

Greed for energy threatens to dam legendary gorge

By Jane Macartney

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Tens of thousands fear they will be displaced if China's latest project takes a leap forward

WITHIN days China will pour the final concrete of the massive Three Gorges Dam across the Yangtze River.

But completion of one of the great engineering feats of our time will not satisfy the country's energy-hungry developers. They will merely turn their attention to one of the deepest and most dramatic gorges on earth - Tiger Leaping Gorge - 900 miles (1,500km) upstream.

China confirmed yesterday that another 80,000 people will be moved this year from areas to be flooded behind the Three Gorges Dam. They are among about 1.3 million being displaced.

Tens of thousands more now fear that their homes will be flooded in the new project. Environmentalists are appalled. But engineers regard a dam across Tiger Leaping Gorge as crucial for the success of the Three Gorges project, which has a small reservoir compared to the enormous flow of the river. Their plan is to add 12 dams upstream from the Three Gorges Dam. The one across Tiger Leaping Gorge would provide the largest reservoir and help most to regulate the river's flow.

Surveys have been going on for 18 months and construction of the proposed 278m-high (912ft) dam could begin as early as 2008. It would dwarf the 180m-high barrier at the Three Gorges. The reservoir would back up for 125 miles.

Ma Jun, an environmental consultant from Beijing and author of the influential book *China's Water Crisis*, recognises the value of the project. "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 is no fan of the plan. Although the dam would leave the 30m chasm across which tigers of legend leapt, he wondered how the gorge would look with a concrete wall across it. "The beauty of this place is unique," he said.

The ten-mile gorge is an important tourist attraction and the setting is breathtaking. Mountains soar more than 3,500m above the river to create a deep defile touched by the sun only at midday.

It falls within a Unesco World Heritage-listed site that harbours great botanical riches as well as ethnic minorities who have farmed along the steep hillsides for centuries, but are now threatened.

Damming the thundering river, called the Jinsha along the upper reaches, could force up to 100,000 people out of their ancestral homes. Most are from the Naxi minority, the last people to use a system of pictographic writing, who farm corn and wheat along the fertile banks. They would have to move north, to a Tibetan area where the altitude and harsh climate mean that the staples are such unfamiliar crops as barley and potatoes.

Liao Qunzhong is a farmer who has lived in Tiger Leaping Gorge all his life and hires out his mule to tourists eager to follow an ancient tea-trading path through the gorge that once supplied Tibet with tea from southern China.

"If we have to move north how will we fit in with people from another community? They will not accept us. We will be strangers," he told The Times. Such worries weigh little with the Huaneng Group, the largest independent power producer in China, which is run by Li Xiaopeng, a son of the former premier, Li Peng. A dam in Tiger Leaping Gorge would block silt being carried down into the reservoir behind the Three Gorges Dam, thus extending the working life of the power station.

Mr Ma is calling for a free and open debate before any decision is taken. "We must make a balanced trade-off," he says. "We want a transparent process. How can we face questions from our children if our decision is not based on a scientific and democratic process?" But officials in southwestern Yunnan province appear to favour the traditional approach, that of top-down government whereby decisions are simply announced by those who believe they know best.

Not everyone is waiting for a decision, however it is made. Some farmers in Tiger Leaping Gorge believe that they will receive 100 yuan (6.70) a square metre in compensation for their homes and are busy extending their houses.

Further upstream, at the First Bend of the Yangtze, farmers have taken the law into their own hands, refusing to allow engineers access to the area to take preliminary measurements and effectively put a stop to preparatory work. Others, certain that the dam will not touch their land, are looking on the bright side. Xiao Yang, a driver, said: "The dam will bring progress for us. And tourists will still come, if not to look at the gorge then to look at the dam just like they visit the Three Gorges Dam."

THE TIGER LEGEND

Among the deepest of river canyons, it contains a series of rapids stretching for 15km (9 miles) beneath towering cliffs

The peaks on either side, Jade Dragon Snow Mountain and Haba Snow Mountain, are both higher than Mont Blanc

Legend holds that a tiger evaded hunters by leaping across the gorge's narrowest section, 30m (98ft) wide at its base

Tourists hiking the length of the gorge require at least two days

The proposed dam would displace 100,000 people and destroy 200 species of plants and animals

No tigers have been seen near the gorge since the 1950s