

Waves of ethnic discontent rise up against Tiger Leaping Gorge dam
RAY CHEUNG in Zhongdian
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There is a powerful undercurrent flowing through southwestern Yunnan's Jinsha River.

However, it is not caused by the 2,290km waterway that forms the middle reaches of the Yangtze River but by the people who live, farm and fish along its banks.

Mostly members of the Naxi, Tibetan, Bai, Yi, Miao and Lisu ethnic minorities, they are up in arms about a proposal by the provincial government and Huaneng Energy Corp to build a 276-metre-high dam on its famed Tiger Leaping Gorge, part of an eight-dam project on the Jinsha's middle reaches.

Supporters pitch the Tiger Leaping Gorge dam as a hydroelectric project and a water-supply scheme. Yunnan party secretary Bai Enpei said the dams would help meet the water needs of the provincial capital, Kunming and flush pollutants from the city's Dianchi Lake.

The entire scheme received preliminary approval from the State Reform and Development Commission in 2002 and construction was scheduled to start this year.

But villagers upstream of Tiger Leaping Gorge see the dam as a blatant land grab that will destroy their livelihoods and culture.

A middle-aged Bai farmer from Chezhou village, 200km upstream from the proposed dam site, asked: How can the dam supporters want to take our land and stop us from farming? This is our life. Even the Japanese invaders did not dare force us off our land.

With his wife, 83-year old mother and two sons, he lives in a spacious courtyard home between a forested mountainside, and wheat and rice fields, with the Jinsha flowing 100 metres away.

The headwaters of the Jinsha, along with the Lanchang and Nu rivers, are classified as a United Nations World Heritage site.

People from all these different cultures live in harmony here because they are united by the land, said an ethnic Naxi anthropologist from nearby Zhongdian county. That harmony will be gone forever once the land is gone and the people are uprooted.

He said the scheme was another example of the Han majority bullying the ethnic minorities.

Yunnan and Huaneng officials have adopted a strategy of stealth to get the dams built with as little resistance as possible. They did not directly reveal their plans to the locals; the only public statement on the scheme was a short announcement published last February in an obscure provincial newspaper. The authorities also started geological work at the gorge site and actual construction at the Jinanqiao site.

At Tiger Leaping Gorge, workers can be seen drilling dozens of deep tunnels into the sheer cliffs above the Jinsha River. The holes are to test the mountain geology so that the best site for the dam can be found, said a worker at one tunnel.

A Huaneng spokesman refused to comment on details of the dam plans, only to say the company was acting in accordance with the law and central government policy.

But residents have fought back. Taking their cue from other recent anti-dam campaigns, the locals joined forces with environmental groups in Kunming and Beijing. They organised a high-profile, nationwide media campaign, held press conferences and arranged for journalist visits to the Jinsha River and Tiger Leaping Gorge.

They also told other villagers about the scheme's dangers, relaying the experiences of past dam projects where residents failed to receive promised compensation.

We not only have a right to know what the government's plans are, but have our voices heard and be part of the decision-making process, said a Zhongdian farmer active in the campaign.

A key weapon in their fight against the project is a State Council order - issued in June - declaring all rural projects must be made public, and residents consulted.

The effort paid off in September when the influential Southern Weekend newspaper reported that construction at the Jinanqiao site had started without central government approval. The report ignited a State Council investigation, with Beijing officials pledging the decision on the dams would be delayed until 2008, following a thorough scientific and social assessment.

But despite the fierce opposition, experts said the dams were likely to be

built because of powerful interests behind the scheme. Huaneng is headed by Li Xiaopeng, son of former premier Li Peng.

Residents said provincial public security authorities started intimidating opponents. But they vowed to fight the project to the end.

Tireless efforts, then early death

RAY CHEUNG

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When Xiao Liangzhong returned from Beijing to visit his family's farm in Chezhou village on the banks of the Jinsha River in Yunnan in early December, his parents were worried.

His father, Xiao Jialin, was concerned about the health of the young anthropologist. Xiao Liangzhong, a member of the Bai ethnic minority, had been leading a fight against plans to build a dam downstream on the famed Tiger Leaping Gorge.

Backed by the Yunnan government and the Huaneng Energy Corporation, the project is part of an eight-dam power scheme for the Jinsha, which forms the middle reaches of the Yangtze River.

The Tiger Leaping Gorge dam would flood close to 400 sq km of land, inundating Chezhou in the process, and forcing out 100,000 people.

To stop the project, Mr Xiao worked day and night, contacting environmentalists and journalists. His father begged him to rest. I told Liangzhong he needed to rest his mind. He could not keep on going like this, he said.

His mother, Sun Yuqiong , was anxious about his safety.

Aren't you going to get targeted? she asked her son before he returned to Beijing.

He replied: I will be OK. If I die, it will be for our land and the people of our river basin.

That was the last time they saw their son alive.

At 4am on January 5, one month after his 32nd birthday, Xiao suddenly experienced convulsions after working late into the night in his Beijing apartment.

I'm hurting, he told his wife, Ma Qian, while gasping for breath. He was dead within five minutes.

The official cause of death was a cardiac arrest.

His ashes were buried above Chezhou where he played as a child.

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