

## **Three Gorges Dam: A Costly Political Project with an Uncertain Future**

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Regions along the Yangtze River, the longest river in Asia, have experienced severe flooding this summer. Hubei Province, still reeling from the aftermath of the coronavirus outbreak, was hit by floods in late June; Jiangxi Province raised the flood-control response from Level II to Level I, the highest flooding warning, on July 11; further downstream, Xinanjiang Dam in Zhejiang Province opened all nine of its floodgates to discharge water on July 8, leaving 300,000 people in danger.

Adding to the complexity is the water discharge from Three Gorges Dam, where three floodgates were opened on July 7 to protect it from damage, reported Taiwan News on July 9. Once celebrated as a high-profile political project, Three Gorges Dam was claimed to rein in major floods that occur once every 10,000 years, as reported by Xinhua on June 1, 2003,

Within several years, however, its function was downplayed. Chinese authority announced in May 2007

that the dam was able to withstand floods that happen once every 1,000 years, In October 2008, the term was quietly reduced to floods once every 100 years.

The changes in tones highlight the project's over-hyped benefits versus its high price. Constructed between 1994 and 2003, the Three Gorges Dam cost over 200 billion yuan (or \$32 billion) with millions of people relocated. Despite the huge sacrifice from the Chinese people, Chinese media hardly mentioned any drawback of the project, let alone long-term economical, social, and ecological risks.

Li Rui, the former vice-minister of Water Conservation, was a strong opponent of the project. His last article about the project was written in April 1996, two years after the project started. He was then told to keep quiet on this matter by then Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leader Jiang Zemin.

When his book On the Project of Three Gorges Dam was published in Hong Kong, he wrote, "I have said all I could say. My sincere heart could be seen by both the divine and mankind." Worried about the dam's future, he also told his granddaughter, "If the Three Gorges Dam causes major

issues one day, please remember that your grandfather was always against it.”

## **An Exception to the Great Leap Forward Movement**

One of the most comprehensive reviews about this project was Li Rui’s article titled “The History of Three Gorge Dam that I Know of.”

When Mao Zedong visited the Yangtze River in 1953, Lin Yishan from the Ministry of Water Resources suggested building a major dam to resolve the flooding issue in the region. Mao agreed with the idea and, as he swam in the Yangtze River in June 1956, he wrote a poem of blocking the river with high dams for a “high flat lake.” People’s Daily followed closely and proposed on September 1, 1953, to finalize plans for the Phase 1 project.

Li Rui, chief of General Administration of Hydro-power, opposed the idea since Lin’s plan to build a 235-meter high dam would submerge about 10 cities including Chongqing with the relocation of over two million residents. He also consulted experts in this field, who confirmed his concerns.

Li Rui wrote an article in 1956 and submitted it to People’s Daily, but then-premier Zhou Enlai didn't allow it to be

published on the grounds that this project was supported by Mao. Nonetheless, Li Rui and some other experts published several low-profile articles on this matter.

During a high profile meeting in Nanjing, Jiangsu Province in January 1958, both Lin Yishan and Li Rui presented their ideas to the Politburo. After Lin advocated for the dam project, Li shared his concerns. His main points were:

- \* Yangtze River has immense and rapid water flow, resulting in a strong self-cleaning ability. If a dam were to be built, it would have damaged the river's self-cleaning ability and possibly lead to a worse flood outcome.

- \* Yangtze River has many tributaries especially in the provinces of Sichuan, Hubei, Hunan, and Jiangxi, with about 50% of the water coming from downstream of the proposed location of the dam at Three Gorges. Therefore, even if the dam were to be built, it could do very little to prevent flooding in the downstream of the dam.

- \* Lin argued that the dam would help prevent and control flood, such as the largest flood in recent history that happened in 1870 in upstream Chuan River in Sichuan Province. Li countered that embankment remains the major flood prevention method, and even if the dam were there in

1870, due to its location, it would not have prevented that largest flood in upstream Chuan River.

- \* A dam of 200 meters or higher would require relocation of over one million people, which is not a trivial matter.

- \* A high profile dam could easily become a target during wartime.

Mao supported Li Rui's arguments, especially the last one, and dismissed the dam idea. At later Politburo meetings that year, such as the one in Chengdu in March and another one in Beidaihe in August, "Numerous resolutions were passed for the Great Leap Forward movement, the one related to Three Gorges [of not building a dam] was the only outlier. It was probably the right decision made in those meetings," recalled Li Rui.

As the political movement advanced, however, Li Rui and some other officials were targeted in 1959 for not keeping up with the Party. Li Rui was stripped of all titles and sent to rural areas to do hard labor. His daughter initially abandoned him because he had been declared an enemy of the state, but later helped him after the Cultural Revolution was over in 1976.

When Li Rui returned to Beijing in January 1979, he was appointed a Vice Minister of Water Resources and Electric Power Ministry. By then, he learned that Gezhouba Dam, another project on the Yangtze River, had been built in 1970. Due to major issues, however, it was delayed by two years and was not fully completed until 1988.

## **A Political Project**

Deng Xiaoping visited Three Gorges in July 1980 after he regained power and an official told him that a dam there would allow 10,000-ton ships to arrive in Chongqing from the ocean. “This was cheating since even downstream bridges in Wuhan and Nanjing only allow 5,000-ton ships,” Li Rui wrote in his memoir.

Nonetheless, Deng specifically told then-premier Li Peng in February 1984 to launch the project. Sun Yueqi from the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and other officials explored the area extensively multiple times and wrote numerous reports to oppose the project. These reports were collected in a book and published in early 1989, which was soon banned when the Tiananmen Square Massacre took place months later.

The Three Gorges project team then produced a documentary and showed it to top Party leaders in 1991. Wang Zhen, one of the veteran generals and then Vice President of China, contacted Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Li Peng to start the project. Since then, opponents were removed from nearly all forms of discussions.

The project was finally approved in a rubber stamp process by the National People's Congress in 1992. Those with objections were barred from the meetings and the discussions focused on how to build it instead of evaluating its risk and benefits. Moreover, top leaders including Jiang Zemin specifically asked attendees to support this political project. Still, only 67% of the attendees voted yes for this project.

## **Scientifically Unjustified**

Scholars who objected to the Three Gorges project also faced serious consequences. Huang Wanli, who received a master's degree in hydrology from Cornell University and then a doctor's degree in engineering from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in the 1930s, had conducted comprehensive research of both the Yellow River and Yangtze River. Four years after becoming a professor of Tsinghua University in 1953, he was labeled as a Rightist

by Mao Zedong and targeted for being unwilling to align with the Party's tone.

Huang found that the Chuan River, a branch of the Yangtze River, had pebbles and grit in the bed. Were a high dam to be built, migration of pebbles—about 100 million tons per year—would be trapped and extend backward upstream. This would ruin adjacent farmland and turn large areas in Sichuan Province into swamps, not to mention irreversible ecological damage and impairment of river transport.

Despite his reputation, Huang was mistreated all along during numerous political campaigns. It was not until 1998 that 87-year-old Huang was allowed to teach graduate students in Tsinghua, three years before he passed away.

When interviewed by the Voice of America in July 2019, Huang's daughter Xiaolu said her father had written 6 letters opposing the dam. "If they give me half an hour, I can convince top leaders why we should not build it," Huang once said. But the CCP never gave him the opportunity.

Li Rui had observed the same darkness in the CCP political system, which he described as "correct opinions are



rejected while incorrect ones are favors. Similarly, capable people are suppressed and incapable ones are promoted.”

## **Defying Nature**

Pan Jiazhen, former Vice President of the Chinese Academy of Engineering, used to be a strong opponent of the Three Gorges Dam. He once listed 20 harms of the project, such as submersion of land and forest, relocation of a large number of residents, potential earthquakes, loss of cultural heritage sites, a decline in water quality, and potential collapse of the dam.

Pan, however, later became the technical chief of the project. He gave three reasons, all of which were political, for why he turned from an opponent to a strong advocate of the dam project. First, “Science can solve all problems and mankind will conquer nature.” Second, 20 drawbacks of the dam could not be an excuse for not following the Party lines. Third, opposing voices to the dam were mainly from the so-called anti-China forces. “On behalf of the Chinese people,” Pan declared “I would never allow the river to run at will without constraint.”

Wang Weiluo, an expert of Three Gorges Dam, revealed in his book that the project was a deal between former CCP

leaders Jiang Zemin and Li Peng. Li helped Jiang to arise as top CCP leader during the Tienanmen Square Massacre in 1989, while Jiang in turn advocated for the project on behalf of Li, who was in charge of electricity in China.

Shortly after being appointed the top CCP leader, Jiang visited the Three Gorges for the project and silenced both Li Rui and Huang Wanli for expressing different opinions. Under Jiang's influence, the National People's Congress approved the project in 1992, but with an unprecedented low approval rate.

Data released by China's National Audit Office in June 2013 showed at least 76 corruption cases related to the Three Gorges Dam project. There were 113 people involved with a sum of 3.4 billion yuan (or \$490 million). Inspection officers and the National Audit Office acknowledged that the project had become a tool for high officials to turn public lands and other resources for their own profits.

Furthermore, the dam, which generates about 20 billion yuan (or \$2.9 billion) worth of electricity per year, has been privatized, although its earlier investment came from public funds. That is, after contributing tremendously to the project including forced relocation, ordinary people not

only didn't receive discounts on electricity fees as promised early, but they instead had experienced more frequent droughts, high temperatures, flooding, and earthquakes.

## **Safety Becoming a Big Concern**

Huang Wanli, who knew well the drawbacks of the dam, once predicted 12 consequences of the dam. The first 11 were: the collapse of downstream banks, affecting voyage, the issue of residents' relocation, silting problems, poor water quality, lower electricity generated, abnormal climate, frequent earthquakes, spreading of schistosomiasis (a disease), the deteriorating of the ecological environment, and upstream flooding. All of them later became reality. The last prediction was, when the risks exceeded benefits, the dam would be blown off.



*Google maps of Three Gorges Dam: left taken in 2009 and right was taken in 2018*

One comparison of Google maps of the dam taken in 2009 and in 2018, was recently circulating online, which drew broad concerns. The earlier image in 2009 showed the dam was straight, but the later one in 2018 showed a severely deformed structure. Chinese authorities gave several explanations, but none of them made much sense. The situation is more suspicious when considering what the Chinese authority said in 2010, “The dam has limited capability of handling flooding. Better not count too much on it.”

It was also worth noting that despite such a high-profile project, no top CCP leaders attended the ceremony upon its completion in 2009. No official certificate of completion was issued for the project, either. Netizens believed that this was because no one wanted to be held responsible for the time bomb.

To some degree, such cover-ups by the CCP officials are similar to what happened during the corona-virus outbreak in China. After a series of political campaigns that targeted intellectuals(1950s), destroyed cultures (1960s-1970s), suppressed a democratic movement (1980s), and persecuted

religious groups (such as Falun Gong practitioners), the CCP did not spare China's lands and rivers, either.

Sanmenxia Dam, a major project on the Yellow River, was also politically based and it started in 1957. Because of opposing the project, Huang Wangli was attacked by the CCP for decades. Zhang Guangdou, a strong advocate who manipulated numbers for the project to pass, was instead constantly promoted. Within two years after the dam was completed, problems surfaced in 1962 making Mao Zedong so disappointed that he talked about blowing up the dam. But proven facts did not change the fate of Huang and Zhang, and the CCP did not openly admit the project was a mistake until 2004.

Beside dams, Pan and Zhang also followed the Party line closely in other aspects. Pan was Vice Chairman of China's Anti-Cult Association (an organization of the CCP that facilitates the persecution of Falun Gong) while Zhang was also a key member of the organization.

As the CCP continues to harm the Chinese citizens, and now the people of the world as seen in the coronavirus pandemic, one may find rejecting the CCP is a major step for our society to go back to normal.

<http://en.minghui.org/html/articles/2020/8/12/186307.html>