

Unravelling the Ambivalent Mobilities of Three Gorges Dam Young-Adult Migrants in Guangdong*

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Abstract

The Three Gorges Dam project (1994–2009) in Chongqing of China created 1.35 million forced migrants. As the region next to the reservoir could not accept all the displaced, 96,000 were relocated to 11 provinces/cities. Among these “out-bound” (*waiqian*) migrants, 9,007 were moved 2,300 kilometers away to coastal Guangdong from 2000 to 2004. Through soliciting testimonies from 32 young-adult “dam migrants” (currently aged 18–39) in Guangdong, this article identifies a commonly shared ambivalence over the meaning of *displacement* such that the informants—after more than a decade of resettlement—still maintain different degrees of feeling as both a stranger and a local, as both a Guangdonger (*Guangdong ren*) and a Chongqinger (*Chongqing ren*), and as both a sojourner and a dweller. It is argued that they possess more complex *movement imaginaries* than older, first-generation migrants, and experience a more complex mode of marginalization. The

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* The author would like to acknowledge that this article was supported by the Research Grants Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, General Research Fund, *Unravelling Ambivalent Mobilities: The Social Memory, Bicultural Identity and Livelihood Strategies of Young Dam Migrants in Guangdong* (Project No. CityU 9042400) and PROCORE-France/Hong Kong Joint Research Scheme, *Migrant Mobilization and Economic Opportunities: A Comparison of Young Three Gorges Dam (TGD) Migrants' Experience in Guangdong and Shanghai* (Project No. CityU 9052023).

political implications of the ambivalently mobile population are discussed as its existence echoes the emerging governmentality scholarship on the migrant experience.

The Three Gorges Dam (TGD) is named after three adjacent gorges (瞿塘峡 *Qutangxia*, 巫峡 *Wuxia*, and 西陵峡 *Xilingxia*) along the middle section of the Yangtze.¹ With a length of 181 meters and a total capacity exceeding 22,000 MWe, the TGD is the world's tallest gravity dam with the greatest hydropower production,² and represents China's largest engineering and infrastructure project since the communist takeover in 1949.³ Its scale apart, the TGD is arguably the most contested development project in China as 20 counties/municipal districts, 227 townships, and 1,680 villages were affected by inundation.⁴ When the water level reached its final level of 175 meters in late 2009, the dam not only flooded 17,200 hectares of farmland, it prompted the relocation of 1,500 enterprises, destroyed many historical relics, and created 1.35 million of forced migrants.⁵ Padovani estimated that as many as two million migrants were created.⁶ In 2007, government officials made another prediction that an additional four million people from Chongqing and Hubei would require resettlement in the following 10–15 years to protect the ecology of the reservoir area.⁷

Central to this paper is a subset of TGD migrants—young-adult migrants aged 18–39 who arrived at the receiving area either as infant/children/adolescents, and obtained a “local” education; or as young-adults at the early stage of their career. Such a selective gaze points at a little-attended knowledge gap in the extensive Chinese and international scholarly studies on first-generation dam migrants which mainly highlight the impoverishment risks of landlessness, joblessness, homelessness, and marginalization encountered during their post-migration lives.⁸ These studies generally suggest that the state promises made to the TGD migrants that they could “move out, get settled, and become rich” (遷得出，穩得住，能致富 *qiande chu, wendezhu, nengzhifu*) have still not been delivered.⁹ But, what about the post-migration experience of the young-adult migrants? Conventional migration/refugee studies seldom acknowledge young-adult migrants as a distinct category. Instead, scholars focus their attention on the displacement experiences of the elderly, children, and women. This focus is justified. For example, scholars are aware of the plight of older refugees who are usually the “at the back of the queue” in