“Returning” Three Gorges migrants face a number of challenges

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Liu Bai’s Prologue

Dachang is an ancient town in Wushan County, Chongqing Municipality, notable as the only well-preserved historical site in the Three Gorges area. “Totally relocated and rebuilt with original appearance,” much of Dachang’s ancient architecture was dismantled and reconstructed in a bid to save it from submersion by the Three Gorges Dam. Half the population of Dachang, some 17,600 people, were relocated outside of the Three Gorges reservoir region to make way for the dam. The first group of migrants from Dachang left nearly 11 years ago but a number of questions remain. How did these migrants fare? What do they do for work and what are their living conditions like? These questions are of real concern for the many people who have closely monitored the movement of people in the Three Gorges reservoir region.

In April 2012, I travelled to the new town of Dachang with the above questions in mind. However, I was greatly shocked by what I saw and heard, because most migrants had returned to their birthplace, and had left the resettlement sites outside of the reservoir area. For example, according to incomplete statistics, in Hekou Village (of Dachang Town) 110 migrants in Group 1 have already returned to their former homelands, 122 in Group 2, 41 in Group 7 and 73 in Group 8. That is to say, around 70% of migrants who were relocated originally from Hekou Village in Dachang have returned to their original places of residence. Similarly, 67 out of 74 migrants originally from Xingsheng Village, who were relocated to Heshan in Guangdong (Province), have also returned.

However, after their return to their birthplace in Dachang, these migrants have become very

1 The “group” is the lowest administrative level in rural China, below the Village Committee. The town government is a higher authority, but still below the county government: the administrative hierarchy in rural China is (from bottom to top): group-village-town/township-county/city-prefecture/city-province/autonomous-region/municipality.
poor people without housing and land. With no permanent residence registration or hukou, no medical insurance and no income, they now endure a miserable plight of poverty and suffering.

WHY I RETURNED TO DACHANG: Wang Renhui

Wang Renhui is 67 years old this year. Eleven years ago, when he was 56, he moved with four other family members, including his mother (more than 80 years old), from Group 8 of Hekou Village in Dachang to Branch 1 of Huayanghe Farm in Susong County in Anhui Province, about 250 km away from Dachang. Classified under the “relocating people in nearby areas on higher slopes” category, Wang’s home faced flooding from the Three Gorges dam reservoir when filled to its normal pool level (NPL) of 175 metres. His farmland, however, would not be affected. As such, Wang and his family built a new home on higher ground halfway up a mountain. But on completion, the town government re-listed Wang’s family under the category, “resettling people in remote provinces” instead. Totally blindsided and confused, Wang went to the town government asking for the reason behind the change, and received the following answer: “It’s the need of the country.” “How about my new home?” responded Wang extremely upset and anxious. “Don’t worry, the house still belongs to you,” he was told. “No one else could be allowed to touch it. You can just leave it there and deal with it in the future.” Always an honest and simple-souled guy, Wang felt powerless to resist the decision by the government. He had no choice but to move from his birth place, with his family, to Anhui, a remote province far from Dachang in Wushan County in the Three Gorges area.

On arrival at the resettlement site, their spirits sank, and frustration and despair overtook them. Wang described his feelings at that time: “The beautiful land with green mountains and clear waters described by local cadres [in Dachang] was really a vast, desolate, barren land without even a single tree in sight. What we saw were several rows of shabby houses built on barren land. When seeing her ‘new home,’ my 80-year-old mother dropped herself down to the ground, crying and sobbing. I also felt heartbroken, as well as guilty. You people in nearby areas, on higher slopes, or “in areas that needed to be developed,” under a policy known as “resettlement with development”; or, individuals destined to be displaced by the dam could arrange their own resettlement, outside of the reservoir area, under a policy known as “relocating oneself.” Under the former, people would move according to an integrated, government-organized plan; under the latter, people would need to use their own connections and seek help or receive invitations from friends and relatives in other areas to settle somewhere else.
know what? My mom had just begun her comfortable life after tens of years of hardship and she had never thought that she would move out of our homeland to such an awful place.”

“My dear son, let's go back to our home in Dachang! Please!” Wang couldn't stop his tears whenever recalling his mother's words.

Wang’s mother was frequently ill after moving to Susong County (in Anhui Province). The water there was smelly and the temperature difference was so great between day and night, it was really difficult to cope with and get used to. Wang knew his mother had never given up hope of returning to Dachang, even though she didn’t mention it. In an effort to make his mother feel more comfortable and at ease, Wang Renhui spent all of his resettlement funding building a new house with a well. However, the old lady couldn't hold out and died of an illness in 2004.

In 2003, Wang had heard that growing cotton was a good way to make money, so he decided to use the 1.5 mu (1 mu = 1/15 ha) of land allotted to his family to grow cotton. He and his family worked from dawn to night more than half of the year, but an injustice took place just when their cotton crop reached maturity. One morning, a truck stopped by Wang’s cotton field. A gang of strangers (strangers to Wang, but they were really local people, as Wang found out later) got off the truck with sacks and rushed onto his land to pick the cotton. At first Wang thought it was because they were in the wrong place and tried to stop them, saying, “I'm Wang Renhui and this is my cotton. You might have found the wrong place.” But the strangers continued picking the cotton without paying any attention to him. Wang called the police, who asked him to go to the police station instead of sending a policeman to the site.

When he arrived (at the police station), the staff laughed and told him, “It's our local custom of picking the cotton from others' land.” Wang couldn't believe his ears: “Absolutely nonsense! If you consider robbing things in broad daylight a local custom, what can be called theft and robbery? What on Earth can you police do?” Wang then went to the county resettlement bureau, where the officials did nothing for him and simply passed the issue back to the local police station again. What the police did do was to ask the people who picked the cotton on Wang’s land to pay 40 RMB as compensation. Wang refused, saying the amount was too cheap and too little to accept as a solution because four bags of cotton were worth much more than 40 yuan.

Wang returned home empty-handed. Standing by his cotton land and thinking of all his efforts wasted, he felt extremely helpless and couldn't stop his tears. His experience at the resettlement site had been one of discrimination and unfairness. Wang decided to leave this place, full of bullies, and move the whole family back to Dachang. His son, who was more upset than him and unwilling to go back, left Susong and went to work in other cities. According to Wang's plan, he still had a house in Dachang, so at least he was able to temporarily settle his family there.

In late 2005, Wang and his family abandoned their house in Susong County at a cost of 60,000 yuan and moved back to Dachang in Wushan County. On return to Dachang, his birthplace, Wang found the house he had built before he left had since been occupied by someone else. The new owner told him that the town government of Dachang sold the house to him and that it was no longer Wang’s property at all! In disbelief, Wang went to the town government offices, where the staff refused to admit what they had promised to him before. Wang's plan of living in his old home had failed, and now the whole family had to lodge with a relative. Before long, Wang borrowed some money to rent a house to relieve the inconvenience of lodging.
In 2008 when his grandson needed to go to school, Wang decided to buy an apartment. The cheapest apartment in Dachang at that time cost 60,000 yuan. Wang gritted his teeth and bought it by borrowing money. “I’ll pay off this debt little by little,” he said. Already 67 years old, Wang performs odd jobs every day to support his family and repay his debt, for instance, working as an unskilled labourer on building sites. Wang Jiujiang, Wang’s 10-year-old grandson, was born into such a life of turmoil, he has become exceptionally sensitive to the fickleness of human nature. When I asked him whether he had realized that he was a child without hukou, he nodded his head, tears running down his cheek.

The interview with those returnees in Dachang made me realize how much suffering and difficulty they are forced to live with. I have no idea who could help them. I just wonder what on Earth caused those problems with the affected group relocated by the Three Gorges Dam. The Three Gorges project itself or China’s autocratic system of government?

IMPOVERISHED COUPLE’S TOUGH LIFE: Jian Xinglan

Jian Xinglan was originally living in Group 2 in Dachang’s Xingsheng Village. Jian was most shocked and upset when she got her notice to move – to Guangdong Province in the south, more than 1,200 km from Dachang. With two little sons, five and three years of age, and a blind husband, Jian had no idea how her family would be able to survive in a remote and completely strange place. At that time, Jian and her family, although by no means wealthy, lived a peaceful and fairly comfortable life. They had a fish pond and a brick kiln, and benefited from the additional support of relatives and friends nearby. Jian couldn’t fathom how her life would be, especially without the help and support she’d known in her place of birth. So she talked to officials from the resettlement bureau in Guangdong, stationed in Dachang to receive migrants, and explained her situation. The officials she spoke to refused immediately to accept her family on the grounds that the local government in the receiving region did not want disabled people, due to the difficulties entailed in settling them properly.

Somewhat relieved, Jian went back to the resettlement office of Dachang Town. However, the officials there disagreed and insisted that she and her family had to relocate to Guangdong.

To force Jian and her family to move, officials at the Dachang resettlement office isolated her family of four inside their home, closed the door, and forbade them to leave unless they agreed to move to Guangdong. This extreme measure did not work however. Jian had made up her mind irrevocably: she would rather die in the local village in Dachang than move to Guangdong.

At the end of their tether, local officials came up with a different strategy: they asked Jian to find relatives and friends (her mother) to live with in Shuangsheng Village (the other village in Dachang Town). Jian and her family had no choice but to move out of Xingsheng Village, their hukou effectively cancelled. According to the resettlement policy, Jian and her family were eligible for 100,000 yuan in compensation, but they received only as much as 40,000 yuan in total. Taking the money, Jian and her family of four went to her old mother’s house. Jian’s mother accepted them. But what could this family do with only 40,000 yuan left to their name?

After Jian and her family had been living with her mother for more than a year, Jian resolutely decided that she must return to Xingsheng Village with her blind husband and two young children. Jian simply couldn’t bear to watch her old mother work so hard on their behalf any longer.
On their return, however, they found everything had changed. In particular their status was now completely different from before: no hukou, no housing, no land, no money, no basic living allowances, no medical insurance, and not even access for the two boys to go to school. In the very beginning, they grew some grain and vegetables in a patch of wasteland opened up in the margin and corners of a nearby riverbank, and built a shack on the hill where they lived for more than two years. The shack was simple and crude so, in winter, Jian had to send her two children to live with relatives, while she and her husband remained in the shack with air whipping through on all sides. One windy night, a storm tore open the roof. Jian sat in the darkness and wind, crying and weeping until the next morning. Seeing their terrible and miserable situation, fellow villagers came to help and built a small house halfway up the slope of the Daning River (a tributary of the Yangtze in the Three Gorges region), using collected bricks and other building materials.

It has been eight years since the return of Jian and her family to Xingsheng Village. The only thing that brings Jian any relief is that her two sons are now grown. In the early years, the two boys had almost no chance of an education because their hukou had been cancelled and there wasn't money to send them to school. With money borrowed from relatives and friends, as well as loans, Jian's children were finally able to enter the local school. They have since maintained good academic grades and haven't let anyone down. Because the family cannot afford the fee for senior high-school, the elder brother, after he graduated from junior high-school, passed the entrance exam of a tuition-free technical school in Chongqing. The younger brother will also graduate from junior high-school, next year. The brothers know that the family has already accrued a debt of around 40,000 yuan or more, in order to support their education.

Meanwhile, Jian is now severely crippled in several parts of her body. With both knees swelling all the year round, she also suffers pains all over her body on rainy nights. Her frail frame has shouldered the heavy burden of life for her whole family. Whenever her son calls her, even a sentence of greeting can make her eyes run with tears. The success of her sons is her greatest wish. It is also because of her sons that she never seeks hospital treatment – she saves every penny for them.

It was a rainy day when Jian came to the hotel I was staying at, in Dachang, for an interview. Before meeting her, I didn't know that her leg was crippled, or that she lived on the other side of the river from the hotel. Braving a heavy storm, Jian endured a 1,500 metres long journey that involved crossing the Daning River by boat, followed by a 15-minute walk. She said she had gone to different levels of government numerous times, but had received no help at all, not even as much as a serious response. She said she had agreed to meet me because she wanted to pour out all the words that had been in her heart for years; to relieve herself emotionally.

I noticed Jian's calloused hands as I listened to her recount the struggles of the past 20 years, when her troubles began in earnest.
Throughout the entire interview, Jian maintained a high tone of furiousness and indignation, as opposed to tears. I began to feel a deep respect for this lady struggling with suffering and destiny. After a long talk, she left with an umbrella. We agreed that I would go to her home the next day to visit with her, in return.

Early the next day, it was still raining. Finally the rain stopped at around 10 am and the sun appeared in the sky after days of hiding. I climbed over a mountain with a guide and found Jian’s house halfway up the mountain. She had been waiting for us in front of her house for a long time. Her home was not a “house” at all but exactly a shack, with walls made up of broken bricks and a roof built from old tiles.

On rainy days, a light rain would make its way inside while heavy rain poured outside. They had to place a bamboo mat over their bedstead to keep off the rain. Pointing at the shabby furniture inside the house, Jian said to me: “Dear reporter, please do not laugh at us! We don’t have even one piece of decent furniture!” With no running water, no electricity, no washing room and no stove, everything in life in this house was totally “simplified.”

As I learned from Jian, her blind husband had gone to bring back drinking water from the village – about 1 km away from their little house. Clay pots were used for cooking, and a small kerosene burner made from an inkstand was used for illumination. Pointing at a piece of land down the hill by the river, Jian said to me, “That is the vegetables we’re growing!” But immediately, she added, “The leader of the village came here days ago and talked to us: ‘Don’t be happy too early, we can take back this piece of land at any time!’” This was the life Jian and her family led: full of uncertainties and insecurity!

While talking, we saw Zhou Kangyong, Jian’s husband, carrying water back home. When I asked him whether he could see the road, he answered, “I just walk by touching. If not so, what can I do? I have done this so many times, I’ve become familiar with the road, so I make no mistakes.” When I asked whether they would continue their life like this, their answer was almost the same: currently this was all they could do, they said. Their future would depend on their two sons. Fortunately the boys were hard-working, diligent and dutiful, which was their greatest comfort.

Before saying goodbye, I suggested taking a picture of them in front of their shack. I asked them to smile but they told me that, although they were trying, they couldn’t manage a smile.

Above: Jian’s calloused hand by Liu Bai.

Above: Jian and her husband by Liu Bai.
because there was nothing cheerful in their lives, just hardship and uncertainty.

THE OLD LADY WHO PICKS UP RUBBISH: Zhu Guixiu

When I arrived in Dachang, every migrant I met would mention the same person to me: Zhu Guixiu, an old lady who made her living collecting rubbish. One afternoon, following a morning of rain, some time in April 2012, I finally met Zhu in her shabby home. When I asked about her experience, this 74-year-old lady looked hopeless and only managed to express a sigh: “What shall I say?” she said.

Zhu and her four family members were originally farmers in Group 1 of Hekou Village, Dachang. They were settled in Branch 1 of Huayanghe Farm in Fuxing, Susong, Anhui Province in 2001. Zhu did not move with her family because she suffered from car sickness and could not make the journey. But half a year later, her husband Lu Chengzhang returned to Zhu after struggling to adapt to life at the resettlement site. Their children followed a few days later. They told Zhu that the resettlement site was built in an area prone to flooding, which is actually illegal according to the state’s Resettlement Law. This region in Anhui Province had also been a site of frequent flooding disasters⁴, and that is where the government of Susong County built new housing for resettled migrants. Zhu’s family came back to Dachang fearing they would meet with a flooding disaster, sooner or later, if they stayed where they were.

To make the situation worse, the drinking water at the resettlement site in Susong was too smelly to drink. There, the running water looked clear at first but turned red and smelled as it ran out the faucet. Although resettled migrants had reported this problem to the government many times, local officials turned a deaf ear to their concerns. Lu Chengzhang’s family were not alone in their return to Dachang, many other families came back as well, owing to the same problem. However, as soon as they returned to their birthplace in Dachang, Wushan County, they faced the same enormous challenges, such as how to get their hukou reinstated, where to stay, and how to make a living.

A return to Dachang for Lu Chengzhang’s family meant they were unable to go back to Susong, where they were settled by the government. Instead, they had to try everything possible to find a way to make a living. To start with, the old couple built a simple shack by Daning River while their children went to work in the county seat of Wushan. The family rubbed along in this way for several years.

The family experienced a really hard time over the past decade. First of all, they encountered a number of difficulties due to the cancellation of their hukou. Without which, they had no chance of obtaining a basic living allowance - a minimum guarantee every citizen should have access to. Living in a drafty shack, unable to keep out the wind and the cold in winter, Lu Chengzhang fell ill and passed away after several years of struggling without money to go to hospital. Later, Zhu Guixiu moved to an apartment with an annual rent of 500 yuan. To ease the burden on her children, Zhu walked several kilometers to the town county seat of Wushan to collect rubbish. In the past, an empty bottle of mineral water earned 10 cents, but now such bottles were only purchased in kilos. “It’s increasingly hard to make money. In the past, I could earn seven to eight yuan in one day, but now only three to five at most,” said Zhu. At the lower

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⁴ This area is sandwiched between a string of lakes in the north and the Yangtze River in the south. The source of flooding could be the Huayang River, a tributary of the Yangtze, the lakes and even the mighty Yangtze as well.
rate, that amounts to up to two hundred yuan per month. “Almost enough for my living,” said Zhu, appearing somewhat satisfied to not burden her children.

“Have you ever thought of seeking help from the government?” I asked.

“Government? You are never allowed to enter the gate (of the government). I thought of seeking relief from government when my husband was sick, but failed several times. Who dares to do that again?”

During the Spring Festival, Zhu’s children called her, hoping to come back to visit her, but Zhu said no. She said she was fine and told the children to save their hard-earned money instead of returning home.

When I asked whether she missed her children, she sobbed, “What I said was not true; actually it was because I love them!”

Zhu was having a rest at home on the day of our interview. A nail had pierced her foot while collecting rubbish the other day. She fainted because of the enormous pain. She went to hospital, where several injections cost her more than the 500 yuan she had saved by pinching and scraping. Deeply distressed, Zhu had no other choice. Yet she was still busy working at home – she found some worn-out clothes and started mending. She chose to sit by the door because it was too dark inside.

Zhu’s home was dark and damp, filled with bottles and cans here and there. A basin of newly peeled potatoes was put right at the door, which would make do as her meals for the next several days. She sat still on a small chair by the door, deep in distress. Even I had no idea about her future life. As Zhu said, “Just go on living like this.”

‘Don’t you hope for a better tomorrow?’ I asked her.

“Of course I do, but I’m afraid I won’t be able to see it!” she said, looking miserable.
WE HAVE NO CHOICE BUT TO STAY: Zheng Yanping and Lu Chengqun

“All of us eight families were originally farmers in Group 1 of Hekou Village in Dachang of Wushan County. In August 2001, acting recklessly, the government of Dachang Town tore down our homes and cancelled our hukou, trying to forcibly move us to Huayanghe Farm in Susong (County) of Anhui (Province), about 250 km away from Dachang. According to the resettlement policy, actually, four of the eight families don’t have to be moved to a remote province because they are qualified to be settled on higher ground in nearby areas. And the other four families should have been relocated a year and a half later than August 2001.

We, eight families, made up our minds: we will never move to Huayanghe Farm in Susong (County) of Anhui after knowing that the proposed resettlement site in Susong is actually a flood-prone zone. Another problem, as we know, is that the proposed resettlement site is also a region which is affected by schistosomiasis. Thus, with big concerns about our safety and no security for our lives and property, we eight families decided to refuse to move there, no matter what. We even swore: we would rather die in Dachang than move to Susong in Anhui.

But nobody knows what we poor migrants went through; all those years of hardship and misery, which was not easy for anybody. In the very beginning, we had to hide from one place to the next because we became ‘black people’ without household registration – our hukou was transferred to Susong in Anhui. Later, some of us built shacks and some others rented apartments by borrowing money. What a miserable life we have had in the last decade!”

The above is from the first part of a discussion in Dachang between myself and Zheng Yanping and Lu Chengqun, two migrants belonging to the eight families mentioned above.

The eight migrant families – represented by Zheng Yanping, Lu Chengqun, Wang Renfu, Wang Renliang, Wang Kequan, Wang Kejun, Lu Chenghui and Lu Chengyu – together resisted the government’s decision to force them to move to a remote province. They pointed out that they were being forced to move far away by local governments trying to meet their targets of migrants to be resettled to remote provinces. During their years of resistance, Wang Renfu’s son was arrested and his wife killed herself by drinking pesticide. Zheng Yanping’s home was ransacked and his property confiscated. Lu Chenghui hid in a remote mountainous area.

With no way to find those who hid somewhere, as Lu Chenghui did, local governments at both county and town levels asked family members working in government departments to find

5 In the early phase of the resettlement plan in the mid-1980s and early 1990s, in an attempt to convince the delegates of the National People’s Congress to vote for the dam project, it was proposed that no migrant in the Three Gorges area would have to move to remote and distant provinces. However, after the approval of the project, in 1999 to be precise, Premier Zhu Rongji introduced a new policy to move local people to remote provinces in an effort to protect the environment of the Three Gorges area. The total number to be resettled in remote provinces was set at more than 160,000. In general, people were reluctant to be moved far away. So, in an attempt to meet their targeted plan to move more than 160,000 people to remote provinces, local governments forced people to do so, even those who were originally classified as “settling in higher ground in nearby areas” (for example, the four families the author referred to above).
their loved ones who went missing, or else face serious consequences, including the loss of their jobs and positions as civil servants. Even so, the government failed to find those migrants who refused to move by hiding.

Several years later when the peak waves of migration had passed, those migrants who had refused to move and had hid instead, came back (to Dachang). Owing to the cancellation of their hukou, they became “black people” and were no longer qualified to enjoy the basic benefits a farmer can have in Dachang, such as medical insurance, a basic living subsidy and money from the post-relocation support fund. And though the state compensation policy said that each of the migrants affected by the Three Gorges project should be entitled to between 40,000 and 50,000 yuan RMB for their resettlement, each adult in these eight migrant families received only 12,000 yuan in 2001, when the government forced them to move to Anhui, with not a penny for the children in their households.

With their meager compensation money already spent long ago, migrants tried every means possible to make a living. Of all the difficulties in their life, however, they found two of them particularly challenging: one was the cancellation of their hukou, and the other was housing. To resolve these problems, all eight families sought help from higher authorities, over and over again. Each time, they were required to return to Dachang to seek assistance from local governments. But town and county-level governments turned a deaf ear to their repeated complaints and petitions.

After 2005, the government of Wushan County suddenly showed a bit of mercy and issued the eight migrant households with documents that required the government of Dachang Town to allocate them some land: 10 square metres for each migrant. But this land was too little for the families to build on and farm at the same time.

Another tough problem for these migrants concerned the difficulty of sending their children to school, especially high-school, due to the cancellation of their household registration. Thus, the children of the eight households could only attend junior high-school in Dachang, at most, and it was impossible for them to continue studying at the senior high-school level. Lu Chengqun sighed when talking about this problem: “My son had very good marks at school. He wanted to continue studying in senior high-school. I had visited his school many times, but they said they could do nothing about it without his household registration. My son, only 15 years old at that time, was really upset and left Dachang to work outside the reservoir area after graduation from junior high-school. He is still working in a remote province and has never returned so far. Before he left home, I told him to obey the rules and never break the law. We must remember that farmers are powerless in the face of government!”

So far, these eight households have grown from 29 people (in 2010) to 36 at the present time, all of whom remain “black people” in Dachang because their hukou was transferred to Anhui (Province) by the government a decade ago. During these years, Zheng Yanping has tried various jobs to support his family, and is now running a passenger boat

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6 The term “black people” refers to people without their hukou, or household registration for that area. This insecure status can occur in different ways: when rural residents migrate to the cities in search of jobs, they are often unable to change their official permanent residence or hukou to the city; when migrants, such as those from Dachang the author refers to, had their original hukou transferred to Susong in Anhui but returned to Dachang; and when babies born to parents who do not have a hukou, those babies will become “black people.” As the author points out, “black people”, i.e. without a hukou registration, experience a number of tough challenges in every day life.
service on the Yangtze River. Typically, he might earn 1,500 yuan a month, if business is not too bad, but he risks no income at all if there’s no business available. Living in poverty and hardship, Zheng has been in debt for more than 50,000 yuan.

Lu Chengqun’s situation is even worse: he makes a living by catching fish in the Daning River. He is blind in his right eye from using explosives to catch fish. He told me that the river’s fish population is now in decline. If he is lucky, he is able to catch fish sometimes, which earns him a little bit more than 1,000 yuan per month. But he doesn’t want to make a living fishing any longer because it’s too risky, especially if he encounters bad weather. He said his heart still flutters with fear from the time he lost control of his fishing boat and capsized it. However, as a half-blind person, he has no idea what other work he will be able to do if he doesn’t continue fishing.

Asked what their greatest hope was at that moment, Lu and Zheng replied with one voice: “What we want most is to get our dignity as human beings back!”

A DRINKING WATER POLLUTION INCIDENT IN DACHANG

This incident dates back to early July, 2011, when the rainy season had just begun. The villagers of Ninghe Village of Dachang (Town) found that the drinking water of their village was turning stale. The originally clear and sweet underground water had become more and more smelly each day, and on the morning of August 6, 2011, the water turned green and disgustingly stinky. As villagers discovered, the pollution source was from a garbage dump at the top of a mountain. It was also one of the hottest days of summer, when the water supply becomes a severe problem for humans and livestock in Ninghe Village.

In the afternoon of that day, more than 100 furious villagers went to the town of Dachang and questioned the government officials in anger: “More than one month has passed since the water pollution occurred. Why don’t you do anything to deal with the problem?” Zheng, secretary of the Dachang Town Commission for Discipline Inspection (of the CPC Central Committee), replied by simply asking the villagers to overcome the difficulty and collect water from other places. The villagers were enraged at the secretary’s ignorance of the life and death matter they faced. They surrounded Zheng, asking for two measures to deal with the issue as soon as possible: first, to stop the operation of the garbage dump immediately; and second, to establish a temporary drinking water supply point for villagers without any conditions attached to it. Zheng agreed and promised to send water to the village before 9 a.m. the next morning. But the villagers still didn’t believe his words, so the youngsters gathered together to block the road leading to the garbage dump. At that moment, Long, the head (or mayor) of Dachang Town, appeared suddenly. He had come, not to appease the outraged masses, but to call a bulldozer to clear the road blocked by the villagers and issue an order to arrest all of the young people.
who had shut down the road.

The villagers had no choice but to devise a special way to express their anger and dissatisfaction: they asked a high-school student named Lu Xingmei to buy two big funeral wreaths and place them at the gate of the town government, alongside a poster featuring text in large, black Chinese characters that read: “Many thanks to the Dachang government which has done nothing to protect villagers from the polluted water, leaving all people in the village to die one by one.” Shortly after the wreaths were placed, the police came and took them away, waving their fists and threatening to make arrests. The scene turned into complete chaos.

In the afternoon of the same day, both the party secretary and head of Dachang Town went to Ninghe Village. Long, the town head, yelled to the villagers in a threatening manner: “You should not have created a disturbance for the town government. The government will solve your problem. We also need to report your problem to the higher authorities level by level, and try to get the problem solved step by step.” After the speech, Long intended to leave, but the villagers surrounded him and showed him an agreement signed by three parties – the village committee, the Dachang government and the Environmental Protection Bureau of Wushan County – before the garbage dump was constructed.

According to the agreement, “Drinking water should be provided immediately, without any condition, if the drinking water in the village is polluted.” The villagers told Long that the garbage dump, owned by Dachang Town, had never been checked and approved. One of the villagers also pointed out that the garbage dump, built by the town government, had spoiled and even destroyed the major water source for Ninghe Village for generations. Long was left speechless when villagers showed him a sign set up by the Dachang government, placed higher up the mountain, that read, “The water has been polluted, please do not drink it on rainy days.”

With anger and resentment running high, Long promised once again to provide drinking water for the village the next day. However, the issue of water pollution remained unsolved. The town officials, who made little effort to solve the pollution problem, instead obsessed over punishing someone for the wreath incident which had hurt them deeply. On August 29, 2011, when the water returned to normal, the officials took Lu Xingmei, the student who had bought the wreaths, to the police station on the pretext of performing a confession, but detained her for 10 days on a charge of “disturbing the social order.”