



# After the Deluge: A longitudinal study of resettlement at the Three Gorges Dam, China

BROOKE WILMSEN\*

*La Trobe University, Australia*

**Summary.** — In 2015 the construction of the Three Gorges Dam in China was completed. For more than two decades, the 1.13 million people it displaced have been rebuilding their livelihoods. To assist, the Chinese government used policy and incentives to stimulate the local economy. Whether the resettlers benefited from such initiatives is not yet understood. This paper offers the first longitudinal analysis of the resettlers' livelihoods. The study follows up with 521 households that participated in a survey in 2003. The initial survey, conducted within five years of their displacement, found that despite improvements to infrastructure and housing, incomes generally declined, livelihoods were dismantled, and permanent employment was replaced by more temporary employment. Resettlers were struggling to meet even their basic needs. However, eight years on from the original survey, this study finds the gains to be substantial. Within the sample groups, income inequality has declined, food is more secure and wellbeing is improved on 2003 levels. What is more, incomes have generally grown and are positively correlated to employment in an enterprise. It appears that the Chinese government's resolve to stimulate the regional economy and to turn the crank on enterprise investment has paid off in this region of the Three Gorges Dam.  
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## 1. INTRODUCTION

“China’s Great Wall across the Yangtze”, “ticking time bomb”, “marvel of engineering” (Stone, 2008, p. 628), “China’s Great Dam”, “River Dragon”, “Mao’s Dream”, but above all the Three Gorges Project is most commonly known as the “world’s largest dam” (Ni & Shao, 2013; Park, Chang, Lek, Cao, & Brosse, 2003; Stone, 2008, p. 628; Xu, Tan, & Yang, 2013).<sup>1</sup> It drew intense criticism internationally for the wide range of risks and uncertainties it posed. Among the controversies (environmental damage, species loss, cultural destruction, technological viability, safety, sedimentation, and security risks), perhaps the most contentious issue was the displacement of more than 1.13 million people.

Many experts were concerned about the effects of the displacement and resettlement, particularly on farmers. Fearnside (1988, p. 627) anticipated that the rural population would be the most difficult to resettle, but that urban resettlement would be “relatively easy.” Stein (1998, p. 8) predicted that the “Three Gorges displacement [was] unlikely to have a better record on income rehabilitation than previous projects which were handled poorly.” Reflecting on the rural component of the resettlement Jun (1997, p. 92) said, “if history provides any lessons it is that a tragedy involving more than half a million people is in the making.” Chau (1995) predicted a cycle of poverty related to resettlement (see Figure 2, p. 101), deforestation, soil erosion and food production.

Concerns about the resettlement were derived from analyses of the environmental conditions at the Three Gorges, the number of people to be displaced, planning frailties and the Chinese government’s past record of resettlement. In the first instance, the harsh biophysical environment and dense population (Chau, 1995) limited the carrying capacity of the region (Fearnside, 1988). However, there were also those who supposed that the number of resettlers had been undercalculated and so they predicted that economic recovery would be difficult (Jun, 1997). Compensation was also regarded as insufficient (Jun, 1997) as was the government’s financial

commitment to the resettlement (Chau, 1995). The use of coercive tactics in the displacement called into question the government’s handling of the process (Chau, 1995).

Past attempts to relocate people and satisfactorily restore livelihoods further undermined public confidence in the state-directed resettlement. From 1949 to 1989 impoverishment was common among those displaced by reservoirs (Li, Waley, & Rees, 2002). In 1989, China’s leading poverty relief agency found that more than seven million people, approximately 70% of China’s 10.2 million reservoir resettlers, were living in extreme poverty and suffering from severe shortages of food, clothes and shelter (Jun, 1999). Chau (1995) estimated that 30% of China’s involuntary resettlements had failed. However, projects like the World Bank funded Xiaolangdi dam reported better outcomes for resettlers<sup>2</sup> (World Bank, 2007), but such cases tended to be exceptional. Even so, the impoverishment caused by decades of resettlement has been intergenerational. In recent years, the Chinese government has recognized the lasting impacts of displacement and begun providing retrospective financial support to former project regions.

For the assurances seemed minimal, it is unsurprising that the resettlement at the Three Gorges Project (henceforth, TGP) faced difficulties early on. The regulations developed by the State Council to guide the resettlement were promulgated in 1993—*The Regulations on Resettlement for the Construction of the TGP on the Yangtze River*—henceforth, the 1993 *Regulations*. The original plan was to resettle

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displaced households “nearby” their old home.<sup>3</sup> Rural resettlement relied on clearing “reclaimable” land (land not in productive use) to replace inundated farmland, and to intensify agricultural practices.<sup>4</sup> Urban resettlers were to be employed in government factories.<sup>5</sup> However, in 1998 the Yangtze flooded, taking the lives of some 3,000 people and forcing the government to re-evaluate the fragility of the environment. It determined that clearing the land and farming the slopes caused serious land degradation, which contributed to the ferocity of the floods (Heggelund, 2004). In response the State Council enacted the National Forest Conservation Program (NFCP), which oversaw the closure of hillsides to facilitate reforestation and the restriction of cultivation (Fu, 1999; Duan, personal communication, August 16th, 2004). Rural resettlement was reliant on opening forests for cultivation but the NFCP reduced the amount of land that could accommodate farming.

At a working meeting about the TGP resettlement in May 1999, former Premier Zhu Rongji announced that there would be “two adjustments” to the 1993 Regulations, henceforth the 2001 Regulations (Heggelund, 2004). The first was to resettle people outside of the reservoir area because the environment of the Three Gorges was degraded<sup>6</sup> (Heggelund, 2004). About 190,000 rural residents (about 15% of the total) were resettled to 11 provinces under a government organized program (Xu *et al.*, 2013, p. 116). The second was to close or restructure enterprises that were polluting the environment and/or running at a loss.<sup>7</sup> Under this adjustment, 1,599 enterprises were reduced to some 200<sup>8</sup> (Duan, 2003, personal communication, September 24th, 2003), which reduced the supply of jobs to the resettlers.<sup>9</sup> Although these two adjustments were aimed squarely at the TGP resettlement they reflected broad praxis at the time. Beginning in the 1990s, the Chinese government was increasingly concerned with combating environmental degradation (Ho, 2001) and from the mid-1990s State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) all over China were either restructured or closed down to improve productivity and profitability (Pannell, 2002).

Perhaps what was most significant about the resettlement policy at the TGP was that it was development-oriented. According to the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank it is “good practice” to partner with affected communities so that they are “materially supported with mechanisms for long-term and regional benefit sharing” (Mathur, 2013, p. 188). Resettlers become “development partners” (Mathur, 2013, p. 188). To this end, China instituted a range of measures to develop the TGP region and share the benefits of development with the affected people. These are stipulated in both the 1993 Regulations and 2001 Regulations and include: (i) allocating income from power generation to the inundated areas; (ii) reallocating tax collected from electricity generated by the TGP to the inundated areas; (iii) providing electricity to the affected areas; (iv) providing a range of funds for support; (v) tax exemptions and reductions; (vi) preferential employment; and (vii) the provision of loans for the development of technology, agriculture, animal husbandry, fisheries, rural enterprises and tourism. The State Council designed two main programs to share the benefits of the TGP. The first was the Partnership Support Program (PSP) (*dui kou zhi yuan*) which encouraged eastern provinces to fund counties in the Three Gorges (Steil & Duan, 2002). The second was the Development Assistance Fund (DAF), also called the Later State Support Fund (*Yimin houqi fuchi jijin*) (Heggelund, 2004). Through these two schemes the State Council aimed to maintain and enhance the living standards of resettlers and the greater Yangtze basin.

## 2. RESETTLEMENT THEORY

The development-oriented approach taken by the Chinese government to support the affected population and the region reflects conceptual theory at the time. Born out of an impressive ethnographic and sociological record, these theories still inform our understanding of involuntary resettlement today. The first model, proposed by Scudder and Colson in 1982, uses data from a number of dam resettlements to predict how communities, households, and individuals respond to resettlement. Four stages of resettlement are observed: recruitment; transition; preferential development and finally; handing over/incorporation (Scudder & Colson, 1982). The second, proposed some 15 years later, is the Impoverishment, Risks and Reconstruction (IRR) model (Cernea, 1997). Concerned by the lack of an actionable framework, Cernea deconstructs the multifaceted process of displacement into its principal components: (a) landlessness; (b) joblessness; (c) homelessness; (d) marginalization; (e) food insecurity; (f) increased morbidity and mortality; (g) loss of access to common property resources; and (h) community disarticulation (Cernea, 1997).

Despite facing modest critiques (de Wet, 2001; Muggah, 2000), the IRR model remains the most influential contribution to contemporary resettlement studies, informing the praxis of large development banks. In fact, it was another 12 years until another substantial conceptual model was added to the field. In 2009, Downing and Garcia-Downing (2009) enriched the theoretical context with their “routine and dissonant cultures” model. It considers the disruption of culture caused by reordering space–time relationships so that traditional coping mechanisms and social networks are changed. At first a dissonant culture is formed and then, over time, a new routine culture (Downing & Garcia-Downing, 2009). Using this model, Downing and Garcia-Downing identify steps to avoid cultural dissonance and establish a new routine culture.

Perhaps the key unifying assertion between these three social scientists is that resettlement does not simply involve paying off the affected community, but instead requires a long-term commitment to the livelihoods of the affected population. As Scudder and Colson (1982, p. 287) note “in most programs of forced removal far too much emphasis is placed on the provision of housing and far too little on the generation of economic opportunities for relocatees.” Like Scudder and Colson, Cernea (1997, p. 1569) believes that resettlement practice should move from a welfarist approach to one based on long-term development: “protecting and reconstructing displaced peoples’ livelihoods is the central requirement of equitable resettlement program.” Resettlement operations should be planned as development projects in their own right “benefiting resettlers” (Cernea, 1997, p. 1579). This tenet extends to the Downing and Garcia-Downing model. Psycho-social-cultural considerations are central here and, with this in mind, they propose that the affected population not only shares in project benefits, but also manage and control such benefits. Although they are clear that meeting material needs does mean that social recovery occurs, they recognize that without viable livelihoods “articulation of a new routine culture is more difficult” (Downing & Garcia-Downing, 2009, p. 238).

Contrary to the theoretical frameworks described above that conceptualize resettlement as a long-term transitional process, involuntary resettlement is usually planned and implemented according to the timelines of the infrastructure project—typically two to six years. That the TGP was planned and implemented with a view to the long-term viability of the region (as evidenced through the PSP and the DAF),

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