Conflict and the Three Gorges Dam

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What is the Three Gorges Dam?

- The Three Gorges Dam is a hydroelectric dam that lays on Yangtze River close to the town of Sandouping, which is located in Yiling District, Yichang, Hubei province, China. The Three Gorges Dam is the world's largest power station.
- It has a height of 185 m, with a water level of 175 m and its width of 2,316 m is equivalent to the span of the Golden Gate Bridge.
- The dam promised to generate 84.7 billion kwh per year, which is the capacity of 18 nuclear power plants, to hold back floods from the upper and middle reaches of the river, and to facilitate the passage of 10,000-tonne ships to the inland regions.
- Besides these uses, the project was mainly to take on the task of helping the urbanisation of central and western China.
- The project cost US$25 billion. It took 16 years to complete and relocated 1.2 million people from 20 cities and counties, 116 townships, and 1,711 villages to make way for the construction and the reservoir.
Conflicts

- Drought is an example on the lower reaches of the Yangtze delayed the dam’s completion from the planned 2009 to the end of 2010.
- Siltation
- Landslides
- Species extinction

Even with the conflicts above, the environmentalist campaign only had a small amount of people going against The Three Gorges Dam. Fun fact, the majority of the campaign was made up of only a small amount of chinese participants and the rest of the activist were mostly from Europe and North America.
Campaigns

In the 1990s and a few years in the beginning of the twenty-first century, there were the anti-Three Gorges lobby. The group tried different things to protest against the construction of the Dam. A few strategies they tried were:

- Full-page advertisements in the New York Times
- Internet campaigns
- and negotiations with the multinational banks that financed the project.
Impact on the human community

- The relocation of people from one area to another.
- Resettlement of villagers.
- Insufficient provision of cultivated land in the inundated area.
- Difficulty of transferring rural migrants to secondary and tertiary industries.
- Limited environmental capacity of the reservoir area.
- Faulty estimates by government officials of the population to be relocated

Although with all the negatives and downsides of this project, there were a few that argued the positive impacts it had on the relocation of the people. They argued that it boosted their income and social satisfaction.
New Stage of Development

This new stage included national priorities from rapid economic growth aimed at providing food and clothing for 1.3 billion people to a “comprehensive” and “balanced” form of development instead.

The new ideology said that if we were to be “putting people first,” it would lead to “coordinated” growth in both the rural and urban areas through a transfer of rural populations to non-rural ones by means of industrialisation and urbanisation. It also said that it would bring “harmony” between humans and nature by protecting the environment and natural resources with the goal of sustainability and would maintain a “balance” between domestic and foreign markets.

While some people in China were cautious about the challenges it would pose to their society, some considered it a golden opportunity for the country to develop economically.
The new phase

- The dam is starting to enter a more critical phase now, known as “the world”.
- In the newspaper article “Belonging to China, [the Dam] also Belongs to the World,” the author celebrated the international attention the project received in terms of, among others, media coverage, visits of political leaders from interested countries, and participation of multinational machinery and hydropower equipment corporations.
- The Three Gorges Dam project had envisioned the accomplishment of the project with international support through capital raising, but when a cash flow crisis arising out of the second phase of construction (1998–2003) prompted the dam authorities to seek funding for the estimated US$3 billion shortfall. They were able to raise over $12 billion but didn’t have enough for the $25 billion project. A lot of the funds would have to come from overseas investors.
- Participating in the endeavour were Merrill Lynch, Morgan Stanley, Nomura, and Goldman Sachs, all of which had drawn up plans to contend for positions as lead underwriters.
November 20, 1997 there was a full page advertisement on the dam. “An Exclusive Bond Offering: Here's your chance to invest in a Grand Monument to China’s Authoritarian Regime.” It continued: “We urge you to call your fund managers . . . and insist that your money does not get funneled into Three Gorges Dam.”

They claimed that the dam would not be effective in stopping the Yangtze floods also it would not produce sufficient energy for China. It would lose its function within 50 years.

A transnational discourse of anti-Three Gorges environmentalism coalesced. The idea that the natural environment was fundamental to human well-being and on the insistence that environmental goals be considered in the development process. These notions, which were part of international agreements, such as the Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (1972) and the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (1992), were well publicised, giving environmental groups world-wide a strong argument.

Individual member groups of the Three Gorges opposition, which mainly came from the USA, Canada, Sweden and Switzerland, carried out separate or joint activities countering the primary discourse of developmentalism.
Global Capital vs. the Transnational Environmental Lobby

1. Unable to launch bond offerings in its name, the Three Gorges Corporation embarked on an indirect path.
2. The China Development Bank, formed in 1994 as the State Development Bank of China to finance state-owned enterprises and infrastructural projects, became the largest funder of the dam.
3. The loan made up 65% of the dam's budget.
4. In 1996, the bank introduced its first international bonds.
5. 1997, the banks turned to Wall Street funders.
6. Lehman Brothers and J. P. Morgan were the lead managers.

Credit Suisse First Boston and Morgan Stanley, combined for $66 million. Smith Barney $46.2 million, and Bank of America another $19.8 million. 1999, when the China Development Bank launched a $500 million bond issue and Merrill Lynch and Salomon Smith Barney each invested $225 million.
Around the turn of the century, as the dam’s construction progressed, the focus of the activists’ argument changed from environmental and social destruction to human rights violation. The anti Three Gorges lobby started to lean that the project violates human rights. This shift led to more news about the resettlement. Five villagers who planned on travelling to Beijing to lodge a petition were intercepted on their way and detained. They had complained that local officials had inflated the number of residents and amount of land to collect more compensation money from the central government. The funds did not go to the peasants but were pocketed by the officials or spent on new buildings for the government and police or used to build luxury hotels for profits. The arrested villagers were later charged with “disturbing public order,” “leaking state secrets” and “maintaining illicit relations with a foreign country.”
National Government vs. Transnational Civil Society

According to eyewitness reports distributed by the activists, the Chinese government was abusing human rights in three ways.

First, the land and jobs promised to migrants were often unavailable. The land which was offered in the resettlement sites uphill or in distant places outside of the Yangtze Valley was, in most cases, infertile or uncultivable.

Second, embezzlement of resettlement funds by local officials led to inadequate compensation. In Hongmiao Village in Yunyang County, out of the officially stipulated Rmb29,000 (US$3,625), villagers who organised their own resettlement received Rmb20,000. Those who went through government-sponsored relocation received only Rmb6,773 (Yi 2003).

The third point put forward by environmental opponents was the lack of an independent redress system to handle complaints and penalise responsible officials. According to an investigative report, the resettlement programme was conducted “in an atmosphere of officially orchestrated secrecy and intimidation.” Villagers were asked not to speak to journalists; when they protested to the local government, the riot police suppressed them by force; when they tried to petition Beijing, they were intercepted, beaten up, and/or detained by local officials.

It was also found that women experienced more discrimination than men. Women did not have as big an advantage as men, mainly because in construction and transportation, the jobs were more readily available for men.
“China combines the universal principles of human rights with the realities and realization of modernization, and thus puts the rights of subsistence and development at the top. Under the circumstances for reform, development and stability, China gears up to promote human rights, which not only realizes the historical transfer from subsistence to sufficiency levels so as to realize the people’s rights of subsistence and development as well as economic, social and cultural rights, but also forms a more complete political and legal system to protect the people’s democratic rights, and to attain great achievements in human rights under the legal system. (Gan 2003)”
“Sustainable Development” and the New Hydropower Discourse

● In June 2003, the Three Gorges Corporation successfully installed world-grade hydropower generators with the help of Western companies. The river was completely blocked and the dam entered its first phase of electricity production.

● “Hydroelectricity, under this premise, was highlighted as a valuable renewable energy source that could “contribute to sustainable development . . . to mitigating greenhouse gas emissions . . . [and] to poverty reduction and economic growth through regional development and expansion of industry” in developing countries” It was in this context that hydropower was brought to the top of the energy agenda in China - as a “clean, renewable, and environmentally sound” resource compatible with the principles of “sustainable development.”

● It was planned that by 2020, China would double its hydropower generating capacity
Under the premises of cutting carbon emissions and exploring clean energy, the hydropower sector consolidated under the lead of the Three Gorges Corporation. August 2002, the company collaborated with five other state-owned energy corporations and established the China Yangtze Power Company.

The five companies - The Three Gorges Corporation 89.5%. Three other enterprises – Huaneng International Power, China Nuclear Industry Group, and China Petroleum and Natural Gas Group 3% each, China Gezhouba Water Resources and Hydropower Project Group 1%, and the Yangtze Surveying and Design Institute had 0.5%.

With its collective capital and knowledge, Yangtze Power made plans to build a cascade of four dams on the Jinsha River, a part of the Yangtze river system upstream from the Three Gorges, which, nicknamed Double Three Gorges, would combine to generate twice as much power as the predecessor project.

The Xiluodu Dam, began in 2005.
“Water itself is undoubtedly a renewable source of energy with minimal environmental impacts. But when it comes to damming the river, especially on a mega scale, the results go beyond what simple flowing water brings to the human world. As the river is blocked, the velocity of water becomes substantially reduced, causing human and natural waste to accumulate behind the dam. At the Three Gorges, floating garbage amounts to 100,000 to 200,000 m³ per year and has been posing a problem particularly in the rainy season.” Besides water pollution, there are other geological hazards humans face, such as landslides, stone desertification and riverbank slumps. In a report entitled “Three Gorges Follow-Up Project,” the government revealed plans to relocate another 300,000 people – on top of the 1.2 million villagers that’s been relocated. According to a government official, since the project was filled to its maximum 175 m water level in October 2010, an increasing number of geological disasters have occurred in the reservoir area. Seventy per cent of the landslides and bank collapses, he said, were “sudden incidents” posing unpredictable threats to people and ships nearby.
Corporations like Yangtze Power, Huaneng, and Huadian are state-owned enterprises having considerable influence on government policies and access to official assets. But they operate as commercial companies, which have access to resources available in the market economy, including funds from banks and stock exchanges. On the Jinsha River, a total of 25 dams are under construction or being planned, an average of 100 km apart.

“With power and capital, the energy companies exercise dominance over nature and local people under the ideological shield of sustainable development for their economic gain.”

With the overarching development discourse, China’s hydropower discourse reached out to the other parts of the world, enabling the dam-constructing sector to establish a dominant position as a global builder and financier.

In 2007, the Chinese government signed an agreement with the Burmese government to construct a dam at Hutgyi on the Salween (Nu). The project would be partly financed by Chinese funds and was to be built by Sinohydro, a major Chinese hydropower company, to provide electricity for Thailand (90%) and Burma (10%) also involved is another 11 dams proposed for the mainstream Mekong (Lancang) – seven in Laos, two between Laos and Thailand, and two in Cambodia.
Conclusion

- The developmentalist-environmentalist struggle over the generation of hydroelectric power shows a chain of action, counter and reaction, strategy and counter strategy.
- Chinese turned to funding sources in the global capital market. However, this was met with a counter tactic from international environmental groups.
- The focus of the activists’ shifted from environmental disruption to human rights violations. But the universal notion of rights clashed with the particularist interpretation of human rights by Chinese developmentalists.
- The argument of human rights was then sidestepped by Chinese hydraulic officials, who incorporated the postulate of environmental protection, a moral claim that had given the anti-Three Gorges lobby a strong argument.