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# Into the Three Gorges

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## Into the Three Gorges

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Wang Ping

*One million migrants from the dam area won't be a problem. They can work in factories and tour services. They can grow more oranges.*

Deng Xiaoping

*W*e find our way into the Three Gorges disguised as tourists who are curious about the Dam, and the central Government's generous policy on the displaced. According to the official document, 40 percent of the total funding for the dam has been spent on the migration. Each migrant should have enough money to move into a new house, to be trained for a new job, to learn a new dialect, to open a new business.

The new settlements are not hard to find. Along the Long River,<sup>1</sup> where the old towns are underwater or half submerged, new towns pop up a few hundred meters above or across the river. They all look the same, be it the Ghost City Fengdu, or the Poetry City Fengjie, or the port city Wanzhou—matchbox structures of concrete and steel and glass for the residents, imitations of the White House or New York's Fifth Avenue buildings for government and corporate offices.

For three days, we can't find a single migrant. According to officials, about 1.5 million people were resettled, the largest exodus in China's history.

In Chongqing, we pay a driver 3,000 yuan to drive us to Hechuan, Fengdu, and Wanzhou. From there, a boat will take us all the way down to the Dam, the route of the submerged towns, fields, and migrants. "Once you're there, you'll see them everywhere," assures the tour guide who sold us the service of the rental car and boat ride. But the driver is skeptical. How can you find anybody unless you know their names and addresses? We beg and promise him more money. He sighs, and says he will try to find the friend he made in Hechuan

ten years ago when he drove a truck there every week to buy fowls for Chongqing restaurants. But that was ten years ago, he says, and we'll see about our luck.

We find the driver's friend in a mahjong house. It's 2:00 in the afternoon on a weekday but the house is full of men at the tables staring at us as the driver talks to his friend.

"Come and have a cup of tea in my place," he smiles at us.

"Where are the migrants, Mr. Xiao?," I ask. The driver didn't introduce us. I assume it's safe to call him Mr. Xiao since the place is named Xiao Family Town.

Mr. Xiao just smiles. The driver gives me a look. I shut up and follow them.

He lives on the third floor of a concrete building. It's spacious inside. A young couple is eating a late lunch in the kitchen. A gigantic TV is blasting a funeral scene. Mr. Xiao's wife serves us pipa, a fruit that cures coughing. Two little girls are playing on a fake leather couch.

Mr. Xiao takes out his little phone book. "So you want to see the migrants? I'll call the Mayor. He can come over and give us some information." He starts dialing before I can stop him. Once the official sees our blue-eyed, blond-bearded American, our hope will be smoked. The phone rings but no one answers. Mr. Xiao puts it down with disappointment. "He's not in, I guess. Where can he be in the afternoon?"

Playing mahjong, perhaps? I think to myself.

Mr. Xiao points to the screen. "My son." A photo of a young man in uniform flashes on. So his son is a soldier. Why is he on the news, though?

"He sacrificed his own life to rescue people and his comrades in the 1998 big flood." No wonder the perpetual smile on his face looks so sad.

President Jiang Zeming appears solemnly, shaking hands with the parents of the soldiers who died in the flood. Mr. Xiao and his wife are among the crowd.

"I'm terribly sorry," I stammer in English. For some reason, I can't find the Chinese words to express my sympathy. "Your wife must have cried her eyes out."

He smiles and points to the stunningly beautiful girl dancing to the TV music on the couch. "We lost our son, but we got her. The Party let us have another child. We wanted a son, of course, but she'll do just fine. Her future is set. The Party will send her to a military college and groom her to be a commander. Both my wife and I have good pen-

sions, and we can travel anywhere in China for a week every year, all paid by the Party. My son is dead, but his spirit keeps watching over us. Even our nephews and nieces have benefited from his martyrdom. They were all given privileges in choosing colleges and jobs."

"Mr. Xiao is the town's rich and famous," says the driver. "His words weigh more than the Mayor's."

The TV stops. Mr. Xiao presses the remote and starts the video again.

"How's the river now?," I ask.

"Much quieter. The big dam has tamed it down. The Party said no more young soldiers will have to sacrifice their lives. Would you like to see the migrants' housing now?"

The heart-wrenching funeral music starts again when we stand up to leave. Does Mr. Xiao keep the tape looping like this every day?

We drive through the town. The wide main street is paved with ancient blue slabs. The same stones are used for sidewalks and steps leading to houses. It must have looked grand in the old days. But now everything is covered with heavy moss. The place would look like a ghost town if not for a couple of old people sitting at some crumbling doors with bamboo fans in their hands.

"Old town," Mrs. Xiao says apologetically. "Our new town is much nicer, thanks to the migrant funding."

I sit up. "How so?"

"Well, each migrant is entitled to a piece of farm land. The migrants sent their representatives all over the country and picked out the land they wanted. They just pointed to the place and it would be theirs. We give them whatever they want because it means money for us. Big money. No one farms the land anymore. It's a losing business. On a good year, we can barely break even. If there's a drought or flood, we can't get our seeds back after a year of sweat. It's better to let the fields grow weeds. Most young men and women go to the cities to earn some cash. Those who stay behind kill time playing mahjong. The Dam is a great money making opportunity for us. Once the migrants pick the land they want, our town representatives negotiate the price with the migration bureau. The Party has rules and prices on everything, but there's rich land, and there's poor land, and that gives us room to negotiate. Then the Party has money to build housing for the migrants. Who is going to contract the construction? Us—the local government and business people. Who is going to be hired to build the housing? Us again, the local peasants. That's why we welcomed the migrants

like fortune gods. When their scouts came to inspect our land, we showered them with a red carpet, music, food, wine, and showed them our best land in the best location. Are people worried about losing the land? No, we're delighted. As I said, no one farms anymore except for some stubborn old people. The fields are empty, the town is empty. We need quick cash to boost it up. Ah, here it is, the migrants' housing project."

We get out of the car. A grand three-story building with eight aluminum storefronts blinds our eyes in the hot afternoon sun. We stand in silent awe.

"The first floor is for businesses like groceries, bike repairs, car repairs, or home industry. The second and third are for living," Mr. Xiao says proudly.

Three floors for one family. Not a bad deal at all.

"Can I go in and talk to somebody?," I ask.

"No one is here yet. They are coming in two weeks."

"Impossible! I have the official document that said they've been here for two years, and some of them were even elected into the town government." I shake the paper at Mr. Xiao. He smiles and waves his hand. "You must have lived in America for too long. You've forgotten some of our officials like to exaggerate good news a little. The migrants are coming in two weeks. That is that. We have another site for them. Want to see?"

From the car window, we look at the cream and orange tiled building.

"They've got it good, lucky bastards," murmurs the driver as he starts the engine.

Everyone nods.

It occurs to me there is no place for kids or animals to roam around. At least nothing in the front. The building stands a few feet away from the highway.

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The second site is on the back road. It has the same impressive façade with one less story—six storefronts with aluminum gates and living quarters on the second floor. Across the dirt road are houses for the local peasants. No one is around. A rotting pool table lies upside down in the front yard. A girl peeks out from the door and vanishes quickly into the darkness when she sees my raised camera.

It is a quiet place. The only sound comes from the rustling corn leaves in the fields.

What kind of business can the migrants do here? To whom will they sell cigarettes, liquor, candy, and other goods? For whom will they repair cars and bikes?

I keep my mouth shut as everyone praises the new project.

One aluminum gate is wide open. I walk in, stepping over the concrete mixer, empty cans of paint, rolls of plastic and other construction materials. The second floor has one big family room, one big bedroom facing the street, and a smaller room facing the rice paddies and corn fields. In the middle is a tiny room with no window. It stinks with old urine. I grope for a light switch but can't find any. I squint and see a hole in the concrete floor. No water tank for flushing. Everything is concrete gray—the walls, the floor, the staircase. The migrants are arriving in two weeks. Will this place be ready for them?

"This is what they want." Mr. Xiao's voice is gentle and soft, but it still makes me jump. I turn to face him. I hear the rest of the group walking up to the second floor.

"They are given money to do the interiors for themselves. Everyone has different tastes. Some like tiled floor, some prefer hard wood. Some like wallpaper, whereas others would rather have the walls plastered and painted."

"They're loaded with money," the driver cuts in loudly as his face appears on the landing.

We walk to the kitchen. Three peasants in straw hats are sealing the deck with tar.

"We guaranteed no leaks or cracks," says Mr. Xiao. "And we promised that the new arrivals would be able to cook their first meal on the day they move in." He points to a small coal stove in the corner and a stack of honeycombed briquettes along the wall.

One worker blows his nose into his hand, throws the fluid on the wall, and wipes his fingers on his pants.

"Where's the chicken coop and pigsty?" I ask.

"They won't need it," he says quickly.

"They will," I insist.

"How do you know?"

"Because I've been a farmer, because those migrants have been farmers for thousands of years. As long as there's land, they'll till and plant. As long as they plant, they'll need animals to grease the soil,

their rice bowls, and their pockets. Animals are their cash machines and friends.”

Everyone laughs, including the workers and my American teammate. It must be the expression on my face.

“Cash machine? Yes! Friends? No!,” says the driver. “You’ve read too many romance novels.”

“Things change. People change,” says Mr. Xiao. “Our town was a totally different place five years ago. So was I. It’s life. It’s fate.”

“But certain things have to remain the same, like this,” I cry out, pointing to the school children singing outside the window. They are trotting home happily along the thin field path.

“Everything changes. Nothing stays the same,” says Mr. Xiao in his quiet, persistent voice.

“Stop playing your son’s video, then, and let him go!,” I want to shout.

Instead, I thank him loudly for showing us the new housing projects.

### Peace. Girls. Hot Fondue.

Quick, he says, shoot the girls. I turn my camera, but the curtain has dropped—only a glimpse of a lavender dress, floating hair, a whiff of fragrance and sweat. Above the door are four plain characters in black—*he ping wu ting*—peace dance hall, and hand-written ads for hairdressers, massage girls, apartment rentals, and cures for genital warts. A man lingers outside the door.

I turn back to the woman selling steamed bread and chicken gizzards on the street. On a small cart behind the stove, a child sleeps soundly. The alley is dim. We are all in the shadow of the highway bridge.

A girl in white runs out of the dance hall, swearing in the local dialect.

We climb the narrow steps to view the city. Wanzhou is small in size, but big in population. Located between Chongqing and Wuhan, the two big cities along the Long River, Wanzhou has been a busy port for ships and barges for thousands of years. The city is known for girls, hot fondue, and *bangbang jun*—porters with yokes and ropes waiting to be hired to carry goods along the steep steps that zigzag from the top of the hill all the way down to the port where ships gather like clouds and stands line the blue slabs selling fruit, herb, vegetables, clothes,

fish, pots, meat, steaming *gege* of lamb, dumplings, ribs, innards of all sorts.

It's a city of dust and noise and colors; a city full of herbal stores, restaurants, and hair salons with floating girls eager to please. It hangs like an ancient scroll on the steep hills of Wanzhou.

On the distant cliff, a yellow sign of 175 meters. By 2008, the river will rise to the silent clock and everything will go under.

Most of the old town is already in the water, including the Bridge of Eternal Peace. When it was blown up in 2003, old men and women gathered here to watch. They came wearing white mourning clothes.

Part of their being went down with the bridge.

Memory, like soul, is not entirely abstract. It is physical, sometimes more so than the objects we hold and destroy.

Wanzhou was once called City of Heavenly Son.

A few feet away from our faces is a building built in the '80s. No light from the windows. No shadow flickers behind the shades. On a bamboo post hangs a skirt, a bra, and socks—abandoned by the owner when she moved out. Caterpillars are digging away under its foundation. When the building goes down, the pit will become a pond for fishing, boating, and barbecuing...

Across the highway bridge, the dance girl in white is talking fast to a broad man, her hands chopping the air. The man glances at us and starts walking in our direction.

"We're in trouble," murmurs Mr. Zhang's son-in-law.

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We met Mr. Zhang and his son-in-law through Professor Wang, who teaches at People's University in Beijing. Since the dam project started in the mid-90s, Prof. Wang has been spending his summers roaming the Three Gorges' would-be-flooded area collecting memories from old people—their songs, stories, myths, jokes. Mr. Zhang is one of Prof. Wang's informants. He's a good storyteller indeed. In an empty teahouse, he chats nonstop for two hours, pouring his entire life out to us.

His mother died giving birth. His father soon married a young girl, his third wife, who refused to take care of the baby. So Mr. Zhang grew up as an orphan, begging for food from door to door, village to village. A few families tried to adopt him. Some were quite wealthy. But he always ran away. A free soul couldn't stand the restrictions, he said. He

didn't go to school till he was twelve. In the '60s, he went to the countryside to be a peasant, and married a girl there and soon they had a daughter. Ten years later, he returned to his birth town and worked in a store selling rice, flour, noodles. Just when his life was settling down, his wife divorced him, and his daughter couldn't find a job after she graduated from high school. Now his house is going to be flooded, but he can't get a penny. He bought the property under his wife's name and he never changed the deed after she left. The government would compensate according to the paperwork only, which means that his wife, who has her own land and property in the countryside, will get paid someday and he can't get a penny for the house he bought with his sweat money.

"I wish I could be big-hearted and let go of my house to support the Three Gorges Dam project," he sighed. "It's our country's need, our Communist Party's need. I'm proud that my sacrifice will make this glorious project happen. But I still need a place to shelter my old bones."

He showed us the photo of himself blowing out candles on a big cake with a group of people watching. "My 65th birthday," he smiled. "Also, my last night in my old house. I'll take you there tomorrow. But there's not much to see," he warned, puffing his pipe. "The whole town is gone, nothing but broken tiles and bricks and garbage. The only houses left are mine and Mr. Ran's, my life-long friend. You'll meet him tomorrow. He's the only one still living in the ruins. I was going to stick it out with my pal till we got paid, but my daughter and son-in-law kept begging me to move in with them. My grandson needs my company. They work thirteen to fifteen hours a day in restaurants, seven days a week. So we keep each other company, the old and young. I'm glad I'm still useful in my old age. I'm a lucky old man with a filial daughter and son-in-law," Mr. Zhang said loudly.

His son-in-law nodded at us. He was on the phone arranging a hot-fondue party for us in the restaurant where his wife worked as a waitress. He had purple bags under his eyes, and his legs were covered with blisters. I asked what happened to his legs and was told that he was filling hot pots with boiling chili oil and dropped one on himself as he dozed off. It was 2:00 in the morning.

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Now he whispers behind me, voice full of fear. "If the man wants to see your camera, let him. You didn't get the girls, right?"

Before I can assure him, he adds, "Do whatever he asks. Don't argue with him." He hops away on his blistered legs.

"Howdy!," the broad man says, leaning close. I smile at his giant jade rings, thick gold chain, and his face, round and bumpy like a pumpkin.

"From Beijing?"

"Minnesota, *Meiguo*." I pull out my business card and hand it to him. The best thing to do is tell the truth at this moment. "This is Professor von Geldern, my colleague."

"America, beautiful country like Wanzhou." He shouts as he glances at the card. "Well, Professors, let me show you the fun places we have here." He points to the brightly lit hill top where the new town has moved, and tells us about the best dance hall in town that is open 24 hours a day, the best massage salon with the best looking hair-dressers, the best restaurant, and the best herbal store.

He has the same chopping gestures as the girl in white. Do they all train in the same karate school?

My mind drifts to Xintian county, where Mr. Zhang's and his pal Mr. Ran's houses stand alone in the ruins. When we visit them tomorrow, will there be trouble? Will we bring them trouble? Wherever we go, people notice us—one bearded, blue-eyed foreign devil, and the other who looks Chinese but no longer moves, talks, or smells like one. The government seems extremely jumpy on the topic of the Three Gorges migrants. Whenever I call to ask their locations, they immediately want to know where I'm from. At first, I tell them the truth, and they either hang up on me or tell me to report myself to the Migration Office and explain why I want to know the whereabouts of the Three Gorges migrants. I found some articles on the subject by Chinese journalists online. When I called the authors, they all claimed they had nothing to do with the subject anymore and had forgotten everything they've written.

"So what are *you* doing here, Miss Professor?" I put on a quick smile. "To see the beautiful river and Three Gorges, of course. What do you do here?"

He looks stunned. Chuckling, he scratches his crew cut. "I'm a scientist," he says.

I laugh. "Really? What kind?"

"Orchids. I study and collect them. There are thousands of varieties, just in China alone. The rare ones cost thousands of yuan, you know that? But money isn't important."

I nod. I don't believe for a second that this man could have studied his way into college and studied his way out with a degree in science. But I do believe, from the fire in his eyes, that he loves orchids, perhaps even more than his love for money.

"Have a nice visit. I'll call you when I visit America someday. I heard there're many wild orchids in deep mountains there. My dream is to go there and find them alive. I'm working hard to make it happen."

He puts my card in his chest pocket, and trots down the bridge to his Peace Dance Hall. His girl across the bridge is leaning over the fence, her voluptuous body curving over the dark steel. She is one of the human orchids he has collected.

"Time to go," whispers Mr. Zhang's son-in-law, behind my ear.

"Did he come over just to talk about orchids?" I turn to him.

"The girl was telling him that you took many photos of the dance hall and were going to sell the girls' images to porn websites."

I turn on my camera to show everyone what I have. There's one shot of Peace Dance Hall. No girl or pimp. Only a shady man passing by, head turned to the drawn curtain. Above the door where the wall is covered with handwritten ads for massage girls, housing rental, genital wart treatment, I find a fading red number—177 meters.

By 2008, the Long River will rise to the red mark. Wanzhou will be under the water, including its noise and the dust from the steep steps lined with food stands, herbal stores, and hot-fondue restaurants, including the young porters and beautiful orchids from Peace Dance Hall—the ocean of desire.

### **Orange Dream**

When the autumn wind blows across the Three Gorges, the hills along the Long River light up with ripening oranges. They have been hiding behind leaves like shy girls all summer, but now they burst out shamelessly, filling the valley with their sharp citrus fragrance and flaming color.

And the peasants get busy. First, they repair the road from the orchards to the villages, from the villages to the highway and the river. All are narrow dirt roads. All zigzag along the river cliffs. They get

muddy after a few rains, and are often washed away by landslides. But no matter, it's the only way to carry the golden harvest off the mountain slopes in bamboo baskets, out of the villages and Sichuan Basin in boats, ships, trucks, planes.

Next they clear the yards to make baskets. Oranges are fragile, easy to bruise and get moldy. Bamboo baskets are the best and cheapest containers. Since each family has about ten- to twenty-thousand *jin* of harvest, they'll need hundreds of baskets. The villagers buy the raw materials and hire bamboo smiths to make the baskets. Bamboo smiths come as a family, husband and wife, children, cousins. They work from 6:00 in the morning till midnight, taking breaks only when they eat. For each basket, they make two yuan, and a good smith can make about thirty-five baskets a day.

The peasants are just as busy. They pick oranges, pack them in baskets, carry them down the steep hills, sell them to buyers from Chongqing, Chendu, Shanghai, Beijing. Orange prices fluctuate according to the market demand, traffic, weather, and the whims of the wholesalers. There are times when they can't sell at all. When late fall comes rolling with rain, the fruit rots in the mud. Even pigs won't touch it.

This has been the way of life for the peasants along the river for two millennia.

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The oranges from the Three Gorges have been known since the time of Confucius (551–479 BC), Warring States (475–221 BC), Qin (221–207 BC), Han (206 BC–220 AD), and Tang (618–907 AD) dynasties, during which orange production was just as important as the salt industry, if not more. There were salt officials as well as orange officials managing the trade and farming. At age 15, Du Fu (712–770) got his first government job to take care of 40 *mu*<sup>2</sup> of orange groves and 100 *mu* of grain fields in Fengjie, where he wrote many of his greatest poems and made the place known as Poetry City.

The earliest and most famous poem, however, was Qu Yuan's (340–278 BC) "Ode to Orange."

*Orange tree, destined to be the best between sky and earth  
Born in the southern country  
Your devotion and deep roots keep you at home  
A real gentleman with beauty and spirits  
...  
Pure and independent, you refuse to drift with the currents  
...  
Moral and selfless, you stand as tall as the sky  
I want to be your friend, to live and die with seasons*

Qu Yuan wrote this ode in exile to express devotion to his homeland, the kingdom of Chu. Banished from the court by the King of Chu for nine years, he'd been roaming along the Long River, his heart broken as he watched his beloved country swallowed by the aggressive King of Qin, his king kidnapped and then dying in the enemy land, his people suffering from the war. Like the orange tree that refused to live or flower outside its homeland, he'd rather die than live as a slave in a strange land. When his country's capital fell under the hooves of the Qin army, he filled his robe with earth and jumped into the Miluo River.

On May 5th of lunar calendar, the Chinese eat sticky rice dumplings and race dragon boats in memory of Qu Yuan and his orange spirit. It's one of the three most important festivals in China: Spring Festival, Duanwu (dragon boat festival), and Mid-Autumn Moon Festival.

Beginning at the Three Gorges and then on down the Long River, oranges flower and form China's citrus belt—Chongqing, Hubei, Hunan, Jiangxi, and Zhejiang. Away from the belt, they change in color and flavor. The farther away from the river, the worse they fare. Is it the soil, the climate, or Qu Yuan's spirit?

The orange harvest has also been used as a symbol for the rise and fall of China. When an emperor chose the right way to run the country, there would be a good harvest and oranges would ripen with the right taste, color, and texture. That was because the Three Gorges orange was the best of all fruit, and would serve only the true heavenly son. If the throne were usurped, then oranges would turn sour or refuse to grow at all. Peasants regard oranges as lucky symbols because of their shape, color and sound. *Ju* (orange) is close to the sound of good luck—*ji*. A peasant bride would hide an orange cake, rock sugar, and a mirror in her bra on her wedding day, hoping they would give her a good, sweet, and bright life.

Dried orange skin is called *chen pi*. It cures gastric pain, clears phlegm, and revives the faint of heart.

Oranges soaked in 65-proof liquor taste the best with hot fondues. It's fire upon fire, burning the toxins out of the body and all the worries out of the mind.

The tastiest oranges grow on ancient graves.

For 2,300 years, the orange has been the best friend to the peasants who live along the Three Gorges. In Fengjie County alone, orange agriculture supports 200,000 people.

Since the 1970s, the orange praised so highly by Qu Yuan has been replaced by new varieties from Florida, Washington, Japan, and South America ...

Most migrants are no longer growing oranges. Those who moved 100 meters above the hills have lost the land and climate suitable for the citrus bush. Those who crossed the river sit in high-rise apartments with a big mortgage and little hope for a job. Those who moved to Shanghai, Fujian, Guangdong, and Shandong are struggling with different dialects and cultures, with dire prospects for jobs or schools. They've been farmers for many generations, and growing oranges and fishing are the only skills they have. Many old and middle-aged migrants can't stand the homesickness. They steal back to their old homes and live with their relatives or friends as illegal idlers. Many men have joined *bangbangjun* (the army of porters) on streets and girls become "goddesses" in hair salons, hotels, dance halls.

The orange: soul of the Three Gorges. It haunts the dreams of every migrant. Even those who have made it in their new places aren't exempt.

*Orange trees have roots in the earth.*

*We migrants have roots in our souls.*

Almost every migrant said they missed the orange fragrance, its color and taste, missed climbing the steep hills along the river to the orchards, missed the backbreaking season of the golden harvest.

They sing "Orange Tree" to the tune of the popular song "Olive Tree."

*Don't ask me where I came from  
My old home is far far away  
Don't ask why I keep roaming  
Roaming in this strange land*

*For the birds wheeling in the sky  
For the gibbons calling from the riverbanks  
For the fish that swim upstream to spawn  
I'm roaming, roaming*

*For the orange tree in my heart  
For the orange soul in my dream* ●

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### Notes

1. The Long River, China's longest river, is known as the Yangtze River to Westerners.
2. *Mu*: a unit of area (=0.0667 hectare)