



Background

Dams proposed for Yunnan's three great rivers

A new law introduces public participation



Three parallel rivers

The Nu (also known as the Salween), the Mekong (Lancang) and the Upper Yangtze (Jinsha) are known as the “three parallel rivers” in Yunnan province. Rising in the Tibetan plateau, the rivers have carved out deep canyons up to 3000 metres deep in the high mountains of Yunnan. In places these canyons widen out into fertile valleys that have been farmed for centuries by the ethnic minorities who live in Yunnan.*

The mountain ridges above the Upper Yangtze are snow capped while the valley bottoms have a temperate climate and fertile farmlands. The farmers here supply food to much of the region. They are relatively prosperous, with handsome tile roofed houses, pigs, water buffalo, and fields of grain, vegetables and tobacco. For centuries the valley was a trading route between China and Tibet. Tea in hundred pound loads travelled up the valley and traded for horses raised on the high plateau. Shigu City, on the first big bend of the Yangtze, is more than 600 years old. It would be submerged by the proposed dam at Tiger Leaping Gorge.

Building dams in a UNESCO world heritage park

In 2003 the high ridges above the three rivers were declared a UNESCO World Heritage site, which led activists to hope that the rivers would not be dammed. But when the park was declared the protected areas were restricted to the ridges above 2100 metres. The reservoir for the big dam at Tiger Leaping Gorge would reach a height of 2010 metres.

A history of dam construction and displacement

Across China more than 80,000 dams have been built, including 22,000 big dams (about half of the total in the world). The best known of these is the Three Gorges project on the middle Yangtze. Across China more than 16 million people have been displaced to make way for dams and reservoirs and it is widely recognized that most of them, especially the farmers, are worse off as a result. Good farmland is a scarce resource in China which has one-third of the world's population but only 22% of its farmlands. Good land is normally under cultivation, so finding new homes and fields for displaced farmers is difficult, and many have suffered as a result. As described in *Waking the Green Tiger*, community organizer Yu Xiaogang had studied the impact of displacement on 7,500 people who were relocated during the construction of the Manwan dam on the Mekong River in the 1980s. Yu was able to document that the situation of many farmers was dire, that compensation was inadequate or had been diverted, and that further assistance was desperately needed. He concluded that the farmers along the Nu river should be exposed to the situation at Manwan, and arranged a meeting between the villagers.



Dams are diamonds

Up until the mid 1990s dams were built by the state. Following economic reforms, large corporations were established which trade on the Hong Kong stock exchange. In 2002 the rivers of Yunnan were opened up for proposals and two of China's largest corporations, Huadian and Huaneng proposed two chains of dams on the Nu (also known as the Salween) and Upper Yangtze (also known as the Jinsha) rivers.

Yunnan holds a quarter of the untapped hydropower in China, and in accordance with

China's efforts to reduce its reliance on coal fired power plants, construction of the dams is supported at many levels. The power companies generally share the ownership and management of the dams with local governments. Dams are popular because, unlike mines and other industrial projects that are depleted over time dams are considered to be "diamonds" that generate income over the long term. The dams proposed for Yunnan would have doubled provincial revenues. As reflected in the film, dam proponents promote the idea that the construction will improve the welfare of displaced populations, when the opposite is more often proved to be true. Sources of information for farmers are limited, and the authority of developers and local and central governments is so difficult to challenge. There was no history of effective protest against dams when the activists set out to publicize the plans for the Nu river in 2004.

A new law opens the door for public participation

In 2002, while the dam proposals were being written, a new Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) law was passed by the State Council, to come into effect in August 2003. The law was double edged. It required developers to submit projects for assessment and approval and it established the principle of public hearings where individuals and experts might contribute to the assessment of the impact of the projects and challenge the plans of developers. This law, the product of years of research, writing and lobbying by **Qu Geping** (see "China's Father of Environmental Protection") placed the tiny State Environmental Protection Agency in a position to review and possibly override massive state projects supported by the powerful National Resource and Development Council and other senior agencies. As Qu and journalists **Ma Jun** and **Wang Yongchen** note in the film, the EIA law laid the foundation for an entirely new chapter in China's history. The EIA regulations, like many of the other rules prepared by the Environmental Protection Agency, provided clear and transparent standards and included a democratic process. It was, in short, a landmark in the evolution of governance in China where the drive toward the rule of law (instead of the rule by bureaucrats) is a long term trend that began with the economic reforms instituted by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s. The right to have a voice in the environmental assessment of the dams provided an opening for a wider discussion of the dam projects in Yunnan. The activists and the media took the new law as a signal that a much wider public debate was now possible. Journalist **Wang Yongchen**, a senior reported at China's National Radio, was the first to test the latitude of the new law when she organized an expedition for journalists and activist to the Nu and Yangtze valleys in 2004. This was the first of a series of yearly expeditions organized by Wang to raise awareness about the state of China's rivers and to promote the conservation.

Build now, assess later

The hydropower developers were not deterred, at first, by the passage of the new environmental assessment law. In the months before it came into effect ground was broken for projects along the Nu and

Upper Yangtze. Then, in many locations along the rivers, construction was begun without permits. When pressed, some officials argued that much of the construction was only preparatory and that they were not actually damming the river as long as the stream was flowing through the construction site. In some cases work proceeded even in the face of stop orders and fines from the EPA. Where fines were levied they have often failed to stop construction along the Upper Yangtze where half a dozen dams are being built including the Jinanqiao, Ahai, Longkaikou, and Ludila dams. These dams, which have small reservoirs, will not reach peak efficiency unless a much larger dam, like the one proposed for Tiger Leaping Gorge, is built.

Tiger Leaping Gorge (Hutiaoxia)

Tiger Leaping Gorge is a national landmark on the Yangtze river, located in a deep canyon in the midst of the Three Parallel Rivers world heritage park which spans the Upper Yangtze, Mekong and Nu Rivers. In the middle of the gorge the slow flowing Yangtze, which is a kilometre or more wide in the upper valley, narrows down to 30 metres as it funnels into the gorge. A tiger was said to have escaped hunters by leaping from the shore to a great rock that divides the river, and then to the far shore. The proposed dam would be higher than an 80 storey building, and would create a massive reservoir stretching 265 kilometres upriver, second only in volume to reservoir behind the Three Gorges dam. The cancellation of the dam at Tiger Leaping Gorge in 2007 was accompanied by proposals for a similar dam further upstream, near the Tibetan community of Dequin.

*** Ethnic minorities in Yunnan**

Among the country's fifty-six recognized ethnic groups, twenty-five are found in Yunnan including the Yi, Bai, Hani, Tai, Dai, Miao, Lisu, Hui, Lahu, Va, Nakhi, Yao, Tibetan, Jingpo, Blang, Pumi, Nu, Achang, Jinuo, Mongolian, Derung, Manchu, Shui, and Buy.