

The Three Gorges: a wiser approach

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China's central government recently warned of a potential ecological catastrophe caused by the huge Three Gorges dam, once hailed as the country's greatest undertaking in 1,000 years. Liu Jianqiang reports on how views of the project have changed.

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The Three Gorges Project Corporation may herald its dam project as "the greatest undertaking in the last 1,000 years of Chinese history," but China's current central government does not seem to want to take credit for this achievement. In September, Chinese officials and experts said that unless steps are taken quickly to solve the environmental problems caused by the project, an [ecological catastrophe](#) could be just around the corner.

Despite almost 20 years of debate and criticism of the dam – and the fact that its negative effects are already being felt – there had, until that moment, never been an official admission of its problems. This sudden admission from the Three Gorges Construction Committee is a sign that the central government is starting to look objectively at the dam's negative consequences – and will try to do something about them.

For the past 20 years, the public impression of the dam project in China has been shaped by an endless stream of glowing propaganda. Finding out the truth about the project (and not only about its environmental effects) has not been easy, including for journalists like me.

In June 2004, a year after the filling of the Three Gorges reservoir began, I interviewed Lu Qinkan, a 91-year-old flood defence expert. Lu was one of the original consultants advising on flood defence for the Three Gorges Project. He is also a former deputy chief engineer at the planning department of the Ministry of Water Resources and Electric Power. Two weeks before I met him, Lu joined 36 other experts in writing a letter to the central government. This letter suggested that in order to avoid severe flooding and the accumulation of sediment at the end of the reservoir near the port city of Chongqing, the reservoir should not be filled to the 175 metre level too rapidly. It was the first time I heard about the potential flood threat to Chongqing from the Three Gorges reservoir.

Rong Tianfu is on the Three Gorges project's panel of sediment experts. He is also a former chief engineer at the Transport Ministry's Yangtze Navigation Bureau, and was responsible for issues relating to Chongqing port. He told me that once the water level in the reservoir reaches 175 metres, due to the accumulation of sediment, Chongqing's Jiulongpo port and Chaotianmen wharf will both become unnavigable.

I also spoke on the telephone to Li Changjun, deputy head of the planning section of Chongqing Transport Department. He said that the accumulation of sediment is "slowly becoming a reality" for Chongqing port. Jiulongpo is the largest port on the upper reaches of the Yangtze River, and is vitally important as a logistics and distribution base, both for Chongqing and the whole of southwest China.

Despite being well aware of the severity of the problem, the Three Gorges Project Corporation has never mentioned anything about it to the public. However, one employee of the company told me that its former general manager, Lu Youmei, once suggested the corporation could pay the few hundred million yuan to relocate Jiulongpo port to a more navigable location. When I interviewed the deputy general manager, Cao Guangjing, he put forward the same idea.

"The corporation thinks that if it lets through more water, it can generate more electricity," said a source who works in water resources and is familiar with the Three Gorges Project Corporation. "If it generates more electricity, then it can earn a lot more money, and it can simply give some of the money to Chongqing to pay for dredging. They look at the problem in business terms, but Chongqing doesn't see it that way. If sediment accumulates in large quantities, the riverbed will rise, and that will cause flood waters to rise too. This would require a second phase of mass relocation of people. Even worse, if accumulation reached a certain point, then the port would be cut off. At that point, the question for Chongqing would be no longer one of money, but of survival."

Jin Shaochou, a 78 year-old geographer, told me: "If, once the reservoir reaches the 175-metre level, we see floods on the same scale as China saw in 1998, the tail end of the reservoir would fill up with hundreds of millions of tonnes of sediment and shingle. Chongqing, China's most important inland port, would be cut off."

However, in order to generate as much electricity and earn as much money as possible, the Three Gorges Project Corporation has given the go-ahead for the reservoir to reach the 175-metre level. Not only that, but they also told me: "the quicker this takes place, the better."

The problems faced by Chongqing port were not all that surprised me. On my visit to the Three Gorges, I saw how the dam is becoming a bottleneck for river transport on the Yangtze. Many large ships are unable to pass directly through the lock; heavy goods vehicles now have to leave the ships and motor further up the banks, where they board roll-on/roll-off ships. The Three Gorges Project Corporation always said in its publicity that the project would bring clear improvements to transport on the 660-kilometre stretch of the Yangtze River between Yichang and Chongqing, and that 10,000-tonne ships

would be able to pass directly to Chongqing. They said that one-way capacity would increase from 10 million tonnes a year to 50 million tonnes, and that shipping costs would be reduced by 35% to 37%. But when people from Chongqing load up their boats and head downriver, they find that the Three Gorges dam is a formidable obstacle. At best, it takes 3 hours and 20 minutes to pass through the lock. Sometimes it can take several days and nights. Just before Chinese New Year in 2004, ships from Chongqing loaded with live pigs, oranges and vegetables were held up for so long that the perishable goods on board started to rot. Some of the pigs even starved to death.

People quickly started to realise that the dam was not as easy to pass through as had been predicted. Its annual capacity has never come close to reaching the 50 million tonnes it was designed for, and not one 10,000-tonne ship has ever been able to reach Chongqing directly.

Once I had completed my interviews, I sent the Three Gorges Project Corporation a copy of my draft report so that they could check for factual errors (this was a condition of the corporation agreeing to interviews), and I set off by boat for Chongqing. That evening, the corporation called me constantly. Before, they had praised me for my professionalism. Unlike most journalists who cover the dam, the corporation did not pay my expenses, and I covered my own interview costs, plane tickets and accommodation. But suddenly, their tone became sterner and far less friendly. They were unable to pick out any factual errors, but advised me to cut out the parts about Chongqing port and the transport bottleneck as a matter of “national interest”. Of course, there is nothing unusual in this. Many companies wheel out the “national interest” as an excuse to protect their own interests. In the end, the head of the corporation's publicity department contacted me and – as if speaking to a friend – warned me that some of the experts who had criticised the project were “enemies of the state” and I should not associate myself with them. I turned off my mobile phone.

I knew that many similar reports had been spiked before publication, but luckily I was working for a newspaper that was committed to reporting the truth, and the article was published. A week later, I was on an unrelated assignment in Lichuan, on the banks of the Yangtze River in Hubei province, when I received a visit to my hotel room from four middle-aged men clutching large wads of documents. These documents were signed by several hundred people who had been relocated by the Three Gorges project and should have received compensation payments. However, the foreman of the factory where they worked had made off with several million yuan in compensation funds. The workers now found themselves utterly penniless. It was clear to me that all the propaganda surrounding the “great project” was concealing even more shocking facts.

We can take some comfort from the fact that more of the truth has emerged in recent years, and people now have a more realistic understanding of the Three Gorges project. Despite denial after denial from some, the indisputable facts are beginning to show through.

The Three Gorges Project Corporation claimed that the dam would bring prosperity to the local people. But the corporation has set up its own travel firm, which has a monopoly on tourism in the area, shutting out local travel companies. The Three Gorges Project Corporation also insists on tourists paying a large sum of money to visit the dam, even though it is funded with tax-payers' money – a part of every monthly electricity bill in China still goes to the “Three Gorges Construction Fund”.

The Three Gorges Project Corporation said that there would not be a problem with landslides in the reservoir area. Their initial report said that the banks were stable, and there were only 150 places where landslides might occur. Once the project had received approval, however, this figure jumped to 1,500. Landslides have now taken the lives of several local villagers.

The former head of the Three Gorges Project Corporation, Lu Youmei, said in 2004 in an interview with the *Beijing News* that water in the Three Gorges reservoir was of Grade 2 quality, and was therefore drinkable. However, water inspection departments have since shown that the water quality in the main stream of the reservoir is at Grade 3, and if [coliform group](#) bacteria are taken into account, this goes down to Grade 5 or below. Lu Youmei's response? “Maybe we calculated it wrong”. He later added: “Coliform group bacteria are everywhere. They are even in the human stomach.”

The main reason the Three Gorges project was given the go-ahead was that it would prevent flooding. However, more and more evidence suggests that its flood-prevention capabilities will be well below what was claimed at the time.

The number of people who been relocated by the project is higher than was predicted. Lu Youmei said that to increase the number of displaced people by a million would be impossible because “there are only 1.13 million people being moved to begin with”. But a report in September in the *21st Century Business Herald* says that the Chongqing municipal government is currently planning a huge second phase of relocation for people living in the area of the reservoir. The number of people moved this time will be double the number relocated 10 years ago – and could reach 2.3 million. The reason for this second phase of relocation is the fragility of the ecosystem around the reservoir and the high cost of developing it. Of the 1.13 million people who were relocated in the first phase, only 140,000 were moved to completely new areas. The rest were simply moved further up the banks, above the water line. Zhang Xueliang, head of the agricultural committee of Chongqing CPPCC, told me: “The development of the hillsides and the relocation of over a million people to higher areas, has led to environmental destruction and increasingly severe soil erosion.”

Lu Youmei says that the people who have been relocated are now living happy lives and claims that “there have been no instances of people trying to return”. However, many people who relocated from counties including Yunyang, Fengjie and Wushan have had no choice but to return home. They were not content living in the unfamiliar places they were moved to. A colleague who had been to the area told me: “Over 159 people were moved from Xintong village, near the county town of Yunyang, to Jiangxi province. Out

of those moved, 130 have come back to the area. They have moved into ramshackle houses in the old county town, where all the old villagers can be together again. Standing in that part of the town, I looked downhill and all I could see to the edge of the horizon was water. And under that water were the homes that the villagers would never be able to return to.”

More of this news is now being revealed, partly due to the efforts of researchers, the public and the media. Equally important, however, has been the tolerance of China’s central government in allowing this news to be published, which stems from a wise and comprehensive stance it has taken towards the project. This stance has allowed leaders to see the benefits and the drawbacks of the project. None of the central government leaders was present at the ceremony to mark the completion of the dam on May 20, 2006. When talking about the Three Gorges dam, premier Wen Jiabao has always emphasised the importance of solving problems of relocation and environmental protection. Wang Xiaofeng said that earlier this year, Wen talked about the potential environmental problems associated with the dam at a State Council meeting.

These signs all indicate that China is going to extricate itself from the forced praise of the Three Gorges project, and objectively look at the associated problems. This is a good thing for the Chinese people – and for the dam project.

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<http://www.chinadialogue.net/article/show/single/en/1417-The-Three-Gorges-a-wiser-approach>