

SATURDAY, AUGUST 10 2002

As China empties whole villages in preparation for the controversial Three Gorges dam, a Seattle company moves in to collect tonnes of ancient, weathered stone. It's destined for upscale homes in North America, but is this a case of cultural salvage or cultural exploitation?

Rock of ages

BY KELLY HAGGART

Richard Rhodes estimates he's bought about 17 Chinese villages worth of stone by now.

With the completion of China's controversial Three Gorges dam fast approaching, hundreds of people are being moved out in advance of the deluge. As they leave their ancestral villages, Rhodes's Seattle-based architectural materials company moves in.

The ancient, weathered slabs of limestone, sandstone and granite, bearing the imprint of millenia, are collected, cut and shipped to North America, where they will surround the pools and fireplaces of upscale homes.

"We're rescuing doomed history" says Rhodes, whose firm Rhodes, Ragen & Smith earned almost \$5-million (U.S.) last year and has been featured in Architectural Digest and on Martha Stewart. The company also collects stone from India, North Africa, Indonesia and France, but 85 per cent of its operations are in China.

"We purchase materials whose fates have already been sealed and which someone is planning to discard or destroy" he says. "None of our collection locations are UN-ESCO cultural heritage sites. We want to make sure we're not contributing to the cultural destruction, so our guiding principle is that we only purchase materials we can verify are in danger of being lost or destroyed."

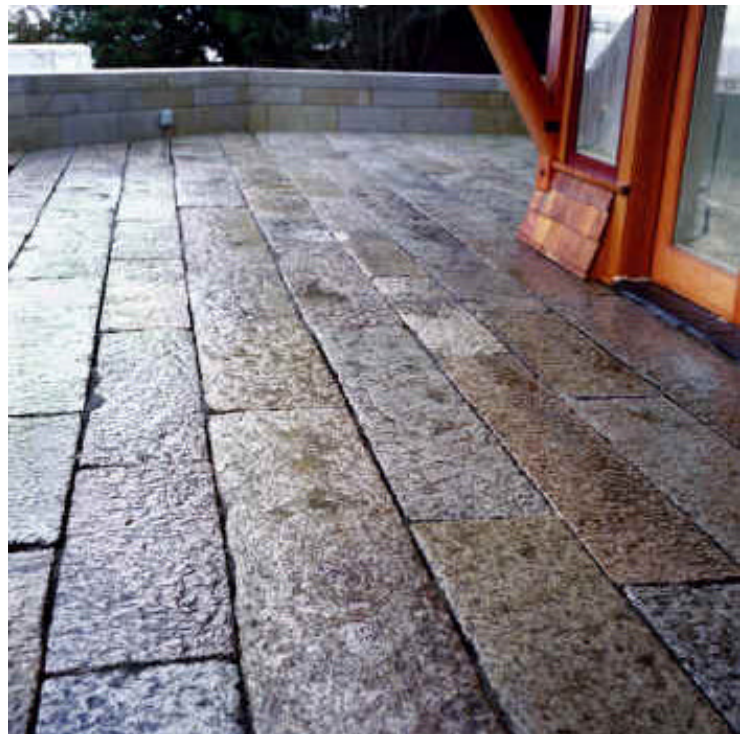
Indeed Rhodes says that its historical pedigree is what makes the Three Gorges stone especially appealing to North Americans who emigrated from China and their descendants. "Particularly those who left China in hard circumstances and have done well in the U.S., they're interested in purchasing some of their cultural heritage. These are not museum pieces, they're common everyday objects-road pavers, walls, rain barrels- which makes it even more special for them."

Vancouver's James Cheng, a Hong Kong-born architect who is using Three Gorges stone in half a dozen projects, counts Chinese-Canadians among his clients: "I love the worn look of the stone-the effect of one or two thousand years of people walking on it can't be duplicated," he says.

"It's got a special colour and warmth that ordinary granite doesn't have-a natural, serene look rather than a highly polished look. And there's added meaning with this stone, in the storytelling value when someone comes to your home. Everyone's looking for their roots, and for ethnic Chinese this stone gives them that little connection to their heritage."

Rhodes Ragen & Smith employs 500 to 600 people in China, from the labourers who dismantle the structures to the skilled artisans who cut the stone into precise shapes using traditional tools- and a modern one.

The company's Seattle-based design team gets around the language barrier by sending drawings over the Internet specifying the exact dimensions of stone that has been ordered by North American clients.



Above, a patio shows rich patina of hundreds of years of wear. Many of the North American homeowners wanting Three Gorges Stone are of Chinese descent: 'Everyone's looking for their roots, and for ethnic Chinese, this stone gives them a little connection to their heritage.'

Because they are so labour intensive to salvage and process, and so expensive to ship, antique paving stones cost much more than new ones. Rhodes's company also produces granite pavers that are handcrafted from newly quarried material and cost \$12 (US) a square foot. The same material with a 500-plus-year old patina costs \$36-\$40 a square foot, depending on the amount of wear. The more wear, the more valuable it is.

"Some of the blocks of stone are very thick, 15 inches or so," Rhodes says. "At our processing plant, we cut off the worn, weathered, beautiful patina-about three inches worth-then donate the rest back to local people. So we're exporting only about 15 to 20 per cent of what we buy."

For Dan Rahimi, manager of collections at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, the export of the stone raises complex ethical issues. "While re-use of building materials is a feature of many civilizations, ancient and modern, where recycling of the building blocks of previous inhabitants is routine, I don't view this commercial venture in the same light," Rhaimi says.

"It seems to me that the stone would fall under the definition of cultural property. It is certainly artifactual-as opposed to natural stone cut, say from the banks of the gorge and ancient. I would regard the stones as objects with ethnographic or archeological provenance, and I believe they should fall under the provisions of the Canadian law that regulates the import of cultural property."

The middle stretch of the Yangtze River where the dam is located has only in recent decades been recognized as one of two major cradles of Chinese civilization. Elizabeth Childs-Johnson, a New York-based scholar on early Chinese cultural history, laments the impending loss of this largely unexplored treasure trove.

"Archeological and cultural salvage work has been the government's lowest priority," she says. And the last-minute archeological work that is now being carried out in the area is "too small, too slow and too late."

Kwok Li, an American engineer originally from Hong Kong is using Three Gorges stone in patios outside his new home being built in Chevy Chase, Md.



Left, slabs of salvaged stone are used in a bathroom shower, tub and vanity; above it forms the mantel for a simple but impressive fireplace.

Rhodes says the fact that the materials he imports are common, everyday road pavers and stone from walls 'makes it even more special' for his clients. For information on Three Gorges stone, call 206-709-3024 or go to www.rhodesragensmith.com.

"I think it's a mistake for the Chinese government to be building the dam, because of the age of huge dams is gone. I understand their wish to control floods, but, as we have learned in the United States, some level of flooding is good for the land, so I'm really sad to see this happening."

"Of course I wish the stone could be back in its original place for people there to walk on and enjoy. But I think Richard is doing a wonderful thing, pulling this material out of the area that's due to be flooded and reusing it."

When the supply of Three Gorges stone dries up next year after the reservoir is filled, where next for Rhodes? He jokes about the army general in central China who suggested another possible source.

"He said to me in all seriousness: 'There's this really big wall in the north that's falling to pieces-you could take many miles [of the Great Wall] and no one would notice.'"

Globe and Mail copy editor Kelly Haggart edits a news Web site run by Probe International, www.three-gorgesprobe.org, which monitors the impacts of the Three Gorges dam