

## **Report from the Nu River: 'Nobody has told us anything'** **By Wang Yongchen**

*Wang Yongchen, Beijing-based journalist and founder of the environmental group Green Earth Volunteers, travelled recently to the Nu River valley in Yunnan province, southwest China, where exploration activity is under way for a string of controversial hydro dams. She wanted to find out what local people have been told about the projects, and how they feel about the prospect of resettlement. Below, a translation of Ms. Wang's account of her trip, which draws on interviews she conducted with people in 100 households. (Translation by Three Gorges Probe.)*

A debate has raged for about three years now on whether a cascade of dams should be built on the Nu River, sections of which are located in a UNESCO World Heritage site. Proponents have argued that it would be a waste of the river not to harness its turbulent water for hydroelectricity—and some have even claimed that 70 per cent of local people like the idea, as they hold out hope that the dams might help lift them out of poverty.

Opponents, however, insist that the Nu River - one of only two major rivers in China that remain undammed - should be left undisturbed. They argue that building the dams would pose a serious threat not only to the environment in an area of spectacular beauty, but also to the region's unusually rich cultural diversity. A multitude of minority nationalities have long lived in harmony with each other, and with the river and the mountains, in the Nu valley.

In late August 2005, an [open letter](#) to the government signed by scores of Chinese organizations and individuals called on the authorities to release environmental-impact documents and hold public hearings on the Nu River plans. Many months later, the petitioners and the public still await a reply.

Meanwhile, an army of engineers has descended on the peaceful Nu valley, leading survey teams that are exploring the proposed dam sites. The teams are drilling on the riverbanks, drilling into the mountain cliffs and drilling down into the riverbed. Rock debris is strewn along the banks of the river, roads are suddenly blocked by mud-rock flows, and the river itself has turned from green to yellow. It is as if a grand campaign has been launched aimed at striking it rich and turning the Nu River water into oil, and all the activity now occurring in the river valley is just the beginning.

When I visited the Nu valley for the first time in February 2004, I was astounded not only by the beauty and biodiversity of the area, but also by its cultural diversity. When I went back a year later, I became very interested in the indigenous people, who are from many different minority groups, and in the relationship between the river and the mountains and the communities in the river valley.

I made a third trip to the region in the spring of 2005, to see how schoolchildren we have been sponsoring were faring, and to find out whether 30 reading rooms we have funded had been damaged by heavy snow that winter. After that trip, I realized just how fragile and complex the area's mountains and geology are.

This Chinese New Year [January/February 2006], I travelled to the Nu valley for the fourth time. Over a two-week period, I interviewed people in 100 households that would have to move if proposed dams, such as Liuku, Yabiluo, Bijiang and Maji, are built. Survey and drilling work is already under way at those sites.

The debate surrounding the Nu River dams has focused on the projects' likely impacts on the environment and on local cultures. Another controversial issue is how the people who would be affected by the projects feel about them, and whether building the dams would actually help raise living standards in a very poor area. For these reasons, I decided to visit 100 affected households, and ask residents the following questions:

1. Are you aware that you will be relocated?
2. If so, where did you get this information?
3. Have you been consulted by the government or any relevant authorities, given that your lives are likely to be affected by the dam building?
4. Do you know anything about compensation terms?
5. Do you have any specific concerns or special difficulties related to resettlement?
6. Do you think building the dams could help lift you out of poverty?

When I was sorting through the material I'd gathered in my interviews, five issues stood out. Although I had been aware of these issues beforehand, I had not fully realized their importance.

### **Faith in the government**

First of all, I was struck by the trust that people living in the Nu valley have in the government, and how dependent they are on the authorities. Regardless of their background, nationality, age or occupation, I heard from all the interviewees in this poverty-stricken region that they really do listen to the government and obey authorities' instructions.

It has been said that the county seat of Gongshan will be moved to Bingzhongluo, a scenic village that is one of the attractions in the upper reaches of the Nu River, located about 45 kilometres upstream of the proposed Maji dam. I interviewed Liu Jian, a villager in his 60s who runs a small family inn in Bingzhongluo.

Wang: How many people are in your household?

Liu Jian: There are 16 of us. We all eat together.

Wang: What nationality are you?

Liu: Nu.

Wang: And your wife?

Liu: Tibetan.

Wang: And your children?

Liu: My son is Tibetan, like my wife, but the others are Nu, like me.[1](#)

Wang: And your son-in-law?

Liu: He is also Nu.

Wang: Your daughter-in-laws?

Liu: One is Nu; the other is Lisu.

Wang: How many languages do you speak?

Liu: Tibetan, Nu, Dulong, Lisu and Mandarin.

Wang: Has the government told you anything about the dam project?

Liu: Nobody has told us anything about it. This is a government plan, so local officials should know something about it.

Wang: Has the government consulted you about anything?

Liu: No, never. If the government did that, there would be a big problem.

Wang: But you are a delegate to the county People's Congress. Can't you convey the views of the locals to the congress?

Liu: No, I can't because I have no education.

Wang: Why does education matter?

Liu: Because I can't write, and there's little point in just speaking about it.

### **Lack of information**

Secondly, it had not occurred to me that the residents of Xiaoshaba, a village near the Liuku dam site, would know nothing about the right to information, even though a sign in the village calls it "a model village of democracy."

When asked, "Are you aware that you will be relocated?" and "If so, where did you get this information?" almost everybody responded the same way: "Rumours."

However, news reports about the plan to build dams on the Nu River have been widely circulated both inside and outside China for almost three years. To my surprise, Ar Ge, party secretary of Longpu village in Chayu county in Tibet, where the Songta dam is slated to be built on the upper reaches of the Nu, told me he had learned about the project from an American! His source was a PhD student from the University of California at Berkeley, who had been in the Nu valley doing fieldwork for his dissertation.

The villagers of Xiaoshaba, near the proposed Liuku dam, were the only exception: They had been told at a public meeting that a dam would be built on the river, that their farmland would be flooded and that no new housing construction would henceforth be approved.

One of the Xiaoshaba villagers told me: "Since that meeting, the resettlement authority has measured my house four or five times, but I have no idea where I will be going or how much compensation I will receive."

Despite all the uncertainty, local people express support for the dam project because they assume it is a state initiative, and they have faith in the government. They don't care whether the Nu River water can be turned into oil, but they are extremely concerned about when and how they will be compensated.

In Xincun village, several kilometres upstream of the proposed Liuku dam, I spoke with Xu Zhaoyang, one of the villagers who will be moved if the dam is built.

Wang Yongchen: Do you think you should be consulted if the dam is built?

Xu Zhaoyang: Yes, I do. But nobody comes and tells us anything, though engineers and workers are busy here, doing surveys and drilling.

Wang: Are they doing this in preparation for dam construction?

Xu: Exactly. They've drilled seven or eight holes along the riverbank.

Wang: I've heard that about 70 per cent of people who would be affected by the dam are in favour of it. Is this true?

Xu: No, not at all.

Wang: How many people do you think want to see the dam built?

Xu: As far as I know, most people dislike the idea \_ apart from the lazy ones, who would be keen to fritter away compensation money on eating and playing.

Wang: Do you mean that farmers dislike the idea?

Xu: Absolutely. Farmers like farmland, just as factory workers like machines.

Apart from the villagers of Xiaoshaba, nobody we interviewed in other villages had been informed or consulted about the dam projects, let alone invited to participate in any way. Nobody from the government or the project authority listens to the affected groups. They don't ask them what they think or what they want.

It has been argued that there is no need to tell the affected people anything because the final decision to build the dams has not yet been made. So why is the project authority drilling and conducting surveys, before the final decision has been made? Why hasn't the project authority conducted any research into the impacts of building the dams on the 50,000 people who would be moved, and on their culture, traditions and futures lives?

### **Years of uncertainty**

Thirdly, I had not known the extent to which the villagers of Xiaoshaba have been living in a state of anxious uncertainty since they were told about the construction of the proposed Liuku dam four years ago.

There are 105 households in Xiaoshaba village. During my visit, I noticed cracks in some

houses \_even right over people's beds. Villagers were reluctant to make repairs, however, knowing that their houses were likely to be demolished. Young people had put off weddings because no new house-building was allowed, and the local people like to hold their wedding parties in their new homes. Their houses and fields are being measured and remeasured, and they see the exploration holes being dug near their homes, but apart from that, they know nothing about what's happening with the project.

I visited about 30 households in Xiaoshaba, and found that what villagers are most concerned about is where they will go if they are moved. They all told me the same thing, that they would rather build their new houses on the rice paddy up on higher ground than relocate to an unfamiliar area. I spoke with Li Yingming, He Xuewen and Ba Fugui, who are all Lisu, about why their farmland is so important to them.

Li Yingming: We don't know anything about whether the dam will be built or not. What we are most concerned about is whether compensation money will actually reach us. We're also worried about whether we're just following in the footsteps of the villagers who were relocated for the Manwan dam and who now work as garbage scavengers. We understand that dam building is part of national development, but we also need to have our livelihoods, and to survive.

Wang Yongchen: You were first informed about the dam plans several years ago, so do you have any idea at this point how to get the compensation money?

He Xuewen: We know nothing at all about that. We know that our houses and fields will be flooded, but we don't know the rate of compensation for each mu [1/15th of a hectare] of farmland, let alone for bamboo, tung oil, banana and other fruit trees.

Wang: Do you think you will be hired as labourers on the project when it starts?

He: Generally speaking, no. We've suffered a lot from the uncertainties. We haven't been allowed to build new homes, and we don't want to put fertilizer on our fields [because they may soon be flooded]. It's time to plant paddy now, but we don't dare buy rice seed because we're not sure if we should plant at all this year. However, if we don't buy the seed now we run a risk, because it won't be available at the market much longer.

Ba Fugui: I'm worried that the government will promise us the earth before our resettlement, but that we won't get anything from them after we move. My main concern is that we'll be cheated by officials.

Wang: Why do you say that, given that you haven't even moved yet?

Ba: We're worried that we won't be adequately or properly compensated. We'll have nothing to complain about if we do get all the money \_but until we have the money in our hands, we'll feel anxious about it.

From my trip to the area, I learned that what the people living in the valley want most is to live a stable, peaceful life. But right now they're living in a state of anxiety and uncertainty because their fate is controlled by others, and because they know nothing about what the future holds for them.

## **'We cannot live without farmland'**

Fourthly, both the mainstream media and proponents of the Nu River project argue that building the dams will not only generate needed hydroelectricity but also help alleviate poverty in a desperately poor region. Whether the dams can actually do this is the subject of heated debate, but from those most directly affected by the proposed projects, I received a clear and direct answer.

I spoke to Lu Xin, a villager who would be moved for the Maji dam, and to Li Yingming and Wan Lingzhi, villagers who would be resettled for the Liuku dam. I asked whether they thought the dams would help end their poverty.

Wang Yongchen: Do you believe you will benefit from construction of the dams?

Lu Xin: No, I don't think so. Only the hydropower station will make any money from the project.

Wang: Wouldn't having dams here also generate tax revenue for the government?

Lu: Probably.

Wang: Could that extra tax revenue benefit local people?

Lu: No way.

Wang: Why not?

Lu: As you see, local officials never even show up here.

Wang: People outside the Nu valley say that building dams here will provide local people with a golden opportunity to climb out of poverty.

Li Yingming: We hope so. We trust the government, and we hope the officials will do a good job of distributing the resettlement money, which would help raise our living standards.

Wang: How can the officials do a good job on that from your point of view?

Li: They should let all the people involved know the compensation terms, and show us how to protect our own interests. We would trust them if they did that. But so far, no public meetings have been held, and we've been told nothing about the compensation terms or any other resettlement issues. And officials always take reporters to visit the same family over and over again.

Wang: People outside the valley are saying that building the dams will make you rich. What do you think about that?

Lu: How will we survive if we're moved far away and have no farmland?

He Xuewen, 75, was born into a rich farming family. He worked at the local court when he was younger, but later returned home to farm.

He Xuewen: Ordinary people lack the civil rights and the rights to express their opinions that are enshrined in the Constitution. And so we ordinary people live on tenterhooks all the time.

Wang: Do you think building the dam will make you rich?

He: Farmers love land. We cannot live without land. What ordinary people living in the Nu valley can do is farm the fields. So if we are not given reasonable compensation for the fields that will be flooded, we would prefer that the dams not be built.

Lu Xin, one of the villagers who will be affected by the Maji dam, came up with his own proposal for a reasonable compensation package, suggesting that each person moved for the dam should receive a monthly stipend equivalent to US\$56 for the rest of their lives, with the amount to rise along with the cost of living.

Villagers in Xiaoshaba who will be affected by the Liuku dam have expectations of compensation ranging from US\$6,250 to US\$10,000 per mu (1/15 ha) of farmland to be flooded. They insist that is their bottom line.

### **Skeptical engineers**

The frank comments of technical personnel working on the surveying and drilling work also took me by surprise. I had hesitated to interview these workers due to the sensitivity of the topic. But one day while I was photographing a sign at the Maji dam site, a middle-aged man approached me. He introduced himself as the manager of a team doing preparatory work for the dam.

After talking to him for a while, I was surprised to find that we held many views in common. He told me that doing these geological surveys was his "iron rice bowl" \_his secure job\_ and that he and his team had been doing the work for many years. While drilling at the Nu River dam sites, he said, they had been astonished to discover a different geological layer every 10 metres. Although his team had travelled almost everywhere in China for their work, he had never seen such a special geological case. Unfortunately, we weren't able to have dinner with him that night because he had to leave for another location. But, after saying good-bye to him, we heard him call out: "The Nu truly is rare and valuable world heritage."

Another proposed dam site, the Songta, is located in one of the most spectacular and deep gorges on the upper reaches of the Nu. I interviewed an engineer in charge of the survey and drilling work there. Standing by a cliff that had been disturbed by drilling, he told me he knew that many experts were calling for a halt to the Nu River dam plans. He said the Nu is called the "Angry River" because of the roar of its water, but that everything in this magnificent landscape will change if the dams are built and the raging river becomes a placid manmade lake. He would feel deep regret, he said, if his country loses the free-flowing Nu.

He also said that no country in the world had built a 300-metre-high dam in an area where the top geological layer consists of such a thick accumulation of debris from landslides and mud-rock flows. For this very reason, two locations selected as possible sites for the Songta dam turned out to be unsuitable and had to be abandoned. Now two other potential spots for the Songta dam are being explored. The engineer said he was worried that yet more splendid gorges and cliffs would be damaged during the extensive search for sites.

We were also told that about 20 people have already been killed in accidents related to the

surveying and drilling. The steeply sloped, deep gorges make for an extremely dangerous work environment.

After our visit to Xiaoshaba village, we travelled back to Bingzhongluo in the river's upper reaches. On the way there, our route was blocked by a mud-rock flow. While waiting for the muddy rocks to be cleared off the road, I was told that a number of people living in the Nu valley had migrated to the Simao area, about 500 kilometres to the south, but that many had later decided to return. I wondered why people from the Nu valley had not wanted to stay in Simao, where the living conditions are regarded as being much better. I decided to try and interview some of the returnees.

In Luzhang township, Lushui county, I hired a taxi to take me to a small village where some of the residents had returned from Simao. I was taken to the foot of a mountain, but discovered to my dismay that the slope was too steep for me to climb. For the first time in 20 years as a professional journalist, I was not able to just press on, and go farther and higher. Luckily, my trip was rescued by a woman working the slopes who called to her neighbours to come down the mountain and meet me halfway. The following is the transcript of a conversation with Mu Jiawu, a local farmer who had moved to Simao, but returned.

Wang Yongchen: How old are you?

Mu Jiawu: 35.

Wang: How many people are in your family?

Mu: Four.

Wang: What's your nationality?

Mu: I am Han but my wife and kids are Lisu.

Wang: Where were you living before?

Mu: Changlin county in Baoshan prefecture.

Wang: Why are you here?

Mu: I married a local woman.

Wang: Why did you move to Simao?

Mu: Life is hard here. We don't have enough to eat because we have only one mu of land per head. The government encouraged us to leave, saying that living conditions were much better in Simao.

Wang: How many households went there at that time?

Mu: Seven or eight.

Wang: And how many of those households have returned so far?



Mu: Three.

Wang: Did your wife and children go there with you?

Mu: Yes. We went in February 1997.

Wang: When did you come back?

Mu: 1999.

Wang: Why did you come back?

Mu: The government promised to give us something and do something for us, but they did nothing. We earned only 173 yuan [US\$21] a month, but the four people in my family need at least 125 yuan [US\$15] to buy 100 jin of grain a month, so that left little money for clothing, let alone medicine and so forth. In a word, we were unable to live there on just 173 yuan.

Wang: What did you do there?

Mu: We grew coffee.

Wang: Could your children go to school there?

Mu: There was a school there, but we couldn't afford it. Even the fee for pre-schoolers was 300 yuan [US\$37] per pupil, which was too much for us.

Wang: What could you do after your return?

Mu: I farmed land belonging to my wife's brother before our migration, but the land was taken away from us after we left. So now we have nothing, and no choice but to try and reclaim wasteland on the slopes.

Wang: How's your life up on the mountain?

Mu: The biggest problem is that we have to transport water from down below, about a kilometre away. We use a horse to do it.

Wang: Have you heard anything about the construction of a dam on the river below?

Mu: My house would not be affected, but the land that other people have hired me to farm would be. What I am most concerned about is that we will not be allowed to live here any more and will be required to move. They measured my house last summer.

Wang: Do you believe the government can do anything for you?

Mu: We have no drinking water so the eight households on the mountain have pooled 2,000 yuan [US\$250], and asked the local government to build a pipeline for us. Two months have gone by but they've still done nothing for us. We've already lost confidence in the local government.

Wang: Do you have another sources of income apart from farming and reclaiming land on the slopes?

Mu: No, none at all.

Wang: Can your children go to school?

Mu: My kids should go to school no matter how poor we are.

I also interviewed another person, San Guicai.

Wang Yongchen: What's your nationality?

San Guicai: Lisu.

Wang: How old are you?

San: 53.

Wang: Why did you go to Simao that time?

San: Because we were having a hard time living here. My family had five or six mu of farmland, but got little grain from the land.

Wang: Did you go there with the first group mobilized by the local government?

San: I didn't go with the first wave of migrants. My family went with the second group.

Wang: What problems did you encounter there?

San: We earned only 180 yuan [US\$22.50] a month but there are five people in my family, including me. I couldn't afford to send my three kids to school there. Another problem was that the government had promised to undertake development projects there, but nothing came of that plan after we got there.

Mu: Higher authorities ordered a halt to the development program.

Wang: Do you lease farmland down below?

San: Yes.

Wang: What will happen if the land is flooded?

Mu: We'll lose our livelihoods once again.

### **EIA law: little impact**

On Feb. 22 this year, the State Environmental Protection Administration issued "[provisional guidelines](#) on public participation in environmental impact assessments," which can be seen as an important step toward allowing citizens to participate in environmental protection in China.

This was the first document focusing on public participation issued by a ministry of the State Council, and also the first official document in China to legitimize the public's right to participate in the field of the environmental protection.

It is a pity, though, that few people living in the Nu valley know anything about the environmental assessment law, let alone the recently released guidelines on public participation. Before my trip to the region, I had formulated a question, "Do you know about China's Environmental Impact Assessment law?" But after asking a dozen Nu valley residents that question, and being met by blank stares, I stopped asking it.

The one exception was in Gongshan county, where two people told me they have heard about the law, though knew little about it. The two identified themselves as being among those who would be relocated for the Maji dam. One was chairman of the county branch of the "Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee of Protestant Churches of China"; the other was a forest ranger in the county's Cikai township.

While I was conducting interviews in Bingzhongluo, I asked a young man if he was happy with the idea of the Gongshan county seat being relocated to Bingzhongluo, one of the most beautiful places in the upper reaches of the Nu valley, if the Maji dam is built. He said he was open-minded about things because he has travelled widely around the country, but that he would much rather look out onto his village landscape than onto a new town.

My trip to the Nu valley raised a number of questions in my mind that I continue to ponder:

- What changes are about to take place in the lives of the people of the Nu valley?
- When will the villagers of Xiaoshaba, who have been forbidden to build anything for the past four years, be allowed to put up new houses?
- Since the government has announced a people-centred approach to development, why have the authorities focused solely on "exploring" the mountains, while showing no similar interest in learning more about the lives of the local people?
- Will we still see in the future a free-flowing Nu that continues to change colour with the seasons?
- And will that "dream" of turning Nu River water into oil come true?

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**Footnote:**

<sup>1</sup> Under China's household-registration system, children of mixed marriages can elect to belong to the "nationality" (ethnic group) of either parent.

*Translated by Three Gorges Probe*