

Tiger Leaping... or Gorge Dam
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Running between Jade Dragon Snow Mountain and Haba Snow Mountain in the north-west of Yunnan Province, Tiger Leaping Gorge is among the world's deepest canyons. Confined between the narrow cliff walls, the torrential Jinsha River roars and crashes spectacularly over grotesquely shaped rocks through the 18-kilometre gorge.

Flowing parallel with the Nujiang and Lancang rivers south for 170 kilometres, the Jinsha River almost reverses direction in a 135 degree turn at Shigu, forming what is known as "the first bend of the Yangtze River." It then flows placidly for a further 30 kilometres before plunging into Tiger Leaping Gorge, or Hutiaoxia, as it is called in Chinese.

According to local legend, the gorge is so named because, at its narrowest point, a tiger once leaped over the swirling waters.

The gorge has attracted a steadily increasing number of tourists in recent years with the improvement of access to this once remote region, but reports that the provincial government is planning to dam the gorge has attracted attention of a different kind.

The hydroelectric dam at Tiger Leaping Gorge is a joint project between the government of Yunnan province and Yunnan Lancangjiang Hydropower Development Corporation, a subsidiary of China Huaneng Group. Preparation work for the construction of the dam has already begun, an official from the Yunnan Provincial Environmental Protection Bureau confirmed to Beijing Today Wednesday.

An ideal location?

The Jinsha River is the name for the upper reaches of the Yangtze River. "The middle reach of the Jinsha has a favourable condition for development. When completed, the dam will have an overall capacity of 20 million kilowatts," the official said.

Xinhua News Agency reported as early as April 2002 that the Kunming Institute of Survey and Design and Zhongnan Institute of Survey and Design, both branches of State Power Corp, had drafted and submitted plans for the dam to the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) and asked an expert group from the National Hydropower and Water Resources Planning and Design General Institute to conduct an analysis and feasibility study. On July 27, 2004, the dam project was approved by the NDRC, despite the lack of a report by the National Environmental Protection Bureau or a long-term seismic inspection report from the National Earthquake Administration, both of which are required under state law for a project of this scale.

Opposition mobilizes

A workshop under the title "Serious Analysis of Overheated Hydroelectric Exploitation of Southwest China's Rivers" was held in Beijing last Sunday. Sponsored by environmental related NGOs including Ch Green, the Institute of Environment and Development, A'Lashan Society and the Institute of International Environment Studies, participants called for the construction of the Tiger Leaping Gorge Hydroelectric Dam to be halted in view of its negative influence on the ecology, geology and social culture of the surrounding environment.

Xiao Liangzhong, an anthropologist from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and a zealous environmentalist was one of the participants in the workshop. He told Beijing Today Tuesday, "The dam is not feasible, for it will bring about serious and irreparable problems to the local ecological and geological systems, as well as the social culture of the region. The planning statement claims the dam will bring enormous economic benefits, but that is absolutely not the case."

According to Xiao's analysis, firstly, the raised water level caused by the dam will damage the local ecological system and destroy a wide range of species.

Secondly, "by sharing their universal values and keeping their own unique culture and ethnic identities, local ethnic groups have been co-inhabiting this area and creating a unique culture together. This is one of very few successful models for such peaceful coexistence in a multi-ethnic region. If the dam is built, a series of immigration-related problems will emerge which will eventually ruin this deep-rooted harmony," he said.

In addition, Xiao points out that a great quantity of ancient stone coffins, tombs and cremation sites are located here, as well as rock paintings and stone tablets. Cultural relics and historical sites have not been excavated or researched yet. Some ancient village building patterns and foundations are still in good condition, all of which demonstrates that it is a place with a rich cultural accumulation. Flooding the area would cause an immeasurable cultural loss.

Moreover geological structural movement and topographical changes have frequently occurred in this basin, demonstrating that the area is in a relatively unstable seismic belt. He Xuesong, a scholar from the National Earthquake Administration's Institute of Geology and Geophysics, told Beijing Today in an interview Wednesday, "Building a terraced hydropower station in this type of geographical environment could lead to consequences that are just unimaginable."

Wang Yongchen, president of an environmental protection NGO China Green and an editor at China People's Radio, told Beijing Today Monday, "Under the agreement, Yunnan Lancangjiang Hydropower Development Corporation would pay the Lijiang local government 400 million yuan, which is twice its total annual income. The project is extremely harmful in environmental terms, and has received no environmental evaluation report from the National Environmental Protection Bureau and no long-term stable seismic inspection report from the National Earthquake Administration."

Not just about economics

Wang Hui, professor from Tsinghua University's School of Humanities and Social Science told Beijing Today yesterday, "the GDP-oriented development mode has been deeply rooted in all levels of government departments for a long time." He pointed out that more needs to be taken into consideration than just economic benefits when assessing the viability of a hydroelectric dam project such as this. "We should also pay attention to what local villagers say, after all it has been their home for generations, and will be still after the dam is finished. Therefore, we should promote an environmental justice development strategy. Moreover, we should not rigidly copy one mode just because it is successful elsewhere. Every place has its own unique characteristics.

Southern Weekend reported Wednesday that an official from the National Environmental Protection Bureau said they had no information about the hydroelectric dam project. Beijing Today confirmed this yesterday with Mou Guangfeng, of the bureau's Supervision and Administration Department. Mou said "we don't know about this report yet, and we haven't read the report in Southern Weekend. As a general procedure, any construction project with an investment of over 100 million yuan would be under the direct administration of the NDRC, not the local department, like this one. Generally speaking, the local government should first carry out a feasibility study, then submit the plan to the NDRC. After it gets approval in an environmental evaluation report, then the NDRC will begin its inspection and decide whether to grant approval or not."

Wang Yongchen commented, "In my opinion, it is impossible for the NDRC not to have been informed, because Tiger Leaping Gorge is within the Three Rivers Drainage Basin. This area was listed as a World Cultural and Natural Heritage site in 2003, so any construction projects there would be very sensitive to the bureau and the NDRC. On the other hand, such a project, tangled with many economic benefits, would probably involve under-the-table negotiations by the involved investment corporation and local government. Thus the bureau is kept in the dark."

The official from the Yunnan Provincial Environmental Protection Bureau told Beijing Today, "The Yunnan government removed Tiger Leaping Gorge from the application report to UNESCO. Now they can say that the dam would be constructed outside the protection range of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage Site."

In July this year, UNESCO warned China that it must improve protection of that area, or risk it being removed. "Fortunately, since 2002 the NDRC hasn't given further approval to this project and discussions from all quarters of society are leading to more and more resistance. And in February this year, Premier Wen Jiabao even ordered that the illegal construction of 13 dams along the Nujiang River be halted," Wang said