

Professor Nick Bisley

Welcome to Asia Rising, a podcast of La Trobe Asia where we discuss the news, events and general happenings of Asia's states and societies. I'm your host Nick Bisley the Executive Director of La Trobe Asia.

The economic transformation of China that was launched by Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening up programme in 1978 has created what can only be described as, a miracle of human development. More people have had their life chances improved more rapidly than in any other point in human history. Yet while China's development is remarkable in its scale, speed and reach, it still follows the basic social pattern of industrial development established over the past 200 years. This involves urbanisation as subsistence farming is replaced with industrial techniques and former farm labourers move to the cities to find work.

The China success has been on the back of moving millions of people from the country to the city, and putting them into largely export focused, manufacturing assembly jobs. This requires largescale construction of new urban areas complete with roads, sewers, bridges, schools and the like, and all this in turn requires a massive increase in energy supplies to power, quite literally, industrial development.

As part of this China has set out on one of the great infrastructure building projects of modern times and one of the most significant and controversial parts of this was the construction of the Three Gorges Dam, the world's largest hydro-electric power station. The dam displaced many hundreds of thousands of people and transformed the environment in a key part of China.

What impact has the dam had on the lives of the people in the region and what does that tell us about China's modernisation and the kind of social challenges faced by rapidly industrialised society?

Joining me to talk about the Three Gorges Dam is Dr Brooke Wilmsen. Brooke is a Research Fellow in the Department of Social Enquiry here at La Trobe University and has been conducting research on the Three Gorges Dam area for nearly a decade. Welcome to the program Brooke.

Dr Brooke Wilmsen

Thanks Nick.

Nick Bisley

So let's start with some basics. The dam was regarded is one of the great achievements of Chinese infrastructure building, but let's get a sense of its scale. Where is it, how big is it, and how long would it take to build?

Brooke Wilmsen

Ok, so the actual expanse of it is roughly the size of Singapore, it extends from a village called Sandouping which is quite close to Yichang city in Hubei Province and that extends right up to Chongqing. Through the Chongqing Municipality to Chongqing city. It displaced roughly around 1.13 million people. It has actually been on the table for planning since the early 1900's, so that's obviously also affected the development of the region.

Mao also wrote a poem about flooding the gorges area, so it's been something that's been on the cards for many decades at least. In 1989 the Canadian feasibility study was done and then through the early '90's the planning of that was developed and in 1997 the first closure of the dam

occurred which was when I first went there; when they first bypassed the region by cutting it off and allowing an area to be developed as part of the dam construction which gradually expanded so that the Yangtze was still usable.

The bulk of the resettlement happened then between the late 1990's and the early 2000's and the construction actually only finally finished last year. It was officially finished in 2009, but in 2015 they were just finishing off the final ship lift which helps the large ships get up the Yangtze.

Nick Bisley

You mentioned the figure of 1.13 million which you see recited regularly, it's obviously the official figure. Do people accept that, I mean the Chinese Government stats across the board are always treated with some scepticism?

Brooke Wilmsen

That's the number that I always quote with an asterisk, we've estimated that around up to about 6 million people in the end, will have been displaced by the project for a whole lot of different reasons. One of the most pressing reasons at the moment for people being displaced in the aftermath of the dam is the increase in seismic activity through the region, because of the pressure of the dam on what is very unstable geology.

In the area I'm working, people are being resettled again after having been resettled for the dam, so only around 10,000 in the region that I'm working in. But numbers around 4 million are being quoted for environmental reasons associated with the dam.

Nick Bisley

So that figure is the narrow figure around the people who were moved out of towns that were flooded?

Brooke Wilmsen

It is but I would argue as well that it's a political identification as well. You have people who come in and speculate when a dam is put on the table for construction, because they know being identified as a re-settler, you have entitlements. So it's a very grey number and I'm always surprised where I've worked in resettlement planning, that they actually do come up with a figure of people affected by a project; which it's impossible to draw a line around who's affected and who isn't affected.

Nick Bisley

So you've got people who are moved out of the places that were flooded, then you've got people who move on because of the consequences of having this enormous thing and one of which is seismic activity?

Brooke Wilmsen

That's right. There's always been landslides through that area but there's an increased incidence of landslides and earthquakes in the area associated with the dam, the scientists are saying. So one of the county towns that I work have been deemed as unstable.

And this has affected the economic development as well. Just the construction of the new city began in one location, which was going to be the central economic hub and then slowly that was moved three times because it was shown to be unsafe. County town is now this long skinny, very difficult town to live in, because there's no clear central hub of activity.

Nick Bisley

So a great big strip mall city?

Brooke Wilmsen

That's right, yes.

Nick Bisley

Prior to the construction, these people whose lives have been thrown up in the air, what were they doing, what kind of walks of life did these people come from?

Brooke Wilmsen

I see the figures are flipped around a lot, but the early figures on the proportions of people that were affected said the majority were rural dwellers, they were living on small farm holdings, so even before they lost their farmland to the dam they had very small amounts of land per capita compared to the rest of China.

They were mostly subsistence farmers, there was some orange production but that was stepped up under the resettlement plans, but mostly producing for their own household and for the local market. You have a lot of State owned enterprises through the region, big, dirty, state owned enterprises.

Nick Bisley

In the case of China that means literally big and dirty?

Brooke Wilmsen

Yes. [laughter].

Nick Bisley

So when the government set about building this thing and moving people out of the villages and lands that were being flooded, did they compensate them or was there a program?

Brooke Wilmsen

They did. Compensation was provided to rural people for their farmland and also to urban people for their loss of housing. Because the land is owned by the collective, the compensation went to the collective which was then passed on to individual households who had their contracts for farming the land. Housing was compensated at around 30% of the actual cost of reconstructing a home.

It means the costs of the resettlement were very much externalised onto the population affected by it, so particularly immediately after resettlement I saw the effects of this with people in debt, very high levels of debt, particularly to family and friends, in order to cover just the basic costs of building their new houses.

Late in the 1990's, the government had a plan to reclaim the land that was higher up on the mountains for farming that was forested land and regarded as wasteland. They started doing this and then there was a massive flood in 1998 along the Yangtze and it killed several thousand people. Part of that they decided, was because of this deforestation that occurred.

Then they changed the policy and they started to move people out of the Three Gorges Region and that compensation plan of providing farmland was changed. They were provided money per the amount of re-claimed land that they reforested. That meant that people just pretty much lost

their land and had to make do with what was left over.

Nick Bisley

And was there much in the way of corruption? You hear stories in many parts of China where essentially you'll have arbitrary acquisition of land/house that will then be put to use for government purposes and either: defrauding owners or completely distorting the distribution of those resources and then creating a lot of local friction and tension towards the party and the... Was that part of the Three Gorges or were they just badly treated?

Brooke Wilmsen

Yes, there were media reports of corruption and there was even one official sentenced to death for his involvement in corruption to do with the Three Gorges Dam so they tried to stamp down on it. I suppose there's also the grey areas of people being put in charge of large amounts of money, and the distribution of that created disharmony in the village and disagreements amongst people.

When I was talking to a villager I said, "Have they been following the plans for resettlement? Are you happy, satisfied with what's going on?" He said, there's supposed to be quite a major road going past his house, according to the plans and he said, "does it look like a major road?" And I said "No", and he said, "Where is the road?" And I said, "It goes up that hill over there" and he said, "That's where the village head lives". Many levels of the term 'corruption' I suppose.

Nick Bisley

And I guess any time there's compulsory acquisition for land and resettlement anywhere; it happens in Australia when people are building new roads through to the Three Gorges Dam, there's a monetary compensation which can be adequate or not, but at least you can get a roof above your head and the like. But people who are put out go, 'this is my home, this isn't just a house, this is where memories are'. And I guess in parts of China with spiritual connections to ancestors and the like, how did that play out for people being displaced?

Brooke Wilmsen

In this project I wasn't able to really explore that in any detail because of the sensitivity of the project. I know a project I worked on in Northern China on the Yellow River that was World Bank Funded, they were very upset about their family tombs having been submerged and they had been provided a certain amount of money to move the family tombs themselves, but of course the distress in having to dig up family members and move them yourself meant they didn't do it and they were submerged. In this case I wasn't able to follow that unfortunately.

Nick Bisley

But it's doubtless out there?

Brooke Wilmsen

It would have been, particularly for older people, they have a really strong attachment to place. You know I asked them, "How long have you lived here?" And they say they don't know because it's generational. And the way in which they dealt with the loss of cultural artefacts was really quite economic, it was to reconstruct temples that were ancient, all new and shiny and call them the same name as the temple and so it was a symbolic, I suppose, replacement of what was lost.

And they've even built a glass tunnel out to one of the major archaeological sites underneath the water that you can walk out and see it on the side of a cliff, so maintaining access to an archaeological area.

Nick Bisley

It just happened to be underwater?

Brooke Wilmsen

Yes.

Nick Bisley

Curious, but I guess there's also that tension in China between, for a long period of the Maoist time there was this suspicion of the past, the past was to be banished. The past and the traditional ways of doing things, that's what got us in the mess that we're in and modernisation is a virtue and...

Brooke Wilmsen

I saw that very clearly in the area, the Maoist ideology was really strong, particularly in the early 2000's when I went there, and even when I was there with the second survey, the pictures of Mao were still on the houses in the main rooms and they still subscribe to this idea that they had suffered for the greater good and they'd done something important for the country.

I think that's perhaps why there wasn't strong resistance to this project because this area hadn't been a focus of any sort of development and had been left out of what had been going on more broadly in China for so long, and probably only under Mao when he moved people from the cities to the rural areas, did they feel that they were part of something. So I suppose they kind of had a rebirth in that sense, that they could do something for China and that ideology certainly helped.

Nick Bisley

Yeah, it's not all one way, it's a complex mix. You mentioned a few times the project you've been doing there. I was wondering if you could dig into that a little bit, about how you first went there over a decade ago: or more?

Brooke Wilmsen

1997.

Nick Bisley

Nearly two decades, scary, and more recently followed it up. How have you gone about doing it? How have you seen the people's lives who have been resettled change and develop over that fairly considerable period of time?

Brooke Wilmsen

It's been remarkable. When I went there in 1997, it was just a student, so I saw the area before it was submerged and then when I went back in 2003, they were up to filling the reservoir to the 153 metre mark, so it was very different from when I'd been there previously.

People had been moved in the late 1990's so it was within five years of their displacement, however, the submergence had happened within six months of the survey that I conducted there, so it was only very new that they'd lost; particularly for rural people, their main source of livelihood.

Unsurprisingly at the time I found widespread impoverishment across the whole range of indicators that I measured with a survey that was based on the sustainable livelihoods approach, which was at that time big in 'development theory'.

Nick Bisley

A bit of a standard measure...

Brooke Wilmsen

It was then, so I've had to continue with that even though it's been critiqued.

Nick Bisley

It's the social sciences, everything gets critiqued.

Brooke Wilmsen

It does. So during that time it was really, just the general story that you get from any development displacement is that the link between displacement and impoverishment, people really struggle to even get to a level that they were before, when is often poor - because they were already poor. They were taking on temporary employment in the construction of the towns and cities around them, so manual labour. Using their compensation to buy things like small buses that they were using as transportation, but then not having any more money in order to maintain those and everybody was doing the same thing, so there was a lot of people with buses and low employment.

I suppose there was a lack of information and support on how to spend compensation money, which was really a pittance anyway and a lot of the people I met were living off their compensation just to cover their basic needs.

Nick Bisley

You've done quite a bit of work in resettlement generally.

Brooke Wilmsen

Yes.

Nick Bisley

To what extent did you see similar patterns being played out in Three Gorges compared with other places you've seen or are aware of and to what extent did it differ?

Brooke Wilmsen

The difference here, was the way in which the government was able to mobilise the provinces. This case is unique in so many ways, and my later surveys have shown that people have actually been able to re-establish their livelihoods and improve their livelihoods but you cannot say that this is indicative of what happens elsewhere.

Early on it was, but what the government did was, they partnered rich provinces with the poor counties in the Three Gorges and they asked them to donate funds into the region and those funds were things like the Beijing Fire Department would build a primary school. It was very specific and it developed the whole region very quickly. And then you had those same provincial governments working with the county departments in order to promote the area for enterprise investment.

So you had big companies like Wahaha Water setting up subsidiary companies in the Three Gorges in order to supply employment for re-settlers. It wasn't mandatory that they do this, but they were 'encouraged' is always the turn.

Nick Bisley

And that's that 'top down' planning approach that certainly the Chinese Communist Party is pretty good at. Was there also a dimension of nationalism in it in the sense that 'here is this massive national project', was that mobilised to some degree?

Brooke Wilmsen

Yes, and so much international scrutiny too, so there was a lot to lose in failing in this. I suppose national reputation was at stake and there was a lot of money poured into the region to make sure that the region flourished.

Nick Bisley

And has it settled now?

Brooke Wilmsen

The longitudinal study that I've done in following up the same 521 households, found that generally incomes have increased enormously - 400% but that's going on all over China over this time period, so the trick for me was to work out whether this is something exceptional or this is something that's happening everywhere. Because the consultant that I interviewed in Beijing said to me, "Resettlement is easy to do in China, you just move people. If you just measure by income you can say the re-settlers are doing well, their incomes have gone up".

But in this region if we compared it even to the nearest urban centre that wasn't affected by the dam at least directly, the catch-up was very vast and the incomes were growing on a level that was much faster than this nearby neighbour, which is regarded as quite a wealthy part of Hubei Province. A lot of that was related to getting a job in an enterprise, this aim of the Chinese Government to crank enterprise development in the area, and to foster new special economic zones and recreating and rebranding this part of Central China as the 'Gateway to the West', building new freeways, building the first railway through the area connecting everything up has actually had a pay-off for the re-settlers who live in the area.

But that said, there has been an enormous out-migration of around 30% of the population that we worked with. In the villages now you have mostly older people and young people which is the story of rural China. So how sustainable these locations are in the long term is really the question.

And resettlement in China is now seen as a tool of urbanisation, so they call it 'Urbanisation Resettlement' and they're moving people en masse in order to support and to hit the urbanisation target by 2020.

Nick Bisley

It's a very communist way of approaching these sorts of things. That's all the time we have but China's development will always be fascinating and a high speed, large scale, continued experiment in social engineering of a kind we've never seen before. We look forward to having you back to see how things continue to develop in China.

Thanks for being part of the program Brooke.

Brooke Wilmsen

Thanks Nick.

Nick Bisley

You can follow Brooke on Twitter @brookewilmsen or me @nick bisley.

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