"It is a test-case", Professor Yu had told me before I went to visit Tiger Leaping Gorge. "The plan to build a dam in this scenic spot is an opportunity for local people; NGO's, the Chinese media and everyone who's concerned with the current decision-making mechanism have their voices heard. The struggle here will have an impact on the future of dam construction in China".

The people of Wuzhou village are certainly willing to seize this opportunity. They've been protesting against the project ever since it was brought to their attention. One of these protests a few months ago resulted in violence. A county official was pushed into the river by some angry farmers, and the story made its way across the region reaching even the foreign media. The villagers are now determined to keep fighting against what they see as a threat to their well-being and traditional way of life. "It is our home" Says Ms. Li, a local minivan driver, as she navigates her vehicle on the narrow road, among rice and corn fields across this incredibly fertile and serene valley. "We will not be pushed out of here by any power company". The people of the valley have also petitioned to the authorities in Beijing to stop all preparation works in the region. More than 8000 people have signed the petition.
The Jinsha River valley, in Yunnan province, Southwest China, is one of the most fertile and most scenic eras in the country, known as "The three parallel river region" an area under United Nations Protection due to the high levels of biodiversity, where the Jinsha (the upper Yangtze River), the Mekong, and the Salween Rivers run in close proximity, creating breath-taking scenery. The spectacular Tiger Leaping Gorge in the upper part of the valley is one of the narrowest and deepest canyons on earth, with more than 3000 metres between the Peak of Jade Dragon Snow Mountain, and the white water beneath. In the gorge, at the point where according to legend, a tiger once leaped over the Yangtze's narrowest point, hordes of tourists take photos from both sides of the river, one of Yunnan's most attractive tourist sites. The atmosphere is that of peace and calm among these awe inspiring cliffs.

But possibly not for long; Plans for a mega hydroelectric dam threaten to submerge the gorge and the whole valley underwater. The dam will cause the lost of much farmland, and will force the resettlement of more than 80,000 people of ten different minority groups. "This dam" says professor Yu Xiaogang, founder of Green Watershed, a Kunming based NGO, "will effect the whole Yulong mountain area, recognized as a class A nature reserve by the Chinese government and given a UNESCO world heritage site status in 2003".

"It is going to be a very big dam" explains professor Yu, an environmentalist who was recently awarded the prestigious Goldman prize for his work to protect rivers in China. "It's almost the size of the controversial Three Gorges Dam". In fact, the water storage capacity in Tiger Leaping Gorge reservoir will be even bigger. The impacts will be social and cultural no less than environmental. It will affect a unique area where different minority groups have lived for thousands of years, including Tibetans, Yi, Bai, Miao, Lisu, Pumi, and the indigenous Naxi people, for whom the valley is their heartland. The region also contains many important cultural relics, especially in the town of Shigu."

"My problem with the dam" Yu continues "is that the decision making process isn't transparent. China Huaneng Power Company, the firm responsible for this project, isn't fulfilling the legal obligation of environmental and social assessment. Everything is being done in secrecy".

But Yu also sees this as an opportune situation. "Our aim isn't just to stop one dam. You may stop one project but a thousand others will come, all over the country. What we are trying to do is influence the decision makers and achieve a serious, long-lasting change in the overall approach to dam building in China. In this respect, the proposed dam being so massive is actually an advantage. It will take time to draw the plans, approve them and start preparation work, so we still have time to enlist public support, and get the local people involved. In the Jinsha valley, many people are very involved, and want to participate in decisions regarding their own future. We also try to work through the media. In Beijing especially, many journalists have good knowledge of the environment and rural issues, they're also becoming less and less restricted by the government. This is a positive trend". Yu admits however, that whilst he hopes for a shift in the government
policy for future project, the construction of this particular dam is probably now unstoppable.

At the village of Longpan, just downstream from the gorge, residents seem to have very little control of, or involvement with the events. "They (the engineers coming to perform surveys) have been coming here repeatedly for ten years" says Mr. He, a farmer and restaurant owner. "They stay in the government building; they go down to the river and we are not allowed to go anywhere near them. They never talk to us or explain what they're doing. No government official ever came to talk to us about the plan, about us having to move and where we will go". When asked what he will do if forced to leave the place, He just shakes his head. "I don't know where we can go. Rumours say we will get land up in Zhongdian prefecture, but you can't grow rice there. My family has been growing rice here for over a thousand years".

What waits ahead?

Where will they go? That is the most pressing question in regard to this project. "The preliminary resettlement plan we were shown is absolutely terrible" Professor Yu says simply. "Local residents who saw it thought it was a joke. According to new regulations passed in August 2006, a reasonable resettlement plan has to be made and approved, with participation of the resettled communities, before the damming plan itself is approved. Green Watershed and other NGO's are now trying to negotiate a better plan with the government"

A Lijiang based environmentalist, who asked to remain anonymous, unfolds the options for resettlement for the Jinsha valley farmers: "In Lijiang, the urban centre of the region there is already an extensive seizure of farmland for urban development, and the remaining land is sandy and unfit for cultivation. They'll probably have to go to the other side of the river, into Zhongdian prefecture. This is a high altitude terrain, much less fertile than the Jinsha Valley. What's' more, in these areas, every piece of arable land is already being used for agriculture. The resettled people will have to settle for an inferior land only partly fit for cultivation. Moving them there will also put more pressure on the already dwindling forests of Yunnan.

So the choice of these now relatively affluent farmers is to become marginalized urban residents with no land, or try to make a living in a harsh mountainous area, with fewer resources. It is the same choice millions of Chinese were facing before as a result of the country's "dam fever". More than twelve million people have been displaced in China, where 85,000 dams, forty-six percent of the worlds' total, have been constructed.

"Statistics show that, of those twelve million displaced people, more than fifty percent still live in abject poverty, sometimes decades after they've been resettled" argues professor Yu. "My own experience while researching the social impact of the Mawan dam (also in Yunnan, on the Mekong River), revealed the wretched living conditions the ten thousand displaced people there were subjected to. They lost land, and sometimes even got to the point of a food shortage. Their communities are breaking down as young
people are forced to leave the place to make a living in distant regions. There are health problems and, due to these conditions, a widespread phenomenon of selling daughters to outsiders for marriage or prostitution". This bleak future, many activists and local people fear, is what waits ahead for the residents of the Jinsha valley.

If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it!

A group of tour guides sit in a new café inside the old town of Lijiang, one hundred and fifty kilometres from the gorge; they all strongly object to the dam. "Tiger Leaping Gorge is one of the main draws for tourists in the area" states Mr. Mu, a hiking guide, "and tourism is the main industry of the prefecture".

"Tourism has brought wealth to this region" agrees his friend, Mr. Li. "The standard of living is on the rise even in the villages. Many of us live well because of the growing interest from both Chinese and international visitors in our environment. In both Lijiang and Zhongdian prefecture, and in the gorge area itself, there are now a number of companies offering hiking trips to this unique and spectacular mountain area. What people are doing here is an example of inside-the-community eco-tourism development that should be imitated, not destroyed. If the current line of tourism development works for the benefit of all, why try to intervene in the local economy with such a massive project"? They all express great worries for their own livelihood if the dam is to be built.

So why indeed is a dam planned, and who will benefit from the project? Almost everyone agrees, it won’t be the local residents of the Jinsha valley.

China's energy consumption has soared in the last decade, following the country's rapid economic development. Most of China still largely depends on coal for its energy supply, which causes the ever present smog over most Chinese cities, and ever deteriorating air quality. Growing dependence on oil also puts China in an uncomfortable position of dependency on Middle-Eastern and Central-Asian oil. Beijing sees hydroelectric projects as a way to answer the countries needs with clean, renewable energy, but environmentalists argue that dams, in the long run, are even more harmful than coal, causing loss of arable land and forest, and increasing the risk of earthquakes. It is even more hazardous in an area such as northwest Yunnan, where Tiger Leaping Gorge is located, a seismically sensitive expanse that has been affected by earthquakes many times in the past.

Apart from generating electricity, there is another important reason behind this dam. It is supposed to help solve the siltation problem that is threatening to block the crown of China's dam industry – the gigantic Three Gorges Dam, 1500 kilometres downriver. "The problem with large scale dams" argued journalist Ma Jun in his influential book "China's Water Crisis", is that they make it almost inevitable that more dams will be built, just to keep the existing ones functioning". The Tiger Leaping Gorge dam, stated Ma, is mainly being proposed to support the Three Gorges dam. Huaneng, the company planning the Tiger Leaping Gorge dam, is also one of the main shareholders in the Three Gorges Dam project.
Provincial governments in China love large infrastructure projects which give them quick and large tax revenues from big east coast corporations. A popular saying in the country goes: "Build a bridge and you'll get silver, build a road and you'll have gold, but construct a dam and you'll be counting diamonds". With subsidies from Beijing declining each year, local governments such as Yunnan, seek to attract large tax paying companies, often against the best interest of the province's own residents.

"In the central government there are many very supportive officials, who try to better decision making mechanisms and advocate more participation of NGO's and local residents in decision making" says professor Yu. "It is a lot more difficult with the local government". Everywhere in China it is evident that, while Beijing has passed many environmental laws in recent years and the National People Congress has called for the adoption of a more "Green" approach to sustainable development, provincial governments still push for development at all costs, disregarding environmental risks and human rights alike.

Professor Tim Oaks, a social geographer from the University of Colorado, who has spent many years doing research in Western China, explained in an interview last year that most of the large infrastructure work going on in western China stands to benefit the urban, wealthy eastern part of the country, whilst the rural areas in the west continue to be impoverished. "One still cannot deny the fact that the eastern regions stand to benefit a great deal from western development and one shouldn’t assume that the “Go West” campaign (The plan to develop China's western provinces) will shift the balance of regional inequality in China that much. I think that as long as the campaign focuses on infrastructure, energy, and the intensification of natural resource extraction in the western regions, then the eastern regions will continue to get more of the benefits". He said.

As the engineers continue their work and preparations are made to start construction, the locals in Wuzhou vow to keep fighting, and the residents of Longpan wait for their future to be decided. One cannot help but conclude that the Tiger Leaping Gorge Dam is, as professor Yu put it, a test-case. It is to become a test for Chinese NGO's and the media, for the participation of common people in decision making processes, and of the government regarding of public opinion. Above all, it is a test for Beijing's control over its profit-hungry provincial governments, and of the seriousness of declarations about benefiting the rural areas of China. In Tiger Leaping Gorge is will be shown whether in China there is really to emerge, as premier Wen wishes, a "New Socialist countryside" or whether everything is still up for grabs for the rich and powerful.

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