China plans to exploit the power of Southeast Asia's last great wild river by building a giant staircase of dams stretching from Tibet down through Yunnan province. A region of unique natural and cultural wealth is under threat.

This article, by Shanghai-based Swedish journalist Ola Wong, first appeared in Ordfront Magasin. Translated from Swedish by Johann Berggren. Photos by Eva Wang.

Engineering teams, all dressed in orange, can be seen dotted at regular intervals throughout the Nu River valley. With their tools clanging like bells amid the roar of explosions, they are digging deep into the green hunchbacks of cultivated terraces and hilly forests. Their heavy machinery is scraping big wounds into the mountainside.

Down in the gorge, the winter river is changing colour, with milky white rapids meeting the jade green of stillwater pools. Some of the gorges in the Nu River valley are 3,000 metres deep. If the staircase of dams planned for the river is built, the rapids will be silenced and the valley turned into a sterile network of water channels, project opponents say.

The Nu River valley contains representatives of 25 per cent of the world's animal species, and more than half of China's, including endangered species such as the snow leopard and the red panda. This stretch of the river runs parallel to the Lancang (Mekong) and Jinsha (Yangtze) rivers. The nature here is so exceptional that UNESCO has put the Three Parallel Rivers on the UN world heritage list.
But with cascades of dams planned for all three rivers, the dramatic canyons are destined to become power generators for the rich east coast under China's program aimed at sending electricity from the west to the east. The Huadian power company is banking on the Nu River project to produce more electricity than the Three Gorges dam on the Yangtze River.

The biggest dam in the Nu River series is planned for the nature conservation area of Maji. Engineers we meet from the drilling teams and an official working with the project tell us that the dam will be 300 metres high, which would make it one of the tallest in the world. It would drown the valley's old growth forest, and turn the river into a giant bathtub.

The villagers, who belong to the Lisu minority, say that all they have been told is that they must not disturb the workers. They want to continue living in the valley, but no one has asked them what they want. In all, 50,000 people will have to be relocated when the river is harnessed.

The population of the Nu valley is a mosaic of 13 minority groups. They are dirt-poor and do not speak Mandarin and so, for all practical purposes, would be helpless outside the valley. Exactly what has been planned for them is a government secret, as are the potential environmental impacts of the dams.

When the National Development and Reform Commission approved power giant Huadian's application to build 13 dams on the Nu River in 2003, it was widely expected that this isolated river valley near the Burmese border would swiftly become another casualty of China's heavyhanded power development. Hydropower is a symbol of national strength for the Communist Party, which has built more than 80,000 dams since coming to power in 1949.

But this time, China's burgeoning environmental movement has allied itself with scientists and journalists in a bid to keep the river wild. Together with environmental officials, they convinced Premier Wen Jiabao to suspend the scheme in 2004. He said the project needed further scientific study before any final decision could be made.

The project has been at an apparent standstill since then, as the secret decision-making process grinds on. But things don't look good for the environmentalists. Media reports have suggested that four of the planned dams will soon get the go-ahead.

"We're counting on beginning construction on the first dam, at the city of Liuku, this year," Zhang Jianxing, vice-chairman of Huadian's Nu River department, said earlier this year. "All we're waiting for now is the formal approval from the NDRC."

Meanwhile, Burma and Thailand have made a deal to dam the Salween (as the Nu is called downstream) at Hat Gyi in Karen state. That dam will be ready in five or six years, Thai energy authorities say. For Beijing, this is another argument not to preserve the Nu River.
'Without land, we have nothing'

One of the threatened Nu valley villages, Xiaoshaba, not far from the Liuku dam site, is a collection of mud houses, a couple of newly built concrete and ubiquitous barking dogs. A farmer restrains a guard dog and invites us into his home.

"The leaders have tricked the villagers into believing they'll be rich when the state buys them out," says the farmer, who we'll call Meng. "So now everybody supports the project. But without land, we have nothing."

The village government will take a 30-per-cent of whatever the state gives for the land, Meng says, and this is why he thinks they are so anxious for the dam construction to get going. He reads aloud a letter he intends to send to Chinese state television.

"I'm an ordinary man with a certain amount of education. It is being said that this dam will raise our living standards, but I don't think that will happen. And that's because the state is corrupt, from the village level up to the highest leaders.

"I've seen what has happened to others who have been moved, like the people who lived near the Manwan dam. If we face the same fate, I won't accept it. There will be a revolution! If the people are oppressed long enough, it will spark an explosion. Remember, that was how Mao won the anti-Japanese war. He had the support of the grassroots. And we, the people of the Nu River valley, are so oppressed that it could happen again!"

Meng is not alone in contemplating an uprising. China's public security bureaus handled 87,000 public order disturbances Ð protests, demonstrations, riots - in 2005, up 6.6 per cent on the previous year. Premier Wen warned earlier this year that the widespread seizure of land from farmers is threatening social stability. China's cultivable land area is diminishing at an alarming rate. And of the 16 million people who have been forcibly resettled for dam construction in China, 10 million are still living in poverty.
'We need energy'

After meeting Meng, we visit the home of one of the local village leaders, Mi Quanrong. But when Mi opens his door and sees a foreigner with a notepad, he instantly assumes I am an inspector from the UN World Heritage committee. Pulling a cigarette from the pocket of his short-sleeved shirt, his face cracks open in a wide smile, and the cigarette is soon swinging wildly as the propaganda phrases flow.

"At the moment, the Nu River is like a virgin with her purity intact. But if this country is to develop, we need energy or we'll be stuck forever at our current level."

He assures me that these thoughts and opinions are his own, that he isn't just repeating things he has been told. Then he proceeds to declare, word for word, the official line.

"The water level will not rise higher than 500 metres. The pristine forest will not be flooded! Developing the Nu River is the only way forward!"

Environmentalist Yu Xiaogang is one of the leaders of the campaign that has emerged to save the Nu River. In 2004, he took Mi Quanrong and other villagers on an educational fieldtrip. They visited the farmers who were moved for the Manwan dam, which was completed on the Lancang (Mekong) River in 1996. They saw the Manwan villagers scraping a living as garbage scavengers, and heard about the broken promises they had endured.

"Oh, that's old stuff!" says Mi Quanrong, waving both hands dismissively. He is convinced that this dam will make him rich.

Asked how he feels about his village being flooded, he says that "as a citizen of the People's Republic of China, you have to obey the government. And, as a member of the Communist Party, I have to follow the leaders faithfully. The Communist Party made great sacrifices in liberating China, and that's why every inch of this country belongs to the party. The party's aim in developing the Nu River is to help the people."

Mi is counting on receiving 600,000 yuan (US$75,000) for his 10 mu (two-thirds of a hectare) of land, but that sum is pure fantasy. According to a Chinese power industry official, he is more likely to receive up to
30,000 yuan (US$3,750), the equivalent of 30 years' income.

"I trust you'll convey the message to the United Nations that the dam must be built at once!" Mi says.

As the daylight streaming into his home shimmers in the whites of his eyes, his gaze darts between me and the photographer. And I wonder if Mi Quanrong really believes his own words.

"As you know, several tributaries of the Nu River have already been dammed," I say. "And I met some people upriver who received only 500 yuan (US$62) in compensation when they were evicted."

"Impossible! I don't believe it," Mi says.

---

Tibetan monk from a temple near Bingzhongluo, upstream of the Maji dam site. *Photo: Eva Wang*

*Life was simple*

About 240 kilometres from the home of Mi Quanrong flows the small river of Dimalou in Gongshan township. Dimalou is one of 11 tributaries of the Nu River that have already been fragmented by dams. Until recently, a 32-year-old Tibetan we'll call Sertan lived with his family beside the river.

"Court officials came and told us that if we didn't move voluntarily, the bulldozers would run us over along with our houses," he says.

So they moved, abandoning everything: their three-storey house, their farmland and pastures. Now the family lives in a one-storey concrete house provided for them outside of Gongshan. Above their bed they have hung a postcard of the Virgin Mary with a bared, burning heart. Like most of the inhabitants of the Nu valley, Sertan is Christian.
The Tibetans used to be the richest people in the area. "Life was simple," Sertan says. He and his neighbours gathered medicinal herbs and mushrooms that they sold for a good price to the east coast. He also earned good money selling butter from the family's cows.

With a monthly income of more than 1,000 yuan (US$125), he was making more than a factory worker on China's relatively affluent east coast. Here in Gongshan, where almost half the population lives on less than 668 yuan (US$84) a year, Sertan was considered wealthy.

But all that ended when his village was razed. As compensation for their losses, the family received 20 bottles of liquor, a carton of cigarettes, a box of tea, a smaller house, a television set and 500 yuan to cover moving expenses. The Dutch who tricked the native Indians out of Manhattan island couldn't have done a better job.

Without pastureland, they had to get rid of their cows. And so, to make ends meet, they joined a forestation program that gives them the right to 150 kilos of rice and 20 yuan (US$2.50) a year. That will last for eight years, after which the plan is to chop down and sell the bamboo they have started to grow. But the bamboo they were given is of a type that won't thrive in the area.

The dam has turned Sertan from an independent and prosperous farmer into a day labourer dependent on subsidies. His income has been cut in half, to 500 yuan a month.

The room falls silent as we watch TV. A travel program about Rome is on, and a blond journalist with a generous cleavage twirls: "After dinner, the Italians enjoy sitting in a trattoria over a bottle of wine."

"I wish they'd given us a tractor instead!" Sertan blurs out.

Asked whether he had been back to visit his old home, he says: "It's a construction site now. It pains me to see it." And the Dimalou, the small river they used to lived beside, is now no more than a brook.

Arguments for and against

The dam proponents' main argument is that China needs energy to boost the living standards of its people. Without it, the current power shortage will worsen, threatening jobs and economic growth. More than a
Million Chinese were forced from their homes for the Three Gorges project, whereas only 50,000 will have to be moved from the Nu River valley.

"Each person moved represents 1,000 tons of coal a year," says Zhang Boting of China's association of hydropower engineers. "It would be a great waste not to harness the Nu River."

Two-thirds of China's energy comes from coal and, as result, seven of the world's 10 most polluted cities are in China. Thousands of workers die every year in coal-mining accidents. Burning coal and oil also contributes to global warming. More hydropower would make China less dependent on oil. And with the profits from the dams, the state would have more resources to spend on environmental protection. That, in any event, is the argument of the provincial authorities.

According to an internal report from the investigation bureau of Yunnan province, more than 6,000 species of plants are found along the Nu River. But most of these grow at altitudes above 2,000 metres and will not be directly affected by the dams, which will not be built in the world heritage site itself.

Dam proponents argue that forest companies and farmers have already done so much damage to nature in the Nu valley that it doesn't matter if the river is dammed. The same report cited above says that the goal of the project is to enrich the poor, and it recommends that the region's diverse cultures be protected by moving minority groups to "cultural protection areas."

Critics argue that China's hydropower sector is overheated, and that the power shortage will soon turn into an overproduction problem.

"We are not against hydropower in general," says Ma Jun, author of China's Water Crisis . "We just want an open, democratic decision-making process where all stakeholders get a say. Only then can we look future generations in the eye, as we now sacrifice our natural heritage." Ma and other opponents of the Nu River dams want the projects' environmental impact report to be made public and open hearings to be held. And they say the law is on their side.

The Nu River campaign represents a milestone for China's fragile civil society. In a country where the Communist Party rules unchallenged, their networks and their calls for public consultation and participation in the decision-making process are unprecedented.

Their strategy is to force China's leaders to live up to their own promises about greater transparency and the rule of law. They have gained the support of officials at the State Environmental Protection Administration, who want to keep at least one Chinese river flowing freely. SEPA has organized debates between dam supporters and opponents, but the state media has censored coverage of the issue, and it remains a sensitive topic. SEPA declined a request for an interview earlier this year, saying "the time isn't right."

Ma Jun is one of 99 individuals and 61 Chinese organizations to have signed an open letter last August urging the government to save the Nu River. They wrote that China has already exploited its water resources more than any other country and yet continues to invest heavily in large-scale dam-building, aiming to double hydropower capacity to 250,000 MW by 2020.

The natural beauty of Yunnan province faces paying the steepest price. Only two wild rivers remain in China today: the Yaluzangbu in Tibet, and the Nu. In all of Southeast Asia, only one wild river remains: the Nu/Salween.

Some Chinese rivers are regulated by up to 300 dams. Local authorities ardently support their construction because it provides opportunities to demand state funds, which means opportunities to embezzle money. Infrastructure projects can also improve local productivity statistics, thus enhancing the political career prospects of local officials.
But "the beauty of China's natural rivers will be lost, and the affected people in southwest China's mountainous areas may fall into dire poverty," the letter writers warned.

At the same time, China is using energy inefficiently -- wasting it, for example, by building uninsulated houses in Shanghai. To really combat poverty in the Nu valley, investment could be made in sustainable tourism, as has proved successful in other parts of Yunnan. Moreover, the protesters argued, "since the Nu River flows through an area of frequent earthquakes, landslides and mudslides, the safety and economic feasibility of dam construction is also uncertain."

According to the plans, more than 20,000 people are to be forcibly resettled into the world heritage area when the city of Gongshan is abandoned. UNESCO has expressed "strong concern" about the Nu River project.

Jing Feng, a program specialist at UNESCO headquarters in the Paris, says that in February 2005 the Chinese authorities "reassured the world heritage committee that the central government has not yet approved the project. But we're constantly hearing that work related to the proposed dams is continuing in the world heritage area."

Ola Wong is a Shanghai-based journalist from Sweden. This article, based on a research trip from Liuku to Gongshan in January 2006, originally appeared in Swedish in Ordfront Magasin (April 2006).

Article not to be reproduced without permission. Direct inquiries to: wong@kontinent.se

Photos by Eva Wang, a Shanghai-based photographer from the United States.

Photos not to be reproduced without permission. Direct inquiries to: evayfwang@gmail.com