

# THE THREE GORGES DAM: A DELUGE OF DOUBTS

Annie Luman Ren

**I**N THE NORTHERN SUMMER of 2020, weeks of torrential rain caused a series of devastating floods across central and south-western China, killing hundreds of people and destroying the homes and livelihoods of millions. In August, during a tour of Anhui, one of the provinces ravaged by flood, President Xi Jinping 习近平 made a speech, mouthing the usual platitudes:

Between ‘the Foolish Old Man Who Moved the Mountains’ [愚公移山] and ‘Yu the Great Who Harnessed the Flood’ [大禹治水], the Chinese nation has fought natural

disasters for thousands of years, gaining precious experience. We will go on fighting.<sup>1</sup>

Both the ‘Foolish Old Man’ and ‘Yu the Great’ 大禹 are mythological figures frequently cited by Mao Zedong 毛泽东 during his mass mobilisation campaigns and monumental nature-taming projects. The Foolish Old Man refers to the story of a ninety-year-old man who was vexed by two giant mountains in front of his house and decided to level them, bucket by bucket. Told he would never succeed, he replied that his descendants would continue until they did. Yu the Great (c. 2200–2101 BCE) is said to have

‘controlled’ 治 the waters of China and went on to establish the oldest dynasty, the Xia (2200–1750 BCE).<sup>2</sup> Both figures reflect a vision in which people must struggle against and conquer nature — a vision that Chinese environmentalists and engineers have been questioning since the 1980s. The natural disasters of 2020 — a record twenty-one floods by September, with 833 rivers rising above ‘warning levels’, and 267 of those reaching over official safety levels — have revived this debate and brought the monumental Three Gorges Dam under fresh scrutiny.

### ‘East of Yichang! Run!’

The Three Gorges Dam, located in the city of Yichang, 300 kilometres west of Wuhan, is the world’s largest hydroelectric facility. It was designed

for a maximum water level of 175 metres. On 18 July, its water level reached 163.5 metres — the highest level recorded since the dam began operation in 2003.<sup>3</sup>

Rumours of the dam’s imminent collapse filled the internet. One WeChat post warned: ‘East of Yichang! Run!’ 宜昌以下快跑. Another post, playing on the literal meaning of Shanghai (‘on the sea’), read: ‘On the Sea Becomes Under the Sea’ 上海已变海上.

State media assured the public that the dam was safe and had prevented the flooding of cities including Wuhan and Shanghai.<sup>4</sup> But many were sceptical. Fan Xiao 范晓, a Chinese geologist and long-term critic of the dam, told the Hong Kong-based *Asia Times* that, although ‘the dam was designed with “once-every-



A riverside pavilion on the bank of the Yangtze in Wuhan is submerged

Photo: Xiaoyiju, xinhuanet

two-century worst-case flooding” in mind’, it was failing in the face of a deluge ‘far less severe than its worst-case design parameters’.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Dream of Becoming Yu the Great**

Since Yu the Great, the ability to harness rivers for flood control, irrigation and navigation has been upheld as an essential task for every ruler of China. In 1919, Sun Yat-sen 孫中山 (1866–1925), father of the modern Chinese nation, envisioned a new and industrialised China powered by a great dam on the Yangtze River. In the 1940s, Sun’s successor, Chiang Kai-shek 蔣介石, invited the American engineer John L. Savage — designer of the Hoover Dam — to survey the region and conduct a feasibility study. In 1956, Mao Zedong characteristically announced his vision of the dam in a poem, rhapsodising about ‘walls of stone standing upstream’ and ‘a smooth lake rising in the deep gorges’.<sup>6</sup>

Many believed Mao gave up his dream because of the economic failures of the Great Leap Forward and the social upheaval of the Cultural Revolution. The truth is, according to Mao’s former secretary Li Rui 李銳 (1917–2019), Mao only

abandoned his plan on account of rising tensions with the Soviet Union, which he feared might try to bomb the dam.<sup>7</sup> Mao’s second in command, premier Zhou Enlai 周恩來, remained supportive of the dam, pushing engineers to break ground on the Gezhouba Dam 葛洲壩, thirty-eight kilometres downstream from the current Three Gorges Dam, in time for Mao’s seventy-seventh birthday in 1970. The project proved expensive, inefficient, and polluting, endangering both river whitefin dolphins and the rare Yangtze River sturgeon.<sup>8</sup>

In the post-1978 Reform Era, Deng Xiaoping 鄧小平 also pushed to build the Three Gorges Dam, believing in its abilities to curb floods and generate energy. However, Deng faced strong opposition from some of the Chinese Communist Party’s most senior members, all of whom were scientists and engineers by training. Their concerns appeared in a book of essays titled *Yangtze! Yangtze!* published in February 1989. This book, edited by journalist and environmentalist Dai Qing 戴晴, was seen at the time as ‘a watershed event ... the first use of large-scale public lobbying by

intellectuals and public figures to influence the governmental decision-making process'.<sup>9</sup>

In the aftermath of the military crackdown on student protesters on 4 June 1989, Dai Qing was imprisoned without trial and her associates purged. Public debate on the Three Gorges Dam was effectively silenced. Three years later, in 1992, the Seventh National People's Congress (NPC) passed the proposal to construct the Three Gorges Dam by the smallest margin of any vote in the history of the NPC: 1,767 voted in favour, 177 against, and 664 abstained.<sup>10</sup>

Many believed that the final push to build the dam came from Jiang Zemin 江泽民 and Li Peng 李鹏, who trotted out the project for their own political and economic gain. Ascending to power after 4 June 1989, Jiang's first ever visit as the new Party general secretary and president was to inspect the proposed site for the Three Gorges Dam. In the words of Li Rui's daughter Li Nanyang 李南央: 'Jiang had just become the Emperor, he needed something to make his mark, so he turned to Yu the Great and sought to harness the water.'<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile, Jiang's ally Li Peng (premier from 1987 to 1998) has been accused of reaping all the economic profits.<sup>12</sup> Despite the fact that every electricity user in China since 1992 has paid levies to finance the dam, the Yangtze Power Corporation, headed by Li Peng's son Li Xiaopeng 李小鹏, currently controls all thirty-two turbines at the Three Gorges Dam and the power they generate.<sup>13</sup>

### **The True Spirit of the Foolish Old Man**

'Man must conquer nature', Jiang Zemin proclaimed at the official ceremony marking the completion of the Three Gorges cofferdam in 1997: 'This is a victory for the spirit of the Foolish Old Man who moved the mountains.'<sup>14</sup>

By the time of its completion in 2006, the Three Gorges Dam had displaced 2 million people from their homes in 13 cities, 140 towns and 1,350 villages—all of which were submerged, along with 100,000 hectares of arable land and innumerable cultural and archaeological sites. Despite ongoing criticism, it was not until 2011 that China's State Council finally issued a vague statement acknowledging the environmental, social and geological



A still from Jia Zhangke's 賈樟柯 film *Still Life* 三峽好人 (2006), an elegiac tale about the destruction and despair caused by the displacement of millions to make way for the Three Gorges Dam. Here, the protagonist gazes over Fengjie 奉節, a 2,000-year-old town, now under water  
Source: YouTube

concerns surrounding the Three Gorges Dam.<sup>15</sup> But the damage, including to the river's ecosystem, is irreversible.

Many Chinese today are unimpressed by the idea of the Foolish Old Man. The question 'Should the Foolish Old Man just move houses instead of mountains?' has become a favourite topic for debating societies in some of China's high schools.<sup>16</sup> Students are encouraged to re-evaluate Maoist ideals, as well as the unrestrained pursuit of development and profit in the post-Mao era.

The story of the Foolish Old Man originated from a collection of Daoist tales attributed to Lie Yukou 列禦寇 (c. 400 BCE). Like many Daoist anecdotes, the story is in fact a commentary on the relativity of human perception. Compared with the two giant mountains, the efforts of

the Foolish Old Man are insignificant indeed, but what are the mountains when they are faced with time's weathering power? Big and small are thus relative. Depending on how one sees it, heaven and earth may be treated as a tiny grain; oceans and mountains merely the tip of a hair.<sup>17</sup>

If anything, the true spirit of the Foolish Old Man reprimands the short-sightedness of human ambition and greed. As demonstrated by this other story from *The Book of Master Lie*:

Once there was a man from the old country of Qi who wanted gold. So he went to a shop and snatched some. The local magistrate caught him and asked, 'Why did you take someone else's gold in front of so many people?' The man replied: 'At the time when I took it, I did not see the people, I only saw the gold.'<sup>18</sup>

This text is taken from *China Story Yearbook: Crisis*, edited by Jane Golley and Linda Jaivin with Sharon Strange, published 2021 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

[doi.org/10.22459/CSY.2021.05A](https://doi.org/10.22459/CSY.2021.05A)