

**Qi Ren:** Pen name for Chinese free-lance writer and newspaper journalist.

**Shang Wei:** Pen name for a free-lance writer.

**Shui Fu:** Chinese newspaper journalist.

**Yi Si:** Pen name for a People's Liberation Army journalist who was purged after June 1989.

**Zheng Jiaqin:** Research sociologist.

### *Western*

**Elizabeth Childs-Johnson:** Visiting scholar at the New York University Department of East Asian Studies.

**Richard Hayman:** Director of Cruise Operations for Victoria Cruises, Chongqing, China.

**Luna B. Leopold:** Emeritus Professor of Geology at the University of California at Berkeley, and member of the National Academy of Sciences.

**Yi Ming:** Pen name.

**Audrey Ronning Topping:** Freelance journalist and columnist for *Earth Times* and *Houston Chronicle*, and frequent contributor to the *New York Times Magazine*.

**Lawrence R. Sullivan:** Associate Professor, Adelphi University, Garden City, New York.

---

## Preface

---

*John G. Thibodeau and Philip B. Williams*

When people who are unfamiliar with China's Three Gorges dam learn of its monstrous size—almost two kilometers wide, with a reservoir the length of Lake Superior—and of the incredible social, economic, and environmental havoc that it will wreak, they usually ask the same deceptively complex question—Why? Why would anyone build a dam so big that its reservoir will be visible from space? Why would anyone build a dam that will force upward of 1.9 million people from their homes?

The essays in Dai Qing's *The River Dragon Has Come!* help answer that question. They describe the political and historical contexts in which the plans to dam the mightiest of all Chinese rivers were made. They portray how, at a time of great economic crisis, a new idealistic government that was committed to rapid social change seized upon the wholesale construction of dams as a magical tool for development. They describe how ideology quickly corrupted rational planning and, in the end, led the rush to build more and more dams and reservoirs. They describe how anyone who questioned the plans was seen as challenging the ideology of the state, and how the iron fist of authoritarianism was used to silence such “subversives.”

For those unfamiliar with the history of dam construction worldwide, the story of the Three Gorges project might sound fantastic. For environmentalists, it is sadly familiar. For decades, the United States, like China, fully embraced the allure of the big dam. During the Great Depression, President Roosevelt seized upon the wild promises of dam boosters in the arid West and, as part of the New Deal, embarked on a wave of dam building that only subsided about fifteen years ago. The unquestioned and never substantiated ideology of American dam builders was remarkably similar to that of the Chinese—that somehow the expenditure of billions of dollars on big dams would create national prosperity. While American dam critics were not likely to be “purged” like their Chinese counterparts, those who questioned U.S. dam-building ideology were reviled and labeled “anti-progress.” The American and Chinese dam-building booms shared other similarities: Both provided ample opportunities for corrup-

tion and the advancement of unscrupulous politicians, and both have left behind similar legacies: environmental damage, social dislocation (most obviously in the form of people displaced to make way for reservoirs, an estimated ten million people in China alone), and the massive waste of economic resources.\*

There is one important distinction between the two countries' experiences, however: The dam-building boom in the United States is over, as it is in most of the countries of the developed world. While a growing recognition of the social and environmental costs of large dam projects—to say nothing of their hefty price tags—has contributed to the end of this era, it was people's opposition to the projects that sounded their death knell. As the government of Quebec learned in the early 1990s when it tried to build the massive James Bay II project in Northern Canada, local people will no longer go quietly to make way for big dams. The Chinese government can build the Three Gorges dam only by suppressing the voices of those Chinese citizens who are fully aware of the true lessons of big dam construction in China, the United States, and elsewhere.

And suppress them, they have. Dai Qing, the chief editor of this collection, has been the brave public face of opposition to the Three Gorges dam, and she has suffered for her efforts. Her first collection of essays on the dam, *Yangtze! Yangtze!*, was published in 1989 to the consternation of Chinese officials, who promptly banned the book, destroyed those copies they could find, and imprisoned Dai Qing for ten months.\*\* Undaunted, she has compiled this second collection of essays to give voice to those within the Chinese government, press, and academia who can speak out only through her or under the cover of a pseudonym. Unlike its predecessor, *The River Dragon Has Come!* could not be published in China because criticism of the dam remains strictly forbidden.

\* For more on the economic, social, and environmental impacts of dam building worldwide see, Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993); Blaine Harden, *A River Lost: The Life and Death of the Columbia* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1996); and, Patrick McCully, *Silenced Rivers: The Ecology and Politics of Large Dams* (London: Zed Books, 1997).

\*\* Dai Qing, *Yangtze! Yangtze! Debate Over the Three Gorges Project*, Patricia Adams and John Thibodeau, eds., Toronto and London: Probe International and Earthscan, Ltd., 1994 (originally published as *Changjiang! Changjiang!* by Guizhou People's Publishing House, 1989).

A question of equal complexity, but one which is also often asked is: Can the dam be stopped? There is no easy answer. First proposed in 1912, reintroduced in the 1950s, and finally approved in 1992, the dam and its supporters have shown themselves to be remarkably persistent. The project inches forward despite rebuke after rebuke from the international capital markets and aid bureaucracies that often fund large dams: The World Bank, the world's foremost dam-building agency, and bilateral aid agencies like the Canadian International Development Agency will not fund it; and some in the private sectors in China and abroad are also staying away. The reason? They claim the dam is just too big and too controversial. Starved of investment, Chinese officials vow to continue by diverting internal capital from other, more productive investments.

It was the steadfast support of China's current premier, Li Peng, and of China's late paramount leader, Deng Xiaoping, which pushed the project this far. But in the wake of Deng's death in early 1997, nothing is certain. In fact, cracks in the Chinese support for the dam began to appear long before Deng's death. Now those cracks threaten to grow into fissures that could bring the project down or cause it to be drastically scaled back.

In early 1997, of the four most powerful men in China—President and Party leader Jiang Zemin, Premier Li Peng, vice premier and economic czar Zhu Rongji, and head of the National People's Congress Qiao Shi—only Li Peng went on record supporting the project. By saying very little about the dam, Zhu and Jiang (who is Deng's hand-picked successor) have left themselves the political space to cancel or redesign the project without losing face. Qiao Shi, for his part, went even further, drawing public attention to problems with the project—something that, in China, is tantamount to outright public opposition.

While Li Peng used a recent site visit to prop up the project and extol its virtues, Qiao Shi used his site visit to draw attention to the difficulties involved in the resettlement of local people and to stress the importance of "project quality control" and of "solidly meet[ing] design requirements."\*

For Western readers who are used to the rough and tumble world of American or European politics where politicians must often take a strong stance just to be noticed, the differences between what Li Peng and Qiao

\* See, "Li Peng, Zou Jiahua Visit 3 Gorges Dam Site," Xinhua, November 12, 1995, and "Qiao Shi Inspects Three Gorges Project," Xinhua, June 19, 1996. Qiao Shi was dropped from the CCP Politburo in September 1997.

Shi are saying may seem trite. But those familiar with Chinese politics understand that these calm words indicate a divide between these two men as wide as the gorges themselves.

Since Deng's death, Li Peng can no longer invoke the support of the paramount leader to quiet his critics. Jiang Zemin may not have the political muscle or the desire to play this role for Li, and it is this, more than anything, that has thrown the project's future into question. Dai Qing has long claimed that there are two fault lines running under the Chinese Communist Party, either of which could cause a serious rupture after Deng's death: The first is the question of how to interpret the events of June 1989 in Tiananmen Square for the history books. The second is whether to support the continued construction of the Three Gorges dam. Only time will tell if she is right.

Amid growing uncertainty about the project's future, one thing is clear: Debate over the project, both within China and around the world, will not be silenced. Banning *Yangtze! Yangtze!* and imprisoning Dai Qing did not stop her efforts to expose the truth about the dam. Rather, it increased her profile within the country and abroad, where she is now regularly called on to speak about the project. At home, Dai Qing's fight for an open debate about the costs and benefits of the dam has earned her the respect of both bureaucrats and officials, and of the silent majority of Chinese, none of whom have the freedom to speak out against the project.

*The River Dragon Has Come!* should play an important role in this growing debate. Its pages describe aspects of the Three Gorges dam and of China's dam-building legacy that were unknown until now. They describe the scale of destruction caused by previous dam collapses in China and warn that a dam collapse at the Three Gorges would constitute a man-made disaster of unprecedented proportions. They describe how traumatic resettlement projects have been, and how tens of thousands of people have already suffered for a dam that is still in the most preliminary stages of construction. And they describe how many irreplaceable archaeological sites will be flooded by the reservoir, and how exasperated the man in charge of salvaging them feels.

The authors whose essays are included in *The River Dragon Has Come!* could not have known for certain that Deng Xiaoping would pass away before their works would be published. If Deng's death does indeed cause China's leaders to reexamine their support for the Three Gorges dam, then these brave authors' contributions could not have been more timely.

Portions of *The River Dragon Has Come!* have already been published in Chinese in Hong Kong,\* and we thank Dai Qing and Oxford University Press for the opportunity to compile this English-language collection.

All of the footnotes were written and compiled by the editors. The few notes which existed in the unedited material are marked by superscript numbers in the text and are now found as endnotes at the end of each chapter.

The production and publication of this book benefited immensely from the efforts of numerous friends and colleagues who gave freely of their time. Special thanks are due to Audrey Ronning Topping, Richard Hayman, and Jim Williams, for sharing their unique personal insights into the dam project and for providing the photographs. Many thanks also to Patricia Adams and Lawrence Solomon for their help and support through all stages of book production. Thanks also to Margaret Barber, who maintains her unflagging commitment to the people of the Yangtze River Valley and to stopping the Three Gorges dam. And, finally, special thanks to Cheryl Brown, whose patience and understanding took much of the stress out of the voyage from manuscript to book.

For their editorial contributions or assistance in the diverse tasks of book production, we would like to thank Andrea Davis, Nancy Hearst, Patricia Koslowski, Professor Vaclav Smil, Una Stevens, Liz Rentzelous, and Gráinne Ryder.

For making the translation and publication of this book possible, we would like to thank the Open Society Institute and Probe International supporters across Canada.

We would also like to honor the memory of Huang Wanli, who courageously opposed the construction of the Three Gorges dam for over four decades.

Finally, we would like to honor Dai Qing and *The River Dragon Has Come!*'s other contributors, many of whom have taken part in this project at great personal risk. Their courage and commitment is inspiring to us all.

---

\* Dai Qing and Xue Weijia, eds., *Shui de Changjiang: Fazhanzhang de Zhongguo nengfou chengdan sanxia gongcheng* (To Whom Does the Yangtze River Belong: Can China in Its Development Undertake the Three Gorges Dam Project?) (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1996).