as one of the founders of the Three Gate Gorge dam (Sanmenxia) project located in Henan Province.

According to the 1949 preliminary report, controlling the perennial floods on the lower reaches of the Yellow River required that a number of dams and reservoirs be built. However, the question of where these dams

*Such commissions exist for all the major rivers in China and are charged with advising the Ministry of Water Resources and Electric Power on management of river resources. But since they have no authority to issue orders that fall within their jurisdictions, it is virtually impossible to implement integrated plans for river-basin development. See, Lieberthal, Governing China (New York: Norton, 1995); p. 286.