



China, Mongolia, and Taiwan

GEOGRAPHY

China's Coming Great Flood

China is currently home to one of the world's most ambitious construction projects. When it is completed in 2009, the Three Gorges Dam will control the waters of the Chang (Yangtze), the world's third longest river. The dam will provide enormous benefits for China. But it will bring great changes as well. Here, a visitor assesses what the effects of the new dam will be.

The great dam is slowly rising, a thousand miles up the Yangtze from the sea. . . . Yangtze waters irrigate China's "land of fish and rice," the great central valley where close to half the nation's food is grown. . . . Yet at the same time the river has brought China misery. Devastating floods have repeatedly inundated [covered] thousands of square miles and claimed more than 300,000 lives in [the 1900s] alone.

To most Chinese the river is known as Chang Jiang—the Long River. On maps it traces the sinuous line of a dragon. Its . . . tail curls out of the ice of the Tibetan Plateau and tumbles to China's largest city, Chongqing. Its torso [middle] twines through the fabled Three Gorges; . . . its neck winds across the flatlands to the river's mouth near Shanghai.

Beijing's plan to harness this dragon . . . is daunting [awesome]. The dam will stand 607 feet high and more than a mile wide. It will create a reservoir 370 miles long, with a system of locks designed to bring prosperity through maritime commerce to China's interior. There are taller dams and there are wider dams, but none has this might: . . . 26 turbines of perhaps 400 tons each, the largest ever built, will generate 18,200 megawatts of electricity, equivalent to the output of 18 nuclear power plants.

. . . No fewer than 1.9 million people will be forced from ancestral homes and farms and relocated elsewhere. . . . To assay [analyze] the dam and its impact on the region, I embarked on a . . . 400-mile [journey] down the middle Yangtze, covering the stretch where the new reservoir will be. . . . I heard many expressions of enthusiasm and pride. . . . But I also heard voices of anger and foreboding [fear]. All along the way I saw new construction on a scale that boggled the imagination—new cities, bridges, and highways being thrown up along the river's mountain flanks. It is all predicated [based] on the success of the dam. . . .

Chongqing, my first stop, was on a building binge. . . . On the riverfront . . . the deepwater port will be expanded to handle vessels ten times larger than those now navigating the river. [This will] increase commercial traffic in coal, tung oil, silk, and an array of agricultural products that south-west China would like to ship to markets on the coast and the world beyond.

But the Chang Jiang is one of the most sediment-filled rivers in the world. . . . Opponents of the dam contend [argue] that a still-water reservoir will cause even more sediment to be deposited, obstructing the passage of deep-draft vessels. . . .

Wanxian, at the midpoint between Chongqing and the dam, stands so high above the river that porters with red-curtained sedan chairs [line] up at the landing to haul tourists up its 183 steps. But its elevation will not save the city. . . . In the center of the city stands a red-and white sign indicating the level to which the waters will rise. All below it—two-thirds of the city proper, embracing 8.5 square miles and 900 factories—will be drowned. A quarter million people will be uprooted and moved to an unknown location. Wanxian will be the reservoir’s costliest victim.

The good news is that a new Wanxian will rise above the reservoir. . . . An airport capable of handling jumbo jets will be built . . . on the south side of the river. Tying the airport to the city, one of the world’s longest single-arch bridges, now under construction, will span the Chang Jiang.

At the bridge site I met Zhang Mingtai, general manager of . . . the region’s largest industrial complex. We stood at the edge of a precipice [cliff] above the river, and Zhang swept a hand across the vista—the doomed city, the Chang Jiang running red with iron-rich soil, the immense valley reaching back into distant mountains. “This is central China,” Zhang said over the wind. “The resources here are unknown to outsiders. We’re enormously rich in coal, salt, and natural gas. . . . When the dam is built, the opportunities here will be limitless.”

“Without the dam?” I asked.

“Without the dam,” he said brusquely [sternly], “we’ll have nothing.”

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Understanding What You Read After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions.

1. Name three reasons that China is building a dam on the Yangtze River?

2. Why do opponents of the dam think it will hurt trade on the river?

Activity

Imagine that you are one of residents of Wanxian who will be flooded out of your ancestral home by the Three Gorges Dam. Write a journal entry expressing your feelings about the project.