Lost Lives: The Plight of the Migrants

By Liu Wei

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The Three Gorges Project approved by the National Peoples’ Congress in 1992 included a policy to settle all affected people on higher ground in the area nearby. These people were categorized as those resettling locally, and included those who resettled higher up on the slopes above the Yangtze, those who relocated to work for a local enterprise, and those who looked for friends and relatives nearby who they could move in with.

After the 1998 floods in the Yangtze valley, however, the State Council discovered that settling all affected people in the reservoir area would trigger serious environmental problems such as deforestation and soil erosion. This damage posed an immediate threat to the dam project itself and the reservoir area, and a serious long-term threat to the entire Yangtze valley.

Official statistics released in 1999 confirmed this danger: between 1950 and 1990, vegetative coverage in the Three Gorges area was reduced from 22 percent to only 8 percent. Further, the vegetation composition has continued to degenerate from forest to shrub, grassland, and rock. Total soil erosion reached 157.5 million tons, of which 60 percent originated with farmland. By 2000, over 80 percent of the reservoir area was suffering from soil erosion, and more than half of that was classified as “severe” or “extremely severe.”

In order to address the mass-relocation problem more effectively, Premier Zhu Rongji, who was also head of the Three Gorges Project Construction Committee (TGPCC) at that time, issued a new policy: All local people affected by the Three Gorges construction were to be moved out of the reservoir area and resettled in remote provinces and municipalities of the country, with particular emphasis on the more economically developed coastal areas. According to official statistics, 161,677 people had been resettled by June of 2006 to as far away as Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Shanghai, Guangdong, Shandong and elsewhere.

The domestic media have repeatedly reported that the distant migrants relocated far from the Three Gorges reservoir area “are now settled and prosperous” and are largely integrated into their local communities. However, significant numbers of those distantly settled have in fact returned to the reservoir area, and those numbers are steadily increasing. According to a confidential survey by the State Power Corporation, 1,115 people (from 442 households) in Zhongxian County alone, who were settled in other distant places have returned to the reservoir area. Among the returnees, 263 people built or bought houses, 732 rented houses, 81 borrowed houses from friends or relatives, and 95 built temporary shelters in which to live. In terms of their livelihoods, 95 returning individuals rented farmland to grow crops, 445 engaged in business or found employment in local enterprises, and 575 remained unemployed at home or made a
living by other means such as being itinerant labourers. As one official at the Chongqing Resettlement Bureau said, citizens have the freedom to migrate so the government doesn’t need to take responsibility for them anymore or force them to return to the resettlement areas.

However, the growing number of displaced migrants who are returning to the reservoir area is clearly a departure from the intended goal of the central government which was to avoid ecological destruction from overpopulation in that region. The “returnees” now comprise a huge group of people who are angry and frustrated because of unemployment, homelessness and extreme poverty, and this has led to social destabilization within the community.

On August 15, 2004, over 300 returnees who were originally resettled in Haimen and Qidong, about 1,000 kilometres downstream of the Three Gorges area in Jiangsu province, returned to their home area in the Tailong Township, Wanzhou District of Chongqing municipality. They gathered in front of the Wuqiao Resettlement Bureau with a petition requesting that their resettlement problems be resolved. After an intensive round of discussions with government officials from both their original residence and resettlement sites, most of these protesters gave in and went back to the resettlement sites in Jiangsu, but some of them stayed and decided to continue fighting. Despite attempts by both governments (the migrants’ home and host governments) to circumvent the migrants’ grievances, this fundamental issue of inadequate resettlement remained unsolved. So whether the migrants returned to their relocation areas or stayed in their original homes, their dissatisfaction and suffering became critical factors affecting social stability in both the reservoir area and resettlement sites.

Shortly after the incident related to the protest, I traveled to Guanyin Village at Tailong Township affected by the Three Gorges dam, from where the petitioners were moved to Jiangsu province. I was told that most of the returnees had already left for Jiangsu, and local villagers were unwilling to talk more about the “petition event.” All I was able to learn from them was the location where the migrants had been resettled: Haimen County of Nantong City in Jiangsu province.

So I decided to have a meeting with those who had participated in the protest and to interview some of those involved. During the summer of 2006, I traveled to Haimen, Jiangsu from Wanzhou in Chongqing municipality. With the help of local residents, I took a motor-taxi to the home of Mr. Chen Guangjiqiao, one of those who had participated in the protest and had just returned from the reservoir area. Mr. Chen is 68 years old, the head of a family of eight. White-haired and plainly dressed, Chen told me his story in detail, the kind of life they were living after their relocation and why he and his fellows had launched a petition for redress of their situation.

Chen was originally a resident of Guanyin Village in Tailong of Wanzhou District, heart of the Three Gorges reservoir area. Back in the early 1980s, Tailong had been ranked as one of the 300 most affluent townships in China, supported by a thriving orchard of orange trees along the Yangtze River valley. With only 0.4-0.5 mu (1 mu=1/15 hectares) of land orchard per head in the village, the per capita income reached 2000-4000 yuan annually.

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“Actually, my ancestors settled in Guanyin Village more than one hundred years ago, so my family had lived there for several generations,” recalls Chen. “There are eight members in my family currently: my wife and I, my son and daughter-in-law and grandson, my daughter and son-in-law and granddaughter. We lived a comfortable life there, and were among the wealthiest in the village. We owned more than 600 fruit trees
which produced 15-20 tons of citrus, generating an income of 20,000 yuan (US$ 2,500) per year. We lived in a house with a living area of 200 square metres, or 278 square metres, if including the converted space. We had 5-plus mu of farmland in total. Each year we raised six pigs and sold four for 3,000-4,000 yuan (US$ 375-500). My wife and I alone contributed an income of more than 20,000 yuan (US$ 2,500) a year to our family.

“In 2004, we were labeled a ‘trouble-making household’ (ding zi hu), and on June 22, were escorted here as part of the second batch of the relocation campaign from the Three Gorges reservoir area. Our house was demolished, and my family received only 74,000 yuan (US$ 9,250) as compensation; we received nothing for our other losses, including our orchard. To express my dissatisfaction, I threatened to file for divorce if I were forced to move but was told that my family would be relocated anyway, whether I divorced or not. My family and I were seen as a major obstacle to the government’s plan to relocate the people affected by the dam project without opposition. To try to win us over, local officials visited us repeatedly, and often gave us false information and empty promises about how good the conditions were at the resettlement site and how nice our hosts would be. We were even visited three times by police officers. I had no choice but to say, ‘If the government does it strictly by the law, I shall cooperate; if not, I will have nowhere to appeal.’ The reply was something like, ‘If you have any problems, you should ask help from officials over there. You can also come back and talk to us if your problems cannot be solved there.’ In this way, then, the officials who came over again and again really pushed us to move out of the reservoir area. I have to say that we actually were forced to move here.

“We were thus settled at Group 5 in Lizhou Village within the jurisdiction of Linjiang Township, Haimen county in Jiangsu province, more than one thousand kilometres away from our original home. About 59 migrants from 18 households, including us, were settled here. You might ask how finding and buying our houses was arranged. I’ll tell you the story. Before our displacement, the head of each family at Wanzhou was sent here on an inspection trip, to have a look at the farmland and housing we could buy. Accompanied by two government officials (one from Wanzhou, our home village, and another from Haimen, our resettlement village), we arrived at the village around 9 o’clock in the morning, and took a quick look at the village, including the farmland and housing. We were forbidden to get in touch with the hosts who would sell their houses to us and had no way to bargain with them, because the location and price of the houses were already fixed. We were forced to sign the purchase contracts before lunch. That afternoon, we were taken back to the county seat of Haimen, and were on our way home to Wanzhou by bus that evening.”

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1. It seems that Chen was trying to make a dramatic gesture to emphasize how devastating the forced relocation would be for him and his family. Divorcing his wife would not have stopped his relocation.

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turned around and took out a wooden chair to let me sit at the open space outside his house. In this three-generation family, only the old couple, Chen and his wife, and the two grandchildren, a four-year-old boy and a teenage girl were at home now, while the parents of the boy and the girl were working out of town. The conversation began about the house in which they currently resided.

"I bought this house before we moved here. It was a ‘spare house,’ unused by the original owner and located in a ‘scattered arrangement,’ that is, we as migrants say ‘like an island surrounded by the houses of local-residents.’ The government officials initially told us that we would be supplied with houses built with bricks and concrete, at 120-150 yuan (US$15-20) per square metre for a two-storey house and 80-120 yuan (US$10-15) per square metres for a single storey house. But the actual prices were much higher. My house is 160-square-metres, two-storeys, with a total of six rooms, and it cost me 32,000 yuan (US$4,000) — more than triple the price that the local people would consider reasonable (below 10,000 yuan (US$1,250)). Many in the village have speculated that the government officials in our original location received kickbacks from the sales."  

I saw that it was a detached two-storey house with a construction area about 120 square metres. Like a typical farmer’s house, there was a kitchen garden in the front and a latrine and a sheepfold in the back (the local people did not raise pigs). There were only a couple of pieces of simple furniture in the house, including a worn-out cabinet with Old Man Chen’s relocation registration tag still attached to its door.

"As you have already seen, my house looks quite empty. We sold most of our furniture before we moved here. I tried to divide a room into two sections with curtains but found that it was impossible to put nails into the walls because the mortar used to bind the bricks together is not concrete or lime, but mud which crumbles easily when nails are hammered into it, destroying the wall surface." Chen pointed to a large hole in the wall while talking to me.

"In the government document shown to us, as I remember, it was mandated that the houses, regardless of who the original owners or the builders were, had to be inspected and certified by the local government, at the county or municipality level, before they could be legally sold to us. I stopped hammering nails into the walls and rushed to the government office in the town to check for the certification of the house I had bought. It turned out that the seller had no certificate for the house at all.

"The problems that this caused became disastrously clear almost immediately. On the seventh day after we moved in, a rainstorm struck and water flooded the house. It flowed like streams along the purlin and from the top of the east side walls—first to the upper floor and then down the stairway to the lower floor, flooding the kitchen completely. A professional I hired after the rainstorm to examine my house reported that the ridge on the roof had cracks so wide that a finger could be inserted into them. The house sank on the east side with seventeen cracks in the floors under the east side wall. The walls on all sides were soaked with water. The officials from the town municipality told me that I should find the original seller and settle the matter with him. But the seller had moved away and could not be reached easily. Once I finally found him, he refused to talk to me, and so no solution has been reached yet."

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2 While there is no way to know the specific details, it is likely that officials would arrange for certain houses to be sold at above market rates and then share the surplus with the vendors. These kickbacks are known to be ubiquitous in China now.

3 Pillars that support the roof.
Chen showed me the room where several cracks appeared on the floor, like snakes stretching out their bodies. Obviously there were problems with the quality of the materials and building of the houses sold to the resettled villagers, and the local government was unable or unwilling to resolve them.

Chen continued, “Later I learned that the government of Haimen County had not even issued certificates for any of the houses sold to the resettlers. So no one was ever going to come out to resolve the problem.” The old man looked very angry now.

“Actually, it is illegal to sell the ‘spare houses’ to resettlers. Dozens of resettlers who had been sold these ‘spare houses’ went to the township municipality several times to demand a solution, but they received only the typical bureaucratic response. In desperation, we decided to go back to Wanzhou to appeal to the local government in our original home townships.

“In Wanzhou, I wrote three letters to the TGPCC of the State Council. In response, I received a phone call from Mr. Yuan who acknowledged the receipt of my letters, and advised me to return to Haimen with the other petitioners. He also told me that he would like to be informed of any progress we made in resolving the problems with the Haimen municipal head. But I had already met with that bureaucrat, and he had played the old game with me until February 2006, when a long rainstorm severely damaged my house. The house was leaking everywhere and the walls on the north and east sides were soaked with water. This time, the town municipal head sent somebody to inspect the damage and take pictures. A newly appointed deputy mayor promised to have a workman come in ten days to repair it. On May 10, 2006, two full months later, a bricklayer named Wu came to the house, and after a brief inspection said that the materials used in making the walls were substandard. To me it was already obvious that a mud-brick structure would certainly have been substandard. Wu also told me that all the houses built in the 1990s should have had steel reinforced grids for strength but this house had none, and therefore it would cost a couple thousand yuan to fix. He left after telling me that. But the township municipal head opposed Wu’s conclusions; he insisted that the house was brick and concrete, not mud and brick, and dismissed the issue. So now it is our nightmare. When it rains, water falls both outside and inside, but the dripping continues inside the house after the rain has stopped. I have begged over and over again for a solution, but with little response.

“The head of local police registrar office, Wu, addressed us saying, ‘I have witnessed all that you came here to protest. You blamed us for failing to follow the state policy, but the fact is that the Jiangsu provincial government is not responsible for implementing it, nor is the Haimen County seat. We here in Linjiang Township would therefore naturally follow suit and not assume responsibility either.” We reminded him that we wouldn’t have moved from Wanzhou to Haimen had the two local governments on the departure and arrival ends not ensured us of a full implementation of the state policy. We asked why the promise had been broken. Wu explained: ‘We had no choice but to present the state policy before you agreed to move here; now that you are here, we can afford to let you know our true policy. We cannot solve your problem but the

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4 “Spare houses” are those houses that owners have abandoned when they move on, to cities for example. According to government regulation, these houses should have been inspected and certified by county regulatory officials before they were sold. Apparently, the sellers and the local government officials failed to do so and dilapidated “spare” houses were sold to unsuspecting Three Gorges migrants. The Three Gorges migrants, who found themselves thus tricked into buying houses that were not legally certified for sale, demanded a solution.
State Council may be able to. Villagers in rural areas like us all have the same dream, to earn enough money to build a house that is better than their neighbour’s. Now the government has set the principle that we migrants should sacrifice our ‘small families’ for the success of a state project. But take a look at this place that my family and I have to call ‘home’!

“Land is another problem. My family of eight members received 8.8 mu of farmland, in accordance with the state stipulation of 1.1 mu of farmland per migrant. But what we as newcomers did not know was the poor condition of the land—in a rather remote location, sandy but without access to irrigation or power. This was the land that the villagers would not take. We grew corn on this plot of land, forced to transport the water used to dilute manure fertilizers 300 metres. We were discriminated against for being newcomers.

“I needed farmland in a more convenient location. But my pleas fell on deaf ears, since I refused to offer bribes. Officials from the town municipality excused themselves by saying that this was a decision to be made by the head of the village. The local government has received state funds of 10,000 yuan for resettling each migrant, but it offers us low-quality farmland which is of very limited use. At this point, we can only grow corn, soybeans, and forage grass. We have also used it to raise six sheep and grow some vegetables, but our main source of income is the state compensation of 120 yuan (US$15) a month per person, which will expire this June. We haven’t determined what we will do then. Perhaps we will have to return to Wanzhou, Chongqing. We would rather live the life of a beggar in our own hometown—at least there is no language barrier there. Nonetheless, we’ll stay if the house and farmland problems can be solved. Where would we live and what would we do if we went back home? The relocation funds we received were very limited and were spent along the way here.

“The family of He Xiaotong [an alias] relocated here with my family but was settled in another village. How are things going for him there? He grew crops on a total of 4.4 mu of farmland and earned 2,200 yuan from it in the year 2005, averaging a little over 500 yuan for each family member. He also raised 36 sheep which were sold for 3,900 yuan, less than what he spent on building the sheepfold, 5,200 yuan. At our age, we are no longer considered employable. It used to be that many in our situation could go out and find other opportunities for work, but that is not possible here. We want to go back to find temporary jobs in our hometown.

“The State says that land is the last security of farmers. If we lost our land, the very means of sustaining our lives, who would come to help us?”

My conversation with Old Man Chen was interrupted by a long-distance call. On the phone was Chen’s son, who had found a temporary job in Suzhou, another city in Jiangsu. I spoke to him, and he told me that his father had been injured by a motorcyclist recently. When we hung up, Old Man Chen gave me more details on that.

“On the fourth day of the first month of the lunar calendar, I was on my way home from visiting my elder sister who had resettled in a neighbouring town—Qidong. I was riding a bicycle and was just about to enter the village when a motorcyclist driving in the wrong direction cut into my lane as he tried to pass the vehicle ahead of him. He hit me, injuring my arms and damaging my bicycle. I reported the accident to the police and refused to settle in private. Here is a signed police report which indicates clearly that the motorcyclist was at fault. The motorcyclist countered our request of 1,800 yuan (US$225) compensation with an offer of 1,500 yuan (US$188). Then

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5 Using the largely ineffective “complaints and letters” redress process.
he disappeared during the negotiations. There was a rumour that he had bribed local government officials for protection after he showed up in another town. What happened after that verified the rumour: The local police claimed that no party would be responsible for the accident, the injury or the damage since the site of the incident had been destroyed, and that the only way to resolve problem would be to file a lawsuit. The local government official in charge of the Three Gorges Project migrant resettlement would not help either. What am I supposed to do after all of these injuries?” The old man rolled up his sleeves to show the scars on his arms left by the accident.

“If we lost our land, the very means of sustaining our lives, who would come and help us?”

“Since we came from mountainous areas to the flat coastline, we all had to learn to ride bicycles, and traffic accidents have taken their toll. In less than a year, two of those resettled in the village Anzhuang of Yuelai Township died in traffic accidents. There are eighteen immigrant families in the area of Linjiang Township, but they are settled in nine villages, an average of two families per village. Distance and language barriers are among the disadvantages caused by this dilution of the resettled population. We are unable to decipher the local accent (for instance, mistaking “for fun” as “forgot”). We cannot sell vegetables competitively in the market. Before we were relocated here, we grew fruits and raised pigs, but now we have to learn to grow cotton and raise sheep. The government should have helped us with the necessary skills to get us started. Here, the land is salinated and the water is salty. The prickly ash trees and citrus trees which we brought here have all died. Our placement in scattered locations effectively prevents us from exchanging information and chatting with other migrants from our home villages. Don’t be fooled by the wall posters you see in our homes which the local government prepared for us. The names and phone numbers of local residents designated as mentors were printed on those posters, but none of them ever showed up.

“The government newspaper labels our relocation as ‘resettlement with development,’ and the state compensates the local government 10,449 yuan (US$1,306) for each of us in order to provide us with the capability to make a living. This state fund should be spent on building roads, improving canals, or raising fruit trees—anything that could truly help our resettlement. But so far, little has been done.

“In terms of infrastructure-related costs, the state compensation is 5,020 yuan (US$628) to the local government per resettled person. Since the house we bought was pre-owned, the allocation of this part of the state funds should be 80 percent to the buyer (the migrant) of the house and 20 percent to local infrastructure development. But the local government did not give us a penny. After collecting the state funds, the local government abandoned us like dirt. Such cold-blooded behaviour in human trafficking is completely in violation of state policy. According to government documents, state funding was made on behalf of the resettlers to compensate local governments for work, and infrastructure and development-related costs for the 59 immigrant families in Linjiang Township totalling 900,000 yuan (US$112,500)—which the township municipal leader said had all been spent. But he refused to disclose the details, claiming ‘You do not need to know!’ The relocation is government-organized and we are not job-seekers asking for help. But the local government spent the money that the state had designated for us, to build luxury office plazas for themselves,
and then turned their backs on us. Before relocation, many of us had to chop down citrus trees on our land that were still bearing fruit because the local government officials demanded "clearance." Although we were promised payment for these lost trees, we have not yet received any compensation.

“We faced so many problems, but there was so little that the local governments here were willing to do! We emigrants began to organize to help ourselves, believing that we had to go back to the Wanzhou district municipality to redeem what it had promised us.

“Co-ordinated by the former party secretary in our home village, we met a number of times to make plans, first at the home of He Laoda (Big He) and then at the home of He Dexing. The date of returning to Wanzhou was set for August 15, 2004. All but one of the 59 migrant families in Linjiang Township planned to go. We decided to travel by chartered buses at a cost of 300 yuan per person. The fee was collected by Chen Long and recorded by He Xiaotong. We departed at 4 a.m. from Linjiang (Jiangsu) to Shanghai. From there, we chartered buses to Wanzhou (in Chongqing) and stopped at Wuqiao. While we were travelling, the deputy mayor of Tailong Township supervising the resettlement program heard that we were coming back and ordered the demolition of the houses we had left in our home villages. My house was still in good condition and was not immediately threatened by flooding. It had originally been retained by the township municipal head, but now it was destroyed.

“After our arrival in Wanzhou, we rested overnight in the open space in front of the office building of the Wuqiao Migration Bureau. Next morning, the party heads in the home villages of the petitioning migrant families, the township municipal officials, and officials from the Wuqiao Resettlement Bureau, all came to work on the petitioners’, but without success. The petitioners elected six representatives, including Zhang Chaoshu (from Pumin Village in Linjiang Township), Chen Cheng (son of Chen Long, from Lizhou Village), He Minquan (from Yuanju Village) to present six points to the Wanzhou District Municipality. The representatives also delivered a copy of ‘Call for Help from Return Migrants’ to Mr. Hong, Chief of the Wanzhou District Municipality’s Resettlement Bureau.”

Old Man Chen showed me a package of photocopied materials— their “petition letter.” It expressed the heartfelt suffering of three hundred migrants from 58 households, and chronicled their mistreatment in the course of resettlement. The distortion and disregard of the state resettlement policy, and the bureaucratic mismanagement of unconcerned local government officials greatly aggravated the plight of these migrants in their settlement location. The quality of their lives had been diminished, their social contacts weakened, and their household income greatly reduced. Helpless and confused, these migrants felt as if they had been led down a dark, endless tunnel. In the letter, they asked the local government to rearrange the resettlement and pay them the full amount of the state-mandated compensation. They hoped the government would not turn a cold face to them again but would provide the help they needed.

Chen resumed the tale: “However, the local government had no interest in solving the real problems but only in shirking its responsibilities. Officials at various levels all demanded that we return to the settlement

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6 The authorities were trying to clear the land that would be flooded to reduce debris and the contamination of water with organic material, etc. The authorities may have also tried to stop the return of evacuees and did so by destroying the assets that might draw them back.

7 To negotiate or persuade the petitioners to return to the resettlement sites in Jiangsu province.
sites before any solution was even considered. Even the Haimen County Municipality had sent officials to Wanzhou. Finally, they made an offer to give every petitioner 2,500 yuan (US$310) as compensation (which was actually the state infrastructure compensation to migrants) as well as reimbursement of travel costs, but only if we departed by their deadline. Feeling helpless again, the petitioners gave in: some of them went back to Haimen, some went to other places for temporary employment, and a few decided to stay in Wanzhou."

Once again, the government had so skillfully dissolved a potential threat that the impact of this petition by returning migrants vanished like the ripples caused by a stone thrown into a pond. But the problems did not disappear. Some petitioners returned to their settlement locations, but before long they gathered again to demand a clear answer from the local authority to the requests they had submitted. Between December 2006 and March 2007, they went to the Linjiang Township government five times, without any success. Each time they heard the same answer: Though the migrants cited the state policy as grounds for redress, the local governments said they were just following provincial policies, so no complaints would be considered in either the municipality or in the provincial capital. The disgruntled migrants discussed the possibility of travelling to Beijing, the national capital, but they eventually abandoned the idea due to practical concerns.

Old Man Chen felt even more exhausted after this unsuccessful appeal to the local government in his hometown of Wanzhou. The whole family found it impossible to continue to stay in Lizhou Village, their assigned resettlement location, and decided to move back to Wanzhou. There, they rented a simple house and settled down. Five other returning migrant families bought homes for themselves. When asked about the current situation, Old Man Chen only shook his head and sighed without a word.

I interviewed many migrants and asked them what they would do in the future. Most of them replied that they did not have long-term plans as they had no idea what would happen in the future; they said they would rather take their lives a step at a time without looking too far ahead. As to where they would end up, I learned that some sold their houses in Haimen and returned to Wanzhou; one unfortunate villager sold his resettlement home to a village cadre at half of the original price of 20,000-plus yuan (US$2,500).

The Deputy Mayor of Chongqing, Yu Yuanmu, was asked about the increasing trend of return migration in the Three Gorges area. He responded that there were “four main types of returnees.” The first type is the majority, who live on the support of their relatives and friends. The second type includes those returnees who do not actually stay but continue to “migrate” to become involved in the business of transporting goods for sale. The third type consists of the homesick or elderly who come back to live in their native place, and the fourth type are those whose loved ones passed away while in the resettlement areas so have returned to live with their relatives or friends here.

Deputy Mayor Yu’s description of returnees contrasts sharply with the vivid personal experience of return migrants. Many of them believe that they have actually been “trafficked” from their native place to an unfamiliar location. Several facts support this view. First, they have been treated very differently before and after the relocation, suggesting deliberate misrepresentation of the conditions of their relocation and compensation. Second, compensation amounts to those who relocated earlier varied substantially to those who did so later, indicating an arbitrary standard of payment. Third, the media continue to tell stories of resettlement that are filled with half-truths. The “scattered settlement” policy dilutes the population of migrants to one or two
households per village, which effectively prevents them from social contact—even contact as simple as knowing the names of their neighbours—and this isolation is compounded by language barriers with the native villagers. Newly settled, they find village cadres unconcerned and unresponsive to their hardships. On rainy days, they find themselves sitting idly at home like a Buddha. The language barrier forces them to spend time learning even basic conversation. What the dilution and isolation of the resettlers does make possible, however, is the local government’s control of these newcomers, reducing the possibility that they would be able to organize to pursue their rights.

The lack of proper follow-up work by the local authorities has had the effect of weakening governmental support of the resettlement, adding to the feeling of the migrants from the Three Gorges area that they have been first deceived and then abandoned. On the critical issue of the compensation to which the migrants are entitled, the government continues to avoid giving a definitive answer. In my conversations with the migrants, the questions they ask the most are “What is the state policy on this matter?” and “Why is the financial compensation that has been provided here different from elsewhere?” When a conflict has arisen and the resettlers have requested information on the relevant laws and policies, the local governments find any and all excuses to hide the content of those policies, and thereby make the issues concerning the emigrants and their resettlement all the more confusing.

As the Three Gorges migration program continues, the government at all levels intensifies the campaign to promote “the happy spirit of Three Gorges migrants.” Throughout the media, this spirit is interpreted as the ultimate patriotism, devotion, and co-operation. The real-life situations of those who resettled in Haimen County provide a disturbing contrast: The true heroes like Old Man Chen are viewed as a threat to the society’s “stability”, and local government authorities respond to the complaints and requests of the migrants with little humanity or efficiency, but much disregard and insensitivity.

The phrase “hurt economically and psychologically” is insufficient to describe the crushing hardships of many Three Gorges migrants like Old Man Chen. It is impossible to tell all the stories of their tears and blood. Because of the government’s negligence and indifference, the suffering of individual migrants has become a growing source of pain in our society. Those who are responsible should realize that simply denying the rights of the migrants is of no help, and the use of deceptive means to evade responsibility is inconsistent with our goal of achieving a “harmonious society.” The misery of the migrants demands that society speak for them with a sympathetic voice and that every citizen work to improve their condition.

“Lost Lives: The Plight of the Migrants” is the fourth in a series of oral histories from China’s Three Gorges region.

Banned and famed Chinese environmentalist and journalist Dai Qing has organized a team of journalists to record a remarkable collection of oral histories from the riverside towns and villages affected by the Three Gorges dam on China’s Yangtze River. Three Gorges Probe is proud to bring you these uncensored, touching and often shocking stories. Those forcibly displaced by the world’s largest hydroelectric project have been denied a voice for too long. This collection gives it back.

Translation, editing and online publication of the series by Chinese author Dai Qing and Probe International has been made possible by funding from the Foundation Open Society Institute (Zug).

8 Such as financial assistance, employment, and housing.