

# A River Rising

Time runs out for towns and monuments  
in the path of the Three Gorges Dam



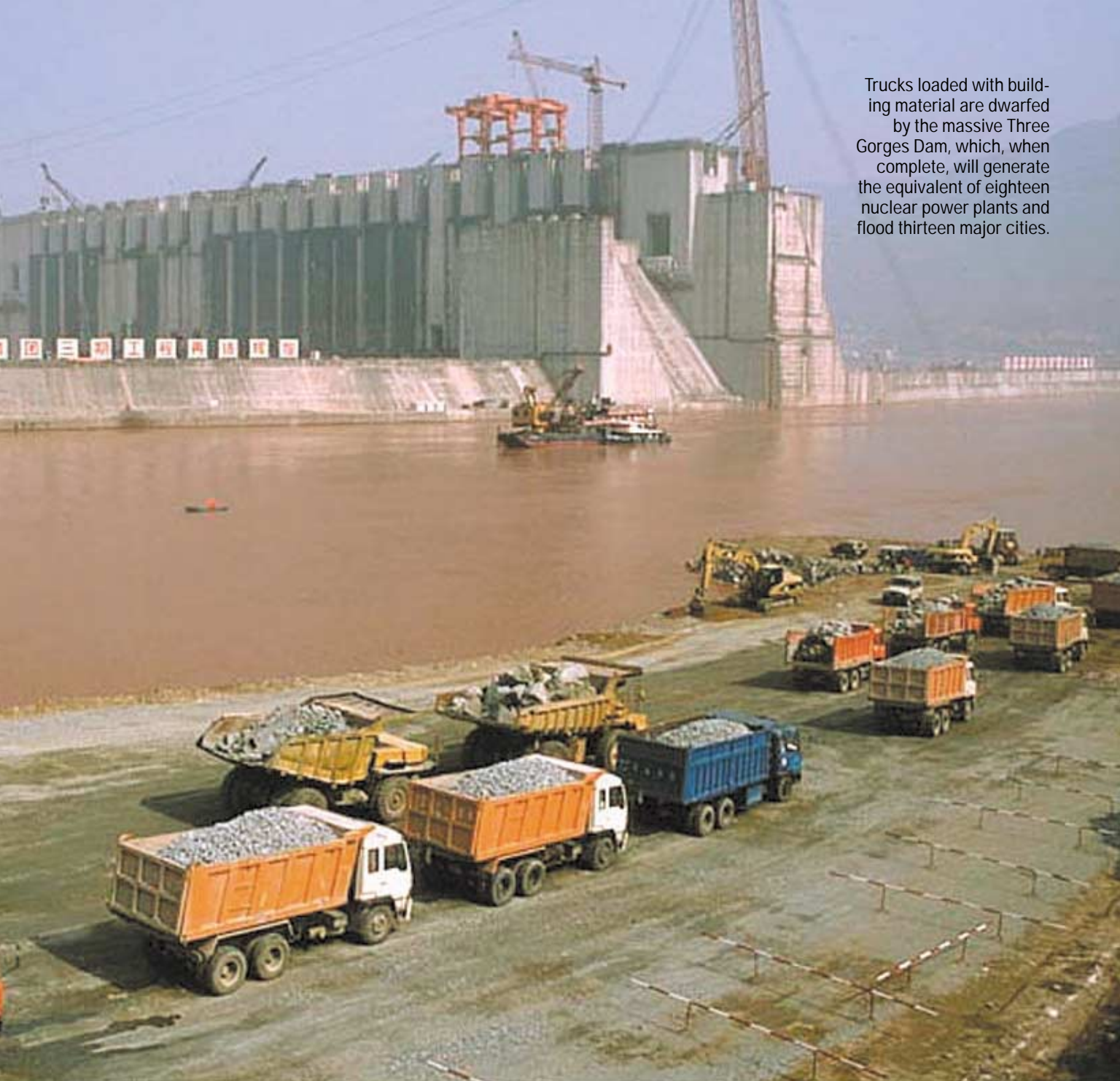
by Jeffrey Austin

**F**rom our winding mountain highway, my Chinese companions and I could see the powerful Yangtze River winding in and out of view below, sparkling in the late autumn sun. Even more stunning was the view before us: the Three Gorges Dam, the world's largest hydroelectric dam—the new Great Wall of China. Giant cranes glided overhead, and massive steel girders and concrete towers soared into the sky, juxtaposed against delicate bamboo scaffolding hundreds of feet high. A cacophony of drilling and hammering drowned out the rushing of the river. Huge trucks moved cement and materials kicked up clouds of fine dust, casting a haze over the stone quarries and workers' housing.

In October 2001, I spent several weeks traveling around Hubei Province, home of the Three Gorges Dam, photographing ancient towns and villages and archaeological sites that will no longer exist by this summer, when the dam reservoir will be full. There were few indications then of the large-scale displacement of people and monuments that I was to witness on my return to Hubei exactly a year later. On that trip, I was struck by the sense that time was running out. In less than eight months the water level would rise



Map TK



Trucks loaded with building material are dwarfed by the massive Three Gorges Dam, which, when complete, will generate the equivalent of eighteen nuclear power plants and flood thirteen major cities.

almost six hundred feet, submerging much of the area surrounding the Yangtze's three dramatic gorges: the Qutang, the Wuxia, and the Xiling. Everywhere I went, workers, villagers, and officials were preparing for the big event. It was difficult for me to see how all the work would get completed in the next few months.

**T**he first place our driver had taken me and my guide, noted Chinese photographer [NAME], was New Zigui, a newly built city with shiny glass and steel buildings high above the anticipated waterline. On the outskirts of town, on a scenic promontory overlooking

the Yangtze—a site selected by China's Administration of Cultural Heritage due to its accessibility to future tourists—workers were rebuilding the Song Dynasty-era (a.d. 960–1280) Jiangdu Temple, recently moved, piece by piece, from Laoqingtan, a historic town some twenty miles away, and one of hundreds scheduled to be demolished and submerged in the rising waters of the Yangtze.

Within a makeshift, canvas-covered woodshop, dozens of skilled craftsmen reconstructed and repaired damaged and missing trim, doors, and moldings of the temple, which will eventually reopen as a museum. Others doubled up to carry massive granite blocks that would once



A craftsman repairs damaged trim on the Song Dynasty-era (A.D. 960–1280) Jiangdu Temple, which was moved brick-by-brick from the doomed town of Laoqingtian to a site above the future waterline.

again become the temple floor. Several of the workers escorted me around the site, showing off every detail of the reconstruction process with obvious pride. My guide told me that the temple, originally built to commemorate the ancestors of Laoqingtian's villagers, and to serve as a meeting place to discuss important matters, was worthy of saving since it reflected the typical ancient construction style of the Three Gorges region. It is one of an estimated XX monuments relocated over the past decade.

I couldn't help but contrast the Jiangdu Temple reconstruction with the deliberate destruction we witnessed over the following weeks at well-known ancient villages, towns, and cities along the Yangtze: Dachan, Badong, Wuxi, and Fengdu—all to be reduced to rubble before being flooded. Some were still at the beginning of the demolition process; others, once thriving centers of commerce and culture, had already been abandoned and resembled moonscapes. Every piece of useful building material—bricks, wooden beams, pipes, windows—had been removed by hand, for use in building new homes and villages higher up the mountains.

I saw owners of small, wood-beamed and brick-walled homes are carefully taking their houses apart, organizing the bricks and timbers in neat piles to be moved and used again to rebuild their homes above the projected waterline. In one small village, an entire family sat in chairs in the middle of their missing home—no roof, no walls, only a crumbling foundation left—chatting with passing neighbors. The memory of their home and the shelter it provided was still vivid to them.

Archaeological excavations, which often incongruously went hand-in-hand with the demolitions, were staffed mostly by local villagers of all ages, digging and hauling dirt. In the trenches, we occasionally got a glimpse of an ancient road or sherds of pottery from some long-ago household. There was usually one official with a notepad overseeing the work, who soon tired of us taking photographs and asking questions and chased us off. The government is sensitive to outside criticism regarding the dam's environmental and cultural impact, and every facet of its construction is carefully managed and supervised.

begun in 1993, the Three Gorges Dam, is defining China's presence in the twen-



Homes and villages in the path of the rising waters are dismantled by their owners, above, and rebuilt higher up the mountains. An ancient road, left, is hastily excavated and documented before it disappears beneath the 375-mile-long reservoir created by the Three Gorges Dam.

ty-first century. More than six hundred feet high and 1.2 miles long, it will generate the equivalent of eighteen nuclear power plants, providing a clean source of energy for large parts of the country.

In addition to providing cleaner energy, improved navigation, and decreasing flood damage down-river, construction of the dam will result in a complex variety of consequences, among them the displacement of one or two million people—depending on who you ask—living along the Yangtze. Many are happy to have the opportunity for new housing and the jobs created by this massive undertaking, particularly the young people, many of whom prefer to be near larger cities and the social and economic benefits of modernity. For others, particularly the older residents who may have never known any other life, the benefits of leaving villages and homes that have been in their family for generations are less obvious.

Whatever the benefits, there are also significant costs. It is estimated that when the dam is complete, over 62,000 acres of farmland as well as 13 major cities, 140 towns, and 1,352 villages along the river's banks will be submerged. The dam will also create an immense, 375-mile-long reservoir and forever change an exquisite landscape that has been the subject of countless Chinese paintings and poems.

We spent one warm October day locating and photographing three historical bridges along the Yangtze that will not survive the flooding. Originally built in 1888, they have virtuous names—Wuduo, Wufa and Wubao (“not to rob,” “not to cut trees,” and “not to steal”)—and were a gift to local villagers from three wealthy brothers, providing a key link between Sichuan and Hubei provinces. The first bridge we found, after an hour-long hike along well-worn footpaths, was a magnificent forty-foot span. Each large stone of the bridge was hand cut, and along the handrail, traces of finely carved ornamental features were now overgrown with moss.

We spent the rest of the day locating the other two, hiking along paths sel-



What's going on up here?  
Blocks from the dismantled  
Ming Dynasty-era (A.D.  
1368–1644) city wall of Old  
Zigui, left, are numbered with  
red chalk to assist reassembly  
in the town of New Zigui.



dom used anymore through small villages where the only people left are older folks puttering about in their gardens with their ever-present dogs and cats. I never learned why these bridges wouldn't be saved. Perhaps they were not old enough, or they simply were too difficult to move.

The last leg of our journey took us to Old Zigui to catch a riverboat. Once a thriving port town of 11,000 people, it was now just a dusty, rocky landscape awaiting its fate. Most of its former residents had already moved on up the mountainside to New Zigui, or to other cities that won't be affected by the rising waters. We came across a row of vendors selling noodles, sweets, and clothing from makeshift stalls along the main road, to the workers completing the demolition of the town and the few visitors, like us, that pass this way.

On a high ridge at the end of town, workmen were excavating Zigui's old city wall. After assuaging the suspicions of the reluctant site manager, we were granted permission to photograph the workers and the site. Before us was a half buried stone archway standing some twenty feet above the ground, and partially buried stone walls out from either side. Hundreds of large limestone blocks, numbered with red chalk, were haphazardly strewn about the site ready to be moved. The few workers digging and chipping away at the packed dirt seem to be making little progress. We were



The city wall of Old Zigui, top, will soon take its new place in New Zigui near the relocated Jiangdu Temple, left. An estimated XX historical monuments will not be moved from the rising river's path.



told the 1,500-foot-long wall, built during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), would be moved, like the temple we saw earlier, to New Zigui to become part of a cultural museum.

Seeing these museum pieces and the doomed bridges reminded me of the ancient Buddhas carved into a mountain at Bamiyan in Afghanistan that were destroyed by the Taliban in 2001. There was a shared sense of loss and outrage when they were destroyed. The world sensed that something important to us all had been lost. I think it is similar with the Three Gorges—while some villages and monuments were being rescued from the dam's rising waters, others had disappeared while the landscape that inspired artists and poets for millennia has been irrevocably altered. The demolition of history to pave way for the new "Great Wall" represents, perhaps, an even more tragic loss. ■

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