

The Lower Yarlung Tsangpo Hydropower Project Will Cause Irreparable Damage to a World Heritage Site and Must Be Stopped Immediately — Starting with UNESCO's *Declaration Concerning the Intentional Destruction of Cultural Heritage*

By Wang Weiluo

The Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon is a completely preserved natural museum, recognized by scientists as a center for species origin and differentiation. It is a crucial area for climate and environmental evolution, and a natural gene bank of biodiversity. It is home to more than half of the Earth's biological species, making it an ideal sanctuary for the rescue and cultivation of endangered species. According to UNESCO's definition, world cultural heritage includes cultural sites related to natural landscapes. Undoubtedly, the Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon is a priceless world heritage site for humanity, but due to historical and political reasons, it has yet to be officially listed in UNESCO's World Heritage catalog.

In 2021, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) included the construction of a hydropower project at the Great Bend of the Yarlung Tsangpo in its Fourteenth Five-Year Plan, an undertaking three times the scale of the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River. On December 25, 2024, Xinhua News Agency announced the CCP had officially approved the project.

If completed, the Lower Yarlung Tsangpo Hydropower Project will cause immeasurable damage to the region's cultural heritage and ecological environment, with destruction comparable to the flooding of the Abu Simbel temples or the bombing of the Bamiyan Buddhas.

The history of world heritage conservation has been closely tied to the construction of large-scale dam projects. In 1960, when Egypt began constructing the Aswan High Dam, the resulting Nasser Reservoir threatened to submerge many historical sites, including the Abu Simbel temples, which prompted UNESCO to launch the *Nubian Campaign* to safeguard these ancient treasures, marking the beginning of international efforts to protect historical sites. This campaign later led to the adoption of the *1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage* and the establishment of the *World Heritage List*.



The Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon is a precious world heritage of humanity. Image source: Internet.

On March 12, 2001, the Taliban ruthlessly destroyed the two giant Buddha statues of Bamiyan in Afghanistan. This act was widely condemned by people and governments around the world. At that time, the Bamiyan Buddhas had not yet been included on the UNESCO World Heritage List. In 2003, UNESCO adopted the *Draft Declaration Concerning the Intentional Destruction of Cultural Heritage*, which states that any intentional destruction of cultural heritage significant to humanity, or the deliberate failure of a state to take appropriate measures to prohibit, prevent, stop, and punish such destruction, must be held accountable under international law, regardless of whether the heritage site is listed under UNESCO or the protection frameworks of other international organizations. This follows the preamble of the *Hague Convention 1954*, which emphasizes that “Being convinced that damage to cultural property belonging to any people whatsoever means damage to the cultural heritage of all mankind, since each people makes its contribution to the culture of the world.”

As a follow-up measure, UNESCO issued the *World Heritage “No-Go” Commitment: Global Standards for Corporate Sustainability*, highlighting that, for decades, threats to world heritage sites have been increasing, particularly due to harmful industrial and infrastructure projects, extractive activities such as mining and oil and gas exploration, and large-scale hydropower projects. In response, the International Hydropower Association (IHA) has called on hydropower companies worldwide, as well as IHA members, to adopt the *World Heritage No-Go Commitment*. Notably, China Three Gorges Corporation, as one of the planners and builders of the Lower Yarlung Tsangpo Hydropower Project, is a signatory to these guidelines, yet it is now blatantly violating them.

To protect the invaluable cultural and natural heritage of the Great Bend of the Yarlung Tsangpo, the Lower Yarlung Tsangpo Hydropower Project must be halted immediately!

1. The Discovery of the Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon: One of the Last Great Geographical Discoveries of the 20th Century

Nestled at the confluence of three colossal mountain ranges—the Himalayas, the Nyenchen Tanglha, and the Hengduan Mountains—the Great Bend of the Yarlung Tsangpo River remains one of the Earth's last uncharted frontiers. This extraordinary landscape boasts the world's most majestic snow-capped peaks, the purest blue skies, the most mysterious grand canyon, and the most striking rock formations.

On April 17, 1994, journalist Zhang Jimin, reporting via Xinhua News Agency, officially announced to the world that “Chinese scientists had confirmed the Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon as the world's deepest canyon.”¹ In 1997, a panel of distinguished Chinese academicians, including Liu Dongsheng, Ye Duzheng, Wei Jiangchun, Hong Deyuan, Wang Wencai, and Qiu Weifan, declared that the confirmation of the Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon as the world's largest canyon was one of the most significant geographical discoveries of the late 20th century.² One scholar among them compared it to another of China's great contributions to world heritage, “If the Terracotta Army is a testament to the artistic and cultural achievements of ancient Chinese civilization, then the Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon is the greatest canyon ever discovered on Earth—a natural wonder of immense scientific significance.”

In front of Beijing's China Millennium Monument, a 262-meter-long bronze corridor chronicles major events and historical figures in Chinese civilization spanning the past three million years up to the year 2000. The entry for 1994 states that, “*Chinese scientists confirm that the Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon is the world's largest canyon.*”³

On October 10, 1998, the State Council of the People's Republic of China formally named it the Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon, marking it as the first time in Chinese history that a geographical unit had been granted such an official designation, underscoring its national significance. In 1999, the National Bureau of Surveying and Mapping in Beijing published

¹ Gao Dengyi: *Revisiting the Initial Intent Behind Exploring the World's Largest Canyon*, February 16, 2012, *China Popular Science Expo Network*, https://www.kepu.net.cn/blog/gaodengyi/201903/t20190326_474989.html
The History of the Discovery of the Mysterious Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon, May 24, 2004, *Sohu News*, <https://sports.sohu.com/2004/05/24/52/news220235255.shtml>.

² Gao Dengyi: *Revisiting the Initial Intent Behind Exploring the World's Largest Canyon*, February 16, 2012, *China Popular Science Expo Network*, https://www.kepu.net.cn/blog/gaodengyi/201903/t20190326_474989.html.

³ Yu Peng: *The Geographic Life of Alumnus Yang Yichou*, September 30, 2009, *Nanjing University Alumni Network*, <https://alumni.nju.edu.cn/f3/bb/c3151a62395/pagem.htm>.

precise measurements, confirming that the Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon stretches 504.6 kilometers in length and reaches a maximum depth of 6,009 meters—both world records.⁴

The scientific team responsible for the first comprehensive survey of the canyon praised its unparalleled natural and scientific value:

“The Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon is a vast, natural museum. Scientists have admired it as a global center for species origin and differentiation, a starting zone for climate and environmental evolution, and a natural gene bank of biodiversity. It contains more than half of the world’s known species, making it one of China’s most promising regions for biological resource development and an ideal sanctuary for the conservation and propagation of endangered species.

The geological traces that the canyon exposed provide irrefutable evidence supporting the theory of continental drift and the uplift of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. Nowhere else on Earth can one find such a spectacular natural combination of towering mountain ranges, expansive glaciers, deeply incised gorges, abundant moisture, dynamic landforms, and rich biodiversity—all coexisting in a single place. The Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon is the most breathtaking natural and cultural treasure on the planet.

Its vibrant, multicolored rock formations originate from the depths of the Earth, preserving a complete record of the epochal collision between the Indian and Eurasian tectonic plates. This geological spectacle serves as a stratigraphic pillar of Earth’s evolutionary history and reveals the full extent of the Tibetan Plateau’s lithosphere. There is nowhere else human beings can gaze so directly into the Earth’s core, where an astonishingly vibrant, multi-hued world awaits.”⁵

⁴ *The Discovery of the Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon – Yang Yichou’s Pioneering Contribution to Border Geography Research in China*, *People’s Digest*, July 2009, https://paper.people.com.cn/rmwz/html/2009-07/01/content_382241.htm.

⁵ Wang Weiluo: *Why Was the Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon, China’s Most Valuable Biodiversity Protection Area, Not Included in the First Batch of National Parks? — The Construction of the Motuo Dam and the Implementation of the Tibet Water Diversion Project Are Already Inevitable*, November 14, 2021, *Democratic China Network*, <https://minzhuzhongguo.org/default.php?id=92134>.
Future Plans for the Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon, November 8, 2002, *CCTV National Geography*, <https://www.cctv.com/geography/news/20021108/21.html>.



Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon is the longest canyon in the world, a masterpiece of nature. Its scenery is characterized by great height, grandeur, depth, narrowness, serenity, lushness, danger, uniqueness, and beauty. Image source: Internet.

2. The Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon Fully Meets UNESCO's World Heritage Criteria

According to the definition of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), a site must possess outstanding universal value to be inscribed on the World Heritage List. The *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* set out ten criteria for selection.⁶ Among these, six relate to cultural heritage, and four relate to natural heritage. A site must meet at least one of these criteria to be considered for inclusion.

UNESCO's Ten Criteria for World Heritage Listing⁷

To be included on the World Heritage List, sites must be of outstanding universal value and meet at least one out of ten selection criteria.

Cultural Heritage Criteria

1. to represent a masterpiece of human creative genius;

⁶ Introduction to the "World Heritage Classification and Evaluation Standards," January 8, 2009, *UNESCO Asia-Pacific World Heritage Training and Research Center Network*, [https://www.whitr-
ap.org/index.php?classid=1544&newsid=1907&t=show](https://www.whitr-
ap.org/index.php?classid=1544&newsid=1907&t=show).

⁷ UNESCO (World Heritage Convention), <https://whc.unesco.org/en/criteria/>.

2. to be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history;
3. to bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared;
4. to be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history;
5. to be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land-use, or sea-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), or human interaction with the environment especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change;
6. to be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance. (The Committee considers that this criterion should preferably be used in conjunction with other criteria).

Natural Heritage Criteria

A natural heritage site must meet at least one of the following criteria to qualify for World Heritage status:

7. to contain superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance;
8. to be outstanding examples representing significant ongoing ecological and biological processes in the evolution and development of terrestrial, fresh water, coastal and marine ecosystems and communities of plants and animals;
9. to be outstanding examples representing major stages of earth's history, including the record of life, significant ongoing geological processes in the development of landforms, or significant geomorphic or physiographic features;
10. to contain the most important and significant natural habitats for in-situ conservation of biological diversity, including those containing threatened species of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation.

Cultural Landscapes and Other Considerations

A *cultural landscape* is a “combined work of nature and humankind,” as defined in Article 1 of the *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*. The selection of cultural landscapes is based on their outstanding universal value, their representation of a specific geo-cultural region, and their ability to illustrate fundamental cultural attributes of that region.

For example, Lushan National Park in China is the only site designated as a cultural landscape among China's World Heritage Sites.

The Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon *exceeds these standards*. The Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon fully meets all four criteria for natural heritage and satisfies several cultural heritage criteria. For instance, it represents a unique artistic and creative masterpiece shaped by natural forces over millions of years and provides an exceptional testimony to a disappearing or soon-to-be-lost cultural tradition or civilization.

If Lushan National Park qualifies as a World Heritage Site based on its cultural landscape, then the cultural landscape of the Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon far surpasses it in significance.

By applying the criteria outlined in the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*, it is beyond a doubt that the Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon is an invaluable heritage of humankind. However, due to historical and geopolitical reasons, it has not yet been officially inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List.

One major complicating factor is that the Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon stretches 504.6 kilometers in total, with over 200 kilometers lying within territory under India's de facto control.⁸ China and India continue to dispute the territorial sovereignty of this region, and ongoing military tensions in border areas have further complicated matters. As a result, the Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon has neither been officially nominated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site nor included in China's tentative list for future World Heritage submissions.

However, bureaucratic hurdles and geopolitical tensions cannot negate the canyon's universal value as a world heritage site. In fact, just because it has not yet been listed, its protection becomes even more urgent and critical.

The responsibility to preserve the Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon extends beyond China. It is a global imperative. According to the fundamental principles of the 1954 Hague Convention, any damage to the Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon constitutes damage to the cultural heritage of all humankind.

3. The Chinese Government's Plan to Build a Hydropower Project Three Times the Size of the Three Gorges Dam in the Heart of the Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon

In 2021, the Chinese government included the construction of a hydropower station at the Yarlung Tsangpo Bend—three times the size of the Three Gorges Dam—into its 14th Five-Year Plan. On December 25, 2024, Xinhua News Agency announced that the Chinese government had

⁸ Wang Weiluo: *The Lower Yarlung Tsangpo Hydropower Project Is a Product of Extreme Nationalism (Part II) — The Project's Power Generation Capacity Is Unlikely to Exceed Three Times That of the Three Gorges Project*, January 27, 2025, *Radio France Internationale (RFI)*.

officially approved the project. Two days later, a spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs further stated that the project had undergone decades of in-depth research, and that adequate safety and environmental protection measures were in place, asserting that it would not have any adverse effects on downstream areas.

However, claims that the Yarlung Tsangpo hydropower project has adequate safety and environmental protection measures, and will not negatively impact downstream regions, is utterly baseless.

To date, the Chinese government has neither disclosed the construction plans and specific technical data for the Lower Yarlung Tsangpo Hydropower Project nor released its feasibility study report or environmental impact assessment.

Engineering proposals circulating on the Internet suggest two main approaches:

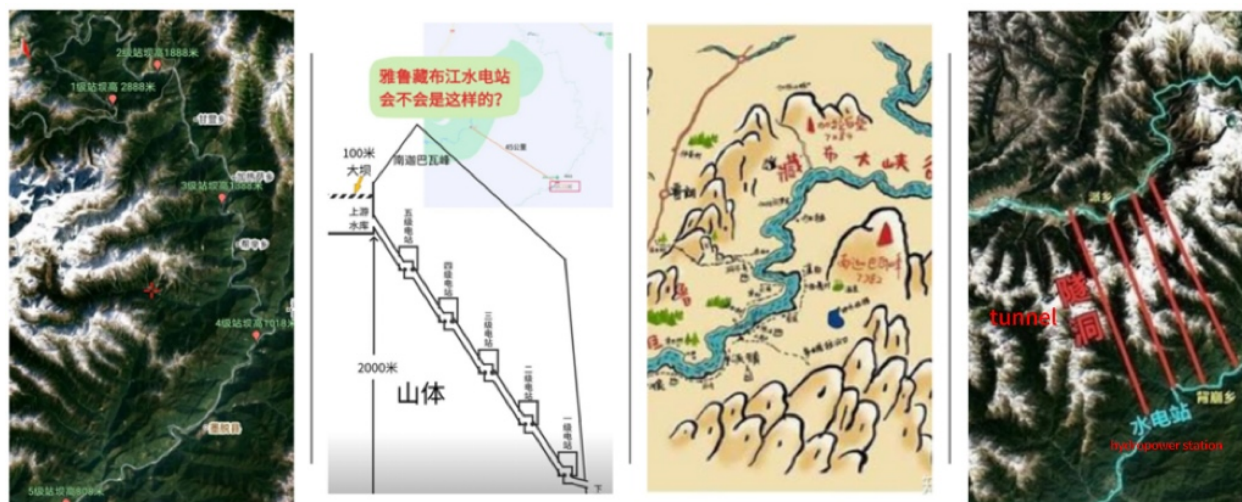
1. **Diverting the River Through a Shortcut:** This plan includes constructing a dam near Pai Town in Milin County (or possibly an additional dam further upstream) to intercept the Yarlung Tsangpo River. This system contains three massive tunnels, each with a diameter of 13 meters and a length of 34 kilometers, that would cut through the Himalayas, diverting the river away from the natural bend and utilizing the resulting 2,400-meter elevation drop to generate electricity. At the downstream end of the tunnels, six cascading hydropower stations would be built along the Xirang Qu in Motuo County. The installed power generation capacity would be three times that of the Three Gorges Dam, reaching between 60 to 70 million kilowatts, with an annual average power output of 300 billion kilowatt-hours, which again, is three times that of the Three Gorges Dam—making it the world’s largest hydropower project. The total investment is expected to reach 1 trillion RMB, four times the cost of the Three Gorges Dam.
2. **Constructing a Series of Mega-Dams Along the River:** This plan entails building five mega-dams along the Yarlung Tsangpo River, each with an average height of 400 to 600 meters—breaking existing world records. These dams would be spaced approximately 50 kilometers apart along the river’s 200-kilometer stretch.

If the entire flow of the Yarlung Tsangpo River is diverted through steel pipes and tunnels to Xirang Qu in Motuo County, the natural river course through the Yarlung Tsangpo Bend will dry up completely, and its aquatic ecosystem will be annihilated. The Yarlung Tsangpo River carries a significant amount of sediment, and water containing sediment cascading down from a height of 2,400 meters will erode even the most resilient steel pipes and tunnels.

As the *Tao Te Ching* states, “*Nothing in the world is softer than water, yet nothing surpasses it in overcoming the firmest of obstacles.*” Water, though soft, is powerful, because it can wear away stone over time. When laden with sediment, its destructive force is even greater. If sediment is filtered out before entering the tunnels, a portion of the river flow must be redirected to flush

sediment out of the reservoir, undermining the goal of constructing the world's largest hydropower project.

If a cascade of mega-dams is built instead, the entire ecological system of the Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon will suffer devastating consequences. All of the canyon's defining characteristics—its towering cliffs, immense depth, narrow gorges, misty atmosphere, lush greenery, rugged terrain, and breathtaking beauty—will be lost forever.



Yarlung Tsangpo Hydropower Project schematic diagram of the lower reaches. Image source: Internet.

According to online reports, several major Chinese state-owned enterprises, including China Three Gorges Corporation, China Huaneng Group, China Huadian Corporation, PowerChina, and China Energy Engineering Group, are fiercely competing for the Lower Yarlung Tsangpo Hydropower Project. Of these, China Three Gorges Corporation and China Huaneng Group were the first to get involved. Preliminary preparations have already started with some aspects of the project, having been awarded through bidding processes, now being implemented.

4. The Aswan Dam Project: Submerging Many Historical Sites and UNESCO's "Nubian Campaign"

The history of world heritage conservation is closely intertwined with the construction of large-scale and mega-dam projects. In essence, dam construction has been a major force behind the destruction of world heritage, prompting rescue operations and eventually leading to international conventions for heritage protection.

In 1952, Egypt decided to build a new Aswan High Dam,⁹ and by 1958, the Soviet Union replaced the United States as the project's key supporter. Construction on the Aswan Dam began in 1960, with Soviet funding and technical assistance.

⁹ Wikipedia: *Aswan Dam*, <https://zh.wikipedia.org/zh-hans/%E9%98%BF%E6%96%AF%E6%97%BA%E6%B0%B4%E5%9D%9D>

The reservoir created by the dam, later named Lake Nasser after the Egyptian president, would submerge the Upper Nile Valley, drowning numerous Nubian archaeological sites that had existed for over 3,000 years. Among the losses, the most notable ones would have been the Abu Simbel Temples, which date back more than 5,000 years.

Carved directly into a mountainside, the Abu Simbel complex features a monumental facade with four colossal statues of Pharaoh Ramses II, each standing 20 meters tall. The temple's grand interior contains statues of the pharaoh and deities, alongside detailed battle murals depicting military victories. One of its most extraordinary features is a precise astronomical alignment: on October 22 and February 22 each year, sunlight enters the temple's entrance at just the right angle to illuminate the inner sanctuary's statues.

Originally built on a cliff at a bend in the Nile, the Abu Simbel Temples were destined to disappear beneath the waters of Lake Nasser once the dam was completed. However, neither the Egyptian government's dam project nor Soviet financial assistance included funding for the rescue of these invaluable cultural relics. In response, Egypt and Sudan appealed to the United Nations and the international community for financial and technical support to save these ancient treasures.

5. UNESCO's "Nubian Campaign"

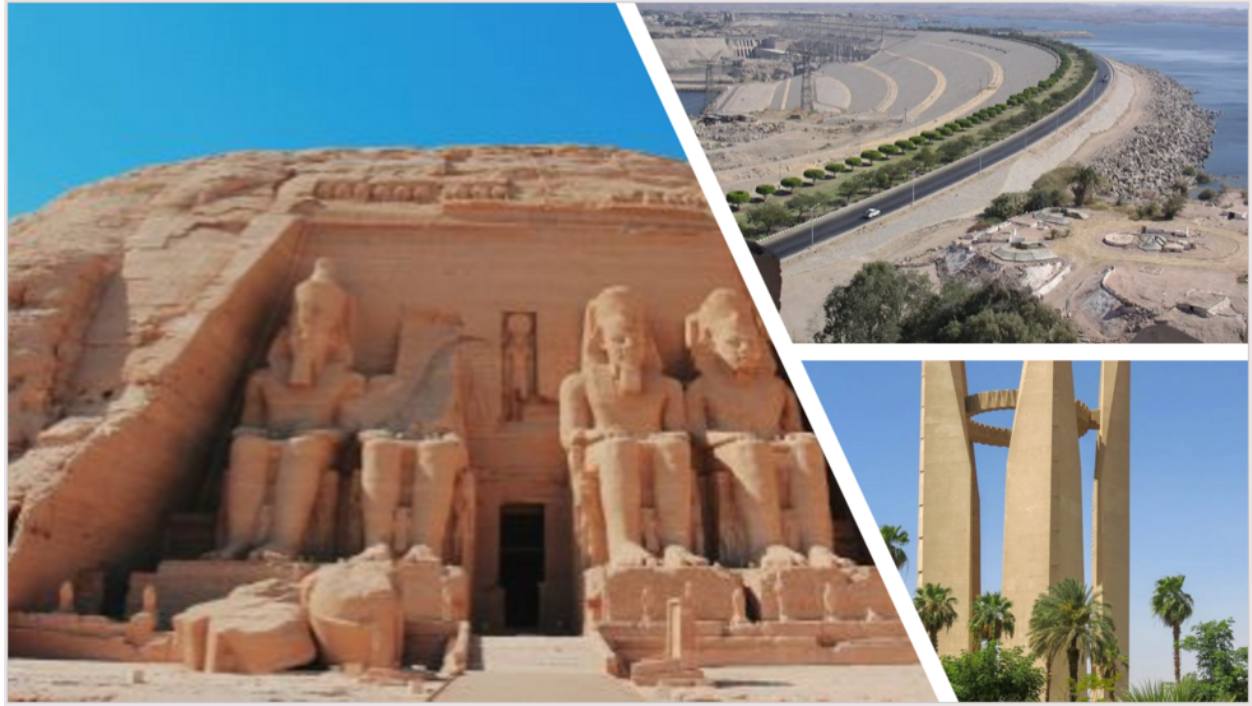
In response to the imminent threat posed by the Aswan Dam, UNESCO launched the "Nubian Campaign"—one of the most ambitious and extensive heritage preservation efforts in human history. This international rescue initiative, which ran from 1960 to 1980, involved collaboration from numerous countries and major international corporations.

The Abu Simbel relocation project became the centerpiece of this campaign. Engineers first separated the colossal statues from the surrounding mountains, then meticulously cut them into blocks weighing between 5 to 20 tons. Each piece was carefully numbered, transported, and then reassembled at a new site 65 meters higher than the original location.

The Nubian Campaign also involved the relocation of indigenous Nubian communities and the reconstruction of their villages. Years later, the author had the opportunity to visit the Aswan Dam project, the relocated settlements, and the rebuilt Abu Simbel Temples. It was widely said that the total cost of relocating the historical sites and resettling the affected populations exceeded the cost of constructing the Aswan Dam itself.

When thinking about this campaign, one thought lingered in the author's mind:

"President Nasser, who decided to build the Aswan Dam, may have been a great leader. But the one who decides to dismantle it in the future will be even greater."



Egypt's Aswan Dam, Egyptian Russian Friendship Monument, and Abu Simbel Temples. Image source: Internet.

UNESCO has since recognized the Nubian Campaign as the catalyst for the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (the 1972 World Heritage Convention) and the establishment of the World Heritage List.

6. UNESCO Declaration Concerning the Intentional Destruction of Cultural Heritage

During the global effort to rescue historical sites from being submerged by Lake Nasser, the reservoir created by the Aswan High Dam, a crucial initiative took shape. In 1965, during a White House Conference in Washington, D.C., a proposal was introduced to establish a “World Heritage Trust,” an initiative aimed at the permanent protection of the world’s most outstanding natural landscapes and cultural heritage sites. A few years later, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) also released similar proposals.¹⁰

This movement culminated in UNESCO’s adoption of the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage on November 16, 1972,¹¹ commonly known as the World Heritage Convention. This unique international treaty was the first to link cultural heritage preservation with environmental conservation, recognizing the interconnection between human civilization and nature and the need to protect their delicate balance. UNESCO emphasized that heritage is not merely a relic of the past, it is an integral part of contemporary

¹⁰ Laura Kiniry: *The Great Relocation of Egypt's Temples*, April 25, 2018, BBC, <https://www.bbc.com/ukchina/simp/vert-tra-43889171>.

¹¹ UNESCO Declaration concerning the Intentional Destruction of Cultural Heritage, 2003, UNESCO UNESDOC, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000133874>.

life and a treasure for future generations. Both cultural and natural heritage sites are irreplaceable sources of identity, inspiration, and life itself.

In 1975, after ratification by the first 20 signatory states, the World Heritage Convention officially came into effect. China joined the convention on November 22, 1985. As of July 2024, China has 59 UNESCO World Heritage sites, ranking second globally behind Italy, with 40 cultural sites, 15 natural sites, and 4 mixed cultural-natural sites.¹²

The Three Gorges region once had the potential to be designated as a World Heritage Site, but the construction of the Three Gorges Dam ultimately cost it that opportunity. Similarly, the “Baiheliang Ancient Hydrological Inscriptions,” China’s oldest known hydrological record, have seen their chances of UNESCO recognition significantly diminished due to the dam’s impact.

Additionally, the Three Parallel Rivers of Yunnan Protected Areas, already recognized as a UNESCO Natural World Heritage Site, now faces potential delisting due to the construction of hydropower projects such as the Tiger Leaping Gorge Dam (renamed Longpan Dam).

While the world was focused on preserving heritage sites, an unspeakable tragedy unfolded in Afghanistan.

The Buddhas of Bamiyan,¹³ two massive standing rock-cut Buddhist statues, were masterpieces of Greco-Buddhist art dating back to the 6th century AD. The western Buddha stood 38 meters tall, constructed around 570 AD, while the towering eastern Buddha, at 55 meters, was built around 618 AD. The two statues were located 400 meters apart in the Bamiyan Valley.

Bamiyan, strategically positioned along the Silk Road, was once a thriving Buddhist center and a vital crossroads for trade and cultural exchange between Europe, Persia, China, and India. The famous Chinese monk Xuanzang(玄奘), who traveled through Bamiyan around 630 AD, documented his encounters in the *Records of the Western Regions* (Datang Xiyuji). He described Bamiyan (once the capital of an ancient kingdom) as home to tens of thousands of Buddhist monks and numerous monasteries.

On February 26, 2001, Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar issued a religious decree ordering the destruction of all Buddhist statues in Afghanistan, including the Bamiyan Buddhas.

¹² Wikipedia: *List of World Heritage Sites in China*, <https://zh.wikipedia.org/zh-hans/%E4%B8%AD%E5%9C%8B%E4%B8%96%E7%95%8C%E9%81%BA%E7%94%A2%E5%88%97%E8%A1%A8>.

¹³ *The UNESCO Declaration on the Intentional Destruction of Cultural Heritage Recognizes the Destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas as a Tragic Event That Shocked the International Community*. For more information on the Bamiyan Buddhas, see:

Wikipedia: *Bamiyan Buddhas*, <https://zh.wikipedia.org/zh-hans/%E5%B7%B4%E7%B1%B3%E6%89%AC%E5%A4%A7%E4%BD%9B>

Baidu Encyclopedia: *Bamiyan*.

At the time, the Bamiyan Buddhas had not yet been officially listed as UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Nevertheless, UNESCO's Director-General Koichiro Matsuura urgently convened a special meeting of representatives from the 54-member Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to intervene and prevent their destruction.

The United Nations, the European Union, and numerous countries, including Nepal, Thailand, Sri Lanka, India, and Russia, publicly condemned the Taliban's plan. However, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) remained silent, refraining from any condemnation or meaningful intervention, which also reveals a stance consistent with its own history of religious persecution and destruction of Buddhist heritage.

Despite the global outcry, the Taliban pressed forward with their plan. Initially, rocket launchers, tanks, and artillery were used to destroy the statues, but the massive Buddhas withstood the bombardment. On March 12, 2001, the Taliban resorted to placing explosives directly into the statues and detonating them, completely obliterating these 1,500-year-old cultural treasures.

In 2003, following the catastrophic destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas, UNESCO officially designated the ruins as a World Cultural Heritage Site—a belated effort akin to “closing the barn door after the horse has bolted.” That same year, the UNESCO General Conference adopted the Declaration Concerning the Intentional Destruction of Cultural Heritage,¹⁴ (hereafter referred to as the “Declaration”).

The Declaration explicitly defines cultural heritage to include natural heritage of cultural significance, aligning with UNESCO's classification of World Heritage Sites, which distinguishes between cultural heritage, natural heritage, and mixed natural-cultural heritage. The determination of cultural heritage is based on its significance to humanity, rather than whether it has been officially listed by UNESCO or other international organizations. In other words, the Declaration applies to all cultural and natural heritage sites worldwide, including sites like the Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon, which, despite not being officially listed, holds undeniable global significance. This principle serves as a lesson learned from the irreversible loss of the Bamiyan Buddhas.

The Declaration underscores the broad consensus within the international community on the importance of cultural heritage protection and reaffirms UNESCO's commitment to opposing any form of intentional destruction of cultural heritage. It is only through such commitments that these irreplaceable treasures can be preserved for future generations.

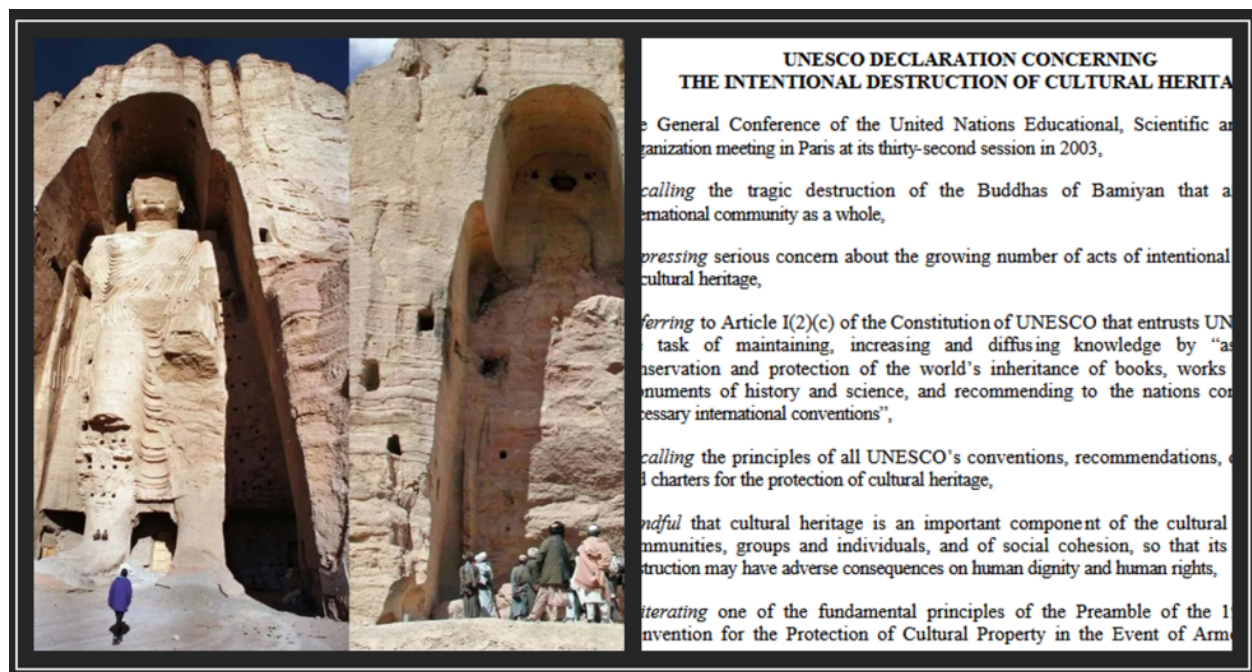
The Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon is one of the world's rarest and most extraordinary heritage sites—one meant to be passed down to future generations. The critical question, however, is what kind of legacy will be left?

¹⁴ [See 13]

Will it be an unspoiled, pristine Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon, preserved in its original splendor? Or will it be a severely damaged and irreversibly altered landscape, sacrificed for short-term economic and political ambitions?

The Declaration devotes considerable attention to the responsibilities of governments, stating that all nations must take necessary measures to prevent, halt, and suppress any deliberate destruction of cultural heritage, regardless of where that heritage is located. It further asserts that any country that deliberately destroys cultural heritage or willfully fails to take appropriate action to prohibit, prevent, halt, or punish such destruction, bears full international legal responsibility, whether or not the heritage site is officially recognized by UNESCO or other international organizations.

Finally, the Declaration calls upon all nations to undertake measures to raise public awareness of its principles, including through grassroots movements and civic engagement campaigns, to ensure that the preservation of cultural heritage becomes a shared responsibility of humanity.



Comparison of the Bamiyan Buddhas before and after their destruction; UNESCO General Conference's "Declaration Concerning the Intentional Destruction of Cultural Heritage." Image source: Internet.

7. UNESCO Guidance for the World Heritage 'No-Go' Commitment: Global Standards for Corporate Sustainability

“UNESCO Guidance for the World Heritage ‘No-Go’ Commitment: Global Standards for Corporate Sustainability”¹⁵ highlight that World Heritage sites, whether cultural, natural, or mixed, represent humanity’s most outstanding and irreplaceable treasures on Earth. These sites, spanning over a thousand locations worldwide, must be preserved as a collective responsibility of the international community. However, for decades, World Heritage sites have faced growing threats, including harmful industrial and infrastructure projects, mining, oil and gas extraction, and large-scale hydropower developments.

Recognizing the unparalleled value of these sites and the mounting dangers they face, leading corporations and financial institutions have pledged to protect them, designating them as ‘no-go’ zones to prevent destructive commercial activities.

For instance, the International Hydropower Association (IHA) has made an explicit ‘no-go’ commitment, vowing not to construct hydropower projects within World Heritage sites.

As the world’s largest hydropower company, China Three Gorges Corporation (CTG) has also pledged to UNESCO that it will respect World Heritage sites as ‘no-go’ zones.

¹⁵ UNESCO Guidance for the World Heritage ‘No-Go’ Commitment: Global Standards for Corporate Sustainability, 2022, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000383811>.

已制定世界遗产保护战略的机构名单

List of Organizations That Have Developed World Heritage Conservation Strategies:

采掘业

- 英国石油司
- ENGIE集团
- 意大利国家碳化氢公司
- 挪威国家石油公司
- 国际矿业与金属理事会——26个矿业和金属公司成员，包括：
 - 非洲彩虹矿业
 - 美国铝业公司
 - 英美资源集团
 - 安格鲁阿散蒂黄金公司
 - 安托法加斯塔矿业
 - 巴里克黄金公司
 - 必和必拓
 - 博利登
 - 智利国家铜业公司
 - 自由港麦克莫兰铜金公司
 - 嘉能可
 - 金田
 - 海德鲁
 - JX金属
 - 圣克里斯托瓦尔矿业
 - 明苏尔
 - 五矿资源
 - 纽克罗斯特矿业
 - 纽蒙特黄金公司
 - 欧安诺集团
 - 板地黄金公司
 - 力拓集团

金融

- 高盛
- 汇丰银行
- ING集团
- 摩根大通
- 摩根士丹利
- 加拿大皇家银行
- 苏格兰皇家银行（国民西敏集团）
- 法国兴业银行
- 渣打银行
- 多伦多道明银行
- 瑞士银行

保险部门

- 《联合国可持续保险原则》签署方，包括130个成员，包括：
- 墨西哥农业保险公司
 - 安联
 - 友邦保险
 - 安盛
 - Caixa Seguradora
 - 可持续保险认证伙伴网络
 - 地球安全集团
 - 东非再保险公司
 - ICEA LION 一般保险
 - 宜可城—地方可持续发展协会
 - 新西兰保险委员会
 - Interamerican希腊人寿保险集团

发展筹资机构

- 亚洲基础设施投资银行（亚投行）
- 巴西开发银行
- 拉丁美洲开发银行
- 日本开发银行
- 南部非洲开发银行
- 欧洲复兴开发银行
- 欧洲投资银行
- 美洲开发银行
- 国际金融公司
- 发展中国家投资基金
- 新开发银行
- 美国国际开发金融公司
- 西非开发银行

建设

- 西麦斯

水电

hydropower
China Three Gorges Corporation (CTG)

- 中国长江三峡集团公司
- 国际水电协会90个成员

珠宝

- 责任珠宝业委员会1200个成员

China Three Gorges Corporation, as the world's largest hydropower enterprise, has made a commitment to UNESCO to designate World Heritage sites as "no-go" zones. Image Source: UNESCO.

8. Protecting the Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon – A Rare and Irreplaceable World Heritage Site

In 1960, when construction on Egypt's Aswan Dam began, then-President Gamal Abdel Nasser declared that the world's largest dam project at the time would usher Egyptians into a new era of prosperity. However, the Nasser Reservoir submerged the Upper Nile Valley and countless Nubian heritage sites, most notably the more than 5,000-year-old Abu Simbel Temples. In response, UNESCO launched the "Nubia Campaign," an unprecedented international effort to relocate historical treasures and resettle displaced communities, at a cost that surpassed that of the Aswan Dam itself. This campaign laid the foundation for the 1972 "Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage" and the subsequent creation of the World Heritage List.

In 2001, the Taliban's destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas with explosives shocked the world. This act of cultural eradication led UNESCO to issue the "Declaration Concerning the

Intentional Destruction of Cultural Heritage,” as well as the “‘No-Go’ Commitment Guidelines for World Heritage Sites,” ensuring that similar tragedies would never happen again.

Yet, history now seems to have come full circle, returning to the very origins of global heritage protection efforts, echoing the Aswan Dam controversy of the 1950s.

Just like the Abu Simbel Temples and the Buddhas of Bamiyan, the Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon is a rare and invaluable world heritage site. However, the Chinese government is aggressively pushing forward its plan for the Lower Yarlung Tsangpo Hydropower Project, a dam three times the size of the Three Gorges Dam. The impact of this mega-dam will be catastrophic. The destruction of the cultural and ecological integrity of the Yarlung Tsangpo region will be immeasurable. The scale of this destruction will be no less than the flooding of Abu Simbel or the bombing of the Bamiyan Buddhas. Worse still, the loss will be permanent and irreversible — once destroyed, it can never be restored.

In line with the fundamental principles of the 1954 Hague Convention, which states that: “Being convinced that damage to cultural property belonging to any people whatsoever means damage to the cultural heritage of all mankind, since each people makes its contribution to the culture of the world,” the Lower Yarlung Tsangpo Hydropower Project must be stopped immediately to protect this irreplaceable world heritage site!