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GRASPING WATER



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from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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The cover image is of Delta of the Yellow River, China (top) and Delta of the Zambezi River, Mozambique (bottom). Landsat imagery courtesy of NASA Goddard Space Flight Center and U.S. Geological Survey.

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FEATURE

THE VANISHING

By Ian Teh

In 1999, I read in a newspaper about the contentious Three Gorges Dam project. China's leaders had a grand vision of transforming the Yangtze River into the biggest artificial lake in the world in an attempt to control recurring floods and to generate an estimated 10 percent increase in hydropower energy. To achieve this, they would have to resettle 1.5 million people and submerge 13 cities, 400 towns, 1,352 villages,

1,283 archaeological sites and 30,000 hectares of agricultural land. The scale was incomprehensible to my mind and reason enough for me to visit the Yangtze with the intention to document some of the enormous changes in progress on the landscape and its people.

For four years I made trips to the affected area on the Yangtze River, compiling material for



The Yangtze River. The construction of the Three Gorges Dam, the largest in the world will displace 1.5 million people and submerge cities, towns and villages, the collective total exceeding over a 1000 along a 700km stretch on China's longest river. Chongqing, China. 2000.

my series *The Vanishing: Altered Landscapes* and *Displaced Lives*. Taking the boat the 700 km from Chongqing to Yichang, I would stop at various ports along the way. On the one hand there was this grand dream of progress, promoted by the government on billboards along the riverbanks; on the other there was the evident cost of such a grandiose project. Towns once full of life became eerily quiet; occasionally there would be the sound of explosions as buildings were demolished. Migrant labourers armed with sledgehammers, wearing only sandals on their feet, worked till dusk dismantling properties and collecting scrap to sell. Fearful faces would occasionally peer out from half-destroyed homes watching this incredible transformation. These were the unlucky families who had not received compensation—either because of corrupt local bureaucracy or because they had simply fallen through the net. One woman broke down crying when I asked her about her plans. She had moved to Badong after divorcing her husband and supported her two sons by selling tofu that she made in the town market. On the wall of her rented accommodation was a Chinese character in broad red brushstrokes—it said “dismantle.” Ineligible for compensation because her residential status was for her previous home in another town, and without enough savings to move, she was destitute.

The images depict the affected communities, each undergoing transformation whilst cityscapes become construction sites before settling into their new form as walls and hollowed spaces for a giant new reservoir. Whilst this is just one significant aspect of a much larger and complex story, the story ultimately leads us to ask if these sacrifices were all worth it? Official estimates put the cost of production at \$23 billion USD, however international experts believe it cost more than double that. Taking more than a decade to complete, it now produces more than eight times

the capacity of the U.S.’s Hoover Dam and about three percent of China’s energy needs. The raised water levels also increased the amount of cargo transported across the river to 50 million tons, triple the maximum annual amount prior to the dam’s construction.

Since the dam started working at full capacity in 2012, a further 100,000 people will have to be moved over the next three to five years because of landslides and bank collapses. It is estimated that the number of landslides and other natural disasters have increased by 70 percent since the reservoir filled up in 2010, perhaps a sign of the inherent instability for any large scale project tasked with storing such enormous amounts of water. Over 265 billion gallons of raw sewage are dumped into the Yangtze annually, which now collects in the reservoir; however the government insists new sewage treatment plants have this under control. Beyond this, although there has been no concrete evidence, there has been talk about the scale of the project being linked to the Sichuan earthquake, and exacerbating the 2011 drought which in turn negated most of the dam’s plus points: ships were stranded and central and eastern China faced a power shortage.

Perhaps a telling sign of the seriousness of the problems that continue to plague the project is the reluctant but necessarily vague admission issued by China’s State Council: “Although the Three Gorges project provides huge comprehensive benefits, urgent problems must be resolved regarding the smooth relocation of residents, ecological protection and geological disaster prevention.” Looking back, I see a dream of a nation, but also the cost, not only for then, but for all of it that still continues to the present day.



A worker returning home after a day's work at the Three Gorges Dam construction site. In the distance, a three-storey boat is dwarfed by the gigantic 1.3 mile wide construction which has nearly blocked off the river. Although the final completion date for the dam is not until 2009, it has been operational since 1st June 2003. Sandouping, China. 2002.



*An old passenger boat on the waters of the Yangtze River by the Three Gorges.
Hubei, China. 2000.*



*The last vestiges of normal life in a town that has virtually been destroyed. The mass exodus of its population has turned the old section of the city into a ghost town. Wanzhou bridge once the defining landmark of the city is now weeks away from being dynamited.
Wanzhou, China. 2002.*



The destroyed old city of Wanzhou, only a few remaining local inhabitants are left behind. Mostly migrant workers remain to dismantle the city by hand and occasionally by using explosives. Wanzhou, China. 2002.



Recent settlers from the new city return home after a visit to the banks of the river. In the foreground the old city of Fuling has been razed and the land reclaimed to protect it from the eventual rising waters. The front row of darker buildings are all that is left of the old city. Higher up in the distance, a strip of lighter buildings mark the beginning of the new city. Fuling, China. 2003.



Migrant worker and travellers. Boat services to Yichang are disrupted due to the completion of the dam and the last section of the journey replaced by bus services. Yichang, China. 2003.



*Migrant worker heading to the local docks after the recent demolition of the town.
Zigui, China. 2000.*



Two brothers playing in their home. Their family are one of the last remaining inhabitants in this partially demolished town. Badong, China. 2002.



Families relocating by boat. Yangtze River, China. 2001.



Labourers unloading sacks of salt from a nearby barge. Many of the labourers in cities and towns along the river come from surrounding villages in the hills, they flock to the larger towns for jobs and better wages. Yun Yang, China. 2000.



Migrant workers carrying a heavy concrete block using a modified traditional shoulder pole. They sing in unison to coordinate their movements. The destruction and and relocation of the population living on the banks of the Yangtze is one of the largest of such projects in history. Zigui, China. 2000.



Labourers carrying belongings with a traditional shoulder pole at the bus station for inhabitants relocating to the new town. Yunyang, China. 2000.



One of the last remaining inhabitants, a barber works in a demolished high-rise building where only the ground floor remains intact. Wushan, China. 2002.



Workers in a small privately owned noodle making factory along the Yangtze River. Many locals owning private businesses remain as long as possible in order to save up for the relocation. There are often complaints of state compensation not being enough for the resettlement. There are also many cases reported of compensation not being paid to locals due to corruption by local authorities. Chongqing, China.



Locals looking at Badong, a town that will eventually be two thirds submerged when the Three Gorges Dam is completed. Badong, China. 2002.



Migrant worker at a construction site in the new town. The town is built higher up the mountains and will replace the old town that will eventually be submerged upon the completion of the Three Gorges Dam. Yunyang, China. 2000.



Migrant workers dismantling a recently vacated building. The workers supplement their poor income by selling scrap metal and bricks salvaged from demolition sites. Badong, China. 2002.



Migrant workers from surrounding villages dismantling a recently vacated building. The dam has had many far-reaching impacts. One of them is the destruction of thousands of cities, towns and villages along the river. The purpose of dismantling buildings is to clear a path for the eventual submergence and to prevent disenchanted ex-inhabitants from returning to their old dwellings. Badong, China. 2002.



Daily life on the Yangtze River. China. 2001.



Last inhabitants. As the last inhabitants move out, business activity of these old towns ground to an inevitable halt. Badong, China. 2002.



Locals sitting in a local eatery. They have not ordered food, but are instead using the space to rest, whilst outside buildings are being demolished. As the last inhabitants of the town move out, the business activity of these old towns ground to an inevitable halt. Badong, China.



A street vendor selling food to passengers on a boat. Yichang, China. 2001.



A displaced family traveling by boat to relocate to one of the coastal cities in the East. The displaced are encouraged to move to the new cities or under-populated regions, which are generally impoverished areas such as Xinjiang, Tibet and Gansu. However, many have also taken their chances by joining China's 150 million floating population and travelling to the richer coastal cities in the East in search of work. China's complex residential laws mean that many of those who choose to relocate to places that do not fit with the Government's relocation programme will lose out on social benefits. Yangtze River, China. 2001.



Night life on Chaotianmen docks. Business men go for dinner on floating Chinese restaurants on the river. Chongqing, China. 2003.



Living quarters of construction workers at the Three Gorges Dam construction site. Sandouping, China. 2003.



Migrant workers. Yichang, China. July 2001.



The last remaining family moves home. In the background is a levelled construction site, this used to be the site of the old city. Wushan, China. 2003.



A view of the The Three Gorges a few days before the waters rise due to the inundation of the dam. Yangtze River, China. 2003.



The new city of Mao Ping, hailed as a model city by the government, it is an example of the new redevelopments that are supposed to replace the old cities and towns along the Yangtze River. However, many new cities suffer from high unemployment, often as high as 50%, and many residents complain about the high cost of renting and buying property. Mao Ping, China. 2000.



New construction higher up on the hills of the Yangtze River. Chongqing, China. 2000.



New settlers visit the riverbanks by the newly built docks in Fuling. Land has been reclaimed and the docks built to accommodate the rising waters of the river in the coming months. Fuling, China. 2003.



*A view of the Three Gorges Dam under construction, a view seen from the Yangtze River.
Sandouping, China. 2000.*

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About the Author

Ian Teh has published three monographs—*Undercurrents* (2008), *Traces* (2011), and *Confluence* (2014)— and his work has appeared in distinguished magazines such as *National Geographic*, *The New Yorker*, and *Bloomberg Businessweek*. His work is part of the permanent collection at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and the Hood Museum. Teh has received the International Photoreporter Grant 2016, the Abigail Cohen Fellowship in Documentary Photography 2014, and the Emergency Fund 2011 from the Magnum Foundation. In 2015, during the Paris climate talks, large poster images of his work were displayed on the streets of Paris as part of a collaborative initiative by #Dysturb and Magnum Foundation. He is a co-exhibitor for *Coal + Ice*, an environmental group show of internationally acclaimed photographers. Teh is a member of the prestigious British agency, Panos Pictures.