

# CLOSING THE GATES ON CHINA'S THREE GORGES

July 1993



Text : John Biggs © 2009

Images: John Biggs and Catherine Tang © 2009

[www.johnbiggs.com.au](http://www.johnbiggs.com.au)

## CLOSING THE GATES ON CHINA'S THREE GORGES

The mighty Yangtze River, 6,380 kms long, is both the salvation and the ruin of rural China. While it supports millions along its banks with fish and agriculture, it floods about once each decade, causing much damage. Chairman Mao, vexed by this capricious behaviour, decided he was mightier than the Yangtze and he would tame it with the largest dam in the world. However, the economic damage caused by his Great Leap Forward put a stop to that. Deng Xiaoping, then Jiang Jemin after him, in more prosperous times pressed on with the project, listening only to the voice of hubris, not to the international and even some internal protests that it would be environmentally very dangerous and economically completely unsound. It was completed in October, 2008, displacing over one million people, their homes destroyed along with irreplaceable villages rich in history and national monuments. Thousands of years of shit are now dissolved in what must be a poisonous brew. An environmental disaster of cosmic proportions is predicted within twenty years due mainly to silting – not to mention that one well-placed bomb would unleash Armageddon on all the cities downstream, including Wuhan, Nanjing and Shanghai. The desirable results could have been achieved by a series of more controllable smaller dams, at a fraction the cost. The current Government now agrees it was a mad project, but it is too late now.

The film *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*<sup>1</sup> captures the grandeur and power of the scenery, especially in the area around Phoenix Mountain, in the centre of Three Gorges, and how the people built their lives into the ecology of the river and mountain – and the banality of its destruction by the flooding created by the dam. The film ends with an underwater shot of the drowned village.



In 1993, work on the dam had just commenced. Catherine and I decided we should see the Three Gorges before it was too late. We booked on a tour, our guide Venus, a schoolgirl waiting for her A Level results. How a schoolgirl was going to cope with the shit dished out by Mainlanders disturbed me a little but I needn't have worried. Venus was that familiar Hong Kong combination: a sweet young woman who if needs be can be as tough as they come. Here she is confiding something to another sweet Hong Kong woman

...

---

<sup>1</sup> Dai Sijie's autobiographical novel of the same name (Vintage Books, 2002) does not mention the flooding of the Yangtze. Dai Sijie himself directed the film, locating 'Phoenix Mountain' right in the path of the flooding, which adds a new and powerful visual dimension to the story.

A group from Macau join us at Guangzhou Airport. One man immediately stands out. He has stumpy little legs poking out of ballooning shorts, a bulky short body, a long face with currants for eyes, and a loud, quacking voice. I dub him *Ngaap Lo* (Duck Man) but Catherine says that means male prostitute, a most unlikely profession for the unlovely vision in front of us. So we settle on *Ngaap Saan* (Mr. Duck). You may think me unkind, but Mr. Duck is one of those irritating characters you usually find on any tour – but neither his name nor his photograph appears here.

We fly to Wuhan, to board the boat upriver for the Three Gorges at I Ching. One of those inexplicable ‘only in China’ things happens. We have dinner in a filthy restaurant, the bus waiting for us outside. We board the bus to take us to the boat. No sooner are we seated, we are told to get off, unload our gear, and reload on a new bus with a new driver. Why? we ask.

‘It is because while you were eating a bad person stole parts from the bus, but never mind we have this nice new bus to take you to I Ching only two hours away, no problem.’

The road to I Ching is appalling, having been washed out in recent rains, and it takes us four hours to get there, not the promised two. We discuss this strange turn of events. We decide that the first, older, bus wouldn't have made it. But instead of saying that road conditions required a change of bus and driver, we were fed this nonsense about stolen parts. Presumably face was being saved somewhere, but by who: the first driver? the company that made his bus? the tour operator? Who knows.

We board and go to our cabin, to find the toilet seat strapped up with adhesive tape and the flush temperamental; toilets are always the thin end of the PRC's malfunctioning wedge. The knobs on the PA speakers in the cabin have been removed. We find out why early next morning when we are awakened by compulsory patriotic music, followed by Mandopop. A minor operation with a pair of scissors brings us an unpatriotic silence. After breakfast, our boat and another proceed through the first major lock.



We are fortunate in our table companions: an old man and his daughter, a young family with amazingly intelligent four-year-old, Jason, and two middle-aged sisters now living in Canada. The other two tables include the Macanese, and a fat Chinese-Canadian and his family, who on entering the dining room each session,

hurls his fat, smelly body, arms outstretched, onto the air conditioner, sighing blissfully, treating the rest of the room to his chilled exudates. Mr. Duck spends his time waddling between the two tables, telling his Macanese colleagues in loud quacks what the other table is talking about.



The weather is drab and overcast, the river swollen with recent floods. We plough our way upstream through swirling mud and garbage, and with huge eddies and whirlpools up to 4 metres across. On either side are towering cliffs, villages huddled on the shore, others more cautious have been built well above any flood levels.

We reach the Szechuan border in an hour or so. We stop at Xigui, to admire the temple and birthplace of the government minister, Qu Yuan. Unfortunately, he fell out with the Emperor, and in his despair threw himself into the river. The people threw sticky rice dumplings into the river so the fish would eat them instead of the beloved poet's body. The people also held boat races to scare the fish away using long boats, shaped like dragons, a drummer sitting in the front banging a drum loudly. It helped the rowers keep time and the fish hated it. And that was how dragon boat racing came about.



At the top of the climb from the dock, there are the usual hawkers. One has a beautiful big owl, wearing a headdress, chained by one foot to its perch, one yuan to photograph it. I do and am immediately sorry. It slowly flaps its wings in protest. It knows it can't fly away but it can assert its right to try. It is letting me and other tourists know it doesn't want to be chained up to be photographed.

Before the river traffic was motorised, the boatmen of the Yangtze were legends. They were the link that made the Yangtze possible. Here at Badung the waters are very treacherous, often the men had to portage the boats and cargo. There are still a few old boatmen surviving, and tough as nails, they have become ballet dancers. They celebrate their skill, courage and toughness with a stylised ballet, celebrating how they managed to steer their boats against the raging torrents. The captain chants in a loud, shrill falsetto, while his crew, wheeling and rowing in perfect formation, chant back their responses.





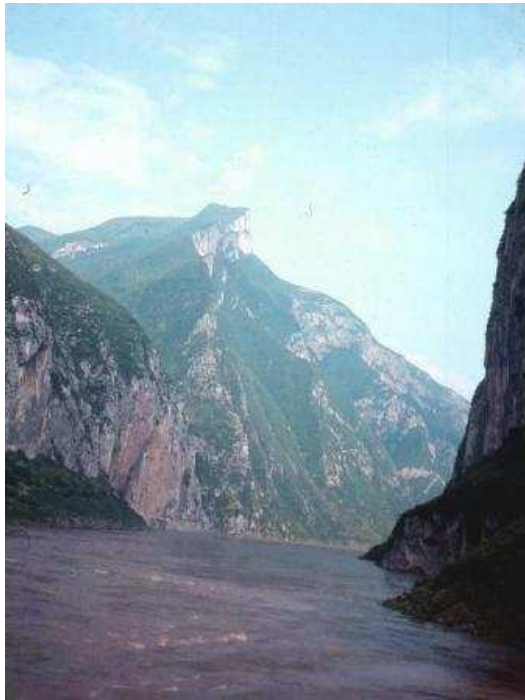
The Three Little Gorges are up the Daning River, a tributary of the Yangtze. The scenery is less grand but prettier, cliffs nearly meeting overhead, wild goats and monkeys in the bush on either side. A few metres above the waterline line are holes in the rock wall into which the ancients had driven stakes into the rock; they then laid planks on them, forming a road above the river itself that extended for miles. Water in the Daning is green, that in the Yangtze is café latté; where the rivers meet can be drawn with a ruler.

While dreaming at the ship's rail, I hear clashing gongs and drums and the braying of a trumpet. I look up. In the distance, high in the hillside, I see a wedding procession. The bride is dressed in a brilliant red; walking ahead of her are men dressed in flowing coloured gowns blowing shiny brass horns. The bride might have been the Little Seamstress's daughter: this is Phoenix Mountain country. That bride wasn't being carried in the traditional *fa kiu* (flower sedan chair), but when in a village later on we came across another wedding procession and this time twas in a *fa kiu*. It is a risky mode of transport. Zhang Yimou's film, *Red Sorghum*, opens with the bride (Gong Li) being bounced viciously in her chair by cruel bearers, but the bride in the picture was being carried solicitously.



On the final stretch, the walls were sheer cliffs, miles of the plank roadways high above the swirling waters. Further up still were the 'hanging coffins', honeycombs of caves, high up in face of the cliffs. It is a mystery how the coffins were placed inside the caves. Near the hanging coffins is Fung Dao, the city of ghosts, where there is a bridge. If you cross it in three strides, your ghost will be reincarnated at a higher level. I manage to cross in three strides. In what form shall my ghost be reincarnated?

The final Third Gorge is at a bend in the river, the two banks not quite opposite. As the boat moves away, one bank gradually draws closer to and finally overlaps the other: 'The Closing of the Gates'. We watch them close.



The journey to Chongqing is an anti-climax after the grandeur of the Three Gorges. We lunch at a restaurant in the old part of Chongqing. In the depths of Szechuan we might be, but the food is determinedly Cantonese. I mention this to Venus.

‘Of course! This is a Cantonese tour so we’ve ordered Cantonese food in advance.’

‘But,’ I object, ‘one of the attractions of this tour was that we wanted to eat regional food.’ They’re as bad as those Brits who in Spain only eat fish and chips.

‘Okay, I’ll get some dishes sent to your table.’

I’ve had Szechuan pepper before, but here it’s applied with a heavy hand. Actually, it’s not a pepper; it’s made from a dried flower, its function evidently to numb the mouth to allow ever greater amounts of chilli to be eaten without combustion taking place. It has a piercing currant taste, very pleasant, but then numbing takes over the glottis, making it seem that food isn’t being swallowed but accumulating from the throat upwards.

It’s a pleasantly unusual way of experiencing asphyxiation.

After this fiery lunch, I search the crowded street for photo-worthy material. A path branches off and ascends a hill, a broad wall on one side. Climbing the path, I see pair of beautifully shaped but grime-encrusted bare legs lying on the wall. They ran into a ragged, tiny skirt. A stunningly pretty woman suddenly sits up, smiling. Catherine warns me sharply: 'Don't take her photo!'

Why ever not? But ever obedient, I shrug and walk on. I look back over my shoulder. The girl is standing, smiling beatifically. She swirls her miniscule skirt waist high. Magnificently bushed, she skips down the hill, smiling and singing. What a story must be there. Having recently read Xinran<sup>2</sup>, I can only ask: How could a girl like that have survived? Who knows what atrocities that beatific smile belied? Catherine saw before I did that there was a photo that shouldn't have been taken.

Another such photo was in a park in Chengdu, capital of Szechuan. A good looking little boy, about ten, was lying across the path, hand outstretched towards his upside-down cap, one leg exposed. It was perfectly formed to below the knee, then it was a thin purplish stick to the ankle. No accident would have caused as perfect a mutilation as that. In any other country, surely a police officer, a social worker, a concerned citizen, someone, would have waited until he was picked up at night, and pressed charges against his captors? Here's a photo in the park, near the spot where the boy was lying.



Catherine told me about a Hong Kong couple who took their two year old son with them on a trip to China. They lost him in a department store; they had looked away at something for only and when they turned back he was gone. Enquiries in the store, from the police, advertising in the local paper, on radio, led nowhere. Dismayed, they returned many times to China to try to find him. One day, in a village not far from the town where they had lost him, a crippled boy crawled up to the wife, grabbed her hand, and said 'Mummy.' It was their son. He had been mutilated and was now a professional beggar. They tried to take him with them, but a man intervened, saying the boy was his: They had to prove otherwise. They went to the police, who repeated: You must prove he is yours. How could they, before the days of DNA testing? They went to the mayor, local officials, higher up officials, same story. The officials weren't going to kill a flourishing trade.

---

<sup>2</sup> *The Good Women of China*, Chatto & Windus, 2002.

How much more civilised we in Australia are; Australian officials wouldn't connive in trade in mutilated children! No? The Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA) did. *The Australian* newspaper in 2003 published several stories of girls, abducted and forced to work in the Australian sex trade. When they escaped and went to the police, DIMIA sent them back to their home country as illegal immigrants, even issuing some with fake passports, rather than allow them to stay to give the sort of evidence needed in court to bring the pimps and slave traders to justice.<sup>3</sup>

We visit the Painters' Village, an artistic community where some of China's most famous artists live and work and sell. I wanted to buy 'The Four Seasons', a common Chinese theme of four hangings depicting essentially the same scene in spring, summer, autumn and winter. It wasn't available here but later found what I wanted in a museum, two museums in fact. The first had a splendid set, using flying cranes as the motif, for which I paid 1,600 yuan. The second museum had a Four Seasons, with the Three Gorges as motif, for 1200 yuan, which, wiser now, I bargained down to 800. I could only pay with Amex but I negotiated with Venus, who negotiated with the bus driver, who carried loads of cash for such contingencies, operating with an underground exchange rate. So he made on selling me cash at a high profit and a tip to boot, Venus got a tip, I got the hangings for a steal at \$800 (about \$150 AUD), and the museum was happy with their 300% or so mark-up. Doing business, PRC-style. Both sets of Four Seasons now adorn my hallway in Mount Nelson – as below and on the last page.



The trip ends in Chengdu, capital of Szechuan and birthplace of Deng Xiaoping. A local guide joins us, extolling the unique qualities of Szechuan cooking. I take her aside and say: 'I agree

---

<sup>3</sup> These revelations followed the death of Puangthong Simaplee in Villawood Detention Centre at the age of 27 on the 13<sup>th</sup> March 2003. She was brought to Australia at the age of 12 to act as a sex worker.

absolutely. But Szechuan is difficult to get this trip; they've ordered all Cantonese! I want Szechuan, and I know a few others on this tour do too.' She tells Venus, who asks the group: 'Do you want more chilli in your food?'

'NO!' is the loud, shouted reply. Fortunately, those at our table *do* want genuine Szechuan food and we negotiate our menu accordingly. When in Chengdu, do as the Chengs do. We have the ultimate Szechuan dish: a hotpot. This is street food – we had seen people at sidewalk tables, with a vicious, oily, black, evil brew swirling away in large cauldrons. You dump a wire basket full of bits of meat and veg into this witches' potion for a quick blasting – it is superb, with a chilli, garlic, peppercorn, oily, well, *Szechuan* taste.

We are taken to factories where young girls, sometimes old men, sat at tables doing finely detailed, eye-killing, repetitive work: bamboo plaiting around porcelain, hangings, all sorts of artefacts. I wouldn't care to calculate the eye-damaging hours that went into producing an item worth 30 yuan (\$6). I photograph a girl at work.



A perceptive member of the group remarks: 'You always take the girls. Why not take the old man?'



I take both of them. I admit it: the old man's photo is the better picture. See for yourself.

\* \* \*

Now, in 2009, the hanging coffins are still above water – they are possibly even more accessible than they were before – but virtually all the other places mentioned, the ancient wooden walkway, Xigui and the statue of Qu Yuan, the reluctant owl with its crass headgear, the mighty warrior and his temple adorning the front page, the ghost city of Fung Dao, and Badung would all be many metres below the murky waters of the Yangtze. The Badung boatmen, along with a million other displaced persons, are trying to scratch out a living from the arid Western desert where most of the displaced Yangtze dwellers were shifted. It is a completely different environment from the one they, and their ancestors over thousands of years, had developed with the mighty Yangtze. In the Western desert, they will have a hard time coping with a very different four seasons.

