

The River Dragon Has Come!

Audrey Ronning Topping

The River Dragon Has Come! is a portentous warning directed to China's leaders and to all concerned powers on earth from scientists and intellectuals in China. This ominous cry was the last rasping voice heard by the survivors of the flood of August 5, 1975, just before the rising reservoir waters burst the Banqiao dam in China's Henan Province—thus the title of this book.

Indeed! The river dragon escaped with such demonic force that giant tidal waves wiped out entire cities. Estimates of the immediate death toll ranged from the official count of 85,600 to the unofficial count of 230,000. Two million people were trapped for weeks in trees and floating wreckage. Some eleven million were stricken by disease, food poisoning, and famine in the aftermath.

On that fatal night in 1975, the Banqiao and the Shimantan, China's so-called "iron dams" that had been proclaimed indestructible—like the Titanic—were only the first to go. Sixty more dams in Henan Province tumbled like dominoes before the winds and rains of an incredibly powerful typhoon. The dams had been hastily and shoddily constructed during the "high tide of socialism" in the 1950s in spite of urgent warnings from scientists, including China's top hydrologist, Chen Xing, who forewarned that the dams "would produce a disaster of gigantic proportions beyond imagination." Chen Xing was purged and all opposition was squelched. But twenty years later Chen's apocalyptic prophecies came to pass and China suffered the most catastrophic dam break in world history.

Almost as incredible as the disaster is the fact that the Communist leaders imposed a news blackout on the controlled media. Twenty years after the fact, Human Rights Watch/Asia compiled an account of the

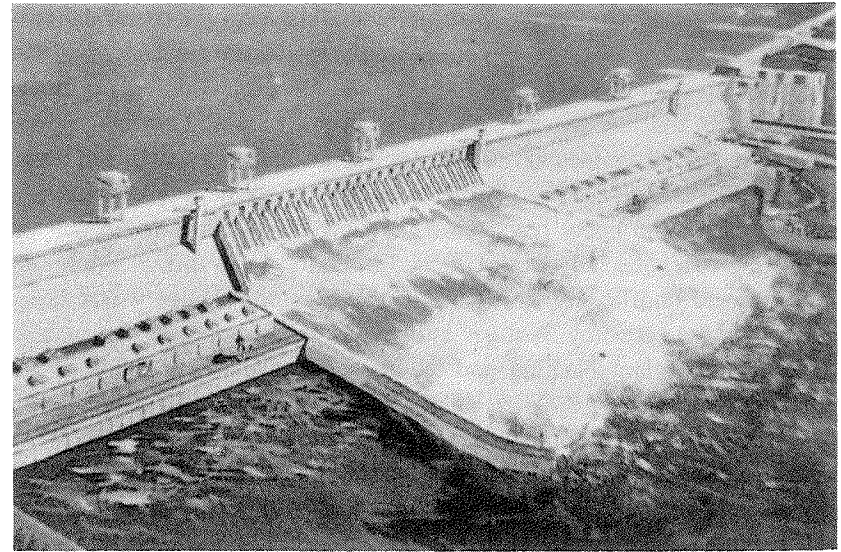
disaster from confidential sources in China.* To this day, the tragedy has not been publicly acknowledged by the Chinese government, or cited in official documents and statements on the Three Gorges project. *The River Dragon Has Come!* records the most complete and detailed account of the horrible tragedy and cautions: "It should be etched in the minds of all civilized people as a lesson and a warning for the future."

Dai Qing, an investigative journalist and author with a wide audience in China and abroad, compiled this book of essays and field reports assessing the impact of the Three Gorges megadam at great risk to her own freedom. The book is a last-ditch effort to prevent history from repeating itself tenfold if the 39 billion cubic meters of water in the Three Gorges reservoir ever escapes by natural or man-made catastrophes. These essays reveal the deep-rooted problems presented by the Three Gorges project that the government is attempting to disguise or suppress. The main concerns are population resettlement and human rights, the irreversible environmental and economic impacts, the loss of cultural antiquities and historical sites, military considerations, and hidden dam disasters of the past. Opponents of the dam are attempting to kill the project or at least reduce the size of the megadam now planned to be the biggest, most expensive, and incidentally the most hazardous of all hydroelectric projects on this planet.

Dai Qing spent ten months in the notorious Qincheng prison outside Beijing (six months in solitary confinement) for publishing a previous collection of articles criticizing the dam, entitled *Yangtze! Yangtze!*, in 1989. That book expressed the views of forty scientists, economists, and journalists opposed to the project. Undaunted, she continues to prognosticate that the angry waters of the vast reservoir will not only bring a scourge upon the people of China today, but will irrevocably erase the unique archaeological traces of their ancient past.

Yangtze! Yangtze! was banned and her numerous other books and essays were black-listed by the Beijing regime when Dai was arrested in July 1989 following the Tiananmen Square massacre. After her release, much to the consternation of the communist government who preferred she leave the country, Dai declined offers of political asylum in the United

* Human Rights Watch/Asia, "Appendix III: The Banqiao and Shimantan Dam Disasters," in *The Three Gorges Dam in China: Forced Resettlement, Suppression of Dissent and Labor Rights Concerns*, vol. 7, no. 2 (February 1995). The original Chinese account of the dam collapses was prepared by a People's Liberation Army journalist, and is found in Chapter Three.



Three Gorges Dam mock-up. (Photo courtesy of Jim Williams)

States and Germany. Instead, she stubbornly hangs on in Beijing, under constant police surveillance, boldly expressing her honest opinions and the opposing views of many of China's top intellectuals and statesmen. She has become the voice for millions of flood refugees who fear retaliation if they openly oppose a project sanctioned by the government.

In summer 1996, I talked at length with Dai Qing, a woman who speaks with the tang of the spicy Sichuanese cuisine that her birthplace, Chongqing, on the banks of the Yangtze, is famous for. It is a voice that has made her, in her own words, "emerge as a thorn in the side of a regime that is determined to prevent the truth from being revealed." Dai has a volatile personality sparkling with an extraordinary energy force. Her round, expressive face is helmeted with perky black hair and her alert eyes harbor a glint of mischief. She can talk with intense passion one moment and erupt into unrestrained laughter the next. "If the Three Gorges could speak," she said, "they would plead for mercy."

The Issues

The Chinese government claims that the megadam will increase the national output of electricity by 10 percent, help control floods downstream,

boost the regional economy, reduce pollution, and with the construction of giant locks enable 10,000-ton commercial ships to reach Chongqing. Dai Qing and other opponents recognize the need for more energy sources and flood control but fear putting all the eggs in one basket. They claim these objectives can be attained at much lower human, environmental, and financial risk by building a series of smaller dams in sparsely populated areas in the tributaries and upper reaches of the Yangtze. They point out that the escalating cost (officially from U.S.\$4.5 billion in 1986 to U.S.\$34 billion in 1994, and unofficially as high as U.S.\$70 billion) could wreck rather than boost the economy. Not yet estimated, for example, are the costs of rebuilding the giant Nanjing and Wuhan bridges that were built in the 1950s for passage of 5,000-ton ships. Critics also point out the rising costs of environmental protection measures, the removal of sediment from the reservoir, the prevention of industrial pollution and sewage back up in the reservoir, and above all the rights of the 1.9 million people being forced to resettle who are not getting the promised compensation money.

The controversy has been simmering since the idea of the megaproject was first envisioned in 1912 by Dr. Sun Yat-sen who was unaware of the ecological dangers or the existence of ancient relics in the valley. The plan was reintroduced by Mao Zedong in the 1950s and by Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s. Both were aware of the potential problems but set their own standards of immediate priorities regardless of future consequences. The debate has now escalated into a serious confrontation.

The chief proponents of the dam have been China's current premier, Li Peng, a Soviet-trained engineer, and the late Deng Xiaoping, China's paramount leader until his death in February 1997. Although Deng's protective mantle may have dropped, Li Peng is still supported by virtually the entire bureaucracy in the Yangtze Valley Planning Office (*Changban*), headquartered in Wuhan and effectively led by a former Red Army General with a staff of about 12,000 officials, all of whom stand to profit monetarily and to cement their power base by building the largest dam project ever. They are backed by scores of overseas firms including the giants of the global dam-building industry: Caterpillar, General Electric, ABB, Siemens AG, Mitsubishi, and Toshiba. These and many other firms are bidding on billions of dollars in contracts to build various parts of the dam. The most lucrative contract? The twenty-six, 680-megawatt turbines and electrical generators that will be the heart of the dam. "China," as Li Peng readily admits, "does not have the technology to build [the dam by itself]."

Chief opponents to the project are Li Rui, a former vice minister of electric power who, in spite of official criticism, has boldly objected to the dam since 1956, and many of China's top intellectuals, archaeologists, and environmentalists who have found their voice in Dai Qing. They are secretly supported by a silent majority of ordinary people as well as an underground network of scientists and officials, some in key positions in the government, and even within the State Council (China's nominal cabinet) and the Ministry of Water Resources. Some of those sources, under the cover of pseudonym, have contributed to this book.

Unlikely Opponents

Ironically, the top players in this bare knuckle political battle, Li Peng and Dai Qing, are both adopted children of two comrades in arms who, next to Mao Zedong, were the most powerful men in China during the Mao era. Li is the adopted son of the late Premier Zhou Enlai, while Dai Qing is the adopted daughter of the late Minister of Defense, Marshal Ye Jianying. Both were honored veterans of the Long March in the 1930s. The two men were bonded for life when the Marshal nursed Zhou through a critical case of malaria which rendered him delirious for several days. Now their adopted children have squared off in dire opposition over the Three Gorges dam project.

The two-kilometer-long, 185-meter-high dam will create a reservoir as long as Lake Superior, which the Chinese call the "lake within the gorges." The reservoir will coil like the spine of the mythical dragon over 600 kilometers upstream from Yichang through the gorges to Chongqing. The rising water will force upward of 1.9 million Yangtze Valley residents to abandon their homes and the tombs of their ancestors. They must leave their shipyards, cherished orange and mulberry orchards, and rice paddies flourishing on the terraced farmlands and resettle in unknown, often hostile territory with lower living standards. China's most extensive ecosystem will be irreversibly upset. The Yangtze River Valley with its ancient towns, sacred pagodas and temples, unique wildlife habitats, and invaluable cultural antiquities will be lost forever, as will the source of its arcane mythology and much of the spectacular scenery that has been a central part of Chinese life and legends since time immemorial.

Backlash

Within China, the megadam has triggered a political backlash. Concern has reached such heights that the people are daring to challenge the

regime's "mandate of heaven" for the first time since the Communists took power in 1949. Intellectuals and farmers alike are bravely breaking the political shackles instilled by centuries of kowtowing to the imperial emperor's divine authority, and later to the terror of military and communist dictators. They are risking imprisonment with insistent pleas for action and for a public forum to register their disapproval. Regardless of the project's outcome, the stormy political waves set in motion have already culminated in an historical watershed event in China.

I asked Dai Qing how she got involved. "Everyone was wondering," she said, "but no one dared to ask: Was this crucial decision to build the biggest dam in the world made on the basis of scientific feasibility or was it decided because of the ambitions of politicians intent on forcing the project through as an icon of superpower status and national prestige?"

"If we had freedom in China," she continued, "the scientists and engineers could have voiced their own opinions, but we don't. They could not speak out without losing their jobs or worse, so I decided to do it for them. In 1989 it was urgent because the National People's Congress had been asked to approve the project without even having the chance to listen to the opponents. I had no choice but to ask my fellow journalists to help me interview the experts for their true opinions. That is how I got involved."

The Megadam as Metaphor

Dai Qing feels that the megadam represents more than a political and environmental debate. She sees it as a metaphor of China's changing society, a microcosm of what is happening in the whole of China symbolized by a power struggle within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) itself—a struggle between the reformists and the hard liners. She contends that the Communist Party leadership today is dominated by an engineering and technology culture without regard to the humanities or history.* "The Three Gorges project is a very special case in China," she said, "for China is undergoing rapid change. The politicians who support the project are seeking power and have all the characteristics of the old society, that is,

* Jiang Zemin, China's president and Party leader, has a degree in electrical engineering and was trained at the Stalin Automobile Factory in Moscow. Li Peng, China's premier and foremost supporter of the Three Gorges project, was trained as a power engineer in the Soviet Union, and from 1955 to 1979 he worked in numerous positions in the Chinese power industry.

authoritarianism, the one-party system, central economic control, and personal despotism. They have no regard for the individual and allow no democratic discussion at all. These are all characteristics of old China. But those opposing the dam represent the majority of intellectuals, and they oppose the project for technical, financial, environmental, and human rights reasons, as well as for the preservation of our ancient roots. They are backed by many caring people the world over. These people have all the characteristics of the new society. They are independent thinkers. They want to express their own opinions.

"All we are asking for is an open democratic debate on a crucial enterprise that concerns the fate of the whole nation. Our people want to be heard. What is the government afraid of? We don't want to repeat the fatal mistakes the Communist Party has made in the past—like the Great Leap Forward (1958–60)* and the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). So, one can study China through this case—the whole of society and contemporary Chinese affairs. This is why so many people in China and abroad are concerned about this project."

Who Is Dai Qing?

Dai Qing has risen like the phoenix from an eclectic and fiery background—one that would have burned out most spirits. She was born in 1941 during World War II into an elite intellectual family. Her father, Fu Daqing, who received his university degree in Moscow in the early 1920s, was a friend and follower of Chen Duxiu, the founder of the Chinese Communist Party. Her mother, the daughter of a prominent Peking scholar, was born at the end of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) and became one of the small percentage of women in China privileged to receive a higher education. She studied in Japan and became an oil engineer. Dai's parents firmly believed that communism was the answer to China's problems. When the Japanese invaded China they joined the communist intelli-

* The Great Leap Forward (1958–60) was a plan promoted by CCP Chairman Mao Zedong to overcome China's economic backwardness through intensive agricultural production and reliance on untried industrial models, such as the infamous "backyard steel furnaces," in order to catch up with and surpass the economies of the West. Its failure resulted in the deaths of an estimated thirty million people. Penny Kane, *Famine in China, 1959–61: Demographic and Social Implications* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988).

gence organization and were assigned to occupied Beijing. When her mother was eight months pregnant with Dai's younger sister, she was captured and tortured on the dreaded "tiger's bench" where the Japanese chained their victims. She survived electric and water tortures, escaped, and made her way back to Chongqing. Miraculously, both mother and infant lived. When Dai Qing was three years old, her father was executed by the Japanese. In China, he became an honored revolutionary martyr.

In her recent book *My Four Fathers*, Dai Qing writes about the influence her real father and three subsequent "fathers" had upon her. Of her real father, she wrote: "He was extremely intelligent but was never appointed to an important position in the CCP for he was uninterested in promoting himself and gaining power, and that is the example that I have been following all my life."*

After the war Dai Qing moved to Beijing with her mother and, at the age of five, was adopted by her martyred father's friend Marshal Ye Jianying. The Marshal was then commander-in-chief of the elite Eighth Route Army and would later become minister of defense. In one of the many contradictions in Dai Qing's life, this "child of communism" attended a former British missionary school. During the disastrous Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s, Dai helped build a small backyard steel furnace in a beautiful old Christian church, and as an enthusiastic "young pioneer" she volunteered to help construct the Great Hall of the People in Tiananmen Square. She was later encouraged by her adoptive father to attend the Harbin Military Engineering Institute from which she graduated as a missile engineer and was classified as a "national treasure."

When the Cultural Revolution broke out in May 1966, Dai was working as an engineer in a top secret laboratory specializing in the guidance and propulsion systems of intercontinental missiles. Her research involved the very heart of the system—the high-speed precision engine. "Back then," she later wrote, "I had no other thoughts on my mind than to become an outstanding engineer and to repay the people for their nurturing. Every thought in our minds came from [Mao Zedong's] 'instructions.' . . . We firmly believed that 'Chairman Mao was the greatest leader of the oppressed in the world' and that 'the sky in the Communist liberated areas was always bright.'" Caught up in the fervor of the Cultural

* Dai Qing, *Wode sige fuqin: zijide gushi* (My Four Fathers: My Own Story) (Hong Kong: Mingbao Publishers Ltd., 1995).

Revolution, Dai left her missile job to join the Red Guards. But she soon discovered that no matter how fervently they followed Mao's directive to sweep away the "four olds"—old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits—from Chinese society, everything was determined by the highest levels of the government and the guards' internecine "struggle" was useless. By 1968, the country was in chaos. The students felt they had been conned by the leaders they once worshiped and like thousands of others, Dai expressed her resentment by getting married and pregnant before the approved age.

Among the thousands of intellectuals who were imprisoned and tortured during this chaotic period were Dai Qing's mother and her second husband, the man Dai called her "third father," Tang Hai. She described him as a man living in a world of his own who only became a Communist because he was snubbed by an official in the Kuomintang government (1927–49). He was a scholar who spoke fluent English. In the late 1930s, he journeyed to the caves of Yan'an where the Communists were hiding out and became Mao Zedong's translator. He fell out of favor when Mao became jealous and imprisoned him for the "crime" of kissing a young woman. During the Cultural Revolution, he was again persecuted and imprisoned for his Western ideas. His suffering was beyond endurance. He went insane and died in an asylum.

The death of Dai Qing's "third father" played a major role in her disillusionment. She learned of his death while she and her husband were working as peasants reclaiming land and raising pigs on a military farm near Dongting Lake where they had been sent during the Cultural Revolution to "reform through labor." "Everyday we were covered in mud from head to toe," she said, "and so exhausted we could hardly move. We had no idea of the damage that the reclamation projects would do to the environment."* At the same time, their infant daughter was taken from them and given to the care of a working class stranger. They did not see their baby for three and a half years.

* Dongting and Poyang lakes are a major catchment area for Yangtze River floods. Such massive reclamation projects and the rapid expansion of lands under cultivation, in line with Mao Zedong's dictum to "plant grain everywhere," severely reduced the size of these lakes and other catchment areas in China, exacerbating flood problems on the Yangtze and other rivers. For her personal experiences in the Cultural Revolution, see Dai Qing, "Zawen" (Piquant Essays), *Chinese Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 27, no. 2 (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., winter 1995/96).

Speaking of her growing disillusionment during these years, Dai said: "I once truly believed Mao's line that 'sweat from work can purify the filth in the soul,' " Dai said. "But it was on the military farm where . . . for the first time I realized the ignorance, hypocrisy, arrogance, and darkness of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in which I had previously served and now observed as someone working at the lowest depths of society. The myth ingrained in my mind since 1960 of the blood and flesh relationship between the people's army and the people was destroyed. I realized that the military was merely an armed political group, and it was used solely as an extension of political action. How was the CCP so able to mystify and romanticize the military? And, what for?" After three years of manual labor, Dai was accused of involvement in a reactionary organization. On learning of her imminent arrest, she and her husband escaped to Beijing where they were fortunately reunited with their daughter but continued to live under the threat of imprisonment until 1971.

Like most of the young intellectuals sent to the countryside Dai was unable to return to her former position as missile engineer. However, her training landed her a job as a technician in the television surveillance division of the Ministry of Public Security which ironically paid off when she was later imprisoned and was able to locate the hidden cameras. In 1978 Dai was employed at the PLA Headquarters of the General Staff where, after studying English, she was transferred in the early 1980s to the civilian intelligence department. There, she admits, "I worked as a spy with the mystery that the profession entails." Her primary task was to guard against foreign enemies. The number one foreign enemy at that time was the Soviet Union, and Dai's first assignment took her to France to spy on writers from Eastern European communist countries. Her cover was to pose as a member of the All China Writers' Association.* She played the role so well that she actually began writing short stories in her spare time and discovered she was good at it. Both publishers and the public loved her stories and she soon became an eminent young novelist in China.

The Making of an Investigative Journalist

Dai Qing left PLA intelligence in 1982 when a male colleague exposed her to the CIA. She landed a job as a journalist and for the next seven

* See, Dai Qing, "Zawen" (Piquant Essays), *Chinese Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 27, no. 3 (Spring 1996).

years wrote for *Guangming ribao* (Enlightenment Daily), a leading national newspaper read mainly by intellectuals. Her assignments took her all over the country, and she focused on extremely sensitive political and environmental issues with a barbed pen. She soon became the country's boldest and best-known woman investigative journalist, but her penchant for getting into trouble with the authorities lost her all chances for promotion at the newspaper. When she was sent to Guangxi Province in China's southwest to report on the Sino-Vietnamese War (1979), instead of the expected propaganda she wrote articles satirizing the foolishness of war and challenging the right of the government to go to war. In 1987, she wrote a seething eyewitness account about how the government's disdain for human life and lack of environmental concern led to a months-long forest fire in Heilongjiang Province, but her newspaper refused to print it. Undaunted, she published her own and some of her colleagues' reports in a monograph with the revealing title of *!And?**

Dai became increasingly determined to reveal the dark side of the Three Gorges project that she knew was being suppressed by the government. In 1989, she produced the shockingly critical work, *Yangtze! Yangtze!*, that catapulted her into political prison. Without explanation she was thrown into solitary confinement where, she later admitted, she "experienced a constant terror like the sword of Damocles hanging over my head." She was forbidden to sing, and kept her sanity by reciting poetry to herself. She studied law in an effort to get herself released, cried for her husband, and for a time contemplated suicide. Her only companions during her exercise period in a zoo-cage were centipedes, spiders, and snails.

Her only visitor during confinement was her "fourth father," actually her father-in-law. He received approval to visit and say good-bye because he was dying of lung cancer. Holding his hand she began to cry and said, "Father, I first met you when you were in prison (during the Cultural Revolution) and now you're visiting me in prison. I don't believe you did anything wrong, nor have I. You must trust me. . . ." He replied, "We can resist!"

He died shortly thereafter but his words were never forgotten. Dai's will to survive and oppose the project was renewed.

After her release in May 1990, Dai remarked that she felt as if she had gone from a small jail into a big prison. She went on, however, to forge

* *!He?: Daxing'anling huozai zhiji baodao* (!And?: A Timely Report on the Fire in the Greater Xing'an Mountains) (Beijing: Huaxia Publishers, 1987).

herself a remarkable career as a writer, environmentalist, and lecturer. She was allowed to travel abroad and eventually became a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University, a research fellow of the Freedom Forum at Columbia University, and a Humanities Research Fellow at the Australian National University. She is a multiple award winner including the 1992 Golden Pen for Freedom (Prague), the 1993 Goldman Environmental Award (San Francisco), and the 1993 Condé Naste Environmental Award.

Courage on the Line

Today, Dai Qing has become that rare creature in Communist China—an independent thinker with an open, flexible mind who dares to express her opinions. She is fully aware of the possible consequences of publishing another critical book about the Three Gorges dam, but she believes her mission to stop the project is more important than her own safety. She is a follower of no one. Even the Western label of “Chinese dissident” or the Chinese label of “dual dissident intellectual” do not fit. Dai has disassociated herself from all political movements. When she discovered that the mass protest movement in Tiananmen Square in 1989 was being exploited by politicians to advance their own power interests she withdrew from the democratic movement. On the day that the Communist Party used force to crack down on the students she submitted her resignation from the CCP.

Dai is quick to point out that she has never lined up with the liberal intellectuals, the hard liners, the democratic elements, or the Beijing regime, a strategy which leaves her free to attack them all, and she does not hesitate to do so, though she sometimes plays the role of mediator. Dai Qing aims her smoking literary gun in all directions—at both the political left and right—from Chairman Mao to Deng Xiaoping, at China’s current top leaders, social climbers, professional opportunists, student leaders, and even fellow journalists, both foreign and Chinese, past and present. No one is exempt, including herself.

Dai describes herself as a “fighter for democracy” but she also supports some aspects of neo-authoritarianism.* She expresses contempt for both the Communist Party and the student dissidents from the pro-democracy

*Neo-authoritarianism calls for a transitional period in China’s progress toward democracy in which a strong leader would impose the rule of law and establish democratic institutions from above.

movement and their intellectual backers who oppose the government. She feels they are cut from the same cloth—“Dogmatists who in the name of ‘revolution’ bring catastrophe to the Chinese people.”

Like Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the democratic leader in Burma, Dai Qing believes reform should be achieved by nonviolent means. “I feel that it is best to avoid revolution at all costs,” she said. “Overthrowing a system by violence is far more fearful than maintaining and reforming the present political order.” Dai has a profound belief in the fundamental wisdom of the Chinese people who are now experiencing sweeping economic, ideological, and political changes as the country struggles through an unprecedented social transition between communism and free enterprise capitalism. By her writings and lectures she is attempting to find an equilibrium for herself as well as for China—an equilibrium that she feels must be achieved by nonviolence rather than the bloody revolutionary upheavals that have characterized every change of government in the last two thousand years of Chinese history. Dai believes that China must go through a profound incremental change before it can find the societal balance which will enable the country to modernize and build a true civil society which she envisions will evolve into a Chinese- rather than a British- or American-style democracy. “China should establish a democratic system with a foundation of Chinese philosophical ideas. This cannot be achieved overnight, but there have been some democratic sprouts emerging such as the growing private economy and direct elections at the village level.”

Dai Qing has been criticized by both the government and the democracy movement for her role during the Tiananmen Square disaster when she tried to show sympathy for the students but urged them to return to their universities. “I tried to be a go-between and find some way of compromise between the government and the students because I don’t think democracy can be achieved by an overnight revolution. The students had a dream. They wanted a revolution and hoped it would bring down the Communist Party. The dream was good but the method was wrong.”

Dai explained that one reason she tried to persuade the students to leave the square was because she feared that the more than one million people being forced to evacuate the Yangtze River Valley, and the hundreds of thousands of still homeless who were driven from their lands to make way for the Three Gate Gorge (*Sanmenxia*) and seven other large dams built on the Yellow River in the 1950s, might join with the students in the square. “Most of [those moved in the 1950s] are still homeless,” said Dai, “or live under terrible conditions. If they had joined forces with the students in

Beijing it would have forced the government to retaliate by military force. It could have escalated into a major revolution, a blood bath that would have set China's progress back many years."*

"The only positive thing that came out of Tiananmen," she said, "was that it finally taught a lesson to the common people that they should not trust blindly any leader or party. In my opinion, removing this superstition is the first step to democracy. The second step would be for the people to be open to new ideas, but unfortunately that has not happened yet."

An Intellectual Underground

Her fame as a writer and her family connections may have helped Dai Qing develop her strategic network of underground sources, but it was mainly the result of her own courage and determination to spread the truth about the Three Gorges project. "They [including her sources who wrote for *The River Dragon Has Come!*] still work in their positions," she told me. "On the surface they work for the Communist Party and the government, even within the Ministry of Water Resources. But inside they know what they should do."

"Is this causing a split in the Party and within the Ministry?" I inquired. "Is there a Three Gorges underground? It sounds to me that some people are saying one thing and doing another."

"Yes, some of them are," Dai said with a disingenuous smile. "Some are even in key positions so they can get information about the project. Then they tell me and practically write an article for me."

"It sounds just like Washington," I said. "Everybody is leaking to the press!"

She dissolved into giggles. "Yes, yes," she said, "the dam is leaking."

"Are your secret sources in the Ministry in danger? Are you putting yourself in danger by telling me this?"

"The definition of danger or risk in Deng Xiaoping's China is quite different from that in Mao Zedong's China. The biggest risk now is to lose your job, but in Mao's era you would lose your head. Officials in the Ministry of Water Resources are willing to provide me information, but they are not willing to use their names. In this book I only use the real

* For more on the Three Gate Gorge dam, see Chapter Ten.

names of older people who are not afraid to lose their jobs; for those still in important positions I use a pen name."

"Are your sources objective and qualified to know why they are opposing the Three Gorges project?"

"They are all experts: scientists, hydrologists, environmentalists, and engineers. Many are Communist Party members. I think that 90 percent of the Chinese people are really opposed to the project. The only ones in favor of it are those politicians and people in the hydroelectric departments who profit in some way—either financially, or through prestige, glory, and promotions. They are after power at the expense of the country. Many people who are against it are not involved in the debate because they think it is useless to object. They still believe that once the Party makes a decision nobody can stop it. You see, this is the cost of centuries of emperor worship. That is the old mind set. Nobody can change it."

Can it be Stopped?

"Do you really believe that popular resistance could possibly stop the project at this point?" I asked.

"Right now I think we have two years to stop it altogether, or at least to change the design.* I think Deng Xiaoping may join his ancestors within the next two years,** and Li Peng's term as premier ends in March 1998, which is the main reason he is trying to push the project beyond the point of no return. After Li's departure, there will be two important figures in Chinese politics, namely Jiang Zemin, president of the country and general secretary of the Party, and the economic czar, Vice Premier Zhu Rongji. Neither have uttered any direct support of the Three Gorges project so they would not lose face by announcing one day that it had been terminated. In terms of foreign companies who have invested, they could still profit just as much by helping to build smaller dams on the tributaries, which would create the same amount of energy at less cost and, most importantly, those 1.9 million desolate people would not have to be forcibly resettled."

*Alternatives include proposals for a series of smaller dams to be built on the Yangtze's tributaries and/or a substantial reduction in the scale of the Three Gorges dam to the size of the smaller Gezhouba dam.

**Deng Xiaoping died in February 1997, a few months after Ms. Topping spoke with Dai Qing.