Report from the Nu River: “Nobody has told us anything.”

Wang Yongchen

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In the Nu River valley in southwest China, exploration work is under way for a string of hydroelectric dams. Wang Yongchen visited the region to hear what local people have to say about the controversial project.

A debate has raged for about three years now on whether a cascade of 13 dams should be built on the Nu River, sections of which are located in a UNESCO World Heritage site. Proponents have argued that it would be a waste of the river not to harness its turbulent water for hydroelectricity -- and some have even claimed that 70% of local people like the idea, as they hold out hope that the dams might help lift them out of poverty.

Opponents, however, insist that the Nu River -- one of only two major rivers in China that remain undammed -- should be left undisturbed. They argue that building the dams would pose a serious threat not only to the environment in an area of spectacular beauty, but also to the region’s unusually rich cultural diversity. A multitude of minority nationalities have long lived in harmony with each other, and with the river and the mountains, in the Nu valley.

In late August 2005, an open letter to the government signed by scores of Chinese organisations and individuals called on the authorities to release environmental-impact documents and hold public hearings on the Nu River plans. Many months later, the petitioners and the public still await a reply.

Meanwhile, an army of engineers has descended on the valley, leading survey teams that are exploring the proposed dam sites. The teams are drilling on the riverbanks, drilling into the mountain cliffs and drilling down into the riverbed. Rock debris is strewn along the banks of the river, roads are suddenly blocked by mud-rock flows, and the river itself has turned from green to yellow. It is as if a grand campaign has been launched aimed at striking it rich and turning the Nu River water into oil and all the activity now occurring in the valley is just the beginning.
This past Chinese New Year [January/February 2006], I travelled to the Nu valley for the fourth time. Over a two-week period, I interviewed people in 100 households that would have to move if proposed dams, such as Liuku, Yabiluo, Bijiang and Maji, are built. Survey and drilling work is already under way at those sites.

The debate surrounding the Nu River has focused on the projects’ likely impacts on the environment and on local cultures. Another issue is how the people who would be affected feel about them the projects, and whether building the dams would actually help raise living standards in a very poor area. I asked residents the following questions:

1. Are you aware that you will be relocated?
2. If so, where did you get this information?
3. Have you been consulted by the government or any relevant authorities, given that your lives are likely to be affected by the dam building?
4. Do you know anything about compensation terms?
5. Do you have any specific concerns or special difficulties related to resettlement?
6. Do you think building the dams could help lift you out of poverty?

When I was sorting through the material I’d gathered, five issues stood out.

**Faith in the government**

Firstly, I was struck by the trust that people living in the Nu valley have in the government, and how dependent they are on the authorities. Regardless of their background, nationality, age or occupation, they really do listen to the government and obey authorities’ instructions.

It has been said that the county seat of Gongshan will be moved to Bingzhongluo, a scenic village that is one of the attractions in the upper reaches of the Nu River, about 45 kilometres upstream of the proposed Maji dam. I interviewed Liu Jian, a Nu villager in his 60s who runs a small family inn there with his Tibetan wife. He speaks five regional languages.
These homes would be flooded by the Maji dam

**Wang Yongchen:** Has the government told you anything about the dam project?

**Liu Jian:** Nobody has told us anything about it. This is a government plan, so local officials should know something about it.

**Wang:** Has the government consulted you about anything?

**Liu:** No, never. If the government did that, there would be a big problem.

**Wang:** But you are a delegate to the county People’s Congress. Can’t you convey the views of the locals to the congress?

**Liu:** No, I can’t because I have no education.

**Wang:** Why does education matter?

**Liu:** Because I can’t write, and there’s little point in just speaking about it.

**Lack of information**

Secondly, it had not occurred to me that the residents of Xiaoshaba, a village near the Liuku dam site, would know nothing about the right to information, even though a sign in the village calls it “a model village of democracy”. When asked, “Are you aware that you will be relocated?” and “If so, where did you get this information?” almost everybody responded the same way: “Rumours”.

News reports about the plan to build dams on the Nu River have been widely circulated both inside and outside China for almost three years. The villagers of Xiaoshaba were told at a public meeting that a dam would be built on the river, that their farmland would be flooded and that no new housing construction would be approved. “Since that meeting,” one of the villagers said, “the resettlement authority has measured my house four or five times, but I have no idea where I will be going or how much compensation I will receive.”

Despite the uncertainty, local people express support for the dam project because they assume it is a state initiative.

In Xincun village, several kilometres upstream of the proposed Liuku dam, I spoke with Xu Zhaoyang, who will be moved if the dam is built.

**Wang:** Do you think you should be consulted if the dam is built?

**Xu Zhaoyang:** Yes, I do. But nobody comes and tells us anything, though engineers and workers are busy here, doing surveys and drilling.
Wang: Are they doing this in preparation for dam construction?

Xu: Exactly. They’ve drilled seven or eight holes along the riverbank.

Wang: I’ve heard that about 70% of people who would be affected by the dam are in favour of it. Is this true?

Xu: No, not at all.

Wang: How many people do you think want to see the dam built?

Xu: As far as I know, most people dislike the idea -- apart from the lazy ones, who would be keen to fritter away compensation money on eating and playing.

Wang: Do you mean that farmers dislike the idea?

Xu: Absolutely. Farmers like farmland, just as factory workers like machines.

Nobody from the government or the project authority listens to the affected groups, or asks them what they think or what they want. It has been argued that there is no need to tell the people anything because the final decision to build the dams has not yet been made. So why is the project authority drilling and conducting surveys, before the final decision has been made? Why hasn’t the project authority conducted any research into the impacts of building the dams on the 50,000 people who would be moved, and on their culture, traditions and futures lives?

Years of uncertainty

Thirdly, I had not known the extent to which the villagers of Xiaoshaba have been living in a state of anxious uncertainty since they were told about the construction of the proposed Liuku dam four years ago.

There are 105 households in Xiaoshaba village. During my visit, I noticed cracks in some houses -- even right over people’s beds. Villagers were reluctant to make repairs, however, knowing that their houses were likely to be demolished. Young people had put off weddings because no new house-building was allowed, and the local people like to hold their wedding parties in their new homes. Their houses and fields are being measured and remeasured, and they see the exploration holes being dug near their homes, but apart from that, they know nothing.

I visited about 30 households in Xiaoshaba, and found that what villagers are most concerned about is where they will go if they are moved. They all told me that they would rather build their new houses on the rice paddy up on higher ground than relocate to an unfamiliar area. I spoke with Li Yingming, He Xuewen and Ba Fugui, who are all Lisu, about why their farmland is so important to them.

Li Yingming: We don’t know anything about whether the dam will be built or not. What we are most concerned about is whether compensation money will actually reach us. We’re also worried about whether we’re just following in the footsteps of the villagers who were relocated for the Manwan dam and who now work as garbage scavengers. We understand that dam building is part of national development, but we also need to have our livelihoods, and to survive.

Wang: You were first informed about the dam plans several years ago, so do you have any idea at this point how to get the compensation money?

He Xuewen: We know nothing at all about that. We know that our houses and fields will be flooded, but we don’t know the rate of compensation for each mu [1/15th of a hectare] of farmland, let alone for bamboo, tung oil, banana and other fruit trees.

Wang: Do you think you will be hired as labourers on the project when it starts?

He: Generally speaking, no. We’ve suffered a lot from the uncertainties. We haven’t been allowed...
to build new homes, and we don’t want to put fertilizer on our fields [because they may soon be flooded]. It’s time to plant [the rice] paddy now, but we don’t dare buy rice seed because we’re not sure if we should plant at all this year. However, if we don’t buy the seed now we run a risk, because it won’t be available at the market much longer.

**Ba Fugui:** I’m worried that the government will promise us the earth before our resettlement, but that we won’t get anything from them after we move. My main concern is that we’ll be cheated by officials.

**Wang:** Why do you say that, given that you haven’t even moved yet?

**Ba:** We’re worried that we won’t be adequately or properly compensated. We’ll have nothing to complain about if we do get all the money -- but until we have the money in our hands, we’ll feel anxious about it.

**“We cannot live without farmland”**

Fourthly, both the mainstream media and proponents of the Nu River project argue that building the dams will not only generate needed hydroelectricity but also help lift a desperately poor region out of poverty. Whether the dams can actually do this is the subject of heated debate, but those most directly affected by the proposed projects had a clear and direct answer.

I spoke with Lu Xin, a villager who would be moved for the Maji dam, and with Li Yingming and Wan Lingzhi, villagers who would be resettled for the Liuku dam.

**Wang:** Do you believe you will benefit from construction of the dams?

**Lu Xin:** No, I don’t think so. Only the hydropower station will make any money from the project.

**Wang:** Wouldn’t having dams here also generate tax revenue for the government?

**Lu:** Probably.

**Wang:** Could that extra tax revenue benefit local people?

**Lu:** No way.

**Wang:** Why not?

**Lu:** As you see, local officials never even show up here.

**Wang:** People outside the Nu valley say that building dams here will provide local people with a golden opportunity to climb out of poverty.

**Li Yingming:** We hope so. We trust the government, and we hope the officials will do a good job of distributing the resettlement money, which would help raise our living standards.

**Wang:** How can the officials do a good job on that from your point of view?

**Li:** They should let all the people involved know the compensation terms, and show us how to protect our own interests. We would trust them if they did that. But so far, no public meetings have been held, and we’ve been told nothing about the compensation terms or any other resettlement issues. And officials always take reporters to visit the same family over and over again.

**Wang:** People outside the valley are saying that building the dams will make you rich. What do you think about that?

**Lu:** How will we survive if we’re moved far away and have no farmland?

**He:** Ordinary people lack the civil rights and the rights to express their opinions that are enshrined
in the constitution. And so we ordinary people live on tenterhooks all the time.

**Wang:** Do you think building the dam will make you rich?

**He:** Farmers love land. We cannot live without land. What ordinary people living in the Nu valley can do is farm the fields. So if we are not given reasonable compensation for the fields that will be flooded, we would prefer that the dams not be built.

Lu Xin came up with his own proposal for a reasonable compensation package, suggesting that each person moved for the dam should receive a monthly stipend equivalent to US$56 for the rest of their lives, with the amount to rise along with the cost of living. Villagers in Xiaoshaba who will be affected by the Liuku dam have expectations of compensation ranging from US$6,250 to US$10,000 per *mu* (1/15 hectare) of farmland to be flooded. They insist that is their bottom line.

**Skeptical engineers**

The frank comments of technical personnel working on the surveying and drilling work also surprised me. A middle-aged man, who introduced himself as the manager of a team doing preparatory work for the Maji dam, told me that doing these geological surveys was his "iron rice bowl" -- his secure job -- and that he and his team had been doing the work for many years. While drilling at the Nu River dam sites, he said, they had been astonished to discover a different geological layer every 10 metres. Although his team had traveled almost everywhere in China for their work, he had never seen such a special geological case. "The Nu truly is rare and valuable world heritage," he said.

Another proposed dam site, the Songta, is located in one of the most spectacular and deep gorges on the upper reaches of the Nu. An engineer in charge of the survey and drilling work knew that many experts were calling for a halt to the dam plans. He said the Nu is called the "Angry River" because of the roar of its water, but that everything in this magnificent landscape will change if the dams are built and the raging river becomes a placid manmade lake. He would feel deep regret, he said, if his country lost the free-flowing Nu.

He also said that no country in the world had built a 300-metre-high dam in an area where the top geological layer consists of such a thick accumulation of debris from landslides and mud-rock flows. For this reason, two locations selected as possible sites for the Songta dam turned out to be unsuitable and were abandoned. Now two other potential spots are being explored. The engineer said he was worried that yet more splendid gorges and cliffs -- which are a dangerous work environment -- would be damaged during the extensive search for sites.

After our visit to Xiaoshaba village, I learned that a number of people living in the Nu valley had migrated to the Simao area, about 500 kilometers to the south, but that many later returned to the valley. I wondered why they had not wanted to stay in Simao, where living conditions are regarded as much better. Mu Jiawu was one of those farmers from a village in Luzhang township, Lushui county. He and his family went to Simao in 1997 and left in 1999.

**Wang:** Why did you move to Simao?

**Mu Jiawu:** Life is hard here. We don't have enough to eat because we have only one *mu* of land per head. The government encouraged us to leave, saying that living conditions were much better in Simao.

**Wang:** How many households went there at that time?

**Mu:** Seven or eight.

**Wang:** And how many of those households have returned so far?

**Mu:** Three.
**Wang:** Why did you come back?

**Mu:** The government promised to give us something and do something for us, but they did nothing. We earned only 173 yuan [US$21] a month, but the four people in my family need at least 125 yuan [US$15] to buy 100 jin [50 kilograms] of grain a month, so that left little money for clothing, let alone medicine and so forth. We were unable to live there on just 173 yuan.

**Wang:** What did you do there?

**Mu:** We grew coffee.

**Wang:** Could your children go to school there?

**Mu:** There was a school there, but we couldn’t afford it. Even the fee for pre-schoolers was 300 yuan [US$37] per pupil, which was too much for us.

**Wang:** What could you do after your return?

**Mu:** I farmed land belonging to my wife’s brother before our migration, but the land was taken away from us after we left. So now we have nothing, and no choice but to try to reclaim wasteland on the slopes.

**Wang:** How’s your life up on the mountain?

**Mu:** The biggest problem is that we have to transport water from down below, about a kilometre away. We use a horse to do it.

**Wang:** Have you heard anything about the construction of a dam on the river below?

**Mu:** My house would not be affected, but the land that other people have hired me to farm would be. What I am most concerned about is that we will not be allowed to live here any more and will be required to move. They measured my house last summer.

**Wang:** Do you believe the government can do anything for you?

**Mu:** We have no drinking water so the eight households on the mountain have pooled 2,000 yuan [US$250], and asked the local government to build a pipeline for us. Two months have gone by but they’ve still done nothing for us. We’ve already lost confidence in the local government.

I also interviewed another person, San Guicai, a 53-year-old Lisu farmer.

**Wang:** Why did you go to Simao that time?

**San Guicai:** Because we were having a hard time living here. My family had five or six mu of farmland, but got little grain from the land.

**Wang:** Did you go there with the first group mobilised by the local government?

**San:** I didn’t go with the first wave of migrants. My family went with the second group.

**Wang:** What problems did you encounter there?

**San:** We earned only 180 yuan [US$22.50] a month but there are five people in my family. I couldn’t afford to send my three kids to school there. Another problem was that the government had promised to undertake development projects there, but nothing came of that plan after we got there.

**Mu:** Higher authorities ordered a halt to the development program.

**Wang:** Do you lease farmland down below?
San: Yes.

Wang: What will happen if the land is flooded?

Mu: We’ll lose our livelihoods once again.

A law with little impact

In February 2006, the State Environmental Protection Administration issued “provisional guidelines on public participation in environmental impact assessments,” which can be seen as an important step toward allowing citizens to participate in environmental protection in China. This was the first document focusing on public participation issued by a ministry of the State Council, and also the first official document in China to legitimise the public’s right to participate in the field of environmental protection.

Few people living in the Nu valley know anything about the environmental impact assessment (EIA) law, however, let alone the recently released guidelines on public participation. While I was conducting interviews in Bingzhongluo, I asked a young man if he was happy with the idea of the Gongshan county seat being relocated. He said he was open-minded about things because he had travelled widely around the country, but that he would much rather look out onto his village landscape than onto a new town.

My trip to the Nu valley raised a number of questions in my mind that I continue to ponder:

1. What changes are about to take place in the lives of the people of the Nu valley?
2. When will the villagers of Xiaoshaba, who have been forbidden to build anything for the past four years, be allowed to put up new houses?
3. Since the government has announced a people-centred approach to development, why have the authorities focused solely on “exploring” the mountains, while showing no similar interest in learning more about the lives of the local people?
4. Will we still see in the future a free-flowing Nu that continues to change colour with the seasons?
5. And will that “dream” of turning Nu River water into wealth equivalent to oil come true?

The author: Yongchen Wang is a Beijing-based journalist and founder of the environmental group Green Earth Volunteers. This article is an abridged version of one originally published on www.threegorgesprobe.org, which monitors the impacts of (and alternatives to) China’s big dams and water projects.


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