CHINA'S SORROW, CHINA'S EMBARRASSMENT
The great relocation that failed
By Peter Lee

This is the first article in a two-part report.

The world has been transfixed by the fate of Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo, now serving an 11-year sentence for his advocacy of democracy and opposition to the Chinese Communist Party's single-party dictatorship.

However, a less-known case - the detention of investigative journalist Xie Chaoping - provides another perspective on the rise of Chinese civil society. It also illustrates the difficulties China faces in righting a wrong, even when the party's survival and the national interest are not seen to be at risk.

In August, Xie Chaoping was detained by the Public Security Bureau of Shaanxi province's Weinan City in a fit of pique over

Xie's devastating, detailed and closely argued expose of municipal corruption, mismanagement and arrogance in the execution of relocation and disaster-relief programs in southeastern Shaanxi, entitled "The Great Relocation".

Xie's detention provoked an outcry from his family and journalistic peers and publicity in the Hong Kong and Western press, and he was released after over four weeks of captivity.

After his release, Xie wrote a moving account of his detention. It shows that, even when torture and "enhanced interrogation techniques" are removed from the equation, the age-old cruelty of the jailer and the widespread indifference of the public to the routine abuse of detainees' bodies and dignity provide ample means to cow and eventually break the spirit of a prisoner.

Roland Soong translated Xie's account at ESWN:

I thought that they were blatant about enforcing the law violently. When they arrested me, they cuffed me tightly so that my left shoulder became swollen and hurt like hell. I asked them for plaster at least 10 times, but
nobody paid any attention to me.

On August 23, we took the train to Xian at the Beijing West Station. Wang Peng [one of the case officers] marched me through five waiting rooms, pushing and shoving me hard. I thought that he wanted to break down my psychological defense this way. I was cuffed to the iron gate by the ticket inspection entrance for more than 30 minutes. As we were about to board, he wanted to cuff me from behind. I said, "My arms felt like they are broken already. I won't run. Don't cuff me from behind."

Wang said that he was only carrying out his duties. I got upset and I said, "If you cuff me from behind, I am going to kill myself by ramming my head against the wall." As I said that, I took a step back and got ready. Zhu Fuli [another of the case officers] came over and held me in his arms. He said, "Old Xie, don't do that." He then cuffed his left hand to my right hand, and then we boarded the train.

[In the detention center], we work in the morning until past 11 am. In the afternoon, we were interrogated, sometimes as late as 7pm. When we return to the cell, there was no meal left. I remember skipping dinner six or seven times ... Once I came back from interrogation and everybody had already eaten dinner ... A 17- or 18-year-old boy crawled over and said to me: "Uncle Xie, you didn't eat yet? I know that you haven't eaten yet. We got two steamed buns per person this evening. I saved one for you." I took a bite and tears began to come out of my eyes. But I felt that a grown man shouldn't be crying. So I turned my head to the wall and cried.

The police did not torture me to get a confession ...

There were no prison kapos or bullies at the detention center. But the rules are that newcomers have to sleep next to the toilets, clean the toilets and wipe the floor. Wiping the floor requires the person to squat down and apply a rag to the floor. I had back problems. After I wiped the floor for four times, my back felt as if it was broken. My clothes were soaking wet. I knelt down to work. The prison guard yelled aloud: "No kneeling." I told the prison warden that I didn't want to squat, and the prison guard let me off. ...

So I have left the detention center. But I have become more fragile. I cry whenever I hear the words "steam bun". I cry whenever I think about my wife. I can never forget the look in my wife's eyes when she rushed out to see me being taken into the elevator. All the bitterness and sorrow of the world were there. [1]

Xie's detention forms another chapter in a miserable story that the Chinese government has been fruitlessly trying to bring to a close for 50 years: the disastrous aftermath of the
decision taken in 1956 to build a dam across the Yellow River at Sanmen Xia (Gorge) on the border between Shaanxi, Henan and Ningxia provinces.

The Sanmen Xia fiasco is exhaustively documented in the book that provoked Xie Chaoping's detention, his *The Great Relocation*.

The relocation referred to the moving of 287,000 peasants from the site of the future reservoir of the Sanmen Xia dam and power station to northern Shaanxi and Ningxia.

By 1964, the central Chinese government realized the recently completed dam - hailed at its commissioning as a monument to Chinese socialist construction - was a disastrous mistake.

Some 1.5 billion tonnes of silt poured into the new reservoir every year, rapidly filling it and dooming the dam to obsolescence as a flood-control measure within a decade. The government repurposed the dam as a power station and lowered the elevation of the reservoir surface by 32 meters. Since the unflooded reservoir area - hundreds of thousands of mu (1 mu = 666.7 square meters) of prime farmland - was still reserved as a flood basin, the Shaanxi government saw no difficulty in permitting state enterprises and the People's Liberation Army to set up nominally temporary farms in the reservoir area.

There was one problem: the displaced peasants wanted their land back.

In the 1950s, the area near Sanmen Xia seems to have been a virtual arcadia, with bumper harvests of cotton and wheat and incomes far above the national average.

The government had encouraged relocation with the fervor usually reserved for preaching the Crusades under the slogan "Relocate one family to succor a thousand families". Crucially, local government officials promised that, based on central government assurances, the peasants' living standard in the new lands would be "at least" as good as that they had enjoyed in their original homes.

Led by activists and patriots, the peasants inhabiting the future reservoir site voluntarily decamped to new residence areas arranged by the government. Instead of a new Eden, in the loess plateau of northern Shaanxi and the deserts of Ningxia, the migrants found poverty, neglect, disdain and death.

One of the first advance teams dispatched to Ningxia discovered their "farmland" was a waterless wasteland and their "homes" five-foot deep roofless pits dug into the barren earth. On their first night, they experienced the horrific Ningxia windstorms that flung up sand and stones and not infrequently buried and suffocated victims unable to take shelter.

The next morning, 34 of the 35 near-hysterical members of the advance party deserted the venture and started a double-time march through the Ordos Desert back to Shaanxi. By a miracle, they didn't die of thirst in the desert, but several members of the party starved to death as the group split up and begged its way home.
When the ragged survivors made their way back to Shaanxi with their stories, most were discovered, detained and returned to Ningxia.

Ningxia was undoubtedly the worst destination for Sanmen Xia relocatees. The virtually insurmountable obstacles to agriculture were compounded by the nationwide famine of the Great Leap Forward years and many relocated peasants starved to death.

But northern Shaanxi was not much better. Bereft of water and capital for improvements and allocated the least desirable land by the unwelcoming and impoverished locals, the Shaanxi relocatees huddled in loess caves carved out of the hillsides, scratched a meager living out of the barren soil, and resentfully recalled their previous, prosperous life along the banks of the Yellow River. Risking interception, detention and return, individuals tried to sneak back to the reservoir area by the thousands.

The relocated peasants then learned their precious land was being occupied by large-scale state farms and farmed by soldiers and city folk. The sense of betrayal engendered by the false promises of good land in northern Shaanxi and Ningxia was compounded by awareness of the futility of their sacrifice and rage at the loss of their lands.

This mix of anger, entitlement and mistrust spawned one of the most remarkable mass movements in the history of the People's Republic: the movement to return to the lands of the unflooded reservoir basin, known in Chinese as the "fan ku" ("return to reservoir") movement.

From the mid-1960s until the 1980s, under a succession of able, committed and risk-taking leaders, the Shaanxi "migrants" (or "yimin" as the relocated peasants came to be known) pushed the envelope of permissible dissent and mass action to the limit in a series of high-stakes confrontations with the local government.

Virtually every spring, thousands of migrants poured into the reservoir area to seize and plant the land they considered to be theirs by right.

As the years wore on, the campaigns became more organized and effectively executed, with propaganda, medical and security teams accompanying thousands of farmers and their "commanders" into the farmlands in banner-waving, slogan-shouting caravans of farm tractors and marchers. Within the reservoir zone, they planted crops, built shantytowns and roads and muscled their way into state farm buildings and facilities for use as command centers.

The migrants were bitterly opposed by the local government, which mobilized local cadres and successfully encouraged the state farm employees to organize and fight back as the encroaching peasants occupied land and buildings, leading to a series of bloody battles.

Finally, the most able leader of the migrant "commanders", Liu Hairong, achieved a
double victory.

In 1985, by organizing a second mass march to sweep ancestral graves in the reservoir area during the Qingming festival, he was able to sustain the migrant presence in the reservoir area until harvest (in an interesting piece of farmland etiquette, whenever the migrants were driven out of the reservoir area, the victorious state farms would plow under the crop instead of harvesting it themselves, recognizing the principle that the crop belongs to those who planted it).

In the same year, most remarkably, he was able to broker an alliance between the migrants and disgruntled workers at the state farms, many of whom were rusticated city dwellers sick both of farming and the incessant conflict and anxious to return their home towns. The dismayed local rulers were treated to the spectacle of 2,000 of their putative allies, the farm workers, besieging the provincial government offices in Xian for seven days demanding the right to return to their urban homes.

With the migrants entrenched in the reservoir area and the forces of opposition crumbling, Beijing summoned the governor of Shaanxi to Beijing and announced a settlement.

Crucially, while treating their antagonists in the local government with defiance and studied insolence, the leaders of the migrant movement had always carefully represented their struggle to Beijing as a land rights movement, not a political activity, and maintained continual contact with the central government and party through petitioning visits known as "shang fang".

In 1984, during the tenure of China's relatively accommodating premier, Zhao Ziyang, a delegation led by state councilor Sun Wei conducted an exhaustive 40-day investigation of the condition of the migrant peasants in their miserable resettlement localities. Sun reportedly cried and apologized for the government's failings during the trip. Since the Chinese oligarchy is not given to spontaneous tears and apologies, it is tempting to speculate that the government had already decided to yield to the migrants' demand for land within the reservoir area.

In 1985, under a State Council directive, the civilian and military farms were to give up 20,000 hectares of farmland to 150,000 returning migrants, based on the calculation that 0.13 hectares of land per person was needed.

Instead of marking the end of the migrants' ordeal, the agreement was in many ways only the beginning.

In retrospect, it was perhaps unwise to put the execution of the State Council directive in the hands of the local governments that had opposed the return of the migrants so bitterly.

The local leaders and cadres reacted with cold fury to their defeat.
The local government took the 20,000 hectares of land from the farms, but limited the number of returning peasants to 75,000 and only gave them about 6,600 hectares of land, a considerable portion of it marginal and floodplain land, and far less than 0.13 hectares per capita on average. Rights to farm the other 13,300 or so hectares of land were apparently contracted to middlemen on highly profitable terms.

The migrants' well-developed sense of injury was confirmed both by this land grab and the ongoing abuses of the local government administering the expenditure of hundreds of millions of yuan of funds allocated by the central government for relief, resettlement and redevelopment of the reservoir area.

Starved of land, capital, aid and political influence by their local government, the migrants now form a despised and impoverished underclass in their own homeland.

As a result, for the past 25 years the government of Weinan - which administers the seven counties in the reservoir area where most of the migrants reside - has taken center-stage in the Sanmen Xia drama.

If the Yellow River is China's sorrow and the Sanmen Xia dam is China's burden, then the city government of Weinan can be considered China's embarrassment.

Over the years, the Weinan city government has, by its own admission, squandered millions of dollars of funds earmarked for the migrants on unprofitable investments, a failed mineral water factory, unrecoverable loans, fraudulent real-estate ventures, influence-buying, and what could be called simple, honest graft. At the same time, it has ruled over the migrants with a steely antagonism and high-handed security presence that, in terms of character if not degree, would be easily recognized by residents of the occupied West Bank.

To a certain extent, Weinan owes its relative impunity to the awareness - even the self-fulfilling prophecy - that any attempt to bring the Weinan city government to book for its corruption and mismanagement would provoke a destabilizing explosion of outrage and activism by the aggrieved and organized migrants.

As Xie Chaoping discovered during his research, even before his own detention, the local government may be extremely lax in exercising its fiduciary responsibility to the migrants, but it is fanatical about controlling the flow of information to the central government and the media concerning its misdeeds.

In one instance, Xie reports the city government responded to the accidental inclusion of
an unfavorable reference in an article in the Weinan Daily by immediately ordering the seizure of the offending issue from news stands and the reprinting of an entire replacement issue with the offending article sanitized.

The first article Xie Chaoping wrote concerning corruption and the migrants, in 2006, was spiked after a Weinan "firefighting team" visited Beijing and deployed its assets at the Ministry of Propaganda to kill the story. Another firefighting team allegedly stopped another story with a payment of 100,000 yuan (US$15,000).

Public knowledge of the shenanigans in Weinan can be credited largely to the indefatigable whistle-blowing of one man - Li Wanmin.

While a functionary in the Relocation Affairs Bureau of the Weinan city government, Li has written over 600 reports alleging malfeasance by the Weinan government in its handling of migrant affairs and in allocating state funds over the past three decades. He sent these reports to the Central Party Procurorate in Beijing, the State Council, the Ministry of Hydrology (as China's dam-building ministry it has jurisdiction over the reservoir area), provincial government bureaus, and news outlets.

The central government, mindful of the responsibility for migrant welfare that it had acknowledged since the 1950s and presumably appreciative of the services of a local informant as enthusiastic, informed and heedless of consequences as Li Wanmin, responded with investigations.

With remarkable tenacity, the Weinan government was able to endure these probes and achieve whitewashes that, for the most part, acknowledged the transgressions but excused them on the grounds that they were either insignificant or understandable spasms of enthusiastic incompetence as China lurched into the era of economic reform.

Reporting at the national level on abuses in Weinan had apparently turned into something of a cottage industry by the early 1990s, albeit not publicly. In his book, Xie reveals that leading Chinese newspapers, loath to wash China's dirty linen in public, reserved these stories for their "nei can" or internal reference editions, distributed only to government, military and party offices.

In late 1996, the dam broke, as it were, with the open publication of one of Li Wanmin's broadsides in the Workers' Daily with an afterword by journalist Ding Guoyuan.

Li - whose struggles with the local government had assumed the dimensions of a Sicilian vendetta - purchased 4,000 copies of the relevant issue of Workers' Daily, added a cover letter written under a pseudonym, and delivered it to the legendary commander of the migrant movement, Liu Huairong. Liu called a mass meeting, read the article and letter to his largely illiterate followers, and proposed a mass letter-writing campaign to bring Weinan's abuses to the attention of the powers that be.

The Weinan government, understandably terrified that these revelations would provoke
another round of debilitating and embarrassing confrontations with the incensed immigrants, sent cadres and public security personnel into the migrant areas at an expenditure of 370,000 yuan (per Li's information) in a quixotic effort to seize all the Workers' Daily issues they could find.

Li Wanmin was also detained.

The circumstances surrounding Li's detention are described in detail in chapters 40 and 41 of Xie's book. However, most versions available online suppress these chapters, presumably because they show the local public security apparatus in a distinctly unfavorable light, both in terms of extra-legal abuses and bone-headed incompetence.

Weinan's anxiety concerning potential migrant militancy is indicated by its decision to detain Li at a military base several dozen kilometers outside the city, instead of a downtown office that could be surrounded by angry demonstrators.

The public security interrogators, though apparently eager to do the bidding of the Weinan city government in neutralizing Li, were unable to come up with an offense with which they could charge him.

Apparently, there was no law that could be brought to bear against Li for delivering newspapers that might incite a disruptive outburst of rage by thousands of aggrieved peasants. After several days of inconclusive argument that failed to establish any legal or evidentiary basis for his incarceration, the public security interrogators shifted to a program of sleep deprivation, psychological abuse, and physical deprivation. These tactics were perfected during the "brainwashing" of American prisoners of war during the Korean War and subsequently guided the development of post 9/11 US interrogation techniques at Guantanamo and other overseas detention facilities - presumably in an effort to break Li and get him to confess to something that would destroy his credibility and legal and political standing.

Before these measures could achieve their inevitable result, the Spring Festival holiday intervened and Public Security focus and discipline drifted.

One foggy night, with senior staff back in their comfortable homes celebrating the New Year, Li's guards nonchalantly neglected to escort Li to the privy. Li walked through the base, climbed a tree, hopped over the wall, eluded the subsequent manhunt, and made it aboard a train to Beijing and the editorial offices of Workers' Daily. Within a few hours, the Central Procuratorate had telephoned instructions to Weinan that Li was not to be mistreated or interfered with.

Indeed, Li is still employed in the Relocation Bureau to this day and still sends out a steady stream of reports and letters.

Li Wanmin's case provided an interesting precedent for Xie Chaoping's own incarceration.
Indeed, Xie seems to have modeled the distribution of his book on Li's provocative example of distributing the Workers' Daily to the migrants.

After his release, Xie revealed to the Southern China Daily that it was originally intended that a "financial big shot" had agreed to pay for printing a copy of *The Great Relocation* for every migrant in the reservoir area free of charge (by now, a not-inconsiderable 100,000 people). The big shot subsequently backed out, stating that he needed the capital for his business projects. [2]

Xie embarked on a lengthy effort to find a publisher for the book, but numerous outfits, apparently feeling outside pressure, indicated they could not publish the book either at all or in its present form. Suspecting that his cell phone was tapped, Xie switched to using public phones and office phones in his efforts related to the manuscript.

Finally, Xie was put in touch with the editor of a small magazine registered in Shanxi (the other province, not Shaanxi), The Spark, who agreed to issue *The Great Relocation* as a supplement with Xie personally bearing the printing costs and arranging distribution.

Less than perfect cooperation and candor may have shadowed relations with The Spark. In an open letter after the affair blew up, the editor indicates that he thought Xie was printing 500 copies; it appears that as many as 20,000 copies (reports differ) were printed.

When the book finally emerged in August, the printers shipped it to Weinan for distribution. A batch was delivered to none other than the famous local gadfly Li Wanmin, who planned to hold them for pickup by representatives of the migrants.

Somehow, the local government got wind of the situation, seized Li's copies and, in a reprise of the Workers' Daily sweep dispatched - in Li's words - large numbers of public security cadres and officers, township cadres and staff of the cultural inspection team - to enter the homes of migrants to seize their copies of *The Great Relocation*. [3]

The inevitable justification for the seizure was that the book would "incite the migrants to raise a rumpus" and "revealed state secrets".

Xie Chaoping had started his career writing for a publication of the Central Procuratorate, a state organ that performs a function similar to a US grand jury, determining if charges should be filed in criminal cases. Therefore, he felt confident that he was not in legal jeopardy.

However, he had not fully reckoned with the political influence of Weinan, its ability to extract cooperation from police and bureaucrats in other jurisdictions, and its willingness to ignore the letter of the law to engage in destructive harassment.

The Spark had apparently neglected to submit the supplement to the relevant authorities in Shanxi for review prior to publication, an administrative lapse; however it was charged
with a criminal offence, "running an illegal printing operation", and shut down.

The Weinan Public Security Bureau seems to enjoy a brotherly accommodation with a police station in suburban Beijing and had no difficulty dispatching officers on several occasions to the capital to confront and harass Spark editors and take depositions.

On August 19, to everyone's shock, the Weinan "special case squad" was - with the assistance of the suburban Beijing police station (which was happy to leave its jurisdiction, enter the city and help arrest Xie and toss his apartment) - able to enter Xie's apartment in Beijing, handcuff and detain him, transport him back to Weinan, and accuse him of "illegal business activities". The squad chose to construe receipts for delivery of books to migrant representatives free of charge as evidence of improper book sales.

In dealing with the Weinan Public Security Bureau, Xie lawyered up and deployed his knowledge of legal procedures, the precedent of Li Wanmin's interrogation and, possibly, his ongoing relationships with the Procuratorate. He also benefited from the energetic support of his wife and favorable attention in the state media, which reported on his detention, another indication that the central government continues to take a critical interest in Weinan and its problems.

He was released on September 17, after almost a month in detention under miserable and demoralizing conditions.

Presumably, the Weinan Public Security Bureau realized it had no case and would have to release Xie sooner or later, but was happy to hang onto him for a month to demonstrate its stubborn thuggishness to other potential critics.

The Spark, however, has suffered serious financial losses as a result of its shutdown and may not survive.

It is difficult to come to a conclusion concerning Xie Chaoping's case.

Maybe the glass is half-full: his book is in wide circulation on the Internet, albeit often in a truncated form; after a nasty, 30-day ordeal, Xie was able to escape the clutches of the Weinan Public Security Bureau.

Maybe the glass is half-empty: 50 years after the Sanmen Xia dam was built - and 25 years after the central government made a commitment to put things right - the migrants are still impoverished, marginalized and voiceless, and Weinan city seems to be a law unto itself.

Xie Chaoping still cries when he hears the words "steamed bun" - but not as much as before.

**PART 2: Damned to failure**
Notes
1. In Xie Chaoping's Own Words, EastSouthWestNorth, Sep 24, 2010.
2. Click here for text (in Chinese).
3. Click here for text (in Chinese)

Peter Lee writes on East and South Asian affairs and their intersection with US foreign policy.

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http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/LJ13Ad03.html