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The Three Gorges Dam's Impact on Peasant Livelihood



China's Project on the Yangtze River

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Glossary

<i>baojia</i>	household registration system during the Qing dynasty and the Republic of China
<i>chai</i>	tear down / demolish
<i>chuanmen</i>	visiting friends or relatives casually
<i>chumen</i>	to leave home
<i>chunjie</i>	Spring Festival
<i>cun</i>	village(s)
<i>fei nongye hukou</i>	non-agricultural household registration (an urban <i>hukou</i>)
<i>gaige kaifang</i>	<i>Reform and Opening</i> (economic reformation under Deng Xiaoping)
<i>geming</i>	mandate of heaven, but revolution, too
<i>guanxi</i>	interhuman relationship
<i>hukou system</i>	household registration system
<i>lanpi hukou</i>	blue (temporary) household registration of a person
<i>linshi hukou</i>	a temporary permit to work and life in an area different from that of the birth place
<i>liudong renkou</i>	floating population
<i>mangliu</i>	blind flow (of people)
<i>mingong</i>	peasant workers
<i>mu</i>	land measurement, equal to 0.0667 hectares
<i>nongmao</i> <i>chichang</i>	peasant markets

<i>siichang</i>	
<i>nongmin</i>	peasant, rural people, farmer
<i>nongye hukou</i>	agricultural household registration (a rural <i>hukou</i>)
<i>renmin jiefangjun</i>	People's Liberation Army (PLA)
<i>sanxia diba</i>	Three Gorges Dam
<i>shenghuo fei</i>	kind of support to livelihood
<i>shikumen</i>	traditional kind of houses
<i>xiang</i>	township
<i>ximin</i>	migrating people
<i>zhongguo</i>	China
<i>zhongoa minguo</i>	Republic of China (now on Taiwan)
<i>zhonghua renmin gongheguo</i>	People's Republic of China

1. Introduction

It is amazing to visit Shanghai. You board the *Xinhu Pearl* (the German transrapid) waiting at the white, science fiction airport station, and travel from the airport to downtown in 8 minutes for a distance of 31 kilometers at a speed of 430 kilometers per hour. The city's endless streets are full of busy crowds, traffic jams and commercial advertisements; a real journey. A famous soccer player is watching you from every cola can. A golden M of an American fast food restaurant which competes with other neon signs is drawing his guests in. A few people are running around in their pyjamas all day long. Some elegantly suited people lay down their hard-top cases in the park green to do Tai Chi for a couple of minutes. There are old traditional houses (*shikumen*) in old traditional alleys, hemmed in by modern skyscrapers as in the *Huaihai Zhonglu*¹. The People's Liberation Army marches in disciplined ranks along the promenade by the *Huangpu River*, while the skyscrapers are springing up around the Oriental Pearl Tower on the other riverbank. It is hard to believe that the borough of Pudong where skyscrapers are growing at breathtaking speed right now was cultivated land just a decade ago. China's economic boom can be felt and experienced in this "glamorous" city with no doubt.

But where light is, there is also shadow. For instance, in front of the main station, thousands of people sit or lie down on the pavement day by day surrounded with small luggage: *floaters*. Floaters left their home provinces for the cities and industrial sectors where the economic boom is. By dreaming of an improved living standard, they offer their labour force for low-paid jobs such as unskilled work on

construction and demolition sites as can be seen in Shanghai's residential area of *Hongkou*.

It is known that there are two kinds of socio-economic gaps in China: the gap between rural and urban areas, and the gap between provinces on the Chinese coast, where the upswing is, and provinces in the hinterland. The government has recognized this problem and aims at development of the hinterland. The Three Gorges Dam should be a contribution to it. The dam was built between 1993 and 2006 on the Yangtze (*changjiang*). The Yangtze is, at 6300 kilometers, China's biggest river and the third longest in the world.² The dam's functions in the future are flood control, generation of energy, improvement in navigation, and water supply to farmland as well as to water-poor provinces and cities in the north such as Beijing.

But the dam also affects the environment of the Three Gorges and the Yangtze in a negative way. When the dam's sluices were closed in 2003 the water level rose to 135 meters and the reservoir became 500 kilometers long.³ In 2009, the water level of the Yangtze will be 175 meters and the lake 600 kilometers long (from Sandouping to Chongqing). Everything below will be submerged.⁴ 19 counties are affected with their cities, towns and villages, with their houses, fields, temples (some of them have existed since 10, 000 B.C.), hospitals, and factories.

Unfortunately, it means a socio-economic change for people living in the Three Gorges of *Qutang, Wu, and Xiling*. Approximately 2 million people will have to be resettled in the end.⁵ Regarding feared negative effects of the dam and its reservoir in the long run such as climatic changes the real number of concerned people who will experience collateral damage could exceed 75 million.⁶

Will the resettlement be successful? Dai Qing, a Chinese engineer, environmentalist and journalist, stresses that there is no plan of resettlement, in general, that could be

adaptable and useful for relocating so many people over such a short period as is happening in the Three Gorges region.⁷ Shiu-hung Luk and Joseph Whitney, Professors of Geography at the University of Toronto (Canada), doubt its success as well:

“China’s record on resettlement is tragic: according to China’s Ministry of Water Resources, 30 to 40 percent of the 10 million people who have been relocated to make way for hydroelectric dams since the 1950s are still impoverished and lacking adequate food and clothing. Although China has recently improved its guidelines for resettlement in accordance with the World Bank’s criteria for ‘successful resettlement,’ the people who would be displaced or affected by the Three Gorges have no guarantee they would be spared the hardship and suffering associated with such schemes.”⁸

So, I ask: what will happen, socio-economically, to the relocated peasants after resettlement? For that reason, in my book I investigate the socio-economic consequences for the rural people, who were engaged in agricultural activities before resettlement and who were forced to resettle to state-assigned areas which can be rural but also urban. For my part, I fear for socio-economic deterioration in daily life for most of them after resettlement for two reasons.

Firstly, when I was in Aswan, Egypt, visiting the Sadd-el-Ali twice, I drove along the reservoir, (the Nasser Sea), which had been the *Golden Land* of 100,000 Nubians before the dam was constructed. This minority group in Egypt’s society almost lost its cultural heritage. Furthermore, the dam did not fulfil its functions of flood control and energy generation as predicted (see chapter 2). Why should the Chinese dam do it?

Secondly, since the 1950s, the household registration system (short: *hukou* system) has divided the Chinese

people into two categories depending on birthplace: rural (*nongye hukou*) and urban people (*fei nongye hukou*). Possessing an urban *hukou* brings additional rights and privileges that people with a rural *hukou* are excluded from.⁹ A Chinese can officially migrate only when the state's bureaucracy agrees. Hence, the displaced people with a rural *hukou*, who lost their homes and land, depend on state-given compensations they receive to restart at the new state-assigned relocations (such as new houses, land, as well as money and a change in their *hukou*). So, how do I investigate the dam's and the reservoir's impact on the peasants' livelihood?

Chapter 2: First of all I compare the Egyptian dam in Aswan with the Three Gorges Dam in China. What were the consequences for Egyptian society and how far downstream did the dam affect the environment? And how close are these experiences to the fears in connection of the dam in China? Are there any alternatives to this project on the Yangtze, which the government could have chosen?

Chapter 3: Then, I begin to focus on the protagonists who face forced resettlement, the rural people engaged in agricultural activities. How far have they been involved in decisions on (1) whether the dam should be constructed, (2) how they should be compensated for their lost homes, arable land and personal belongings which are submerged by the reservoir, and (3) in what way the resettlement process should happen? Is the resettlement process overshadowed by political corruption, embezzlement, and unrest on the side of the affected? At the end of the chapter, I look at Fengjie, which was submerged in 2002. How did the residents as well as the villagers of Jiaochang near the city experience the preparation and compensation processes before resettlement?

Chapter 4: How far do the dam and its reservoir affect the environment and influence the livelihood of the peasants? Do the latter find new cultivatable land and are they able to continue fishing as they had before the dam's construction began? Therefore, I investigate the climatic and geographic conditions and changes of the reservoir but also the conditions of the newly assigned arable land for the relocatees to see whether the quantity and quality of harvests declines or not. If there is not only a decline, but also deterioration, peasants suffer from less agricultural products twice over. Firstly, they have less to consume and secondly less or no surplus to be sold at local markets for additional income beside their own consumption of the harvests' produce.

Chapter 5: What are the socio-economic consequences for the relocated peasants if they experience a decline in their livelihood? What expenditures do they have to meet, such as taxes, leasing land, health care, or schooling? To understand the situation it is today, I take a historical look back to the household registration system, the *hukou*, and state-owned collectives the people were organized in and engaged to, which were created to realise the planned economy in the 1960s and 1970s. Although the planned economy was abolished and replaced by economic reforms in the 1980s, the *hukou* is still a functional instrument, even if altered. This primarily economical change means a change in the security of social insurances such as health care and retirement today. How far do this economic change and the probable deterioration in livelihood threaten the secure insurances, if peasants remain peasants and try to continue their agricultural activities as before resettlement?

Chapter 6: What alternatives do the peasants have if their income is too low and cannot cover daily costs and needs? Is moving to the city an alternative? Can they manage to

find new employment in industrial and service sectors there; even migrate to daily life among the urban host population? To see a tendency whether the urban areas can become new homes for the rural relocatees, I look at urbanization and rural-urban migration in China. Regarding the *hukou*: is it possible to migrate from a village to a town or a city at all? Or do they face barriers? Are they threatened with isolation among urban society? What about access to goods or commodities such as accommodation, water, electricity, social security insurance or schooling?

At the end of the book, I want to come to a conclusion in chapter 7, according to the knowledge collated in the book's investigation. It is certain that not all questions, unclear situations, or facts can be clarified. The book is mostly explorative. Furthermore, it has to be taken into account that the resettlement process is not yet finished and the long-term consequences for the peasants in the long run cannot be seen now. What can already be said is that where even China's western provinces become slowly involved in economic development and upswings, and where there is a surplus of rural labour higher than the current 30 million people, many rural people have no choice but to seek a good qualification or / and to find employment in non-agricultural sectors. No doubt, the displaced peasants from the Three Gorges are definitely a core group that is heavily affected in the changing structures of society; from an agriculture-orientated to an industrial-orientated and service-orientated society. Unfortunately, this break in structures happens faster than in Europe where the *Industrial Revolution* started and countries slowly developed over centuries to communication, information, and service societies. For the people in the Three Gorges, however, their previous structure of daily life is submerged by the reservoir more quickly; of course it would have happened even without the dam but probably not so rapidly. I approach my

initial position literarily. Unfortunately, there are not so many books directly working on the Three Gorges Dam and the resettlement process. The books I use are (1) *“Yangtze! Yangtze!”*, published 1989 by Dai Qing (ed.), (2) *“Damming the Three Gorges. What Dam Builders Don’t Want You to Know”*, 2nd edition, published 1993 by Margaret Barber and Gráinne Ryder (eds.) from the Canadian Probe International, (3) *“Der Drei-Schluchten Staudamm in China. Das größte Staudamm-Projekt der Welt”*, published 1997 by Eckhard Freiwald, (4) *“The River Dragon Has Come! The Three Gorges Dam and the Fate of China’s Yangtze River and Its People”*, published 1998 by Dai Qing, edited by John G. Thibodeau and Philip B. Williams, and (5) *“Before the Deluge. The Vanishing World of the Yangtze’s Three Gorges”*, published 2002 by Deirdre Chetman.

For more current information I also have included online sources such as the homepage of Probe International Canada (www.threegorgesprobe.org), as well as several online articles such as those of BBC News Online, Washington Post and Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. Moreover I added two books in my investigation which address the floaters who enter urban areas and try to migrate and integrate there, try to live the daily lives of urbanites: *“Contesting Citizenship in Urban China. Peasant Migrants, the State, and the Logic of the Market”* by Dorothy J. Solinger (1999) and *“Strangers in the City. Reconfigurations of Space, Power, and Social Networks Within China’s Floating Population”* by Li Zhang (2001). For information in general, I used articles from *“China aktuell - Journal of Current Chinese Affairs”*, published by the Institute of Asian Affairs in Hamburg, Germany, to set the relocation of the displaced peasants in its current social, political and economic context.

Furthermore, I added the TV documentaries *“Fengjie, Before the Flood”*, directed by Yifan Li and Yu Yan (2004),

which shows the way of resettlement that took place in Fengjie County in 2002, and “*Die Wanderarbeiter von Shanghai*” directed by Christoph Tubbenthal (2005) which shows the daily lives of some floaters in China’s “glamorous” city.

¹ It is a street in the centre of Shanghai.

² See Hiblk (2003), p. 84; see Wilkinson (2005), p. 12; see www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drei-Schluchten-Staudamm

³ See International Rivers Network (2003), p. 1

⁴ See Probe International (1993), p. 33

⁵ See International Rivers Network (2003), p. 11

⁶ See Larson (1993), p. 74

⁷ See Dai Qing (1989), chapter 11

⁸ Shiu-hung Luk/Whitney (1993), pp. 89-90

⁹ Meaning the right to live in a certain urban area and to have access to schooling, medical care, or a guarantee of employment there.

2. The Three Gorges Dam

There has always been discussion on damming rivers in China; as early 500 B.C., during the Chinese dynasties: let the rivers run autonomously or use dykes to “domesticate” them?¹⁰ In recent years, after the Gezhouba Dam, the government decided to construct a second, even bigger dam on the river: the Three Gorges Dam. But was the decision to construct the dam, a sound one? Besides the question of whether it can ever fulfil its purpose at all, at what costs has the dam has been constructed?

I have twice been to Aswan (Egypt) where the Sadd-el-Ali, the more recent of two dams there, created the famous reservoir, the Nasser Sea. It is true that the dam has contributed to Egypt’s welfare, but as we will see later in this chapter, at the expense of the Nubians and the environment. The aims, however, that Sadd-el-Ali were intended to achieve are similar to those of the Three Gorges. For that reason, the Chinese dam is compared with the Egyptian dam to gain insights of what will probably happen at the Three Gorges. This is preceded by a brief historical view of the Three Gorges Dam.

2.1 The Original Idea of the Dam

Sun Yatsen, co-founder of the Guomindang (GMD) and founder of the Republic of China on 1 January 1912, is the first person connected with the original idea to construct such a dam.¹¹ Already at that time, the aims were flood control, improvement in navigation, energy generation and also to create an industrial impulse. But because of a lack of financial means and because of decentralised political