

Troubled Waters

The rising Yangtze will soon drown an ancient river town, but graft is swamping its replacement

By HANNAH BEECH Fengdu

Hell is on the move. For centuries the town of Fengdu—a collection of grimy hotels and apartment blocks that sprawls down the northern bank of the Yangtze—has been the final resting place of the King of the Underworld, according to Chinese legend. Now a new Fengdu lies on the opposite side of the river—a pincushion of half-finished buildings and gleaming hotels that is dedicated to the god of greed.

When the Three Gorges Dam was approved in 1992, Beijing promised the people of the Yangtze River valley a steady stream of electricity and a halt to the floods that periodically devastate the lower stretches. These benefits may eventually come. But for now, the world's largest hydropower project has opened the floodgates of cash flowing into the pockets of crooked officials and has sounded the death knell for dozens of towns and cities, which will be submerged by a massive reservoir. Fengdu is one of those earmarked for a watery grave. Already, hand-painted red numerals mark the various water levels that will inundate the town in stages between now and 2009. The 135-m mark scrawled on the wall of Feng Qin's convenience store will be reached, at the latest, by 2005. The 36-year-old shopkeeper has been promised a new space on the other side of the Yangtze. But Feng worries that she will no longer be able to cater to the tourists who ride the chair lifts up to Fengdu's star attraction, the garish King of Hell temple. Besides, the government has promised Feng only \$4,800 for her old store, while the new shop will cost her \$6,000. "I don't mind going from this dirty place to a clean town," she says, fanning her sleeping one-year-old. "But I wish it weren't so expensive to move."

In truth, the majority of Fengdu residents don't seem terribly bothered about having to shift across the river. Most folks have little sentimental attachment to the shabby concrete buildings that replaced their ancestral wooden homes decades ago. The young, in particular, are excited by the prospect of moving into the high-rises on the opposite bank and hope that the new town will bring new jobs. Only the elderly who shuffle through the marketplace or gather on street corners for long gossip sessions say they will miss Fengdu. "I don't understand why they want to move us," says a 71-year-old woman who gives only her last name, Xiang. "It's too much effort for an old person like me."

What does anger younger Fengdu residents is the corruption that has dogged the relocation project. Although bribery cases related to the dam can be found all along the Yangtze, the problem has reached epidemic proportions in Fengdu. A promised shopping center has not materialized, nor has a cultural museum. Instead, the city got a new hotel, whose four cavernous banquet halls said more about ill-gotten contracts than about the sleepy Fengdu social scene. When Beijing finally responded to complaints by townspeople, investigators discovered that millions of dollars in resettlement funds were either missing or had been misspent. In February, Huang Faxiang, director of the land resources administration of Fengdu county, was sentenced to death for skimming off \$1.8 million in land sales revenues. More than a dozen other Fengdu officials have been convicted of lesser charges. Despite the punishments, however, Fengdu folks are still irate. "They told us that heads have rolled," says a soft-drink vendor. "But when we asked for our money back, no one took our demands seriously." With graft and greed rising as fast as the Yangtze's waters, Hell Town may not have to change its name when it moves.



The men of Yantang must move to Shanghai and go into hard labour to build better lives for their families

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