

The Three Gorges: the unexamined toll of development-induced displacement

by Martin Stein

In China, the context of forced displacement in its broadest sense centres on four issues: (1) coercive displacement for development; (2) political persecution resulting in controlled displacement; (3) massive labour dislocations; and (4) disaster-induced displacement. This article looks at the role of the state in displacement, focusing on the first of these issues: development-induced displacement.

Introduction

The Chinese context highlights grey areas in the adopted definition of displacement, in particular with reference to unrecognised methods of persecution capable of impelling displacement. In recent years, however, complete and accurate reporting on this and other facets of China's human rights situation has been impossible, since most of those Chinese networks which made it their cause to verify reported rights violations are now suppressed. For this reason, one of the few remaining diplomatic measures available to the international community to draw attention to China's internally displaced person (IDP) problem would be to broaden the inclusiveness of its IDP criteria.

The uniquely omnipotent state security apparatus in China is fully capable of suppressing major internal displacement and cross-border refugee flight from regions fraught with dissent. Geographical barriers

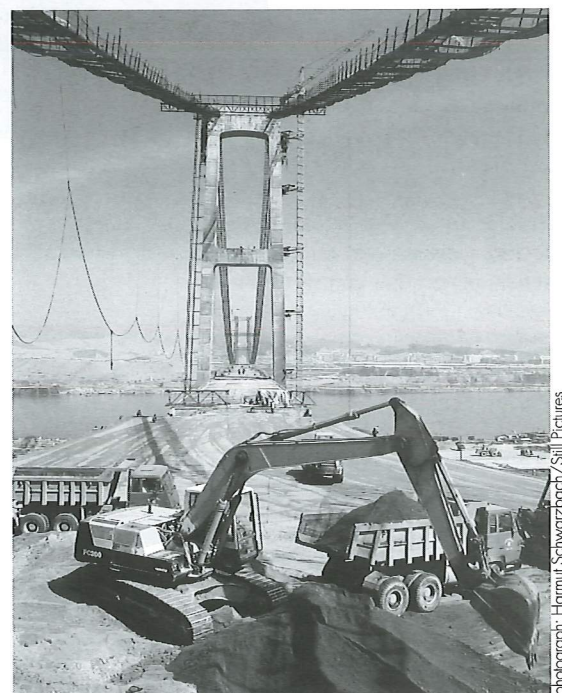
against exit are also significant deterrents. Those fleeing Tibet must endure a perilous journey for up to four months exposed to freezing temperatures. Xinjiang's borderlands with Central Asia are also predominantly impassable, and the border with Pakistan is now being

Furthermore, where displacement is officially benign in intent - as it is in forced displacement for development - the outcome may be politically coerced. In the first 40 years after the 1949 revolution, China resettled an average of 800,000 people per year for development purposes, some voluntarily, many not. In recent years the average has undoubtedly risen, since the current operation displacing 1,200,000 or more people from the Three Gorges Dam area is the largest dam resettlement in history. In involuntary resettlement, the government's frequent resort to the Public Security Ministry causes intimidation of those displaced so that the operations appear orderly. In the case of voluntary resettlement, which occurs

"A painstakingly choreographed ballet of bulldozers and dumper trucks will today seal in just six and a half hours the fate of millennia of Chinese history - and set up a colossal gamble for the future. As a cascade of concrete and rock plugs the last 40 metre gap in a barrage across the Yangtse River - the first stage of the world's biggest and most controversial dam - China's most ambitious project since the Great Wall will pass the point of no return."

The Guardian,
8 November 1997

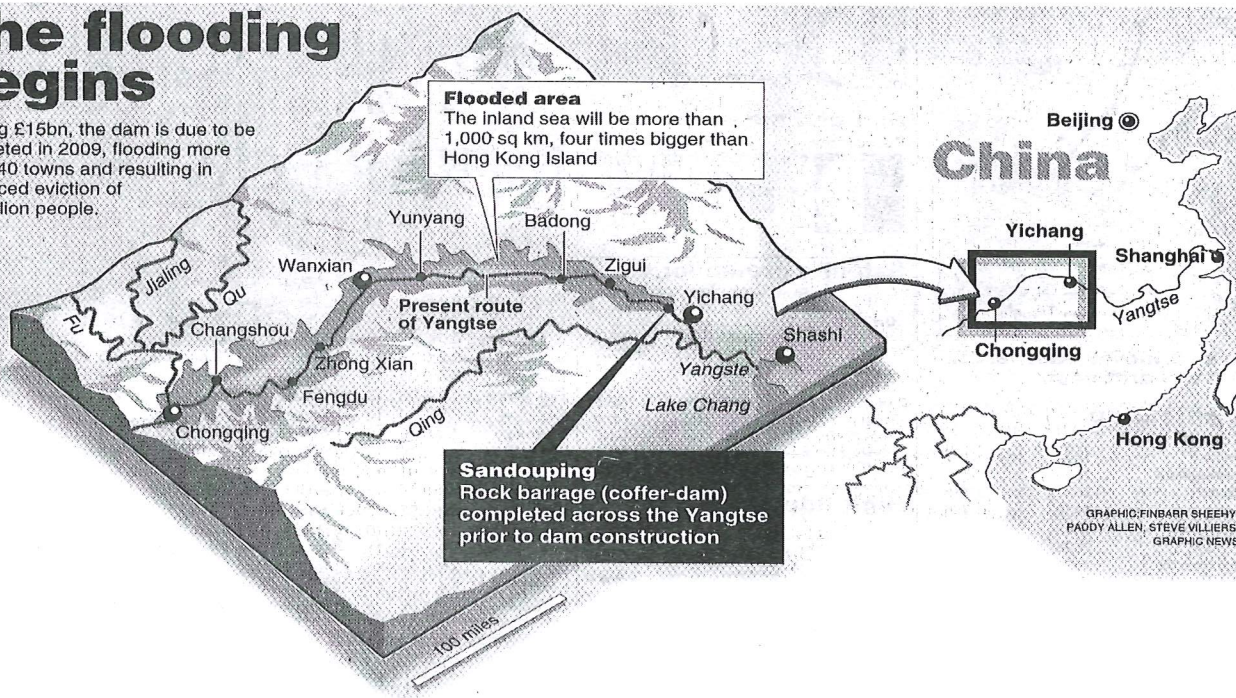
barricaded with barbed wire. *Refoulement* has occurred among small numbers of refugees who recently entered Pakistan, and bilateral security cooperation on suppressing dissident groups has commenced with CIS governments. The government engages in patterns of political persecution that lead to controlled displacements within its borders, but many such instances probably go unreported.



photograph: Harmut Schwarzboach/Still Pictures

The flooding begins

Costing £15bn, the dam is due to be completed in 2009, flooding more than 140 towns and resulting in the forced eviction of 1.2 million people.



source: © The Guardian, 8 November 1997

mostly in anti-poverty operations, international monitors privately concede that 'voluntary' has a different meaning in the Chinese context, where strong state inducements deprive those affected of the option of appeal.

Coercive developmental resettlement

The Three Gorges Dam displacement is four times more extensive than the world's previous largest development-related population displacement, which was also in China. The operation will displace the populations of 17 cities and 109 towns, forcing 1,200,000 or more people to comply without appeal. World Bank evaluations of other recent large-scale dam resettlements in China indicate a persistent pattern of failures:

'Failure to involve local people in selecting designs led to a near-universal rejection of the contractor-built houses...' (Daguangba)¹

'Resettlers are experiencing very high unemployment rates and most remain dependent on government grain rations...' (Yantan)²

'60 per cent of the resettled residents still live below the poverty level...' (Wuqiangxi)³

Furthermore, many of those shunted aside for dams built at the beginning of the People's Republic are still pro-

testing quietly at their continuing state of immiseration, particularly at Dongpinghu in Shandong (which resettled 278,000), Xinjiang in Zhejiang (306,000), Sanmenxia in Henan/Shanxi (319,000), Jinzhai in Anhui (100,000), Xinfeng in Guangdong (293,000), and Danjiangkou in Hubei (383,000).

The World Bank cites a Chinese study, measuring the effects of dam construction over 30 years, which states that only one third of those resettled had 're-established their lives at satisfactory standards'; another third returned only 'subsistence livelihoods'; the remaining third were 'mired in

and the suppression of the aggrieved, stem from the incapacity of local economies around dams to sustain those who are displaced. The Three Gorges displacement is unlikely to have a better record on income rehabilitation than previous projects which were handled poorly.

Urban resettlement

The Three Gorges operation will submerge 1,600 enterprises and factory towns. Displacement to urban areas will be dependent on the employment absorption capacity of (i) subsidised start-up enterprises which have a high risk of failure and (ii) internationally non-competitive, debt-ridden state en-

Various journalistic accounts suggest that announced compensation payments serve as a lure, while promises are frequently not kept.

poverty'⁴. The Government has a stronger record on urban resettlement, rural transport and rural industry-related resettlement, which less frequently jeopardise resettler incomes, are managed locally, and are less frequently constrained by political commands. Yet China's dam resettlement problems are acute.

The reasons for immiseration, besides the style of decision-making

terprises, with already mounting job redundancies. The displacement coincides with the closure of some major state enterprises and mass lay-offs that are expected to spread pervasively though the Chinese economy. In the medium term, before bankruptcies set in, market pressures will force managers to cut wages, putting the original workers in the industry at risk of impoverishment as well. Dams and reservoirs in China, as elsewhere,

are generally rarely located where market conditions are favourable, but rather 'are typically found in rugged terrain distant from major markets'⁵. In the Three Gorges area, the Government has elevated Chongqing to the status of municipality on a par with coastal cities like Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin, and exempt from prior central approval for private investments. However, there are limited prospects for attracting outside investors: the planned Yangtze cargo passage is at least 15 years away. For a further two decades, the Three Gorges

these populations are included in the budgets of the resettlement compensation schemes in any significant way.

Compensation and appeals

Finally, it is not clear that the government's planned compensation for the Three Gorges displacement will materialise as announced. By early 1996, roughly 7.5 per cent of the resettlement funds had been spent in displacing only 1.5 per cent of the targeted population. One study projects a maximum cost of displacement of

195 billion yuan, although only 40 billion is budgeted⁶. Various journalistic accounts suggest

that announced compensation payments serve as a lure, while promises are frequently not kept.

While appeals and protests appear appropriate over the Three Gorges and other displacement operations, the government effectively suppresses the rights of displaced communities. First, the 1991 reservoir resettlement regulations explicitly exempt all China's dam resettlements from developmental goals, stating that the provisions for resettlement must only be adequate 'to ensure that the life of the relocatees will gradually reach or surpass their previous standard'. Second, enforceable legal guarantees for the dislocated populations cannot be found in the state resettlement regulations for the Three Gorges (or presumably for other dam resettlement operations in China). Third, the World Bank found that virtually all legal channels for appeal are cut off in state-mandated projects like dams, since 'those elements of resettlement judged to be matters of state policy (including overall compensation levels) remain beyond challenge'⁷. The World Bank's own assessment of the record of the Chinese legal process on resettlement issues suggests that the state wilfully silences appeals: 'The records do not distinguish those who won total or partial vindication of their claims from those who received no satisfaction...the final resettlement agency offer in the mediation process is rarely modified.' Fourth, the World

Bank found that conditions do not allow the establishment of credible independent displacement monitors in China: 'A review of such monitoring activities undertaken as part of this overall resettlement review reveals not a single successful effort.'

Past dam displacements have been politically incendiary. The Sanmenxia, Xinanjiang and Danjiangkou dams built in the 1960s each displaced 300,000 or more people, producing not only widespread impoverishment but a persistent movement of petitioners (*shangfang*). Even China's smaller dams, resettling only several hundred people, such as the Xinhua Reservoir in Wushan County and Baishi Reservoir in Zhong County, according to unnamed security officials, 'have constantly been the cause of frequent mass disturbances of no small scale'⁸.

Passive resistance to the resettlement conditions include the outright refusal to leave and the refusal to take up new jobs. A few prominent cadres are among those dissidents imprisoned for their opposition to the Three Gorges Project, including Li Rui, Mao's former secretary and a vice-minister of water resources, and journalist Dai Qing, author of the banned exposé *Yangtze! Yangtze!* Dai Qing's *The river dragon has come*, published November 1997, recounts more recent opposition to the Three Gorges resettlement conditions. Within the government, there is substantial silent opposition to undertaking the Three Gorges Dam operation on grounds of both the conditions of displacement and the expected environmental damage. Put before the National People's Congress in 1992, an unprecedented one-third of the cadres cast their votes in opposition to it or abstained⁹.

Conclusion

Many findings - including those of the World Bank - suggest that resettlement in China often implies abandonment of a very large portion of those displaced to conditions of chronic immiseration. Thus, while development-induced displacement falls technically outside the definition of IDPs currently used in the United Nations, there are problems occurring on a massive scale as a result of poorly conceived safeguards and a pervasive lack of administrative responsiveness to aggrieved groups. If coercive factors are not noted, administrative

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area will remain an inland market, difficult to access for those industries evaluating the local investment potential.

Rural resettlement

Those displaced to rural areas face equally unfavourable economic prospects. In most dam displacements, rural populations are relegated to slopes and ridges, available only if they were unable to support a farming population in the past. In the Three Gorges area, only 37,000 acres of new land have been reclaimed against 74,000 to be submerged. Many of the displaced are being squeezed onto higher elevations around the reservoir, where already 30-50 per cent of land is cultivated on slopes greater than 25 degrees, suggesting serious soil erosion and productivity problems for both the displaced and prior residents. The state also plans an unsustainable farming mix. Citrus production, deemed a panacea, will suffer at the altitude of the new displaced communities, subject to frost in the hard inland winters. Additionally, depressed citrus producer incomes were already common in China prior to the Three Gorges plan, due to over-reliance in other areas where income-rehabilitation projects have been needed. Further compounding the immiserating effect of the displacement is the burden born by long-standing neighbouring farming populations from heightened price competition; very few of

forces at work in displacement appear perfectly above board and sincere. In reality, there is an enormous capacity for persecution operating *sub rosa* in displacement issues.

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The Global IDP Survey's *Internally displaced people: a global survey* (1998) handbook includes a report by Martin Stein on the four aspects of internal displacement in China, as mentioned in the introduction to this article. More details on page 41.

For more information on the Three Gorges:

International Rivers Network, Three Gorges Campaign: <http://www.irn.org/programs/3g/>

Probe International, Three Gorges Campaign: <http://www.nextcity.com/ProbeInternational/ThreeGorges/>

Notes

1. World Bank Environment Department 'Resettlement and development: the Bankwide review of projects involving involuntary resettlement', 1986-1993, 8 April 1994, 6/11.
2. Yo Kimura and Lee Travers, World Bank China and Mongolia Department, 'China involuntary resettlement', 8 June 1993, p37.
3. 'Wang Maolin addresses Hunan resettlement conference', Hunan Ribao, 15 November 1996, p1.
4. 'Selected essays on reservoir resettlement and poverty alleviation', Ministry of Water Resources Resettlement Office, October 1988, p142
5. Yo Kimura and Lee Travers, 'China Involuntary Resettlement', World Bank China and Mongolia Department, 8 June 1993, p37.
6. Samuel Wang, 'Migration for flood control', *China Strategic Review*, No 3, April 1996
7. Citations and quotations from Yo Kimura and Lee Travers, as above, p12.
8. 'Three Gorges Resettlement expected to spawn massive civil unrest', *Three Gorges Background* No 26, Probe International, 15 March 1995.
9. Audrey Topping, 'Ecological roulette: damming the Yangtze', *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 1995.

Articles in *Forced Migration Review* can be accessed and downloaded from the FMR pages at the RSP's website at: <http://www.qeh.ox.ac.uk/rsp/>