

Behind the Gate - China in Flux After the Flood of the Three Gorges Dam

The effects of the Three Gorges Dam
China, its people and the Yangtze River

A photo exhibit and video installation by Wang Ping

With support from Macalester College
The Freeman and Bush Foundations

www.macalester.edu / wangping.com
651-696-6512 / ping@macalester.edu



175 Meters Water Marker



Xintian Village before the Flood



Mr. Ran before His Old House



Mr. Ran's Daughter in Her Father's Room



Mr. Ran in front of His New Home

From Yichang to Chongqing, the riverbanks are dotted with giant white billboards. The lower ones are marked 156 meters, the higher, 175 meters—the final reach of the rising water by 2008.

In Xintian, the number was carved into a stone looking over the flattened village below. Women and kids were picking bricks in the ruins that used to be their homes. A bus came, stopped, then continued along its old route, oblivious of the village that no longer existed. Along the demolished road, a stream flowed by to join the Yangtze a few hundred yards away.

Mr. Ran's house remained standing, one of the last "nails" that refused to be pulled out. Every thing was cut off: water, electricity, mail; all the windows were shattered, all the doors taken out. In his attic bedroom, he showed us the eviction notice from Wanzhou District, three days past the deadline. The coffer dam would be blasted in two days, and the water would rush in. His daughter begged him to leave, but he refused. He was born, grew up, and raised his family in this house, just like his three brothers, his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather. The compensation from the government wouldn't be enough to buy the smallest apartment for his old wife. He'd have to take a loan. He hadn't been able to find work for years. Who would hire a sixty-five year old man when the streets are crowded with twenty-year-olds waiting for a job, any kind of jobs?

“Don’t be afraid,” he said, taking my hand into his burning palms when the local police arrested us. “Don’t be afraid,” he said again as we were taken into separate rooms for interrogation, “We have nothing more to lose.”

Six month later, we met again in front of his new apartment building. The front with the pull-up aluminum gate was designed for the new settlers to open small business like groceries, bike and car repair, etc. But who would stop at these back streets for business? His daughter rushed us in and pulled down the gate. Mr. Ran sang old songs for us, but his voice cracked. “I’m too old for this,” he said.



Three Gorges Dam on June 1, 2006

On 6/6/06, an auspicious day for Chinese, the coffer dam was blasted, symbolizing the completion of the construction. The water has been rising fast since the blast, reaching 175 meters by 2008. Behind the dam, the wild, mighty Yangtze is stopped, turned into a lake on the highland.

The Three Gorges Dam is hailed as China's most magnificent project since the Great Wall. Apart from generating power for industry and cities down the river, it has become one of the biggest tourist attractions. A ticket to take a stroll on the dam costs 150 yuan, a quarter of a monthly salary for a factory worker.



Night Bridge on the Yangtze



Inside Ertan Dam

China's tallest dam, now 2nd largest, Ertan was built in the 1990s on the Golden Sand River, near Panzhihua Steel Plant, the third largest steel plant in China. The dam was built as one of China's pilot projects to harness energy from the Yangtze in the early 1980s.

The high-security underground plant doesn't receive visitors. We got a tour through a back door connection: the head of the Police and Security Bureau of Panzhihua City.



New Fengdu Petitioner

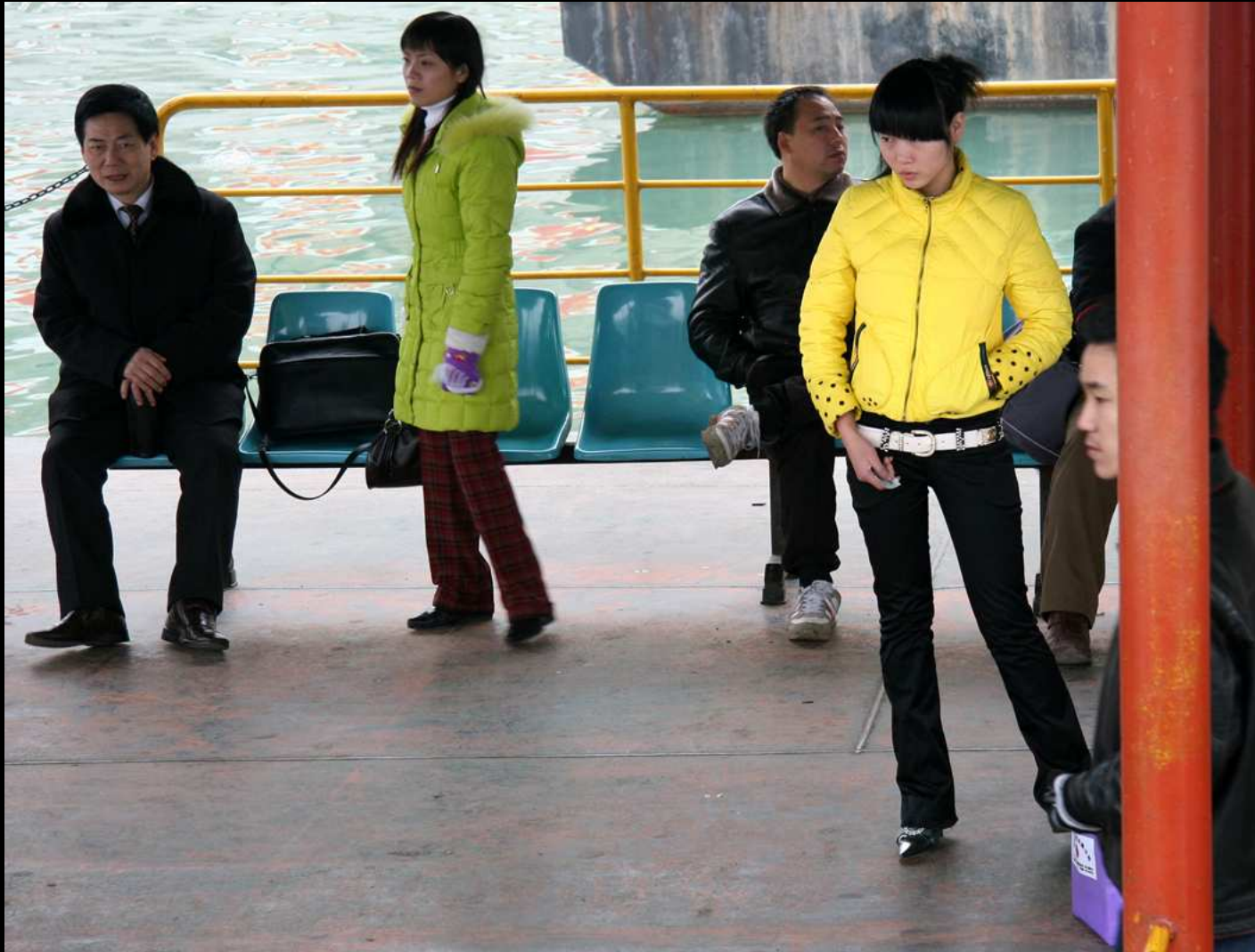
40% of the budget for the dam went to the displacement. Theoretically, each migrant should have received a substantial sum. By the time it trickles through many gates of bureaucracy and corruption, only a few thousand yuan was left for each individual. By the time they settle into the new apartment, for which they have to pay double, sometimes triple the price they could get for their old houses.

In the new city of Fengdu, I encountered the first angry crowd of migrants, after many days of searching along the river. I entered the grocery store to buy a bottle of water, and asked casually if they knew any dam migrants nearby. Immediately, we were surrounded. The crowd got bigger and louder, each trying to tell us their stories. All their stories are the same: cheated out of the compensation by corrupt local leaders, cheated out of the buildings with good locations to open small business, cheated out of their fertile farm lands, out of the hope for the future.

Wang Yu, the hotel boy who took us to see his new home, pulled my sleeve and whispered that I should leave. "They arrested a dozen people here a few days ago, including an eighty-year-old woman." I told him to get into the car.

I had promised an old man to wait till he came back with his petition. He wanted me to take it to Beijing, America, the world. "Let them know how we are suffering in our pigeon holes," he had said, looking back as he ran home, just to make sure I was not going anywhere.

I haven't been able to find Wang Yu again. He's no longer working at the hotel where we met. His cell phone is canceled, and a stranger is now living in his apartment. I wonder if he left the city to be united with his father, who works in Fujian Province, or with his mother in Yiwu, a bustling commerce center in Zhejiang Province. His parents had gone their separate ways to find jobs after the old Fengdu was demolished. Their only son was preparing for his college entrance exams. He wanted to get into the Navy Academy.



Port Girl Waiting



Orange Vendors along the Highway

The Three Gorges has a long history of growing tangerines and oranges dating all the way back to Confucius' time and the Warring States Period in BC. It's been a big cash crop for peasants in the region. The dam has flooded the most fertile groves along the riverbanks. For the migrants, what constantly haunts their memory is the fragrance of the tangerine blossom and fruit.

Younger generations seek other opportunities to make a living: selling trinkets and fake antiques to tourists, selling labor as porters on demand at ports, streets, hotels, or selling flesh at ports, hotels, bars, barbershops...



The Orange Foreman

I used to deal fruit, whole sale, selling tangerines, oranges, apples, anything you name, to Canton, Shanghai, Beijing, Chongqing, and other big cities. Now I'm a contractor, supervising a team of over sixty workers to build retaining walls along the riverbanks. See the large orange hill to your right? That's mine. I've been working at it for nine months. We pave it with concrete hexagons, and then drill twenty-meter-long steel cables into the hill to nail them. We hope this will hold the city on the hill. We hope. Money is good, always good when it comes from the government. But it carries a big weight. If the city falls, so goes my head. No one would be able to save my ass, not even my son, a general in Canton. Here, take this, just introduced from Florida, the belly-button orange. It's really sweet. You'll love it, I guarantee.

--Mr. Chen, a contractor from Badong, Three Gorges



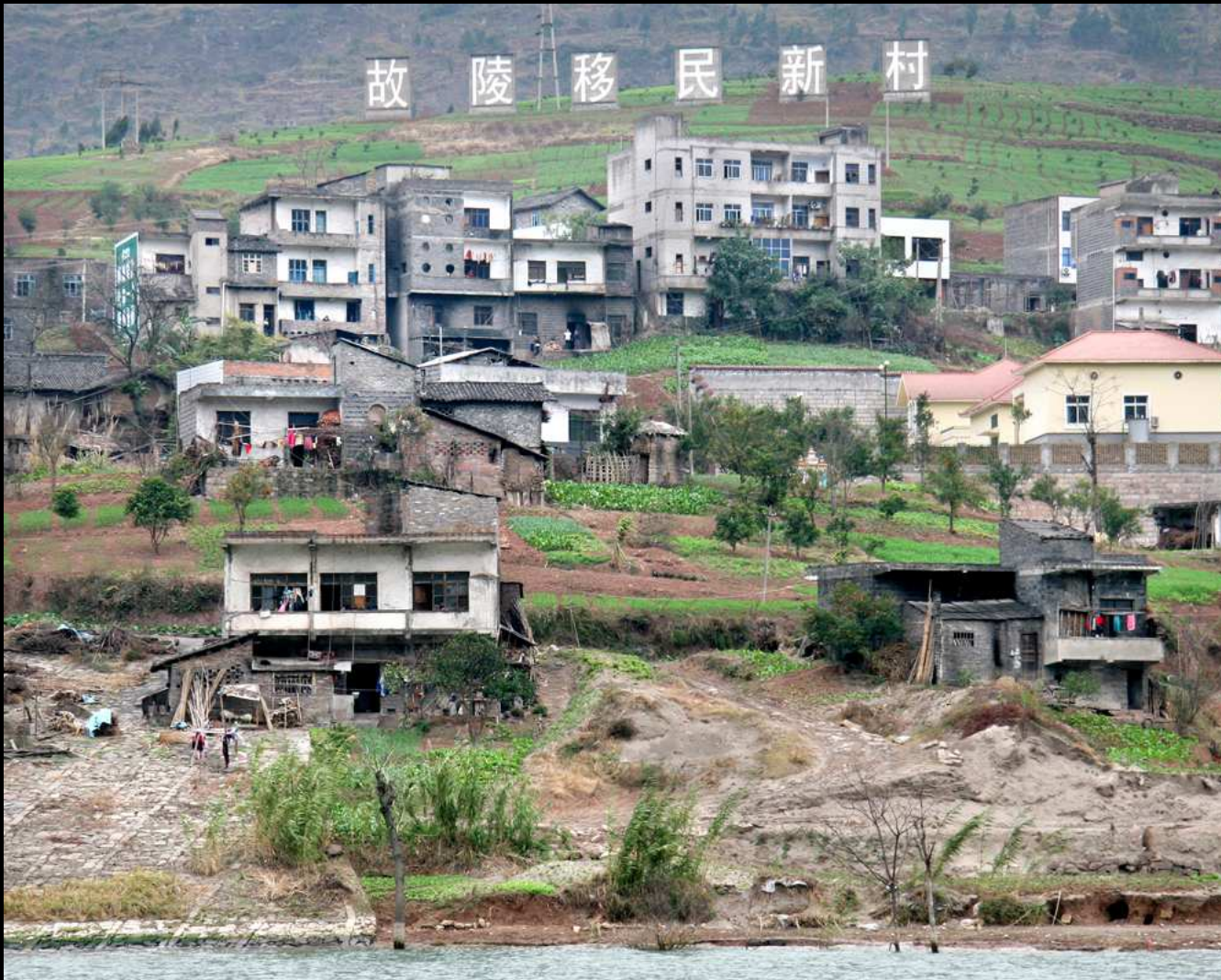
Overlooking Wushan from the Back of Gaotang Temple



Boat Rounding Wu Gorge



Highway Construction along the Three Gorges



Guling Migrant New Village



New City: Badong



Speed Boats at Wanzhou Port



100-Year-Old Barbershop



Old Man Reading Newspaper amid Rubble



Angry Old Wife

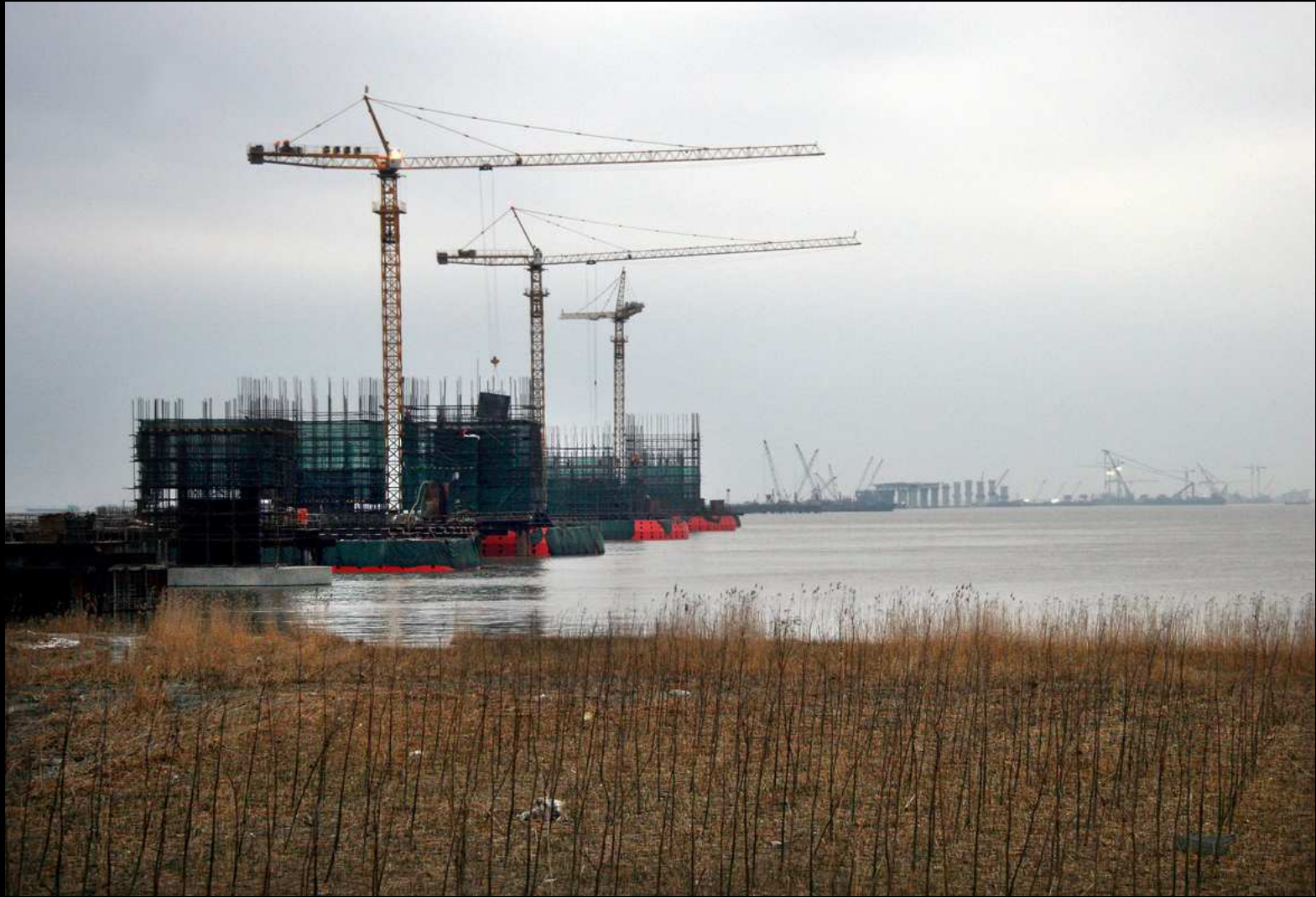
An old couple waiting to move into the new apartment building, a few hundred meters away from their old house. The wife is screaming because someone stole the bundle of wood she had collected.



Chongming Dongtan Wetland



Fisherman



Chongming Shanghai Bridge



Bridge Workers

Chongming, China's third largest island after Taiwan and Hainan, is the only county under the jurisdiction of Shanghai. It is a low-lying alluvial island in the mouth of the Yangtze River, first emerging from the water in 618. The island has an area of 1200 km² and a population of about 700,000. The “Shangri-la of Shanghai”, as it claims to be, has a pleasant climate, loamy land and sufficient water. Well-known for vast green woods, fertile soil, whirling reeds and crossing rivers.

It is also a major relocation centre for migrants from the Three Gorges Dam.

Dongtan Wetland on the island's eastern tip is Shanghai's biggest habitat for wildlife, including endangered species like black-faced spoonbill, hooded cranes, whistling swans and many others. It is also a resting and feeding ground for millions of shorebirds migrating between Siberia and Australia.

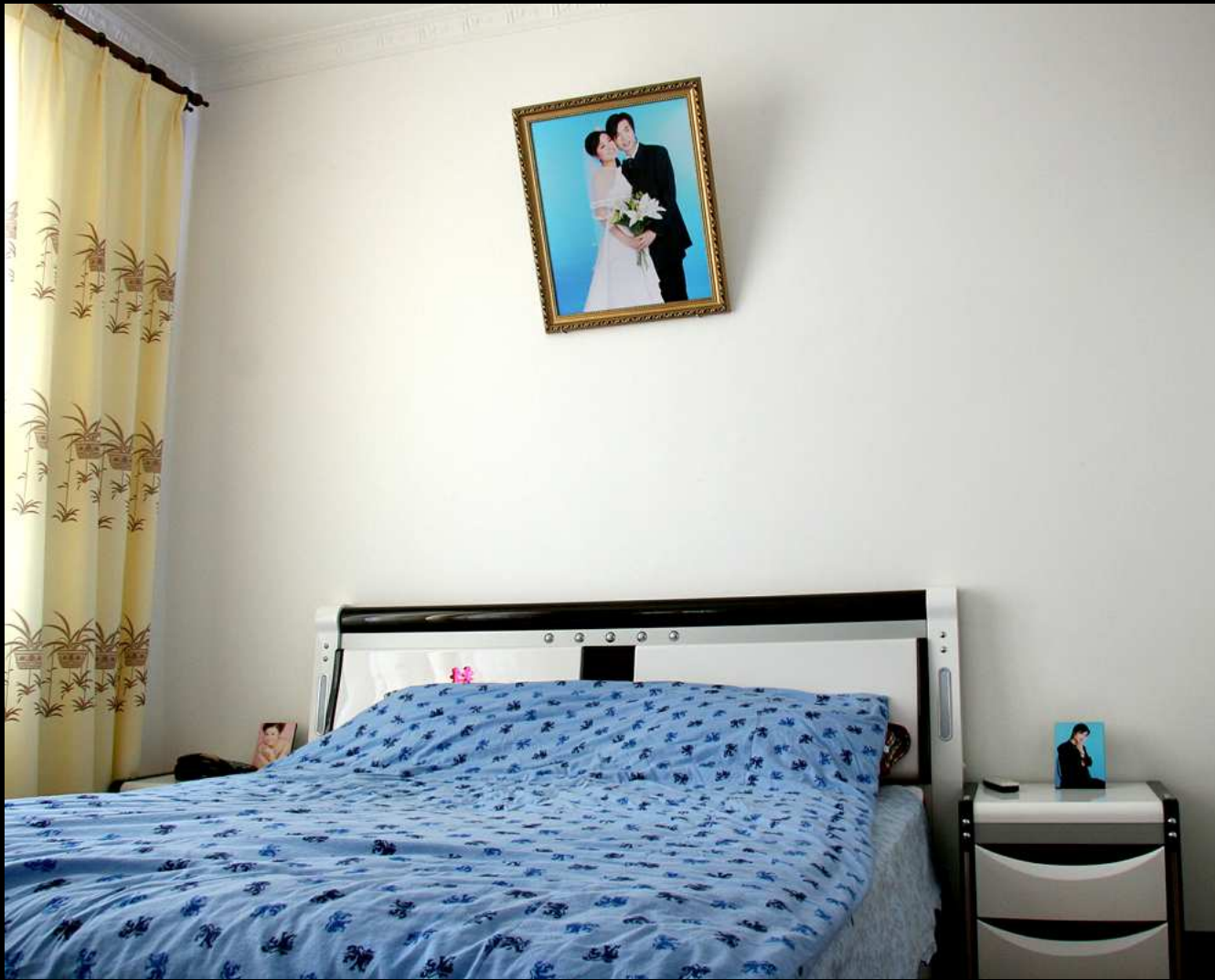
The wetland, however, is shrinking. The sediments that made the island are blocked behind the dams along the Yangtze (estimated 48,000), disrupting the river and ocean ecosystems and causing severe erosion along the shoreline.

Only ferry boats connect the island with the mainland. But Shanghai is building a 25-km-long Shanghai-Chongming expressway, which will be completed around 2008. A 9-km-long tunnel will connect Shanghai's Pudong district with Changxing Island and a 10-km-long cable-stayed bridge will link Changxing and Chongming islands. The expressway will further expand in the future to connect Chongming with Jiangsu Province in the north via a cross-sea bridge. This will greatly spur the development of the island.

People are rushing to the island for gold.



Duck Farm



The Newly-Wed Bedroom

We moved here from Yunyang in 2000, one of the earliest dam migrants. Six of us, my parents, my sons, me and my wife. My wife and my father went back to the Three Gorges to work in a restaurant. Without connections, jobs are hard to find. I work part-time, one in a factory, one in a restaurant, delivering goods, for 500-600 yuan a month. I'm between my shifts now. That's why I'm home in the middle of the day chatting with you and your American friend. My older son and daughter-in-law, the newlyweds on the wall, deliver materials for construction sites and factories. They pooled their money together and bought a used truck when they married. They make about one to two thousand yuan a month, depending on how many tickets they get from the cops. We don't have connections with the local government. Anyone can stop us on the road and give us a fine.

We moved here with so much hope. We were told us we could get rich fast. The island is fertile. Whatever we sow, they grow: vegetables, fruit, and the famous hairy crabs that sell for 500 yuan a kilogram. It's close to Shanghai, where we can easily find a job, any job. We tore down our house and got 9,000 yuan a head for the relocation. But the new house cost double than what we got paid. We had to take a loan. Thank god it's interest free, ten years. We were given three *mu* farm lands. Two years ago, the government decided to turn the island into a green eco-friendly place to attract rich tourists and developers.

Our land was taken away, and then given to an entrepreneur to grow trees. Compensation? Two hundred kilograms of rice a year, about a thousand yuan. Can we live on that? No! It's our land, and we watched it get ploughed under right in front of our eyes, and we have nothing to do with it. Why can't we grow trees ourselves? Connections! It's all about connections. God knows how much money the entrepreneurs slipped into the government's hands. The rumor is they're building a bridge to connect the island with Shanghai. Once it's complete, the island will be a gold mine. Every inch of the land will cost more than gold. Mansions and expensive restaurants for the rich, parks and forests for the tourists. But what does it all have to do with us? We're landless. All we have is the house and a big loan.

Do I regret? No. I feel very lucky. Everyday we hear stories from friends and relatives: no job, no connections, no language, stranded in their empty new houses with no hope for exit. Here the weather is close to home, and the tangerine I planted has survived two winters. It'll never grow fruit. Not the right soil or water. Tangerine trees are stubborn, like us. But it's something. And I go home whenever there's a job. My brother-in-law is a contractor. He builds bridges, highways and retaining walls for landslides. Money is good, and work is plenty, but competition is high. Everyone has rushed in for the "fat pork."

I don't get it. They flood our homes to build the dam for "clean" power, and they build so many highways and bridges to get into the coal mines in deep mountains. My old home used to be so clean, now everything is dirty: the air, the river, the mountains.

But money is good when there's a job. Last year, I built a retaining wall for the new Yunyang City with my in-law, made ten thousand yuan, fixed up this house for my older son's wedding, and still got enough to send my younger son to the best middle school on the island. He just won the first prize in a radio making contest for junior high, and is now competing for the national in Chongqing, his old home. I wish you could meet him. If he wins, he'll be guaranteed a spot in a top college of his choice, unless he screws up. He still has five years to go. But he's not going to. I'm fifty-one. My life is over. Our life is over. My little boy will carry on. We're all working for him, my old parents, my older son and his wife, myself, working and saving our money for his college, *fen* by *fen*, *yuan* by *yuan*.

--Chen Qingxiang

A *mu* is equivalent to 0.1644 acre.

100 *fens* equal a *yuan*, equivalent to about \$0.75.



Tiger Leaping Gorge, Golden Sand River, Upper Yangtze

According to local legend, a tiger jumped across the river at the narrowest point (80 feet wide) to escape from a hunter, hence the name. The Golden Sand is one of four major rivers that flow through Northwest Yunnan Province then continues its way into Sichuan's Three Gorges. Impacted by the "plateau geographical effect from the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, the highland has vertical differentiations in water and heat in its deep-cut river valleys, providing one of the world's most biologically diverse temperate ecosystems. It is home to many rare plants and animals including the Yunnan golden monkey, one of the most endangered primates on Earth, and at least 1,700 plant species, including many herbs used in traditional Tibetan medicine.

Compared to the Three Gorges, the Golden Sand River's population is sparse. Scattered on steep mountain slopes, tiny patches of terraced corn and bean fields are tucked under stone villages of two or three families. Many of the residents migrated from the Three Gorges several generations ago during famines or floods. Water is brought from distant waterfalls through a steel pipe that meanders along a small dirt road. A goat slips and bleats among white rocks, searching for its flock and master. Deep in the valley, the river flows like a ribbon, its roar drowned in the wind.

“Words pale in front of the terrifying beauty of the Tiger Leaping Gorge, still pristine, still untamed. But not for long,” said Nima Zeren, a Tibetan guide with a college degree in economics. “In 2003, the government invested 400 billion yuan and started the second largest dam in Xiluodu Gorge of the lower Golden Sand River. It will raise the water to 600 meters high, flood nine counties in Sichuan and Yunnan, and displace thousands of people. A scientist in Beijing, Mr. Zhang, heard the news and petitioned to the government to stop the project. When he got no response, he returned to his hometown in the gorge and took the villagers to visit the flooded Three Gorges. They witnessed how the displaced people were stranded in their apartments, landless and jobless, their compensation fee spent quickly on relocation or bad investment. They witnessed the young girls loitering in hotels, ports and barbershops for clients, young men waiting on street corners with their yokes to carry goods for passers-by, old men and women picking garbage or begging... In the end, he collected thousands of names to petition to the central government in Beijing. It still got no response until he died suddenly of a “heart attack.” His death sparked an investigation, and the rumor that he was murdered for his political activity spread quickly through media and Internet. January, 2005, Beijing issued the order to halt the construction.”

“Over twelve thousand workers were sent back home, but the gorge had already been flattened and prepped for the dam, and ten thousand people had been moved. The reason: violation of environmental protection! What an irony! Everyone believed it was the scientist’s sacrifice that made it possible. Many peasants burnt incense in his memory. He’s becoming a martyr, our martyr.

Now the government has approved a different plan: to build 12 escalator reservoirs, starting from Xiluodu, and ending in Tiger Leaping Gorge. They’ve already started the prepping in the Two-family Village a few miles away from here. When it’s complete, everything will change: the valley, the mountain, the birds, the fish, and the air. I don’t know where I’m going then. I escaped the city five years ago. I worked a year as a manager for a health food and supplement company. Every day, I felt nausea. Every day, I had to lie to the consumers. Under the green and gold wrap, the so-called organic tonic booster was made of the waste oil from restaurants and factories. When my mother bought a package and asked me why I had never brought her the treasure, I cracked. I tore it into pieces and called my boss to tell him to go screw himself. Mother cried, and father was mad. They invested all their money in my college, and now this.”

“So I came here, helping my uncle with his hotel business, and make extra money as a guide. I get by. I don’t care about becoming rich. I have a lovely wife, a beautiful daughter. I’m content. But things will change when the dams rise and the water is taken away. They say the dams are built to create clean power, but why are they building so many highways on the bare mountains? What for? The real story is to elevate the river to bring the water to the west for industrial development. The environmental impact? I tremble to think about it.”



Window Reflections from a School on the Golden Sand River



Windmills in Xinjiang

The Great Northwest development is one of China's mega-projects such as the Three Gorges Dam and the Tibetan-Qinghai Railroad. The super-dams on the Yangtze will not only provide the much needed energy, but also provide water to the vast desert area.



Lights from Shanghai Bund



Shanghai New Year's Eve 2006



Golden Monkey



Chinese Sturgeon

When the autumn wind blows, *Zhonghua Xun*, the Chinese sturgeons, the biggest and most majestic sturgeons of all, begin their journey home from the ocean. They enter the lower reaches of the Yangtze, traveling over three thousand kilometers without food to the Golden Sand River, Yangtze's upper reaches, to mate and spawn, then carry their fry back to the East China Sea. The young live in the sea for 15 to 26 years before they mature and are ready to begin the two-year migration. Such is their way of life for over 140 million years, a living fossil that dated back to the time of dinosaurs.

The construction of Gezhouba, a dam completed in 1989 in Yichang, 38 km downstream from the Three Gorges dam, blocked the migrating route for the sturgeons, forcing them to spawn behind the dam, reducing their spawning area (from Yichang to Golden Sand River) from 600 kilometers to 7 kilometers. With the completion of the Three Gorges Dam, even this reduced spawning ground will shrink further, pushing Chinese sturgeons, among other endangered species in the Yangtze, to the brink of extinction.

Wild sturgeons are now captured in the fall and brought to the Chinese Sturgeon Museum in Yichang, where eggs are fetched and hatched. The fry are then returned to the river.



The Completed Three Gorges Dam, January, 2007

The water is rising fast. So is China. The dam barely satisfies the insatiable appetite for energy and water. To clear the site for the construction, the government urged people to “sacrifice their small families for the good of the big family.” Should the 1.2 million displaced people be counted as part of the big family? Should the mountains and rivers be counted? And the sturgeon, the white dolphin, and other species extinct or going extinct?



Old Gate



Wu Gorge in 2007



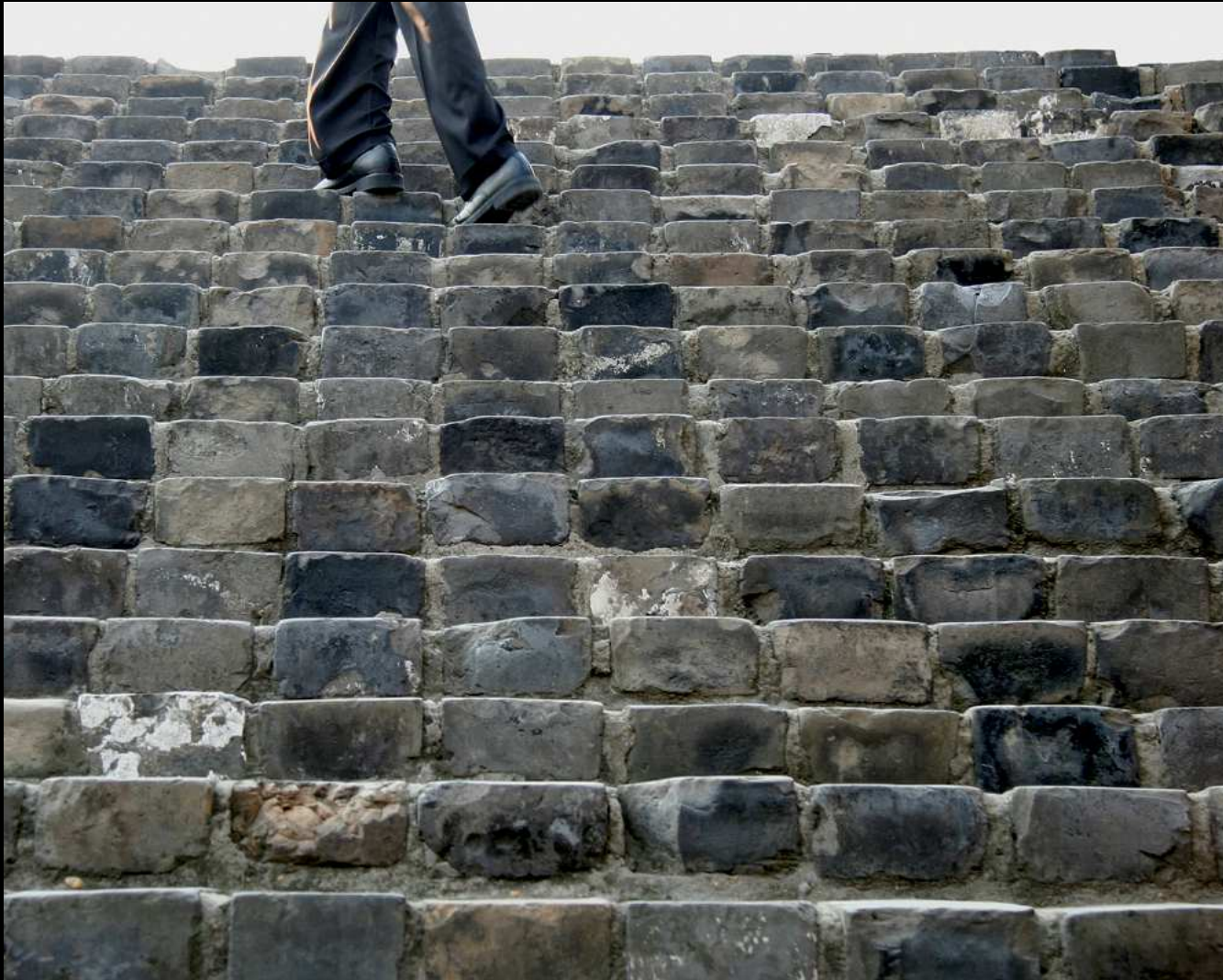
Chongming Wetland, Shanghai



Tiger Leaping Gorge



Flowing Sand Mountain, Kashgar, Xinjiang



Nanjing Old City Wall