



Remembering Miyun Reservoir

密云水库区

By Wang Jian

Translation by Madeleine Ross and Fang Li

Below is the third in a series of Beijing water oral histories, as told to Wang Jian by 60-year-old Huang Deyu and 59-year-old Guo Shulian of Miyun County. Wang Jian is a Beijing-based water resources expert.

BACKGROUND

Huang Deyu and Guo Shulian originally lived in Ganhechang Village to the east of White River (*Bai He*) in Miyun County. For generations the family had been farmers but, after 1968, they were employed as administrative staff at the Miyun Reservoir. Having now retired, they have moved into accommodation provided by the Beijing Water Bureau in Chaoyang District's Zuoqia Village.

PLACES

Ganhechang Village east of White River
(*Bai He*)

Stone Dyke Road (*Shi tang lu*) to the west of
the White River

Tidal River (*Chao He*)

The Miyun Reservoir Dam (*Shui ku daba*)

Twin River Village (*Liang he cun*) in
Zhaixiang County

Old Man Stream Village (*Xi weng zhuang*)

Horse Grazing Valley (*Fangma yu*)

Valley of the Feng family (*Feng jia yu*)

GUO SHULIAN (WIFE, 59 YEARS OLD)

There are two rivers flowing into the Miyun Reservoir: the northwestern branch called White River (*Bai He*) and the northeastern branch called Tidal River (*Chao He*). The reservoir gets all its water from these two rivers. When I was young, we lived in Ganhechang Village on the east side of White River, about one *li*, (half a kilometre) from the river. We had a big courtyard with a gate front and back, three large south-facing rooms and a cow shed in the yard. My parents were farmers and we depended on the land for our livelihood.

In those days the villagers went down to the river to wash clothes; bang, bang, bang, beating the clothes clean with sticks on a piece of flat ground, near the water. It wasn't like today where every household uses a washing machine and washing powder. After finishing the washing, everything was put out to dry on large rocks and, later, any loose sand on the clothes could just be shaken off. The river was very clear and not very deep so it was possible to wade across to the eastern side easily or talk to someone on the opposite bank. The grownups chatted as they

rinsed clothes in the river while the kids played nearby. Turning stones over, we were able to find little green crabs, two or three inches long or sometimes little tadpoles. We always took a little tin can with us so we could take them home to keep. Wow, it was such fun!

All the kids could swim because we lived near the river and we used to go jumping about in the river instead of having a nap at lunchtime. When our teacher found out that we were doing this we were strictly forbidden to go. There was no need for him to ask who had had an afternoon sleep or who had been swimming, he just had to scratch our arms lightly with two fingers and he could tell, because doing so left two well-defined white imprints.¹ Denying it was useless, so we just had to accept our punishment, which was to stand in the corner.

In those days there was another thing we were afraid of – camels. In the 1950s there were no roads in the area, and we had to get food, such as oats or soybeans, to the village grain market on camels. The camels wouldn't put up with being pushed around and if they got annoyed they'd just spit in our faces. It was said that camel spit would leave a whole lot of dark freckles on girls' faces so, although we all loved playing round the camels, at the first sound of them getting ready to spit we'd run off.

In 1958, when I was eleven, we heard that a dam was going to be built and that we would have to move. Someone loaned us two horse carts so that we could move house. I was very young then and felt thrilled to see the horses and carts, not understanding why the grownups' faces looked so gloomy. I just remember the courtyard being full of clothes all hung out to dry and my mom saying, "Shulian, could you bring the clothes in for me?" I replied, "They're not dry yet, let's wait until we get back." Mom said, "Wait? Wait for

1 Teachers and parents, in China's rural areas in particular, use this simple and popular test to determine whether children have been swimming or not.

what? You silly kid, we're leaving, we'll never be back."

Where were we moving to? The first time we moved to Twin River Village (*Liang He Cun*) in Henanzhai Township, Hebei Province, which was a good 30 *li* (15 kilometres) away, and at about the same altitude. It was only much later that I realized we actually became refugees because of the dam project from that time on. In those days we were all rather naïve, and whatever happened to us, happened. We felt that the government was doing everything in the best interests of the ordinary people, so there weren't any "resistant households" then. If we were told to leave, we left, if we were told to go somewhere, we went. Then, without knowing what happened, our homes were just gone. Or possibly the adults knew what was really happening but the kids didn't understand.

The village we came from, and where our family had lived since my grandfather's time, was in a valley in the mountains. Low-lying with fertile soil, anything we planted, like millet, sorghum, corn, sweet potatoes, chestnuts or pears, grew well. Where we lived we had our own courtyard, but in the new place we had to share the landlord's courtyard. The five of us had been resettled into a temporary work shed where we had to also share a kitchen with the landlord – we weren't happy about it and neither was he. It wasn't just our family; everyone else had to do the same. The older people had found it very hard to leave and many became ill, some even became depressed. They had left because they were told to, without the authorities showing any concern for them. The land in the new area was not up to much and because no resettlement compensation was paid for several years we all ate in communal dining halls of the people's commune. I don't know why, but the Miyun Reservoir wasn't filled immediately, and after a few years quite a lot of people moved back to their original areas. We also returned after three years only to find that our old house and courtyard had been stripped bare. The best we could do was to gather up a few planks of wood

and some tiles to put up a makeshift shelter from the wind and rain next to a stretch of remaining wall. In those days the neighbours all helped each other.

When the Miyun Reservoir began filling up in 1963, the government built some homes for resettled people in the valleys of the area to be dammed – North Ravine (*Beiyu*) and West Ravine (*Xiyu*). We moved to North Ravine where there was no river and there were no camels. We had moved from flat ground to a place which was about the same height as the top of the dam wall and felt we were nearly in the sky. At an elevation of about 158 metres, we had mountains on three sides and water, the Miyun Reservoir, on the other, with roads all around the new area. Our home was on the mountainside, quite a distance from the reservoir. It was delightful to hear the gurgling sound of running water, the rustling of leaves in the trees and the call of cuckoos all day long in spring when the mountains were covered with fragrant pear blossom. In summer, we could keep cool relaxing under the trees

land with big rocks and sand everywhere. Even though we were near the reservoir, we were living too high up to be able to use the water for irrigation, and just had to rely on the elements to grow drought tolerant crops, like sweet potato or millet. After the move, lots of families had no land and had to rely on buying low cost grain from the government.

I recall that when there was a lot of rain in 1964, many people rowed up into the ravines to plant grain and fruit trees thinking that they might be able to harvest something at least, but if they couldn't, it didn't matter. That's when the water level was at its highest, coming right up to the threshing grounds, and making us go around it to get anywhere.

In the 1980s, I heard that the areas of *Shitang* and *Hexi* were completely submerged. The authorities had decided to keep the reservoir at a very high level in order to provide water to the darlings in the capital and, with a volume of three billion cubic metres of water in the reservoir, many places were inundated. All at

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while knitting or stitching shoe soles, with the reservoir right in front of us when we looked up from our work. We had well water to drink and on summer nights we could see the sky and count the stars from our beds. The darkness of the night sky made the stars especially bright. The air was good there; beautifully cool without any mosquitoes. It wasn't like the city where it is overcast all day long.

But, just as before, the ordinary people were really poor and it was impossible to plough the

once, 40,000 *mu* (1*mu* = 1/15 hectares) of land around the reservoir disappeared, but there were no fewer people and everyone still had to eat. Life became more and more difficult. We became extremely poor when water was put into the reservoir because we could do nothing to earn a living except grow drought resistant crops like sweet potato or millet.

Later on, there was a new regulation in the cities requiring all the areas which had benefited from the dam should accept their share of the



poor people who had to be resettled because of the dam. It was also decided that there were too many people living around the reservoir and so they then had to move again. The policy at the time was called “solving a range of problems with a single solution.” When the food store was knocked down and the school was removed there was nothing left to do but move. Our family moved house once again in 1995, but this time the government policy was better and accommodation with a room for each person was promised. Two hundred families from the areas in North Ravine and West Ravine ended up leaving, and only 40 families stayed.

HUANG DEYU (HUSBAND, 60 YEARS OLD)

The dam occupied a really huge area. As far as I know, 54 villages and 200,000² people were moved in order to build it. After the dam was built and the reservoir filled, many swamps were created in the upper reaches making the soil very fertile and springy to walk on, just like walking on carpet. Crops grew well there, waterfowl and other birds stopped there and many wild birds looked for fish to eat there in winter. Downstream there were no longer any floods after the dam was built; in *Shunyi, Tongzhou, Sanhe, Ninghe, Fengwang, Tangshan* and all the way to *Tianjin*, flooding problems became few and far between. I remember that under government policies of the time, any regions that were going to benefit from the dam all had to provide free labour for its construction and therefore the volunteers who built the dam were all recruited from those areas. One year I led a group of workers who were building the 66-metre-high dam wall which had 302 steps. Workers had to climb up and down all day, each person carrying up rocks of 20 - 30 *jin* (1 *jin* = 1/2 kilogram) to complete about four to five square metres of dam wall. And do you know what they were given to eat at lunchtime? Only two sweet potatoes; there was simply nothing else.

² According to official estimates, 220,000 people were resettled to make way for the Miyun Reservoir.

Key personnel and people with any technical knowledge all stayed on the job, becoming employees of the city’s Bureau of Hydrology. That was how, in 1969 when the water regulation dock at Miyun Reservoir was being built, Shu Lian, my wife, was engaged as a warehouse storekeeper in the main water management team for the city’s Bureau of Hydrology.

One night, while on duty at Miyun’s Zhangjiafen Water Management Station³, I went outside to check things and my hair stood on end – there was a flood! The river which had previously been 40 to 50 metres wide had suddenly turned into a terrifying one to two hundred metre roaring torrent.

At the time my job was to survey the water flow. How did I do this? A thick steel wire cable was strung between the two banks of the river with a boat fastened to it. Carrying the water velocity measurement equipment, I would pull myself across the river in the boat, testing the velocity of the current as well as collecting sediment. From that I could work out the volume of the water flowing into the reservoir as well as the amount of silt. That sort of testing was very dangerous and if the steel wire cable broke because of the force of water, it just broke. A cable had once broken and a boat washed away after a heavy fall of rain in the early 1970s. Fortunately there was no one on it that time.⁴

As the water level rose behind the Miyun Dam, the reservoir became a sea of green; if the water level fell, the broad strip of land between the high and low water level marks was totally bare and nothing at all would grow there. As soon as the water level dropped, the wetland dried up and many plants simply died for lack of water. It went back and forth between wet and dry. Fish had to go to the upper reaches of the White River to spawn, but once the dam wall was built it

³ Huang Deyu was on the staff of the Miyun Reservoir Administration Department.

⁴ Needless to say, Huang Deyu did not take the measurements the night of the roaring torrent.



blocked off their migration route and they were unable to go up there any longer. So they all died at the dam wall with bellies full of eggs. You can't tell me that those fish did anything to bring that on themselves.

Then, for several years, fish farming was carried on in the reservoir using net cages – a business which expanded to include 74 *mu* (1 *mu* = 1/15 hectares) of cages of African carp. Well, then it was discovered that fish farming in that way was causing even more pollution

into the water a little way and pick out two big fish, tuck them under their arms and go. That was the most fish I've seen in my entire life. Although our work unit told everyone to get some, we just couldn't manage to get them all and with the fish all heaped up like that in the sun, we ended up with a pile of stinking dried fish.

At the beginning of the 1980s, large scale tourism around the reservoir began. Busloads of people were brought in and big amusement

Because of the reservoir, we lost the homes that we all miss so much.

than the tourism industry would have done. It was equivalent to 20,000 to 30,000 people all dumping their sewage into the reservoir. I found this information quite convincing, because if you looked at the opposite shore of the reservoir the water was clear, whereas on this side where the fish farms were, the water was sometimes green and sometimes a murky black. After that, the city government passed a law prohibiting fish farming and the net cages were all dismantled, which was a tragic blow for the fishermen.

After the 1976 earthquake, water was continuously released from the Miyun Reservoir for three days.⁵ We stretched a huge net below the dam and although we didn't catch much to begin with, by the last day the water was as thick as porridge with fish and they flowed out like that for the whole day. There were so many that we didn't even want them, all about 30 centimetres long, all floating on the surface of the water like tree leaves. People could just reach

parks were built on embankments at the edge of the reservoir. Tourists went for pleasure cruises on tour boats and lots of people went there to swim. It was really lively and exciting with the newly built holiday resorts, hotels and restaurants, as well as training centres for the tourism industry and groups of people everywhere having little barbeques. I heard later that the city government banned it because of the pollution. Now you can't even visit the dam by car, it has all been cordoned off with wire fencing.

In the nearby region of Horse Grazing Valley (*Fang ma yu*) and Feng Family Valley (*Feng Jia yu*) the peasants started up iron ore mines, carrying out so many explosions that the mountains were laid bare with rocks lying around everywhere. Mining carts followed one after another, taking the ore to Xuanhua from what I know. The dust created by the mine explosions made everything filthy, in some places becoming dangerously slippery after rain and, in other places, silting up the river beds. If the wind blew it was like a sand storm because of the amount of soil in the air. They say that the silt has choked the reservoir and that mining is no longer allowed as the ecological effects are too serious.

⁵ Here Huang Deyu is referring to the Tangshan Earthquake, which occurred in the Tangshan, Tianjin and Beijing area in 1976 with a magnitude of 7.8. More than 240,000 people were killed. Water was released from the Miyun Reservoir for safety, just as the Zipingpu Reservoir was drawn down after the May 12, 2008 earthquake in Sichuan province.



I haven't been back to Miyun for ten years. The last time I was there I noticed that there wasn't nearly as much water and the tops of many little hills were protruding from the water. Now one can even drive by car to our old village, *Ganhechang*, which was once under water, and corn is being grown in many places in the reservoir...

Because of that reservoir, we lost the homes that we all miss so much. Older people, in particular, shed so many tears over the loss. They say that in those days small organizations complied with larger ones and individuals did what was good for the collective. If the government asked us to move, what could we do? You might ask where all our fellow countrymen from the 54 villages went. Well, some are still living around the reservoir. When we moved for the last time in 1995, they said that "the regions that benefit from the dam should accept resettled people," so quite a lot of people went to *Shunyi* and *Tongxian* counties and possibly other places. Some were sent to the headwaters as forest rangers, others were taken on by the city authorities in coal mining, metal casting, spray painting, road building and other dangerous kinds of jobs associated with geological work.

AUTHOR'S COMMENTARY

The Miyun Reservoir is one of Beijing's main sources of potable water, located in Miyun County, 80 kilometres northeast of downtown Beijing. The original purpose of this large-scale feat of hydraulic engineering was flood prevention, electricity generation, agricultural irrigation, and aquaculture. It has a catchment area of 15,788 square kilometres and a maximum storage capacity of 4.375 billion cubic metres. [Editors' Note: Beijing municipality consumes about four billion cubic metres of water annually.]

With Beijing's undiminished expansion and fast-paced economic development since the 1980s, there has been a gradual day-by-day lowering of the city's underground aquifer so that more

surface water has had to be used as drinking water. From 1985, the Miyun Reservoir had the important responsibility of providing the capital with drinking water, in the amount of 1.17 million cubic metres of water everyday. By 1999, the Miyun Reservoir was supplying 490 million cubic metres of water to the capital and was Beijing's only source of surface water.

In order to secure Beijing's water supply, people resettled to make way for the Miyun Reservoir area have been forced to move a number of times, with some still living around the reservoir. To build the dam, farmland and houses were requisitioned and the more than two hundred thousand people resettled experienced substantial difficulties. Even though they all went along with the government's resettlement plans, compensation has been very slow getting to the right people.

Since the Miyun Reservoir is so essential for dealing with Beijing's water shortages, the city should provide appropriate assistance to the people who were forced to move, to help relieve the difficulties they have encountered. Not nearly enough has been done. Only in the 1990s were any measures taken to help the affected people, after 30 years of procrastination. People only live a total of a few score years after all!

MY HOME AND WATER: A PEOPLE'S ACCOUNT

Beijing, once famous for its sweet spring water and clear-flowing rivers is now infamous for its polluted canals and dried up riverbeds. *My Home and Water: A People's Account* provides a rare uncensored glimpse of life and water in the ancient capital of Beijing and surrounding areas – as told by longtime residents.

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