A dam shame up the Yangtze

It's crowded with ancient sites and spectacular scenery. But soon the Three Gorges region of the Yangtze River may disappear forever, writes **DONALD MORRIS.**

THE singsong Mandarin syllables spluttered from the tour guide's tinny megaphone, barely rising above the growl of the little boat's engine. The group, all from some anonymous town in middle China, craned their necks and gasped with dutiful awe.

A long line of notches was carved into the seemingly inaccessible sheer cliff above us. This, explained the guide, was a remnant of the plank road built during the Eastern Han Dynasty in the first century AD.

The road was a means of passing the then unnavigable rapids on the Daning River, a tributary of the Yangtze. Planks were inserted into the notches, forming a path that gave access to the rugged valleys beyond.

The Three Gorges region of the Yangtze River is one of China's most popular tourist destinations. It is crowded with historic sites, spectacular scenery and colourful legends. And it may very soon disappear forever.

Opposite the village of Sandouping, in Xiling, the longest of the Gorges, near where the river finally spills out onto the vast plain of eastern China, earth-movers have gouged a long scar in the red soil of the riverbank.

Site preparation work is well advanced on the Three Gorges Dam, which, if completed, will submerge everything for 600 kilometres upriver beneath 175 metres of water. The dam, one of the most ambitious engineering projects in the world, is primarily designed to control the disastrous floods that periodically devastate the Yangtze Valley.

It will also be the world's biggest producer of hydroelectricity.

But the plan has provoked opposition on a scale unprecedented in modern China. When the scheme was approved by the normally rubber-stamp National People's Congress in April 1992, a record 841 delegates, about a third of the total, voted "no" or abstained.

Critics say the dam will only partly solve the flooding problem and the build-up of silt will quickly turn the reservoir into a huge mud hole. At least a million residents of the area will have to be resettled before their homes are inundated.

Among the issues raised by the opponents of the project is that of the cultural sites that will be lost or have to be relocated.

CIPM Yangtze Joint Venture, a consortium of Canadian companies that published a feasibility study of the project in 1989, identified 108 such sites, some of them dating back to 10,000 BC.

A sharp, sweaty climb up the hillside in Zigui County, not far from the dam site, brings you to the temple commemorating Qu Yuan, a renowned poet and statesman of the Warring States Period (475-221 BC). Legend has it that Qu Yuan drowned himself after being betrayed at court and a giant fish returned his body to this, his home town.

The site commands a fine view of the river and the precipitous opposite bank, with white farmhouses nestling amid terraced fields and orchards. But even at this height, the building will have to be moved 30 kilometres when the valley is flooded. The town of Zigui will move 60 kilometres.

Upstream in modern-day Fengjie County is the site of the Ba Kingdom, founded over 2,000 years ago. A later addition is the Baidicheng, or White King City, dating from the end of the Western Han Dynasty (25 AD), which crowns a hill at the mouth of Qutang Gorge.

The complex contains several graceful buildings added during the Ming Dynasty (AD 1368-1644) and 74 steles, or ancient inscribed stone tablets. When the valley is flooded, the Baidicheng will become an island.

By the river opposite the hill stand the remains of AD 3rd-century battlements built to keep out the invading navy of the Wu kingdom. This place will be submerged.

Further upriver, sites under threat include the Zhang Fei Temple, 1,700 years old. The building houses hundreds of important stone tablets, carvings and relics.

Behind Fengdu city, 48 temples and pavilions stretch up the wooded, mist-shrouded flank of Ming Mountain. Begun during the Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907), and with additions made periodically through to the Qing (1644-1911), each shrine contains particularly gruesome statues intended to convey the Buddhist conception of hell.

The Government says it will move all threatened buildings to higher ground, but Dai Qing, a leading Chinese environmentalist and opponent of the dam, claims that the removal of historic buildings has not been accorded sufficient priority by planners.

"The cost of the project given in April 1993 was 57 billion yuan, of which 18 billion was for resettlement," she told Western environmentalists in June. "The cost of moving all the ancient things will be expensive if it is done right, and this is not included as a separate estimate in the cost of the project."

A number of Chinese planners and economists have claimed that the dam is seriously underbudgeted. Under pressure from environmentalists, Western institutions such as the World Bank may well refuse to invest in the project. One such organisation, the Bureau of Reclamation, recently cancelled its involvement.

If that is the case, Beijing will face considerable difficulties financing the scheme. Under these circumstances, it seems likely that saving historic sites will take a back seat to the more urgent priority of population resettlement.

In any case, some relics cannot be relocated. These include the plank road and numerous stone carvings along the riverbank.

"Many of the temples and so on can be moved, but one very important site will be lost forever," says Lin Fatang, a former member of China's State Planning Commission. "A large rock, the Fish Rock, will be submerged.

The rock contains hydrological records that stretch back hundreds of years. For hundreds of years, records of water levels, as well as poems and comments, have been carved into the rock.

Take a look before they open the floodgates . . . A million people will be reloca and cultural sites will be submerged. Picture by DONALD M