

China ponders price of progress at spectacular gorge  
By Alan Wheatley

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TIGER LEAPING GORGE, China, May 8 (Reuters) - Legend has it that a tiger vaulted the mighty Yangtze here at its narrowest point. Before long, anybody or beast might be able to saunter across the river atop a towering dam wall.

Residents and environmentalists fear that China's hunger for hydropower to feed its booming economy could spell the end of one of the world's deepest river gorges and scar some of the country's most spectacular scenery.

Ma Jun, an environmental consultant in Beijing, says the beauty of the 3,900 metre (12,800 ft) deep gorge, nestled in the mountains of southwestern Yunnan province, is unique.

"There's a sense of nature you won't see in many other places in China. To many who feel that we've lost too much nature and need to preserve some for this country, this is a very big issue," Ma, author of the influential book "China's Water Crisis", said.

Dam builders have their eye on Tiger Leaping Gorge not only for the power it would generate but because it would help prevent silt from flowing into the reservoir behind the huge Three Gorges Dam, now near completion, some 1,500 km (930 miles) downriver.

The decision whether to go ahead has yet to be taken.

But surveying work has been going on now for 18 months, fanning talk that construction of the proposed 278-metre (912-ft) high dam could begin as early as 2008.

## UNDER WATER

The dam, just one of a dozen proposed for the upper reaches of the Yangtze, where the river is called the Jinsha, would create a vast lake that would back up for 200 km (125 miles).

As many as 100,000 people, many of them from the Naxi ethnic minority, would be forced to abandon fertile land their families have worked for centuries.

Among those who fear they will be uprooted is Liao Qunzhong, an illiterate 32-year-old who grows corn, wheat and broad beans.

Liao also makes money from trekking tourists who, unused to the thin

mountain air at 2,500 metres (8,200 ft), succumb to the temptation of surveying the gorge from the back of his mule.

The bearded peasant said the compensation being talked about is meagre and he doesn't fancy moving north. Land is available, but the climate is harsher and he's unsure of the reception he'll get. Nor is he keen on the staples there of potatoes and barley.

But Liao is resigned rather than angry. What matters most for him is that his 10-year-old son should do better than he has.

Liao dropped out after just three years of primary school and is saving hard to send his son to junior middle school. The fees of 2,000 yuan (\$250) a year are half his annual income, but he says he's willing to sell his mule if need be to make ends meet.

"I'll do everything I can to make sure he doesn't have to spend his life walking up and down this trail beside a mule."

Although he is already making plans for his new life, Liao in fact farms land that would be several hundred metres above the new waterline. He would be unscathed.

In contrast, other farmers are building extensions to homes that would be submerged. Some are spurred on by talk that compensation would be set according to the size of their homes; others just don't believe the dam will ever be built.

## CONFUSION

The palpable confusion and anxiety breed suspicion.

Locals said one young anti-dam activist died while he was making his case in Beijing, fuelling conspiracy theories.

"There's a saying around here now that if you complain you'll come back as ashes," said Margo Carter, an Australian who runs a cafe-hostel in the town of Qiaotou at the entrance to the 16-km (10-mile) gorge.

For Ma, the consultant, the fog is an inevitable result of a planning process shrouded in secrecy. He would like to see broad-based participation when such complex projects are decided.

Ma said he is not day-dreaming: China has had an environmental impact assessment law, though vaguely worded, since 2003 and developers are now required in theory to disclose their reasons when seeking construction

permits.

"We understand that, with development and environmental protection, we need to make a trade-off. If the benefit is much larger than the losses, then perhaps we have to go ahead. But we want this process to be transparent so everyone can see that this is a reasonable trade-off," Ma said.

Ma acknowledged the potential benefits of damming Tiger Leaping Gorge, which is just 30 metres (100 ft) wide at the spot where the tiger is said to have leapt.

"For every drop of water stored, it would add more value for hydropower generation than any other reservoir in China or perhaps the world," he said.

But he said the economic gains needed to be weighed openly against the environmental, social and cultural losses.

"One day, if our children say 'Why did you do this?', it'll be much easier to face that question if we can say it's the result of scientific research and a democratic process," Ma said.